Emblematic Mediterranean Mountains

as Coastal destinations of excellence

(EMbleMatiC)

Project Ref: 594 | 1MED15_3.1_M12_272

Experimentation Report

Deliverable D 4.5.1

WP4 – Testing

Activity A 4.5 –Evaluation of the pilot activities

August 14, 2019

SUMMARY

Evaluation activities for all the actions undertaken within the WP4 ("Testing") were foreseen in the project Application Form (AF). This document is an Experimentation Report (ER) that contains the results of the evaluation that was carried out to assess transfer and capitalisation possibilities of the project. The objective of the ER is to highlight the testing initiative's strengths and weaknesses, the difficulties encountered during the process and, not least, to capture some learnings and recommendations in view of dissemination outside the boundaries of the EMM network partners. In other words: the ER provides a general overview of the design and implementation process of the nine *Ecojourneys.*

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1. Introduction: What is the Experimentation Report?

The Experimentation Report (hereinafter: ER) contains the results of the evaluation of the testing initiative that was carried out to assess transfer and capitalisation possibilities of the project EMbleMatiC. The objective of the ER is to highlight the testing initiative's strengths and weaknesses, the difficulties encountered during the process and, not least, to capture some learnings and recommendations in view of dissemination outside the boundaries of the European Mediterranean Mountains (EMM) network partners from the project EMbleMatiC.

Specifically, the ER provides a comprehensive summary of the process of design and implementation of the main results of the EMbleMatiC project, namely the *Ecojourneys*. The *Ecojourneys* are routes of experiential tourism across selected places of each of the nine mountain areas belonging to the EMM network. These routes or itineraries are tourist products that should contribute to overcome the network's common challenges (i.e. unbalanced tourist flows between the coastline/mountain summit and the hinterland areas; marked seasonality, absence of economic benefit of the hinterland areas from the touristic activities). To do so, the *Ecojourneys* comply with a series of commonly agreed attributes. The attributes are related to five topics (basic features of the routes, associated services, ethics & sustainability, management & governance, and marketing[1]).

The ER is mainly a document of internal character, i.e. conceived for the project partners (including those ones of external character). However, the document has been conceived in a manner that it can be also understood by external public. For instance, internal jargon elements (such as abbreviations and too technical terms) have been avoided.

Summing up, the ER should provide a general overview of the design and implementation process of the nine *Ecojourneys*.

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[1]The attributes related to the marketing issues were all linked to a marketing brief that CETT-UB provided as a marketing tool for the network. Since the partners didn't need to demonstrate the degree of fulfilment with these attributes, they haven't been included in the questionnaire and, therefore, they aren't be analysed in this document.

2. Used Methods: Questionnaire and Focus Group

The ER is based on a series of surveys undertaken by the CETT Tourism & Hospitality School, the academic partner within the EMbleMatiC consortium. The surveys were executed using two different methods: first, a questionnaire, and second a focus group. The recipient of both methods were the nine partners representing the nine mountain areas of the network (*see Table 1*)

Partner internal code	Name of the partner	Name of the mountain	Region (Country)
LP1	SyndicatMixte du Canigó	Canigó mountain	Occitanie (FR)
PP1	Himara Municipality	Çika mountain	(AL)
PP2	Development Agency of Berguedà	Pedraforca mountain	Catalunya (ES)
PP3	LAG Gran SassoVelino	Gran Sasso	Abruzzo (IT)
PP4	Pieriki	Mount Olympus	Kentrikí Makedonía (GR)
PP5	LAG Terre de l'Etna e dell'Alcantara	Mount Etna	Sicilia (IT)
PP6	Consell de Mallorca	Serra de Tramuntana	IllesBalears (ES)
PP7	AkommPsiloritis	Mount Ida/Psiloritis	Kriti (GR)
PP16	Métropole Aix-Marseille	Ste.Victoire	PACA (FR)

Table 1. List of the project partners representing a mountain area. *Source: Application Form.*

The **questionnaire** was conceived to be filled in by each partner individually. It is structured in 10 sections (*see Table 2*), each of them containing questions about the design, creation and implementation process of each *Ecojourney*. The total number of questions was 37. The questionnaire was answered by all partners within 3 weeks in April, 2019.

Name of the section's topic	Questions included
1. Informing potentially interested stakeholders about the existence of the project	1.1. What channel did you mainly use to inform potentially interested stakeholders about the project?
2. Contact and invitation of stakeholders	2.1 What kind of stakeholders did you contact? 2.2 Why did you invite them? 2.3 What kind of difficulties did you experience when contacting and selecting stakeholders? How could you overcome them?
3. Involvement of local stakeholders	3.1 Which percentage of the contacted ones was initially involved in the project? 3.2 What kind of difficulties did you experience when involving stakeholders? How could you overcome them? 3.3 How would you rate their average involvement?
4. Fulfilment of the common EMbleMatiC attributes	4.1 Please rate the degree of difficulty you found when fulfilling the attributes and specify which one was the main difficulty. 4.2 Do you disagree with the need of any of the attributes? 4.3 Do you miss any attribute that is not in the list?

	4.4 What kind of feedback have you received from the involved stakeholders when you discussed with them about the attributes?
5. Submission of evidences	5.1 Were the submission deadlines properly scheduled?
	5.2 Did the individual feedback from the responsible partner (PP8) properly help you to complete or improve the submitted evidences?
	5.3 Did the sharing of evidences in the Dropbox help you to complete your own evidences?
	5.4 Which evidences wereparticularly difficult for you to submit? Why?
	5.5 In case you consider that any evidence does not adjust to the corresponding attribute, please indicate which one…
6. Identification and design of the *Ecojourney*	6.1 Please summarise in maximum 10 steps the process you have followed for the design of your *Ecojourney*.
	6.2 Did you collect the opinions of the stakeholders for its design?
	6.3 What difficulties did you address during the whole process?
7. Legal aspects concerning the implementation of the *Ecojourney*	7.1 What have been the legal aspects that you were forced to take into account for the implementation of your *Ecojourney*?
	7.2 Have you been forced to change the design of the *Ecojourney* because of them?
	7.3 Have you been favoured by any kind of legal advantage in the process of design and implementation of your *Ecojourney*?
8. Investments for the implementation of the *Ecojourney* on the ground	8.1 How difficult was to estimate the investments needed?
	8.2 Can you describe the main difficulties found in the estimation and how have you overcome them?
	8.3 Do you consider the budget allocated in the project adequate? If not: Have you been able to execute your scheduled investments anyway? Where have you found the additional funding?
9. Creation of the tourism product on the base of the *Ecojourney*	9.1 Did you transform the designed itinerary into a tourism product? If so: How did you transform the designed itinerary into a tourism product? Did you create a tourist package or tour?
	9.2 Can you describe the main difficulties found?
	9.3 If you have not yet transformed the itinerary into a product: what difficulties do you foresee when turning it into a touristic product?
10. Marketing, promotion and communication of the *Ecojourney*	10.1 How do you plan to market, promote and communicate your *Ecojourney* to the public?
	10.2 What are the main target markets you will direct your messages to?
	10.3 Have you found support from any regional/national authorities in your product promotion?
	10.4 In your opinion, what are the main strengths and weaknesses of the Marketing Brief?
	10.5 How satisfied are you with the communication strategy of the project?
	10.6 Do you have any comments/suggestions related to this issue?
Off-topic question	*Do you have any other comment/suggestion/complain… related to the design and implementation process of your Ecojourney that you would like to tell us?*

Table 2. Questionnaire guidelines. *Source: ER Questionnaire.*

As it can be obtained from its questions, the questionnaire has a mixed quantitative-qualitative character. Most of the questions were analysed using statistics and have been represented in charts (that will be displayed in the next chapter), while other were analysed in a qualitative manner, i.e. analysing the contents of each answer and clustering them in order to find common trends, but also individual and unique comments (that will be displayed in text boxes with green background).

After having analysed the questionnaire, the CETT organised a 60 min. **focus group** session with 16 representatives from all partners (see Table 3). The session took place during one of the project's transnational meetings (TNM6) by end of May, 2019. The session had a plenary character.

Name of the partner	No. of participants
SyndicatMixte du Canigó	2
Himara Municipality	3
Development Agency of Berguedà	1
LAG Gran Sasso-Velino	2
Pieriki Anaptixiaki S.A.	1
LAG Terre de l'Etna e dell'Alcantara	2
Consell de Mallorca	2
AkommPsiloritis	2
Métropole Aix-Marseille	1

Table 3. Participants of the focus group session. *Source: Authors' own.*

The CETT facilitated the session, including moderation and protocol writing (it was decided not to record the discussion). The discussion was conducted on the basis of some guidelines that the CETT prepared previously. The guidelines focused on those aspects needing either further individual clarification from given partners, or offering some room for discussion between them. Table 4 shows summarises the followed guidelines.

Topic no.	Topic
6	Identification and design of the *Ecojourney*
8	Investments for the implementation of the *Ecojourney* on the ground
9	Creation of the tourism product on the base of the *Ecojourney*
10	Marketing, promotion and communication of the *Ecojourney*

Table 4. Source: Authors' own.

3. The Ecojourneys: from the Path to the Product

This chapter tackles the body of the ER, this is, to explain in a detailed way the process that each partner followed during the project's testing phase regarding the design, creation and implementation of their own *Ecojourney*. This means that we were interested in capturing every single step from the initial thoughts until the finalisation of the project, including stakeholder information, contact and involvement (section 3.1), how the *Ecojourney's* common attributes were addressed (section 3.2), how the works on the ground run (section 3.3), and how the *Ecojourney* as tourist product was conceived and launched (section 3.4). These four moments fairly correspond to the questionnaire's backbone and, therefore, they reflect the partners' responses (aggregated in order to offer a general picture of them). The comments from the focus group have been also integrated into the report, and they give some interesting insights, often of individual character.

3.1 Informing, contacting and involving local stakeholders

One of the main pillars of the project is the co-creation approach. In practice, this means to be able to involve local stakeholders in the development of the *Ecojourneys*. For this reason, the first three sections of the questionnaire were dedicated to this issue. This section corresponds, therefore, to the topics 1, 2 and 3 of the questionnaire (*see table 2*).

Who was informed, contacted and involved?

The partners contacted a wide range of actors, being the most usual accommodation services, restaurant and other food services, and local producers (*see Fig. 2*). In addition, companies providing active tourism services and management authorities of protected areas were often contacted. They are usually active territorial agents and by no chance were contacted by most of the partners. On the other hand, members of the academia and –interestingly- tourist offices were the least contacted. Whereas members of the academia aren't usually very much attached to territory, the reason of the low contact ratio with tourism offices might be a simple one: that some of the partners play this role (or a similar one) themselves.

Figure 2. Chart showing the aggregated results of Q 2.1. *Source: Authors' own.*

Why were the stakeholders contacted/informed?

There were four main reasons explaining why the partners contacted certain stakeholders. As it can be seen in figure's 1 chart, the fact that the actors were established in the area where the *Ecojourney* was supposed to develop is the main reason for most of the partners. However, there are at least three further reasons that were mentioned by more than 2 partners: first, the fact that the partner collaborated with the actor in the past; second, the partners' own decision on the convenience of contacting and involving a given stakeholder; and three, the proactive attitude of the stakeholder by showing interest in the project.
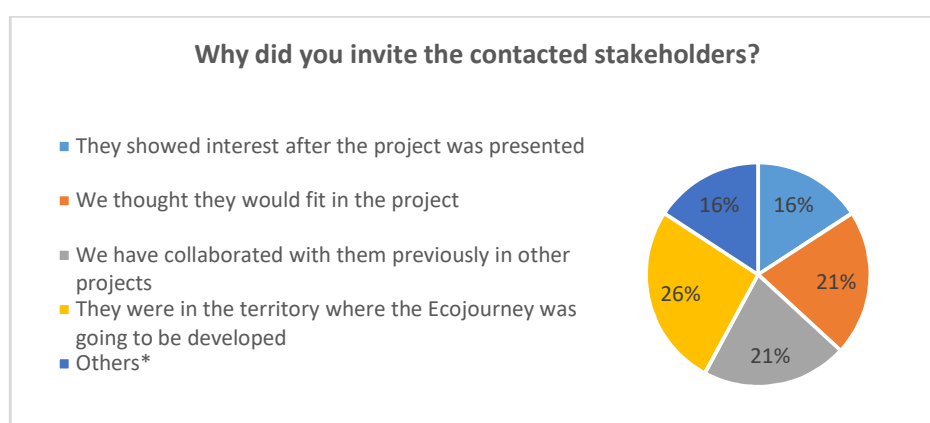

Figure 1. Chart showing the aggregated results of Q 2.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

Apart from these reasons, some partners argued further reasons:

"We want to create an **integrated network** on the area."

How were the stakeholders involved?

According to the partners' responses and explanations, the process usually started by outreaching potentially interested actors. To do so, the partners used a variety of channels, although most of them (50%) preferably contacted the actors directly, i.e. calling them or writing them emails (*see Fig. 2*). This is, according to the explanations that the partners gave, because they already knew what actors could be potentially interested. This is, in its turn, due to the reduced geographical size of the area in which the project was expected to develop. In most of the cases, there were networks of actors prior to the *Ecojourney* project, as we have shown above.
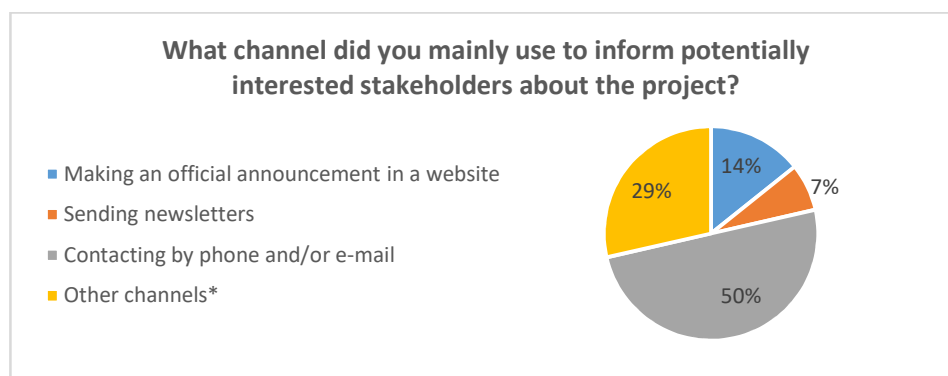
Figure 2. Chart showing the aggregated results of Q 1.1 of the ER Questionnaire. *Source: Authors' own.*

Additionally, some partners used other channels that were not mentioned in the questionnaire:

How many stakeholders were involved?

According to what the partners have stated, a relatively high percentage of contacted stakeholders participated in the execution of the *Ecojourneys* (*see Fig. 3*). Of course, this percentage doesn't reflect exact figures, since the partners didn't quantify the exact number of involved stakeholders. Rather, they were asked to give rough numbers. These numbers, somehow, indicate an optimistic perception of the partners, since involving at least one third of the initially contacted actors can be considered as a

success. To what extent and in what dimensions of the process the actors were involved are important issues that will be tackled later on.
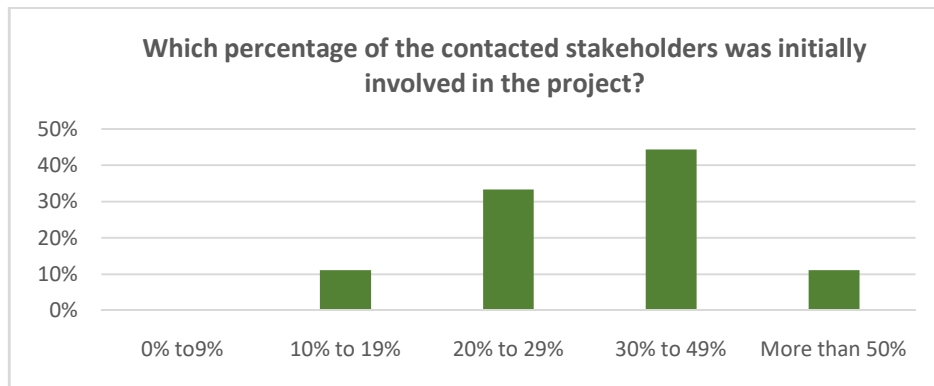
Figure 3. Chart showing the aggregated results of Q 3.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

The outcome from the whole process

The partners considered that the average involvement of their stakeholders was overwhelmingly "rather high", as the chart in figure 4 shows. Similarly to the previous issue on the number of involved stakeholders, here it's important to stress that it is a subjective perception from the partners, and that the further sections will provide important information in order to better understand this positive perception.
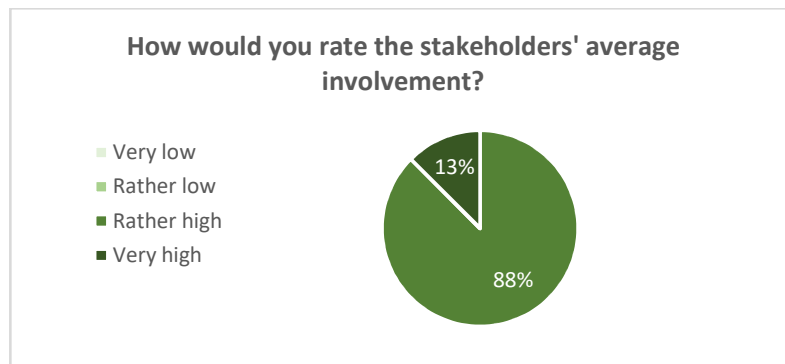
Figure 4. Chart showing the aggregated results of Q 3.3. *Source: Authors' own.*

A very interesting insight from the outcome regarding the stakeholder involvement is what the partners reported, and precisely on the **difficulties** they found during this decisive step and the strategies they followed to overcome them. On the one hand, the partners referred to the difficulties when contacting and selecting stakeholders. From the overall feedback, five issues can be identified:

1. SEASONALITY: "Contacting the stakeholders beyond the tourism season was the main difficulty. Thanks to a rich database of stakeholders a series of individual meetings were conducted."

2. SELECTION "The main difficulty was to identify a reasoned list of stakeholders. The problem was solved by making preliminary meetings within the LAG Working Group and, after selecting the most suitable territory

for the characteristics of the project, a list of stakeholders was drawn up. Through the direct contacts that have been activated over the years by the members of the LAG, it has been possible to involve a fair number of stakeholders"

3. LEGAL HURDLES: "There is a lot of legislation that we have to take into consideration before making an action. The collaboration with the authorities is very important action."

4. REACHABILITY: "difficulty to reach them, they are much solicited and are afraid that they are asked for money"

5. TIME CONSUMPTION: "a lot of time going to see them"

On the other hand, partners were also asked to make thoughts on those difficulties experienced in the next step of the process, namely in the effective involvement of stakeholders. In this case, a colourful set of answers can be observed. The arguments don't seem to be that surprising. In other words: most of them were expected. Maybe that there're too many stakeholders is a bit surprising, since one tends to think that in mountain hinterland areas like the ones from this project, there are a few actors who could become an involved stakeholder.

LACK OF TIME: "They [the stakeholders] have little time; difficulty to gather them together. You need to see them one by one, and it requires a lot of time"

SPEAKING THE SAME LANGUAGE: "The main difficulty was the time to organize the meetings till they have understood the importance of our project. Many words in our typology were unknown to them; consequently, we had to plan an alternative way of thinking, acting and motivating in order to feel part of a network. We should make Emblematic in stakeholders' words."

BUREAUCRACY AND... SCEPTICISM? "Contacting private and final choice of stakeholders needs the agreements of the municipalities. And certainly, involving private stakeholders will be easier once the itinerary is definitely open and signposted."

"SHORTTERMISM": "They [the stakeholders] asked if this project will have a future or it is just a three year planning without any future development."

TOO MANY STAKEHOLDERS? "We have a significant number of businesses, mostly in the tourism sector, in different categories. So we had contact with some of them but also with their associations."

DISTRUST: "The main difficulty is due to the lack of trust that private stakeholders have in funds managed by public bodies"

OFFICIAL'S WORKLOAD: "the difficulty by the side of public administration representatives concerns the excessive workload on some officials"

LACK OF REWARD: "the lack of adequate financial reward for extra activities"

MISSING SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY: "There's a total lack of responsibility for the success or failure of projects financed by public funds."

REACHABILITY (OUT OF SEASON): "The attitude was positive apart from the fact that out of the tourism season most of the stakeholders are not located in our region."

REDUCED AVAILABILITY of stakeholders:
"Professionals from small business cannot drop their customers for meetings"
"Elected representatives are often volunteer, but are receiving many invitations to many meetings from the various public instances in charge of the management and monitoring of the territory"

As of the **solutions** that the partners mentioned in order to overcome these difficulties, the following should be highlighted:

> "The **frequency** of our working group meeting is every 3 months"
>
> "The day of the meeting is chosen to fit **pre-established patterns**: Monday is often a day off for restaurant owners and other professionals open to public"
>
> "Any stakeholder registered to one of the working groups receives the **minutes** of the meeting in case they are not able to attend so that they can keep pace with the group progress."
>
> "Highlighting our inclusion in a **transnational initiative** and a network of European mountains was the best strategy to attract the attention of the stakeholders. So far no initiative of this nature was undertaken in this area integrally."
>
> "To overcome the resistance, we opted for a strategy aimed at **individual and personalized meetings**, to convince and illustrate the potential of the project. During the meetings, the importance of acting in a structured manner was emphasized and the suggestions of the various operators were taken into consideration, so as to involve them directly in the implementation of the project activities."

A kind of **comprehensive answer** about this topic that might apply for several partners was provided by one partner:

> "We have found two different type of involvement among stakeholders:
>
> 1. **The proactive one**. It is a group of stakeholders that usually are optimistic and try to take advantage of any proposal. Usually, in this group we could find those who benefits directly from tourism (accommodation, restaurants, museums, guides…).All of these have been directly involved with the project from the beginning and have acted as prescribers to attract other stakeholders.
>
> 2. **The passive group**. They usually wait for the result of the proposal. If the proposal goes on, they follow the first group, if not, they disappear.
>
> For this project, we have tried to keep involved all of them by organising focus group, workshops… in order to involve them in the design of the project."

3.2   Fulfilling a common baseline: the EMbleMatiC attributes

This section corresponds to the topics 4 and 5 of the questionnaire, which are devoted to the way the partners addressed the fulfilment of the commonly agreed attributes and how they proved this compliance via submission of evidences. The following charts complete an exhaustive review of the results from the questionnaire. On the left side, pie charts show the results related to the degree of difficulty that the partners found when fulfilling each attribute, while the bar charts on the right side show the main difficulties that the partners faced in this process.

The presentation of the charts doesn't follow the original attributes' list order. Instead, they will be presented according their fulfilment's average degree of difficulty: from the easiest to the most difficult attributes.

The attributes for which the partners found the least difficulties are the following:

#2 Low to medium difficulty

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

33%
67%

Main difficulty
None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0%   50%   100%

#5 Including properly indicated panoramic viewpoints

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

22%
78%

Main difficulty
None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0%   50%   100%

#9 Including visits on cultural heritage sites & monuments

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

44%
56%

Main difficulty
None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%

#26 Providing interpretation material in at least local languages & English

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

20%
80%

Main difficulty
None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0%   50%   100%

All these attributes (except for the last one, no. 26) are included in the basic features of the *Ecoitineraries*. In most of the cases, the attributes indicate aspects that have a fundamental character and, therefore, no partner found difficulties to fulfil, since they belong to the essence of the project. Actually, partners hardly ever indicate a specific difficulty, as the charts on the right hand show.

There is a group of seven further attributes that have received a few answers highlighting a "rather difficult" degree of fulfilment. Attributes #1, 3 and 7are included in the basic features of the *Ecojourneys*. They are associated to 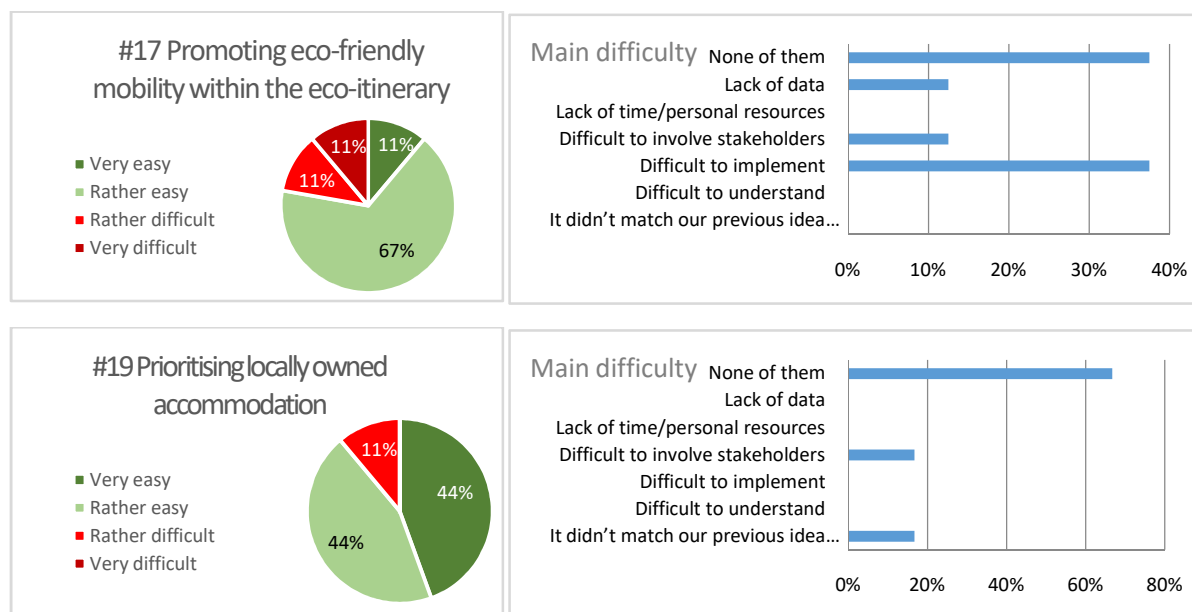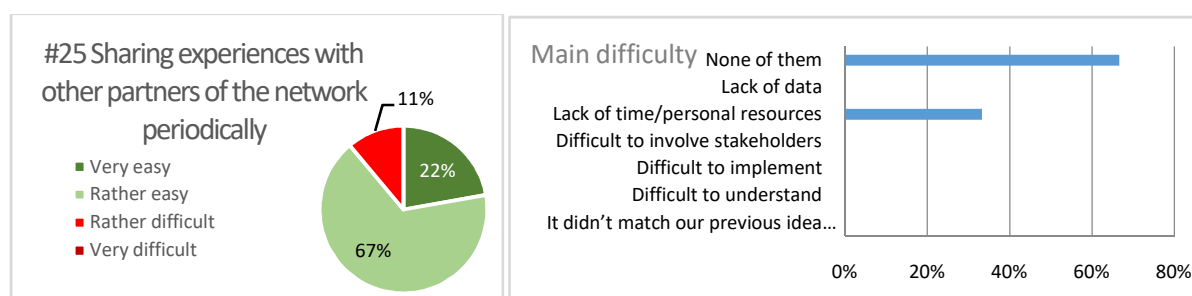unequal starting assumptions within the process by each partner or to the different characteristics of the itineraries. For instance, two partners had to change the design of the route in order to avoid summits and to put the emphasis on the foothills. As of the existing infrastructure, partners made an effort to avoid creating new infrastructure, and they succeed. These individual situations were happily solved in the course of the process. Undoubtedly, the bilateral dialog between the CETT and the respective partner, as well as the multilateral dialog during the transnational meetings helped to overcome these difficulties. Certain accessibility conditions weren't possible to be changed: for instance weather conditions (which are decisive to understand attribute #3) make the accessibility to certain mountains difficult in winter or in summer time.
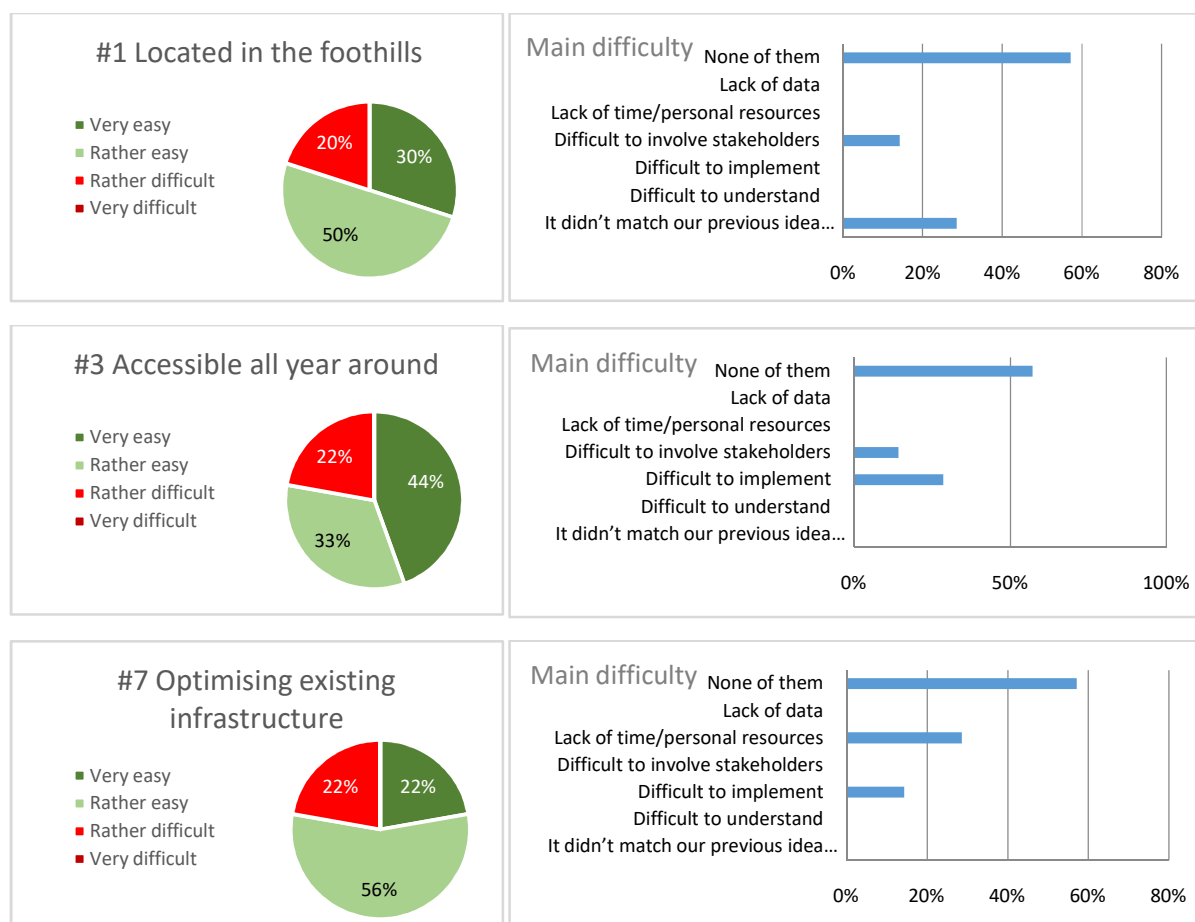
Attributes #17 and 19 are related to the topics of ethics and sustainability. Similarly to the above mentioned attributes, only given partners found difficulties to fulfil them because of their particular characteristics. However, the process of implementation of the *Ecojourneys* and the submission of the corresponding evidences has shown that both issues (i.e. promoting eco-friendly mobility and locally owned accommodations) have been assumed by the partners.

#17 Promoting eco-friendly mobility within the eco-itinerary

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

11% | 11%
11%
67%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

#19 Prioritising locally owned accommodation

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

11%
44%
44%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
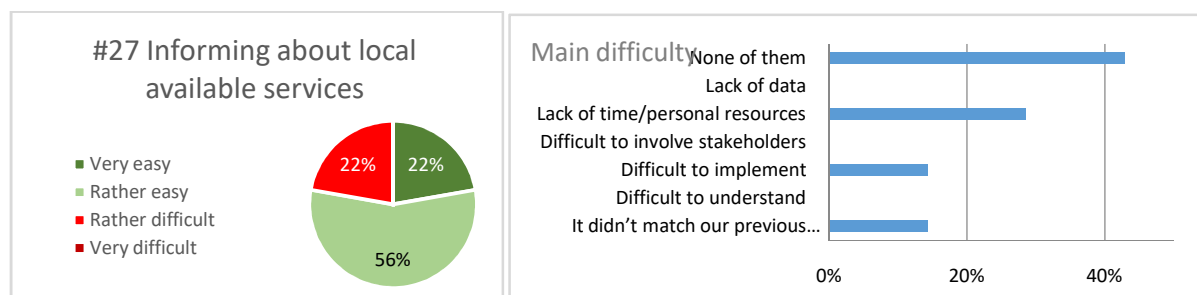- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

Attributes #25 and 27 (related to management and governance aspects) have been overwhelmingly easily fulfilled by the partners with some exceptions. However, at this point, it is relevant to highlight that the attribute #25 has been misunderstood by the partners. Sharing experiences with other partners of the network was referred to the future, i.e. beyond the EMbleMatiC project. During the discussion process of the common attributes, many partners argued that they weren't in a position to reassure that regular exchange will take place between the partners. The CETT provided then a common framework consisting in two parts (the first one based on reporting activities and the second one based on the possibility to organise virtual or physical meetings). No specific calendar was agreed, though. The partners agreed and the document was adopted. After the discussion process, it was surprising that only one partner declared some difficulties to fulfil the attribute.

#25 Sharing experiences with other partners of the network periodically

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

11%
22%
67%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

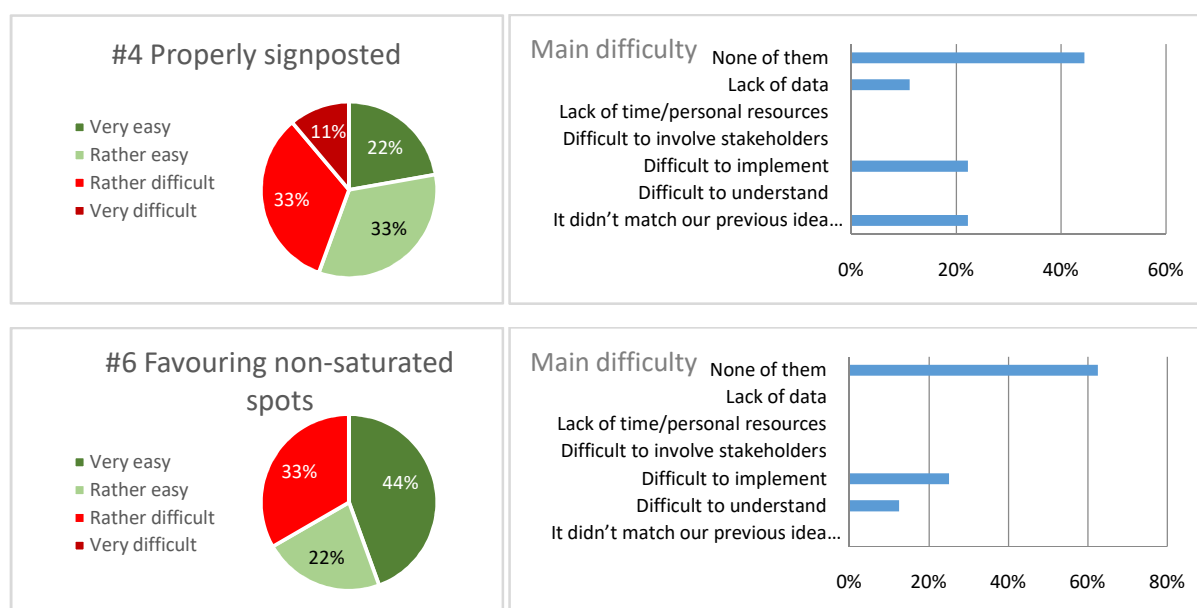0% 20% 40% 60% 80%

As of attribute #27, the major difficulty was to include accommodation services in the tourist guide. Whereas this is valuable information for visitors, some partners stated that they weren't allowed to include certain accommodation, since it would be against the ones that won't be included. In the end, each partner decided whether to include this information in their guide or not.

#27 Informing about local available services

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

22% / 22% / 56%

Main difficulty
- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
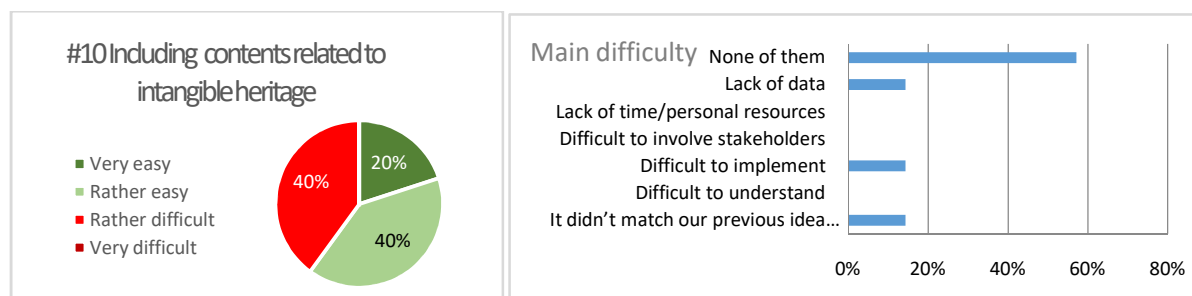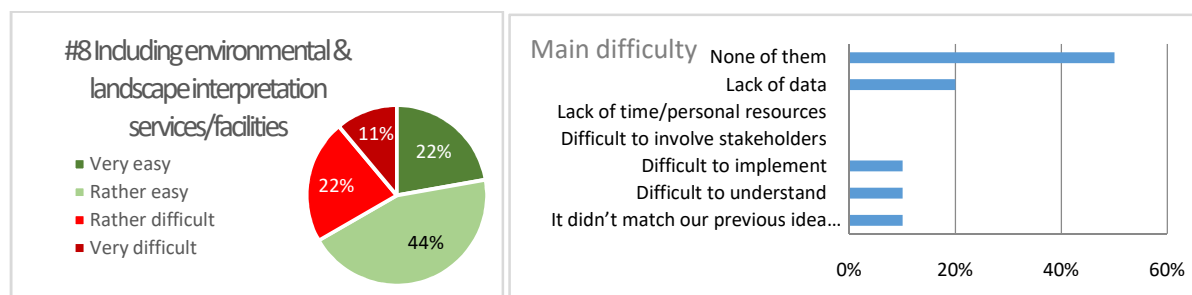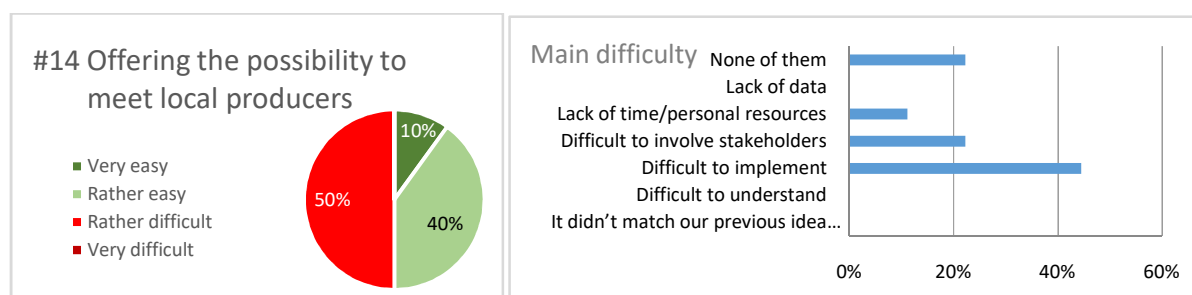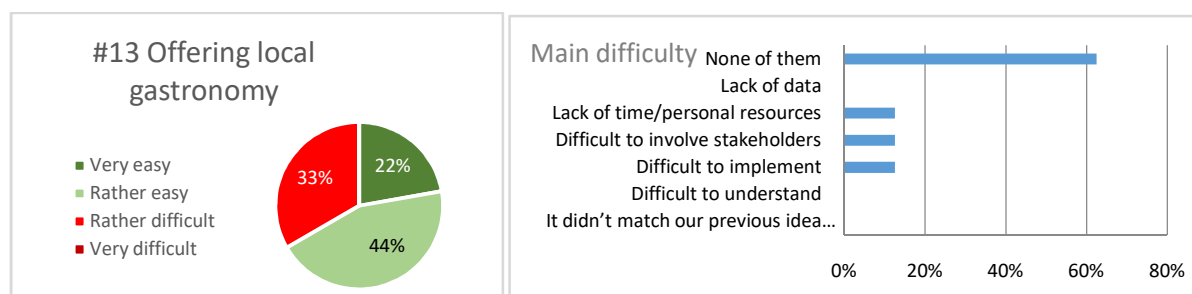- It didn't match our previous…

The next group of attributes show more difficulties to be fulfilled, although the responses highlighting the easiness of the fulfilment are still more than those ones highlighting the difficulties. All in all, they are eight attributes belonging to different topics. Attributes #4 and 6 show the most "problematic" basic features of the *Ecojourneys*, since they aren't self-evident and, therefore, had to be worked out during the design process of the itineraries. On the one hand, signposting was a tricky issue for given partners, since protected area management authorities are often strict with new signs. Eventually, all partners managed to overcome their difficulties and to execute their own signposting projects. On the other hand, some partners had also difficulties in avoiding non-saturated spots, since they are key to access to the planned routes of the *Ecojourney*. Nevertheless, the results from the questionnaire are surprising, since almost all partners focused on external spots that were easily avoided, e.g. coastal and/or urban areas in the vicinity.

#4 Properly signposted

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

22% / 11% / 33% / 33%

Main difficulty
- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

#6 Favouring non-saturated spots

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

44% / 33% / 22%

Main difficulty
- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

Four further attributes show given services that are associated to the *Ecojourney*. Similarly to attribute #6, the responses surprisingly highlighted the difficulties found (especially for including contents related to intangible heritage), whereas the evidence submission for these attributes didn't seem that problematic (see below). All partners were able to identify a series of interpretation services (#8) and also some festivities or events related to intangible heritage (#10). From the charts below, we should interpret that incorporating them to the *Ecojourney* hasn't been straightforward in some cases, and this might be related to some difficulties by involving the corresponding stakeholders (e.g. protected areas management authorities, museum authorities, institutions/associations organising cultural events etc.).

#8 Including environmental & landscape interpretation services/facilities

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

22%, 44%, 22%, 11%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% — 20% — 40% — 60%

#10 Including contents related to intangible heritage

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

20%, 40%, 40%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% — 20% — 40% — 60% — 80%

Attributes #13 and 14 refer to the same idea: to offer services associated to gastronomy and other local products. Here, most of the partners answered that fulfilling them was "easy" or "very easy" (particularly on attribute #13). However, during the evidence submission process it became evident that most of the partners had difficulties to fill in a data base in which they were asked to provide a detailed picture of the involved actors, including their degree of involvement and the certifications they have.

#13 Offering local gastronomy

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

22%, 44%, 33%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% — 20% — 40% — 60% — 80%

#14 Offering the possibility to meet local producers

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

10%, 40%, 50%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea…

0% — 20% — 40% — 60%

There are two further attributes with similar results from the questionnaire that are related to ethics and sustainability aspects. On the one hand, attribute #16 has presented difficulties from the very beginning of the discussion of the attribute in itself, and precisely carbon offsetting. Taking into account that many partners didn't know about this issue and that the network eventually decided that CETT will provide a common framework to promote this issue, the majority of responses stating the easiness of
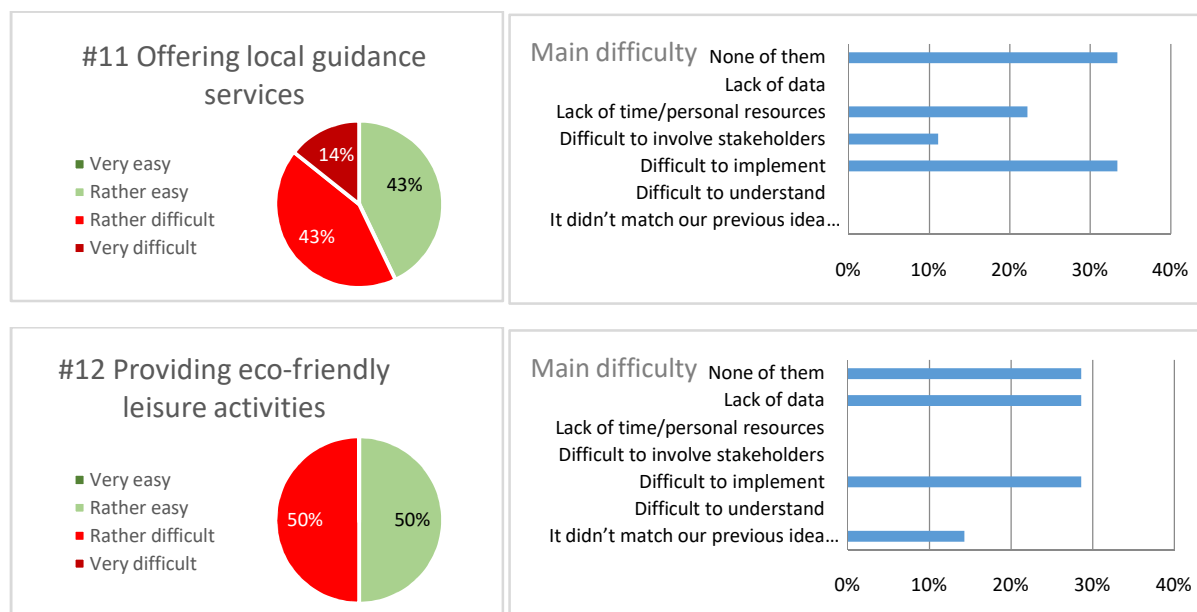
the fulfilment is surprising. Yet, one third of the responses acknowledge that the fulfilment was "very difficult", which is, after all, significant. Likewise, the relatively high percentage of responses highlighting the difficulties in the fulfilment of attribute #20 is surprising, taking into account that the CETT provided a common basis document and that none of the partners had difficulties to provide its own document.
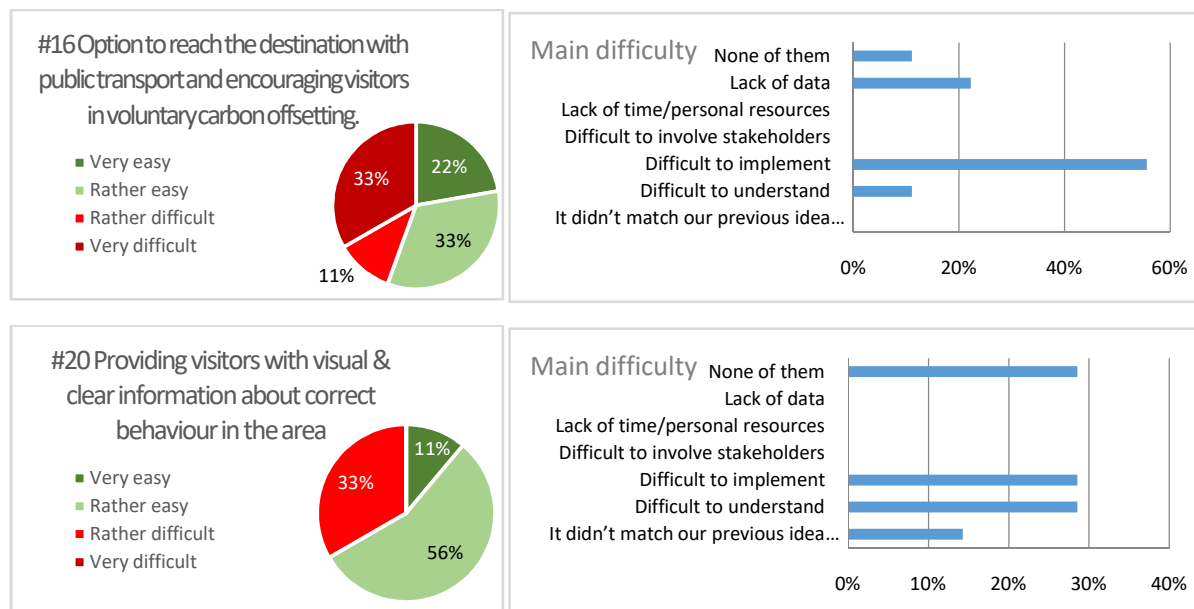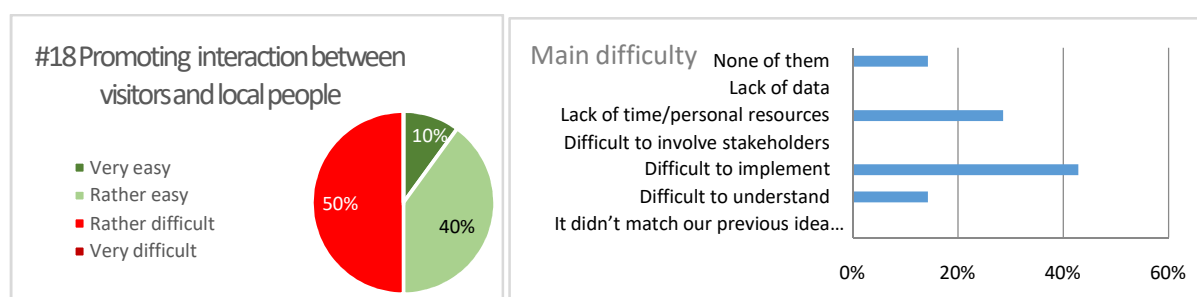

Last, attribute #23 refers to management and governance issues. Here, the partners had to fill in a template with an exhaustive list of stakeholders that were/will be involved in the process. The relatively high number of responses highlighting the difficulties found is surprising, and it reflects that collecting the data from the stakeholders was, indeed, an arduous process.
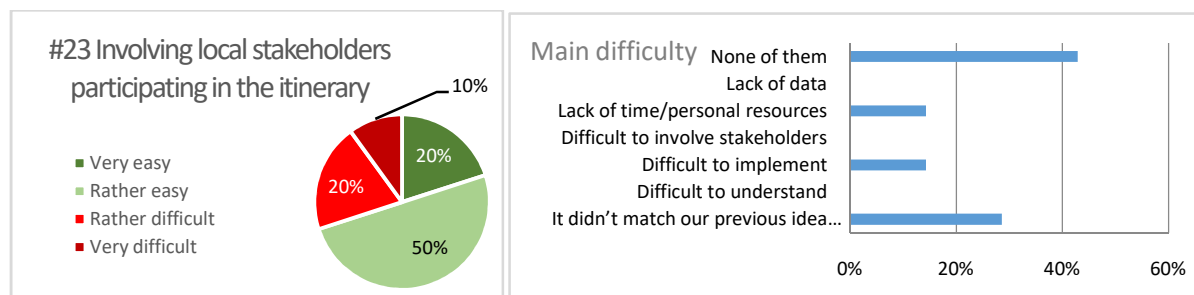
Three further attributes report high degrees of difficulty in at least half of the responses. Two of them (#11 and 12) correspond to the *Ecojourney's* associated services of guiding and leisure activities with environmentally friendly character. In both cases, partners highlighted implementation difficulties (*see charts on the right side*). As of guidance services, the evidence submission process showed how difficult arranging local guides can be. In most of the cases, the partners complemented their pool with guides from the greater region.

#11 Offering local guidance services

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

14%
43%
43%

Main difficulty

None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

#12 Providing eco-friendly leisure activities

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

50% 50%

Main difficulty

None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0% 10% 20% 30% 40%

Attribute #18 was agreed by the whole consortium as necessary, although setting it down on the real praxis is something tricky: while everyone recognises the need to facilitate interaction between visitors and locals, no specific form of interaction could be reassured by the partners. The interactions should happen as a result of the visitors' decisions. Arenas for these interactions might be the accommodation, the leisure activities offered by locals (both with commercial and non-commercial character), and the plain chance. It was no coincidence that the most mentioned difficulty was the implementation of the attribute (*see chart on the right*).

#18 Promoting interaction between visitors and local people

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

10%
50% 40%

Main difficulty

None of them
Lack of data
Lack of time/personal resources
Difficult to involve stakeholders
Difficult to implement
Difficult to understand
It didn't match our previous idea…

0% 20% 40% 60%

The following four attributes are the last ones of the list. They are, according to the questionnaire responses, by far the ones that presented the most difficulties to be fulfilled. One common issue is that, attending the whole evidence submission process, they were those in which the majority of the partners had more difficulties. As a matter of fact, all the following attributes have been discussed several times during the lifetime of the project; and, for all of them, common documents were prepared to ease their fulfilment. Lastly, these attributes show the limits of the common effort to establish a bottom line that all partners had to meet in order to build up an *EMbleMatiC Ecojourney*. As it will be argued in chapter 4, these attributes summarise the future challenges that such a product has to face in order to become something *different* from the usual touristic offer in the Mediterranean basin.

Attribute #15 is the only one that was considered as "rather difficult" or "very difficult" by all partners. During the process, there were numerous difficulties dealing with this issue. First, two partners argued
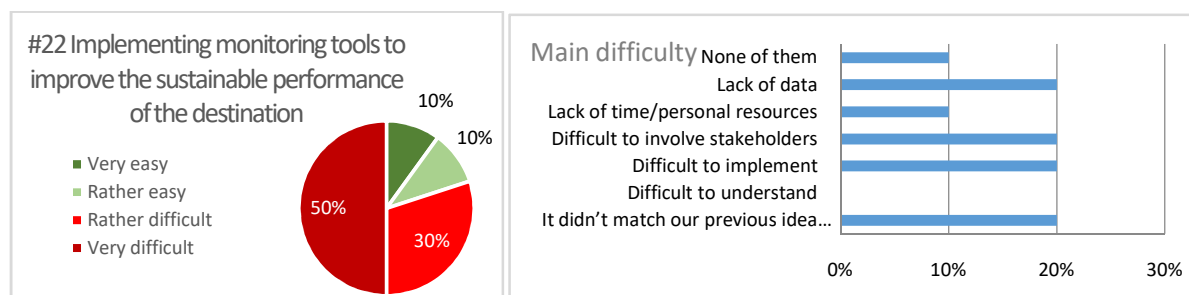
that in their countries there is no tradition of preparing take-away meals for hikers. Second, several partners misunderstood the content of the attribute: whereas it's about promoting eco-friendly services, they thought it was about offering facilities to have picnic. Most of the partners realised only at the end of the process what was their mission here: indeed, just to raise awareness about the need of offering picnic packages containing as many regional, seasonal and organic products as possible and the minimum plastic packages as possible. It's not surprising that the associated evidence was rated as the most difficult to provide by the partners (*see chart in figure 7 below*). Anyhow, even when the content of the attribute was clear to everybody, some partners (*see Fig. 5*) put in question the feasibility of the attribute.
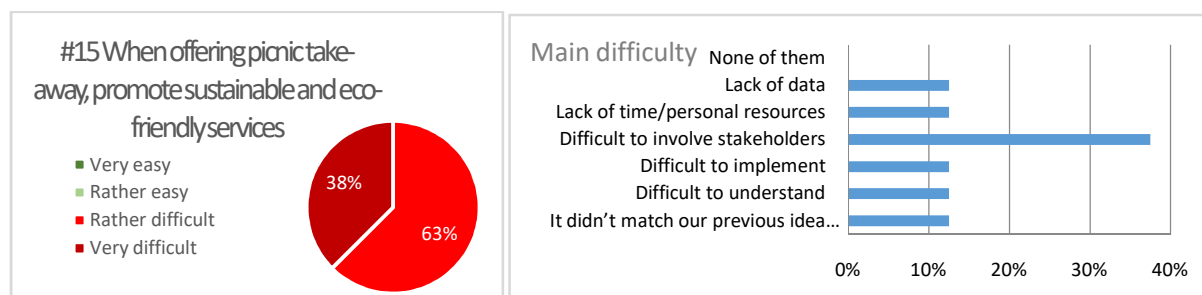
Likewise, attribute #21 created intense discussions within the project consortium about its feasibility. As everyone understood the need of implementing best practices in terms of responsible tourism, most of the partners argued that the current moment is not mature enough to take that step. Difficulties in involving stakeholders and the implementation of a strategy in this direction were mentioned as the main difficulties (*see chart on the right*). Nevertheless, all partners have committed to use an agreed document consisting in 9 measures when approaching local stakeholders. Similarly to attribute #15, here the goal is to raise awareness among them, since no measure can be imposed by any of the partners, not being a certification authority.
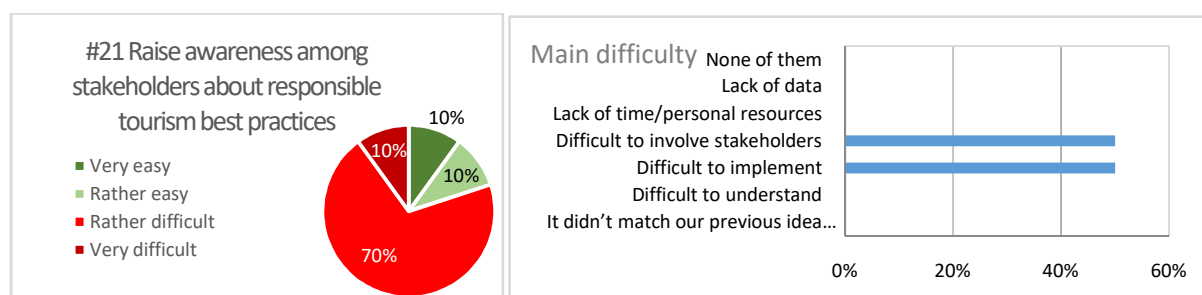
Attribute #22 tackled one aspect (monitoring) with at least two aspects that are *per se* difficult: first, the fact that it needs to be applied in the future, i.e. after the project's lifetime, and this always means high degrees of uncertainty. And second, the intrinsic difficulties of monitoring third parties (i.e. stakeholders). Having a look on what happened during the evidence submission process, this is by far the most demanding attribute in terms of time. Most of the partners had difficulties in submitting the plan of action that CETT designed for this evidence. Many of them asked for support. Even one partner has not been able to submit its plan of action yet (as of September 1, 2019).

#22 Implementing monitoring tools to improve the sustainable performance of the destination

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

10%
10%
50%
30%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea...

However, there's one attribute with an even higher percentage of responses saying that its fulfilment was "very difficult" (more than half of them): it's attribute #24, about indicators. Here, the difficulties are self-evident: lack of available data, which means in the practice the impossibility to apply the suggested indicators, and lack of resources by the partners (which is both related to lack of personal and to the uncertain future after the project end). Indeed, the initial suggestion by the CETT (consisting of a selection of 20 ETIS[2] indicators) was agreed on an even shorter selection of 10 of these indicators after the insistence from several partners.

#24 Using indicators to monitor and manage the impact of the itinerary

- Very easy
- Rather easy
- Rather difficult
- Very difficult

11%
11%
56%
22%

Main difficulty

- None of them
- Lack of data
- Lack of time/personal resources
- Difficult to involve stakeholders
- Difficult to implement
- Difficult to understand
- It didn't match our previous idea...
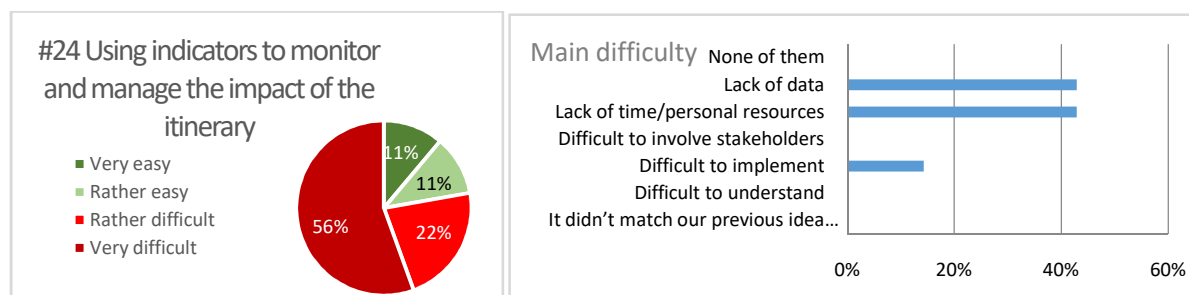
Apart from an exhaustive review of each attribute, the partners were asked if any of the included attributes wasn't needed. Only two partners answered positively, arguing that attribute #15 (on picnic services) is more likely to become part of the future development (as mentioned above), once there will be some consolidated tourism products. The picnic offer, so they argued, might become sustainable only if regular flows of visitors happen. In addition, another partner warned about attribute #18 (on promoting interaction between visitors and locals), which might become a simple commercial relationship between client and provider, if it only includes services such as accommodation or guidance. Interaction with locals and residents is, according to this partner, much more than this: they should be outside the tourism sector, and this is very difficult because you can't force relationships that can only happen spontaneously.

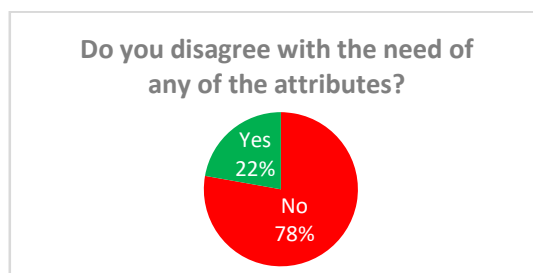[2] ETIS stands for European Tourism Indicators System.

Figure 5. Chart showing the results of Q 4.2. *Source: Authors' own*

The other side of the coin is whether some attribute is missing. Only one partner answered positively, while providing a list of possible missing attributes:

(i)   To establish a regular network with local stakeholders.
(ii)   To establish a network with local stakeholders and elected people.
(iii)   To improve to accessibility for disabled people within the *Ecojourney*.
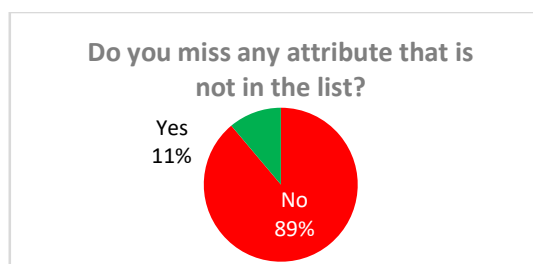(iv)   To organise training sessions for stakeholders.

Figure 6. Chart showing the results of Q 4.3. *Source: Authors' own*

An issue that is of outmost importance in this process is **how stakeholder reacted to the agreed attributes**. During the internal discussion about the list of the attributes to be included in the terms of reference, the partners were often reluctant about certain attributes because of the negative local stakeholders' reactions. This was actually one of the main reasons why certain attributes (e.g. #18, 21, or 24) were substantially modified, namely "softened" in terms of demand level. The following box summarises what the partners answered to this question from the questionnaire. The overall conclusion is that, generally speaking, stakeholders didn´t seem to react in a reactive way. However, many partners highlight communication barriers with stakeholders.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK:

"Our own overall feedback is positive, since (i) there is a **clear coherency** between the contents of the 5 attributes group and (ii) there is a clear **mirroring** of the *Ecojourney* attributes and one of the structuring project from our site certification action plan that inspired us when writing the EMbleMatiC application form."

"The stakeholders **agreed** with the attributes and also **offered**[themselves]to improve the quality of evidences."

"Stakeholders **agreed** on the necessity of the existence of a Destination Management structure. The existence of such an organisation could improve our performance in the tourism market highlighting our mountain as one of the main assets."

"They saw this project as an **opportunity** to evolve in the management of the territory and develop joint strategies between the public sector and the private sector. They are active because they see that our label is a brand name for tourism. The label is a local agreement that **motivates** them to promote and support initiatives as *Ecojourneys*."

"We had very **goodadvice** from the authorities and NGOs that are acting in the area."

"Stakeholders would like to **receive some training and more information** about ecotourism taking also responsibilities and feedback about our destination and its networks."

NEGATIVE FEEDBACK:

"Looking at it from the point of view of our stakeholders, the attributes are more an **auditing list** using our project jargon **rather than a communicative tools** that concentrate on main eco-itinerary principles. Therefore, we had to seek various contributions from various stakeholders by highlighting only the attribute relevant to them to get the best contribution."

AMBIVALENT REACTIONS:

"While some attributes were completely **familiar** to some stakeholders, for others, they were **totally new** and they sound **strange and useless**."

"Whereas some stakeholders saw this project as an **excellent opportunity** to improve their business, others **couldn't understand** why we need such a long process to build a new tourism offer.Anyway, when we explained them, they understood it perfectly and realised that it was necessary to open new ways to improve their business, attract new clients and adapt to new tourism trends."

"Most of the topics are already known to operators and meeting participants. Both at the level of public administration (national park, municipalities, and regions) and at the level of individual operators (accommodation facilities, restaurants, services) concepts such as sustainable tourism, optimisation of resources, and respect for the environment are now known and are part of a culture that is consolidating. However, **some topics were not and are not familiar**, such as offering take away picnics because it is not part of the local or national culture; the one about public transport was also problematic, because it is a sort of taboo subject – cultural barriers and the fact that the *Ecojourney*cannot be reached by public transport; the one about raise awareness on environmental good practices is still difficult to achieve because among the operators the culture of "exchange of views" is missing; the one about a plan of action and about sustainability indicators were also difficult because of there are extremely complex issueswithout adequate tools and –not least- the operators do not care about this type of information.There are also many difficulties regarding the attribute about including services in the tourist guide because often individual operators do not know what others are doing and do not want to join a network or a structured system."

Moving to further issues, the actual commitment from the partners in the attribute fulfilling had to be demonstrated with positive **evidence**. Under the initiative of the CETT and with the agreement from the whole consortium, given documentation was established for each attribute. The monitoring process of

the evidence submission has taken one year, with regular checks on the online platform and numerous bilateral and multilateral consultations.

In the questionnaire, some questions related to the evidences (their nature and their submission process) were included. First, the partners were asked about the **difficulty degree** of each evidence. This is a question that runs parallel to the questions related to the degree of difficulty of the attributes in themselves (being shown above). As a matter of fact, and as the chart on figure 7 shows, there are many parallels with the charts from the individual attributes. Evidence from attribute 15 (on picnic services) has been mentioned by the highest number of partners, and this matches the high degree of difficulty of the attribute as such (*see the corresponding chart on p. 19*). Other often mentioned evidences were the ones corresponding to attributes #10, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23 and 24. From these evidences, only two, i.e. #19 (about locally owned accommodation) and 23 (about stakeholder involvement) correspond to attributes that weren't particularly difficult to fulfil, according to the partners' responses (see corresponding charts above). The rest of the evidences correspond to attributes that have been difficult to fulfil. This means that there is a high degree of coherence in the partners' responses between attributes and evidences.
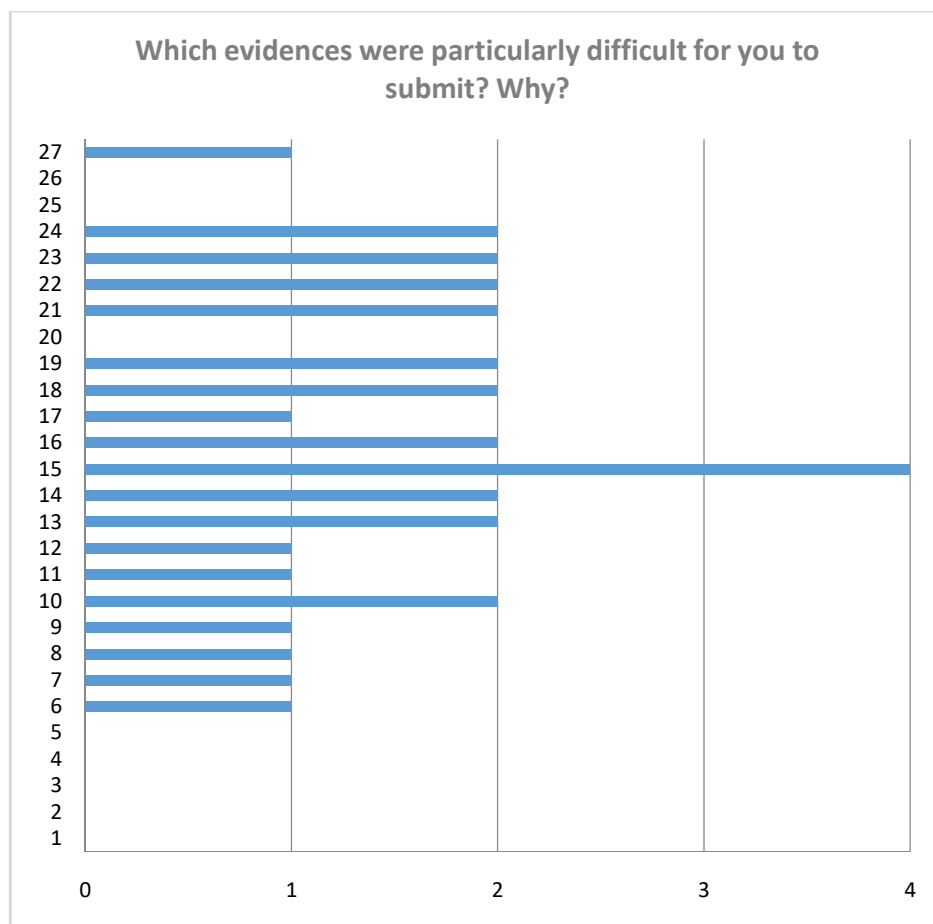
Figure 7. Chart showing the results of Q 5.4.The Y axis shows the attribute nos., whereas the X axis shows the number of responses.*Source: Authors' own.*

In the following box, the individual responses to this question are summarised:

"#1 and 2 could have been joined together"

"#6, on favouring non-saturated spots. As we have not enough information about the number of visitors of each place, it is difficult to show the evidence that we are favouring non-saturated spots."

"#10, because I had difficulties in understanding what information to select and where to go to find the data, since they are all fragmented and there are no specific collections"

"#14, although we had a complete list of the operators present in the *Ecojourney* territory, it was difficult to understand how to insert them in the itinerary because not everyone is willing to participate in events or tastings and not all of them have the requirements of quality (for example WC or adequate spaces for tasting)"

"#15, because of the absence of tourist flow to already stimulate an offer from stakeholders and for the requirements to raise awareness about use of biodegradable/non plastic packaging and cutlery"

"#15, because there's no picnic service existing today. We have asked restaurants to offer this service but they are not necessarily equipped for, and it requires them to change their logistics."

"#18, on promoting interaction between locals and visitors. Except interaction between visitors and tourism business, it is difficult to extend this evidence more"

"#21 & 24. Apparently, time is a crucial factor for the production of both evidences. Although the itinerary has been consolidated, raising awareness is a time consuming process. So is the monitoring of the impact of the itinerary."

"#22,because it is long term and it may be easier to raise it and conclude it once the project is live andmake a real sense to the stakeholders involved."

"#22 and 16, because it is difficult to be measured and be implemented."

"#16, because public transport is present in the territory of the *Ecojourney*, but it is difficult to implement a voluntary carbon offsetting"

"#24, aboutusing indicators to monitor and manage the impact of the *Ecojourney*. For implementing this point, we need information and collaboration from different points, it will be very difficult to manage."

"#27, because of a lack of organized information and, therefore, a lot of time in finding what information to enter and where to find it"

"All evidences related to involvement of private stakeholders were difficult"

Further aspects that were surveyed are related with specific aspects of the submission evidence. The chart from figure 8 shows that only one partner had timing problems with the evidence submission, although the reality looks very different: only one partner managed to upload all evidences by the first agreed deadline, and the same happened for the second deadline. In the third (and last) agreed deadline, there was still one partner with pending evidences to be uploaded. If we have a look on the compliance level, in each of the deadlines there have been manifold evidences that needed some kind of improvement in order to fully comply with the common standards. This means that there has been an

extremely divergent perception between the partners and the coordinator of the evidence submission process, namely the CETT about the deadline calendar and its convenience.
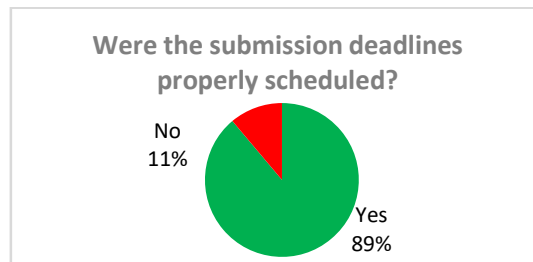

Figure 8. Chart showing the results of Q 5.1. *Source: Authors' own.*

As of the role of the CETT, there were no complaints on the questionnaire (*see Fig. 9*) nor during the focus group. Bilateral communication (both via email and in person during the transnational meetings) always develop in terms of cordiality and with positive feedback. Very often, partners reacted when the CETT sent reminders or individual feedback.

Figure 9. Chart showing the results of Q 5.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

The well-known online storage platform *Dropbox* was used to store all evidences by all partners with the exception of one partner, which was not able to use it due to internal regulations. Apart from this, there were no major technical problems with the platform and the CETT could always do the monitoring without the need of approaching each partner for every single aspect. In the questionnaire, the majority of the partners stated that the platform allowed them to take advantage from the fact of having access to all data from all partners (*see Fig. 10*).
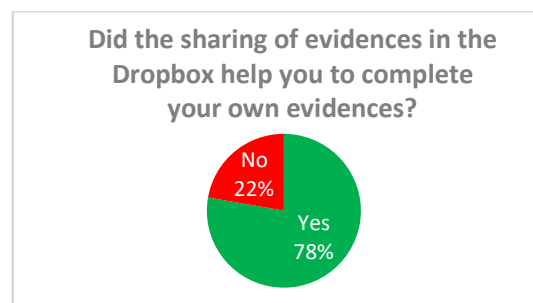

Figure 10. Chart showing the results of Q 5.3. *Source: Authors' own.*

3.3   Bringing the route on the ground: practical issues

The next step of the process was to implement the designed itinerary on the ground. To do so, aspects related to the identification of the route, legal issues surrounding the project and investments needed to bring the idea from the paper to the terrain were considered as important to be surveyed. For this reason, the questionnaire included them (topics 6, 7 and 8 –*see questionnaire guidelines on table 2*).

All partners were asked to describe their own process of design of their Ecojourney. They provided heterogeneous answers on the basis of a list of steps that they followed. In order to ensure a minimum reading flow in this report, we're not going to show here all individual responses or an aggregate result, since merging responses wouldn't make sense. Instead, we include the results of the plenary discussion during the focus group. On the paper, all partners collected stakeholder opinions in order to design their *Ecojourney* (*see Fig. 11*)…

Figure 11. Chart showing the results of Q 6.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

However, in practice, the individual experiences have been different. All partners (with only one exception) have involved both private and public stakeholders. Some of them strove for establishing stable associations with public and private members to give continuity to the project. There have been examples of municipalities that didn't show any interest because of lack of trust from the elected charges. This lack of trust might be related to the uncertainty after the end of the project, since funds are not ensured. As of the nature of the contact with the stakeholders, only two partners have been celebrating regular meetings with the stakeholders, while the rest seem to have organised 1 to 2 meetings only, one at the beginning of the process and another at the end.

Of course, this point, which is of outmost importance, and precisely the partners' approach, strongly depended on the legal nature of the partner, which –as a matter of fact- was pretty diverse. This issue has also determined the kind of **difficulties** that the partners have found during the design of their *Ecojourneys*. The answers from the questionnaire are summarized in the following box:

TO ENSURE THE PROJECT BENEFITS TO THE WHOLE AREA
"… to involve the largest number of municipalities (as possible) into this pilot project."

DEALING WITH LEGAL CONSTRAINTS
 "The main difficulty has been that the initial itinerary had to be redrawing because of legal aspects with a section, so the initial circular route turned into a linear route."

DEALING WITH EXTERNAL EXPERTISE

"... an external expert to bring out an overall coherency under a storytelling narrative has generated extra deadlines by postponing the implementation of mediation tools and contents to put them in conformity with the story telling message.
...to make sure that this (communicative story telling) message will apply to the (whole area)."
"...need to have external expertise"

TRANSLATING INTO UNDERSTANDABLE LANGUAGE
"...need to mediate the technical aspect of the project framework to make it more accessible to stakeholders and general public."

ON THE ECOJOURNEY SERVICES
"...the conceptualisation of the inclusion of services in the *Ecojourney*."

ENGAGING PUBLIC SECTOR
"...the lack of involvement by the public agents of the territory that has remained essentially in the hands of private agents."

CHANGING THE TOURISM MODEL
"... many operators still try to attract mass tourism and "Sunday" that is difficult to reconcile with the territory itself and with the guidelines of the project and the Med program. (...) Our work has been mainly on (...) promoting a culture against "mass tourism"and making the various operators aware of a concept of slow tourism, focusing on quality and a tourist offer not concentrated only in the summer. "

SCEPTICISM FOR INVESTMENTS
"Most of the stakeholders are always suspicious about European projects. They think that after the work it will be not a prosecution that's why many of them are not willing in making investment in the project"

(RECONCILING) OPPOSITE INTERESTS
"The main issue was to present them that *Ecojourney*would be a common goal and everyone has benefited from this. After that, everyone would like to have accessibility in the *Ecojourney*, everyone would like to ha the *Ecojourney*. Our solution was to share *Ecojourney*in 9 different but connected paths surrounding our mountain."

"...opposite interests of a part of the entrepreneurs of the tourism sector, who were interested in investing on the *Ecojourney*(hotel investments mostly)."

"... the needs of the mayor of the small town are different from those of the restaurateur, but an attempt has been made to bring all the ideas together in a common project linked to sustainability."

SELECTING STAKEHOLDERS
- stakeholder selection (objectivity, completeness)

MAKING STAKEHOLDERS TRUSTWORTHY
"to know the real practice of restaurateurs"

Another topic was the influence of **legal aspects** on the *Ecojourney*. First, the partners mentioned a series of issues they were forced to take into account. The following box summarises the answers, which have been thematically clustered.

ACCESSIBILITY, OWNERSHIP:
"Accessibility of paths"

"Choosing public paths to be integrated in the eco-itinerary, requiring authorisations from natural park manager & municipalities"
"To use open paths (or validated paths for walking and cycling)"
"Land property and related legal responsibility"

PROCUREMENT/INVESTMENT ALLOWANCE/RULES:
"What kind of small scale investment and in which point to put them"
"Generally public procurement rules for the recruitment of the various contractors"

RESTRICTIONS IN PROTECTED AREAS (incl. SIGNPOSTING):
"Mostly of the problem are linked to the part of territory including the two regional parks, because they have sometimes very restrictive laws concerning the use of the territory"
"In the protected areas there are bureaucratic difficulties, sometimes insurmountable, for the signage of the paths or to place signs indicating a restaurant or an accommodation facility, even on the road. In addition, there are many public road managers that prevent organic work related to signage"
"Follow the rules of the Natural Park for the general panels, signposts,"

SIGNPOSTING
"Permissions for signposting was one legal aspect we had to take into account. This issue was facilitated by the municipality as the competent body to issue permissions for the installations of signposts."
"Signalisation: compliance with the existing established protocols and practices: painted marks on tracks, directional panels and blades on footpaths, directional panel on public driving roads"
"Signposting"

PROMOTION
"Promotion"
"Compliance with the "project branding, information and publicity rules" (and more widely programme and EU rules)"

TRANSPORTATION
"Transportation"

One third of the partners stated that, at some point, they were forced to change the design of their *Ecojourney* due to legal aspects (see fig. 12)…
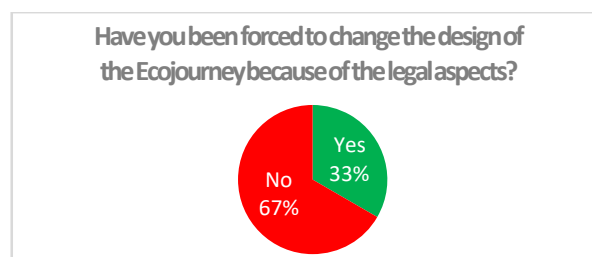

Figure 12. Chart showing the results of Q 7.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

…whereas only two out of nine partners were favoured by some kind of legal advantage, such as existing protocols for directional signage, road signage, and footpath painted directional marks. One partner stated that the fact of being a local public authority gave them certain advantages of legal character, but without specifying which ones.
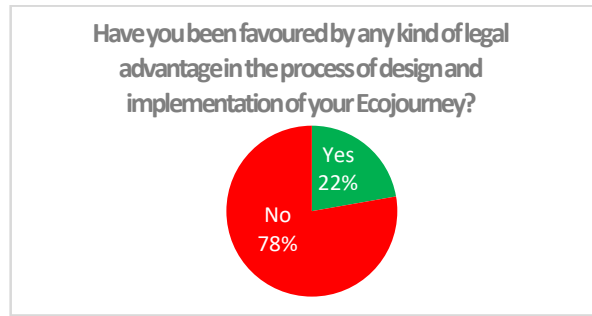
Figure 13. Chart showing the results of Q 7.2. *Source: Authors' own.*

The last topic of this chapter is related to **ad-hoc investments**. For the majority of partners, estimating the investments they needed for their project was rather easy (*see fig. 14*). Still, one third of the partners stated that this issue was rather difficult for them.
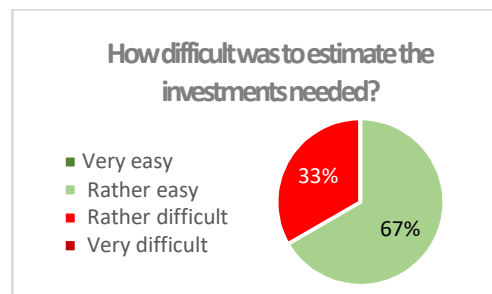

Figure 14. Chart showing the results of Q 8.1. *Source: Authors' own.*

Being asked for the reasons, the partners who answered that the investment estimation was difficult highlighted the following:

"The difficulties related to small-scale investments were of **economic character** (the amount is really small compared to the total amount of the project), but also related to the **typeof investment**. The project mainly included expenses for signage and eco-counters, but these investments proved to be unsuitable for our territory. For this reason, we had to request a specific authorization from the Joint Secretariat [of the Interreg MED programme] to have an investment plan more appropriate to the territory, also based on the concrete needs expressed by the operators"

"To make investments in our country and in our region is matter of Archaeology Agency, Forestry Authorities, Local Authorities and Region Government, so it's an issue of **bureaucracy** and many rules that everyone should follow."

"For this programming period, the Interreg MED team has introduced a **20% flexibility** rule on the way the partners manage their budget between accounting lines and working packages. In addition to this, we have learnt that there will be an extra 10% reallocation available to use when partners will file their final period payment claim. (...) Our focus on the *Ecojourney* has leaded our budget choices and allowed to **multiply by more than 2.5 the initial budgeted** amount dedicated to this purpose. We have for example redirected some of the internal staff cost to fund mediation tools needed on the eco-itinerary and generating direct impacts for the municipalities involved."

The latter issue might be related with the available budget. In this sense, we asked the partners to estimate whether the allocated budget was enough or not. And the result gives a fairly balanced picture, in which positive answers are only slightly below negative ones (*see fig. 15*).
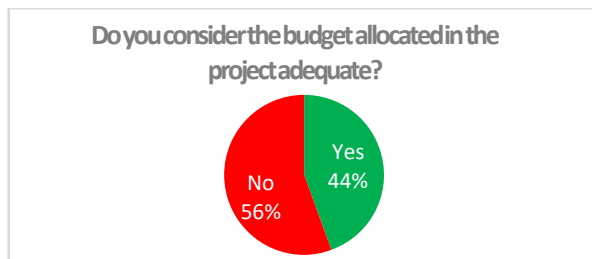

Figure 15. Chart showing the results of Q 8.3. *Source: Authors' own.*

Anyhow, most of those partners who don't consider their budget adequate were able to execute their scheduled investments anyway, as figure 16 shows. This has been possible mainly to internal flexibility rules given by the InterregMED Joint Secretariat. In some other cases, the partners obtained some additional budget from external partners, e.g. municipalities involved in the *Ecojourney*.
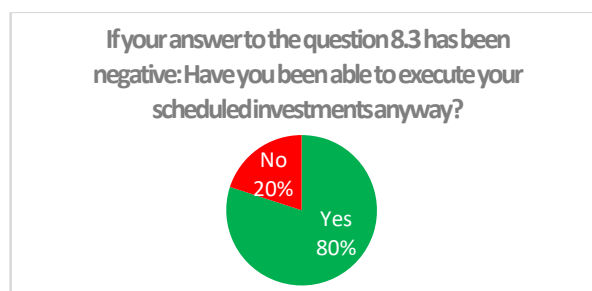

Figure 16. Chart showing the results of Q 8.4. *Source: Authors' own.*

3.4   Launching a tourist product: the Ecojourney

Once the project could be implemented on the ground, the partners were confronted with its promotion. From a route or itinerary, a tourist product, which we agreed to call *Ecojourney*, was expected to be created. This issue corresponds to the questionnaire's topics 9 and 10 (*see table 2*).

The first point was whether the partners have actually done the above mentioned step, i.e. whether they have **transformed the itinerary into a tourist product**. The aggregate answers (*see fig. 17*) might be surprising, because more than half of the partners answered negatively. However, the main explanation is the project schedule. While the testing period of the *Ecojourney* was scheduled for the last 4 months of the project (July to October 2019), the questionnaire feedback happened before (April-May 2019). As a matter of fact, and despite the differences among the partners (resulting on unequal capacity on promoting a product –*see below*), all partners endeavoured to bring the itinerary to the market.
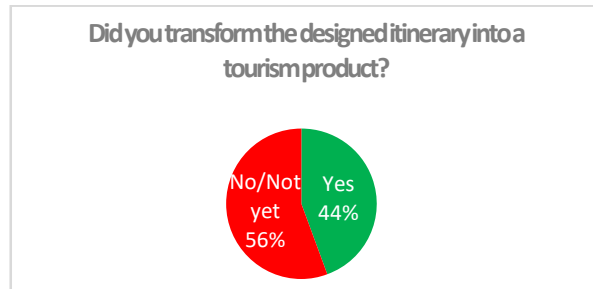
Figure 17. Chart showing the results of Q 9.1. *Source: Authors' own.*

As of the way of promoting the *Ecojourney*, figure 18 shows that from those partners who (still) haven't done this step, most of them will create a tourist package or tour.

Figure 18. Chart showing the results of Q 9.3. *Source: Authors' own.*

This issue gains interest when some insights about how the partners managed to transform the route into an *Ecojourney* are presented:

"Our *Ecojourney* will be advertised using the **current channels**: all tourism offices will have printed versions of the map (both sides with the full layout of the main itinerary and the 9 small peripheral loops of the path) alongside the printed material of the existing path and products that we are offering."

"In the **creation of the business network**, we have included a **tour operator** among the members. Thanks to the presence of the tour operator we are quantifying the activities to propose a tour package on the market. In our opinion, marketing a product and, therefore, a territory creates an added value to the project that, otherwise, would remain only on paper as experimentation (yet another)"

"It was (already) a tourism product, but we have made it more **communicative** and more **functional**"

"We **encourage stakeholders** during our meetings to create a tourist product"

Also the **difficulties** found during this process are of high interest:

TIMING:
"Hiking activity is part of the touristic offer in our region, well developed, with consolidated local and private initiative taking benefit from this, so the itinerary **will turn into a touristic product once been open and promoted** via the tourist guideof the *Ecojourney*, leaflets, and info available on Internet (websites, our Hiking APP, social medias, etc)."
"The challenge here is to **move from a tour to a package**. Our working group "economical development" and "commercialisation" has identified and isolate two portions for the eco-itinerary and has worked with the

tourism offices and the tourism boards of the communities of municipalities to put together an offer of 2 products (tours) for summer 2019. At this stage, we **cannot confirm** that this offer**will be definitely ready** for the summer 2019."

TIME AVAILABILITY:
"The reason why we haven't achieved it is the lack of time until now."

PERMIT RESTRICTIONS:
"Only public entities are allowed to create tourism packages, so **we can't**. We will offer it to any commercial company to create and sell a proper product."

PRODUCT FINE-TUNE:
"We try to find special features in the area that **differentiate** this journey from the routine vacation journeys and the sports (hiking, mountain biking and extreme sports) that are common for the area. Also a series of interventions upgrading and preserving the cultural and natural assets made it difficult to give a final shape to the elements of this journey. Hence, the information about this *ecojourney* keeps being updated. The transformation of the *ecojourney* in a tourism product may be materialised **in the future**. No major problems are foreseen in this aspect."

RAISE AWARENESS:
"It's an alternative kind of tourism in our area which is **not usual and popular for our stakeholders**. It is important to inform them about the benefits of this hiking experience which is opposite of massive tourism model supporting individually and self-organising tour packaging"

The partners were also asked about **marketing** issues. One of the issues that was foreseen already on the project application was a common marketing document called **marketing brief**. This document was developed by the CETT in an iterative process with all partners representing a mountain area. Actually, the Terms of Reference with the common attributes (*see chapter 3.2*) was developed hand in hand with the marketing brief, which was finished in September 2018, i.e. before the partners started to implement their *Ecojourneys* on the ground and (of course) well before the final phase of the project, i.e. turning the routes in tourist products.

An important point when evaluating the whole process was to better know *to what extent the marketing brief has been perceived as a useful document*. For this reason, we asked the partners in the questionnaire about the strengths and weaknesses of this document. Table 5 summarises their answers:

Strengths	Weaknesses
Clear definition of the network common values and objectives	We thought the marketing brief would give us more communication tools
The mythological storytelling	Stakeholders don't have a network to address
Clear exposition of the document origin and purpose	We don't have yet applied a completed tourist and cultural policy
Easy to understand	Too vague (e.g. target, price range) due to the collective character of the users (i.e. partnership)
To the point	Perhaps another logotype could convey a stronger message; logo is not the final one
Clearly set out the marketing actions	Superficial storytelling
The positioning is clear and shows all singularities to create our product	Confusing nomenclature (e.g. "attributes")

Branding	Too schematic, i.e. not really inspiring
Logical step sequence	Too much focused on the previous process and too less on agreed issues
Good tool for partners and for the network	No direct application (not allowed to commercialise)

Table 5: Summary of the answers from Q 10.4. *Source: Authors' own.*

Another aspect that is tightly related to the marketing brief are **target groups**. This issue was intensively discussed during the writing process of the marketing brief. Being nine partners located in different regions and with different characteristics, it was not possible to define a specific target profile, but a spectrum of targets being defined according to different criteria: age, household composition, main interest/motivation, way of travelling (e.g. individually, couples, groups), preferred mobility means, region of precedence and budget. The results from the question included in the questionnaire ("What are the main target markets you will direct your messages to?") coincide with the strategy set by the marketing brief. The partners' answers are different, depending on what topic they focus. Some do it on the size/kind of the visitor groups, being small groups preferred in front of large ones, and being seniors and families slightly preferred upon individuals and couples. As of visitors' motivation, nature lovers and active tourists were the most repeated answers. Finally, local and regional/national visitors were slightly preferred in front of international visitors.

Beyond the marketing brief contents, the partners were asked about their **strategies on market, promote and communicate** their *Ecojourney* to the public. The answers are manifold and are summarised in the following box:

USING DIGITAL TOOLS:
- To send articles to various magazines/local press
- To add information in our websites
- To add information in the stakeholders' website
- To insert information in other websites
- To insert information in newsletters
- Through social networks

ORGANISING AND/OR PARTICIPATING IN EVENTS:
- To participate in tourism fairs
- To contact with some tour operators or travel agencies to create a packaged tour
- To organise a press trip
- To organise a *fam trip* for tour operators
- To participate in events organised by public institutions (e.g. municipalities, educational institutions)
- To organise internal meetings with regional working groups
- Other events with EMbleMatiC project

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF EXTERNAL STRATEGIC ACTIONS/NETWORKS:
- Strategic touristic action plan of regional authorities
- Other transnational programs such as Leader
- National/international path networks (e.g. world-trail.com)

AND NOT LEAST: USING ANALOGICAL CHANNELS:
- To reprint cards and diffusion in the tourist offices
- To distribute maps, posters, window stickers among the involved stakeholders

Being asked about any **support** when promoting their product, two thirds of the partners answered affirmatively, i.e. they have received any kind of support, mainly from public authorities (including local/regional authorities -equivalent to NUTS-3 or NUTS-2 regions), national networks of protected areas/sites, national/regional tourism agencies and chambers of commerce.

Figure 19. Chart showing the results of Q 10.3. *Source: Authors' own.*

Further, the partners were asked about their satisfaction level about **communication** aspects around the project. The answers (*see fig. 20*) show an overwhelming, almost complete majority of partners who are very or rather satisfied. As a matter of fact, negative feedback came only by one partner.
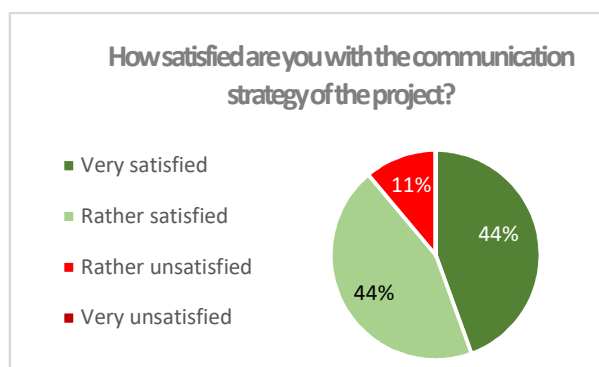

Figure 20. Chart showing the results of Q 10.5. *Source: Authors' own.*

A last open question regarding this issue provides some interesting insights:

"Social network put aside, there is **little done in term of regular periodical information of stakeholders** of all partners. We had suggested releasing a periodical 2,500-character main achievements article that we could write in a press release format to be inserted into our project progress report."

"I think that the most problem is related to the **dissemination** of the project. More must be done in the publicizing of the product"

"We need more **collaboration with other networks** in order to communicate our work."

"For now, **communication is difficult for the general public**. On the Facebook page of EMbleMatiC, too many hashtags discourage people to read."

"We have **not developed or designed enough tools to communicate properly** the strategy of the project and the results neither."

This issue was also discussed during the focus group. The **timing** of the project was the main discussion point: since the final product will be ready only at the final stage of the project (and, in some cases, it seems that even after the project completion), communicating the existence of the *Ecojourneys* is difficult and sometimes not possible. Another point of discussion was the used communication tools. It was argued that in the project budget, no budget for own *Ecojourney* websites was foreseen.

Last, an off-topic, open question was included in the questionnaire ("*Do you have any other comment/suggestion/complain… related to the design and implementation process of your* Ecojourney *that you would like to tell us?*"). Only few partners gave their input, which has been summarised in the following box:

"We'd like to underline the need to **distinguish between the use of two project words**:
 - "*eco-itinerary*" for the physical path on the ground
 - "*ecojourney*" for the eco-tourism product(s) that can be developed and promoted only once the "eco-itinerary" will concretely exist."

"I am worried about the **future of the *ecojourneys***in terms of communication, commercialisation, …as a network."

4. Lessons learnt & Recommendations

In the last chapter of this report, we offer a summary of the main issues that could be identified as the main strengths and weaknesses of the process of designing and implementing the *Ecojourneys*. These issues are clustered in three categories, according to what are the main topics that have influenced the project at most. Additionally, a series of recommendations that are intimately related with the contents of this chapter is offered.

1- The "heterogeneity factor" and the need to reach compromises

After the whole process, the main conclusion that we obtain is that working with a network with nine representatives from nine different regions across the Mediterranean basin is everything but straightforward. There are at least two reasons that illustrate this statement: 1) although the mountain areas included in the project are confronted with similar problematic, their local characteristics and contexts are different; and 2) although all partners share a common vision and very similar diagnostics about their regions' challenges and ways of overcoming their barriers, they (the partners) are also inserted into their own local and regional peculiarities and –what is more decisive- they have different legal character, which determines to a high degree what they can do and what they can not.

This issue, which –in the end- is self-evident, lies on the background of almost every issue, and it has made the process of designing and implementing a common product (the *Ecojourneys*) inherently more difficult. We have manifold examples of this:

- The project lifetime and its scheduled has been influenced (and sometimes jeopardised) by the partners' particularities: elections, the own institution's house rules, different speeds in launching tendering...
- One key aspect to obtain a shared tourist product are marketing issues. However, the mountain areas' different characteristics have made this issue pretty difficult. The best example is the definition of target groups. This issue was intensively discussed among the partners and the CETT. Eventually, we didn't manage to define a specific tourist target profile, so we agreed on a spectrum of targets being defined according to different criteria: age, household composition, main interest/motivation, way of travelling (e.g. individually, couples, groups), preferred mobility means, region of precedence and budget.

Recommendations:

→ The larger the partnership is, the more difficult is to reach agreement in critical issues.

→ It is important to discuss those critical issues (e.g. what kind of visitors am I interested in?) as earlier in the project's lifetime as possible.

→ Each partner has to be able to estimate how much room for taking action they have in terms of legality and political landscape.

2- *The long and tortuous path towards sustainability*

In addition, we have found common problems that go even beyond this "heterogeneity" factor and that can be explained by the way our socioeconomic system works. These issues are usually related to aspects such as sustainability. Bringing sustainability aspects forward is definitely a common problematic in tourism as well as in any other socioeconomic activity. This factor could be clearly identified during the process of discussion and fulfilment of the attributes.

For instance, we could state how far away the project partners are concerning the application of certifications that give standards and, therefore, can ensure a certain compliance level with aspects such as energy consumption, waste management, or using local/regional, seasonal and/or organic products. In our mountain regions, very few local actors have some kind of certification. This fact was a major problem for us, since our marketing strategy is based on sustainable and responsible tourism. However, without certifications, visitors can just trust on local actors, which might be a weakness of the project.

That making steps towards sustainability is often a matter of cultural change has been showed by the debate around carbon footprint. As stated in chapter 3, most of the partners weren't familiarised with this concept. It took some time and several attempts by the CETT to explain on what carbon footprint consists. The first reactions were very illustrative: "we don't want to pay!" "we don't want new taxes!". A similar conclusion can be obtained from the debate around picnic services. Generally speaking, the partners were reluctant to bring this issue to the local restaurants because it's "too early" for them to make changes the way they work.

Recommendations:

→ Choose partners that…

…are the more attached as possible to the area they represent, i.e. they know the local socio-economic "ecosystems";

…are sensitive to sustainability issues;

…dare to communicate sustainability in an effective and persuasive way to local and regional actors.

→ If this is not possible or only partially possible, then make sure that the partners at least get familiar with those basic sustainability issues by e.g. conducting workshops, courses, instructions…

3- *Working in a network – a matter of human relationships*

Last, but not least, a series of common difficulties that were identified are related to the way human relationships work. For instance, an issue that is of outmost importance in this process is how stakeholders reacted to the agreed attributes. During the internal discussion about the list of the attributes to be included in the terms of reference, the partners were often reluctant about certain attributes because of the negative local stakeholders' reactions. This was actually one of the main reasons why certain attributes (e.g. #18, 21, or 24) were substantially modified, namely "softened" in terms of demand level. As it has been showed in chapter 3, the involved stakeholders didn´t seem to

respond in a reactive way. However, some partners have adopted a very conservative attitude in this sense.

Another aspect is communication: How to convey the message from our project has been a lively debate about this issue during the focus group, but also during certain project activities (which have not been evaluated in this report) such as the participation in tourist fairs. We, as consortium, were confronted with the potential visitors only in the final part of the project, but we realised that we lacked the know-how (and, very often, the possibility –due to the nature of the institutions being represented in the consortium –see point 1 in this chapter) to properly communicate and bring our product to the market. In addition to this, the partners have expressed their different opinion on how to address these issues. Sometimes, these opinions were pretty much divergent. Anyhow, when the partners were asked about this issue, the results were overwhelmingly positive (*see chart from fig. 20*).

Recommendations:

→ Those partners with more flexibility and resilience (i.e. to be able to adapt to new circumstances) are the most suited to large networks.

→ Make sure that the partners have regular contact with local stakeholders by e.g. agreeing in a minimum number of (documented) meetings.

→ Always try to communicate in a positive manner! E.g. put the emphasis on the benefits of certain action/measure rather than on the trade-offs, without trying to hide the latter.