EXtOR

EXperiential **TO**urism for sustainable **R**ural development

WP2: Success stories and needs mapping for VET renewal in rural tourism

A2.1: EU collection of success stories and analysis of national trends

EXTOR

Analysis of the current national status of rural tourism and related VET offers

Focus Group National Report – LAND Impresa sociale

Please add the main information about your focus group(s).

COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Italy

CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Palermo

NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS: No Focus Group but Individual Interviews concerning the VET providers.

DATES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): Throughout the month of April.

VENUES OF THE FOCUS GROUP(S): Telephone Interviews

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per focus group if more than one): 6 people by telephone interview and 2 by ZOOM call.

TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS: VET providers and teachers

Please provide a detailed description of the focus group(s).

- **Number of focus groups implementers and description of their background:**

Generally, the number of interviewers is 1, that is, the person in charge of managing and monitoring EXTOR project activities, the project managers of EXTOR. The backgrounds of both are similar in the aspect of tasks performed within the LAND social enterprise but differ in professional and educational background. The similarities consist of knowledge of the EXTOR project goals and objectives and the mission and vision of LAND social enterprise. In implementing and monitoring Erasmus+ project activities related to rural development and environmental sustainability issues and designing similar project proposals. In networking and communication activities we alternate in skills and soft skills.

- **Number and description of the participants' background:**

The people who were interviewed have similar but not the same backgrounds and professionalism. Among them are, 4 are men and 4 are women, including: the vice-president and communication and secretariat manager of AITR (Associazione Italiana Turismo Responsabile), the contact person of the European University School of Tourism (UET Italy) based in Rome and Palermo; the Destination Manager for Sicilia delle Meraviglie, which deals with tourism and hotel consulting by offering courses in tourism training, sustainability and coaching; two teachers from the MIM of the Scuola Secondaria Superiore -

Istituto Alberghiero Pietro Piazza of Palermo; a Geography and Marketing teacher from the University of Palermo, expert in tourism; and, a teacher at the "Manager of Agro Experience" Alta Scuola ARCES course.

- **Duration of the focus group(s):**

Each interview lasted 45 min / 1 hour.

- **Main structure and agenda of the focus group(s):**

Since it was not possible to organize the focus group due to lack of participants, we opted to organize individual interviews following the structure of success stories:
(1) Introduction of the purpose of the call and invitation to participate.
(2) Project goals and objectives.
(3) Alternate questions and answers following the baseline questionnaire.
(4) Possible digressions and curiosity questions to create a bond of trust and understanding with the interviewee.
(5) Conclusion and call to action for the next stages of the project.

- **Description of any group and/or interactive activities:**

Classic phone call and interview on the phone.

- **Level of engagement of the participants:**

High interest in project goals demonstrated by participation in conversation and content research, but medium response in terms of specific programs and training. For some and the more classic VET providers unfortunately, the topic of school programs and training offerings proved to be a bit thorny as there are no specific programs for rural tourism, so the response and interaction in some cases was not particularly engaging. On the contrary, for some, the project and training were a source of great interest and opportunity.

- **Main comments and evaluation points from participants (the most important suggestions and recommendations, improvement points etc.):**

Trends and opportunities:

Rural tourism is experiencing significant growth, driven by several key trends and opportunities that cater to modern travellers seeking unique and sustainable experiences. The trend of Slow Tourism is more than representative. This trend emphasizes a leisurely travel pace, allowing tourists to immerse themselves in local culture, nature, and lifestyle. Slow tourism is particularly appealing as it fosters a deep connection with the territory on an anthropological level, encouraging travellers to engage more profoundly with the places they visit. Also, Root Tourism is becoming a trend in Sicily. This form of travel focuses on exploring one's ancestral heritage and cultural roots. It has a strong appeal as it binds visitors to the territory through personal and historical connections, making it an emotionally enriching experience. So, concerning trends, VET providers underline a growing demand for sustainable tourism, where travellers seek eco-friendly practices and a minimal environmental impact. This includes guided nature tours, back-to-the-land experiences, and bike tours. Experiential tourism, on the other hand,

offers hands-on activities that allow tourists to participate in local traditions and lifestyles, enhancing their overall travel experience.

Moreover, while rural tourism was traditionally associated with the summer months, it is now extending to cover longer periods throughout the year. This shift provides more opportunities for businesses to attract visitors year-round, enhancing the economic sustainability of rural areas. In Sicily, one of the most popular sectors within rural tourism is agritourism, particularly experiences related to local cuisine and winemaking. These experiences not only attract food enthusiasts but also create job opportunities, especially in animal husbandry and the production of related products. Linking these experiences with sports, musical entertainment, and wellness areas modelled after spas can further enhance their appeal.

This *"old but gold"* sector integrates various aspects of rural life, including agriculture, culture, and hospitality, to offer a comprehensive and relational experience. Agritourism businesses often collaborate with third countries to diversify and enrich their offerings, appealing to a global audience. Activities such as hiking, cycling, and nature exploration are increasingly popular, promoting also outdoor tourism. Outreach tourism involves engaging with local communities and participating in social and cultural projects, providing a meaningful travel experience.

Finally, the AITR vice-president outlines that the trends in tourism in Italy differ by geographic and cultural region and include the practices of outreach and community-based tourism, with special reference to hiking, biking and outdoor sports, food and wine tourism, environmental tourism and education, etc. Moreover, the creation of more job opportunities depends on matching supply/demand/training, which in most cases, in Italy, does not align. In any case, responsible tourism has the task of creating a method, it is a qualitative approach that - according to the vice president of AITR - does not teach the job but refines characteristics of supply/demand and gives an ethical edge to the experience and tourism management.

Overall, in Sicily, the most popular sector remains agritourism, which offers a wide range of job opportunities and can be combined with extra-hotel receptivity, providing alternative accommodations like farm stays and rural lodges. Finally, VET provider state that rural tourism is evolving to include a broader array of experiences and extended travel periods. The integration of sustainable and experiential elements, combined with the appeal of food and wine experiences, creates vast opportunities for growth and innovation in this sector.

VET offers/programs available:

Training programs related to rural tourism, and more broadly to tourism, as reported by respondents, can be summarized as follows:

- **Marketing and Communication Training Programs**: these are the most sought-after, with 50% of respondents indicating their importance.
- **Tourism Management and Sustainable Practices Training**: these programs, which cover the management of hotel services and accommodation facilities, are indicated by 33.3% of respondents.
- **ITC Training Programs for Rural Tourism**: these programs are noted by 16.7% of respondents, highlighting the need for technological skills in the sector.

Additionally, some respondents mention training institutions like Elis or Euroform, which also operate in the food and wine sector, although specific details about their offerings are not provided.

Regarding specific programs that support the professional development of rural tourism professionals, 4 out of 6 respondents indicate the lack of specialized training programs in Sicily. One respondent mentions the RDPs (Rural Development Programs) as a potential training opportunity, and another highlights the Scuola Secondaria Superiore - Istituto Rutelli in Palermo for its work in Territorial Marketing. This suggests that Technical-Commercial Institutes are starting to include tourism-related courses, bridging the gap between Secondary Schools and Universities. The Universities of Catania, Palermo, and Messina offer tourism-related courses, with UNIPA providing courses in tourism within both the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Business Administration. For experiential tourism in Sicily, the European University School for Tourism is noted as the only VET provider offering a recognized course.

Finally, AITR, Italian Association of Responsible Tourism is permanently committed to the dissemination of the theory and practice of Responsible Tourism and, within this framework, implements and offers the following activities and services:
- Ongoing training of AITR MEMBERS.
- Administration of periodic courses to operators of the sector and (ADV and TO) and to any kind of interested users, including private ones.
- Design and implementation of in-depth Workshops and Masters.
- Designing Round Tables for Public Bodies and Private Businesses on sustainability issues applied to the Tourism Industry.

AITR therefore organizes specific courses for specific target groups, taking into consideration the social impact of tourism and the environmental impact. The course that has had the greatest professional impact for the past two years is the Gender Business Lab, which considers the gender approach to tourism practices and services. This course is aimed primarily at women.

Respondents also highlight several challenges in the current training landscape:
- **Insufficient Focus on Sustainable Practices:** there is a lack of emphasis on training related to sustainable tourism practices.
- **Lack of Support for Vocational Training Programs**: Promotion and support for vocational training in rural tourism are inadequate.
- **Information/Training Deficit for Public Calls**: There is a lack of information and training on how to participate in public calls for the sector.
- **Absence of Rural and Experiential Tourism Management Roles**: There are no specific roles dedicated to local rural development in this area.
- **Technological and Digital Skills Gap**: Operators, with few exceptions, lack the necessary technological and digital skills to adapt to modern management practices and market demands.

Overall, while there are some training opportunities available, they are limited and often do not address the specific needs of rural and experiential tourism professionals.

Engagement of the authorities/community:

In response to the question about the efforts made by authorities to promote rural tourism, 33.3% of respondents state that there are no efforts from the authorities. However, another 33.3% report that there is a willingness to promote policies supporting rural tourism, as well as a desire to support collaboration and network creation at the local level (e.g., facilitating partnerships between VET providers and rural tourism businesses). Only 16.7% of respondents indicate that there is political will to

work on creating informational resources (e.g., developing comprehensive brochures, maps, and/or digital resources highlighting the attractions and unique features of each rural area) and informational/educational campaigns (e.g., workshops, seminars to inform about rural tourism), as well as to work on infrastructure development (e.g., improving essential infrastructure such as transportation, partnerships for funding and support).

Moreover, support modalities that are most requested by authorities consist of networking and collaboration (e.g., facilitating partnerships between VET providers and rural tourism enterprises), and support in promoting VET programs-66.7 percent preference in this area.

The second is asked for support in professional development opportunities (e.g., training programs to be updated on industry trends and best practices, workshops and seminars to improve skills) - 50 percent preference in this area. Finally, support is requested in promotion and training related to public calls for proposals - 33.3 percent of preferences - and technology integration (e.g., support in integrating technology into the curriculum, such as online learning platforms, assistance in obtaining and maintaining hardware and software).

AITR managers respond that the involvement of the politicians depends on the region and/or the municipality in question. The tourism sector is in the hands of the Region's management, so there is no homogeneity in practices, but it depends on the approach to managing DMOs (Destination Management Organization). Another approach that formally might work well is the bottom-up approach of LAGs, but it depends on the political figures who take charge of resource management.

Suggestions/Recommendations

- **Any challenges faced during the focus group(s)**:

Finally, respondents suggest encouraging training in the private sector and increasing opportunities for networking between entrepreneurs belonging to the same supply chain, and especially between tourism operators and trainers, between operators/businesses and policy makers, supply and demand networks, and promotion at the territorial level. In addition, it is suggested to create commercials that are short and immediate for the promotion of the tourism sector and the reception of tourists, promoting attention to sustainability seen as an asset and not just a constraint. Interviewers at the end all agree to continue working to foster the processes described above: education and training at all levels are critical to growing both professionally and as a supply chain.

- **Main conclusions of the focus group(s):**

There were no common final conclusions for the focus group, but the considerations above were common to all six respondents.