

THE ETHICAL AND LOCAL DIMENSIONS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RELATION TO SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED FIRMS PARTICIPATING IN TOURISM-RELEVANT PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the case of local small and medium-sized companies involved in tourism-relevant projects that can contribute to sustainable development. The aim is to discuss and present an approach to sustainability in tourism that includes the ethical dimension and that represents the local dimension of the tourism phenomenon well. A case study strategy is adopted to investigate and illustrate the proposed approach. The case concerns a collaborative project aiming to retrieve a path along the coasts of the island of Elba (Italy). This study concludes by proposing an approach to sustainability in tourism in which the following elements are considered crucial: the local entrepreneurs' sense of attachment to and responsibility for the territory, their concern about the quality of life of the local community, their role as change agents and their understanding of ethics as practice, and the presence of both private and public actors from the tourism sector as well as other sectors. **Keywords:** sustainability, responsibility, ethics, entrepreneurship, collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to discuss and present an approach to sustainability in tourism that can be relevant to the case of collaborative projects. The focus is on small and medium-sized firms that actively participate in such projects.

Since the report *Our Common Future* by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987), sustainability has been approached, both in theory and in practice, in various ways. In the tourism context, the term “sustainable tourism” has been broadly used. In general, it can be said that this term indicates a beneficial form of tourism that can affect, both in the short and in the long run, the economic, socio-cultural and environmental context in which the tourism activities take place.

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Although widely used, the concept of “sustainable tourism” has also been criticized. In the tourism literature, a tendency to give the tourism industry quite a dominant position in the debate about sustainability has been noted by some scholars (Saarinen, 2006). These scholars reject explicitly a tourism-centric view and prefer to consider sustainability in tourism as one among several paths contributing to regional development.

This study concerns tourism projects that are not labelled as “sustainable tourism projects” but that are tourism-related and can contribute to the sustainable development of the specific area.

As mentioned above, the focus of this study is on the small and medium-sized firms that join collaborative tourism- and sustainability-relevant projects. The research questions are formulated as follows:

- How do small and medium-sized local firms participating in collaborative tourism-relevant projects view their contribution to sustainability and that of the projects?
- Which are the central elements of an approach to sustainability in tourism that take such a view into consideration?

The research questions are investigated through a case study (chapter 3) and its discussion (chapter 4) based on some relevant theoretical contributions (chapter 2).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter starts by presenting the concept of collaboration, paying particular attention to sustainability (chapter 2.1). The chapter continues by focusing on the case of local small and medium-sized enterprises (chapter 2.2) and on the issues of responsibility and ethics (chapter 2.3). At the end of the chapter, this study’s position is summarized (chapter 2.4).

Collaboration and sustainability

Collaboration has been broadly recognized as one of the major critical factors for the implementation of projects of sustainable development (UNEP and WTO, 2005; Moore and Weiler, 2009; Erkuş-Öztürk and Eraydın, 2010; Wegner et al., 2010; Pansiri, 2013). As noted by Jamal and Getz (1995), one of the main functions of collaboration is to advance shared visions. Sustainable development through collaborative tourism projects can be interpreted as one of these visions.

Several studies have investigated the issue of collaboration, partnerships and networks that include various actors belonging both to the private and to the public sector (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010; Erkuş-Öztürk and Eraydın, 2010; Zapata and Hall, 2012; Pansiri, 2013;

Ruhanen, 2013). Since the publication of *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* by Freeman (1984), collaboration in tourism has been studied by some scholars applying the stakeholder framework (for example, Sautter and Leisen, 1999; Sheehan and Ritchie, 2005; Timur and Getz, 2008). The term “stakeholder” indicates those individuals or, usually, groups of individuals who can influence tourism development and are affected by it.

The identification and analysis of stakeholders and the relative relationships have been studied with regard to several cases, including tourism development in rural and protected areas and sustainability (Hall, 2008; Haukeland, 2011; Hewlett and Edwards, 2013; Waligo et al., 2013; Komppula, 2014). Here, the following categories of stakeholders are usually identified in the literature: tourists, industry, local community, government, special interest groups and educational institutions.

Among the various stakeholders, both tourism academicians and practitioners recognize the relevance of the local community to sustainability (Simpson, 2001; Goodwin, 2002). In particular, the local community’s sense of ownership, feeling of responsibility and practical involvement in tourism projects have been indicated as crucial (Simpson, 2008).

Place attachment and embeddedness

Local small and medium-sized enterprises are typically embedded in local business networks, social structures and interpersonal relationships, a characteristic that tends to create both business constraints and business opportunities (Jack and Anderson, 2002). As a consequence, these enterprises can be viewed as particularly important stakeholders as they belong to the local community and are active participants actors in the local economy.

It has been noted that local small and medium-sized enterprises usually have a strong attachment to the local context. This consideration can be related to the concept of place attachment (Stokowski, 2002; Saarinen, 2004). Several scholars have argued that places, as physical and social environments, are vital to the development of a person’s self-identity, understood as his/her sense of meaning and stability in life (Dawson, 2012).

It follows that individuals, including entrepreneurs, tend to attach to a place, especially in the case of their place of origin and where they live and work, a particular meaning. This can lead to the perception of a form of responsibility toward the specific place. This position is supported by a recent study concerning rural tourism that emphasizes how local entrepreneurs tend to take responsibility for the development of tourism at the local level, more than is usually indicated in the literature (Komppula, 2014).

Responsibility and ethics

The concept of sustainability is strictly related to the issues of responsibility and ethics. There is an extensive body of literature concerning responsibility in tourism (Goodwin, 2011) and a central question in this context concerns the identification of the actors who have the responsibility for tourism development.

Recognizing as the conditions of responsibility the subject's role in the causal chain leading to possible negative outcomes and the freedom and power to influence the outcome (Stahl, 2005), the tourism literature and practice have traditionally indicated tour operators, hotels and airlines as the main subjects of responsibility (Kasim, 2006; Henderson, 2007; Coles et al., 2011). Furthermore, tourists, in the role of critical consumers, have been signalled as being responsible for the sustainable development of the industry (Goodwin and Francis, 2003).

Adopting a business perspective, the concept of corporate responsibility (CR) has been broadly explored and applied (Font et al., 2012; Coles et al., 2013). CR usually refers to businesses' commercial and non-commercial responsibilities in regard to the well-being of the community that the businesses' activity influences and along the three main dimensions relative to their economic, social and ecological effects (Dahlsrud, 2008). Moreover, CR has been indicated as a factor that can influence an organization's brand and reputation positively, while supporting societal objectives, as a form of strategic or altruistic philanthropy (Lantos, 2001). Examples from the tourism context are actions that can contribute positively to the socio-cultural and natural environment, creating value for the tourists as well as the locals, for instance sponsoring events and participating in the maintenance of the cultural heritage (Lamont and Dowell, 2008; Polonsky et al., 2013).

In the case of developmental and tourism-related projects, some scholars have studied how collaboration also implies that the responsibility is somehow shared among different subjects. Some of these studies indicate that the inclusion of several stakeholders and the active participation of the local communities could contribute to a more practical approach to sustainability and its implementation through responsible behaviours (Ryan, 2002; Simpson, 2001; Simpson, 2008).

Some recent tourism studies have focused on ethics-related issues, indicating justice and care as the main ideas behind a sustainable approach to tourism (Spiller et al., 2011; Jamal and Camargo, 2013). In this context, it has been noted that sustainability and responsibility could be approached by rejecting the idea of the existence of abstract, fixed and universal principles to which firms have to adapt. In this sense, acting morally is described as a situated process. This aspect can be related to post-modern thought, according to which ethics can be viewed as a form of practice (Clegg et al., 2007).

In the business literature, some scholars have focused their attention on small and medium-sized enterprises and indicated the necessity of a specific approach to such cases, in which elements such as altruism, personal values and social priority can play an important role (Hemingway, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Anderson and Smith, 2007; Fassin, 2008; Harris et al., 2009; Blundel et al., 2010; Tamajón and Font i Aulet, 2013). This aspect is also present in the tourism literature, in which some scholarly contributions have investigated the case of family firms and “lifestyle entrepreneurs” in relation to their commitment to sustainability (Ateljevic and Doorne, 2000; Carlsen et al., 2001; Getz and Carlsen, 2005). Some scholars have suggested that small firms might be considered to have a greater affinity with the values of sustainable development than large companies (Vernon et al., 2003).

The latter element can be related to an aspect present in post-modern thought, particularly that of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. According to such a position, taking responsibility, also in business contexts, is essentially a personal pursuit and it can be the result of an individual's emotions rather than reason. Individuals are viewed as the central subjects of moral action, they are part of a network of relations and their acting morally can be described as “being for the other”, an attitude that is strictly influenced by the individuals' emotions (Kelemen and Peltonen, 2001).

This study's position

This study proposes an approach to sustainability in tourism that can be particularly relevant to the case of collaborative projects in which small and medium-sized firms participate.

The starting point is that, due to their embeddedness and sense of attachment to the local area, local entrepreneurs who participate actively in collaborative projects can hold a particular view concerning sustainability and their responsibility in promoting it. This form of responsibility can be described by adopting the idea of responsibility as a personal pursuit, strongly influenced by the individual's values and strictly linked to the specific context.

The proposed approach is elaborated and illustrated on the base of an empirical case, to which the following chapter is dedicated.

EMPIRICAL STUDY

This chapter describes an empirical case relating to a collaborative tourism-relevant project that can contribute to the sustainability of a specific area. The case concerns a project of retrieval of sev-

eral paths and merging them into one path that runs along the coast of the island of Elba (Italy). This project constitutes a collaboration among a fragrance company (*Acqua dell'Elba*, Water of Elba), a tourism micro-business (*Econauta*), a non-profit environmental organization (*Legambiente*, League for Environment) and a national park (*Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago Toscano*, National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago). The path is denominated the *Via dell'Essenza* (The Fragrance Route).

Method

The case is investigated through the collection of secondary and primary data. Some of the secondary data were collected online, including video footage about the inauguration of the project including interviews with the representatives of the participants, several short articles about the project from the local newspapers and information about the project from the webpage of the fragrance business. Additional secondary data about the presence of walking and hiking paths on Elba were collected in the field, by visiting the information office of the main town on Elba.

Primary data concerning the project as the object of study were collected through interviews with the following individuals: the partners and the individual responsible for marketing of the fragrance enterprise, the owner of the tourism micro-business and the director of the park. Due to practical reasons, these interviews were performed differently: two interviews were performed through video calls by Skype, one interview was conducted face to face and one interview was carried out by telephone. The representatives of the two firms were asked direct questions about the motivation behind their participation in the project and their relative involvement as well as the relevance of the project in terms of tourism and also in regard to the local community. The interview with the park director aimed to gather information about the situation concerning the paths on the island and the existence of projects for their retrieval and maintenance.

In addition to the *Via dell'Essenza* project, a project concerning the retrieval of another path was also investigated: the *ElbaVerdemare* (Elba Green Sea) project. This project was investigated in order to find possible common and divergent elements between the two projects. The *ElbaVerdemare* project, also supported by the park, has as its main participants an agro-tourism business situated along the path and a cooperative of guides. Data were also collected in this case: an informative brochure from the tourist office and two telephone interviews with the main participants, the owner of the agro-tourism and the representative of the cooperative, who is also a guide.

The island of Elba and the Via dell'Essenza project

Elba is an island off the Tuscan Archipelago, in the Tyrrhenian Sea. It covers an area of 244 km² of which approximately half part belongs to the National Park of the Tuscan Archipelago.

The local nature is the main tourist attraction of Elba. Elba can be described as a sea, sun and sand destination, with a high season from June to September. Although to a lesser extent, the presence of tourism can also be observed in spring and autumn, when tourists are attracted by the possibilities of hiking, cycling and horse riding. Such forms of tourism have recently been encouraged by several initiatives promoted by the park, among which is the Walking Festival. Within this event, several trips are arranged, usually during the weekends of traditionally low-season months. These trips include some sporting activities (mainly walking and hiking) as well as cultural activities (for example visits to the local museums and food and wine events).

The total length of the paths on Elba is approximately 250 km, with several paths located both within the park and on private property. These paths require considerable work in terms of maintenance and the park has recently arranged a campaign to recruit individuals and groups that can help in this direction. Such a campaign, denominated *Adotta un sentiero* (Adopt a Path) has until now involved various subjects. The vast majority are local actors, some strictly connected to the tourism sector, as hotel owners and guides, and others from the broader context, mainly local cultural and sport groups.

Differently from the other projects within the *Adotta un sentiero* campaign, the *Via dell'Essenza* project has a broad scope. As mentioned above, the participants in the *Via dell'Essenza* project are a fragrance company (*Acqua dell'Elba*), a tourism micro-business (*Econauta*), a non-profit environmental organization (*Legambiente*) and a park (*Parco Nazionale dell'Arcipelago Toscano*). Another peculiarity of the project is that a firm that is only indirectly linked to the tourism sector is involved, the fragrance company.

As part of the Elba area belongs to the park, the park's support of the project is necessary in order to gain permission to operate in the area. The park's participation in the project is also important to support the promotion of the path through its communication and marketing channels. The national environmental organization *Legambiente* is also a participant in the project. Its participation, together with that of the park, gives strategic support to the project, especially in terms of legitimacy.

Although such an important role is played by the park and the environmental organization, it is the two companies that can be identified as the main and more active participants, both in the planning and in the implementation of the project. *Acqua dell'Elba* has its office and production facilities on the island. The main products of the compa-

ny are perfumes and home fragrances inspired by and produced on the base of the local vegetation. The products are distributed mainly in single-brand shops on the island and in perfume shops throughout the rest of Italy. The target group of the company comprehends but is not limited to tourists. The company is run by three partners, who, as it was emphasized during the interviews, have the common factor of being “elbani” (from Elba).

The other company is *Econauta*, a one-person business that organizes nature-based tours. Furthermore, the person behind *Econauta*, an experienced naturalistic guide, is “elbano” (from Elba). *Econauta* is involved in the planning of the path together with the other participants, and, having the necessary competence and skills, is responsible for the implementation, which is performed by the company owner, sometimes helped by another local guide.

The *Via dell'Essenza* project was officially presented to the public in 2013. In 2003, *Acqua dell'Elba* was already involved in financing the retrieval of two paths on the island. This initiative was one of the company's social responsibility activities, which, initially, covered four areas: art promotion, protection and conservation of the natural environment, and support for cultural and social activities. In a later phase, the company decided to concentrate its resources on one of these areas, namely the natural environment. In accordance with and thanks to the competence of *Legambiente* and *Econauta*, the company's initial idea of restoring paths developed into a more complex, structured and, as it was qualified by one of the partners of the fragrance company, ambitious project, the *Via dell'Essenza*.

On the base of the retrieval of mostly existing paths, the objective of the *Via dell'Essenza* project is to develop a path that runs along the coast of Elba for a total of approximately 127 km. In addition, data concerning the path and the local vegetation are meant to be collected in a photographic archive. The path is divided into 12 parts, each dedicated to a month of the year during which a particular aspect of the *macchia mediterranea* (Mediterranean scrub) can be experienced.

At the time of the present research (2013), the north-eastern part of the path remains to be developed, something that is planned for the coming two years, together with the organization of the signs and information material, probably through the adoption of ICT solutions and in collaboration and with the support of the park.

The role of the involved firms and their perspective on the project and its contribution to sustainability

As mentioned before, the idea by *Acqua dell'Elba* of restoring some existing paths is not particularly recent. The idea of developing such

an idea into a broader project originated from the strategic choice of the fragrance company to concentrate its resources on one of the four areas of responsibility. Also decisive was the company's dialogue with *Econauta*. During the interviews, this initial phase of the project was described by the representatives of *Acqua dell'Elba* by referring to the passion toward the natural environment shown by the owner of *Econauta* and by the latter referring to the enthusiasm shown by the partners of *Acqua dell'Elba*.

The terms "passion" and "enthusiasm" were used several times during the interviews. These and similar expressions were used when describing the project and, even more often, when describing the sense of attachment of the project participants to the island. The island was often qualified as "our island", and several times comments were made about the attachment an individual can feel to the island due to his/her "being elbano/-a" (being from Elba). One partner of *Acqua dell'Elba* referred to his attachment to Elba as a very deep emotion: in his words, "a feeling that is difficult to describe to those who are not from here, who are not islanders".

The entrepreneur behind *Econauta*, who has been guiding tourists on Elba for approximately 20 years, said that he had the idea of offering tourists the possibility to walk all around the island on the basis of his experience of the tendency of walkers to try to find paths along the coast when on an island. Remembering the origin of the project, he said that, after spending a long time trying to promote this idea, he was extremely happy to find someone who shared his vision – *Acqua dell'Elba*. Similarly, one partner of the fragrance company qualified the project as "a dream becoming true".

According to the company partners, the project represents well the company's tenet about the natural environment as a unique and crucial resource that has to be maintained and developed. The *Via dell'Essenza* is viewed by the company's partners as quite an innovative project that can fulfil this function. During the official presentation of the project, the president of the park commented on the project, describing it as a unique case of collaboration and sponsoring. During the same event, as well as during the interviews, the project was also described by the company partners as responding to the company's intention to contribute to the local community and territory. This element is also clearly stated in the catalogue of the firm:

"We are proud of our origins as islanders and we are convinced that the duty of young entrepreneurs who live in this place is to give back part of their incomes to the local community and the territory."

The beneficial aspects of the project in relation to the local community were mentioned several times during the interviews, by the representatives of the company as well as by the entrepreneur of *Econauta*.

In this context, the expressions used were “creating value for the island” and “emphasizing the value of the territory”. Such expressions were explained by adopting a tourist perspective and also in a broader way focusing on the local community as a whole. In regard to tourism, it was observed that a path along the coast can be particularly attractive as it allows beautiful views, in addition to the possibilities of walking at different altitudes and on different types of terrain.

Still from a tourist perspective and including broader considerations as well, the representative of *Acqua dell’Elba* commented on the necessity for the local people to know the territory in order to being able to sell it to the tourists. In this sense, the path, used by the locals during their free-time activities, is viewed as a means to help the locals to know their own land better and to discover or rediscover particular aspects of the territory, which can then be promoted to the visitors.

Despite these considerations concerning the role of the project in the tourist context, the main focus of both companies seems to be on the local community. The owner of *Econauta* said:

“An important idea of this project (...) is to create the possibility for the elbani (people from Elba) to know the island. The knowledge of the territory is important to make the local economy and ethics flourish. (...) Here on Elba, we all come from families of farmers, or miners ... people who had a very close contact with this land ... and now it is important for the elbani to go back to these places where our grandfathers and dads used to live and work.”

In addition to this element, which is clearly related to a strong sense of belonging and place attachment, he also commented on the form of tourism that is present and can be further developed on the island. He said that walking and hiking possibilities help the local economy considerably. He specified:

“It helps the real economy ... I mean the reality of the small and all-year open enterprises ... it is not the big hotel that opens only in the summer and uses personnel from other places ... these tourists who come to walk are different: they use the local shop to buy food, they stop at the local bakery and stay at small accommodation facilities.”

Based on his direct experience when working along the path, *Econauta* means that the project is welcomed greatly by the local population. The conflicts have been few and all related to cases in which the path crosses private land belonging to someone who has a second home on Elba. In these cases, the support of the park and *Legambiente* has been decisive.

The support of the local community is also seen as an important factor from the perspective of future maintenance of the path. As emphasized by *Econauta*, only if the path is valued by the local peo-

ple can different solutions concerning its maintenance be found so that the path will continue to exist in the future.

During the interviews with *Acqua dell'Elba*, it was also remarked how the project is used by the company, in terms of image and branding. The individual responsible for marketing of the company, together with a company partner, commented on the fact that the company, as can be understood by its name as well as by the profile of its products, is strictly linked to the island of Elba. Nonetheless, the specific project is not particularly used in the company's promotion. Recently some changes have been introduced, with a broader use of storytelling in the communication and the development of an e-book with quite an extensive interactive section dedicated to the project.

Still in relation to the use of the project by the company, some comments were made in relation to the mismatch between the reality of the company taking responsibility for some aspects of the local community and the traditional corporate responsibility approach, centred on strategic long-term thinking, the elaboration of documents with fixed deadlines and formats and official certification. The *Via dell'Essenza* was described as a project that evolves "step by step", which can contribute to the local community but which cannot be implemented by adopting a rigid approach that might suit large companies and different sectors but that is viewed as "heavy and unrealistic" for the specific context.

As mentioned above, data from another project – *Elba Verdemare*, also concerning the restoration of a path – were collected. The project concerns a path in the north-eastern part of the island, which is the less touristic part of Elba. The main participants are an agro-farm, *Ristoro dell'Amandolo*, and an association of guides, *Pelagos*. This project has some common elements with the *Via dell'Essenza* project and also some differences. The common elements can be related to the attachment of the involved actors to Elba, the natural environment and its history. In particular, one of the respondents commented on the project, saying:

"The objective is to conserve the territory, to recognize the value of our environment and its dignity. The natural environment of this area is unique (...) and deserves more attention, also in relation to the recognition of our history, in respect to the people who have lived and worked here leaving clear but sometime forgotten traces of their presence".

The *Elba Verdemare* project has the objective of increasing and promoting the touristic value of the territory, with a particular focus on the idea of offering an authentic and high-quality experience. Despite this focus, also in this case several considerations about the importance of the path as a way to conserve the local heritage, both natural and cultural, were made by the respondents and referred to the local community's sense of identity.

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the findings on the base of the two research questions formulated at the beginning of this paper.

How do small and medium-sized local firms participating in collaborative tourism-relevant projects view their contribution to sustainability and that of the projects?

The case study suggests that the individuals who own and manage small and medium-sized firms participating in collaborative tourism-relevant projects are quite concerned about several aspects of the sustainable development of the specific area. The desired outcomes of the projects in which they participate are, first of all, those relative to the improvement of the quality of life of the local people, then outcomes related to the local economy and the natural environment.

Using the concept of sustainability, it can be said that the projects are viewed as a means to contribute to the different aspects of sustainability, with a focus on the socio-cultural aspect. The natural environment is also considered, and seems to be viewed as having a value first of all when it is accessible by humans.

As with the projects, the tourist activities also seem to be viewed first of all as a means to achieve the mentioned goal of improving the quality of life of the local people. This can be explained in part by the fact that, as is quite common in tourism, the objects of the project – the paths – serve tourist purposes and can also be used for the recreational and educational activities of the local population.

Based on such considerations, it can be proposed that an approach to sustainability in the context of a collaborative tourism-relevant project in which local firms participate has its centre neither in the tourism sector nor in the concept of sustainability, but in the idea of improvement of the quality of life of the local community.

Which are the central elements of an approach to sustainability in tourism that take such a view into consideration?

Centred on the quality of life of the local community, such projects seem to be heavily dependent on the following factors: the participants' personal sense of attachment to the place, their sense of responsibility and care towards the local context and their understanding of ethics as practice.

The sense of attachment to the place expressed by the participants in the *Via dell'Essenza* project is an element that emerges quite clearly from the data. The term "territorio" is used, and can be translated as

“place” or as “terroir”. Considering, in addition to the *Via dell’Essenza* project, the *ElbaVerdemare* project and the information about the campaign *Adotta un sentiero*, it can be said that such a sense of attachment is common among the different projects’ participants, and the economic sector to which the projects’ participants belong is not particularly relevant. The central role in the creation and implementation of these projects seems to be the individuals’ emotional bond with the territory.

Emotions play an important role in this context, and positive strong emotions seem to be at the origin of the projects. The business-related motivations, for example in terms of branding, seem to have a secondary role. This aspect can be related to Bauman’s rejection of the consideration of emotions as the enemy of rationality and morality (Kelemen and Peltonen, 2001). On the contrary, it seems that emotions motivate the participants more than anything else.

Related to this sense of attachment is the sense of responsibility that the individuals feel in relation to the protection and valorization of the local natural and socio-cultural context. The entrepreneurs are members of the local community and feel themselves to be in a position that allows them to influence the local context. This implies responsibility that is perceived at the individual level. No private or public organization, for example the park, is viewed as having the responsibility for the local development. Although these organizations can and, in the case of the public sector, are expected to be supportive, the individuals feel the sense of responsibility as being “on their shoulders”. Furthermore, this aspect is present in Bauman’s thought and his criticism toward the individual’s tendency of escaping personal responsibility due to the existence of over-individual entities, such as the state and businesses.

This aspect can also be noticed in relation to the concepts of corporate responsibility and strategic or altruistic philanthropy, briefly presented in chapter 2. Such concepts cannot be easily related to the observed sense of responsibility as the individuals seem to base their actions neither on economic and financial considerations nor on a sense of “doing something for others”, as in this case “the others” are the local community to which the individuals belong and of which their firms are an integrated part. This aspect, supported by the findings of other studies focused on “lifestyle entrepreneurs” and, more generally, small firms, can be related to the considerations presented above about the link between place, place attachment and self-identity.

The sense of responsibility felt by the individuals participating in the projects can be related to the concept of ethics of care. As mentioned in the theoretical part, ethics of care have been proposed in the tourism context (Spiller et al., 2011). Based on this case study, such ethics seem to be suitable for describing the morality implicit

in collaborative projects based on the participation of local actors. An ethic of care in the context of a project with different stakeholders is about creating value for the entire network of stakeholders through cooperation. This consideration is based on a relational view of the world in which every individual is part of a network, in this case, a local community, an aspect that is particularly suited to the case of local entrepreneurs.

Final remarks

The findings of this study have confirmed the considerations of some previously conducted studies concerning collaboration and sustainability in the case of small firms and “lifestyle entrepreneurs”. They have also shown how some ideas from the post-modern understanding of responsibility can be relevant, in particular those concerning the central role of the individuals/entrepreneurs and their values and the view of ethics as a situated practice. It can be said that the process of contributing to the sustainable development of an area through collaborative tourism-relevant projects of local small firms can be seen as a series of practices that operate in a contextualized manner and that have their origin in the individual’s values and sense of responsibility, regardless of his/her belonging to the tourism industry.

CONCLUSION

This study has investigated an empirical case about a collaborative tourism- and sustainability-relevant project involving small and medium-sized local firms. The findings have been discussed based on theoretical contributions from the tourism and business ethics literature, paying particular attention to the post-modern view of ethics.

Rejecting a tourism-centric view, this study suggests that the concepts of sustainability in tourism and local development can be approached with a focus on the improvement of the quality of life of the community. Crucial then is the local dimension of the tourism phenomenon that involves a specific geographical area and the correspondent socio-cultural context. This study suggests that individuals belonging to local firms, not necessarily and exclusively from the tourism sector, participate in collaborative projects as a way of taking responsibility for the improvement of the quality of life of the local community. They do so following a logic that is not related to the economic idea of corporate responsibility or the philanthropic idea of acting for others, but on the basis of their emotional bond with the territory and their sense of attachment to the place.

This study concludes by proposing an alternative approach to responsibility and sustainability in tourism centred on local entrepreneurs' role as moral individuals and change agents and on the necessity to include in such an approach different actors (private and public), sectors (tourism and others) and levels of analysis (individual, organizational and regional). The latter element suggests some practical implications for the management of collaborative projects and in particular the recruitment of the participants.

This study has adopted some elements of the post-modern thought concerning ethics and the results suggest that such elements can be fruitfully used in tourism. More specifically, the issues of responsibility as a personal pursuit and of the inclusion of "the other" in the sphere of a person's responsibility can be further investigated. It can be suggested that such investigation could include scholarly contributions about social entrepreneurship and the understanding of entrepreneurs as change agents.

Finally, the result of this study suggests that sustainability is understood by the individuals participating in collaborative projects in an anthropocentric way. This element raises some questions about the value recognized to the natural environment. It could be proposed that the understanding and the practice of sustainability are highly dependent on the context. The issue of sustainability in relatively small and relatively densely populated areas, as in the investigated case, is different from the cases of wild areas. Although this adaptive approach to sustainability can be said to be intuitive and practically useful, it can be asked how such a position of differentiating the way the natural environment is protected and used can be ethically justified.

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Submitted: 30th January 2014

Final version: 07th March 2014

Accepted: 28th March, 2014

Refereed anonymously