

COOPERATION BETWEEN ACTORS FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE APRECIATION OF HERITAGE AND CULTURAL RESOURCES IN RURAL TERRITORIES

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ABSTRACT

Framed by the theoretical context concerning cooperation between tourism agents, the present paper aims to contribute for better understanding South Alentejo tourism agents' perceptions on the areas in which they can cooperate for promoting development and competitiveness in the region. Furthermore, the paper also looks at the tourist agents' perception on role that the dynamics of cultural resources play in promotion of development and competitiveness in the region. This paper reports results from a case study conducted in the frame of the thesis developed as requirement to get the PhD in Tourism. Data was gathered by a questionnaire developed for the study from a sample of tourism agents working in the public, private business and associative (non lucrative) sectors.

The study results has indicated that valuation of the existing culture, integrated development of tourism resources and products and organization of promotional activities are the areas considered more relevant for the tourism agents to cooperate among them. In particular, leaders of different sectors agree with the need to cooperate focusing on the valorisation of local and regional cultural resources. This is important because the South Alentejo region has excellent cultural resources that, if strategically used, can provide a major differentiating factor.

Keywords: Cooperation, Actors, Sustainable Development, Cultural Resources.

JEL Classification: Z32

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the conservation of natural and cultural resources has become one of the concerns at the global level, contributing to the establishment of compromises among various individual actors, organizations and even nations (Baud-Bovy & Lawson, 2002). From late 70s, as a result of reflections on the negative impacts provoked by the mass tourism, an understanding that tourism development must be planned according to a set of principles has started to be considered a requirement for promoting development. Those principles, at the regional and local context, leads to the need for evaluating the tourism resources and analyzing intervention of the different active agents and actors in the tourism phenomenon in the territory. This is relevant because the relationship among tourism agents, in general, and between agents from the public and private sectors, in particular, is essential for promoting development of tourism destinations, especially the destinations located in peripheral and rural areas (Svensson *et al.*, 2006). However, although considered relevant by

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some experts and practioners, this intersectoral relationship still suffers some difficulties to be implemented (Inskeep, 1991; Costa, 1996; Hall, 1999; Gunn, 2002).

The planning approaches to tourism development also advocate the need for actors to cooperate in the form of partnerships based on the belief that the tourism organizations and destination areas have the ability to gain competitive advantage by bringing to the process knowledge, experience, capital and other resources hold by the various actors (Kotler, Haider & Rein, 1993). Cooperation between tourism agents is undoubtedly a way to contribute for promoting sustainable development in the local and regional territories. This is true because, in addition to promote synergies for development of territories, the concertation of efforts and sharing of common mechanisms among tourism agents allow restoring, appreciating and boosting the (material and immaterial) cultural heritage. This understanding is very important and constitutes a key element for designing and marketing tourism packages and itineraries in rural territories, usually less prepared to conduct, within a cooperative spirit, the recovery processes and promotion of cultural heritage.

The development of tourism in regional and local territories requires mechanisms for identifying and boosting resources to promote and develop tourism products and create the conditions for the territory to become an attractive tourism destination. It is precisely in those aspects that cooperation among the various tourism agents can play a key role in the tourism development process in rural areas. For the same purpose, the territories also need to formulate and promote policy and strategies for valorizing cultural heritage in order to, in a framework of sustainability, strengthen their competitiveness.

The South Alentejo sub-region is an interland territory, strongly marked by rurality, with similar problems comparing with other Portuguese rural areas, namely human desertification and lack of employment. However, it presents a number of highly attractive and differentiating set of features such as the beauty and quality of its natural environment, known as “Alentejo plain land”, and the rich cultural heritage that includes mainly churches, wine production and gastronomy and a traditional way of song (“cante alentejano”), recently recognized as heritage of humanity, just to name a few.

Framed by the theoretical context concerning cooperation between tourism agents, the present paper aims to contribute for understanding perceptions of South Alentejo tourism agents on the areas in which they can cooperate to promote development and competitiveness in the region. In addition, the paper also resumes tourism agents’ perceptions on the relevance of promoting the existing cultural resources and valorising the cultural heritage for facilitating cooperation in the areas they have identified.

2. PLANNING, SUSTAINABILITY AND ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS OF TOURISM

The sustainability criteria for tourism require a holistic view of the various effects of the tourism activity on territory which are not only of environmental nature. For that reason, the tourism planning is essential for promoting a balanced tourism development in harmony with the physical, cultural and social resources of any destination territory (Ruschmann, 2008). As stated by Moniz (2006:121), “[the] social, cultural and ecological impacts of tourism can be either of positive as negative nature reason why there is a need to reaffirm the existing synergy between good tourism practices and conservation and management practices of the natural and cultural heritage.”

Based on the large reflections concerning sustainability taken place in the 80 and 90 decades, the growth of tourism has started to be questioned due to the negative impacts that it may cause in the destination territories. Those impacts can be perceived at different

scales such as local, regional, national and international levels and their degree of intensity, whether positive or negative, can vary at different levels. In some cases, “(...) *the impacts are not relevant, but in others, may compromise living conditions or attractiveness of the tourism destinations*” (Ruschmann, 2008:34-37). So, people, in general, and decision makers and tourism experts, in particular, have started perceiving that the tourism activity can not only bring benefits and advantages to local economies but it may also cause damages to destination territories.

In the early days of the mass tourism, impacts of economic nature were the most valued for the local economies given the importance and relevance that this type of tourism has while economic activity. The mass tourism has been considered worldwide as one of the most important economic forces once it originates and promotes income, consumption and development of markets mainly at the local destinations. For this reason, many countries began to consider tourism as a strategic priority for its socio-economic development.

The perception that people have of the importance of socio-cultural impacts of tourism on the target territories is sometimes somewhat limited due mainly to differences in the way the phenomenon is seen and analyzed. These impacts can be positive since the visits, increasing the demand for handicrafts, revitalize the craft skills of the local community, encourage cultural exchanges between different populations, and value cultural and historical heritage. However, the socio-cultural impacts may also be negative for the visited territories due to degeneration of the craft provoked by commercialization, the incentive of pseudo-events by marketing of ceremonies and rituals of the local communities and also by the occurrence of cultural damage to historical sites and loss of cultural diversity (Ferreira, 2005; Wahab & Pigram, 2005; McIntosh *et al.*, 2005; Cooper *et al.*, 2007).

3. TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL DESTINATIONS

Tourism is seen as an important agent for regeneration, economic development and preservation of isolated rural territories thanks to the attraction elements they have. Thus, the tourism activity may constitute a means of livelihood for local communities and diversification of rural economies (Sharpley, 2002; Jackson & Murphy, 2006; Fotiadis, 2009). In this sense, all efforts concerning promotion of tourism in rural areas should be oriented for developing innovative and differentiated tourism products based on the local resources and characteristics (Ribeiro & Vareiro, 2007) and strengthening strategic partnerships in order to preserve the environmental balance and to valorize the cultural heritage.

In recent times, several factors explain the increased number of destinations based on rural tourism: 1) the decline of agriculture income that requires diversification of economic activities, 2) the promotional activities developed by tourism agencies; 3) the promotion and financing of rural tourism in the framework of rural development programs based on the LEADER approach and the EU Structural Funds; and even 4) the increased awareness of the benefits of tourism activity for organizations involved in environmental management, including national and regional parks (European Commission, 2000). Additionally, there have been major changes in tourism demand behavior with positive impacts on rural tourism, characterized by short stays, great interest in health and active vacations and a greater concern for the environment. Therefore, tourism in rural areas may become an alternative for a more sustainable development by enabling the preservation and valorization of traditions and social relations, allowing rational use of natural resources, generating income and taking advantage of the human competencies at the local level (Silva & Perna, 2002; Sampaio, 2003 as quoted by Pellin, 2005). Furthermore, tourism in rural areas also contributes to environmental protection and conservation of natural, historical and cultural heritage by relying on the management of local and rural areas to its success. In this way, the rural tourism

encourages the management and sustainable use of local rural areas benefiting primarily the local population, directly and indirectly involved in the tourism activities (Campanhola & Silva, 1999). It also constitutes an excellent opportunity in terms of job creation and can be clearly seen as a possibility for economic support and an alternative to the economies of the regions where traditional activities have been losing importance, unable to meet needs of the populations dependent on them (Sharpley, 2005; Sousa, 2006).

Unlike cities and resorts, rural areas tend to be diffuse with limitations in terms of funding and human resources. Usually, these rural tourism destinations are characterized by having a private sector made up of small companies mostly owned and composed by family members and a public sector (municipalities) that need to work together in an integrated manner to develop a viable destination. However, those rural areas, despite not having a clear tourism identity, understand that tourism activity constitutes a great opportunity to support the traditional rural economy through promotion and provision of accommodation and other local services and products to visitors (European Commission, 2000).

Rural tourism destinations can be considered as popular destinations near urban areas that receive large numbers of visitors and in traditionally vacation areas with a good supply of accommodation for visitors. Tourism destinations can also be located in protected areas where tourism activity is integrated with environment practices and characteristics of local economy, or in rural areas characterized by historic towns with a significant patrimony related to the agriculture and rurality. Remote rural areas with strong resources in terms of wildlife and farming activity where agriculture is truly a factor of attraction and areas near by the sea or located in mountains and forests can also be attractive tourism destinations (European Commission, 2000). In view of the diverse features described, a question should be posed. That is, taking into consideration the weaknesses and fragilities of rural areas and the territories located in the Portuguese interland, all the rural regions have conditions for promoting and developing the tourism activity?

A region with a developing potential must have some distinctive cultural, social and natural features which can be used to define its regional identity (Cunha & Cunha, 2005). This is important because the simple availability of accommodation and gastronomy offers do not guaranty the demand capture and not all rural areas are attractive for tourists given they are too remote or do not have sources of attraction in scenic or cultural terms (OECD, 1994). In this context, the tourist destination must have a sufficiently broad and attractive range of opportunities and benefits for the visitor and be located in the vicinity of strong tourism attractions (Kastenholz, 2014).

It is crucial to consider that the development and organization of rural tourism require a significant investment, not always available at local level (Fleisher & Felenstein, 2000), and that the own local communities and businesses may find difficult to adapt themselves to the new role of 'servility' type of service (Fleischer & Piozam, 1997). In addition to the referred aspects, the territories that promote rural tourism should have quality products and services that meet the demands and expectations of tourists. However, the tourism businesses at the rural areas often lack skills and resources for effective marketing of the tourism activities (Sharpley, 2005). Furthermore, developing tourism offers do not always constitute the "lifeline" for the rural territories which, in general, have a very fragile local economy (Butler & Clark, 1992 as quoted by Hall & Page, 2006). For those reasons, the risks associated with the investment opportunities in rural tourism should not be neglected given that it might provoke negative impacts on the local territories and communities (Kastenholz, 2014). In this sense, the concern for the sustainability of tourism in rural areas must be a clear commitment inscribed in the collaboration among stakeholders from the different sectors *"(...) in order to safeguard the integration and the possible valorization of the various components of the*

tourism experience and obtainment of benefits for the greatest possible number of stakeholders in the long run “(Kastenholz, 2014:3).

4. COOPERATION FOR DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL DESTINATIONS AND APPRECIATION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE

Since tourism activity has a strong impact on the development of local territories it can be said that this economic activity is closely interrelated with the local development process. In fact, when the social, economic, cultural and environmental issues are worked at the local level, the tourism activity merges with the local development process (Cunha & Cunha, 2005). In this sense, the formulation of tourism policies and strategies, regardless of the intended goals and ambitions and / or motives that are behind the programs, projects and activities to be undertaken, should take into account the dimensions of social, economic, cultural and environmental nature. Appropriate and effective local development strategies require actions to promote the sustainability of territories and the integration of all sectors of activity and, therefore, sectoral investment programs must first obey “(...) *the preservation policies concerning the cultural, artistic, historical, natural, documentary and landscape patrimony of the country*” (Beni, 1997:103). In this sense, all tourism-related actors should coordinate their actions with public and private entities in order to promote the conservation and sustainability of national cultural and natural resources (Beni, 1997).

The relationship of the cultural and social conditions suggest a strong presence of the social dimension in all events organized by local actors. Thus, the most significant is the social content of the programs in terms of democratization of access and range of values, the more lasting will be the results achieved and, in this regard, tourism activities should be geared to “(...) *encouraging creativity, the arts and social events, craft and folk and increasing the number of people affected by this policy and the areas concerned by it or benefit*” (Beni, 1997). Being the economy the last condition, the programs and projects should activate and streamline “(...) *the enterprises operating in the sector, with broad support to trade, the hotel industry, the specialized production and artisan, to transporters, the travel agencies and any other valuable initiatives in the sector*” (Beni, 1997:104). In the frame of this approach, the intersectoral relationships contribute clearly to improving the quality of socio-cultural aspects (eg. historical heritage, theaters, parks and recreational areas) (Zrilic & Peric, 2001).

The tourism is a fragmented industry based on small business units, aspect clearly more evident in rural areas. This feature of tourism makes it difficult for the small businesses' managers to control all the tourist system components as well as the elements and stages of the decision process. For this reason, cooperation among local tourism stakeholders assumes significant relevance in facilitating tourism agents to overcome the difficulties that arise in the development of the tourism sector, aspect clearly positive mainly when local tourism agents want to open the activity to new markets (Keller, 2008).

The associativism and networks between companies and organizations and territories are the most common forms of collaboration and cooperation. Relations arise within regions stably and joint efforts are successful. This allows for transactions between public and private actors on the basis of agreements (more or less formal) working together the partners in development issues and sharing a kind of equity in their relationships. In developed countries in particular, much of the development agencies use this process, which in the end is organizations based on trust between the parties and targeted at very specific goals (Vázquez-Barquero, 1995). For example, as part of cultural tourism already identified since the 1980s and 1990s, some partnerships in order to develop tourism in historic centers (eg. Britain, seaside resorts in southern Europe). In this context there is clearly an intersectoral involvement to support the development of cultural activities and invest in the protection

and enhancement of heritage (Ferreira, 2004), to complement the other supply components (eg. beach) that were in decline.

The associativism and networks between firms and other organizations linked to the tourism sector are the most common forms of collaboration and cooperation in rural areas. This kind of relationship arises stably in local territories showing that joint efforts are successful. This way of working permits to conduct transactions between public and private actors on the basis of (more or less formal) agreements under which the partners work together to develop products and solutions to problems arising in the course of the tourism development process. A large part of the development agencies and structures of the so-called developed countries use this approach based on trust between the partner parties and oriented towards very specific targets (Vázquez-Barquero, 1995). For example, in the context of cultural tourism, some partnerships were established in the 80s and 90 in Britain and in seaside resorts in southern Europe in order to develop tourism in historic centers. In these circumstances, an inter-sectoral involvement among different actors was found as adequate strategy to support the development of cultural activities and invest in the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage (Ferreira, 2004) to complement the other components of tourism offers that were in decline at that time as was the case of beach resorts.

5. STRATEGIES FOR TOURISM DEVELOPMENT - THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HERITAGE (ALENTEJO)

The National Strategic Plan for Tourism (PENT) constitutes a document of unquestionable relevance for the development of a national strategy for tourism and, consequently, for the formulation of tourism strategies at regional and local level. Given the subject discussed in this article, from the eleven measures identified in the document, the measures 4 and 7 should be emphasized. The Measure 4, related to the development of products, recommends development of strategies aiming at *“developing and structuring a multiproduct offer in the various regions (...) investing on an innovative structuring of cultural and religious tourism.”* The Measure 7, related to the experiences and characteristics of locals and regions, points out to the differentiation of local and regional territories in terms of traditional cultural experiences and contents through *“developing and innovating Portuguese traditional contents and experiences which constitute factors of tourism differentiation and are the basis of remarkable and genuine experiences.”* On the other hand, in terms of cooperation, networking and partnerships, the Measure 5 of the PENT advocates the need and importance for promoting intersectoral approach in tourism development and points out to *“take the Regional Tourism Entity (...) as the structuring engines and enrichment of the local tourism offers, promoting the involvement of the business community and the public agencies (...)”* (2005:10-11) for the purpose of improving the products supported by distinctive tourism resources of the territories.

The National Strategic Plan for Tourism (PENT) clearly emphasizes the importance of a tourism development model for the country based on sustainability. In fact, one of PENT axes is based on the need to (1) preserving and enhancing the historical and cultural heritage with a strong focus on the use of local cultural elements in the architecture, cuisine and decoration; (2) encouraging and supporting the recovery of monuments, museums, and other local historical landmarks; (3) incorporating the local history, traditions and culture in regional and local tours and events, and (4) not least, promoting the local culture and contents (PENT, 2005).

Taking into account the Alentejo region, the PENT, in terms of strategic products, advises that the region must direct their efforts and investment in the *Touring* - cultural and religious tourism and for the food and wine (gastronomic tourism and wine tourism)

(PENT, 2005). This orientation is very relevant for the Alentejo's tourism development given that the Alentejo region has a varied and differentiated set of tourism resources that include the cultural heritage elements from which must be highlighted the historical (urban-monumental) heritage, the sacred art heritage, the ethnographic patrimony and the folk art (PORA:16). "The Regional Operational Programme of Alentejo (PORA - 2014-2020)" is one of the regional documents with relevance for the tourism development in the Alentejo given that it was developed based on a very detailed survey of local realities including strengths and opportunities for development of the territory. Alentejo region has 15 museums integrated into the Portuguese Network of Museums and its cultural assets include 214 national monuments, 351 buildings of public interest and 54 properties of municipal interest, all classified as cultural patrimony (PORA:16). This cultural offer constitutes in fact a considerable added value for structuring economic activities and above all, to designing attraction program for visitors, in general, and tourists seeking destinations with a strong identity, in particular. However, the region has a number of weaknesses in the area of inventory, classification and valuation of the cultural patrimony reflected in the insufficient availability of assets for public enjoyment (PORA:16) which have to be surpassed.

The Strategic Document for Alentejo Tourism (2014-2020) indicates clearly that one of the strategic priorities for the tourism development in Alentejo is managing the tourism destinations by reinforcing skills and competencies through cooperation among tourism agents. That cooperation should take into account the *"coordination of working hours of the various visiting attractions, including tangible cultural heritage, according to the demand profile"* through establishment of a *"global program with appropriate scale which, under the leadership of the Alentejo Regional Tourism Entity, should involve municipalities, Museums, Church, Charity and other (...) asset managers"*. Another strategic priority is promoting the industrial tourism in the region by requalifying and creating tourism products through rehabilitation of industrial and mining sites for tourism.

In addition to the above mentioned strategic documents, the Alentejo region has also an Operational Plan for Supporting the Development and Promotion of the "Heritage in Alentejo" Product which combines action and strategy proposed by the Regional Entity of Tourism for 2014-2020 planning period. This plan advocates a strong emphasis on promoting tourism products around the existing classified World Heritage in the Alentejo region with the purpose to make tourism offer more inclusive, cohesive and attractive (POSDDP:3).

The patrimony assets of the Alentejo region inscribed presently in the UNESCO list as a World Heritage are the historic center of Évora city and the fortifications of Elvas city. In addition, the Alentejo's popular sing ("Cante Alentejano") and the art of making cowbells in Alcáçovas (village in the Central Alentejo region) are classified as intangible cultural heritage of humanity. Furthermore, processes to propose to UNESCO classification as cultural heritage of humanity for handmade carpets by people of the Arraiolos city (Central Alentejo) and popular parties of Campo Maior city (North Alentejo) are presently being developed.

6. METHODOLOGY

This article presents some of the results obtained in research conducted in the sub-region of "Baixo Alentejo" with the purpose to understand tourism agents' perceptions on measures to be implemented in order to promote the development and competitiveness of tourism in the region. The study has also looked at identifying the areas considered most relevant for cooperation among tourism agents taking a cross-sectoral perspective.

The empirical study was conducted with the use of a survey questionnaire applied to leaders of public organizations, associative sector and business managers working in the tourism sector in the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region.

The information obtained was subject to a statistical analysis of essentially descriptive nature with the use of measures of central tendency and dispersion. In addition, the non-parametric Friedman test was used to identify the most relevant practices and strategies to promote cooperation among tourism stakeholders, activities with tourism potential and the most important attributes of the region for tourism activity. The Friedman test can be used to estimate significant ranking of a set of items submitted to evaluation by a panel of judges. Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis test was used to estimate differences among tourism agents' perception concerning practices and strategies to promote cooperation among tourism stakeholders in function of the sector they belong (public, associative, business).

7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

According to all respondent leaders, competitiveness and the development of tourism in the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region will be fundamentally improved, firstly, by increasing offer of tourist packages including circuits and organized visits, and then by increasing offer of attractions and thematic products and promoting tourism products and activities as well. The quality / price ratio and increased protection measures of (natural and cultural) tourism resources, while important, were considered relatively less relevant by all leaders for that purpose. This finding highlights the importance of the uniqueness of the destination's resources, both natural and cultural that, if well promoted and energized, may constitute differentiating factors compared to other competing destinations.

This shows that the main concerns of the “Baixo Alentejo” tourism agents are confined to the development of the tourism product and attractions in themselves. In fact, the development of an identified and promoted area for visitors, i.e. a tourism destination, is only possible with the existence of a well identified tourism product, jointly coordinated and promoted by the various local bodies (Lazzeretti & Petrillo, 2006). Furthermore, the tourism product is a set of services that exist only because of a tourism attraction (Ignarra, 2003).

The need to increase the protection measures of natural and cultural resources emerges as one of the aspects least valued by the leaders of the public sector which seems to be related to the fact that tourism in the sub-region is still at a very early stage. For this reason, leaders consider that the exploitation of natural and cultural resources will be sufficiently safeguarded by the responsible entities given the low volume of tourists visiting the sub-region.

Concerning the domains in which tourism agents consider relevant to cooperate for promoting tourism development in the sub-region, results have indicated that the dimensions considered most important consist primarily in valuation of the local culture, followed by jointly developing resources and tourism products and organizing promotional activities as well. In turn, the less valued areas for cooperation were the development of the travel services industry and coordination of tourism management. The appreciation of the existing local culture and the development of resources and tourism products as priority areas for cooperation among tourism stakeholders is supported both by the agents of the public sector as the business sector. However, tourism agents differ relatively to the need for a joint organization of promotional activities. The agents of the public sector consider it important for cooperation among all while the private sector agents attach greater importance to the jointly organization and promotion of the development of events and conventions industry.

Tourism agents from the associative sector converge with the agents of the public sector with regard to the priority areas for cooperation above referred. However, they are also in accord with the agents from the business sector regarding the development of events and conventions as an important area for cooperation between them.

Both agents of the public sector as the business sector consider that the attributes most valued by visitors are related to food and the destination uniqueness in terms of natural conditions and of cultural identity. The same actors are also in agreement that the attributes less valued by visitors are the opportunities for shopping and for participating in religious events. The leaders of the associative sector consider that the most important attributes for visitors are in the first place, landscape and historical heritage, monuments and museums and, secondly, the tranquillity and the rhythm of life. In third place, the agents of the associative sector consider, in a balanced way, gastronomy, the uniqueness of the destiny and the availability and quality of tourist services. For those actors, the less relevant attributes for visitors is the opportunity for shopping and the availability and quality of local transport.

8. CONCLUSION

Tourism constitutes an activity with high potential for economic growth and regional development. For that reason, rural areas should adopt strategies based on a joint work prepared by multidisciplinary teams with the participation of all stakeholders who should be actively involved in defining and implementing these strategies in a long-term time horizon (Eusebius *et al.*, 2013).

The “Baixo Alentejo” is not yet consolidated as a tourism destination since it is an area with incipient tourism offer and demand. However, it has a high tourism potential resulting from the uniqueness of its natural and cultural resources. The development of this Alentejo sub-region should assume a set of strategies and policies involving all social actors at local, regional and national level and even at cross-border with Spanish sub-regions, in a frame of an integrated and interactive planning perspective.

The leaders of the public and of private business sectors agree on the need to cooperate with a commitment to promote local and regional cultural resources. This is important because the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region has excellent cultural resources that, if well used, can constitute a great differentiating factor comparatively to other regions of the country. Those actors also value the need for entities to engage in joint efforts in order to build a set of stronger tourism products for the region, largely based on the tangible and intangible cultural resources. The tourism agents, especially those of the business sector, have indicated that the development of tourism events and conventions also constitutes a relevant sector for strategic investment. Events, such as medieval festivals, food fairs and wine, trade shows and conferences can constitute as a strategic investment for the development of tourism in the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region in order to minimize the effects of typical seasonality of tourism. This strategy will contribute to a higher occupancy rate in hotels especially in low seasons and will maintain good profitability levels to certain destinations (Ansarah, 2000). The private sector leaders see this kind of tourism as tourism demand generator for the destination bringing more dynamics to the local territories and communities and as an incentive to investment returns if properly framed by cultural and business tourism offerings.

According to the perception of most tourism agents, the appreciation of gastronomy, the uniqueness of destinations in terms of natural and cultural resources and existing historical and cultural heritage and even the availability and quality of tourism services are the core attributes for attracting visitors to the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region. In fact, many of the

tourists visiting the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region are looking for the aspects more characteristic of the region such as is the case of the typical dishes, wine and architectural heritage. The challenge is to preserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage, as an identity, social and developing resource, integrating production and natural processes, differentiating and adding value to products that contribute to the conservation of the ecosystems (PORA).

Despite all this awareness and importance given by the tourism actors to the need for valuing the existing culture in the sub-region and, in recent years, there has been an investment in the renovation and restoration of much of the cultural and religious heritage, many difficulties persist in the region because of the processes, although financed, are quite slow, largely due to the difficulty of coordination among the large number of entities involved. In this sense, it is important to streamline processes in order to focus on the renewal of the patrimony and, subsequently, making it more dynamic by including it in the tourism itineraries. In the “Baixo Alentejo” sub-region, some activities have already been planned in this way. For example, the “Fresco Itinerary” which constitutes a strong bet on Cultural Touring already includes some of the intangible heritage such as the “Cante Alentejano” and the art of making cowbells. Another example is the «Tile itinerary», which is a cultural and tourism dissemination project which aims to disseminate knowledge about the tile heritage of the region. Some municipalities have also a concern to articulate cultural activities of municipalities with local operators, by setting up organized programmes integrating a stay in a Rural Tourism accommodation, a historical itinerary, a wine tasting, a typical meal and a night with “Cante Alentejano”, articulating entities and different spaces (eg. Serpa municipality).

It is necessary that the actors gain consciousness that networking, enhancing the potential of each municipality and adding all this potential to the neighboring municipalities, the tourism activity will gain scale for capturing, not just visitors, but above all more investment in the sector. The cooperation networks in the tourism activity in the rural spaces may be cross-border (as is the case of village networks), aggregating the resources of several territories (regional, national and transnational). Those networks can also bet on the recovery of some localities (towns and villages) of the sub-region, constituting them as a great tourist attraction. There are already some examples of revitalization programs for towns and villages (eg. Recovery Program of Historic Villages) which are coordinated by the Regional Development Entity and have the ambition to revitalize and energize the rich spaces in heritage, culture and tradition. This is important because those revitalization programmes has a relevant impact on the slow the aging population trends and on the depopulation of the local territories (Nascimento, Nogueiro, Paul & Bastos, 2008:2072), responding to some of the existing problems in rural interior territories of the country. Moreover, these programs have in essence a practice of intersectoral cooperation, gathering dimensions such as socio-economic animation, involving local actors through, for example, existing local development associations, and tourism promotion in the domestic and international market.

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