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The quest for excellence and a socially responsible approach in the planning process for sustainable tourism development: A case study of Slovenia

Abstract

The article deals with the significance of the quest for excellence and a socially responsible approach in planning for sustainable tourism. Research and experience show that tourism organisations need to search for alternative sources and innovative elements in order to improve their competitiveness. This can be done by forming a social-relationship-network in the field of tourism, which is an important factor in creating added value and innovation. There has to be a continuous pursuit of excellence and a socially responsible approach, starting from the idea, via development, and right through to project implementation. One of the beneficial methodologies for developing and expanding a level of tourism which is sustainable and enhances the totality of local and regional environments is a multi-stakeholder approach. The second part of this paper presents a case-study of "Heritage trails through Dolenjska and Bela krajina in South East Slovenia", in which sustainable rural development¹ was pursued by using an integrated approach in terms of start-up, implementation and development. This initiative was supported by and benefitted from the notion of having a core of multiple stakeholders.

Key words: quest for excellence; a socially responsible approach; a multi-stakeholder approach; heritage trails Dolenjska and Bela krajina; Slovenia

Introduction

Tourism is a fast growing and strategic economic activity on a worldwide scale; it is one of the biggest industries oriented towards the future and represents an important business opportunity for Slovenia. The basic principle in the implementation of all activities is using a sustainable approach, which is the only way to ensure that tourism as a successful economic sector of the national economy will be a key contributor to the welfare of society, and to giving a positive image of the country to the world. The basic orientation in intensive marketing of Slovene tourism is an increased level of recognition of Slovenia in important markets, the development of new markets, positioning of tourism products, effective virtual marketing, and an increasing extent of coordinated promotional activities through partnership.

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The establishment of a good practice case requires a new and practical tourism paradigm combining excellence, co-creation and co-operation, and high quality services. Development of innovative tourism products is aimed at increasing competitiveness, facilitating sustainable tourism development, and consequently increasing tourism turnover. A systematic approach is important if you are to achieve organisational synergy, with creation of new jobs, development of new skills, and ecological innovations in tourism. This takes into account the competitive adjustments required for sustainable development. For successful performance of the Slovene tourism offer in global tourism markets, partnerships and clear targets are crucial. People living in the destination represent a key advantage and are also an aid to competitiveness. The social capital of tourism networks is of highest importance in the process of creating tourism development. In the concept of social capital there was at first a strong emphasis upon the social capital of individuals, but later it was realised that development of human capital, and the economic activity of businesses, geographic regions and nations were all important.

Taking into account the existing economic situation, the current stage of development and development potential, tourism can become one of the leading industries of Slovenia. In the last decade the development of Slovene tourism was based upon the construction of basic transport infrastructure, which is an absolutely necessary basis for development. However, in that period little attention was given to the »soft part«, meaning a wider range of different tourism products and the growth of service-quality. This area is coming to the fore in tourism, as tourism destinations and tourism companies are increasingly aware of such a need, and they rapidly implement activities in order to raise the level of offer and of service-quality.

The need for excellence and a socially responsible approach in the planning process for tourism development

Tourism is largely dependent on the natural attractiveness, and the distinctive identity of a destination. According to research on Europeans and their relationship to tourism, the quality of environment plays a key role in their choice of holiday destination. That is the opinion of some 32 % of EU citizens (*The Gallup Organization, 2011, p. 33*). Every tourism destination is unique, therefore sustainable development and the quest for excellence demands a socially responsible approach and the maintenance of distinctive identity. Hence tourism has to be planned carefully and developed sustainably, while aiming for the highest quality of resources and a socially responsible approach.

In the establishment and implementation of new tourism products a socially responsible approach is of extraordinary importance as an integral part of the destination. Every destination has some kind of social strength. Pek Drapal, Drevenšek and Drapal (2004) suggest that the only long-term useful and effective business approach is the approach of social responsibility. Through such an approach the destinations should give a sound reflection of their economic activity, their environment, new products for implementation, key stakeholders and their values. Of special significance are the expectations of the people who live in the destinations. Therefore it is necessary to plan social responsibility in a strategic manner and to start with the social responsibility of individuals, which is reflected in all their actions.

Innovation in terms of use of new ideas for creation of better results plays an important role in the implementation of new products. It is important to note that innovation is not an achievement, but a

tool for achievement (Cook, Matthews & Irwin, 2009). Innovation covers all activities in a destination, from policy development to programme implementation. It consists of regulatory approaches in the use of technology, organisational innovations as well as new and improved services. Characteristically innovation is more general and wider than creativity. It can appear in different forms. Some innovations are fundamental, because they change the current situation of a destination profoundly. Others are more gradual and natural. Innovations can cover organisational improvements or the use of new technologies, and may result from corporate or individual initiatives.

The circumstances in Slovene tourism - an activator for excellence and a socially responsible approach in the formation of sustainable tourism products

In Slovene tourism, which is known for a diverse and rich offer, tourism professionals have been noticing many deficiencies, weaknesses and different obstacles in planning and developing tourism products. Some acute and more general examples appear below:

- *Many enterprises and agencies involved in tourism operate individually, and are not co-ordinated. Some actors try to connect tourism products and services, to co-create, but most of the time they lack long-term goals and success, without an adequate strategy or an organisational model.*
- *Different projects are generated, for which institutions and associations gain municipal, state or EU funding. Many such projects do not get implemented. Work is done on various activities, reports are submitted, different target groups are approached to join the project, a final report on project implementation is prepared, a notable project promotion day is organised and new acquisitions made, but later on the project is left to itself and after some time there is no trace of anything having been done at all.*
- *Tourism enterprises in some areas have had bad experiences with some professional institutions, which are responsible for preparation of tourism projects, because these institutions urge them to share data and information on their business, their offer, and other characteristics of their company or organisation. Also they animate them to join many projects, they conduct surveys and gain different information, but often the tourism enterprises gain nothing out of it. The projects emerge, somehow they are implemented, but they do not achieve a viable or durable level, and in consequence there is no marketing or added value for those who are involved in the projects.*
- *Some municipalities prepare tourism development strategies, which are also created on regional and national levels and cost a lot of time and money. Unfortunately, after a couple of years it is apparent that the strategy has been put into a drawer, and is just another project, but there has never been any progress on its realization or, even worse, the realization has never been monitored. There is too little emphasis on innovation and adequate organisational network, which involves key factors and actors of the social environment, from which the strategy is generated. Excellence and a socially responsible approach in the planning of tourism development are not taken into account.*
- *If we exaggerate the situation today, then almost everybody who has ever been on vacation somewhere is involved in tourism. Almost everybody is a tourism expert, anyone who travels from time to time; even bus drivers, are tourism professionals with lots of experience. The leading positions in tourism companies and*

organisations are taken by personnel from non-tourism professions, instead of experienced and qualified tourism managers. Personnel from non-tourism professions have different knowledge and predispositions and usually do not see or know what an experienced, adequately professionally educated and qualified tourism professional should do.

The case study presented below of the regional tourism product Heritage Trails through Dolenjska and Bela krajina in the southeast of Slovenia, illustrates how excellence, a socially responsible and the establishment of a social-relations network can be pursued in the planning of sustainable tourism development.

Case study - innovative multi-stakeholder approach to tourism development

The Dolenjska-Bela krajina Heritage Trail

The rural case-study presented is one of a region in Slovenia along the border with Croatia, where a twelve year process can be tracked, from preliminary idea to the operational reality of sustainable international tourism in a strategically-located destination-region. In this case study, an additional factor is the multiple dynamic of international, national, regional and local agencies involved in the project. These were drawn from public, private and social sources, but the key actors and catalysts who can be identified in this story were the Slovene Ministry of Agriculture, the Bavarian State Ministry for Agriculture, the Faculty of Architecture in Ljubljana, the European Commission's Tourism Directorate, a Regional Chamber of Commerce, a commercial tourism operator, and at later date, an international market research consultant.

Integrated rural community development project - CRPOV

The community development role of CRPOV involved many local village meetings, linked to the economic need for diversification of the rural economy. CRPOV worked together with an expert team on strategy and action. Critically, this case-study relates to a rural region which sits strategically between Ljubljana and Zagreb, on the international motorway from Belgrade to Ljubljana. This has a high location potential for selling locally-sourced food and wine products, as well as craft and tourism products. Tourism is based on the appeal of a gentle landscape of hills and river-valleys - for walking, horse-back riding, cycling, angling, rafting, or the simple enjoyment of its unspoilt character!

The CRPOV, as an Integrated Rural Community Development programme, led the way towards rural product development, and as a by-product, community-based sustainable tourism. Such tourism requires partnership and co-operation between the public, private and the NGO voluntary sectors. Co-operation of this sort was not common in the period 1992 -1995 in Slovene tourism. It was clear, however, that sustainability - in Slovenia or anywhere else - requires community involvement together with the firm commitment of local actors and producers of products and services. The appeal of such action is to add tourism products to the other rural products, which they complement².

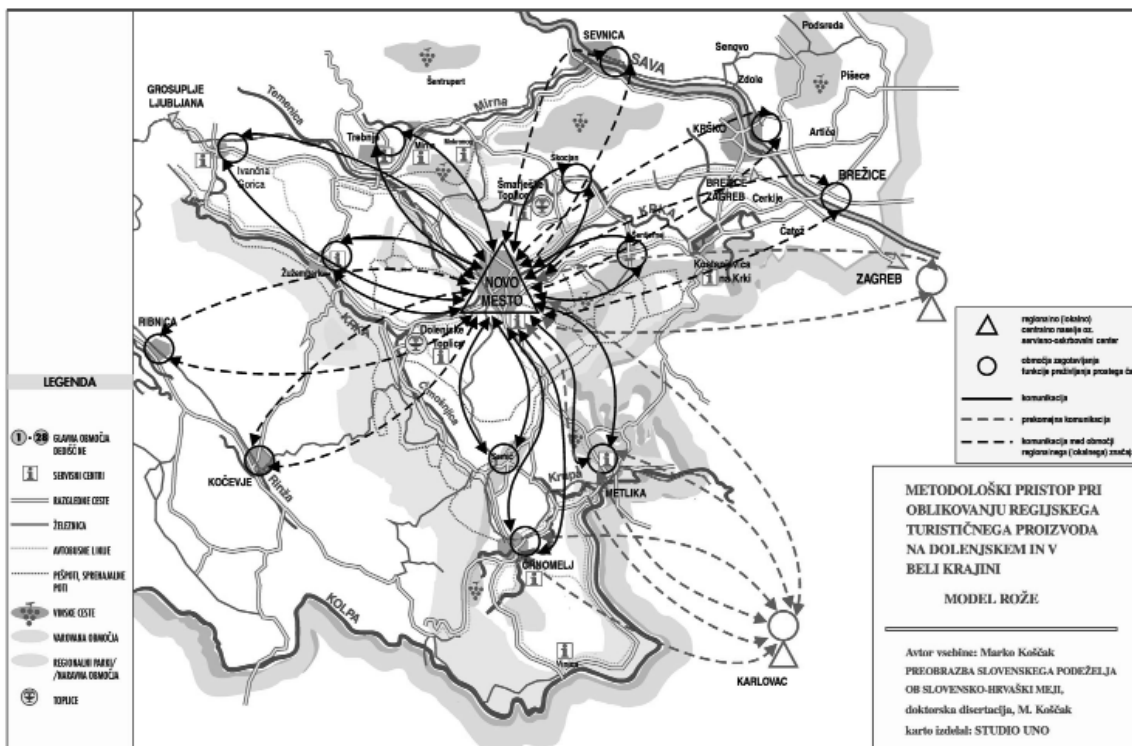
International team Heritage Trail consultancy

This background of the CRPOV programme as well as the parallel development in terms of Wine Trails, prompted the Regional Chamber of Commerce of Dolenjska & Bela krajina to accept an invitation by a consortium (which had in 1996 secured European Union funding to launch two pilot projects in Slovenia and Bulgaria) to create Heritage Trails. The consortium included Ecotourism Ltd. (a British consultancy firm), PRISMA (a Greek consultancy firm) and ECOVAST (The European Council for the Village and Small Town). All of these were supported by regional and national institutions in the field of natural and cultural heritage.

Material and methods

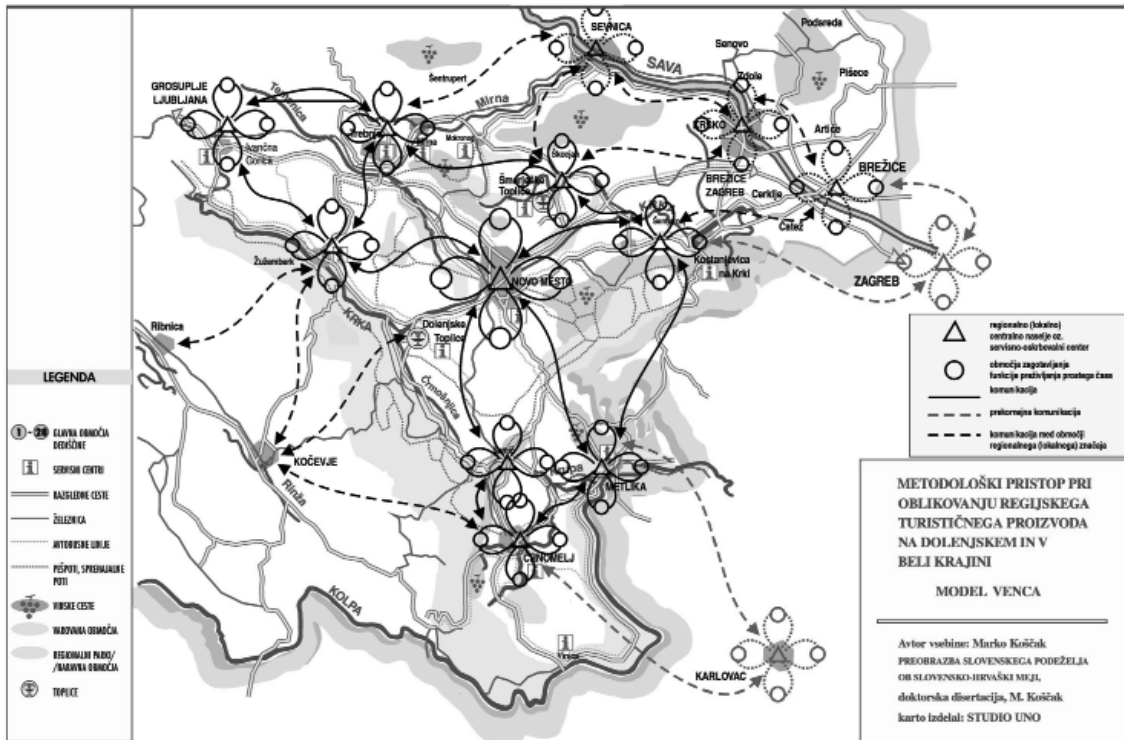
The UK/Slovene Heritage Trail team conducted a 'Tourist Resource Inventorisation & Selection', based upon natural, built and living cultural heritage resources in the selected region. Some 150 sites were identified and proposed by the different partners involved in the participation process for the Heritage Trail. From this large number, 28 sites were selected, to be networked in a trail system for the area. The idea was to develop a tourist product which was capable of offering opportunities for stays of up to seven days in the region. Two key access-forms were used for the clustering of attractions, one a "flower structure", and the other a "garland structure" (see Figures 1 and 2). Existing tourist assets and potentials were the basis of these groupings.

Figure 1
Flower structure



Source: Koscak,1999

Figure 2
Garland structure



Source: Koscak,1999

Results

A major result of this work was the creation of a Regional Partnership of 32 organisations, from the public, private and NGO sectors, which signed an agreement to co-operate in the Heritage Trail's implementation phases of marketing and product development. This partnership - working under the umbrella of the Regional Chamber of Commerce – was in operation for 12 years until December 2008, then "transferred" into LAG LEADER partnership which remains a vibrant and robust operating entity. The partnership supports, co-ordinates and brings together the provider-partners. Work in general consists of marketing activities, product development, and training activities, where different combinations of partners, institutions, and individuals are involved.

For marketing purposes, a local commercial partner - Kompas Novo mesto - was invited into the partnership in 2002, in order to articulate a stronger and more effective assault on foreign markets. Kompas was engaged to act as the marketing agency, on behalf of the Heritage Trail partnership. Although the official launch of the product was in 1997, at the World Travel Market in London, followed in 1998 by a presentation at ITB/Tourist Fair in Berlin, there was no significant response. Foreign markets at that time had limited awareness about any Slovene tourist products, other than what can be described as the constantly featured traditional Slovene Tourist icons such as Lake Bled, Kranjska Gora ski resort, Postojna Cave, and Portoroz seaside resort.

The effective commercial launch of the Heritage Trail at an international level, with a foreign tourist industry adviser and a much greater professionally co-ordinated national approach, was delayed until

2002, in London. There, at the World Travel Market, the launch had the active support of the Slovene Tourism Board, together with other relevant institutions.

Stages of commercial product adaptation and implementation

Despite the launch of the Heritage Trail in the domestic market, followed by the international launch at the World Travel Market in 2002, the level of response by foreign tour-operators and travel agents was weak. From Travis's (2003) market research on Slovenia's key foreign markets, the special interest markets, with a focus on either cultural tourism or nature-tourism (eco-tourism) were selected. Independent and some major commercial operators were to be approached by phone, fax, or on-line. 200 firms were identified in 7 European countries; of these 60 firms were contacted by at least two contact modes, but only 6 showed some degree of interest.

The problem revealed was that though there is much interest in Slovenia as a high-growth destination country, it was seen by the international industry as one with 3 major attractions – the 'tourism icons' already mentioned – lakes and mountains, caves and sea. For a significant period of time Slovene overseas marketing has tended to focus only on these well-known destinations!

In-depth contact with key operators by phone showed that there were two viable special-interest packages, which could appeal commercially:

- a) A Heritage Trail Add-On Package to offers at Bled (Lakes & Mountains) or Ljubljana (City & Culture)
- b) An Integrated new 'Highlights of Slovenia' holidays, which started with 25% of their time at two existing icons (Bled & Ljubljana), then the remaining 75% of the time allocation spent on the Heritage Trail

Thematic routes – next stage development...

From these well accepted initial considerations we sought for further development of the product. Our thinking was led by the facts that:

- More than 75% of tourists from foreign markets are seeking active holidays
- More than 50% of the reservations are made by internet
- More tourists want to change the destinations every couple of days, etc.

So, it was found necessary to create a product which:

- Can be used by the individual traveller in the same manner as by a tour operator
- Will connect actual tourist offer components in the region
- Will be supported by all new commonly used technologies
- Will support active holidays
- Should be different to other products in the field of active holidays.

In 2009 and with financial support of the European Regional fund we successfully finished the project, which fulfil all that conditions.

With the project we built "back-bone" for four main activities hiking, biking, horse riding and rowing in the whole region. The routes are connecting natural and cultural heritage of the region with other tourist offer, such as accommodation, activities, information, services etc.

Figure 3
Thematic routes web portal



Wholly digitalised and located by GPS, routes are now presented in the renewed portal (see the front page of web portal on Figure 3) <http://www.slovenia-heritage.net/> and the new built mobile portal <http://activeslovenia.mobi>. The product also is presented in the Facebook and YouTube. Biking and horse riding routes are also visualised. Main tourist offer of the region is showed on these attractive visualised routes and in the portal (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Visualised routes in 3D on web portal



The potential tourist can detail look and plan its holidays from home (internet). Once on the terrain, they can use Mobile, PDA, GPS devices (and print outs) to navigate himself on the region. For those who don't have enough time to create the holidays by themselves, the active tourist packages are (pre)-prepared and shown on the web as well.

It is clear that:

- Entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial skills, harnessed in a bottom-up model of development, will have a huge impact on rural and agri-tourist micro-economies at a local community level. The effect in driving wealth creation and expanding employment is measurable in a very tangible and transparent way.
- Furthermore, multi-stakeholder tourism projects benefit the ownership transformation process by forcing public³, private⁴ and social⁵ ownership agents and enterprises to work together for common benefit. Because of the bottom up approach the measurable value of an enterprise or agency level is also more tangible and obvious. It can also be seen that by engaging local public agencies, the dimension of environmental planning and protection can be assured. In this way the sustainable nature of tourism and its impact on the local environment can be assessed and given due priority.
- At the same time, in such integrated projects, individual entrepreneurs begin to comprehend and understand the value of co-operation as well as of competition. A key feature is often the need for small-scale tourism entrepreneurs to develop a promotional mechanism to market their product or service at a wider national and international level. Individually the costs of such an activity are too great for micro-enterprises, but they are possible for groups of enterprises. This shows how an integrated model enables participants to benefit from the totality and complexity of resources and skills held by all stakeholders.

Clearly the model referred to, as demonstrated in the Case Study utilised in this paper, has a very precise local/regional orientation. The Heritage Trail of Dolenjska & Bela krajina Case Study has a rural base and is profoundly affected by the necessity to attract tourism inputs without damaging the sensitivities of the rural environment. It also employs a strong multi-stakeholder approach. This in many ways illustrates the impact of EU-funded programmes using the concept of subsidiarity⁶ - aiming at seamless connectivity between EU supranational policies and funding, member state objectives in macro-economic harmonisation, stabilities, and local micro-economic needs.

Learning points and conclusion

- It is evident from the Case Study that the Heritage Recycling for Tourism phase was preceded by the work on Integrated Rural Community Development. This stimulated a community-based approach to development, in which context tourism was a part of the economic mix. This created a real hope of sustainability via the local communities support for a new mixed economy, thus indicating that sustainable development can underpin successful tourism, if the correct strategy is chosen.
- The evidence from the project has also made clear that heritage-resource based tourism development, if it is to be sustainable, must a) show respect for the carrying capacity of resource-zones, be they

robust or fragile and b) have rural community involvement and commitment to tourism, because they have a stake in it, and have net gains from it.

- Much tourism development arises because the destination creates potential tourism products, due to the fact that they wish economic gain from them. Rural tourism products have to be adjusted to fit niche market demands that are highly competitive sectors internationally. Thus market awareness and understanding must be built-in early in the development process, or it becomes much longer and harder.
- New tourist destinations are very difficult to launch internationally, even if they have high accessibility, unless they can be linked and tied in to existing tourism icons or magnets. This new Slovene offer had to be adjusted to do just that.
- The "gateway" identification is critical in new product formulation. Whether this be a selected airport, seaport, railway station or whatever. If the gateway is the airport of an attractive heritage city (such as Ljubljana), then both add-on package possibilities, as well as links to a popular 'short-city break' destination, add great value.
- Continuity of personnel in a development process is of real importance. The role of the Project Manager in initiation and continuity is critical, and the continuing interaction with external partners - who are supportive and share a belief in the integrity of the development, over the long term – is also valuable.
- This model ultimately is one of community-based multiple-stakeholders, having the equal support of small rural operatives and major agencies. The support from several levels: local, regional, national, and international, have enabled the thirteen year development-cycle of the Dolenjska – Bela krajina HT project to be achieved.

It is highly important that any tourism project must have a preliminary research (study) and analysis carried out, unfortunately in many cases there is used an »ad hoc« approach most of the time. The project must also have established a marketing strategy and it has to follow that strategy strictly. It is a fact, that there is no existence of an effective connection-system in marketing of tourism products and services. That kind of system has also not been established with the latest document Development plan and guidelines for Slovenian tourism. It is necessary to set short-term and long-term goals, which have to be pursued.

It seems that institutions and different organisations in the search for sources of funding for their existence get a last-minute-idea, which is not even researched or tested in the environment, they apply to a tender, receive the funds, the project is realized and that is where their work finishes. But as well as the first part of the story also the second part is important, and that is the adequate project implementation in practice and the care of its life and successful marketing.

Political willingness, economic situation as well as the functioning of the public and private sector are of extraordinary importance in every economy. It is necessary to search for new, innovative guidelines and paradigm and to focus on the creation of social capital in form of tourism networks, which calls for participatory planning or the bottom-up approach. In the end we need to have an adequate innovative business model, which can be tested in practice, implemented in the environment and be ensured an appropriate durability in all segments of operation.

Tourism is an opportunity for destination improvement; it is the base for many innovative approaches and ideas, and at the same time a possibility for business opportunity or society development. In order to achieve sustainable development it is necessary to have a socially conscious management that cooperates in designing and implementing global programmes in the long run.

Excellence on all levels of development and innovation is of key importance in the process of planning a new tourism product in order to achieve successful implementation in the destination. Excellence starts with every individual stakeholder, who is part of the project. In order to achieve excellence a precondition is to ensure quality infrastructure. Without appropriate destination conditions an implementation of a pursued project is not possible. In the planning process of a sustainable tourism development it is necessary to consider the principals of a socially responsible destination approach, but this is utopia without the socially responsible approach of the individual.

The presented case of the Heritage Trail project was a huge organisational and professional undertaking, supported on all levels by tourism, political and economic stakeholders and having wide social support, therefore positively implemented and in some way still alive today. Despite the fact, that the partnership for development no longer exists, tourism products, which emerged through this project, are still well marketed. The prove of that are the last year results, which show a growth rate of 26,7 % and are above average in terms of marketing success in comparison to other products in the destination region of Dolenjska and Bela krajina, as well as a general high level of demand for this product. Furthermore, different institutions, associations and tourism suppliers/producers from Slovenia and abroad (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro), who want to establish this kind of good practices in their destinations, are interested in the project formation, development and organisational model.

Notes:

¹ We take this to include cultural & heritage, viniculture & gastronomic as well as ecological tourism.

² NB. Community-based rural development is thus an ideal starting point for sustainability, whether in agriculture, and/or in tourism. This creates an 'environment' in which new opportunities for economic diversification, new job-creation, added value to agricultural products, local guiding, and new farm-services can occur. In this process, institutions like an Agricultural Extension Service and others play a very important role, in terms of capacity-building, and of human resource development.

³ By public we mean municipal/local government, state agencies and international organisations operating in a local or regional framework.

⁴ By private we mean privately owned companies, including quoted or unquoted companies, as well as partnerships or self-employed individuals.

⁵ By social we mean entities established for mutual benefit, including co-operatives, societies and not-for-profit agencies.

⁶ The principle of subsidiarity is defined in Article 5 of the Treaty establishing the European Union and was intended to ensure that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen and that constant checks are made as to whether action at supranational level is justified in the light of the possibilities available at national, regional or local level. The Edinburgh European Council of December 1992 issued a declaration on the principle of subsidiarity, which lays down the rules for its application. (source: European Commission, 2007).

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