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Communicating Actions for Sustainable Tourism Development. The Implementation of the European Tourism Indicator System for Sustainable Destinations in South Sardinia

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability communication plays an essential role in informing tourists about the availability of sustainable products and in addressing them to choosing eco-friendly experiences, as well as in sharing awareness and responsibility within tourist operators about the urgent need to improve the sustainability of tourism offers. The European Tourism Indicator System for sustainable destinations (ETIS) looks a tool able to provide a holistic approach to improve the sustainable management of European tourism destinations, by encouraging stakeholder engagement and monitoring processes. Moving from the conceptual framework of the sustainable tourism, this qualitative study investigates the role of communication as a key strategy related to the ETIS' implementation in the South of Sardinia, Italy, among the various stakeholders involved in it. Considering that research in sustainability communication and the ETIS outcomes are scarce, this study aims to contribute to filling this gap. The findings show clear weaknesses in the ETIS communication and stakeholders' engagement, particularly at local level, and in the appropriation of the results. The study suggests to improving communication as a strategic lever to involve tourism operators and tourists while implementing sustainable actions like the ETIS, and to share the knowledge created, both at local and international level.

Keywords: Sustainable tourism development; sustainability communication; Sustainable Tourism Indicators; ETIS; Sardinia

La comunicazione della sostenibilità svolge un ruolo essenziale nell'informare i turisti sulla disponibilità di prodotti sostenibili e nell'indirizzarli verso la scelta di esperienze

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ecologiche, così come nel condividere consapevolezza e responsabilità tra gli operatori turistici sull'urgente bisogno di migliorare la sostenibilità delle offerte turistiche. Il sistema europeo di indicatori turistici per il turismo sostenibile (European Tourism Indicator System, ETIS) appare uno strumento capace di fornire un approccio olistico per migliorare la gestione sostenibile delle destinazioni turistiche europee attraverso il coinvolgimento degli stakeholder e del monitoraggio dei processi. Partendo dall'inquadramento teorico del turismo sostenibile, questo studio qualitativo indaga il ruolo della comunicazione come chiave strategica dell'applicazione di ETIS nel Sud Sardegna, Italia, tra i vari stakeholder coinvolti in tale applicazione. In considerazione del fatto che la ricerca sulla comunicazione della sostenibilità e dei risultati di ETIS è scarsa, questo studio è finalizzato a colmare questo gap. I risultati mostrano una chiara debolezza nella comunicazione di ETIS e nel coinvolgimento degli stakeholder, particolarmente a livello locale, e nell'appropriazione dei risultati. Lo studio suggerisce di rafforzare la comunicazione come leva strategica nel coinvolgimento di operatori e di turisti nell'applicazione di strumenti come ETIS e di condividere il sapere generato sia a livello locale, sia internazionale.

Keywords: Sviluppo del turismo sostenibile; comunicazione della sostenibilità; indicatori del turismo sostenibile; ETIS; Sardegna

Introduction

Indisputably, sustainability has become a core issue in tourism. Since the last three decades, several researches have been devoted to the analysis of the various aspects of the sustainable management of destinations and sustainable tourism development (Bramwell *et al.*, 2017), as well as certain attention has been given to the role of the governance as a key requirement for implementing sustainable tourism (Bramwell and Lane, 2011; Dredge and Jamal, 2013; Heslinga, Groote and Vanclay, 2017). The information on sustainable products and consumer experiences depends also in the communication activity which is essential for increasing transparency related to firms' sustainability engagement (Tölkes, 2018), as well as in spreading open dialogue and awareness between tourism stakeholders, such as operators and tourists, aimed to achieve concrete sustainable goals. Although languages and means of communication tend to be different, businesses engage with academia to address challenges related to the implementation of sustainable actions, like the sustainability indicators (Budeanu *et al.*, 2016).

Within such flourishing production of knowledge related to sustainable tourism, a field of study which focusses on monitoring destinations in order to improve in more sustainable ways tourism performances through the use of indicators has emerged (Agyeiwaah, McKercher and Suntikul, 2017; Gunn, 1994; Inskeep, 1991; Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias and Vinzón, 2015; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen, 2014). According to the UNWTO (1997), indicators measure or evaluate specific information, allowing decision-makers to reduce the possibility of making poor business decisions

unconsciously. As showed later, literature provides a wide range of Sustainable Tourism Indicators (STIs) which reveal how the adoption of STIs is difficult to implement for the process of selecting, measuring, monitoring and evaluating a viable set of relevant variables (Jovicic, 2014). Within the STIs, the European Tourism Indicator System (ETIS) looks a useful opportunity to improve the sustainable management of destinations (European Commission, 2013). Local administrators and political representatives of the five municipalities which founded the Destination Management Organisation (DMO) "Visit South Sardinia", in Italy, have promoted the implementation of the ETIS in their own territory through the researchers' support of the University of Cagliari. The ETIS pilot project were realised between the period 2013-2015 (Modica *et al.*, 2018; Modica, 2015; Fanari, 2015).

Adopting a qualitative approach based on the interpretive paradigm (Burrell and Morgan, 1979), and case study (Yin, 2003) and interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) research methods, this study is addressed to explore the role of communication (Ghanem and Elgammal, 2017; Tölkes 2018) of the ETIS implementation in the DMO Visit South Sardinia, considered a strategic lever to engage stakeholders involved in that project and to make it successful. Indeed, it is believed that the efforts addressed at improving sustainable tourism must be shared among different players of the tourism system who are called to take concrete responsibility for minimizing the unsustainable effects of the tourism industry (Ghanem and Elgammal, 2017). Thus, communication is seen as the common thread to investigate the impact of the ETIS implementation in the case study of Southern Sardinia. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) How sustainability is perceived by the tourism stakeholders involved in the ETIS implementation? (2) Which channels and messages have been used to communicate the sustainability of the project and for what audience? (3) What are the outcomes of the communication activity? The study seeks to offer a practical contribution to policy makers and tourism scholars who are involved in the implementation of sustainability indicators such as the ETIS, in order to improve the effectiveness of communicating their projects in engaging and benefitting all stakeholders, as well as to spur new research.

1. Key issues and problems in sustainable tourism

Since the last couple of decades, sustainable tourism has been receiving much attention in the academic community. Therefore, this topic is quite popular with policymakers and business actors at any level, both global and local. Sustainable tourism implies a wide range of concepts regarding definitions, characteristics, impacts, policy, tools, measurements and performances, both from destination and tourist perspectives. Moving from the concept of sustainable development conventionally ascribable to the Brundtland Report of World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), it is widely recognised that sustainable tourism consists of that tourism which meets the needs of present generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The formulation points out the important question of the intra and intergenerational equity principle, and thanks to

this, some important keys for analysing and interpreting tourism experiences and consumptions under the lenses of sustainability have been identified. Rather than being a simple economic or financial issue, sustainable tourism is a complex phenomenon which also involves socio-cultural and environmental aspects - the so-called three pillars of sustainability (Bramwell and Lane, 2011) from which the triple bottom line approach (Elkington, 1997; Harris *et al.*, 2002) was derived. From a critical perspective, Higgins-Desbiolles (2018) argues that the definition of sustainable tourism development given by the Brundtland Report contains an oxymoronic base as the term “sustainable” recalls the concept of limits (Meadows *et al.*, 1972) while the term “development” emphasises human use to meet human needs.

The main principles of sustainable tourism contemplate key concepts such as a holistic approach, focusses on long-term capacity, and equity (Bramwell *et al.*, 2017; Lane, 2018; Telfer and Sharpley, 2008). In other words, sustainable tourism aims at the improvement of quality of life, the satisfaction of basic needs, the self-reliance approach, is based on endogenous development and in a common alliance between human beings and nature. Sustainable tourism is first of all, a matter of sustainable society which can be achieved only through organisations and individuals who are convinced of the need to be part of the sustainability project (Cavagnaro and Curiel, 2012).

Despite the popularity of sustainability, both overall and in the context of tourism, its implementation has remained elusive (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2010; Ioannides *et al.*, 2001). Perhaps the most important obstacle, barring the transformation of sustainable development into action, derives from the fact that there still is no consensus as the term’s precise definition (Butler, 1999). On the contrary, Garrod and Fyall (1998) suggest that the time has come to move on from defining sustainable tourism and concentrating the efforts on more practical issues. The difference between the goals of sustainable tourism and the actualities of tourism impacts clearly shows the presence of an implementation gap or deficit (Hall in Gössling *et al.*, 2008). Although, the notion of sustainable tourism can be considered “one of the great success stories” of tourism research as numbers of dedicated texts have been produced since 1989 (Gössling *et al.*, 2008; Hall, 2011; Mowforth and Munt, 1998). In fact, the term has been introduced in strategic planning and political speeches, and it has been adopting in the business sector as marketing argument. Analysts generally agree that while the concept has merited as a long-term principle for ensuring that a society does not live beyond its means, it is impossible to achieve, given that it remains unclear what needs to be sustained and how (McCool and Stakey, 1999). Although during the past three decades academics have been involved in debates on sustainable tourism definitional issues and perspectives, there is no doubt that a variety of actors spanning the public and private domains are now familiar with the concept.

Within the academy, as well as in the tourism system, there is a large acknowledgement about the imbalance between the efforts and the results for making the tourism less unsustainable. Butler (2013: 225) states that “making tourism more sustainable is relatively simple in theory, namely, reduce the numbers of people travelling for tourism”, while the international trends show the persistent increasing of flows. Higgins-Desbiolles (2010) criticises the neoliberalism system which heavily affects the sustainability of tourism by fuelling consumerism and the never-ending

growth of tourist flows, socio-cultural and environmental impacts on destinations. According to some authors (Gössling *et al.*, 2012; Hall, 2011), the unsustainability of tourism is also caused by limited progress towards implementing more environmentally friendly operation on a global scale. Some authors believe that tourism businesses implement sustainable tourism practices that increase profits, improve public relations (Gössling *et al.*, 2012; Lane, 2009; Weaver, 2009) and firm's reputation, for instance by adopting green washing schemes that are more addressed to marketing purposes, rather than reaching pro-environmental goals. Although the lever of profit has been underlined by Mowforth and Munt (2003) who noted that the profit maximization has a tendency to subvert any ethical and environmental issues, similar considerations are stated by Weaver (2013: 232): "decision makers in industry and government are usually guided by considerations of financial or political expediency, respectively – industry stakeholders will consider how knowledge can be mobilized to increase profits, and public sector stakeholders will have to consider how it facilitate the re-election of the government of the day".

Although such sharable criticism, according with McCool *et al.* (2013: 239) who state that "lack of knowledge is the only barrier we face", sustainable tourism still looks as the paradigm to be implemented through obstinate efforts as well as the continuous updating of knowledge. Agyeiwaal, McKercher and Suntikul (2017: 26) state that "sustainability is a never-ending journey, as technical and managerial innovations along with changes in consumer behaviour will always create opportunities to improve performance". The mantra repeated by several scholars that the realisation of sustainable tourism practices requires the adoption of a new social paradigm, technological systems, and a global alliance facilitating integrated development (Pearce *et al.*, 1989; WCED 1987, IUCN 1991) still maintains its importance nowadays (Bramwell *et al.*, 2017, Budeanu *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, scholars stress that sustainable tourism requires transformations at societal level, which includes deep changes in norms, culture, behaviour of social actors who are called to alter their relationships within social practices, social relations and socio-technical systems (Hignam *et al.*, 2013; Iaquinto, 2015; Luzecka, 2016). In the complex framework in which tourism operates, working together within public and private stakeholders, represents a key point for pursuing sustainable tourism development policies and strategies at various level, especially at destinations level. Moreover, creating effective communication is essential for achieving sustainable tourism goals, especially because sustainability messages look still ineffective (Tölkes, 2018).

2. Looking for tools: the sustainable tourism indicators and the European Tourism Indicator System

Within the issues of sustainable tourism, a need was felt for the development of indicators as tools to measure the impact of tourism (Wheeller, 1993) as well as for monitoring progress in the achievement of sustainable goals (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005). As Hunter (1997) and Wheeler (1993) note, sustainable tourism as a concept is meaningless without indicators and other monitoring tools that can assess the impacts

of tourism and determine whether they are acceptable or not (McCool *et al.*, 2001). As in any approach, the temptation to find a panacea may emerge. Céron and Dubois (2003) underline that indicators cannot themselves create sustainable tourism as they are a tool not a solution, and a technical approach to a human problem. Within the various attempts to develop indicators of sustainable development, in 1995 the United Nations launched a programme of work for this purpose (UNCSD, 2001) and a similar initiative was undertaken by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development which began publishing environmental indicators in 1991 (OECD, 2003). However, the most significant attempt so far to develop indicators of sustainable tourism (STIs) has been undertaken by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) through its Environment Task Force (Twining-Ward and Butler, 2002). The WTO project aimed to develop a set of internationally acceptable sustainable tourism indicators that would assist tourism managers in their decision-making processes (Manning *et al.*, 1996). The task force identifies a set of core indicators to compare tourism sustainability between destinations as well as a range of supplementary indicators.

According to the UNWTO (1997), indicators measure information with which decision-makers may reduce the chances of unknowingly taking poor decisions. They could be considered as a useful policy learning tool - policy learning being defined as a deliberate attempt to adjust the goals or techniques of policy in response to past experience or new information (Hall, 2011). The use of STIs is crucial both at an early stage of tourism planning, and also in supporting its development and management since it allows: conceiving a quantitative diagnosis characterizing the conditions, business and territorial needs; setting of targets for strategies, policies and actions; measuring the operationalization of principles, objectives and goals of management and development; measuring and assessing progress and identifying any need for revision and amendment (Oliveira, 2013).

While agreeable in theory, however, STIs are complicated to implement for the actual process of selecting, measuring, monitoring and evaluating a viable set of relevant variables (Jovicic, 2014; Torres-Delgado and Saarinen, 2014). The development of sustainability indicators is a process of both scientific knowledge production and political norm creation. Incompatibility between the needs and objectives of the academic versus the political world often challenges the need for indicators. That is why some authors considered that indicators have to be achieved through political consensus resulting from discussion among the stakeholders (Tanguay *et al.*, 2011). Academic researches on STIs have focused mainly on indicator development phase through metrics (what variables to measure, and why) more than analysing implementation process issues or effectiveness of STI in terms of concrete development of sustainable tourism actions and policies. The key lesson from the UNWTO experience is that it is easier to get experts and destinations to work together to define and develop a set of indicators than it is to get them to implement the system. Two main keys for success can be identified: the importance to formulate clear objectives for implementing an indicator system through establishment of a multi-disciplinary advisory panel, and the necessity to design an effective and flexible implementation framework for converting indicator results into management action (Twining-Ward and Butler, 2002).

The European Commission (EC) is working on sustainable tourism indicators since the creation of the Network of European Regions for a Sustainable and Competitive Tourism (NECSTouR) and the European Tourism Destinations of Excellence network (EDEN), a system of indicators for the sustainable management of destinations. Thus, STIs are not new on the European agenda, even if ETIS was formally launched by DG Enterprise and Industry of the European Commission in February 2013. The instrument has been planned to be easy to use thanks to a "Toolkit" which explains step-by-step the implementation process. ETIS is designed as a locally owned and led process for monitoring, managing and enhancing the sustainability of a tourism destination. Operatively the indicator system is composed of 27 core indicators and 40 optional ones that can be adapted to the needs of the destination. The indicators are broken down into four subjects: destination management indicators, economic value indicators, social and cultural indicators and environmental impact indicators. ETIS can help stakeholders to improve information for decision making, as well as to prioritize actions, and beyond the simple adoption of a kit of indicators, it can promote forms of collaborative thinking and coo-planning within diverse players. In fact, the basic principle of the ETIS is that destination responsibility, ownership, and decision-making is shared within the group of stakeholders (Oliveira, 2013).

Basically, ETIS implies a deal with politicians, private entrepreneurs, researchers, NGOs operators based on a fundamental principle of sustainable development, as well as of sustainable tourism development: being directly involved in sustainable management destination process both at local and international level (Cannas and Theuma, 2013; Oliveira, 2013). Since the launch of ETIS, there have been several applications across European destinations. More than two hundred destinations across Europe have applied for the pilot testing phase between the 15th July 2013- till December 2014. The new ETIS toolkit, which employs 43 core indicators and a set of supplementary indicators, was developed as a result of the pilot phases and is available in all official EU languages to enable European destinations to monitor, measure and improve sustainable tourism practices. Only a very few studies about ETIS implementation have been published.

3. Methodology

The study deals with the implementation of the ETIS in the DMO Visit South Sardinia (VSS), located in the Southern coastal area of the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, belonging to Italy. In particular, it focuses on the communication activity (Ghanem and Elgammal, 2017; Tölkes 2018) that stakeholders involved in the ETIS have realised during the implementation of that project. Basically, this research aims to investigate the role of communication as a key-strategy to make the project successful by answering to the three research questions: (RQ1) - How sustainability is perceived by the tourism stakeholders involved in the ETIS implementation? (RQ2) - Which channels and messages have been used to communicate the sustainability of the project during the seven steps of ETIS and for what targets-audience? (RQ3) - What are the outcomes of the communication activity? The research questions subtend subjective realities and

suggest adopting a qualitative methodology and an interpretive stance. The methods are based on case study research and interviews with the main players of the ETIS implementation.

Mainly, the study aims to offer a practical contribution to policy makers and tourism scholars who are involved in the implementation of sustainability indicators such as the ETIS, in order to consider the effectiveness of communicating their projects among stakeholders to achieve sustainable tourism goals. In fact, this study is grounded by the assumption that communication is a strategic lever to share awareness and engagement with social actors, and change their behaviours to take on responsibility towards the adoption of actions for sustainability.

3.1. Research Methods and data analysis

The research is based on a case study analysis focussed on the ETIS implementation in the DMO Visit South Sardinia, and semi-structured interviews with key representatives of that project. Specifically, the case study (Yin, 2003) was selected as the most appropriate research method addressed to seek an in-depth understanding of issues generated by the implementation of ETIS in the DMO VSS; the interview with stakeholders was considered as the proper method to gather in-depth qualitative data through the direct contact and dialogue with the key stakeholders from which achieve understanding and interpretation of meaning (Brinkmann, 2018) about the role of the communication activity.

The territory of the DMO VSS belongs to five municipalities located in the Southern Sardinia, having in the middle Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia. As explained better in the settings, the DMO is located in a precious coastal area, characterised by domestic and international sea-side tourism. The interviews were conducted in two different periods of time: the first one was completed in the summer of 2015, after the ETIS pilot test phase, and the second one was realised in October 2018. In the first interviewing phase, the interviewees were the mayors of the four municipalities of Muravera, Villasimius, Pula and Domus de Maria, and the tourism councillor of the municipality of Cagliari; the president of the entrepreneurial association “Consorzio Turistico Sardegna Costa Sud”; the responsible, as well as some collaborators of the ETIS working group belonging to the University of Cagliari. In the second phase were interviewed the representatives of the three entrepreneurial associations and other two key stakeholders: the responsible of the ETIS implementation and the director of the Marine Protected Area of Villasimius. Even though there have been several attempts to interview with political representatives of the DMO VSS’ municipalities, none of them was interviewed. Moreover, the study was enriched by informal interviews conducted in Brussels with representatives of the Tourism Unit of European Commission, during dissemination seminars related to ETIS and meetings of the ETIS pool of experts, between 2013-2015. On the whole, during the in-field investigation, a total of fifteen interviews with key stakeholders have been realised.

The length of interviews has had an average of one hour. The protocol of interview was framed by the three research questions. Depending on the specific context and constrains of the interviews, some of them have been type recorded and others just written down in a notebook. In certain conditions, e.g. in their personal evaluation of

the project, interviewees have requested to stop recording. Considering the heterogenic nature of transcripts, the data analysis was supported by a qualitative text analysis, in which primary data were triangulated with secondary ones (e.g., tourism data; web analysis; media analysis; other studies and reports). In fact, a web analysis conducted by entering key words such as “DMO Visit South Sardinia”, “ETIS Visit South Sardinia” through Google, had to investigate the role of communication during the ETIS implementation.

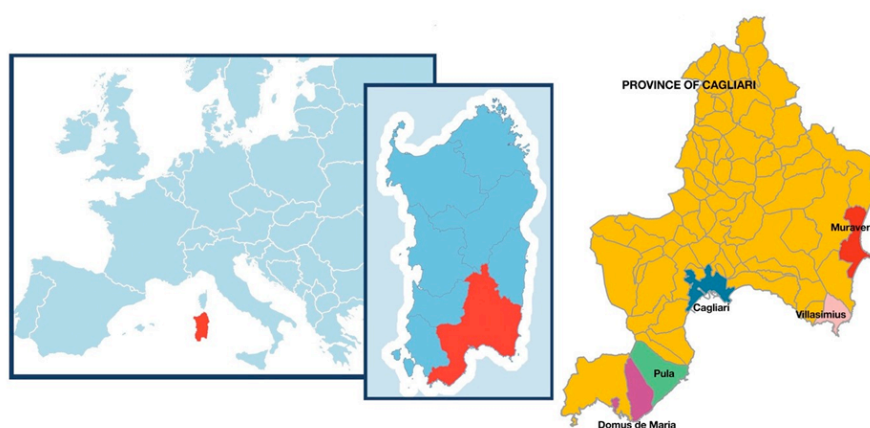


Figure 1: Maps of Sardinia and the DMO VSS area

Source: Modica Capocchi, Foroni and Zenga (2018)

3.2. The settings: ETIS implementation in DMO Visit South Sardinia

The DMO Visit South Sardinia (VSS) was established in February 2013 by the mayors of five municipalities of Cagliari, Domus de Maria, Muravera, Pula and Villasimius, located in the Southern Sardinia, and then joined by three associations of entrepreneurs, namely “Consorzio Turistico Sardegna Costa Sud”, “Consorzio Costiera Sulcitana”, “Consorzio Villasimius per il Turismo” and one association of tourism promotion, “Associazione di Promozione Turistica Costa Rei”. The founders aim to promote their own tourism resources and products as a macro-area, beyond the boundaries of any single municipality, through a system approach, which basically implies the collaboration between the public and private stakeholders. In other words, the common will expressed by mayors is to create, communicate and promote their own tourism products as a South Sardinia destination through a governance approach, which seeks to bring together different types of actors, basically grouped into the key representatives of both public and private sector. Formally, until today the DMO VSS has not a legal subject (The DMO VSS protocol is retrieved by: <https://www.leonardonews.it/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/Protocollo-Visit-South-Sardinia.pdf>). It can be considered as an underwriting intent expressed by the mayors of five municipalities which start creating a DMO community, as a propaedeutic step addressed to establish concretely a DMO in any aspect (organigram, roles, funds, programme).

Placed in the middle of the Western Mediterranean Sea, Sardinia has a land area of 24,000 squares kilometres and a coast line of 1,419 miles long. Looking at the main

socio-economic features of the DMO VSS, there emerges the prominent role of Cagliari, the capital of Sardinia, which counts around 154,000 inhabitants while the other four municipalities have a population comprises between 1,700 and 7,000 residents (ISTAT, 2017). Geographically speaking, Cagliari occupies the central position of the DMO VSS, while Villasimius and Muravera are located in the South-East side, and Pula and Domus de Maria in the South West side. The overall five municipalities are placed in coastal areas and hold spectacular white-sandy beaches that are well-known both nationally and internationally. In the small municipalities of VSS tourism is one of the main economic activities, while in the bigger, Cagliari, a varied range of economic activities are placed, as in any capital city. However, in the latest year tourism has surprisingly become an important share of the economy of Cagliari too. The seasonality of tourism is quite high in the small municipalities, where tourist flows are strongly concentrated in the summer; instead, Cagliari reveals a lower level of seasonality, due to the presence of diverse tourist segments. The regional tourism features (Sardinian Observatory for Tourism, 2017) show that Sardinia counts 3,1 million of tourists and 14.4 million of tourist nights; from a supply side, are established almost 5,000 accommodation facilities in which only 810 are hotels, which count around 213,000 bed spaces where the share of 43% is ascribable to hotels. The DMO VSS counts almost 600,000 tourists and more than 2.4 million of tourist nights representing the regional tourism share of 17%. The average length of staying is of 4.59 nights at regional level, and of 4.28 at DMO VSS level.

Promoted by the University of Cagliari, the implementation of ETIS was seen by local stakeholders as a tool to support and launch the activity of the DMO VSS, as well as to spread awareness and responsibility across tourism operators towards sustainable tourism improvements. Before the ETIS implementation, the DMO VSS became an early adopter of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC) criteria and indicators programme within the 10 international destinations selected to demonstrate pioneering projects in sustainable tourism management (Modica *et al.*, 2018). The ETIS was implemented in the period 2013-2015. Thanks to its innovative approach combining EU and UN sustainability indicators, in April 2016 the DMO VSS was awarded the European Sustainable Destination prize associated with the first joint ETIS and Accessible Tourism Award hosted by the EC (see: https://ec.europa.eu/growth/content/south-sardinia-and-barcelona-win-top-prizes-first-etis-and-accessible-tourism-awards-0_en)

4. Findings and discussion

Before exploring the specific themes related to the research questions, a brief introduction about the local political scenario is needed. At the beginning of the project, in spring 2013, the main supporters of the DMO VSS and the ETIS implementation were basically the mayor of Villasimius (who played this role for 33 years) and the tourism councillor of the municipality of Cagliari (holding a relevant educational as well as a professional background in tourism). They have been unanimously considered by the private sectors' interviewees such as "the mind" of the

DMO. An interviewee representing an entrepreneurial association specifies that *“they really adopted a system thinking approach to the DMO ... they expressed a strategic vision which went beyond the boundaries of their municipalities”*. In May 2014, a new mayor was elected in Villasimius; in 2016 the tourism councillor of the Cagliari municipality finished her term. The new tourism councillor of Cagliari seemed less involved in the DMO project. In the view of some interviewees, such changes impacted on the ETIS implementation process: there have emerged individualistic mind sets within the mayors which caused a fragmentation of views within the public representatives of the ETIS Local Group and consequently the collaborative spirit shared among stakeholders was weakened. From another point of view, an interviewee of an academic body notices that the political change in certain municipalities is a natural fact which did not compromise the ETIS implementation process *per sé*; instead the critical question seems relying in the low level of decision making showed by the five mayors who at first founded the DMO community and then they did not act towards the effective realisation of the DMO. The lack of a strong commitment in the public sector seems to have affected the project outcomes, as discussed later.

4.1. RQ1. The meanings of sustainability

Literature shows the predominance of environmental meanings and issues related to sustainability (Tölkes, 2018; Zolfani *et al.*, 2015). Thus, the in-field investigation starts by gathering information about the stakeholders' knowledge on sustainability, which is also propaedeutic to the analysis of RQ2 and RQ3, in the light of finding connections and potential mismatches with the international literature. As a general view, environmental meanings linked to the concept of sustainability are quite well-known by the all interviewees who perceive sustainability through this mainstream. Particularly those who live in the South West area of DMO VSS may experience daily environmental concerns for the presence of the main petrol refinery of the Western Mediterranean, and the fire ranges established by the Italian Ministry of Defence. Most of the interviewees consider sustainability in the conservation of shorelines, and the nature link to an economic development model addressed to promote the VSS as a destination. In other words, the conservation of natural and landscape heritage is instrumental to the tourism development: *“tourists seek clean sea water, and clean beaches”* says an interviewee of the entrepreneurial associations who intends the protection of environment as a *conditio sine qua non* to attract tourists.

The economic sustainability of tourism is widely considered by stakeholders. They recognise a primary goal in addressing policy, strategies and actions to achieving the economic profitability of tourism activity while dealing with sustainable issues. The tourism councillor of the Cagliari municipality states that *“the EC ETIS award must be seen as a stimulus for the whole DMO VVS' stakeholders to the tourism development for a territory which has to make sustainability the main operative attractor of territorial marketing”* (Nuvoli, 2016). In other words, sustainability is seen as a strategic lever to market the DMO in order to increase its tourists flow and revenues.

Only the minority of interviewees recognises the importance of social and cultural aspects of sustainability as the environmental and economic ones. Moreover, they

transpose the cultural meanings of sustainability into practice by referring to the changes in social norms and cultures that should be needed to make citizens, particularly the youngest, more aware about the adoption of behaviours which respect the natural environment. They seem not familiar with the term of commodification of culture probably because most of the tourists (who are domestic and European) share the same western cultural roots with the local community, and echoing Higgins-Desbiolles (2010) no criticism related to the neoliberalism paradigm which rule their lives has been expressed. Only a few interviewees recognise sustainable tourism development meanings in terms of a system thinking approach which embodies all the four (social, cultural, economic and environmental) aspects of sustainability, which allows individuals, businesses and organisations to integrate sustainable practices in their daily activities (Roxas, Rivera and Gutierrez, 2018).

An interviewee of the private sector states that *“although DMO VSS has been recognised as a sustainable destination, we are still not a sustainable destination: how can you smile at tourists when the people around you are experiencing poverty and loss of jobs?”*. From his point of view, the wellbeing and happiness of the local community should be at the top of criteria for being recognised as a sustainable destination. However, interviewees agree about the concept of sustainability as an ongoing process, which requires constant efforts of various social actors.

4.2. RQ2. The ETIS communication: messages, channels and audiences

The communication activity is a fundamental pillar of any ETIS implementation project but in the analysis made by a member of the ETIS pool of experts (Sirse, 2014) within over hundred destinations implementing ETIS, this appears to be one of the main critical points. As suggested by the EC, creating a local group by engaging with different stakeholders is a necessary step to make ETIS implementations successful. The Table 1, drawn by Modica and colleagues (2018), offers a detailed overview of the main communication steps undertaken by the primary stakeholders' group (PSG), composed by the mayors and tourism councillors of the five municipalities of VSS and then the presidents of the tourism associations. The PSG was supported by the University of Cagliari which has led the ETIS implementation in the DMO VSS, and the University of Bicocca for statistical expertise. Within the events, 6 up to 13 took place at international level; only a minority of them focused on the local level. However, as clarified by the responsible of the ETIS implementation in DMO VSS, that table reports only the main events but there have been several meetings at local level in which the leading team of the University of Cagliari met local stakeholders for planning activity as needed for the ETIS implementation process.

As said by interviewees, most of the communication of the ETIS project was realised in the first phase of the project, in 2013. The creation of the local stakeholders' group (LSG) needed frequent meetings both at local (within each municipality) and at destination (intra municipalities) level. The main communication tools adopted by the main stakeholders (the mayors and the team of the University of Cagliari) were public relations and press conferences. Most of communication went through online channels, in form of news release on municipalities' websites, and the involvement of local/national journalists who published their articles in newspapers and in TV news. In

other words, the ETIS communication was mainly non-personal and addressed to general audience. This matches a Tölkes' (2018) assertion, who notices that in the literature the most channels of sustainability communication are non-personal communication channels such as media that carry messages without feedback or personal contact (Kotler *et al.*, 2010). The leading group promoted the ETIS implementation in DMO VSS particularly through public relations at international level, and press realises at national/local ones, adopting a mix of personal and non-personal channels.

Table 1: VSS events, meetings, and working groups associated with the ETIS implementation

Event	Place	Date/Period	Content	Outcomes
1	Brussels	22 February 2013	Launch of the ETIS	Knowledge on the ETIS
2	Cagliari	13 March 2013	Sustainable Tourism conference	PSG decision to start with international and European indicator systems implementation (GSTC and ETIS)
3	Brussels	19 April 2013	Expert Meeting	First discussions at the EU level on the problems that destinations encountered with the ETIS toolkit and its first implementation
4	Cagliari, Domus de Maria, Muravera, Pula and Villasimius	24 July–5 August 2013	PSG working group discussion	Discussion on the utility and availability of environmental, social and economic indicators based on GSTC criteria and indicators Early Adopters program
5	Cagliari	30 November 2013	Press release organized by PSG and University of Cagliari	Presentation of GSTC implementation and results
6	Rome	25 June 2014	Destination conference organized by Lazio Region, Italian ETIS Pool of Experts (PoEs) in collaboration with the EC	Results from VSS and Cuneo Alps. ETIS first pilot phase
7	Brussels	4 July 2014	WORKSHOP—European Tourism Indicator System. The results of the first pilot testing phase: Exchanges of experiences	Presentation of the results of the first ETIS pilot phase from 6 selected destinations and presentation of the document of the overall results from the EC and ETIS PoEs
8	Oristano	9 March 2015	Presentation of VSS project and STPMS	Involvement of PSG and students in ETIS data collection through 2015 surveys
9	Villasimius	29 April 2015	VSS DMO promotion with the participation of tourism enterprises	Presentation of ETIS surveys to PSG and distribution of the ETIS enterprise survey: Request of collaboration
10	Brussels (videoconference)	25 June 2015	ETIS pilot phases	Discussion between EC, ETIS PoEs and destination representatives
11	Brussels (videoconference)	29 October 2015	ETIS pilot phases	Discussion between EC, ETIS PoEs and destination representatives
12	Brussels	28 January 2016	ETIS and Accessible Tourism conference. Managing and promoting sustainable and accessible tourism destinations	EC release of the ETIS toolkit 2016. Presentation of VSS implementation of GSTC and ETIS indicators, difficulties and challenges
13	Brussels	22 April 2016	ETIS Award	ETIS ceremony. Decision of the ETIS winners to continue their experience and share results through the establishment of the ETIS Destinations Network (EDN) led by VSS

Source: Modica, Capocchi, Foroni and Zenga (2018)

What clearly emerges from the web analysis related to the ETIS implementation in the DMO VSS, as well as from the interviews, is the lack of a communication plan and a communication staff within the PSG. For instance, the PSG did not realise a DMO VSS official website nor social media pages addressed to disseminate the ETIS project outcomes among residents, tourists and tourism operators. From the interviews realised in 2015 emerged a wide stakeholders' awareness about the need to improve communication and filling that gap but this consciousness was not put into practice. The representatives of the entrepreneurial associations who were involved in the DMO VSS project opened a portal about VSS with the only aim to market the DMO. As stated by an interviewee of an academic body *"the sustainability in VSS is not communicated: this has been one of the main observations of GSTC evaluators when assessing the VSS. It is a political issue if mayors did not invest in human resources and money on a project that they have created by themselves... The entrepreneurial consortia could have realised ad hoc communication campaigns but they did not"*. Another interviewee representing an entrepreneurial association states that *"the ETIS project has been communicated badly... It lacked the communication among key stakeholders and consequently there has been a lack of communication at a wider level"*.

From another point of view, the representatives of entrepreneurial associations express their dissatisfaction for the lack of public investments in the DMO VSS project as well as for the lack of communication that the leading group of ETIS should have covered during the project implementation: *"communication is a key element for making the ETIS project successful: the people of the University of Cagliari led the project but then they did not work anymore to disseminate the projects' results within the tourism operators"*. Substantially, the University of Cagliari got funds by the DMO VSS municipalities to implement the ETIS project, while the associations of tourism entrepreneurs did not, although they should have managed public funds for the promo-commercialisation of the DMO.

The communication appears fragmented and just oriented in informing general audience about the main outcomes achieved through the ETIS implementation in the DMO VSS. In other words, most of the communication activity took the form of "above the line" advertising, addressed to reach untargeted audience. Basically, two were the main achievements, corresponding also to the main contents of communication: (1) the GSTC assessment by which the VSS was recognised as an early adopter programme; (2) the European Sustainable Destination prize of EC which has been awarded by the DMO VSS.

As an early adopter of GSTC, the DMO VSS received an international attention which helped in creating the best conditions for the ETIS implementation. The collective euphoria for having reached such an important goal at international level can be read in the several online communications provided by stakeholders: e.g., in the DMO VSS municipalities' websites as well as in the economic operators' ones (see Figure 2). However, only three municipalities (Pula, Domus de Maria and Cagliari) communicated the GSTC assessment on their own home pages: among them, only Domus de Maria still communicates (October 2018) the achievement of GSTC certificate on its official website. Currently, none of the DMO VSS municipalities communicates being recognised as a sustainable destination by the EC, although they have been the political and financial sponsors of the ETIS implementation in VSS.

Within accommodation facilities and other tourism services providers, currently only few of them, such as the Hotel Salinas, mentioned on Figure 2 (See: <http://www.hoteltorresalinas.it/area/?lang=en>) communicate to be placed in a sustainable destination, but some of them have undertaken European environmental programmes of sustainability, such as the EMAS and Ecolabel, and promote their achievements by their own websites.

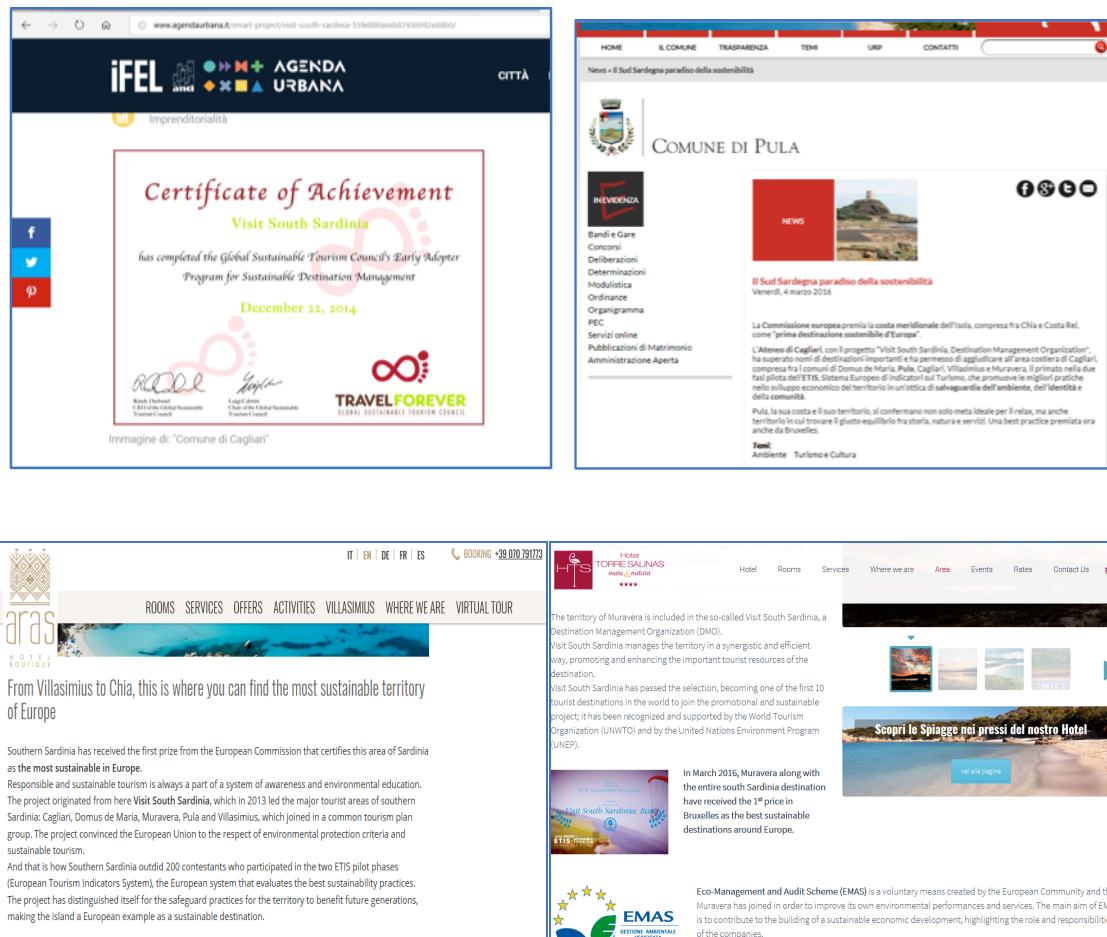


Figure 2: Examples of online communications about DMO VSS achievements in sustainable tourism management

Sources: own online communication analysis

4.3. RQ3. The ETIS communication outcomes

All the Interviewees stress that the ETIS should have been a part of a wider project aimed at launching the DMO VSS. Instead, most of them agree that the ETIS implementation has been the main project which catalysed the DMO's planning and the financial resources: in their view for this reason the DMO VSS has partially remained as a "paper project", and it has not developed all its great potential. Moreover, interviewees agree that the same ETIS project has not fully matched its goals because of the partial dissemination of its results which mainly reached international audiences (such as tourism experts and tourism scholars), and the partial appropriation of long-term benefits within the local stakeholders. As explained by an

interviewee of the entrepreneurial associations: *“the result achieved by ETIS was not communicated and disseminated for DMO’s marketing purpose: after reaching the European prize as a final outcome of ETIS, the leading group achieved its own goals by publishing books and articles in international journals, but also the local community and tourism operators should have reached their own benefits. But this did not happen”*.

The fact that, during the ETIS data collection process, only 25 questionnaires were partially or fully self-completed by tourism operators (Modica *et al.*, 2018), means that something did not work in the collaboration between the ETIS leading team and the tourism operators. As recognised by these authors *“This finding suggests the need within future investigations for strengthening the involvement of the private sector in implementing STPMS [sustainable tourism performance measurement system]”* (Modica *et al.*, 2018: 15).

All the interviewees agree that the main critical issue related to the ETIS implementation regards the low level of decision making expressed by the politicians who at first created the DMO and then they did not support all the activity they had planned to realise. For sure the DMO VSS was a recipient of an important prize as a sustainable destination at European level, and before it was internationally assessed as an early adopter of GSTC, but these achievements are seen as the final outcome of a choral action undertaken by various stakeholders, rather than the merit of a single one (e.g., the University of Cagliari).

What clearly emerges in the interviewees’ perceptions while evaluating the ETIS implementation, is their sense of a “lost opportunity”, particularly within the entrepreneurial representatives who are aware about the extraordinary results reached by VSS. In Figure 3 is reported a good practice of sustainability communication made by the four-stars Hotel Albaruja (Muravera) which until today mentions to be located within *“the first sustainable Mediterranean destination”* (see: <https://www.albaruja.it/en/hotel/perche-sceglierci/>).

As stressed above, tourism operators highlight a clear change in the political framework from the beginning of the project until the end of it. In other words, from the GSTC assessment in 2013 and the EC prize in 2016, the imprinting role of the public sector changed completely: the shared vision expressed by the five DMO VSS mayors to create a South Sardinia destination was not supported by specific actions toward this goal. The initial spirit of collaboration addressed to create a destination which embodied the five municipalities appears lost during the time. The political scenario changed as an effect of the administrative elections where three new mayors were elected. In the views of the interviewees, such changes affected the governance approach expressed by the main stakeholders of the DMO: instead of pursuing a system approach by giving power and instruments to the destination project and supporting the marketing actions of the tourism operators, they adopted individualistic choices by promoting their own municipality, against the destination approach. A clear example emerges from the municipality of Villasimius where, as stated by the director of the Villasimius - Capo Carbonara Marine Protected Area, the mayor has recently created a local DMO with the mentioned Marine Protected Area, and the local Entrepreneurial Tourism Consortium.

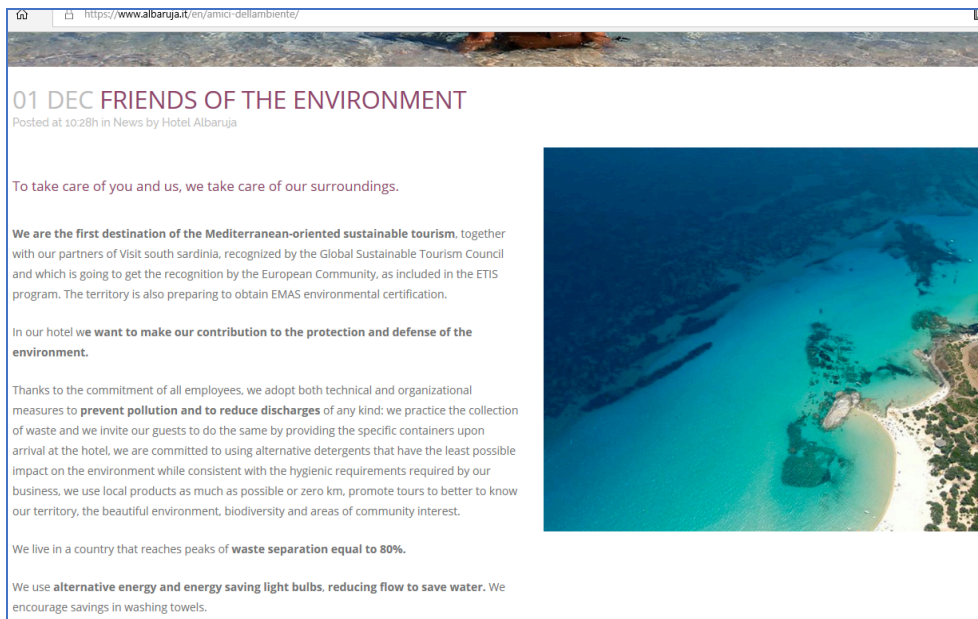


Figure 3: A case of sustainability communication by a VSS four-stars hotelier
Source: <https://www.albaruja.it/en/hotel/perche-sceglierci/>

The role of the academic team who gathered funds from the municipalities and other regional bodies to collect data for building the ETIS indicators, without assuming a leading position in the communication activity as well as in the relationships governance at a destination level (the university should have taken the leadership as the main facilitator of the project), has been criticised by most of the interviewees. However, it is important to stress that without the efforts done by the University of Cagliari, the DMO VSS would not have achieved the important prize from the EC. This aspect has been clearly recognised by the all interviewees.

Most of the DMO VSS municipalities provided financial resources to the ETIS project but they did not require and share the report realised by the University of Cagliari in collaboration with the University of Bicocca, in which a huge number of precious indicators about sustainable tourism were realised in a destination where there is a clear need of data for managing and benchmarking sustainable tourism performances. Perhaps this means that the main stakeholders are not fully capitalising such outcomes in terms of the rise of destination reputation and visibility, the enhancement of community awareness and prouddness to pursue sustainable goals, and the destination promotion toward sustainability-sensitive targets.

Conclusions

The investigation due through the lens of sustainability communication analysis reveals a clear gap in this matter. Not a single group of communicators, nor a communication plan supported the ETIS implementation and other activities of the DMO VSS. Fragmented communication took place as a result of uncoordinated initiatives undertaken by the main municipalities through press realises carried on their own

websites, and the involvement of local/national journalists. Also, the leading group promoted the ETIS implementation in DMO VSS particularly through public relations at international level, and press realises at national/local ones. Most of the communication activity of the ETIS leading team seems addressed to reach international/national audience rather than to engage with local stakeholders, particularly those representing the private sector. However, due to the constant links with international bodies carried by the ETIS leading team, the DMO VSS achieved important outcomes, such the GSTC assessment as an early adopter of sustainability and the EC prize as the European sustainable destination. Nowadays, only a few messages about the important DMO VSS' achievements are present on the main stakeholders' communication activity, referred to the five municipalities and the over a thousand of tourism operators of the DMO VSS. This fact shows that not all the opportunities deriving by the ETIS implementation have been seized.

The ETIS implementation results of more than two hundred of European destinations which took part at the two pilot phases, are not available yet to the EC. Only a few studies report back knowledge about the ETIS implementation, although ETIS can be considered as an ambitious EC project addressed to offer the ground for growing horizontal and cooperative relationships among stakeholders, for testing new governance approaches, and for experiencing and sharing more specific practices to make tourism sustainable holistically within the destinations.

Basically, this study aimed to offer a contribution to various stakeholders who are involved in the implementation of sustainability actions such as the ETIS, in order to consider the effectiveness of communicating their projects to achieving sustainable tourism goals. However, the final remark of this study is addressed to scholars, politicians and policy makers who have been involved in sustainable tourism actions, like the ETIS, to share the knowledge generated by such implementations both at local and international level, in order to communicate and critically discuss the efforts done to pursue sustainability.

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