



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



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

Individual Interviews National Report – LAND Impresa sociale

INTERVIEWS INFORMATION

Please add the main information about the interviews.

COUNTRY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Italy

CITY OF IMPLEMENTATION: Palermo and all-around Sicily

NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS: 21

DATES OF THE INTERVIEWS: During the month of April and the first days of May

VENUES OF THE INTERVIEWS: Telephone interviews.

TOTAL NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS (per interview): 21

TARGET GROUP AND STAKEHOLDERS: Rural entrepreneurs and tourism sector professionals.

INTERVIEWS DESCRIPTION

Please provide a detailed description of the interviews.

- **Number of interview implementers and description of their background:**

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 participants we engaged counted 10 entrepreneurs and 11 tourism professionals operating in Sicily, most placed within the rural tourism sector. All of the entrepreneurs interviewed work within similar businesses, mostly farms, educational farms and agritourism; while the professionals are more varied. Some are nature guides, others work in hotel reception in rural areas, and still others own or work in third sector organisations as chaperones and/or certified tour operators. All interviews are reported as appendices to the paper.

- **Duration of the interviews:**

In this case the telephone interviews lasted from 45min to 60. Not with all participants it was possible to fill out the form together during the interview, some people preferred to fill out the questionnaire with more time finished the interview, which in this case lasted less and was aimed at informing participants of the purpose of the project and the reasons why they had been contacted.

- **Main structure and agenda of the interviews:**

For rural tourism professionals and entrepreneurs, the preparation phase and interview structure were always the same. During the preparation phase, the questionnaires were translated into Italian and converted into digital form in Google Forms; the interviewer then began a process of selection and involvement of the target group, using desk research, the social enterprise's contact list and a search for experts, professionals, entrepreneurs and networks already existing in the area. After this brief phase, we started to contact the people possibly interested in participating, first by email - introducing the aims of the project and the objectives of the interview - and then by telephone.

During the telephone interview, the pattern is the same:

(1) Introduction of the reasons for the invitation and explanation of our interest in participating in the project of the organisation contacted. (2) Objectives and aims of the project. (3) Alternate questions and answers following the reference questionnaire. (4) Possible digressions and curiosity questions to create a bond of trust and understanding with the respondent. (5) Conclusions and call to action for the next phases of the project.

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

There were no particular group or individual activities. The interview was conducted as a Q&A with the people we chose to interview.

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

Participants showed a good level of willingness to answer our questions, demonstrating considerable interest in the project as a whole. Almost all respondents expressed a desire to be informed about future project activities.

- **Any challenges faced during the interviews:**

No significant challenges were found during the interviews. In order to avoid wasting time – and given our experience in conducting this type of research – after ever drawing up a list of possible rural tourism entrepreneurs and professionals, we began immediately with phone calls. If the interviews could not be condensed entirely over the phone, we opted to forward an email with all the details and a link to the Google Form.

- **Main conclusions of the interviews:**

Rural Tourism Entrepreneurs

Q1: When did you start your rural tourism business?

In 2019, one entrepreneur began their journey by purchasing some land and acquiring others on a loan basis. They started cultivating the land and, over time, obtained funds to purchase equipment to increase production and expand sales. About five years ago, another individual took over the family olive grove, transforming it into a permaculture project. A cultural tour guide, primarily working in cities with rich historical heritage, occasionally received requests for tours exploring nature and quieter, pristine areas. This led them to provide brief rural tourism experiences, visiting local wineries and nearby villages, offering a slower-paced alternative to traditional tours.

RURALIA, a farm dedicated to agricultural and food biodiversity, was established in 2017 when an architect set up a lab to educate about local agriculture and the origins of everyday food products. The farm organises workshops with schools, field trips, and events focused on biodiversity, local knowledge, and ancient grains, enriched with multimedia presentations. The Rural Library enhances agricultural knowledge, and the Scientific Café offers a unique way of discussing scientific topics while tasting products.

Approximately ten years ago, a business opened up to social projects, with initial experiences between 2010 and 2012. They manage social projects independently, provide family hospitality in rural areas, and serve as a welcoming point for the CAI. They have offered horseback riding since 1982.

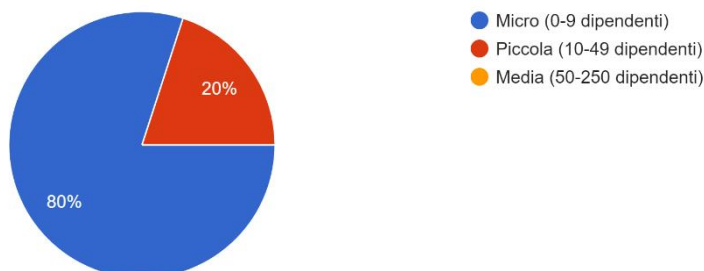
Another business began three years ago. The activity originally started in the '90s when a small 2-hectare farm transformed into an agritourism. Initially focused on dining services, they later added accommodations, an educational farm, and a social farm. Simultaneously, they expanded and diversified agricultural production. Today, the farm spans over 100 hectares, offering a variety of quality products representing the territory.

Valentina, 51, manages an agritourism venture with her family, including Alberto, Armando, Luigi, and Zelia. They have been running it together for seven years, cooking for guests, welcoming travellers, and tending to the crops. Valentina was motivated by the desire to meet new and interesting people. Guests at Casale Poggio del Tiglio particularly appreciate the warm and familial hospitality.

Q2: What is the size of the business?

Quali sono le dimensioni della tua azienda?

10 risposte



80% of respondents say they have a micro business. Just 20% of participants, on the other hand, describe themselves as owning a small business.

Q3: What is the sector of your business:

Among beneficiaries 60% of the entrepreneurs responded that they have a business engaged in Rural Tourism: a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is linked to a wide range of products generally related to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle/culture, sport fishing, and sightseeing; and Agritourism and Farm Tourism: a form of tourism whose activities are focused directly on agriculture and utilise the unique offerings of rural and agriculturally rich communities. 50% among the total beneficiaries say they have a business engaged in activities related to cultural tourism: a tourism activity in which the visitor's essential motivation is to learn, discover, experience and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions/products of a tourist destination. Instead, 30% recognize themselves in Eco-tourism: a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature and is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented. Only 20% identify with the more generic form of sustainable tourism, and only 10% with the more specific form of regenerative tourism: a process in which tourism stakeholders exercise care and protection (through decision-making and practices) for the improvement and enhancement of natural, human and man-made elements. Finally, no one practises adventure tourism.

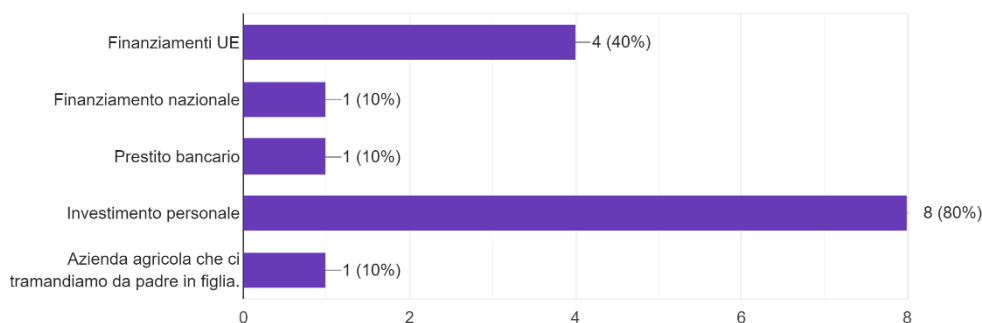
Q4: What is the type of your business?

80% of respondents say they have a farm (e.g., offering farm stays, tours, farm activities), where they produce and sell local products and welcome tourists and visitors. Forty percent also have an accommodation facility, where they can offer hotel services, and 30 percent also have a store where they can sell their ecological/organic/bio and other fair-trade products. 20% are involved in organising tours and visits to places and sites of historical and cultural interest. Only 10% have a winery where they organise vineyard tours and wine tasting or organise sports and outdoor activities. Finally, only one company is involved in permaculture.

Q5: What sources of funding did you use for starting the business?

Quali fonti di finanziamento hai utilizzato per avviare l'attività?

10 risposte

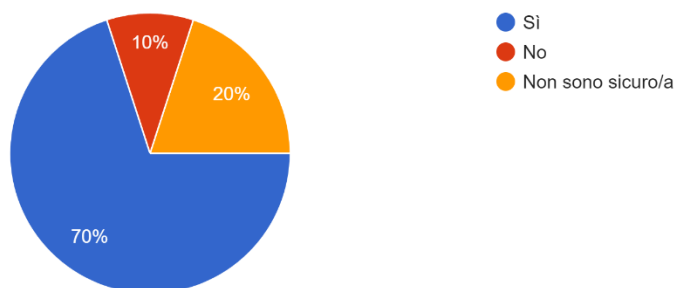


As the chart shows, the majority of respondents used a personal budget to start the activity (80 percent). 40% of respondents say they have used and continue to use EU Funds - mostly through the RDP measure. Finally, only 10% of respondents have taken advantage of national funding, and bank loans to start the business, and a final 10% say they received the business as an inheritance from their family of origin.

Q6: Are you aware of European or national funding opportunities?

Sei a conoscenza di opportunità di finanziamento europee o nazionali?

10 risposte



As the chart shows, the majority of respondents are aware of national and European funding opportunities (70%), 20% say they are not sure if they know about them; while 10% say they know nothing about this topic. Only 10% respond that the biggest challenge has been/is the lack of skills and knowledge in the field, farming in Sicily, and not having employees to take care of the land.

Q7: Have you faced any challenges since you started your business? If so, what kind?

Half of the respondents cite lack of human resources to manage and implement activities in the company as the biggest challenge they face; followed by financial problems, lack of financial

support (40%) and lack of involvement of a local network (30%). Finally, 10% say that the lack of specific skills, doing agriculture in Sicily, and the lack of employees to take care of the land are just some of the difficulties they encountered when starting up their businesses but are also affecting them now.

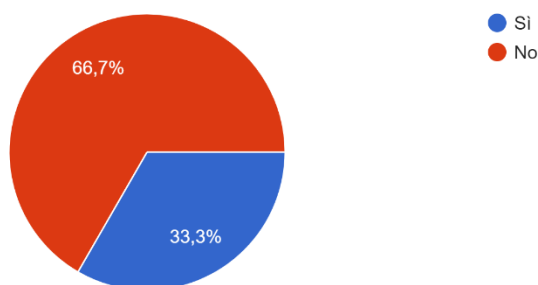
Q8: Is your business sustainable? If so, how do you ensure sustainability?

Most respondents say that through their work they are concerned with preserving culture through the promotion of local traditions, culture, and heritage (88.9%), engaging the community by supporting local products, creating economic opportunities, and cooperating for the preservation of the natural environment and cultural identity (77.8%), ensuring tourist satisfaction by providing high-quality products and services, and encouraging responsible tourism (e.g., informing tourists about responsible tourism, local traditions, and the importance of supporting local people, informing about environmental conservation) (66.7%). Slightly more than half of the respondents also add that through their work they promote environmental sustainability-for example, through the use of green practices-and provide training and skill development for both personal and professional development, including for employees (55.6%). Finally, 11,1% responded that they intend sustainability in that they carry out food education activities through the educational farm or stated that they are in fact doing pure volunteer work because the business is loss-making but with passion and a lot of will they keep going.

Q9: Have you ever participated in a VET program related to rural tourism or received any personal or professional development training? If yes, please specify.

Hai mai partecipato a un programma di formazione professionale relativo al turismo rurale o hai ricevuto una formazione personale o professionale in materie simili?

9 risposte



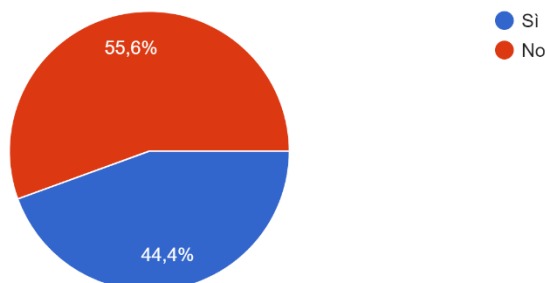
Only 33.3% of the participants respond that they have participated in specialist training programs in the field, compared to the remaining 66.7 percent who say they have not received any professional training in this regard. Only 3 out of 10 respondents answer this question, stating that they participated in an Enoturismo course in 2010 at the Institute of Sicilian Vines and Wines, specific courses for company employees for celiac disease, and, finally, with a degree in Industrial Architecture and Design, one employee states that she does the graphics and videos for the

company herself, and that both current managers of the company (husband and wife) have obtained a degree in Agriculture from UNIPA.

Q10: Have you ever provided personal or professional training to your employees? If yes, please specify.

Hai mai fornito formazione personale o professionale ai suoi dipendenti?

9 risposte

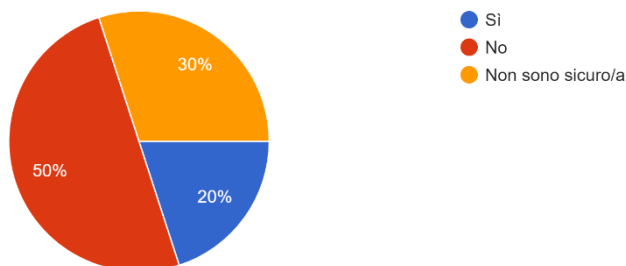


44.4% of the participants respond that they have provided training programs for their employees in the field, compared to the remaining 55.6 percent who say they have not received any professional training in this regard. For example, 10 young people participated in training activities within the company through community service, EVS and training internships, and at the end of the course 2 of them found jobs at a similar company. A few others responded that they organised specific training in reception, cooking, cheesemaking and communication for their employees. Finally, someone indicates simple routine training. 55.6% have never provided specific training to their employees.

Q11: Are you aware of the VET programs or other professional training offered in Sicily related to rural tourism?

Sei a conoscenza dei programmi di formazione professionale o di altri corsi di formazione professionale offerti nel tuo Paese/regione in materia di turismo rurale?

10 risposte



As the chart shows, 50% of the people who participated in the interviews have no idea about the rural tourism training courses provided in Sicily. The remaining 20% are aware, while 30% are not sure.

Q12: Do you think it would be useful to receive professional development training? If yes, in which of the following topics/areas?

6 out of 10 people suggest they would like to receive specific training on key concepts, challenges and practices at the European level on sustainable and rural tourism, as well as eco-tourism practices (66.7%). 5 out of 10 people add that they would like to learn about good practices to implement in the management of agritourism and farm tourism, as well as specific training in digital marketing and e-commerce and national and European funding in experiential tourism (55.6%). In addition, 4 out of 10 people would like to learn more about sustainable and experiential tourism (44.4 percent), and 3 out of 10 people would instead like to develop their skills on video making. Finally, two people would like to know more about cultural tourism (22.2%) and only one about sports and adventure tourism (11.1%).

Q13: In your opinion, are there any gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in Sicily? If so, which of the following?

According to the entrepreneurs who participated in the interviews, the gaps affecting the rural tourism sector mainly relate to depopulation of rural areas, such as in staff recruitment (70% of the responses); lack of adequate infrastructure and poor access to rural areas due to deficiencies in transportation (60% of the responses); and problems with basic services such as electricity, water, sewage, internet, telecommunications (50% of the responses). Only 40% say gaps may relate to lack of training/education programs or insufficient support for green transition. Only 30% also state that gaps may concern lack of adequate financial support or insufficient promotion. Some people, however, also state that official promotion of the tourism industry and territories at the municipal or regional level can actually help introduce places to tourists and visitors from outside. Finally, 20% say the gaps relate to insufficient support for the digital transition of rural areas and the people who live there.

Q14: Do you have any recommendations for improving the rural tourism sector in Sicily ?

To improve the rural tourism sector in Sicily, rural entrepreneurs suggest that it is important to focus on the quality of services and products rather than quantity, increasing comfort for tourists. It is necessary to enhance knowledge of the territory and create a local network among producers, artisans, and farmers to valorise local resources. Continuity in public grants and support is essential, as well as dialogue with local stakeholders, companies, ATS, and associations. Involving hospitality schools with mandatory long-term internships and implementing marketing activities will further contribute to the sector's development.

Q15: Is there any other kind of support that you would like to receive as a rural tourism entrepreneur?

Some rural tourism entrepreneurs want support in designing a business model plan, funding for eco-friendly accommodation facilities, training courses, internships in establishments, and better

mortgage rates. Others suggest communication and awareness campaigns on the topic. Some are unsure or have no specific requests.

Rural Tourism Professionals

Q1: In what sector do you work?

5 people of 11 respondents say they work in experiential tourism. In contrast, 4 out of 11 people say they work in eco-tourism and sports and adventure tourism. 3 people instead say they are involved in rural and cultural tourism, 2 in sustainable and regenerative tourism. Finally, no one indicates farm tourism as an alternative, contrary to what we report in the previous section of the paper, where instead this area is much more explored.

Q2: In what specific type of business do you work?

The majority of interview participants among tourism professionals answered that the task they most perform on a daily basis consists of organising sports and nature activities (e.g., hiking, horseback riding, biking, climbing, wildlife and bird watching, camping) - 54.5% - and organising visits to historical sites and cultural events - 36.4%. Individually, the rest of the participants, respond that they are involved in various capacities in running an accommodation, spa or wellness centre, managing the buying and selling in a store, conducting arts and crafts activities (e.g., handicraft courses/workshops); involved in education/training in the tourism/hotel industry (e.g., teacher, trainer in rural tourism/entrepreneurship); organising cooking classes for tourists, and environmental education for adults and children.

Q3: What is your profession?

Professions and Daily Tasks of Tourism Professionals

1. **Chef and cooking instructor:** Researching ingredients for cooking classes, purchasing from local markets or gathering from the business's grounds, cooking with participants, and tasting specialties.
2. **Natural reserve operator:** Management of use, promotion, protection, supervision, environmental education, and organisation of excursions.
3. **Nature guide:** Leading groups of teenagers and adults in nature, entertaining and telling anecdotes about the importance of preservation and reintegration with the natural world.
4. **Itinerary organiser:** Finding and proposing characteristic itineraries through site inspections.
5. **Tour logistics and organisation:** Responding to emails, planning weekend activities, organising tours and activities for groups and tour operators, managing bookings and social media.

6. **Excursion organiser:** Organizing hiking trips, site inspections, meetings with existing and potential partners (accommodations, bars, restaurants, other tourism operators), and logistical and organisational management of the structure and website.

7. **Teacher and nature guide:** Organizing nature excursions when not teaching food science at a hospitality school.

8. **Tour guide:** Welcoming and guiding visitors within a tourist site.

9. **Tourism operator:** Managing a cultural site, supervising staff, handling book office and front office tasks, and leading guided tours.

10. **Event organiser:** Organising events with a historic shop in Palermo to tell the story of the Sicilian territory and raise customer awareness towards responsible purchasing.

Q4: How long have you been working in rural tourism?

The experiences of tourism professionals vary widely. Some have been working in the sector for a relatively short period, such as two years or about seven years. Others have amassed considerable experience, with some boasting over twenty years in the field. Among them, there are professionals who have worked for 17 years, 12 years, and some for 11 years. There is also someone who has had occasional experience in the sector for about fifteen years. Additionally, one professional has a combined experience of six years between tourism and Horeca.

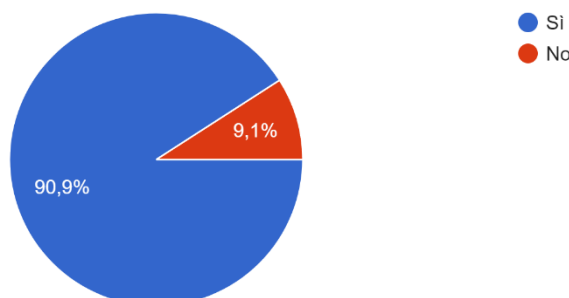
Q5: In your role as a rural tourism professional, what challenges do you face?

The challenge most faced by tourism professionals mainly concerns the lack of infrastructure (e.g., poor access to work due to inadequate transportation). Seven out of 11 people-63.6 percent of respondents-indicate this as their first response. Slightly lower on the other hand, with only 27.3 percent of responses, lack of training/education on the topic of rural and sustainable tourism is cited as a challenge. A lack of support for digital transition is also indicated by 18.2 percent of responses. Some respondents complain about the difficulty in finding practical workers: artisans, carpenters, labourers, plumbers, electricians in rural areas of Sicily and in creating a sustainable network of people working in agriculture. Tourism professionals would like to support local businesses more and more. Finally, there is an inability of accommodation facilities to adapt to modern and international tourism. Very few make receipts, do not display prices or schedules, and do not have up-to-date sites.

Q6: Have you ever participated in a VET program related to your profession or received any personal or professional development training? If yes, please specify.

Ha mai partecipato a un programma di formazione professionale relativo alla tua professione o hai mai ricevuto una formazione per lo sviluppo personale o professionale?

11 risposte



90% of the respondents participated in training courses organised by various entities. These include Coquis Culinary School in Rome, environmental education training courses, courses for nature guides with Feder Escursionismo Sicilia and Astrid Natura, and Palma Nana. SOSVIMA provided training on process analysis and studies on local development and eco-tourism. AIGAE provided continuous training for naturalist guides, while other training was related to workplace safety and updates organised by the University of Religious Sciences of Syracuse and Google.

Q7: Do you think it would be useful to receive professional development training? If yes, in which of the following topics/areas?

4 out of 11 people suggest that they would like to receive specific training on key concepts, challenges and practices at the European level on rural and experiential tourism, as well as on ecotourism practices and cultural tourism (36.4%). 3 out of 11 people add that they would like to develop their skills in video making, as well as specific training in digital marketing and e-commerce (27.3%). In addition, 2 out of 11 people would like to learn more about sustainability and national and European funding for experiential tourism in order to open and develop SMEs in this sector (18.2%), good practices to be implemented in the management of agritourism and farms (55.6%). Finally, 9.1% of respondents say they would like to learn more about agritourism and agricultural tourism, as well as sports and adventure tourism. Some professionals express interest in learning how to better use a PC, issue an invoice, and learn the basics of language related to their work.

Q8: In your opinion, are there any gaps regarding the rural tourism sector in Sicily? If so, which of the following?

Among the shortcomings of the tourism sector in Sicily, professionals in the sector point first to the lack of infrastructure (e.g., poor access to rural areas due to inadequate transportation, the road system and connections to airports with basic public services, lack of roads - 81.8% of responses - followed by the lack of financial support for entrepreneurs and businesswomen in the sector - 63.3% of responses. In third place, 4 out of 11 people - or 36.4 percent - respond that the gaps of medium concern lack of training and education programs, insufficient support for digital transition, and insufficient promotion of the tourism sector outside the mass tourism routes. Finally, 9.1 percent of respondents answer that the gaps also affect lack of knowledge in English and other European languages and the presence of strong envy and spitefulness between operators and administrators within the same territory.

Q9: Do you have any recommendations for improving the sector in Sicily?

To improve the tourism sector in Sicily, some recommendations include: providing low-cost shuttles to reach tourist destinations, creating moments for sharing best practices, significantly improving communication, enhancing attention to the territory and infrastructure, stabilising roads and transportation through appropriate policies, promoting the Madonie area through self-promotion and advertising, and ensuring the involvement of municipalities, the region, and park authorities in launching and promoting Madonie tourism. Additionally, it is necessary to increase inspections by NAS and financial authorities, improve signage for tourist sites and transportation, increase infrastructure, and engage in small-scale projects that are feasible, replicable, and sustainable both financially and environmentally.

Q10: Is there any other kind of support that you would like to receive as a rural tourism professional?

Some sustainable tourism professionals desire meetings on experiential rural tourism topics, managed planning of regional public lands and forests, economic support, and improvements in connections and roads to inner areas and between major cities. They also request support for visibility in the tourism sector, participation in fairs like ITB Berlin, simplification of the participation process for fairs, and funding to reduce logistical costs. Additionally, they want to report illegal guides and violations of economic and health regulations without fear of retaliation. Finally, they ask for funding for youth entrepreneurship in the South, with simplified bureaucracy, financial sustainability, speed and efficiency in accessing funding and communication with public administration, and guarantees of state support.

CONCLUSIONS

The report highlights trends, needs, and opportunities within the rural tourism sector in Sicily, analysing the answers of 20 professional and rural entrepreneurs in the tourism sector.

Many entrepreneurs began their ventures by utilising personal budgets and loans, with a significant portion transforming existing family farms into diverse agritourism businesses. There is a strong emphasis on micro businesses, often involving family members, and the majority of these businesses are engaged in rural and farm tourism, with a smaller percentage also involved in cultural, eco-tourism, and sustainable tourism. The size of the businesses predominantly falls within the micro category, and a majority of the participants operate farms that produce and sell local products while welcoming tourists.

Key challenges identified by the entrepreneurs include a lack of human resources, financial support, and a local network, as well as issues with infrastructure and access to rural areas. There is also a notable lack of specific skills and training in the field. Despite these challenges, many entrepreneurs focus on sustainability by preserving local culture, supporting the community, and promoting environmental practices. However, only a small percentage have participated in professional training programs, and there is a strong interest in receiving more training in areas such as sustainable tourism, digital marketing, and funding opportunities.

Tourism professionals working in Sicily face similar challenges, including inadequate infrastructure and support for digital transition. They often engage in organising sports and nature activities, cultural tours, and educational programs. The professionals have varied experience levels, with some having over two decades of experience. Training and professional development are areas of interest, particularly in topics related to rural tourism, eco-tourism, and digital skills.

Recommendations for improving the sector include enhancing service quality, fostering local networks, ensuring continuity in public support, and involving local stakeholders. There is also a need for better infrastructure, financial support, training programs, and promotion of rural areas. Entrepreneurs and professionals alike express a desire for more structured support, simplified bureaucratic processes, and opportunities for professional development to enhance their businesses and the overall rural tourism sector in Sicily.