BEST MED

Sustainable Path and Cultural Routes Model – MED S&C Path

Research Authors

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1 INTRODUCTION TO BEST MED

BEST MED project is implemented in eight Mediterranean countries (Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, Croatia, Slovenia, Greece and Montenegro) with the general objective of enhancing Mediterranean Governance. Its main challenges are to fight against seasonality and the lack of effective cooperation among main tourism actors, including low citizen active participation on the design of policies. It aims to introduce a new integrated and sustainable tourism planning approach, to contribute to the mitigation of seasonality in the MED area, by connecting coastal and inland regions with resources such as a path-route method. A testing phase allowed us to build a joint model that will be transferred and capitalised, as well as a toolkit and updated set of data indicators.

BEST MED follows a strategy of previous approaches and outputs, testing an updated toolkit of data and indicators, contributing to the design of a new Green model (MED S&C Path - Sustainable Path & Cultural Routes Model), focusing on the integration of tourism planning into wider development strategies, together with mobilizing key players both at local and specifically at transnational level, creating synergies across MED countries and promoting the awareness of the MED area.

2 CONCEPT AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Theoretical Concept of the Model

The BEST MED project highlights the importance of cultural heritage to support local sustainable development in particular through tourism products. Tourism is strictly interconnected to a destination's natural and cultural endowments, as well as local communities and stakeholders and its impact is far from only economic, but it also concerns the socio-cultural and environmental dimension as well (Giulietti, Romagosa, Esteve, Domingues, & Schröder, 2016). Therefore, it is essential to assess its sustainability.

Considering this assumption, many destinations, institutions, and international organisations foresee the need for an integrated tool, which makes it possible to monitor and evaluate the impact of tourism, assessing all sustainability dimensions (economic, socio-cultural, and environmental), to sustain destination managing and planning, as well as policy making (Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2014). Far from being developed and implemented, this comprehensive tool has been approximated through piloting and testing in several EU funded projects.

The BEST MED project focuses on sustainable tourism development along cultural routes and paths. A review of existing models adopted so far in this geographical as well as thematic settings has been performed.

2.1.1 Cultural and sustainable development of tourism

Following the EU background policy on tourism, one of the roles mobility and tourism should play is to contribute to the creation of a shared European Cultural Identity.

The main question is then how cultural tourism could be used as a tool to overcome ethnic divisions and discrepancy in cultural heritage values perceptions by communities. Fostering "cross borders", cultural tourism helps in building a common future and identity, giving new values also to contested heritage/history/memory through the visitor's gaze.

Culture is one of the driving forces for the growth of tourism. As such, cultural tourism can bring many opportunities and benefits such as deseasonalization and diversification strategy of a destination. At the same time, the uncontrolled development of cultural tourism can lead to further problematic situations with excessive day trips, a limited use of the number of available heritage sites and complicated accessibility and mobility. For instance, there is a tendency in historic cities to an irreversible process of 'touristification' due to a lack of sustainability principles implementation. Understanding the importance of the World Cultural Heritage, the behaviour and policies of tourism industry leaders and clients in this sector as well as understanding the fact that cultural tourism plays an essential role in protecting and preserving the world heritage makes it possible to coordinate various efforts and helps the site managers cope with the emerging problems.

The safeguarding of cultural heritage and activities is the key to preserving the cultural identity of territories and for a more effective sustainable development.

The competitiveness of the European tourism industry is intricately linked to its sustainability, as the quality of tourism destinations is strongly influenced by their natural and cultural environment and their integration into the local community. The focus on the building processes of the European identity through tourism, the core of the cultural routes' projects, is therefore strategic for shaping Europe as a unique tourism destination. This is even more important in times of pandemic, when mobility limitations have led to people rediscovering nearby destinations and slow tourism.

Cultural routes are defined as new wide-ranging cultural assets connecting diverse and homogeneous elements of tangible and intangible cultural heritage and related to both contiguous and far apart territories so as to create a new knowledge system (ICOMOS, 2005).

On this basis, over the last years, many local authorities and administrations have aimed at the implementation of thematic routes such as strategies for promoting minor tourism destinations, thus helping a growth of themes and destinations whose concrete economic contribution is still uncertain (Mariotti, 2012).

The recent trend towards the endorsement of specific funding policies aimed at cultural routes (especially through European funds or national policies in some European countries), seems to delineate a clear orientation towards economies of scale (or dimensional optimum), in terms of cultural tourism added value enhancement.

These trends are often fostered through innovation and creativity empowerment policies, because of their ability to boost cultural production. Tools such as cultural routes can represent an alternative path to gain, within the international panorama and by means of a "creative culture" oriented approach (OECD 2009), a strong and dynamic cultural identity increasingly oriented towards the involvement and participation of local communities and visitors, as well as towards sustainability and less impacting leisure activities.

2.1.2   Types of cultural routes, trails and itineraries

In 1987, the Council of Europe launched the Cultural Routes programme as an invitation to travel and to discover the rich and diverse heritage of Europe by bringing people and places together in networks of shared history and heritage. They put into practice the values of the Council of Europe[1]:

- Human rights
- Cultural diversity
- Intercultural dialogue

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[1] https://www.coe.int/en/web/cultural-routes/about

- Mutual exchanges across borders.

The certification "Cultural Route of the Council of Europe" is a guarantee of excellence and among the criteria required to be recognised as a Cultural Route of the CoE there are a number of priority fields of action. One of these directly addresses the need to develop sustainable tourism products to foster sustainable cultural development. Cultural Routes of the CoE are grassroots projects, mainly based on the actions and activities organised by the civil society, thus allowing closer encounters with the members of different communities in lesser-known destinations. As stated by Berti in her PhD thesis, about 90% of Cultural Routes cross rural areas and agricultural landscapes, allowing visitors to discover off-the - beaten track destinations (Berti, 2012). It is important to note that the concept of the cultural route is complex and multidimensional. In that sense, Berti (2015/1: 14) emphasizes the fact that "the word route is to be understood not only in the restricted sense of physical pathways: it is used in a more conceptual and general sense, meaning a network of sites or geographical areas sharing a theme, taking different forms according to the identity of each site or area".

In the step-by-step guide to the Cultural Routes of the CoE (2015), following their territorial shapes, Berti also identified three main categories of Cultural Routes:

- Territorial pattern routes: this category includes Cultural Routes that involve different territories sharing the theme on which the route is founded, as in the case of the Iter Vitis Route or the Iron Route in the Pyrenees. A series of paths is generally established to propose an exploration of the different parts of the route.
- Linear pattern routes: these are defined by historical infrastructure, such as land and maritime trade routes. These routes that were used for travel, over the centuries, are now used to create relationships between distant territories. The routes in fact structured villages, towns, castles and buildings, which were connected through the presence of the route.
- Reticular pattern (archipelago) routes: these routes are composed of individual items or aggregated goods, presenting different scales, and connected by a theme. In this case, routes are not characterised by territorial continuity, and they may be called "virtual routes". Sometimes, depending on the theme of the route, linear routes overlap with archipelagos pattern routes.

Independently from their shape, "Cultural Routes raise travellers' awareness of the value of cultural resources and landscapes. The responsible and sustainable use of the resources of the Cultural Routes is ensured through environment-friendly formats such as biking and hiking tours. But there are also innovative offers such as culinary tours that promote a slower form of tourism". Slow tourism is a new trend in tourism development. It combines sustainable tourism (which means that economic, environmental and social aspects are essential) and responsible tourism. The idea of "slow" is linked with culture, cuisine, nature and society. The main aim is living in harmony with nature. (Council of Europe - Route 4U, 2020).

Although BEST MED has been designed to primarily address cultural routes as they are conceived by the CoE program, in this model we could not ignore that in the last 10 years, thematic tourism products and itineraries have also been developed outside of this framework. This is the case in for example Italy, where the Ministry of Culture and Tourism launched in 2016 a year-long initiative on walking trails, the so called "Anno dei Cammini".

With this definition, the Italian government wanted to boost hiking and slow tourism as a way to highlight the historical, natural, cultural and religious heritage of the peninsula. In the realm of the actions and activities taken to foster local initiatives and connect them at the national and international scale, research was undertaken to distinguish different forms of hiking paths and itineraries. Cardia (2018) in the report on the results of this initiative, proposed a possible classification of cultural itineraries based on:

- The main motivation: pilgrimage, religious, spiritual; trekking, sport, adventure; culture and cultural encounters; commercial.
- Type of assets: natural landscape; history, artistic, cultural.
- Historical background of the itinerary: historical roads Vs recently developed trails.
- Geographical scale: local, regional, national, transnational, transcontinental.
- Legal entity: recognised or not by public institutions.

By approaching the model, we use the wider definition of cultural route, also adopted by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism: "*cultural itineraries of particular European and or national importance, pass through on foot or with other forms of sustainable soft mobility, and that represent a way of using the widespread natural and cultural heritage, as well as an opportunity to enhance the natural, cultural and territorial attractions*". This definition, going beyond the institutional recognition of the CoE, ensures the transferability of the model from the pilot areas to a wider typology of itineraries.

As another example we could mention the creation of the Network of cultural routes to mitigate seasonality in the Balearic Islands in 2015, therefore also helping to contribute to the sustainability of tourism in this destination; or the creation of the Cycling tourism routes on the islands that also greatly help to mitigate seasonality since most cycling tourists travel to the islands between the months of January to May and September to November and a percentage of their time on the island is dedicated to cultural tourism.

Finally, we will also include pilgrimage trails as a possible form of cultural routes because of the valuable contribution they could make in peripheral areas, combining low environmental impact and sometimes unexploited or hidden local development potentials. Pilgrimage has an often-underestimated power, but has been recently recognised (UNWTO, 2015) as one of the fastest growing segments of the travel industry, with more than 300 million pilgrims per year. An example of which is one of the world's most known pilgrimage routes, the "Camino de Santiago" (the Way of St. James), now looked upon as an innovative tourism product.

Promoting a combination of different tourism niches, like for example eno-gastronomic tourism with cultural tourism, is also a way to create innovative tourism products and provide a more immersive experience to tourists and visitors.

This contribution might be even more crucial in times of pandemic era when mass tourism destinations are having to rethink their spaces of social conviviality and from now on abandoned or unexploited regions are seeing a raising interest for their "isolation" assets.

2.2 Definition of the Model

2.2.1 Model's Objective

The objective of the Med S&C Path model is to achieve an integrated planning and management of cultural routes and other physical or thematic paths in Mediterranean destinations, by following sustainability principles. By monitoring sustainability, route managers and regional policymakers are able to take evidence-based decisions to better manage the routes and the social, economic and environmental impacts related to them.

The aim of the model, besides monitoring sustainability, is to contribute to a better governance of routes and paths, achieving greater levels of cooperation between regional authorities, the managers of cultural routes/paths and other key stakeholders in the territory (such as business networks, associations, regional parks, research institutions, cultural institutions, entrepreneurs etc.)

Additional outcomes of applying the model include favouring the connection between coastal and hinterland destinations, redistributing tourist flows to less crowded destinations. In accordance with the results from the Interreg Med Sustainable Tourism Community, tourism planning needs to consider the redistribution of tourism flows in space and time, by promoting hinterland destinations and off-season offers.

Integrated planning can refer not only to geographical integration (like coast and hinterland) but also to the different parts of the system that make up the tourism sector and integration of tourism into the overall development of a region's policies and plans.

Development suggests progress, not only in quantitative terms, such as economic growth, but also in qualitative terms, such as the wellbeing of the local population, taking into consideration the triple bottom line: economic, environmental, and social dimensions. These are the "pillars" of sustainable development, which should involve a development that generates economic benefits that are well distributed, generating equal opportunities, while reducing negative impacts on the natural resources. This paradigm is the so called "*balanced approach to sustainable development*" (Hall, 2011, p. 661).

The word sustainability implies the idea of maintaining certain resources for a long period of time. In this regard, Farrell and Twining-Ward remind us that "sustainability must be conceived as a transition, journey or path, rather than an end point or an achievable goal" (2004, p. 275).

The MED S&C Path model is a voluntary monitoring tool, based on a self-assessment that route managers can apply together with key stakeholders, sharing the responsibility to manage the route's impacts and ensuring tourism is acting as a socio-economic driver for the stakeholders involved in the route.

The model capitalizes on the experience of the EU funded project, MITOMED Plus, specifically the Green Beach model[2], applying a similar concept, adapted to cultural routes and paths. The model also builds from the results of other EU funded projects and international initiatives of tourism sustainability measuring and monitoring.

2.2.2 What is a MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route?

The Med Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model takes as starting point the criteria developed by the Council of Europe for its Cultural Routes, further developing an approach to support the sustainable management of Mediterranean routes and paths.

A Med S&C Path is a route or path that incorporates sustainability principles into its planning and management, achieving sustainable development of cultural and economic activities along the route, while protecting the natural resources. By monitoring sustainability, route managers and regional policymakers are able to take evidence-based decisions to manage the routes and the social, economic and environmental impacts, both positive and negative, related to them.

The wider definition of cultural routes has already been described in section 2.1.2 of the present document.

A "Green Path" can be defined as a walking trail made up of paths, surrounding landscapes, interest points (both natural and cultural, like museums, visitor centres, cultural heritage, nature reserves, scenic points, etc.), and associated services (such as accommodation, restaurants, tourist and cultural attractions, local transportation services, bike rental, etc.), that can be enjoyed by different means of mobility (e.g. walking, cycling, public transport, private vehicle) from an interest point to another one, by interested people and tourists.

BEST MED has developed a series of sustainability criteria (as well as several categories with specific criteria to be complied with) that can be used to evaluate a cultural route or path as a "sustainable or green path". These criteria are divided into 4 main sections:

- Sustainable Management
- Economic Sustainability
- Socio-cultural Sustainability
- Environmental Sustainability

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[2] MITOMED+ Green Beach Model is a planning tool that helps local authorities and beach operators to make better-informed decisions about managing beaches in a sustainable way.

To implement the model, a toolbox is provided including a step-by-step guide, sustainability criteria and other tools such as a self-assessment audit sheet, suggested indicators and an online platform to measure performance and benchmark (see Deliverable 3.3.2[3] and 3.2.3[4]).

The model and toolkit have been developed and used during the Work Package 4 Testing Phase of the project, to test its application in the pilot areas of the different countries involved, to assess their actual level of sustainability, to evaluate gaps and needs in the different issues examined, and to discuss possible improvement of Cultural Paths (management and planning).

The project also aims to evaluate, at regional scale, the impact of the Med S&C Path Model to promote connections between coastal areas or those affected by overtourism, to hinterland areas, with the aim of making tourism a lot less dependent on seasonal factors.

2.2.3   Why destinations should implement the MED P&C Path Model.

The Cultural Routes are at the heart of cultural tourism development in Europe today. Over the last decades, they have achieved a noteworthy impact and progress, and shown remarkable potential for SME generation, networking, social cohesion, intercultural dialogue, and for promoting the image of the Council of Europe and Europe generally. The Cultural Routes encourage widespread community participation in cultural activities, raising awareness of a common cultural heritage. Established on cultural and social principles, the Cultural Routes today represent a source of innovation, creativity, small-business creation, and cultural tourism products and services development.

Cultural routes have very satisfactory properties. They help in the conservation and appreciation of places and their nostalgia, memory, and tradition. Moreover, they improve the attractiveness and sustainability of such places and bring multiple actors to work together. Cultural routes attract a tourist model that seeks the history and identity of the region, as well as interaction with the local population. The new cultural routes are considered a value of sustainable development. In fact, they can be considered as economic clusters in which the members can share and conserve their attractions and as contributors to tackling depopulation and the effects of climate change in the most disadvantaged areas. These cultural routes have the potential for self-tourism and proximity trips, which have a lower environmental impact and offer greater security in the face of health crises.

[3] https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/3.3.2_MED_S_C_Path_Benchmarking_Toolbox.pdf
[4] https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/D_3.2.3._BEST_MED_Open_Platform.pdf

Therefore, the valorisation of cultural routes can bring great benefits to tourism destination at it contributes to the reduction of seasonality, extending the touristic seasons and its geographical scope. In addition, Cultural Routes networks can benefit SMEs, especially in rural areas and less-known destinations.

The work performed under the BEST MED project enabled the definition of a comprehensive Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model. The implementation and testing of such model in real conditions in a wide range of European tourism destinations, gathering results and valuable experiences, led to the validation of this specific model that can be used as a reference for replication in other destinations. As already mentioned, the benefits of the BEST MED SC Path Model lays in a better governance, and a more sustainable development of the cultural and economic activities of the destination, while protecting its natural resources.

2.2.4   Target audience of the Model

The responsibility of implementing the Med S&C path Model falls on three main target audiences:

1. The management structure of the cultural routes (in the case of itineraries from the Council of Europe) or the associations/ legal entities in charge of managing other types of itineraries.
2. The Regional Public sector: policymakers at regional level where the part of the cultural route/ path belongs.
3. Other key stakeholders in the territory (such as business networks, associations, regional parks, research institutions, etc.)

This combined responsibility is because the aim of the model, besides monitoring sustainability, is to contribute to better governance of routes and paths, achieving greater levels of cooperation between regional authorities, the managers of cultural routes/ paths and the private and public stakeholders in the territory.

Regions have their own strategies, including tourism and sustainability, and strategic plans for routes should be in line with them. At the same time, cultural routes/ paths need support from the region to adapt their strategies; they also need support to carry out monitoring activities to measure the impacts (positive and negative) from the routes. Besides, the regional public sector and the routes' managers have complementary roles for different aspects, such as promotion and infrastructural interventions, therefore they should work together.

As expressed in the report on the impacts of tourism on the itineraries of Italian paths (Università degli Studi di Perugia, 2018), cultural routes/ paths managing organizations are usually small in structure which implies:

- Limited financial resources and therefore limited ability to pay continuously external experts to carry out the necessary studies and analyses.

- Limited number of human resources that can engage in controlling and monitoring activities (generally, in fact, such human resources are polyfunctional and non-specialist).

The aim is that regional policymakers can work together with route managers to comply with the criteria, as several aspects regarding the economic and environmental impact of the route is outside the control of routes' managers. Moreover, this exercise could help with assessing why itineraries face more difficulties in some regions than in others.

How to reach/involve the target audience?

To implement the MED S&C Path Model successfully it is necessary to involve actors from different governance levels and include public and private entities and the civil society.

- DMO or leading entity public, private or mix that so far has been fully or partially managing the destination;
- National / Regional/Provincial / Local authorities with tourism competencies;
- Representatives from a specific sector of the local/regional government (e.g., Tourism, Cultural heritage or Economic Development departments);
- Town centre management organizations, Park Authorities and Coastal and Maritime Protected Areas;
- Stakeholders from the tourism private sector (e.g., incoming agencies, tour guides, accommodation establishments, etc.);
- Representatives from the academia (e.g., researchers, professors), consultants and experts of different domains (tourism governance, environmental sustainability, etc.) that can guide/support its implementation.
- Specialised organisations (NGOs, associations, foundations…) linked with the cultural routes and sustainability.

These audiences shall be reached/involved through the implementation of a communication plan that should include:

- A clear message to be conveyed on the objective and expected outputs and benefits of the MED S&C Path Model
- A mapping of the stakeholders
- A calendar of events and meetings with the relevant stakeholders and focus groups
- An identification of the communication channels
- Definition of the dissemination and communication tools.

2.3 Methodology

To define the MED S&C Path Model, we initially went over the literature on existing initiatives that have developed standards and criteria on sustainable tourism management

and cultural routes/paths. A total twelve initiatives on sustainable tourism have been analysed and nine specific initiatives for cultural routes and paths.

Based on this analysis, in the MED S&C Patch Benchmarking Toolbox (Deliverable 3.3.2[5]) we have proposed a set of criteria and an implementation toolbox, supported by an online tool, the BEST MED Open platform, that is relevant and feasible for cultural routes and paths to comply with and improve their sustainable management.
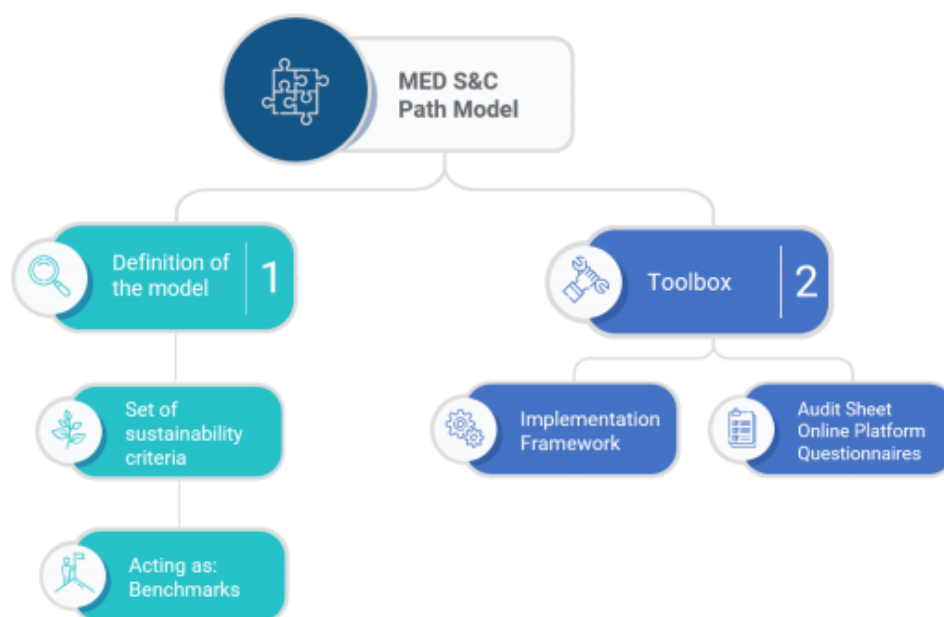
Figure 1 Model Implementation Framework

2.3.1 Review of existing models and initiatives

The complete review of existing models and initiatives is available in the "MED S&C Path Model Benchmarking Method[6]". In this document were analysed different initiatives of data collection and management, using criteria and indicators to manage tourism sustainably. The studied sustainable tourism models and international standards and initiatives were:

1. Mitomed Plus - M&C Tourism Management Model.
2. Mitomed Plus - Green Beach Model.
3. Destimed.
4. Co Evolve.
5. Emblematic.
6. MedCycleTour.

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[5] https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/3.3.2_MED_S_C_Path_Benchmarking_Toolbox.pdf

[6] https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/D_3.3.1_Med_SC_Path_model.pdf

7. Sustainable Tourism Programme at World Heritage Sites.
8. GSTC Criteria.
9. Green Destinations.
10. INSTO Observatories.
11. European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas.
12. European Tourism Indicator System – ETIS
13. **Green Pilgrimage Project.**
14. Criteria for Cultural Routes certification.
15. Routes4U project.
16. UNESCO Culture for Development Indicators (CDIS) tool.
17. Impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs innovation and competitiveness report.
18. CERTESS project.
19. CULT-RING Project.
20. University of Perugia Report on Italian Paths.
21. Policy brief on Cultural Routes of Europe.

2.3.2 Conclusions and implications for MED S&C Path Model

A total of 21 initiatives were revised to select the main criteria and draw the conclusions on how to apply to the MED S&C Path model. These initiatives range from international standards, EU funded projects and programmes, study reports and policy briefs dealing with the topics of sustainable tourism monitoring and cultural routes management.

From these already existing initiatives we preselect 53 criteria, divided into 4 dimensions and 12 categories, together with a number of preliminary suggested indicators.

Firstly, criteria were selected taking into consideration sustainable tourism initiatives, to include the main dimensions of sustainability and the aspects that must be considered regardless of the type of destination, to understand main positive and negative impacts. To this end, we have adopted the division on four main sections adopted by GSTC (sustainable management, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability), complementing it with criteria from other international initiatives such as Green Destinations and ETIS. Several of the EU funded projects that were analysed built from the ETIS experience, so these criteria were automatically incorporated.

Particularly relevant for our project is the INSTO Framework (the network of sustainable tourism observatories established by UNWTO) since BEST MED aims at advancing the cooperation between tourism observatories at Mediterranean level. Accordingly, when selecting the criteria for our model, we ensured the inclusion of the nine mandatory areas that INSTO requires to monitor, namely:

- tourism seasonality,
- employment,
- destination economic benefits,

- governance,
- local satisfaction,
- energy management,
- water management,
- wastewater (sewage) management, and
- solid waste management.

After considering the general aspects of sustainability measuring, we focused on Cultural Routes, Pilgrimage ways and other types of itineraries, as they are the target of the model and present specific characteristics that differentiate them from single destinations. Thanks to the literature revised on cultural routes' projects, programmes and other reports and initiatives, we were able to adapt the criteria and indicators for destinations to be relevant for this particular "type of product", recognizing that some aspects of sustainability monitoring are out of the control of route managers and therefore cooperation with other stakeholders is needed in order to perform the monitoring.

All the initiatives analysed highlight the importance of adopting a participatory approach to sustainability monitoring, as it is clearly impossible for one actor to be able to access all the needed information to comply with criteria. This aspect for us is key as the BEST MED project intends to contribute to a better governance at regional and transnational level, therefore cooperation between different stakeholders at different levels is of particular importance.

The review of initiatives had also covered the scope of comparing different models that are used to implement sustainability at destination level, in order to build our model on the basis of existing and proven knowledge. To this regard, we have seen that the most common approach is to design a step-by-step model, usually starting by identifying a working group with key stakeholders, followed by a baseline of the current situation, setting the priorities, collecting data and performing continuous monitoring. On this basis, we have defined a step-by step methodology.

With regards to the tools used for data gathering, online platforms and excel data sheets are the most common tools, since they allow for the calculation of quantitative results as well as the comparisons with other destinations. In terms of data collection, surveys seem to be the most useful tools, although they can be costly and time-consuming. Consequently, it is recommended to perform this type of analysis in partnership with universities, in order to reduce costs while providing relevant field research experience for students. To perform the surveys, several of the reports and toolkits reviewed present examples and guidelines that have been taken into consideration to design the questionnaires for the MED S&C toolbox.

Besides selecting the main relevant criteria for the MED S&C Path Model, a number of suggested indicators were selected and included in the toolbox (see Annex 1) as a way to provide additional guidance to measure the exact level of compliance with the criteria. The selected indicators are meant only as a guide for stakeholders, they are not an exhaustive list.

Stakeholders are free to monitor the ones they consider useful and in combination with the indicators included in the BEST MED Open Platform.

Finally, several of the reports regarding cultural routes stress as one of the key challenges the need to improve the monitoring and evaluation methods to assess the actual and potential impacts routes have on the economy and social tissue of territories, particularly less known and rural areas. This represents an outstanding opportunity for the MED S&C Path model to provide a much-needed tool to measure the impacts routes, pilgrimage ways and other types of paths generate in Mediterranean regions.

3 BENCHMARKING TOOLBOX

3.1 Implementation of the BEST MED S&C Path Model

The toolbox is a guide to implement the MED S&C Path model, including the step-by-step methodology as well as the tools to successfully apply the model to a cultural route or path. These tools include:

- A self-assessment audit sheet: The audit sheet allows us to measure the percentage of compliance with the criteria and consists of the 4 main sections defined for the criteria: Sustainable Management, Economic Sustainability, Socio-cultural Sustainability, and Environmental Sustainability. This audit sheet is filled out by the route's manager, the regional policy makers and the working group. The Self-Assessment Audit Sheet is included in the toolbox as a separate file (for the moment an Excel sheet).

- A set of indicators: In order to measure the level of compliance with each criterion, a number of indicators can be used. A list of core and optional indicators were selected based on their relevance, feasibility, credibility, clarity, and comparability. Core indicators are useful to establish comparisons across destinations (benchmarking) because they represent common issues to all destinations, while optional/ additional indicators can be those site-specific ones, related to the tourism policy and particular issues/ priorities of the destination.

- In this context, indicators were validated, through participatory processes involving different stakeholders, during the Policy Learning Seminars and during the Testing Phase of BEST MED.

- A benchmarking method: Once a set of indicators is selected to measure the exact level of compliance with each criterion, the benchmarking will be possible, both with respect to the baseline results of the same route, and with respect to other cultural routes / paths implementing the model. The exact procedure to perform the benchmarking analysis will be defined once the final list of indicators is selected.

- Recommendations on best practices and actions plans to implement sustainability in the route/ path can be provided after the testing phase, with the input from the stakeholders involved in the pilot process. Best practices and lessons learnt from the testing phase of the project can also link to results from other projects involving cultural and pilgrimage routes.

- An online platform with indicators: The BEST MED Open Platform consists of a map with destinations that are part of cultural routes. Each destination is presented with representation of Mitomed Plus and Eurostat data on the regional or country level. Indicators were chosen from available Eurostat data to provide evidence-based context to the cultural routes' operations. Each indicator is presented as a visual representation (e. g. in the form of graph). Eurostat data serves as quantitative data for the objective benchmarking between the destinations. An important feature of the BEST MED Open platform is an online form based on The Self-Assessment Audit Sheet, which simplifies the use of the toolbox for registered users (e.g., managers

of the cultural routes). The result of the self-assessment is graphically presented and can be downloaded for future use. Another essential feature of the BEST MED Open Platform is the set of 26 core indicators that have been selected to allow the most efficient benchmarking. The indicators are collected through the online form that is available for registered users. Once the users fill out the form, the indicator values are publicly reported for each reporting period, and automatic benchmarking is available by comparing the indicator values of selected cultural routes.

▪ Questionnaires: two sets of questionnaires have been developed (one for visitors and one for cultural route managers) and 4 guidelines have been delivered. These questionnaires are useful to profile the type of visitors interested in cultural routes / paths (to direct the promotional activities to those tourists), and to gather feedback about the sustainability level of the route.

3.1.1   Step by step implementation framework
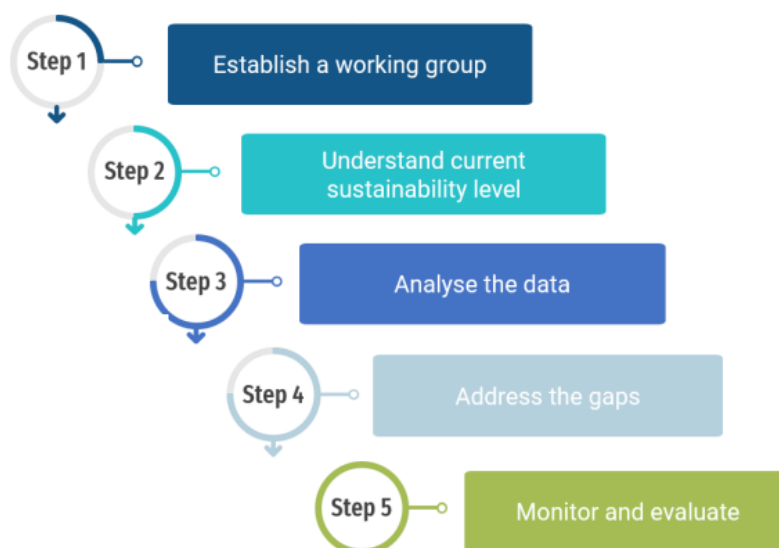
Figure 2 Step by step implementation framework

Together with the definition of the model, a toolbox is provided, including a step-by-step guide, to allow stakeholders to properly implement the system. An implementation framework is an integral part of any model, to ensure the results stemming from monitoring sustainability are in fact used to improve tourism management. (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005, p.165).

The implementation guide includes the following five steps:

Step 1: Set up a working group

The working group should be made up of regional policy makers, route managing bodies (at local level) and other key stakeholders related to the route. The group will be in charge of implementing the model, working together to measure the sustainability of the route and acting based on the results.

The key stakeholders to be involved in the working group include:

- The local managers of the Cultural Route/ Path (from the area where the model is being implemented).
- Regional policy makers (as the path involves more than one destination).

Other relevant stakeholders to invite to the working group include institutions and associations that are part of the route's network, such as: local municipalities, local DMOs (Destination Management Organizations), civil society organizations involved in cultural, social, and environmental areas, tourism stakeholders (hotels, restaurants, T.O., etc.), protected area managers, academic institutions.

The importance of setting up a multi-stakeholder working group is given by the possibility to establish relationships between the different actors working in the destination, to align objectives, resources and work towards common goals.

Since the concept of sustainable development and sustainable tourism in particular is often perceived as "too abstract", the process of discussing its meaning and implications for destinations helps to understand the concept and makes it more tangible. This is known as the "conceptual role" of indicators, and it is related to the social learning process that results from bringing a broad range of stakeholders together and facilitating conversations among larger communities (Bell et al., 2011; Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004; Hezri & Dovers, 2006; Lehtonen, Sébastien, & Bauler, 2016).

Sharing the responsibility for data collection provides a sense of ownership and commitment to the process (European Commission, 2013; European Commission, 2016).

Step 2: Understanding the current sustainability level of the route/path

This will be possible by performing a Self-Assessment using the provided Audit Sheet. The Audit sheet is an excel sheet with a set of criteria (yes/no statements) that allow stakeholders to assess the current level of sustainability and use it as a baseline from where to start.

A first meeting with the stakeholders working group can be coordinated to go through the Audit Sheet and fill it out, according to the situation in the route/ path and in the destinations involved. The Self-Assessment Audit sheet allows a qualitative evaluation, providing a percentage of compliance with the criteria. This is a preliminary but important result, that allows the manager of the route and regional policy makers to evaluate at which stage they are actually at with respect to the goal of becoming a sustainable route.

Since cultural routes/ paths usually involve several destinations, the borders of the area need to be defined for monitoring purposes. It is possible to implement the model in a short stretch of the cultural route/ path or along the entire length of the route. The difference will be in the number of stakeholders to involve and the overall complexity of the process if it involves different regions/ countries where the route passes through.

Step 3: Address the gaps

According to the gaps identified in the second step, between the current situation and the compliance with all criteria, a participatory process of data collection and analysis can be organized.

A second meeting can be held with an enlarged working group, to discuss the criteria and suggested indicators, and collectively agree on a work plan for data collection, dividing the responsibilities since certain stakeholders would naturally have easier access to certain information depending on their positions. At this stage, stakeholders' part of the working group should raise awareness about the decision to implement the model and keep the level of attention and interest high during all the stages of implementation, so that citizens in general are informed and can as well get involved in the process if they wish to.

The tools provided in this toolbox assist the working group in collecting the needed information to comply with the criteria and improve their level of sustainability, as well as the management of the route. Apart from the Audit Sheet with the criteria, the toolbox includes several suggested indicators, the instructions on how to use the Best Med Open Platform, and two sets of questionnaires for route managers and visitors. Each of these tools are explained in detail in the following sections.

The questionnaires have been adapted from existing initiatives such as the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS), the report on the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism flows in Italian paths (Università degli Studi di Perugia, 2018) and the Green Pilgrimage project report (Norfolk County Council & University of East Anglia, 2019). The questionnaires can be used as they are, or can be adapted to suit the particular needs of the route.

The information can be sourced as much as possible, from sources already available, such as statistical data at regional/ local level, surveys already performed, etc., to reduce the amount of time and resources dedicated to data collection. However, the lack of available data should not be a reason to disregard certain indicators, as one of the advantages of developing indicators is precisely to start collecting valuable data that was previously not being collected.

Step 4: Data analysis

Once the Audit Sheet and indicators are completed using the several tools provided, the working group can analyse the results and see the percentage of compliance with the criteria, as well as the results from the indicators. It is not necessary to fulfil all indicators, stakeholders can start with those that are able to source first and slowly add more over time.

The tools provided (Audit Sheet and Open Platform) will enable a clear view and interpretation of the results to help make sense of the data and the implications for the destination.

According to the results, the group should discuss main issues and establish priorities, defining goals for the sustainable development of tourism along the stretch of the path and creating an action plan. The responsibility for following up the action plan should be shared between the route's manager and the stakeholders working group, including the regional public sector.

Step 5: Regular monitoring and evaluation

The working group commits to periodically monitor sustainability using the toolbox and the information stemming from the model to make informed decisions and policy development.

3.2 Evaluation Criteria

Thanks to the Literature Review of international initiatives for sustainable tourism and the cultural routes management activity performed during the project's implementation, we have selected a common set of criteria useful to evaluate the sustainability of a cultural route or path.

Criteria is used to describe the desirable situation that routes should comply with. The criteria serve as a benchmark to compare actual performance and the gaps between that performance and the criteria.

When selecting the framework to organize the criteria, we have taken a similar approach to that of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), identifying main dimensions, categories, and criteria for each category, as well as suggesting specific indicators.

Each category includes several criteria to comply with. The indicators suggested are intended only to provide guidance to destinations and they are neither exhaustive nor mandatory, so users of the model are encouraged to use other relevant indicators or focus on the ones they consider relevant for their context.

The criteria are divided in four main dimensions, following the pillars of sustainability:

- Sustainable Management (related to the Cultural Route/ Path management)
- Economic Sustainability
- Socio-Cultural Sustainability (including accessibility)
- Environmental Sustainability

Each dimension is composed of categories with a total of twelve categories and 53 criteria.

Figure 3 Criteria to evaluate sustainability of route

CATEGORY	CRITERIA
A. Sustainable Management	
A.1 Cultural Route / Path Planning & Management	Stakeholders involvement
	Funding
	Trained staff
	Route's strategic plan
	Region's sustainable tourism strategy
	Visitors management
A.2 Quality of Infrastructure	Infrastructure condition
A.3 Health & Safety	Safety information
	Emergency protocols
A.4 Information & Promotion	Visitor Information
	Interpretative material
B. Economic Sustainability	
B.1 Economic contribution to local economy	Tourism flows (volume and value)
	Supporting local entrepreneurs
	Joint promotion
	Local products and services
	Employment and career opportunities
B.2 Seasonality	Tackling seasonality
C. Socio-Cultural Sustainability	
C.1 Preservation of Cultural Heritage	Protection of cultural heritage
	Promotion of cultural assets
	Respect of cultural heritage
C.2 Accessibility	Accessible facilities

	Accessibility Information
C.3 Residents engagement & feedback	Residents consultation
	Strengthening social identity and cohesion
C.4 Gender equality	Gender equality
D. Environmental Sustainability	
D.1 Resource Management	Solid Waste management
	Sewage treatment (wastewater management)
	Water management
	Energy consumption
	Sustainability certifications
D.2 Sustainable mobility	Soft mobility strategy
	Low impact transportation
D.3 Landscape & Biodiversity protection	Protected areas
	Landscape & Scenery
	Wildlife

Figure 4 Evaluation Criteria

3.2.1 Self-Assessment Audit Sheet and Best Med Open Platform

The audit sheet is used to measure compliance with the criteria. This audit sheet is filled out by the regional policy maker and the route's manager.

In the testing phase of BEST MED, the project partners together with the local stakeholders acted as auditors, evaluating the sustainability level of the chosen routes and filling out the audit sheet. However, once the model is tested, there is no need for an external auditor. The model is a voluntary tool to improve the management of the route and the self-assessment will be complemented by other tools in the toolbox (online platform and questionnaires). The Self-Assessment Audit Sheet, available through the BEST MED Open platform, is included in the toolbox as a separate file (excel sheet). A preliminary view is available in Annex.

In addition, it is important to highlight that the BEST MED Open Platform interconnects the data collection of tourism observatories and destination management organizations within MITOMED+ with publicly accessible Eurostat data and the data gathered from the self-assessment of cultural routes member network. By combining the data collection with geographical mapping, the BEST MED Open Platform provides a user friendly interface to access and compare the diverse sustainable tourism data, either at the level of a selected destination or at the level of a cultural route section.

The BEST MED Open Platform includes the data and information collected during the self-assessment phase. One of the primary uses of the platform is the self-assessment form for the managers of the cultural routes. By signing into the online platform, the editors will be able to fill out the online form, which will provide us with the data about the sustainability practices of the particular cultural route.

The self-assessment online form that participants will fill in is composed of four main parts that are further divided into additional subcategories. The main categories, all revolving around sustainability, are Sustainable Management, Economic Sustainability, Socio-Cultural Sustainability and Environmental Sustainability. Two options of the self-assessment are offered on the platform; the simplified version (the questions are the same as for the Self-Assessment Audit Sheet) and the advanced version (the same as simplified with additionally explanatory questions). The format of the forms consists of different types of questions. Some questions can be answered with Yes or No; other questions need an assessment to be made in the form of a number ranging from 1 to 5. Moreover, a specific type of question regarding seasonality will require the users to indicate specific months.

Usually, additional explanations can be or are to be provided by users in the form of text to elaborate on their answers or to give an explanation about their decision. Uploading files will also be possible. The form enables saving the already completed questions and a continuation of filling in the form at a later time. An indicator will present the current state of a questionnaire.

The first category (Sustainable Management) focuses on topics such as

- management structure,
- funding, staff,
- impact monitoring or
- infrastructure conditions

to gain an understanding about the framework and results of the management infrastructure of the routes.

The second category (Economic Sustainability) focuses on the economic impact of a specific route in terms of

- employment,
- promotion,
- economic benefits of the route for the local residents and
- the seasonality of tourist visits.

The third category (Socio-Cultural Sustainability) focuses on management of cultural heritage sites that can be found along the route, but also on public participation in the route management, the social impact the route has on the residents and on the infrastructural and service accessibility along the route. As such, the criterion of this category includes the protection and respect of cultural heritage, the promotion of cultural assets, the accessibility to facilities and information, the residents consultation, social identity and cohesion, and gender equality.

The fourth category (Environmental Sustainability) focuses on topics such as waste and water management and energy consumption, as well as mobility along the route and landscape and wildlife protection.

3.2.2   Set of Indicators

To measure the level of compliance with each criterion, a number of indicators can be used. To evaluate the choice of indicators, UNWTO and several scholars propose several criteria, which we will take into consideration when selecting the key indicators for our model.

Based on the criteria from UNWTO (2004), we have evaluated indicators based on:

- Relevance: Does the indicator respond to the specific issue and provide information that will aid in its management?
- Feasibility: How can the information be obtained and analysed?
- Credibility: Is the information coming from reliable sources to be believed by users?
- Clarity: Will users be able to understand the information and act on it?
- Comparability: Can the indicator be used to establish comparisons over time and across jurisdictions or regions?

These criteria are generally shared by scholars (Agyeiwaah et al., 2017; Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012; Tanguay et al., 2013). In this sense, Tanguay et al. (2013) proposes seven selection criteria for sustainable tourism indicators that are scientifically valid, but policy-relevant. The criteria are classified into Primary and Secondary criteria:

Primary criteria: General sustainable development dimensions

1. Classification (environmental, social and economic components of sustainable development)
2. Frequency of use (the most frequently used indicators from among the several initiatives analysed)
3. Coverage of the main issues in tourism sustainability (according to the 20 main issues of sustainable development in tourism defined by UNWTO)
4. Measurability over time (dynamic indicators)

Secondary criteria: site-specific, to ensure policy relevance

5. Availability of data: link with statistics or data already available at regional/local level
6. Compatibility with the destination tourism policy: if there is one, compare indicators to see if they match the principles of the tourism policy of the region, but always covering the 4 main criteria. When the data are unavailable, it is always possible to choose substitute indicators as long as coverage of the sustainable development dimensions is maintained
7. Validation of indicators by the decision makers through participatory processes (which is our objective during the Policy Learning Seminars).

Following these several criteria from the scientific literature, together with the practical experience of past initiatives such as ETIS indicators and EU funded projects (Coccossis & Koutsopoulou, 2020; Niavis, et al., 2019) and those initiatives analysed we were able to identify an initial, long list of possible indicators that have demonstrated effectiveness to measure the intended phenomenon.

Moreover, these indicators could be further classified into Core Indicators and Optional or site-specific indicators.
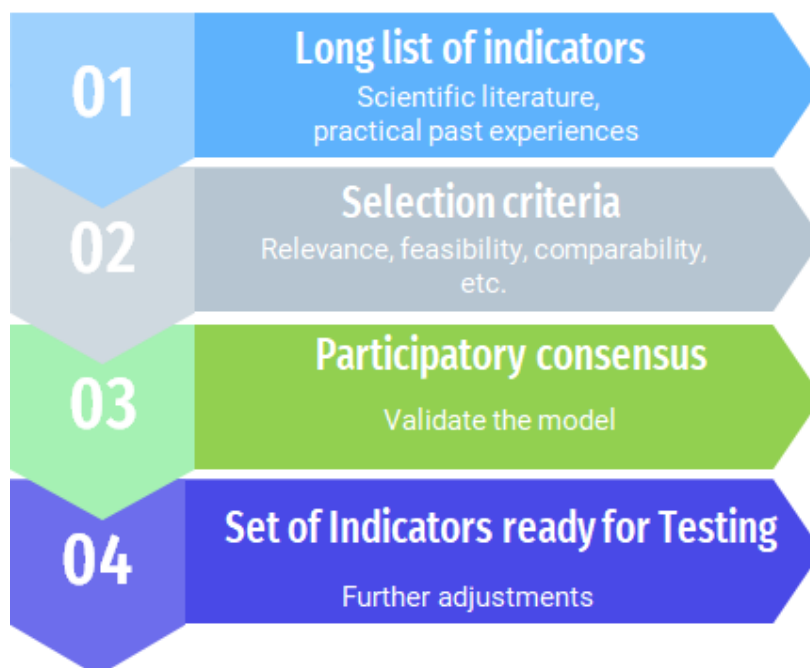

Figure 5 Indicators' selection process

Core indicators are generally those common to all kind of destinations and those which represent the main dimensions of sustainable development. Selecting a set of core indicators can facilitate comparisons against different destinations (Coccossis & Koutsopoulou, 2020). Instead, optional/ additional indicators can be those site-specific ones, related to the tourism policy and particular issues/ priorities at the destination.

Since there is no agreed number of indicators to use, researchers and practitioners have to apply their own subjective criteria in order to define a number which allows to cover the main sustainability dimensions but that is relevant and feasible for the site-specific context (Torres-Delgado & López Palomeque, 2014), which is very much in agreement with the proposal of Tanguay et al. (2013). In this context, validating indicators through participatory processes involving different stakeholders is desirable and this was precisely our intention during the Policy Learning Seminars and during the Testing Phase of BEST MED.

Clearly, implementing indicators is not free of challenges. As asserted by Agyeiwaah et al., 2017, "the combination of funding constraints, lack of commitment and support, lack of proper implementation and action framework, unclear goals and outcomes, unclear definition of stakeholder roles, and little development of systematic measures of assessment for enterprises is a recipe for failure". These are some of the issues we intend to tackle with the model and the tools to implement it provided here.

An extensive presentation, discussion, and evaluation of the most important worldwide initiatives on measuring and monitoring sustainable tourism has been carried out in the

Diagnosis - State of the art on collection and management of tourism data in. From this work a set of 26 core indicators have been selected:

1. Percentage of stakeholders' representation from each community/sector in the route's management structure
2. Percentage of staff adequately trained in tourism, heritage and sustainability
3. Percentage environmental, social, cultural actions recommended in plan which have been implemented
4. Percentage of the destination with a sustainable tourism strategy/plan with agreed monitoring, development control and evaluation arrangement
5. Number of tourists on a trail, at one time, in a given time period or season, per year
6. Level of satisfaction by tourists, including perception of cleanliness
7. Number of new infrastructure facilities developed related to the management of the Cultural Route
8. Number of tourist information offices per tourist
9. Number of public organisations dedicated to tourism which have included the route in their promotional material
10. Number of tourists nights per month
11. Daily spending per overnight visitor (accommodation, food and drinks, other services)
12. Average length of stay of tourists (nights)
13. Number of SMEs in the tourism, culture and creative industries sector
14. Direct tourism employment as percentage of total employment in the destination
15. Percentage of all occupancy in peak quarter or month
16. Number of policies, strategies, action plans and tools in place to protect cultural heritage
17. Percentage of attractions offering alternative access for those with mobility concerns
18. Percentage of residents satisfied with tourism
19. Women/men as a percentage of all formal tourism employment
20. Percentage of destination area covered by solid waste collection services
21. Percentage of sewage from the destination treated to at least secondary level prior to discharge
22. Water use: (total volume consumed and litres per tourist per day)
23. Percentage of businesses participating in energy conservation programs, or applying energy saving policy and techniques
24. Percentage of tourism enterprises using a voluntary certification/label for environmental/quality/sustainability or Corporate social Responsibility along the route
25. Percentage of tourists and same-day visitors using soft mobility/public transport services to arrive to and get around the destination
26. Number of rules regulating activities such as hunting, fishing, etc.

3.2.3 Benchmarking Method

As previously explained, the Self-Assessment Audit sheet allows a qualitative evaluation, providing a percentage of compliance with the criteria. This is a preliminary but important result, allowing policy makers and managers of the route to evaluate at which stage they are actually at with respect to the goal of becoming a sustainable route.

As a second step, once a set of indicators is selected to measure the exact level of compliance with each criterion, the benchmarking will be possible, both with respect to the baseline results of a route, and with respect to other cultural routes/paths implementing the model.

Benchmarking can be defined as "a continuous and systematic process that comprises the identification, learning and implementation of the most effective practices and capacities from other destinations, in order to improve the performance of the destination that introduces these practices" (Luque-Martínez & Muñoz-Leiva, 2005 in Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012). According to Lozano-Oyola et al., the idea is to first select the "best performing destination" which will be the destination obtaining the best results for the indicators measured, and secondly, to compare other destinations against the reference destination, to measure the performance gap between the current results and the desirable goal. This allows managers to define the necessary steps to achieve the performance level of the reference destination (Blancas et al., 2011).

It is important to note that the benchmarking should be a learning exercise (Blancas et al., 2011; Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012) enabling other destinations to improve their level of sustainability, and not be perceived as a competitive process.

Along with the indicators and questionnaires, the BEST MED Open platform is another useful tool produced by the project to measure compliance with the criteria of the model and allow benchmarking among destinations.

The online platform consists of a map with destinations that are part of cultural routes. Each destination is presented with representation of Mitomed and Eurostat data on the regional or country level. Core indicators were chosen from available Eurostat data to provide evidence-based context to the cultural routes' operations. Each indicator is presented as a visual representation (e. g. in the form of graph). Eurostat data serves as quantitative data for the objective benchmarking between the destinations.

Important benefits of this representation are that there is no need for external auditors and the data can be automatically updated when Eurostat updates the existing databases.

Eurostat databases were chosen in accordance with categories of sustainability. Most indicators fit in the category of economic sustainability (arrivals, same-day visits, occupancy rate, employment rate). Tourist arrivals will be presented annually and monthly as the annual data serves for growth evaluation while the monthly data informs about seasonality issues.

Another important tool of the BEST MED Open Platform is the interactive form that allows gathering the information about the tourism sustainability of the particular cultural route through 26 core indicators (see chapter 3.2.2 Set of indicators), which the registered users can fill out through an online form. The form also enables saving the already completed questions and a continuation of filling in the form at a later time. An indicator will present the current state of a questionnaire. Once the data for the indicators is provided, all users of the platform can see the indicator values for the particular cultural route. An additional feature also enables comparing the values of the selected periods with other cultural routes, which simplifies the benchmarking process.

3.3 Questionnaires

In this section, we provide a brief description of the type of information that should be collected with each of the surveys presented to the different types of key stakeholders in the territory. This information is in line with other initiatives previously analysed (ETIS surveys, Green Pilgrimage surveys and the "Atlas of Paths" Report).

Two questionnaires have been designed following these guidelines (Visitors Survey and Routes/ Paths Managers and Guidance questionnaire for tourists, attached) and are included in annexes. In addition, if the use of questionnaires for local businesses and residents is considered necessary, we have included guidelines for their design as well.

- Guidance Questionnaire for cultural routes/path managers
- Guidance Questionnaire for tourists. This questionnaire is useful for two purposes:
  - to profile the type of visitors interested in cultural routes/ paths (to direct the promotional activities to those tourists)
  - to gather their feedback about the sustainability level of the route
- Guidance Questionnaire for residents
- Guidance Questionnaire for businesses

A complete description of the guidance questionnaires used in the frame of the BEST MED project is provided in Annex in the present document (see section 7.1).

4 CAPITALIZATION OF RESULTS

4.1 Results and Outcomes

BEST MED has analysed twenty EU funded projects in depth, and an assessment of their relevance to BEST MED has been carried out. The purpose of this assessment was to make use of already tested and ready to use tools developed by previous projects, and for BEST MED to capitalise those tools and good practices that could be implemented in the following phases of the project.

Most of the identified projects worked on measuring tourism sustainability, apart from a few of them that mainly dealt with product diversification. From those projects suggesting a set of indicators for measuring tourism sustainability, most of them are building from the ETIS knowledge and adapting the system of indicators to their specific needs. Since ETIS is an initiative from the European Commission, it is not surprising that EU funded projects take the system as the logical base where to start. This result has also been confirmed by Niavis et al. (2019) in a study on 14 projects part of the Mediterranean Sustainable Tourism Community, where ten of these projects considered ETIS as the most useful tourism sustainability assessment initiative.

With regards to applying sustainability indicators, it is interesting to see that most projects concentrate their attention on developing their own sets of indicators and online platforms where to collect them, while less attention seems to be given to the implementation process. According to Miller and Twining-Ward, "an implementation framework is an integral part of the indicator development programme" to ensure the results are used in tourism management (2005, p. 65). To this end, ETIS provides an implementation framework (the 7step methodology) that requires an important involvement from local stakeholders to implement. Whereas the set of indicators and online platform to collect data are certainly useful instruments, not giving enough importance to the implementation process and having the "buy in" of the relevant stakeholders might lead to the failure of these initiatives.

Moreover, ten of the twenty projects covered in this report have developed an online platform, in many cases also with similar purposes, such as measuring tourist destinations carrying capacity (Shape Tourism, Alter Eco, Herit Data) or measuring tourism impacts using indicators (Mitomed Plus, Castwater, Destimed).

Another pattern we have identified analysing the projects is the multiplication of sustainability labels and certifications (Emblematic Mediterranean Mountains, Consumeless Med, Green Beach, Sirocco certification, INHERITURA). Although it is true that some are specific for certain tourism products, in other cases they are quite similar, as they basically promote sustainable destination management. It is worth noting that a large amount of labels might have the contrary effect in local stakeholders and tourists; instead of persuading them to join the initiative or choose the product, it might confuse them and get them overwhelmed.

Focusing on the Mediterranean Sustainable tourism community of projects, which is the main group of projects we have analysed in the present study, according to their policy paper on "Measuring Tourism Sustainability in the Med Area", there are two categories of indicators being developed by projects: Destination indicators and Sector specific indicators. While destination indicators take a broader approach, including several topics concerning the tourism development and its impacts in the destination, the sector specific indicators focus on certain tourism products and services (for example ecotourism, cruise tourism, cycling tourism, etc) (2018).

BEST MED has also thoroughly studied the most important worldwide initiatives on measuring and monitoring sustainable tourism. From this work, available through deliverable 3.1.1[7] , conclusions have been drawn concerning gaps, needs and challenges in data gathering and management on sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean. In the last years, several EU funded projects have supported research and pilot initiatives on the topic, generating a wide range of local actions and related preliminary assessments of gaps, needs and challenges.

As far as official statistics are concerned, all EU countries, as well as IPA and Southern Mediterranean countries, have an operating National Statistics Bureau (NSB). All the NSB could be reached online and are free of access with few exceptions for specific studies or research. The type of data available varies from country to country, but at least the basic information about tourism flows and the accommodation sector consistency are present for each country.

Tourism observatories in the MED area belong to different local research traditions related to tourism, as well as to the different weight the tourism industry has on the national economies. This might be also the reason why in some countries the regional dimension of observatories has been developed, more than the national one. Seeking information at the destination level, the regional boundaries seem to be more appropriated to framework specific phenomena or to support decision making based on benchmarking activities.

Different researches emphasize the potential of Big Data for tourism firms to gain relevant insights and information on customers' experiences, feelings, interests, opinions, behaviours, preferences etc. However, in a tourism destination context such data are not widely used by policy makers and authorities to create value. Many of the issues with big data in general apply to the tourism sector. One of these is the difficulty of sharing information across sources. Though cities have no shortage of information, it is often spread out across multiple organizations that do not combine data. On top of that, organizations often do not have a standard way of collecting data. This prevents it from being used to its

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[7]https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/D.3.1.1_Diagnosis_State_of_the_art_on_collection_and_management_of_tourism_data_.pdf

full potential. In conclusion, the implementation of big data in the tourism sector is still at an early stage. However, there are interesting perspectives as demonstrated by the current EU initiatives.

Despite the efforts, sustainability indicators for tourism have not been extensively adopted by local or regional administrations. As stated by the MED Sustainable Tourism Community: "Lack of data availability at local level, lack of political commitment and financial investment for monitoring, low level of skills of human resources to properly manage measurement and data collection" are the gaps to be filled. This has led to the absence of a standardized basis for the collection of relevant information, particularly at the national level.

4.2   Testing Outcomes

4.2.1   Seminars and Workshops

All project partners were free to choose how to organise their respective seminars and what methodology to use. Still, they followed specific guidelines according to the previously defined policy learning seminar format. Specifically, the seminars were to be carried out through participatory techniques to assess the needs and perceptions of stakeholders concerning the pilot areas.

Considering the differences between the pilot areas and the flexibility of the organisation of the seminars, a set of evaluation templates were designed in advance so that the partners could present their individual outcomes in a standard form.

4.2.1.1   Online Workshop on Data Management for Sustainable Tourism

The online workshop on data management for sustainable tourism had the purpose to present the overall goals of the project and, in particular, to showcase the results of its study activities coordinated by the Regional Tourism Agency of Lazio Region.

The workshop was an opportunity to analyse and compare goals and management models of existing tourism observatories in the Mediterranean area at national, regional and local level and it provided information on relevant EU funded projects and existing standards on data management for tourism.

The workshop was considered the first step in the development of the BEST MED's governance approach for sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean area.

The main themes addressed by the event were the use of web platforms for data gathering and management, especially in the field of tourism sustainability indicators and how to use big data for tourism management. Particular attention was paid to the presentation of the new platform developed by BEST MED on the basis of Mitomed+ project's platform.

During the workshop, a special focus was placed on the presentation of the "Best Med Sustainable Path & Cultural Routes Model" meant to improve the sustainability policies

along the cultural routes of the Mediterranean Basin, since BEST MED's intervention field is also the promotion of tourism sustainability planning in local territorial systems. This model is further developed in the next phases of BEST MED project, using for example Francigena South in Lazio region as pilot area.

The workshop set the knowledge basis for the next activities of the project and paved the way for the creation of a Mediterranean Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories based on a participatory approach.

4.2.1.2 Policy Learning Seminars

Several Policy Learning Seminars have been held with the main objective to present the Med S&C Path Model to relevant local stakeholders. Notably, the primary purpose was to compare the most critical needs of each pilot area with the model's criteria and validate the step-by-step implementation methodology.

The evaluation template for the 1st policy learning seminar consisted of two sections:

- An assessment of the prioritised positive and negative characteristics, implications, and influences of tourism in the pilot area.
- A gap analysis of the needs of the pilot area included in the MED S&C Path model, divided in "covered", "partially covered", and "not covered" by the model criteria, and classified by sustainability dimension.

A thorough evaluation of the gap analysis results reported by each of the project partners was carried out to improve the model. The process employed was as follows: once all project partners concluded their respective seminars, they submitted the filled-in templates together with a report summarising their main outcomes.

- First, the data from these templates were extracted into a single spreadsheet to facilitate their comparison and analysis.
- Second, the project partners' reports were examined in-depth to comprehend the current context of each pilot area.
- Then, each of the needs reported as "covered" and "partially covered" by the project partners were matched to their respective MED S&C Path model criteria.

Because these are categorical data, a simple descriptive analysis was carried out first by constructing contingency tables of the results reported by each partner. Each criterion's frequency and percent frequency were assessed by sustainability dimension and by pilot area, as observed in Tables 2-9. The most frequent criteria and the issues not mentioned during the policy learning seminars were also calculated. The aim was to examine the most pressing issues and inspect the discrepancies between theoretical and actual contexts.

A similar descriptive analysis was also performed regarding the needs reported as "not covered" by the project partners. However, it was first necessary to further clean the data by cautiously examining each of the reported needs to ensure that they were, in fact, not

covered by the model. With this in mind, each reported need was subsequently classified as "*already present in the model*", "*implicit in the model*", or "*not present in the model*".

Specifically, as observed in Figure 4 Comparison of needs reported as "not covered" and model criteria, out of the total needs that the partners reported as "not covered", 64.4% were already present in the model; 22.2% were implicit in the model, either in the criteria or in the other resources included in the toolbox; and 13.3% were not covered by any of the criteria.

From these two latter categories, a descriptive analysis was conducted to assess the actual limitations of the model.

Furthermore, for the 2nd seminar, a similar template was distributed to each project partner to report their outcomes. In this case, however, the template consisted of mostly open questions regarding the step-by-step methodology to obtain suggestions from the local stakeholders on improving and implementing the model.

Since most of the questions were open-ended, the results were analysed on a case-by-case basis and complemented with the reports submitted by the partners. However, a descriptive analysis was also performed concerning the multiple-choice questions included in the templates, and their respective percentage frequencies were calculated for issues such as: "1. Who should be part of the Working Group?", "2. Who should lead the process of contacting and forming this group?", "7. Who should fund the data collection process?", "8. Who should have the responsibility for following up the implementation of an action plan?", "10. Who should be responsible for monitoring and evaluating?" and "11. Which could be good incentives for stakeholders to implement a model like Med S&C Path?".

As a final point, it is necessary to add that the data presented here refer to the responses reported by each project partner and could therefore be interpreted as a first appraisal of the model and its criteria at the level of the pilot area and its local stakeholders, but not as an exhaustive evaluation of the model. In fact, a consequent assessment of the model on a more detailed level has been carried out in the following focus groups that has been held in each pilot area.

4.2.1.3   BEST MED & SMARTMED Joint Transferring Seminar

This seminar was held on April 20th, 2021 and its theme was "*Perspectives on new models of governance for sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean*[8]". A follow-up survey was sent to those attending and showed that participants were interested in one or the other project (or both) in terms of replicability and also identified main challenges and support needed to replicate the results of the projects.

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[8] https://best-med.interreg-med.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/Sites/Governance/Projects/BEST_MED/5.3.1._1st_Joint_Seminar_20_April.pdf

Thirty-six people took the survey, most of which were from National Public Authorities. Most participants believe that the activities implemented in the projects could be applied in their territory. Results of the survey are shown hereafter:

Can you please specify which type of organisation / entity it is?

36 odgovora

- Local Public Authority
- Regional Public Authority
- National Public Authority
- Sectoral Agency
- Infrastructure ad (public) service provi…
- Interest groups including NGOs
- Higher education and research
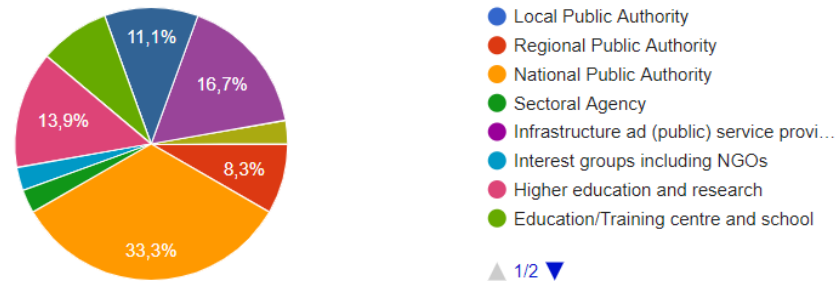- Education/Training centre and school

▲ 1/2 ▼

Figure 6 Type of organisation/entity
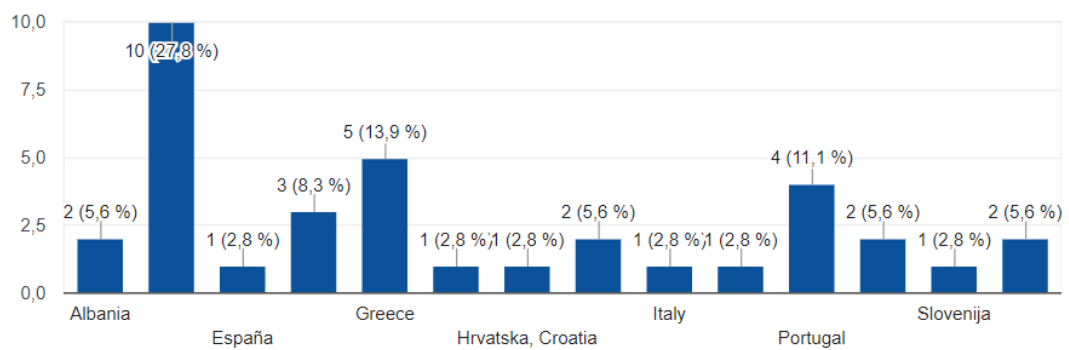
In which country is the organisation located?

36 odgovora

Figure 7 Organisation location

To what extent the preliminary results presented in the event were of interest?

36 odgovora

- High interest
- Medium Interest
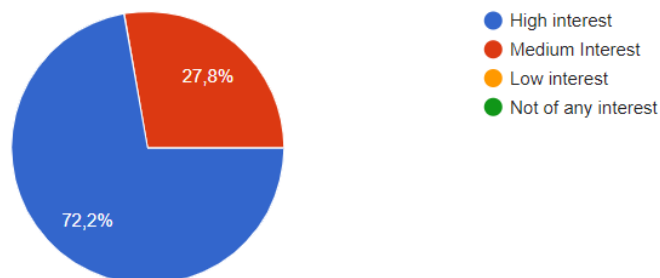- Low interest
- Not of any interest

Figure 8 Level of interest

Based on your previous answer, do you think that the activities implemented in the project(s) could be applied to your territory?

36 odgovora

- ● Definitively yes
- ● Probably yes, with due adaptations/ modifications
- ● Probably not as such
- ● I do not know
- ● Not applicable
- ● Not applicable
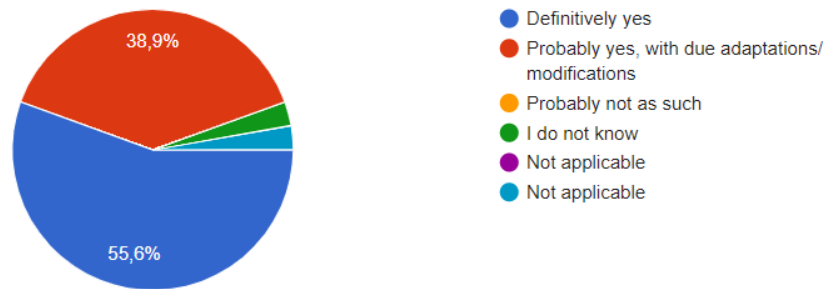
Figure 9 Applicability of the activities

Would you be interested in exploring more about the projects presented (via follow-up meetings, events, etc.)

36 odgovora

- ● Yes
- ● No
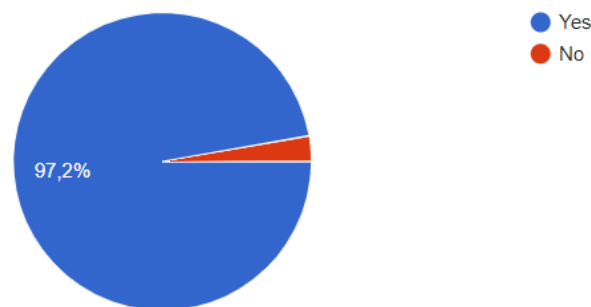
Figure 10 Interest about the projects

In terms of the replication of results most participants believe support should come from Stakeholder's involvement, Networks-Contacts and access to funding.

After going over the results of this survey there is a clear understanding that the main challenges to replicate the activities are a lack of funding, followed by a lack of human resources/skills/expertise.

Main added values identified for the replication of the results are the possibility of Good Practice Sharing and the high relevance for tourism policies.

Other actors identified that might be most suitable/interested in replicating the results of the projects were different public bodies, tourism authorities, offices and tourism boards, SMEs relating to tourism (travel agencies, etc) and Associations and Federations, etc.

4.2.1.4 Testing Seminar

The Testing Seminar took place on 29th September 2021, with the purpose of presenting the results of the testing phase and discussing the system of indicators. In particular, the seminar was an opportunity to discuss about the testing that included a focus group, a living lab, and fam trips.

Once each partner had chosen the route on which to test the model, the testing phase took place including mainly 4 kinds of activities.

Figure 11 Activities of the testing phase

The BEST MED partners have presented some data on the activities that were carried out:
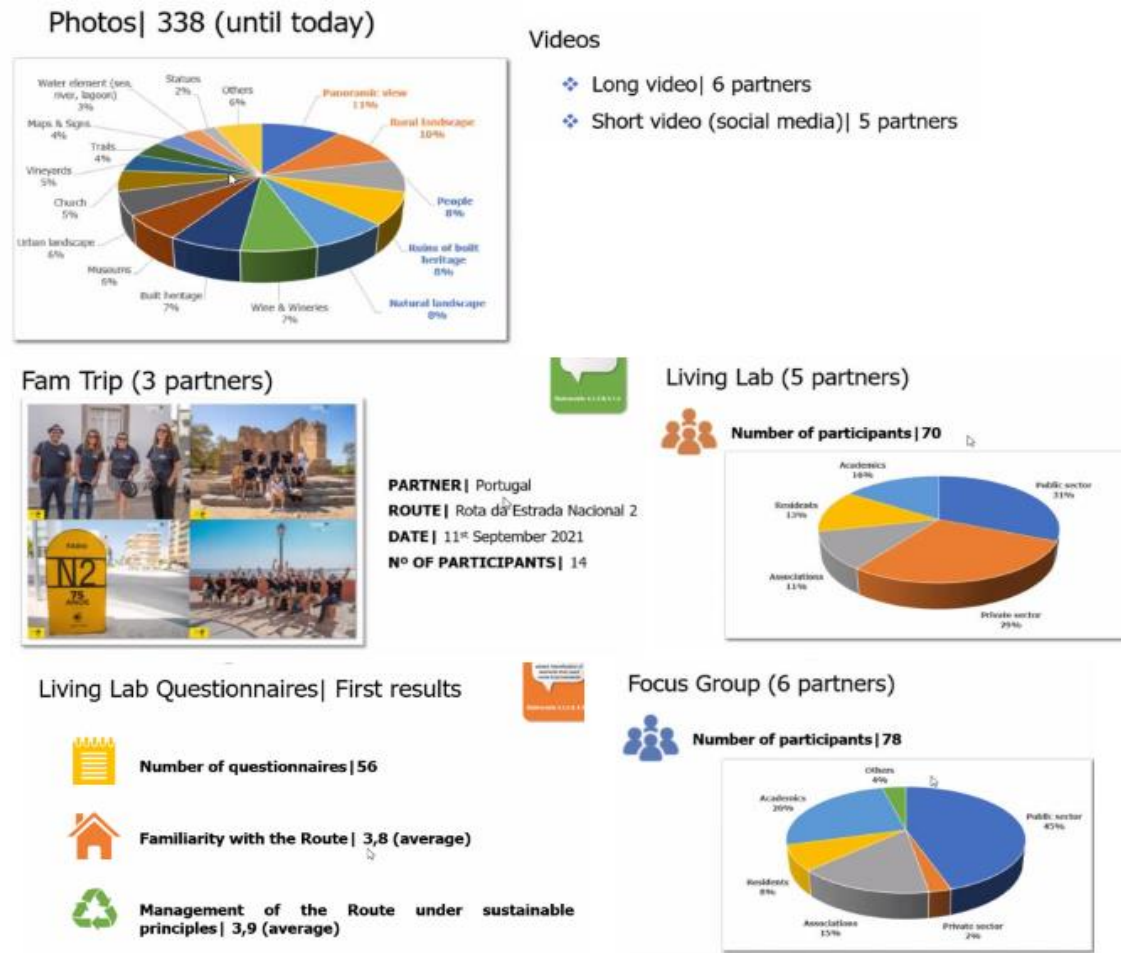
Figure 12 Data on the activities carried out

The first results of the Living Lab Questionnaires (56 questionnaires filled) were presented and discussed, as well as those of the Focus Groups.

Overall, testing gathered a valuable amount of material for the following phases, reaching out to more participants than initially foreseen. WP5 Transferring and WP6 Capitalisation are the next steps.

Figure 13 Outputs (Number structures/stakeholders)

Several routes from the different participating countries were presented.

- The Route of the Alpujarras, Andalusia, Spain
- Southern part of the trail of pilgrims to Rome, Italy
- Cultural route in Croatia (part of Iter Vitis – Kvarner Wine Routes)
- Parco del Pollino route in Calabria Region, Italy
- Route of the Olive trees, Greece
- Cultural route in Montenegro (part of Illiricum trail)
- Three routes in Slovenia (Saint Martin of Tours Route; European Cementeries Route; Iter Vitis Route)

The conclusion of the focus group held on 6th of July were:

- The S&C path model is well developed, encompassing all dimensions of sustainability relevant to the cultural routes
- The platform is built efficiently to gather data from different sources and enables benchmarking among the different cultural routes

As a conclusion of the testing seminar, the key messages were the importance of measuring sustainability, developing more responsible tourism and improving communication with residents. Issues related with the lack of funding were raised. Also, all participants agreed that the valorisation of cultural routes will contribute to the reduction of seasonality, extending the touristic seasons and its geographical scope.

4.2.2   CPMR IMC Tourism Task Force's Results

Two IMC Tourism Task Force meetings have been conducted: The first one was held in mid-July 2021 and focused on projects different to BEST MED (in particular, HERIT-DATA, WINTERMED, and 3 other selected projects from the Sustainable Tourism Community), while the second one (which took place in December 2021) focused on the BEST MED project as well as on other projects on Sustainable Tourism (DestiMED PLUS[9] and another Strategic Project on Maritime and Coastal Tourism, SMART MED[10]).

4.2.2.1 First Meeting[11]

The aim of the IMC Tourism Task Force was to work towards an effective transferring of tourism project results for the Intermediterranean Commission Regions in a post COVID context. A series of tools produced by some cooperation projects on sustainable tourism were presented, with the objective of contributing to regional policies and nourishing reflections on the recovery. Indeed, the huge shock provoked by the COVID-19 related crisis

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[9] https://destimed-plus.interreg-med.eu/
[10] https://smartmed.interreg-med.eu/
[11] https://cpmr-intermed.org/download/conclusions-task-force-culture-and-sustainable-tourism-16-july-2021/

requires a renewed commitment to build a more resilient tourism economy, throughout stronger coordination and multilevel governance. In this sense, the meeting was a first step to respond to the needs identified throughout the survey and helped regions to transfer and capitalize appropriate solutions: the meeting's outcomes were meant to help public administrations orient priorities but also feed policy recommendations, by integrating the project results into policymaking.

The Task Force was organised in two sessions. Session 1 focused on tools for better managing tourist flows and its negative impacts on territories. Session 2 focused on the sustainable recovery of the sector in the Mediterranean and represented the occasion to inform about three MED Sustainable Community Projects.

During the first session, the results and outcomes of the HERIT DATA project[12] were presented. In particular the project's open platform (Snap4city) that intends to create synergies with local and pre-existing apps developed by the competent authorities in order to access to wider information and data. Lessons learnt stress the importance of integrating coastal tourism strategies into the Blue Economy, in order to strengthen the interest of civil society in the topic, and that the sustainable management of historical spot is crucial to avoid overcrowded situations.

The results of the project WINTER MED[13] focus on action plans to develop all-year round destination, supporting participation processes with several tourism actors and close collaboration with citizens as a priority. The results highlight other aspects such as connectivity, that should be considered a priority by regional authorities as transports' connections are usually reduced after summer season, or the importance of building capacity within the region and among municipalities as well as ANCI capacity to build a larger connection with other municipalities within the association.

During the second session, results from different projects (EMBLEMATIC[14], MEDCYCLETOUR[15], and SHAPETOURISM[16]) were also presented.

The overall conclusions of the first Task Force Meeting are available here[17].

4.2.2.2 Second Meeting

The second meeting of the IMC Tourism Task Force addressed the progresses of the projects in which the CPMR Intermediterranean Commission & Islands Commission and their member regions are involved, followed by a capacity building session for sustainable

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[12] https://herit-data.interreg-med.eu/
[13] https://winter-med.interreg-med.eu/
[14] https://emblematic.interreg-med.eu/
[15] https://medcycletour.interreg-med.eu/
[16] https://shapetourism.interreg-med.eu/
[17] https://cpmr-intermed.org/download/conclusions-task-force-culture-and-sustainable-tourism-16-july-2021/

tourism implementation in the Mediterranean organised with the UfM. The aim of the event was to make sure to capitalise on project's results, and in particular to provide new inputs on how to support regional administrations on the implementation of technical and policy elements. The meeting was also an opportunity to share practices and experiences from Interreg MED projects in view of supporting a sustainable recovery of the sector in the participating territories and in the Mediterranean as a whole.

In particular, progresses and results of the projects DestiMED PLUS and MEDCYCLETOUR were presented, as well as the work performed by the MED Sustainable Tourism Community. DestiMED PLUS aims to improve levels of integration between regional tourism and conservation policies in Mediterranean protected areas through the creation of ecotourism itineraries, while the objective of MEDCYCLETOUR is to use these routes as a tool to influence regional and national policies in favour of sustainable and responsible tourism, providing transnational solutions in coastal areas across the Mediterranean. MED Sustainable Tourism Community introduced the handbook that is currently been drafted on how to use the EU recovery plans and the ERDF regional funds 2021-2027 to foster the sustainability of tourism in the Mediterranean.

The IMC Tourism Task Force meeting was also an opportunity to introduce the work currently carried out by the BEST MED project to establish a Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (NSTO), whose objectives are to:

- Cooperate in sharing strategies and data management models related to sustainable tourism;
- Share information and tools;
- Develop joint projects and joint activities, in relation to the funding opportunities;
- Develop capacity building actions and share best practices;
- Fill the existing Info Hub in the BEST MED web portal;
- Collect data and updated information in real time;
- Contribute to the goals and activities of UNWTO INSTO and the EU works on data.

4.3 Guidelines and Recommendations

The present section delivers general guidelines, recommendations and conclusions on sustainable and cultural path models, as a result of the work carried out during the implementation of the BEST MED project. These guidelines and recommendations are addressed to two main target audiences:

1. The management structure of the cultural routes (in the case of itineraries from the Council of Europe) or the association/ legal entity in charge of managing other types of itineraries.
2. The Local, Regional and National Public sector: Policy makers at local, regional and national level where the section of the cultural route / path belongs.

4.3.1   Guidelines and Recommendations on S&C Path Model Implementation

The recommendations of BEST MED regarding the implementation of a S&C Path Model are:

1. It is extremely important to identify, map and involve all local stakeholders in the S&C Path Model implementation process.
2. Secure the commitment of relevant public and private stakeholders at local and regional level in the fields of culture and tourism to implement the model, setting short, medium- and long-term objectives and responsibilities, so that the model has continuity in time. This could be achieved through the Granada Charter planned for the Capitalization phase of BEST MED (WP6) and could provide opportunities to access new funding sources to continue the monitoring activities.
3. To be successful, it is necessary to have an efficient multi-level governance capable of uniting requests and efforts between local and regional levels and between public and private sectors.
4. Provide incentives: incentives are essential for the implementation of the model. These incentives could be in the form of certifications/labels, a yearly award, education and capacity building and funding to implement the model.
5. It is necessary to establish an implementation framework such as the one developed in BEST MED with its step-by-step implementation guide.
6. Design a common framework to define indicators, standardise data collection methods and management, as well as data communication and accessibility (Advocate at EU level for a Common Methodological Framework to measure and monitor tourism sustainability in the Mediterranean aligned with existing tools within the European policy framework. See MED STC actions suggested). The framework should not be limited to tourism data, but to the whole set of data relevant to understanding the complexity of tourism.
7. Evaluate the feasibility of including new criteria, such as "Lighting pollution" and "Activities with NGOs and the local community to raise awareness of resource and environmental protection"; and CO_2 footprint.
8. Each pilot area should assess and define who should be part of their working group and define the responsibilities for data collection.
9. Each pilot area should strive to identify thresholds for the indicators in order to be able to perform a benchmarking against other pilot areas. In the current toolkit, we provide benchmarking suggestions as part of the guidelines for the use of BEST MED core indicators.
10. An assessment of the prioritised positive and negative characteristics, implications, and influences of tourism in the tourism destination has to be carried out, as well as a gap analysis of the needs of the pilot area.
11. Undertake awareness building activities amongst all relevant key stakeholders on the importance of tourism and its contribution to development and poverty alleviation.

12. Connect existing tourism observatories/entities for the consolidation of the Mediterranean Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (NSTO) to be implemented in the framework of the project and further maintained with a long-term strategy/perspective.

13. Provide capacity building and skills training for tourism officials and key stakeholders involved in governance, including in sustainability issues, but also to cultural routes/paths staff, providing training in the fields of sustainability monitoring, as well as in new participatory and cooperative approaches and integrated cultural heritage management.

14. Clearly assess the role of cultural route/ path managers, in order to verify if it is feasible that they perform the protagonist role suggested for them.

15. Secure support from the European Institute of Cultural Routes (EICR) to certified European cultural routes interested in applying the model. Being EICR an associated partner of BEST MED, the Med S&C Path model could be recommended or supported by them as an instrument for cultural routes to comply with their 3-year evaluation.

16. Due to COVID19, foreseeing safety and health measure would be important to guarantee routes can continue to be followed once people have started them.

4.3.2 Guidelines and Recommendations on Synergies with Policies and Instruments

The recommendations of BEST MED regarding synergies with policies and instruments are:

1. Enhance commitment and financial investment from government and the private sector at a national and local destination level, with relevant policies and tools, such as value chain analysis, to determine which interventions can best take place to support implementation of S&C Path Model and sustainable tourism management.

2. Include sustainable indicators, measures and incentives from the first steps of the cultural route creation.

3. Implement an environmental, social and economic assessment for the existing and newly created cultural routes.

4. Review national trade and investment policies and ensure they take full account of tourism.

5. Implement adequate legislation and regulations to control and guide tourism development while being sensitive to the needs of the sector.

6. Ensure that the policies and actions put in place help to conserve and safeguard the cultural and natural assets and biodiversity rather than threaten them.

7. Improve coordination between national and local level tourism governance and action.

8. Provide incentives by allocating specific funds to regional governments within the ERDF and other ESIF tools to gain access to relevant data from private sources with

a long- term perspective to contribute to informed and evidence-based policy making.

9. Development of cooperative structures, such as clusters, networks and consortiums to support the involvement of different actors: private data owners, private companies, public entities, national statistics offices, etc. in contributing to data sharing.

10. Promote sustainable production and consumption in the sector, including reducing the use of resources such as water and energy.

11. Strengthen the level of engagement of the private sector in governance structures and processes.

12. Find synergies with existing monitoring systems and certifications, such as the Slovenia Green scheme, as the data already collected by these other systems could be integrated in BEST MED platform for those destinations part of the pilot areas.

13. Generate synergies with European initiatives such as the Tourism Transition Pathway of the European Commission.

14. Adopt or consider adopting the set of indicators proposed by the Med S&C Path Model for cultural routes.

4.3.3   Guidelines and Recommendations on Improved Use of Data

The recommendations of BEST MED regarding how to improve the use of data for sustainable tourism management are:

1. Have a clearer picture and make a better use of the data already available such as data from National Statistics Bureau or Tourism Observatories. By using as much as possible pre-existent data (official statistics, big data, etc.) will make the monitoring process cost-efficient.

2. Analyse the data for the criteria and indicators in the pilot area in order to test the feasibility of the model.

3. Reuse and update existing website and platforms instead of creating ones with similar capabilities, especially those dedicated to tourism data gathering and management.

4. Support the development of a single platform to host the outputs of related projects already funded through EU.

5. Raise awareness about the importance of collecting adequate statistical data for better managing tourism and its intended effects.

6. Strengthen commitment and coordination across government and industry on tourism data and analysis.

7. Implement standards for collecting data to unleash their full potential.

8. Disseminate the data in a simple and straightforward manner so that end users are able to understand the information.

9. Implement courses and training to improve the skills of human resources to properly manage measurement and data collection.

10. Bring value to the collected data by sharing information across sources and organizations.

11. Foster the implementation of Big Data in the tourism sector to improve sustainability and tourism management, by incorporating methods to collect big data. This is linked with the importance of interoperability and semantics.

12. Following EUROSTAT methodology implemented at the national level, data harmonization should also be extended at the regional and local scale across EU destinations, integrating in one single tool the outcomes of ESPON activities.

13. Support transboundary and cluster-like data aggregation to better understand tourism sustainability within the boundaries of sub regional destinations.

14. Enhance the accessibility to secondary data sources also through networking, best practice sharing and compatibility of data warehouses of regional observatories.

15. Provide capacity building in all aspects of tourism statistics and analysis.

4.3.4   Guidelines and Recommendations on Sustainable Tourism Planning

The recommendations of BEST MED regarding sustainable tourism planning are:

1. Define and implement at local, regional and national levels tourism policies, strategies or master plans that commit to sustainability principles and that are effectively implemented.

2. Implement and support structures and processes that enable and encourage private sector interests and other stakeholders to work with government on tourism planning, development and management.

3. Measure and monitor the performance and impact of the sector through the use of appropriate indicators.

4. Identify destination indicators and sector specific indicators and set up monitoring systems.

5. Prevent or minimise the potential negative social impacts of tourism by consulting, engaging and empowering local communities to influence decisions on tourism development and operations that may affect their livelihood and society.

6. Improve local awareness and knowledge of sustainability issues in tourism through communication and training.

7. Improve linkages between tourism and other sectors, such as agriculture, handicraft and other creative industries, and between businesses.

8. Carefully plan the need of human resources to ensure that tourism can fulfil its employment creation potential and has a sufficient supply of suitably skilled labour to meet future growth.

9. Clearly understand where the skills gaps in the public and private sector lie and ensure that accessible training is available to meet them, both at managerial and vocational level and with attention paid to the provision of skills in areas relevant to the sustainability of tourism.

10. Avoid the use of multiple sustainability labels and certifications.

11. Implement Project Cycle Management for efficient destination management and decision-making procedures: (i) assess the destination situation; (ii) identify areas for intervention; (iii) select interventions; (iv) formulate actions; (v) implement actions; and (vi) evaluate actions taken.
12. Ensure the sustainable tourism strategy or master plan includes an action plan, with clearly defined actions to be taken, responsibilities, timelines, budget and success criteria.
13. Make clear the business case for monitoring sustainability: relating it with an increased level of competitiveness of the cultural route/path.
14. Provide examples of best practices to implement sustainability in the route/ path, coming from the input received from the stakeholders involved in the pilot process. Best practices can also link to results from other projects involving cultural and pilgrimage routes.

4.3.5 Final key Recommendations on future EU programming period 2021-2027

The new EU programming period 2021-2017 offers numerous opportunities and support for organizations. Interreg Europe operations could offer the interregional policy learning processes specific to each thematic field for these other EU instruments and policies to use. Interreg Europe operations could support in the policy learning process leading to improve skills development for smart specialisation and entrepreneurship, digitalisation of the economy and the society and uptakes of advanced technologies. As regards innovation in SMEs, policy learning support could be envisaged towards the Single Market programme (former COSME).

On research and innovation, complementarities with some Horizon Europe topics could be established. Indeed, some calls of the Horizon Europe programme already accept pilots and use cases on tourism. It is important to consider that everything related to BigData, Artificial Intelligence, etc., fall under the Horizon Europe programme.

It is necessary for public and private entities, as well as citizens, to have a good understanding of EU programmes and mechanisms, being able to identify funding opportunities, tools and services available through the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework. Therefore, it is necessary to raise-awareness on EU objectives and opportunities.

4.4 Funding opportunities

To support stakeholders in the implementation of their own sustainability and cultural path model, a range of funding opportunities exist and are presented in the following sections.

4.4.1   At National Level

4.4.1.1   Spain

The current relevant Spanish Governmental bodies are:

- Ministry for Ecological Transition and Demographic Challenge
- Ministry for Culture and Sports
- Ministry for Industry, Trade and Tourism

In the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the Spanish government has focused on this sector to address its recovery and modernisation. Within the Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan" "*España Puede*", the component 14 "Plan for the modernisation and competitiveness of the tourism sector" aims to transform and modernise the tourism sector in Spain by increasing its competitiveness and resilience. The Plan addresses the modernisation of the Spanish tourism sector from a strategic and comprehensive perspective, with different areas of action:

1. The transformation of the tourism model towards environmental, socio-economic and territorial sustainability, benefiting tourist destinations, social agents and private operators in the sector, through the Spain 2030 Sustainable Tourism Strategy, Tourism Sustainability Plans in Destinations, Social Sustainability Plans, and other measures that include actions for the organisation and coordination of the tourist housing market.
2. The digital transformation of tourism destinations and companies.
3. The implementation of specific resilience plans in extra-peninsular territories.
4. Boosting competitiveness through the development of the tourism product, energy efficiency and the circular economy in the sector, investment in the maintenance and rehabilitation of the historical heritage for tourist use and in the improvement of commercial areas with a large tourist influx.

The total estimated investment of the above-mentioned Component 14 amounts to 3.4 (from the RRF only) billion euros.

As part of the development of the Component 14, Spain have drawn two major planning schemes:

1. Its Tourism Sustainability Plans within the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism in Destinations. This is the roadmap that will guide the selection and financing of projects aimed at supporting the transformation of destinations into poles of tourism innovation that make them more resilient, while moving towards greater territorial cohesion, not only relating the offer and the destinations of each territory, but also creating connections between the destinations of different regions.

2. The strategy for the creation, innovation and strengthening of the country's offering – *Experiencias Turismo España*[18].

Finally, there is a web portal devoted to gather all funding opportunities from different public administration levels where stakeholders can search and find different calls and financial resources: https://www.reactivatur.es/es/

4.4.1.2 Portugal

The current relevant Portuguese Governmental bodies for the support of sustainable and cultural routes are:

- Ministry of Culture
- Ministry of Environment and Energy Transition
- State secretary of Tourism
- State Secretary of Spatial Planning and Nature Conservation
- State Secretary of Culture

Within *Portugal 2020*[19] and *Turismo de Portugal*[20], there are several lines of public grants that can support your projects.

Portugal has set up an Action Plan (2027 Action Plan) with the vision to become one of the most sustainable tourist destinations in the world. The action plan includes seven key verticals put in place to ensure the stability of tourism based on the following five strategic axes: Value the territory, boosting the economy, enhancing knowledge, increasing connectivity ang promoting the country. In particular, one of the measures already implemented include Portuguese Trails – aimed at stimulating cycling & walking routes in Portugal to position the country as an international destination for this activity. This action plan focuses on the qualifications of regional destinations to capture new markets and promote business services in partnership with industry stakeholders.

There are other funding opportunities for Portuguese entities such as:

- National Operative Programme on Competitiveness and Internationalisation[21]
- National Operative Programme on Sustainability and Resource Efficiency[22]
- EEA Grants[23]

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[18] https://www.mincotur.gob.es/es-es/gabineteprensa/notasprensa/2021/documents/plan%20experiencias%20espa%C3%B1a.pdf
[19] https://mercal.pt/en/how-to-obtain-grants-for-tourism-projects-in-portugal-2020/
[20] Portuguese Sustainable Tourism Plan 2020-2023
[21] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/portugal/2014pt16m3op001
[22] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/portugal/2014pt16cfop001
[23] https://eeagrants.org/countries/portugal

- Atlantic Area Interreg Programme[24]. The Programme promotes cooperation between 37 Atlantic regions from 5 EU Member States: France, Spain, Portugal, Ireland and the United Kingdom. It has a clear focus on innovation in all priorities and a commitment to building a resource efficient economy supported by a sustainable and integrated approach to the development of the territory. Cooperation projects will generate a measurable impact in the regions and improve sustainable economic development.

In the framework of Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Portuguese government propose a Plan named "*Reativar o Turismo | Construir o Futuro*"[25] (Reactivate Tourism | Build the Future), which aims to be a guideline for the tourism sector, both public and private, whose actions are fully integrated with the objectives of the Recovery and Resilience Plan and the Portugal's Strategy 2030, thus ensuring a concerted strategy for the recovery of the national economy.

The Plan is based on 4 pillars of action:

- supporting businesses
- fostering security
- generating business
- building future

Also consists of specific actions that, in the short, medium and long term, will transform the sector and will position it at a higher level of value creation, contributing significantly to GDP growth and a fairer distribution of wealth.

The three main axes of this Plan involve:

- strengthening the resilience of the Portuguese economy and society
- investing in responses to climate change
- accelerating the digital transition.

The logic of the Recovery Plan is closely linked both to the stabilization and emergency policies and to the structuring of priorities for the next programming period.

4.4.1.3 France

The current relevant French Governmental bodies are:

- Ministry of Culture
- Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs
- Ministry for the Ecological Transition

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[24] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/atlas/programmes/2014-2020/portugal/2014tc16rftn002
[25] https://dre.pt/dre/detalhe/resolucao-conselho-ministros/76-2021-165228578

Each year, the Ministry of Culture (Directorate-General for Heritage and Architecture) awards training and research grants[26], intended to provide financial support for research work likely to be of interest to the following areas: archaeology, built heritage, movable heritage, General Inventory of Cultural Heritage and Historical Monuments, and help young researchers in their action or knowledge of their territory. There are also grant schemes proposed by the Ministry of Culture.

Other funding opportunities are:

- Démarches "Appels à Projets"[27]
- Tourism recovery and transformation plan[28]
- Creation of the "Tourism and Heritage" fund and the launch of the French Capitals of Culture[29]
- Finally, the French transversal policy document addressing finance bill for 2022 is available[30]

In the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the French government has created a webpage dedicated to France Relance on the website of the Ministry of Economy and Finance. Several funding opportunities and "Appels à Projets" can be browsed by keyword, sector, or target audience.

In particular, three main measures aim at protecting heritage and tourism:

- Sustainable Tourism Fund[31]: this call is currently closed
- Support for investments in heritage sites[32]: with a budget of €40 million, it targets private and public owners of heritage sites. It is managed by the Directions régionales des affaires cultures (DRAC)[33]
- Support to heritage operators[34]: with a budget of €334 million, it targets public and private operators of patrimony. It is managed by the Ministry of Culture.

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[26] https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematiques/Sciences-du-patrimoine/Allocations-de-formation-et-de-recherche-dans-le-domaine-du-patrimoine?limit=20

[27] https://mesdemarches.culture.gouv.fr/loc_fr/mcc/requestcategory/appelsprojets/?__CSRFTOKEN__=613230bc-4080-4bfa-963a-f3b9f8a88e43

[28] https://www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/document/document/2021/11/dossier_de_presse_-_destination_france_-_plan_de_reconquete_et_de_transformation_du_tourisme_-_20.11.2021.pdf

[29] https://culture.newstank.fr/thinkculture2019/news/147527/creation-fonds-tourisme-patrimoine-1-lancement-capitales-francaises-culture.html

[30] https://www.budget.gouv.fr/documentation/file-download/14290

[31] https://appelsaprojets.ademe.fr/aap/SlowTouris2021-83?resultats=1

[32] https://www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-de-relance/profils/collectivites/soutien-investissement-monuments-historiques

[33] https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Regions

[34] https://www.economie.gouv.fr/plan-de-relance/profils/administrations/mesure-soutien-operateurs-patrimoniaux

4.4.1.4 Italy

The current relevant Italian Governmental bodies are:

- Ministry of Culture and Tourism
- Ministry of Environment and Protection of Land and Sea

Italian cultural heritage is managed at a national level by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism (also known as the Italian abbreviation MiBACT), which oversees heritage protection throughout the state. MiBACT operates at a local level through its organizational units known as *soprintendenze*, which manage cultural policies and work with local governments on issues related to conservation. Italy's economic and political issues have affected the *soprintendenze* and weakened their centralization within the state.

Culture and Development Italy Structural Fund[35]: the overall objective of this National Operational Programme is to promote cultural heritage of less developed regions in Italy and to strengthen the touristic demand and cultural activity. Specifically, the Programme seeks to preserve major cultural sites in the southern part of Italy and to promote entrepreneurship by supporting SMEs and non-profit organisations in the creative and cultural sector. In order to achieve this goal, the Programme focuses on the following Priority Axes (PA):

- Strengthening of cultural endowments
- Promote territorial development related to culture

In the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Italian government has dedicated several investments to sustainable and innovative tourism, within mission 1, component 3 of the national plan 'Italia Domani'[36]. Five main lines of investment can be pointed out:

1. Investment 1.1: Digital strategy and platforms for cultural heritage. Objectives: digitalization of heritage in museums, libraries, archives; creation of a national platform for conservation public fruition.
2. Investment 2.1: Attractiveness for small villages. The 'Piano Nazionale Borghi' will aim at cultural regeneration and the relaunch of tourism activities. Other objectives include the enhancement of cultural services and creation of cultural and historic routes, as well as support to activities aimed at enhancing local culture, products, and knowledge
3. Investment 4.1: Digital Tourism Hub. With a budget of €114 million, it is expected to promote the creation of an integrated touristic ecosystem at national level, through data analytics and Artificial Intelligence. It targets businesses, tour operators, and institutional stakeholders.

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[35] https://www.euro-access.eu/programm/national_operational_programme_on_culture_and_development_italy
[36] https://italiadomani.gov.it/it/home.html

4. Investment 4.2: Funds for competitiveness of tourism activities. This investment includes several sub-measures aimed at creating or developing new touristic offers, at renovating and digitalizing services, at creating a comprehensive network of tourism offers at the national level. The measures take the form of tax credits, grants, low-interest loans, quasi-equities.

5. Investment 4.3: Caput-Mundi – Big Touristic Events. Objective: countering over-tourism and enhancing the value of routes connecting Rome to other Italian regions. It will support the renovation of areas surrounding the city of Rome, the digitalization of services, he creation of cultural offers to enhance social inclusion.

In addition, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti manages a €2 billion- National Tourism Fund[37], aimed at relaunching the touristic sector, mainly through training and innovation activities.

Finally, three main measures managed by Invitalia support touristic businesses, among other sectors.

1. Cultura Crea 2.0[38]: with an overall budget of €54 million, it supports the creation and development of cultural entities, as well as their integration into the local cultural ecosystem. It is only available for businesses and non-profit organizations based in the Southern regions of Basilicata, Campania, Puglia, Calabria, Sicilia.

2. SelfieEmployment[39]: with a budget of up to €50,000 per project, it provides interest-free loans to start-ups created by young NEETs, women, long-term unemployed.

3. Resto al Sud[40]: with a budget of up to €50,000 per project, it provides grants and interest-free loans to under-56ers willing to launch a business in a specific set of municipalities.

4.4.1.5 Croatia

The current relevant Croatian Governmental bodies are:

▪ Ministry for Economy and Sustainable Development
▪ Ministry for Culture and Media
▪ Ministry for Tourism and Sports
▪ Ministry for Construction, Spatial Planning and State Property
▪ Ministry for Regional Development and EU Funds

In the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Croatian government has dedicated several measures on improving the business environment in the country, supporting SMEs and large enterprises, innovation and R&D. In particular, there are several measures that intend to give a more sustainable approach to tourism in Croatia, by focusing attention on the less developed regions and tourism products. Further measures to support

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[37] https://www.cdp.it/sitointernet/it/fondo_nazionale_turismo.page
[38] https://www.invitalia.it/cosa-facciamo/creiamo-nuove-aziende/cultura-crea-2-0
[39] https://www.invitalia.it/cosa-facciamo/creiamo-nuove-aziende/nuovo-selfiemployment
[40] https://www.invitalia.it/cosa-facciamo/creiamo-nuove-aziende/resto-al-sud

growth aim to strengthen the policy making and public procurement chain in Croatia (to support better use and higher absorption of EU funds). Reforms are proposed to improve learning outcomes and labour productivity, to reduce the administrative and financial burden on businesses, to improve research and innovation, and digitalisation of public administration as a whole. In the end, all these investments are made in favour of fostering the necessary green transition (clean energies, sustainable tourism, etc.) of Croatia and the EU as well.

4.4.1.6 Slovenia

During the IPA II period 2014-2020, Slovenia was eligible to participate in the following IPA II cross-border programs that have been resulting in many beneficial outcomes for tourism and culture:

- Italy - Slovenia
- Slovenia - Austria
- Slovenia - Croatia
- Slovenia - Hungary

It anticipated that in the programming period 2021 – 2027 Slovenia will be eligible to received funding from the same cross-border programmes.

In addition to IPA projects, Slovenia is currently actively participating in the following EU funding programs: Horizon 2020, Erasmus +, Creative Europe, Europe for Citizens, COSME - Program for Competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises. The participation in these programmes has already been proven to be beneficial for the cultural routes

Additionally, National Tourist Board, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Economic Development and Technology and other relevant public stakeholders also provide different tender opportunities for public associations and private companies in tourism and culture.

In the framework of the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the Slovenian government has dedicated several measures in the field of sustainable tourism development, with focus on the adoption and upgrade of numerous strategic acts in the field of tourism, which will strengthen the focus of policies and activities towards further positioning Slovenia as a destination for sustainable boutique tourism. Tenders for companies will address concrete challenges and gaps in practice, which are mainly in the lack of accommodation facilities with higher added value and partly unregulated public tourism infrastructure, which together with accommodation facilities and tourism and culinary products contributes to the overall impression of tourist destination[41].

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[41] https://www.gov.si/novice/2021-09-24-predstavitev-nacrta-za-okrevanje-in-odpornost/

Within 3rd development area: Smart, sustainable and including growth, component 4 of the national plan named "Sustainable development of Slovenian tourism, including cultural heritage", three main lines of investment can be pointed out:

- Sustainable development of the Slovenian accommodation tourist offers to increase the added value of tourism.
- Sustainable development of public and common tourist infrastructure and natural attractions in tourist destinations.
- Sustainable restoration and revitalization of cultural heritage and public cultural infrastructure, and integration of cultural experiences in Slovenian tourism.[42]

The Ministry of Economic Development and Technology additionally published a public tender for investments in quality and sustainable transformation of Slovenian tourism to strengthen its resilience. The subject of the public tender is the co-financing of energy and environmentally efficient and green-oriented operations, upgraded with the use of modern digital tools and solutions.[43]

In Slovenia, where tourism represents approximately 10% of GDP, the Government, introduced staycation vouchers in year 2020. Each resident received a voucher worth €200, while children up to 18 years old received one worth €50. In 2021, the government has issued new voucher with the same policy applied regarding use, although in smaller value. Through this scheme, the Government was subsidising residents to go on vacation in Slovenia. The initial results are positive.[44]

4.4.1.7 Greece

The current relevant Greek Governmental bodies are:

- Ministry of Development and Investments`
- Ministry of Culture and Sports
- Ministry of Tourism
- Ministry of Environment and Energy

Greece has implemented its Transport Infrastructure, Environment and Sustainable Development Operative Programme that includes in total 16 priority axes, divided amongst transport and environment. It bases itself upon the following Thematic Objectives:

- supporting the shift towards a low carbon economy in all sectors,
- promoting climate change adaptation, risk prevention and management,
- preserving and protecting the environment and promoting resource efficiency,

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[42] https://www.eu-skladi.si/sl/po-2020/nacrt-za-okrevanje-in-krepitev-odpornosti
[43] https://www.gov.si/zbirke/javne-objave/javni-razpis-za-vlaganja-v-kakovostno-in-trajnostno-preoblikovanje-slovenskega-turizma-za-krepitev-njegove-odpornosti/
[44] Knežević Cvelbar, L., & Ogorevc, M. (2020). Saving the tourism industry with staycation vouchers. *Emerald Open Research*, *2*, 65.

- promoting sustainable transport and removing bottlenecks in key network infrastructures.

EEA Grants [45] are also available for Greece.

4.4.1.8 Montenegro

The current relevant Governmental bodies in Montenegro are:

- Ministry of Ecology, Spatial Planning and Urbanism
- Ministry of Economic Development
- Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports
- Environmental Protection Agency

During the IPA II period 2014-2020, Montenegro is eligible to participate in the following IPA II cross-border programs:

- Trilateral cross-border programs with EU member states:

    1. Croatia - Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro,
    2. Italy - Albania - Montenegro

- Cross-border programs with IPA II beneficiary countries:

    1. Serbia - Montenegro
    2. Bosnia and Herzegovina - Montenegro,
    3. Montenegro - Albania
    4. Montenegro - Kosovo

In addition to IPA projects, under the new financial perspective 2014-2020, Montenegro currently participates in the following Union programs: Horizon 2020, Erasmus +, Creative Europe, Europe for Citizens, COSME - Program for Competitiveness of Small and Medium Enterprises, EaSI - European Employment Program and Social Innovation.

4.4.2 At European Level

4.4.2.1 Interreg Euro-Med Programme

The Interreg MED Programme gathers 13 European countries from the Northern shore of the Mediterranean. They are working together for a sustainable growth in the region. The Programme supports projects developing innovative concepts and practices and promoting a reasonable use of resources.

The new Interreg Euro-Med Programme 2021-2027[46] has been launched in December 2021 with the aim to contribute to the transition towards a climate-neutral and resilient society.

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[45] https://eeagrants.org/countries/greece
[46] https://interreg-med.eu/index.php?id=13352&L=0

It aims at fighting the impact of the global changes on the Mediterranean resources while ensuring a sustainable growth and the well-being of its citizens. It is fully aligned with the UN sustainable goals, the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development and the European Green Deal.

The projects funded under this programme will have at their core to make the Mediterranean smarter and greener. They will operate to fulfil 4 complementary missions to fight the impact of global changes.

- Mission 1: Strengthen an innovative sustainable economy. This can be done more specifically by consolidating a competitive innovation ecosystem with the stakeholders of the 4 helix or by supporting the transition to a circular economy
- Mission 2: Protect, restore and valorise the natural environment and heritage
- Mission 3: Promote green living areas
- Mission 4: Enhancing sustainable tourism. This mission will concern all projects that fit into the 3 above mentioned missions.

The Programme also has the complementary priority of providing the Mediterranean with better territorial governance.

4.4.2.2 Interreg Europe

Interreg Europe is a policy learning programme for Public Authorities. The programme helps regional and local governments across Europe to develop and deliver better policy. The programme creates an environment and opportunities for sharing solutions and policy learning. It aims to make sure that government investment, innovation and implementation efforts all lead to integrated and sustainable impact for people and place.

Interreg Europe exists to assist three types of beneficiaries:

- Public authorities – local, regional and national
- Managing authorities/intermediate bodies - in charge of the Investment for Growth and Jobs programmes or European Territorial Cooperation
- Agencies, research institutes, thematic and non-profit organisations – although not the primary target group of the programme, these types of organisations can also work with Interreg Europe by first engaging with their local policymakers in order to identify options for collaboration with Interreg Europe

The programme provides financial support to projects related with research and innovation, SME competitiveness, low-carbon economy and environment and resource efficiency. As such Interreg Europe will co-finance up to 85% of interregional cooperation projects that work together for 3-5 years on common interest.

Interreg Europe also delivers its Policy Learning Platform to facilitate continuous learning among organisations dealing with regional development policies in Europe in order to improve the way they design and implement their public policies.

4.4.2.3 Interreg SUDOE

Interreg Sudoe Programme is part of the European territorial cooperation objective known as Interreg, which is financed by one of the European structural funds: the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

The Interreg Sudoe Programme supports regional development in Southwestern Europe, financing transnational projects through the ERDF. The Programme promotes transnational cooperation to solve common problems in the covered territory, such as low investment in research and development, weak competitiveness of the small and medium-sized enterprises and exposure to climate change and environmental risks.

The European Commission confirmed in September 2020 the continuation of the Interreg Sudoe programme for the 2021-2027 programming period. Activities for the preparation of the future programme are under way.

4.4.2.4 HORIZON EUROPE

Horizon Europe[47] is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation with a budget of €95.5 billion. It tackles climate change, helps to achieve the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and boosts the EU's competitiveness and growth.

The programme facilitates collaboration and strengthens the impact of research and innovation in developing, supporting and implementing EU policies while tackling global challenges. It supports creating and better dispersing of excellent knowledge and technologies. It creates jobs, fully engages the EU's talent pool, boosts economic growth, promotes industrial competitiveness and optimises investment impact within a strengthened European Research Area.

Among its many work programmes, clusters, calls and topics, some are particularly relevant to BEST MED, especially:

- WP5 on culture, creativity and inclusive society, in particular through its destination "innovative research on the European cultural heritage and the cultural and creative industries"

4.4.2.5 Creative Europe Programme

The Creative Europe programme[48] 2021-2027 has a budget of € 2.44 billion, compared to €1.47 billion of the previous programme (2014-2020). Creative Europe invests in actions that

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[47] https://ec.europa.eu/info/research-and-innovation/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe_en
[48] https://ec.europa.eu/culture/es/node/821

reinforce cultural diversity and respond to the needs and challenges of the cultural and creative sectors.

The main objectives of the programme are to: (i) safeguard, develop and promote European cultural and linguistic diversity and heritage; and (ii) increase the competitiveness and economic potential of the cultural and creative sectors, in particular the audiovisual sector.

4.4.2.6 LIFE Programme

The LIFE Programme[49] is the EU's funding instrument for the environment and climate action. Its budget has increased to €5.4 billion between 2021 and 2027. The current renewed programme covers the following areas:

- Nature and biodiversity
- Circular economy and quality of life
- Climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Clean energy transition.

The LIFE Programme contributes to a just transition towards a sustainable, circular, energy-efficient, renewable energy-based, climate-neutral and -resilient economy, to the protection, restoration and improvement of the quality of the environment, including the air, water and soil, and of health, and to halting and reversing biodiversity loss, including by supporting the implementation and management of the Natura 2000 network and tackling the degradation of ecosystems, either through direct interventions or by supporting the integration of those objectives in other policies.

4.4.2.7 The Digital Europe Programme

The Digital Europe Programme (DIGITAL[50]) is a new EU funding programme focused on bringing digital technology to businesses, citizens and public administrations. The Digital Europe Programme will provide strategic funding to answer the challenges of making Europe greener and more digital, supporting projects in five key capacity areas: in supercomputing, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, advanced digital skills, and ensuring a wide use of digital technologies across the economy and society, including through Digital Innovation Hubs. With a planned overall budget of €7.5 billion (in current prices), it aims to accelerate the economic recovery and shape the digital transformation of Europe's society and economy, bringing benefits to everyone, but in particular to small and medium-sized enterprises.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that NECSTOUR (Network of European Regions for Competitive and Sustainable Tourism,) can provide valuable technical support as well as the

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[49] https://cinea.ec.europa.eu/life_es
[50] https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/activities/digital-programme

necessary networking opportunities in order to facilitate the access to funds, to the exchange of best practices and the execution of projects. Although these services are meant for members of the Network, their commitment to the "tourism cause" makes them a vital partner always worth to count on.

4.4.3 Other funding opportunities

The EC has published a guide[51] on EU funding for the tourism sector. The aim of this guide is to help tourism stakeholders to find appropriate funding. It contains links to relevant EU programme websites with the latest developments (such as annual work programmes or call for proposals) and further details per programme. The document also presents concrete project examples funded by previous EU programmes.

The UNESCO regularly publishes calls to the International Fund for Cultural Diversity[52] (IFCD) with the aim to fund projects that lead to structural changes through:

- Introduction and/or elaboration of policies and strategies that have a direct and structural impact on the creation, production, distribution of and access to a diversity of cultural goods and services;
- Reinforcement of skills in public sector and civil society organizations to support viable local and regional cultural industries and markets in developing countries.

All projects shall ultimately contribute to sustainable creative ecosystem and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda of the United Nations.

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[51] https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/tourism/funding-guide_es
[52] https://en.unesco.org/creativity/ifcd/what-is

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6 ACRONYMS

CoE	Council of Europe	IMC	Intermediterranean Commission
COSME	Programme for the Competitiveness of Enterprises and SMEs	INSTO	International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories
CPMR	Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions	IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
CDIS	Culture for Development Indicators	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
DMO	Destination Management Organisation	NSB	National Statistics Bureau
EEA	European Economic Space	NSTO	Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories
EaSI	European Employment Program and Social Innovation	OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
EC	European Commission	PA	Priority Axes
EICR	European Institute of Cultural Routes	SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund	SME	Small and Medium Size Enterprise
ESIF	European Structural and Investment Funds	TO	Tour Operator
ESPON	European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion	UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
ETIS	European Tourism Indicators System	UN	United Nations
EU	European Union	WP	Work Package
EUROSTAT	Statistics Office of the European Union	UNWTO	World Tourism Organization

GSTC	Global Sustainable Tourism Council	UNESCO	United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization
IFCD	International Fund for Cultural Diversity		

7 ANNEXES

7.1 Guidance Questionnaires

7.1.1 Guidance Questionnaire for cultural routes/path managers

Category	Type of information to collect
General information	1. Name of the cultural route/path. 2. Name and role of the contact person. 3. Type of cultural route/path. 4. Length of the cultural route/path (in kilometres). 5. Location. 6. Private stakeholders involved. 7. Public stakeholders involved.
Visitors	8. Types of services offered to visitors: Tourist guide, camping, food and beverages, transportation, accessibility, etc. 9. Visitor profile: Domestic, international, families, couples, groups, etc. 10. Communication with the visitors before and after visiting the cultural route/path.
Sustainability practices	11. Number of people visiting the cultural route/path per year (specify the source of information). 12. Measurement of visitor satisfaction. 13. Types of measurements or estimates of the impact of tourism on the cultural route/path. 14. Measurement of the environmental impact on the cultural route/path (pollution, waste, etc.). 15. Measurement of the social or cultural benefits related to the cultural route/path (transfer of local traditions and culture, strengthened territorial image, education, etc.). 16. Sustainable practices implemented on the cultural route/path.
Governance model and cooperation	17. Organisational structure: Stakeholders responsible for the cultural route/path, roles, responsibilities, participatory practices. 18. Type of cooperation between the members of the cultural route/path: Occasional, periodic, collaborative, competitive, formal, informal. 19. Partnerships with tourism-related stakeholders. 20. Process of planning activities related to the development, maintenance, or promotion of the cultural route/path. 21. Networking with bordering regions or other regions regarding cultural routes/ paths 22. Relationship with other regional stakeholders (challenges, success factors, etc.) 23. Main competitors.

7.1.2 Guidance Questionnaire for tourists

Category	Type of information to collect

Profile of visitors	1. Demographics: age, nationality, employment status, socioeconomic status, type of visitor. 2. Type of transportation used to get to the cultural route/path. 3. Length of journey to get to the cultural route/path. 4. Times that the cultural route/path has been visited.
Type of activities	5. Type of visit: short, part-day, full-day, multi-day. 6. Sites or attractions visited / planned to visit. 7. Planned activities: sightseeing, photography, shopping, eating, outdoor recreation, spiritual or religious activities, visiting cultural or heritage sites. 8. Reasons for visiting the cultural route/path.
Level of satisfaction	9. Importance of the characteristics of the cultural route/path: natural environment, benches, places to sit, rubbish or recycling disposal points, signage, width of the road. 10. Level of satisfaction with the characteristics of the cultural route/path. 11. Level of overall satisfaction with the cultural route/path.
Level of expenditure	12. Estimation of average daily spend per person. 13. Estimated expenditure per activity.

7.1.3   Guidance Questionnaire for residents

Category	Type of information to collect
Resident characteristics	1. Demographics: age, nationality, employment status, socioeconomic status.
Level of satisfaction	2. Level of overall satisfaction with the cultural route/path. 3. Perceived benefits of the cultural route/path. 4. Perceived negative impacts of the cultural route/path. 5. Participation in the planning and development process of the cultural route/path. 6. Effects of the cultural route/path on the local identity and cultural heritage. 7. Effects of the cultural route/path on the quality of life.

7.1.4   Guidance Questionnaire for businesses

Category	Type of information to collect
Enterprise characteristics	1. Type of business: accommodation, catering, recreation, transport, other. 2. Type of employees: full-time employees, part-time employees, seasonal employees, trainees/interns. 3. Gender equality: proportion of workers by gender, proportion of management positions held by women. 4. Accessibility initiatives or certifications.
Environment	5. Environmental or CSR certifications. 6. Locally sourced products. 7. Participation in climate change mitigation schemes. 8. Climate change adaptation actions.

	9. Actions to reduce energy consumption. 10. Renewable sources. 11. Waste sorting. 12. Water consumption reduction. 13. Actions to support biodiversity, environmental protection or conservation.
Level of satisfaction	14. Level of overall satisfaction with the cultural route/path. 15. Perceived benefits of the cultural route/path. 16. Perceived negative impacts of the cultural route/path. 17. Participation in the planning and development process of the cultural route/path. 18. Effects of the cultural route/path on business activities.

7.2 Preliminary View of the Self-Assessment Audit Sheet

Section	Category	Reference			Criteria	Yes / No
1. Sustainable Management	1.1 Cultural Route / Path Planning & Management	**1.1.1**	Management structure	1.1.1.1	The route has a legal entity, group or committee responsible for managing the route	
		1.1.2	Stakeholders involvement	1.1.2.1	The management structure involves stakeholders from the public and private sector and civil society, enabling participation in the planning and management of the route	
		1.1.3	Funding	1.1.3.1	The management structure is appropriately funded to carry out its duties	
		1.1.4	Trained staff	1.1.4.1	The staff working in the management structure is adequately trained in sustainability	
				1.1.4.2	The staff working in the management structure is adequately trained in tourism	
				1.1.4.3	The staff working in the management structure is adequately trained in heritage	
		1.1.5	Route's strategic plan	1.1.5.1	The route/ path has a strategic, multi-stakeholder, up to date plan in place to manage all aspects of the route, including tourism and sustainability, with performance indicators to monitor implementation results	
		1.1.6	Region's sustainable tourism strategy	1.1.6.1	The region where the stretch of the route is located has a sustainable tourism strategy and the cultural route/path operation is compatible with it	
		1.1.7	Visitors management	1.1.7.1	Tools are implemented along the route to count the number of visitors on territories crossed	
				1.1.7.2	Visitors satisfaction with the quality and sustainability of the route is regularly monitored	
	1.2 Quality of Infrastructure	**1.2.1**	Infrastructure condition	1.2.1.1	The infrastructure along the route is well maintained and provides all the services visitors might need, comprising:	
				1.2.1.2	Physical paths/ treks	
				1.2.1.3	Viewpoints	
				1.2.1.4	Rest areas	
				1.2.1.5	Litter bins	
				1.2.1.6	Water fountains	
				1.2.1.7	Toilets	
				1.2.1.8	Information boards	
				1.2.1.9	Sheds or other type of shelter	
				1.2.1.10	Bicycle racks	
				1.2.1.11	Vehicle parking bays	
				1.2.1.12	Signposting system indicating the sites/paths/buildings that are part of the cultural route	
	1.3 Health & Safety	**1.3.1**	Safety information	1.3.1.1	A safe use of the route is guaranteed by safety information: the provision of permanent, all-weather, environment-friendly, clear signposting and other markings associated to a trail are available wherever necessary	
		1.3.2	Emergency protocols	1.3.2.1	Emergency protocols are established to respond to natural or man-made disasters as well as health issues from visitors	
	1.4 Information & Promotion	**1.4.1**	Visitor information	1.4.1.1	There are Information Centres along the route to provide guidance and information to visitors	
				1.4.1.2	Promotion and visitor information material about the route is accurate with regard to its products, services, and sustainability claims	
				1.4.1.3	Responsible tourist behaviour is encouraged through awareness raising campaigns	
		1.4.2	Interpretative material	1.4.2.1	Accurate interpretative material is provided which informs visitors of the significance of the cultural and natural aspects of the sites they visit	
				1.4.2.2	The information provided is culturally appropriate, developed with host community collaboration, and clearly communicated in languages pertinent to visitors and residents	
		1.4.3	Website and Social Media	1.4.3.1	The route/path has an updated website and social media profiles where to provide information and promote the activities along the route including its tourism offer. Please provide links	
				1.4.3.2	They are periodically monitored to check their effectiveness and visitors satisfaction	

Section	Category	Reference Number			Criteria	Yes / No
2. Economic Sustainability	2.1 Economic contribution to local economy	**2.1.1**	Tourism flows (volume and value)	2.1.1.1	The direct and indirect economic contribution of tourism to the destination's economy is monitored and publicly reported. Appropriate metrics include levels of visitor volume, visitor expenditure, employment and investment	
		2.1.2	Supporting local entrepreneurs	2.1.2.1	Local businesses, especially small and medium sized enterprises are supported through funding, training, etc. to benefit from the route	
		2.1.3	Joint promotion	2.1.3.1	SMEs along the route / path highlight the theme of the route/path in their promotional activities and benefit from its visibility	
		2.1.4	Local products and services	2.1.4.1	The retention of tourism spending at local level is encouraged through the promotion of local sustainable products based on fair trade principles and that reflect the area's nature and culture. These include food and beverages, crafts, performance arts, agricultural products, etc.	
		2.1.5	Employment and career opportunities	2.1.5.1	The route/ path stimulates the creation of employment opportunities or retention of existing jobs for local inhabitants	
				2.1.5.2	Training opportunities and business advice are available to improve the skills of staff directly or indirectly related to the route/ path and to increase employment opportunities related to sustainable tourism	
	2.2 Seasonality	**2.2.1**	Tackling seasonality	2.2.1.1	Options to tackle seasonality are investigated and implemented, including a mechanism to identify year-round tourism opportunities, where appropriate—and direct tourism flows from coastal to hinterland areas	

Section	Category	Reference Number		Criteria			Yes / No
3. Socio-Cultural Sustainability	3.1 Preservation of Cultural Heritage	3.1.1	Protection of cultural heritage	3.1.1.1	The route management structure together with public authorities supports the protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage along the route		
		3.1.2	Promotion of cultural assets	3.1.2.1	Thematic events and festivals are celebrated to promote the traditional / local culture and heritage		
		3.1.3	Respect of cultural heritage	3.1.3.1	Guidelines (Code of Conduct) for visitor behaviour at sensitive sites and cultural events are made available to visitors, tour operators and guides before and at the time of the visit		
	3.2 Accessibility	3.2.1	Accessible facilities	3.2.1.1	Where practical, sites, facilities and services, including those of natural and cultural importance, are accessible to all, including persons with disabilities and others who have specific access requirements or other special needs.		
		3.2.2	Accessibility information	3.2.2.1	Information is made available on the accessibility of sites, facilities and services		
	3.3 Residents engagement & feedback	3.3.1	Residents consultation	3.3.1.1	Residents in the destinations along the routes are regularly consulted about their level of satisfaction with tourism along the route		
		3.3.2	Strengthening social identity and cohesion	3.3.2.1	The route has strengthened the spirit of social cohesion among community members, their local identity and the opportunities for exchange and learning related to the encounter between residents and visitors		
	3.4 Gender equality	3.4.1	Gender equality	3.4.1.1	Gender equality in formal tourism employment is encouraged		

Section	Category	Reference Number		Criteria			Yes / No
4. Environmental Sustainability	4.1 Resource Management	4.1.1	Solid waste management	4.1.1.1	The route / path and destinations along the route have a waste management system to treat and dispose waste safely		
				4.1.1.2	There are facilities along the trail and in destinations to separate waste and recycle it		
				4.1.1.3	The management structure of the route and the public authorities encourage enterprises along the route to reduce waste production, especially plastic waste		
		4.1.2	Sewage treatment (wastewater management)	4.1.2.1	The route / path and destinations along the route have a wastewater management system to treat and dispose sewage safely		
		4.1.3	Water management	4.1.3.1	The quality of drinkable water along the route is regularly monitored		
				4.1.3.2	The management structure of the route and the public authorities encourage enterprises along the route to reduce water consumption, incorporating new technologies and awareness raising activities		
		4.1.4	Energy consumption	4.1.4.1	Facilities using renewable sources of energy are incorporated along the route, such as solar panels, etc		
				4.1.4.2	The management structure of the route has created synergies with enterprises sensitive about sustainability who are taking steps to reduce their greenhouse gases emissions and incorporate renewable sources of energy		
				4.1.4.3	The public authorities provide financial incentives to local enterprises working together with Cultural Routes, to encourage the purchase of renewable energy technologies and increase energy efficiency		
		4.1.5	Sustainability certifications	4.1.5.1	Businesses along the route and destinations are encourage to adopt voluntary certifications/ labelling for environmental sustainability as concrete efforts to reduce negative impacts		
	4.2 Sustainable mobility	4.2.1	Soft mobility strategy	4.2.1.1	The route has a soft mobility strategy with concrete targets to reduce transport emissions from travel within the route and its destinations		
		4.2.2	Low impact transportation	4.2.2.1	Soft mobility options are encouraged to travel to and along the route (walking and cycling)		
				4.2.2.2	Public transport is available to reach destinations and attractions along the route		
	4.3 Landscape & Biodiversity protection	4.3.1	Protected areas	4.3.1.1	Natural sites and biodiversity are protected along the route thanks to national and regional laws and designated protected areas		
		4.3.2	Landscape & Scenery	4.3.2.1	Natural and rural scenic views along the route and destinations visited are protected and the sense of place is maintained		
		4.3.3	Wildlife	4.3.3.1	Activities and services provided throughout the route do not disturb wildlife, or come into contact with endangered, threatened species		