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Community-based tourism and networking: Viscri, Romania

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This paper raises questions concerning the complexity of the term “community” when dealing with community-based tourism initiatives. It highlights the difficulty of translating into practice the paradigm of “community-based tourism”. Through a case study of tourism in the multi-ethnic village of Viscri, Romania, the paper discusses the operational role that a network of both internal and external actors may play in piloting tourism initiatives that produce benefits for communities that are unaccustomed to participatory development processes due to various barriers. The study highlights the key role played by a local leader and an external foundation in building a network that, thanks to the bonding and bridging relations activated, led the community towards a form of sustainable tourism development and a broader amelioration of the social conditions. The network described can be replicated in other geographical contexts, provided there is strong local leadership and also international interests and donors. In the long term, however, the network needs to be strengthened by involving other actors, above all local authorities. They are needed to assure the basis for long-term empowerment, participation in decision-making and progressive diversification of economic activities.

Keywords: community development; networking; local leaders; participation; tourism; Romania

Introduction

A community-based approach to tourism development has long been advocated by researchers and practitioners as central to the sustainability of tourism and of great importance to planners, managers and operators (Boyd & Singh, 2003; Murphy, 1985; Okazaki, 2008; Page & Dowling, 2002; Tosun, 2006). It is believed that, for sustainable tourism to occur, local residents should have inputs into the decisions that affect them and their families and communities. Community participation in tourism initiatives should always be encouraged because it makes the planning process more effective, equitable and legitimate (Buanes, Jentoft, Maurstad, Søreng, & Karlsen, 2005; Simpson, 2008).

From a theoretical perspective, it is widely accepted that in community-based tourism (CBT) a high degree of control and a significant proportion of benefits must be in the hands of local residents. Yet the effective implementation of the paradigm is still a matter of concern. Blackstock (2005, p. 45), for example, considered CBT to be “naïve and unrealistic”, claiming that it largely fails as a community-based approach, especially because it tends to treat the host community as a homogeneous unit. In reality, however, most communities are complex, heterogeneous and stratified, so that sub-groups and individuals often pursue their own interest rather than the collective well being.

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Other scholars have identified a number of inter-related barriers that prevent effective involvement of local communities in tourism development (Cole, 2006; Manyara & Jones, 2007; Tosun, 1999, 2000). Thus, this approach has often been considered ineffective because of its high transaction costs in terms of start-up and management (Getz & Jamal, 1994). Gray (1985) emphasised that residents need adequate resources and skills to acquire the capacity to participate, but governments and other key stakeholders do not always regard local residents as equal partners and they tend to keep power in their own hands. Residents themselves often do not even know how to start and manage a bottom-up participation process (Joppe, 1996). This is especially true of small communities that are “off the beaten track” and do not have the necessary capital and knowledge to attract tourists. In many cases, unless external inputs are available to help the community to start a tourism initiative, it is very difficult to apply the CBT concept. An exception to this, according to Iorio and Wall (2012), is when a “cosmopolitan local” (a resident with external exposure) plays a key role in taking initiatives and acting as a catalyst for CBT projects.

It has also been argued that the implementation of CBT in developing countries tends to be particularly difficult (Simpson, 2008; Tosun, 2000). According to Simpson (2008), in such contexts communities may become subject to external pressures and internal power struggles, while the likely growth of new hierarchies diminishes or undermines the potential benefits to community members.

The degree of applicability of the CBT concept is related to the institutional arrangements and stage of tourism development present in a community (Li, 2006). Wang, Yang, Chen, Yang, and Rui (2010) stressed that, in contexts characterised by centralised public administration, such as in China, the applicability of CBT is particularly difficult to achieve since residents’ and other stakeholders’ participation in decision-making is not encouraged and most people are unfamiliar with democratic participatory processes. This weakness can be exacerbated where, due to unequal access to literacy and education, not all residents are able to understand the policy documents, and so they cannot participate fully in planning processes (Li, 2004; Wang et al., 2010; Wang & Wall, 2005). On the other hand, communities can receive satisfactory benefits from tourism even without active or thorough participation in decision-making (Simpson, 2008).

Considering the above observations, this paper contributes to the discussion on the applicability of CBT. It argues that, especially in marginal and heterogeneous communities that are not familiar with the concept of participation and where barriers to equitable access exist, its implementation is unlikely unless external intervention takes place. In particular, the paper argues the need to unpack the complexity of the term “community”. It also makes a practical contribution to the application of some of CBT’s principles, stressing the role of networking as an operational tool. The case of Viscri, Romania, is discussed to show how networking that involves both internal and external actors can enable a remote and complex community to gain benefits from tourism development. An attempt to evaluate the sustainability of this peculiar form of CBT is also presented.

The case selected is pertinent to this discussion since Viscri is a rural multi-ethnic community that is facing economic and social challenges. It has valuable tourism resources, but it is still not accustomed to a proper participatory development process. This is because of the legacy of decades of a communist regime and deeply rooted ethnic-based discrimination, and also because of a series of internal barriers.

First, the paper discusses the complexity of the term “community” and it succinctly reports on the literature concerning networking in tourism contexts. Secondly, it describes the case study and the methods by which the data were collected and analysed. Thirdly, the data are used to illustrate the actions performed by the network for addressing a form

of CBT. Finally, there is a commentary on the benefits and challenges related to this kind of network and on how the case study offers a contribution for better understanding the complexity of CBT initiatives.

Community: a complex concept

There is an extensive literature concerning the nature of community, and several books have been written on the topic (Blackstock, 2005; Bowles, 1981; Kumar, 2005). In general terms, the various definitions of a community all use some combination of space, people and social interactions (Harwood, 2010). Simple definitions include “a group of people, often living in the same geographical area, who identify themselves as belonging to the same group” (Sproule, 1996, p. 236) and “a group of people in a physical setting with geographic, political, social and economic boundaries, and with discernible communication linkages. People or groups interact in the defined area to attain shared goals” (Shaffer, 1989, p. 40).

However, there are problems with such definitions. For example, individuals who live together may not share the same goals, and they may also be competitors rather than partners. The portrait of communities involving distinct social groups living in harmony and achieving consensus may rarely exist in reality. Indeed, most communities are heterogeneous, stratified by gender, ages, education, abilities, status and aspirations, sites of uneven power distribution and individuals who often act out of self-interest rather than for the collective good (Blackstock, 2005; Harwood, 2010; Kumar, 2005; Simpson, 2008).

Furthermore, although at first sight people in a small, remote place may appear to be inward-looking and isolated, the reality is that they usually have had contact with the outside world for generations across centuries. The new forms of mobility that are developing as a result of globalisation (Sheller & Urry, 2006) have strengthened the complexity of communities. People may leave the community to emigrate elsewhere and new residents may arrive to settle in the community, or to stay for a period of time, thus modifying the community assets and aspirations. In such contexts, the meaning of what is local and what is not needs to be continuously redefined.

It is very difficult for a small location that is “off the beaten track” to get involved in tourism. Most people will have had limited exposure to tourism and may not have been tourists themselves. Thus, they are slow to see the opportunities and, even if they do, they may not have the capital to put the necessary infrastructure in place or external contacts to attract tourists who, by definition, come from elsewhere. As a result, it is often outsiders that first see and seize on the opportunities, sometimes to the benefit of local people but often to their detriment (Iorio & Wall, 2012). Thus, there are few cases of CBT that originate in community initiatives and investment and are under local control in their entirety. In fact, even if tourism is initiated locally, it may be necessary to seek external inputs and linkages for it to succeed.

The above observations lead to a discussion about the role of external partnership and networking in tourism planning and development.

Networking in tourism

The network concept is based around relationships between entities such as organisations or people (termed nodes; Wellman & Berkowitz, 1988). Thus, a network consists of a set of nodes and ties representing some kind of relationship among the nodes. Networks involve commitment by network members to set a common goal and, quite possibly, the sharing of worldviews (Dredge, 2006). This connectedness, in turn, gives rise to opportunities

for sharing and transferring knowledge, which are important attributes for developing innovation and competitiveness (Cumbers, Mackinnon, & Chapman, 2003).

Within the tourism literature, network theory provides an important analytical approach for the study of local tourism policy and for understanding more about government–industry–community relations (Bramwell & Lane, 2000; Pforr, 2006; Tyler & Dinan, 2001). However, in tourism, as in other fields, networks are not easy to identify. They can be formal or informal, and network members may engage or withdraw from active involvement (Dredge, 2006). Networks operate at different spatial scales over time and members can belong to more than one network at the same time.

Networks can be investigated in different ways. From a structural–functionalist perspective, they can be investigated according to a number of dimensions, including centrality, density, strength and reciprocity of relation ties (Pavlovich, 2003). Centrality refers to the position that a member obtained through the network structure, so it highlights how resources are managed and how power is displayed. Density refers to the number and characteristics of ties among the members. Granovetter (1973, 1985) identified two groups of network relations: “strong ties” that an actor has with others within a linked group, and “weak ties” that an actor has with others in external groups. The latter are necessary to gain new ideas and opportunities that emerge from the external environment and provide contacts with people in more distant clusters.

For the purposes of the present study, community participation within networks is particularly interesting, since networks promote social capital, which plays a crucial role in development at various scales (Jóhannesson, Skaptadóttir, & Benediktsson, 2003; Okazaki, 2008). The concepts of bridging and bonding have been used by various researchers and practitioners (e.g. by Baerenholdt & Aarsaether, 2002; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) to highlight different facets of the building and maintenance of networks. Bridging, also called “weak ties”, refers to the process of building relations that cut across social groups, while bonding, also called “strong ties”, is concerned with strengthening intra-group solidarity. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) stressed the importance of bridging social relations. Without network relations, communities may become locked into narrow-minded strategies, copying outdated initiatives that hamper development in the long term, especially in a rapidly changing world economy.

By taking into account the concept of bonding and bridging relations, this study illustrates how a network created by local and external stakeholders has been incorporated into a CBT project. That project is helping the village of Viscri to cope with development challenges, after having experienced dramatic demographic, social and economic changes.

The study site: Viscri

Viscrist is a rural village located within the municipality of Bunești, in central Transylvania, Romania (Figure 1).

The village area was formerly predominantly inhabited by Transylvanian Saxons, a people of German ethnicity who settled in Transylvania mainly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after an invitation made by King Géza II of Hungary (1141–1162), to defend the south-eastern borders of the Kingdom of Hungary (Gündisch, 1998). The Romanian, Roma/Gypsy and Hungarian communities used to form a minority of the population in the area. Viscrist, like many other Transylvanian Saxon villages, remained largely self-sufficient economically and politically until the twentieth century, when it went through rapid and deep economic, social and political changes (Michalon, 2003). In particular, after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu’s regime in 1989, almost all the remaining Saxon inhabitants



Figure 1. Location and view of Viscri. Source: authors, 2011.

left Viscri (others had left during and immediately after WWII), and Germany was their favourite emigration target (Gräf & Grigoraş, 2003). The mass emigration of the Transylvanian Saxons led to the abandonment of many houses, several of which were subsequently bought by Romanian and Roma inhabitants. Thus, the ethnic composition of the village has deeply changed, with the almost complete disappearance of the Saxon community and the growth of the Romanian and, particularly, the Roma communities (Table 1).

In spite of its small size (around 400 inhabitants), the community of Viscri shows a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, religion, literacy and income, with the Roma community forming the poorest part of the population. The complexity of the term and concept of “community” thus finds an interesting example, as the different components of this community have played different roles in the tourism development project that has been going on in the village, and that will be analysed later.

The living conditions in Viscri are still typical of a marginal rural community. The village shows most of the characteristics that distinguish peripheral areas (Botterill et al., 2002; Brown & Hall, 2000), such as geographical isolation, declining population, low levels of economic vitality, poor infrastructure, remoteness from decision-making and lack

Table 1. Proportion of the ethnic groups in the population of Viscri (1880–2011).

Ethnic group	1880	1930	1975	1989	1992	1998	2011
Germans	495	562	342	279	69	30	15
Romanians	169	145	110	125	230	119	100
Gypsies/Romas	28	78	141	180	101	251	305
Others	11	2	25	30	15	47	0
Total	703	787	618	632	415	447	420

Source: Institutul National de Statistica (<http://www.insee.ro>).

of political power. In particular, over 40 years of communism, with its lack of democratic participation, inhibition of freedom of speech and distortion of economic mechanisms, still causes difficult relations among the people in Viscri and between them and the political and administrative authorities. The patterns of institutional intervention are weak and local participation processes are still unpractised.

The economy of the community is mainly based on subsistence farming, and barter is relatively common. However, tourism development is giving new economic opportunities. Remittances, pensions and social aid are other important income sources for the local population, supporting the high incidence of emigrants, elderly people and poor families. While remittances often provide families with significant revenues, pensions and social aid are not enough to sustain the families adequately.

The long presence of Saxon inhabitants is still evident in the village, which retains a valuable architectural heritage, which includes an impressive Lutheran fortified church that is mainly built in Romanesque and Gothic style, and a traditional type of rural settlement consisting of colourful farmhouses located along the streets of the village (Akeroyd, 2006). The rapid decrease of the Saxon population, documented above, has seriously threatened the built heritage since many houses have remained empty and have started to fall into decay. In spite of the deep changes in the social and ethnic composition of the village, the historical buildings linked with the ancient Saxon presence have been saved thanks to the commitment of some local families and the aid of several international organisations.

Since 1999, many projects have been realised in order specifically to preserve the historical structure and architecture of the village. Some of the restored farmhouses, together with their historical fixtures and decorations, are now available as guesthouses for tourists. Thus, the protection of the Saxon heritage has been the core element of the actions and strategies adopted by a number of stakeholders in order to create opportunities for tourism development in the village.

Methodology

The study is based substantially on a qualitative research method and it incorporates all three sources of data recognised in qualitative research: observations, interviews and consultation of secondary sources (Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). The field study was undertaken in summer 2011 over a period of 20 days. Observations included visits to the main tourist attractions and repeated walks in the village. Due to the way of life in Viscri, the streets are constantly busy with movements of people collecting milk, walking to school, visiting the local store for groceries, and so on. Thus, it was easy to observe the social dynamics among residents. Moreover, the authors, as guests of a local guesthouse, had the opportunity to undertake participant observation in order to understand the tourism benefits for the locals. They were able to share and discuss their observations and interpretations throughout the period of field investigation and afterwards.

Interviews were undertaken as informal conversations with local people and key stakeholders. The former were addressed during simple walks from one end of the village to the other. The authors introduced themselves politely and requested permission to ask a few questions. Nobody refused to be interviewed and 16 random conversations with inhabitants belonging to the three ethnic groups were collected, namely with three guesthouse owners, the milk processing facility owner, three owners of grocery stores, the owner of a tourist shop, a guesthouse maid, a blacksmith, a cart driver, a charcoal worker, a brick maker and four farmers (Table 2). The interviewees were asked to say what they think about networking, to indicate the benefits that they directly or indirectly received or expected from the

Table 2. Occupation, sex and ethnicity of the interviewees.

Occupation	Sex	Ethnicity
Guesthouse owner	Female	Romanian
Guesthouse owner	Female	Roma
Guesthouse owner	Female	Saxon
Milk processing runner	Male	Romanian
Grocery shop owner	Female	Romanian
Grocery shop owner	Female	Romanian
Grocery shop owner	Female	Roma
Souvenir shop runner and sock knitter	Female	Roma
Guesthouse maid	Female	Roma
Blacksmith	Male	Roma
Cart rider for tourists	Male	Roma
Brick maker	Male	Roma
Farmer	Male	Saxon
Farmer	Male	Saxon
Farmer	Male	Roma
Farmer	Male	Romanian
MET director	Female	Saxon
Orthodox priest	Male	Romanian
Teacher	Female	Romanian
Secretary of Municipality	Male	Romanian
Doctor	Female	Romanian
President of sock co-operative	Female	German

Source: Authors' fieldwork, 2011.

tourism initiatives undertaken by the network, to express their opinion about the good and bad aspects of tourism development in the area, and to talk about their vision of the future of the village.

The conversations with key stakeholders usually occurred in their office or house. Six extensive conversations were held, namely with the director of the non-profit foundation "Mihai Eminescu Trust", the Orthodox priest, the doctor, the school director and teacher, the Secretary of the Municipality and the president of the sock-knitting co-operative "Viscri Începe" (Table 2). The main topics covered by the conversations concerned the problems and the challenges that Viscri is facing and possible scenarios for its future.

Conversations with residents and stakeholders had a length varying from 30 to 60 minutes and they were conducted in Romanian. In most cases, they were taped and subsequently transcribed. There was no language constraint, since the authors speak Romanian fluently.

Prior to entering the field, a range of secondary sources was consulted. A review of literature on CBT and networking, part of which has been reported above, was undertaken to provide a broad academic context for the research. Also, materials that directly or indirectly deal with Viscri were consulted in order to place the study in its geographical setting.

The findings revealed by the three sources provided the bases for in-depth reflection about the role of internal-external networks for CBT development. To give further insights, the most significant assertions made by interviewees have been reported as quotations.

Networking: the actors involved

The serious weaknesses in the village's socio-economic circumstances have led to several initiatives for local development. The actors who have mainly contributed to the emergence

of Viscri as one of the most well-known highlights for cultural and rural tourism in central Transylvania are a local leader, the Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET), UNESCO and the wool sock-knitting co-operative “Viscric Începe”. Their reciprocal relations, interactions and synergies took the form of an informal network involving internal and external elements, working together in a dynamic and ever-changing effort to interpret the needs of this complex and multi-ethnic community and to drive it towards what they considered to be the best directions for its future.

From a structural point of view, the central position inside the network is held by the local leader who acts as a mediator between the MET and the community. The MET bridges relations between the outside world and the community, doing so by capturing international funds and by promoting a variety of initiatives for the benefit of the community. The sock-knitting co-operative “Viscric Începe” is very close to the community; it strengthens the bonding relations and organises an economic activity that provides the community with cash incomes. The role of UNESCO is less prominent, even if, as discussed later, it marked the starting point of the development process by inscribing the fortified church of Viscri into the World Heritage List (Figure 2). The roles and activities of the main actors in the networks are discussed in turn next.

The local leader

The local leader is one of the very few Transylvanian Saxon inhabitants who chose not to leave the village in the early 1990s. She studied at university, outside of Viscri, and is fluent in speaking the Saxon dialect, German, Romanian and English. She has worked as a teacher in the village and, since 1992, has been Municipal Counsellor at the Municipal Council of Bunești.

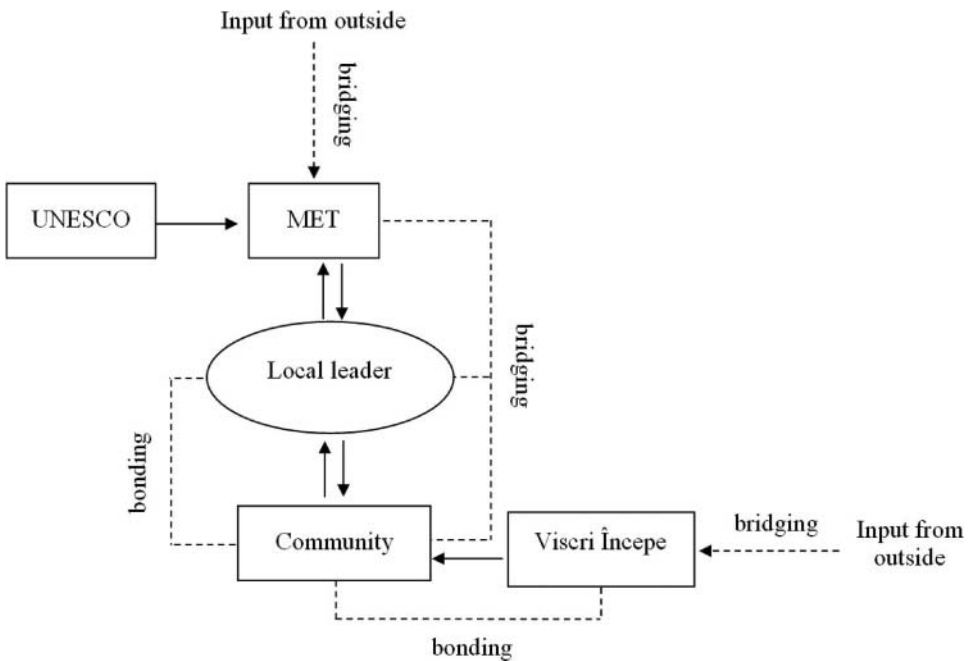


Figure 2. Structure of the network. Source: authors, 2011.

The conversations with the authors revealed that she was one of the very few people who fought to draw national and international attention to the cultural heritage of Viscri. Between 1990 and 1999, she ran a commercial enterprise in the village, led cultural projects in the local school, set up a guesthouse in her house, gathered Saxon furniture to create a village museum and managed to bring public funds to improve the road that links the village with Bunești and to renovate the primary school. She recalled that her early projects (until 1999) were developed through increasingly tight dialogue with transnational supporters and mentors, particularly from the USA, Belgium and the UK. She learned to devise business plans and funding proposals for village projects and attracted grants from George Soros' Open Society Foundations and from small Belgian and German organisations. In addition, she turned occasional tourists from Germany, France, Belgium, the UK and the USA into sponsors of her projects.

In 1994, she encountered an English writer (Jessica Douglas-Home) who was visiting Viscri and she showed her the fortified church and Saxon heritage. This encounter created the basis for the subsequent development of the network. In 1999, Jessica and the local leader agreed to join their efforts together in the first house restoration project in Viscri.

Due to her engagement in the projects for Viscri's development, this resident is widely recognised as the local leader. This was due to her skills, activism and willingness to encounter, negotiate and have dialogue with people of any ethnic and cultural background. This was shown by the fact that people from Roma, Romanian and Saxon ethnicity invariably showed appreciation for her work during the authors' interviews. She can, thus, be seen as a "cosmopolitan local".

The Mihai Eminescu Trust

The Mihai Eminescu Trust is a British/Romanian non-profit foundation created, as already mentioned, in 1999 under the initiative of the British writer Jessica Douglas-Home. As reported by the MET director in conversation with the authors, and as stated on the official website, its aim is to preserve and restore traditional architecture, produce sources of income for local people and revive the sense of community, favouring the participation of Transylvanian Saxon, Romanian and Roma populations. Charles, Prince of Wales, is the Royal Patron of the Trust and he bought a house in Viscri, which helped to promote the local actions at national and international levels.

Viscri is the village where the earliest and most visible actions of MET have been concentrated. The local leader of the community is also its vice-president. Although MET has an office in Sighișoara, the headquarters are based in London, and almost all patrons, trustees and advisors are British. A large part of the funds comes from the USA, through the Packard Humanities Institute of California.

Through the local leader's mediation, MET has worked within three main groups of actions, namely the restoration of the tangible heritage, the promotion of cultural and rural tourism and the amelioration of social conditions.

Concerning the first group of actions, great emphasis has been put on tangible heritage, by means of restoring the fortified churches, opening them to visitors, giving information on their history and restoring the façades of traditional houses, which mainly belong to the Saxon architectural style. These actions were stimulated by the inclusion of some of the Lutheran fortified churches of Transylvania (among which is the church of Viscri) in the UNESCO World Heritage List. In Viscri, since 1999, the first and main group of actions involved the restoration of around 105 buildings. Restoration works have been done according to the Saxon traditional style, colours and decorations, employing a local

workforce and using locally produced materials (MET, 2009). The Trust pays for the restoration of the façades, while work on the house interiors is left to the owners, who are free to modify them to non-Saxon or non-traditional forms. As neither a workforce nor traditional materials were available any longer, training courses were organised for over 30 people. A brick and roof tile kiln has been built, employing 10 villagers (MET, 2009), and the two village blacksmiths have been encouraged to re-start traditional ironwork. The medieval fortified church has been restored, and it regularly opens for visitors, with tours provided in several languages. An ethnographic museum has also been opened inside the walls and towers of the fortress.

The second group of interventions addressed the promotion of mixed forms of cultural and rural tourism, which have been formally or informally managed by local inhabitants so as to provide them with incomes to add to subsistence agriculture and also to link cultural and natural heritage protection with material benefits. In each of the 12 villages where the Trust operates, a “model guesthouse” has been opened to encourage similar initiatives in areas where rural tourism had never been practiced previously. In Viscri, MET has established three guesthouses and helped local residents to reorganise their houses in order to host tourists. Moreover, several training courses have been organised and funded to develop skills in tourism and crafts.

After securing the tangible heritage and starting and developing rural tourism, MET has been focusing on a third group of activities, which concern the more general social conditions of the village, such as education, health care and infrastructure. More attention is also being given to community participation in the development of the projects. In fact, village meetings are held regularly in the school building or at the church, and direct proposals from the inhabitants are encouraged. A variety of social projects have been realised. Among them, low-cost tangible projects have been given a priority. They include new wooden bridges, wooden cattle troughs, re-cobbled streets, restored barns, replanted tree lines and improvements and repairs to the schoolhouse, always using local materials and traditional techniques. Private and public waste collection, which is not organised by the municipality, is also arranged and partially covered by the Trust through an agreement with a private company from Sighișoara. Most importantly, a sewer network linked to an ecological wastewater treatment system has been built by MET. A “village kitchen” project is also in progress with the aim of improving meal production for the local tourism sector. Finally, a proposal has been presented by MET for the creation of a natural park covering most of the surface of the municipality of Bunești, in order to further experiment with the relations among conservation, agriculture, tourism and other activities.

UNESCO

The role of UNESCO was particularly significant in the first stages of the local development projects, encouraging the early actions of the MET that focused, as mentioned above, on the restoration of the Saxon tangible heritage.

The Saxon fortified church of Viscri was included in the World Heritage List in 1999, together with the villages and fortified churches of Biertan, Călnic, Dârjiu, Prejmer, Saschiz and Valea Viilor, as an extension of the previous inclusion of Biertan alone (1993). The motivation for their inclusion was:

These Transylvanian villages with their fortified churches provide a vivid picture of the cultural landscape of southern Transylvania. The seven villages inscribed, founded by the Transylvanian Saxons, are characterized by a specific land-use system, settlement pattern and organization of the family farmstead that have been preserved since the late Middle Ages. They are dominated

by their fortified churches, which illustrate building styles from the 13th to the 16th century. (UNESCO, 1999)

In the case of Viscri, almost all the village has been incorporated into the UNESCO protected area of 48 hectares, excluding a few modern houses in the lower part of the settlement but including the areas historically populated by Romanians and Roma. The first initiatives that led to the inclusion of Viscri in the World Heritage List came in the early 1990s from the Ministry of Culture of Romania and from the University of Bucharest, but as mentioned, the advocacy provided by the local leader and by Jessica Douglas-Home was strategic. Mrs Douglas-Home, at the time, was a consultant at International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and she could count on a network of acquaintances to support the inclusion of Viscri into the World Heritage List.

Nowadays, operatively the role played by UNESCO in the network is more marginal. No delegate enforces the rules and standards fixed by UNESCO, nor does it provide funds to restore the buildings. However, UNESCO's recognition is a brand that attracts tourists, and it provided inspiration to the network to consider heritage protection and cultural tourism development as key actions to increase incomes and improve living conditions in the village in the long term.

Viscri Începe

The creation of the co-operative "Viscri Începe" was the initiative of two German people (a wife and husband) who moved to Viscri in 1999. When they settled in the village, a local lady brought them a pair of wool socks knitted by her to barter for some food. News that the Germans would exchange food for socks spread and other women started to bring socks to the new arrivals. All the friends and guests who came to visit the German couple used to buy at least one pair of socks.

This was the start of the wool sock-knitting co-operative "Viscri Începe", meaning "Viscri Begins". As time passed, women started knitting not only socks but also mittens, gloves, hats, scarves, jumpers, vests, cardigans and blankets.

As reported by the president of the co-operative in an interview, at one stage there were some 140 knitting women – virtually every woman over 14 years of age in the village. They earned around 25–35 Euros per month and this was the sole source of income for most of them. Since several families had sheep, in 2002, with the help of an international sponsor, the association set up a wool-spinning shop and four women learned how to use the spinning machines (Stanculescu, 2006). A few years later, the women started producing and processing felt. In 2011, 70 women were involved in the association, of which four were Romanian and the others were Roma.

The products are destined for the tourism market. The larger part is sold outside the village, in particular in Germany, within the "fair trade" distribution chain, producing significant incomes. Two new German women relocated in Viscri, replacing the former couple who went back to Germany, and they are taking care of the commercialisation abroad. A small number of the socks is sold directly near the fortified church of Viscri in a shop that has been established with the support of the local leader and the MET.

Sock production has potential to be a further attractor for national and international tourism in the village. During spring and summer, women knit socks while sitting in front of their houses, and tourists like to observe their work (Figure 3). This peculiarity gained Viscri the name of "village of socks", as was shown in a documentary (Stanculescu, 2006).



Figure 3. Selling wool products. Source: authors, 2011.

The co-operative has an important social dimension, since Romanian and Roma women work together and share moments of interaction with each other, which reinforces local bonding. Furthermore, following a suggestion made by the couple that runs the commercialisation abroad, they decided to devote part of the co-operative's output to cover the cost of petrol for the daily commute of village children to the secondary school of Rupea, at a distance of 14 km.

Sharing the benefits of the tourism initiatives promoted by the network

The tourism initiatives supported by the network are providing considerable benefits for the community of Viscri, even if tourism is still at a relatively early stage. Most interviewees declared that tourism helps them to diversify the livelihood sources of their families, enhancing their well being. Tourism appears to be firmly integrated into families' existing situations as a complementary activity, contributing to economic diversification and forging positive linkages with agriculture. The conversation with the local leader revealed that 27 local women have been trained to host tourists in their houses and 16 guesthouses are currently working, 13 as regular accommodation and three as occasional accommodation, with a total of 98 available beds. Most guesthouses are furnished according to Saxon traditions (Figure 4). These guesthouses directly employ about 40 people, which is over 10% of the village's active population. However, with tourism mainly concentrated in summer, and partially in spring, this employment is essentially seasonal. This is not necessarily



Figure 4. Guest house in Saxon style. Source: authors, 2011.

a weak point, as families are also involved in agriculture, and tourism is essentially a complementary activity.

Direct observations by the authors revealed that the average price for a night including breakfast is 40 RON (US\$1 = 3.3 RON), and for a meal around 13 RON. According to the interviewees, tourism produces 40–50% of the involved households' incomes. Almost all food is produced locally and cooked according to Saxon and Romanian recipes. Tourists are mostly day-trippers, but there is a significant presence of overnight stays. Overnight tourists mostly arrive through package programmes organised by foreign and national tour operators that are in contact with MET. Thus, operatively, MET receives the bookings and distributes tourists among the accommodation available in the village. A minority of visitors gather the information from the MET's website and contact the guesthouse owners directly. Viscri's guesthouses work as an informal network, with fixed prices, and they exchange their guests with each other according to day-by-day availability. The usual length of stay for overnight tourists is around two days, while day-trippers usually stay for two hours. The main activities are the visit to the fortified church and museum, shopping for local wool socks, carriage and horse riding tours, hikes and visits to the brick kiln, to the blacksmith shop and to the charcoal kiln.

Viscra is now a relatively well-known village, cited in almost all tourist guidebooks about Romania. In 2000, about 400 tourists visited the fortress; in 2008 their number had already increased to 10,000 and in 2010 it was 12,000 (data provided by MET). Most tourists are international, but the share of domestic tourists is growing (4000 in 2010), as a consequence of a slow but steady growth in interest in rural life and the heritage of ethnic minorities. The involvement of Prince Charles, often cited by Romanian media, has also

worked as an attractor, as many national tourists show curiosity about the “Prince’s house” and about his concern for such a remote village!

The interviewees confirmed that their livelihoods have improved significantly since the beginning of tourism activity, so that they can better pay their bills, more easily buy what they need, afford health care expenses and educate their children. Tourism helps the interviewed families to achieve significant goals by providing money for ordinary expenditures. A guesthouse owner, for example, reported that, thanks to the accommodation activity, she can more easily fund her two daughters’ studies at university:

We earn some money by hosting tourists and we use it to pay university fees for our two daughters who study in Cluj-Napoca. If we had not started this little business, we would not have had enough money to educate our daughters.

A farmer reported that he had bought another piece of land to increase his fruit and vegetable production, believing that tourism and agriculture can support each other: “I mostly serve food coming from my own farm: fruit, vegetables, chickens, eggs [. . .]. There is no tourist who does not buy at least a pot of my home-made jam”.

Looking beyond the experiences collected from families, people living in the neighbourhood also benefit. For example, some guesthouse owners do not have cows on their farms, so they need to buy milk from neighbours, who are glad to sell the milk that exceeds their household consumption. Other families, though not personally involved in tourism, benefit from the presence of tourists in the village by selling their products to the guesthouses. Some other small businesses, like grocery stores and craft shops, also benefit from the tourists. A store owner reported that she had diversified the goods in her grocery store to meet tourists’ requests: “See, I sell all sorts of things that tourists ask for: ice-creams, beverages, snacks, postcards and some crafts, I do good business with them!”

In order to better understand the community’s sharing of the tourism benefits, an analysis of the ethnic composition of the families involved in guesthouse activity was undertaken. Data reveal that, out of 16 families owning accommodation, six are Romanian, one Saxon, two Roma and seven have mixed ethnicities (Table 3).

The Romanian and Saxon communities run around 75% of beds in the guesthouses, in spite of being only 28% of the population. They are property owners and generally have the appropriate knowledge and social capital to deal with the bureaucracy and to start and run the business. In contrast, the Roma community, the most numerous and poorest group in the village, generally lacks the funds and the knowledge on how to engage in new business endeavours. However, it is significant that two guesthouses run by Roma have been opened recently and this is a sign of change. Undoubtedly, the Roma have a better opportunity when they marry Romanians, as has happened in five cases out of 16.

Table 3. Ethnicity of owners and keepers of the guesthouses in Viscri (2012).

Ethnicity of the owner/keeper	Number of guesthouses	Number of beds	% of total beds
Romanian	6	42	44.7
Saxon	1	15	16.0
Gypsy	2	9	9.6
Gypsy/Romanian	5	16	17.0
Romanian/Saxon	2	12	12.8
Total	16	94	100

Source: Authors’ fieldwork, 2011.

Observations revealed that around 10 young Roma women are employed as guesthouse maids and cooks, which gives them the opportunity to have a better life. As reported above, almost all of the 70 women involved in sock-knitting are Roma, which indicates that they can earn cash and use it for family needs. A woman belonging to the co-operative said: “Through these socks we can earn money and stay in our village with our families and friends. It is hard work but it is worth it and tourists like it”.

Moreover, there are about 14 Roma men who provide horse-cart tours for tourists. For each person carried, they earn around 8 Euros, which is a good amount of money in their terms. As a cart driver told the authors: “I like to share with tourists the beauty of our landscape, and I earn money at the same time. I enjoy seeing tourists’ children riding a horse cart for the first time in their life”.

Awareness of the economic importance of the preservation of cultural and natural heritage seems to have arisen. The tidy aesthetics of the houses, the use of traditional materials and colours, proper waste collection and preservation of the landscape are now directly associated by most inhabitants with real income benefits. For example, a farmer reported:

I am happy when tourists come here to see the Saxon church, but also our nice houses and our nature. I think that we should park our cars inside the courtyards, so that the village will look even better without the cars along the main street.

Education for children, training for adults, improvement in the infrastructure and opening to the outside world, at the same time, are facilitated by the presence of tourism, following the actions of UNESCO, MET and the local inhabitants and associations. This means that the “Saxon” look of the main streets and the Lutheran church are perceived by the inhabitants as an important asset for the future, although they are not linked to their own ethnic or religious backgrounds. No resentment or identity clashes ever emerged in the interviews, even though locals are aware that the “Saxon” elements of Viscri, mainly related to past history rather than present-day reality, are the main attractors for tourism. As stated by the Orthodox priest:

There are no ethnic tensions in Viscri; people respect each other [. . .] and it is amazing to see that Orthodox people go to the Evangelic church and join the few Saxons left during Christmas and Easter celebrations, and Saxons sometimes come to our church too.

Benefits of networking

The synergies created by networking pushed Viscri towards a peculiar form of CBT that needed both the intervention of outside actors and the mediation of a local leader. The network directly tackled some of the main problems (lack of education and business experience, insufficient financial assistance, low level of democratic participation, etc.) that generally prevent communities, especially marginal ones, from taking tourism initiatives.

The network provided the community with bridging and bonding relations that facilitated the development process. Through advocacy (to protect and enhance Saxon heritage), fund raising (substantial international and national funds have been obtained to support the projects) and territorial marketing (as mentioned, MET is linked with tour operators and promotes Viscri through its website and publications and with the involvement of Prince Charles) provided by the network, the community gained important relations and connections with the outside world. As a result, the community is improving its livelihood, for tourism produces significant flows of money into the village, and a growing share of the

population directly benefits from it. It is also achieving and enhancing essential skills, as training courses in tourism and in other fields have been organised for community members, who have obtained certification to start independent enterprises. Furthermore, the standard of living of the whole community is improving, since basic infrastructure, such as sewerage and wastewater treatment, has been built thanks to the network's actions.

At the same time, the network reinforces the bonding relations inside the community. This is evident, for example, when local guesthouse owners informally exchange guests among the different accommodation according to availability, or when they employ local women not formally involved in tourism to help with cooking or cleaning, or when they hire local men, in particular Roma, to do guesthouse maintenance. This is particularly important in a multi-ethnic context.

Social inclusion has been strengthened, as a growing number of projects in collaboration with the school, the medical centre, the wool sock co-operative and other occasional partners, such as EEA Grants (Norwegian–Icelandic–Liechtenstein co-operation), are focusing more and more on the poorest members of the community, particularly the Roma inhabitants. The inter-ethnic dialogue has been reinforced as well. The Romanian and Roma communities have accepted the idea that Transylvanian Saxon heritage is prominent in the external image of the village and do not show resentment about it. Bilingual signs, in Romanian and German, have been welcomed by local people, which is a positive exception in a country where relations among ethnic groups are not always harmonious. Some signs of the inclusion of the heritage of other ethnic groups are starting to appear, as Romanian handicrafts are sold in the local tourist shop, and some dancing and music events based on Romanian and Roma folklore have sporadically appeared.

Local people seem to have understood, justified and approved the network's approach, which aims at promoting material and social benefits in the early stage and proceeding towards participation in later stages, as several people confirmed during the interviews. For example, a farmer said: "To me it is not important to have meetings and assemblies, because we talk all the time about the village with the local leader and the other inhabitants and many things have improved". A guesthouse owner reported: "The local leader and the British people of MET were right, it was important to restore the church and the houses. Now tourists are coming and the village is in a better condition than all the neighbouring ones".

Challenges and future perspectives

Although the results achieved by the network are producing tangible local development, real empowerment of the population is yet to be achieved. As clearly emerged in the previous paragraphs, even though bottom-up initiatives have taken place, they have depended on the decisions and actions of the local leader and the external stakeholders who identified the priorities in the development process. This was, at least in the first stage, an essential strategy because the community was not familiar with the concept of participation, but it also means that the majority of the population has not yet found a way to express their views directly.

There is now a clear need for a comprehensive public participation system and the community should be helped to take part in it as well as to adapt to the new market-oriented economy (Linsell, 2008). The Roma group, in particular, ought to be more involved in decision-making. As reported by the local leader, MET is completely persuaded that efforts need to be taken in order to increase Roma's participation both in decision-making and in receiving benefits from tourism and other economic activities:

Gypsies are the future of Viscri, they have the right to decide what is best for the village and to take active part in this decision [. . .]. See how proud that young woman [a Roma lady who works as maid] is about her life. To me, just seeing how her life changed since she started working in tourism is worth the entire activity of MET.

Of course, not all the Roma inhabitants of Viscri experienced success stories and most of them still live meagrely on subsistence farming in low-comfort houses located in the *țigania* (the predominantly Roma section of the village). Their persisting poor life conditions cannot be blamed on, nor entrusted to, the external actors who, most of the time, are forced to act without the collaboration of local authorities, which should take a more active part in the development process. Thus, a major weakness and challenge for the future is the difficult relation between the community of Viscri and the institutions of the Municipality of Bunești. Even after 23 years since the fall of the regime, dialogue between the population and institutions in Romania, as in other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, generally remains weak. The predisposition towards listening to and involving local communities, and experimenting with forms of participation, devolution and empowerment, are still sporadic as, in most cases, local authorities have never been trained in the involvement of local communities.

This weakness is particularly evident when related to the involvement of the Roma population by local administrations, as mentioned above. At the same time, peculiar electoral behaviours related to client politics, self-exclusion and a widespread feeling of educational inadequacy keep a large part of the Roma population out of the political process in Romania (Denton, 2003). The Roma community is not represented in the Municipal Council of Bunești, despite forming the majority of the population, which is a clear indicator of this attitude. Distrust and diffidence towards the Roma population distances the administration from the population, and it partly explains why, in the case of Viscri, the institutions have not played a significant role in the development efforts sustained by the mixed internal–external network that have been described. This could produce serious challenges in the long term.

These difficult relationships between the public authority and the Roma community were highlighted by the Municipal Secretary: “We do not have enough money to sustain all those Gypsies, they have a lot of children, they do not go to school, and they are increasing”. Thus, there are internal constraints that need to be overcome for Roma’s participation in tourism benefits to increase. They include their lack of know-how, sometimes their willingness to live on social assistance or subsistence agriculture and their marginalisation by local authorities. The local leader and MET seem to have partly filled this gap, bypassing the institutions in several cases and directly interacting with local and external stakeholders.

As already observed, “Saxon heritage” has been given great emphasis in the tourism development process by the local leader and the external actors, which in the long term may turn into a risk. The image of Viscri that is presented and “sold” to the outside world is that of a Saxon village (Hughes, 2008; Klimaszewsky, Bader, Nyce, & Beasley, 2010; Klimaszewsky & Nice, 2009), even though almost all the population is Romanian and Roma and follows the Greek Orthodox religion. Tourists take pictures of Saxon houses bearing freshly restored and re-painted German family names; the visit to the Lutheran fortified church is the highlight of a stay, and the associated museum basically only shows history, culture, lifestyles and habits related to Transylvanian Saxons. The Orthodox church and the older Romanian and Roma sections of the village are usually skipped.

Tourism in the village is suspended between the image of a romantic rural Saxon village unchanged over the centuries and a community of real people, of different ethnicity, struggling to survive in a poor country, while trying to integrate tourism into their livelihoods to fulfil their basic needs. Besides a positive attitude towards the German heritage as

beautiful to see and attractive to tourists and funding agencies, several issues related to the risks of “museumification” have already emerged. For example, many inhabitants insisted on having the main street of the village paved in asphalt, which would make walking and driving easier. In this regard, a store owner interviewed reported: “We need a paved street [. . .], you should see what happens here when it rains or snows”. However, MET has insisted on using only old-style cobblestones to preserve the atmosphere of the village. The local leader said: “If we paved the street, Viscri would lose its charm, and even buses with mass tourists would arrive, which we are trying to avoid”.

The village is, thus, experiencing transformation from a traditional, isolated settlement into a tourist destination, which is bringing positive consequences but is also forcing the community to re-consider its relation with the place and their history. The network is trying to assist in this transformation process, but the final outcome is still uncertain.

Conclusions

This paper has discussed the role of a network of external actors and a local leader in realising a form of CBT in the rural multi-ethnic village of Viscri, Romania. It has also highlighted how complex the term “community” can be, even when dealing with a small community like the one analysed. Therefore, it has further contributed to the dismantling of the myth of the homogeneous and harmonious community once assumed in the community-based development paradigm.

Viscrist is a multi-faceted community that experienced profound economic and social changes after the exodus of its previous prevalent ethnic components and the fall of the communist regime. Lack of knowledge and experience about participation, mainly as a result of a centralised political system, deeply affects the community capacity to cope with these complex changes. The study revealed that the combination of actions coming from local leadership and external actors has been able to overcome some of the barriers to endogenous tourism initiatives in this situation, such as lack of financial resources, geographic remoteness, negligible experience of tourism and lack of knowledge of democratic participatory processes.

In the absence of the network, Viscrist’s community most probably would not have had the power and knowledge to start or sustain a successful CBT project. Although the community is still not completely involved in participating in decision-making, there is broad participation in the benefits provided by tourism development. Tourism is enhancing the livelihood strategies of the community members. It has become a complementary activity to agriculture, crafting and tertiary activities, and assures cash income that the families use to meet their needs. This tourism model seems to fulfil the sustainability paradigm, if we acknowledge that tourism is sustainable when it occurs as a people-centred process that focuses on the community, particularly on what people have (assets, knowledge, skills, etc.) and on local resources (natural, physical, human, social, etc.). This form of tourism has enhanced substantially the community’s livelihoods, providing new inputs, options and aspirations, as well as optimism towards the future.

The study highlights that the success of Viscrist, at least to date, has relied on the capacity of the network to build bridging relations that have opened the community to the rest of the world. In this way, the community has acquired inputs (funds, know-how, ideas and innovations) to embark upon tourism initiatives. At the same time, the network has reinforced the bonding relations inside the community, enhancing its sense of belonging to the village and its collaborative spirit, in spite of the ongoing spatial and social separation among the three ethnic groups of the village.

Embracing the concept proposed by Iorio and Wall (2012), the study recognises the role of the local leader as fundamental in this kind of networking: a “cosmopolitan local” is often a very important ingredient of community development. This is a person who has travelled abroad and acquired mind-broadening experiences when compared to the rest of the local population. This kind of local person is generally respected and trusted by the community and knows how to build social capital. Such local leadership can make vital contributions to the building of a network of internal and external stakeholders, and they can work as a mediator preventing the community from feeling ruled by outsiders. As locals, they understand local systems and know how to work within them, but they also have the ability to reach out and establish vital connections outside of the community. They can be bridge builders among different social and ethnic groups. Thus, under certain conditions, a small community, especially one with a limited history of public participation, can accept and justify the idea of setting participation aside, delegating decision-making to a trusted network of actors, at least in the early stages of development, in order to increase the chances of success, perhaps taking more active roles as their experience and confidence increase.

Nevertheless, this kind of network has its own inherent risks and challenges, particularly related to power relations inside the community, for it may represent and defend the interests of some members to the detriment of others. In the case of Viscri, for example, the cultural heritage of one ethnic group has been highlighted, overshadowing others that are considered less attractive for tourism, at least in the early stages of tourism development. Particularly when tourism develops in multi-ethnic communities, only one ethnic group’s heritage can be promoted or a more multi-cultural approach can be chosen. The model pursued by the network in Viscri, which initially emphasised the legacy of one ethnic group, is evolving. It is becoming more oriented to the representation of all the ethnic groups and delivering benefits to them, including the still marginal Roma population, using a realistic approach to tourist marketing. However, the lack of strong local entrepreneurs and the limited commitment of local institutions are ongoing weaknesses that challenge the future of the development process.

The authors recognise that not all communities can benefit from the existence of a local leader and external actors that work together to start a community-based initiative, even if they possess potential tourism resources. Indeed, the other former Transylvanian Saxon villages close to Viscri, which have very similar features, have not experienced the same success, because they did not receive the outside help or do not have the right local leadership. Very few small, poor and remote communities can be successful in tourism in the absence of external inputs. Viscri needed MET funding and outside expertise to build its tourism development. Even the sock-knitting co-operative needed inputs from external people both for its establishment and for the commercialisation of the products.

Although it is difficult to generalise from one case, since all places are unique, generalisation is necessary if insights are to be shared and knowledge is to be cumulative. Our study suggests that internal–external synergies can work as effective catalysts of tourism development during an early stage of the process while, in later stages, dialogue with other actors and stakeholders, above all local authorities, is necessary in order to build the bases for long-term empowerment, greater participation in decision-making and progressive diversification of economic activities. This is also necessary because the role of the local leader cannot go on indefinitely and the community cannot depend on their actions in perpetuity. Also, external interests and donors may recede with time.

It will be worthwhile to monitor the evolution of tourism in Viscri to understand possible network actions that may help to establish a model that can be reproduced in other places.

There is also a need for further research to compare and draw parallels with other cases, both in Romania and elsewhere, and to seek initiatives that have been taken to start and maintain CBT development in order to learn from these experiences.

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