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Enhancing the Anglona Coros territory: a tourist itinerary design and evaluation process

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Abstract. Sustainable and cultural tourism challenges today cannot fail to deal with the objectives of the ONU Agenda 2030. Furthermore, in many European regions sustainable and cultural tourist strategies and activities frequently extend into territories where marginalization, progressive depopulation and abandonment processes represent critical dynamics. This article focuses the Italian framework by analyzing two items: 1) the fragile contexts and the link with the characteristics of tourist attractiveness, attempting to go beyond the current interpretations and positions; 2) the scientific debates on the themes of sustainable and cultural tourism as triggers for territorial valorization. The article proposes a methodological approach aimed to support local authorities in designing tourist itineraries by taking into account the stakeholders' preferences through a Conjoint Analysis model and by evaluating the territorial potential by means of spatial analyses based on cross-dimensional indexes and indicators. In particular, this article aims to reflect on the future of the Anglona Coros inner and fragile territory in the Sardinia Region (Italy) as a potential area of tourism development. With these multiple perspectives, the conditions of marginality and fragility are analyzed and the proposed methodological approach is applied in order to outline a new tourist itinerary able to activate a dialogue with the local Public Administrations and with all the stakeholders who have already shown interest in fostering a decision-making process and developing new local tourist strategies.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism, Economic Evaluation, Fragile Territories

1 Introduction

Sustainable and cultural tourism challenges today cannot fail to deal with the objectives of the ONU Agenda 2030 [1], [2], with the specific conventions and resolutions of the Council of Europe [3], with the program on European cultural routes and the policies

Commentato [c1]: We revised all the editing in accordance with the Springer editorial template and numbered the Introduction as per the Editorial Board suggestion. We carried out a significant revision of the English text

of ICOMOS, which recently revised the “ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism” [4], underlining how essential is "Reinforcing cultural heritage protection and community resilience through responsible and sustainable tourism management" [5]. As Mzembe et al. [6] emphasize, there are two core issues: 1) the educational and responsible vision of tourism emerges as a pivotal response to the heightened awareness among travelers regarding heritage and territories, recognized not merely as physical spaces but as repositories of collective memory crucial for transmission to future generations [7]; 2) The inherent strategic significance of the value chain stemming from the tourism sector underscores its pivotal role in shaping and influencing various interconnected aspects of economic, social, and cultural dynamics [8].

According to the Charter, heightened attention is warranted for additional issues, notably the increasing concerns about the degradation of cultural heritage, the diversification of cultural heritage tourism in the interdependence of their tangible, intangible, cultural, natural, as well as past and contemporary dimensions. Moreover, the Charter emphasizes the significance of perceiving heritage, the foundation of tourist activities, as a shared and collective resource.

Furthermore, in many European regions sustainable and cultural tourist strategies and activities frequently extend into territories where marginalization, progressive depopulation and abandonment processes represent critical dynamics. In Italy, in recent years these fragile territories have been supported by public policies which directed the greatest efforts in terms of investment in technological, infrastructural and service innovation. Enhancement strategies for the tourism sector can benefit communities and users, particularly influencing choices related to their free time and leisure activities, the perception of cultural heritage values and different accessibility and mobility modes [9].

In Italy, the opportunity to develop new tourist infrastructures and strategies was offered by the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR – Turismo 4.0, which allocated 6.68 billion euros to tourism and culture, of which 2.4 billion were dedicated to Tourism 4.0 [10])¹. These funds were divided between the competitiveness of tourism businesses, large tourism events and the construction of the digital tourism hub. In particular, the Sardinia Region, that is one of the Italian regions where the tourism sector has a great impact on the development of the territory, structured some policies included both in strategic plans and in specific projects (Strategic Development Plan and Tourism marketing of Sardinia 2018-2021, RESET Project - Territorial Network of Provincial Tourism Development and Experimentation 2022-2023, ANCORA Project 2023-2025 of the GAL Anglona Coros). In all these different plans the intention to innovate the region's tourism system at different scales of action emerges, by investing in its territorial capital - as conceptualized by Camagni et al. [11], Camagni [12] and Fratesi and Perucca [13]- in order to intercept and attract new tourist flows and break

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¹ PNRR or National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP): is part of Next Generation EU, an economic recovery project dedicated to member states. The investments and reforms included in NRRP-Italy will make the country more territorially cohesive, with a more dynamic labour market and without gender or age discrimination. Public health will be more modern and closer to people.

down the seasonality framework typical of seaside tourism (which concentrates activities in about 120-150 days), thus becoming a destination of interest for different markets.

Researchers have [widely](#) demonstrated that the COVID-19 crisis has strongly underscored the numerous contradictions experienced by marginalized communities. This unfolding situation has also opened up opportunities of growth also for territories considered fragile and lacking in a recognised or valued tourist identity.

Therefore, this article proposes a methodological approach aimed at supporting local authorities in designing tourist itineraries by [considering](#) the stakeholders' preferences and evaluating the socio-economic characteristics of the considered territory. In particular, this article aims to reflect on the future of the Anglona Coros [an](#) inner and fragile territory in the Sardinia Region (Italy), as a potential area of tourism development, starting from the results achieved by means of a survey based on a Conjoint Analysis (CA) model [14]. These preliminary results are analyzed and tested by applying the methodological approach developed in the context of the research project of national interest (PRIN 2017) "B4R - Branding4Resilience", which was based on the integration of different qualitative and quantitative tools and methods to explore inner territories and define enhancement projects.

The article comprises five main sections: the first one outlines the international and national context for exploring the fragile context connection with tourist attractiveness and delves into debates on sustainable and cultural tourism. The second section details the methodological approach outlined and applied to a case study in the Sardinia region, which is presented in the subsequent section, while the fourth section comments on the results achieved. Lastly, a discussion on potential themes for constructing sustainable and cultural tourism strategies aligned with territorial decision-makers choices is reported in the final section.

2 Background

Fragile areas today are affected by profound changes offering a compelling space for interesting research and experimentations. Numerous fragile areas, characterized by emerging risk factors [such as](#) depopulation, territorial inequalities, [underscore](#) the need for [proactive](#) actions and policies to rebalance [the presence of](#) basic services. [These necessities non only addressing immediate challenges but also fostering](#) socio-economic development. [These themes deepened within the National Strategy for Inner Areas \[15\], signaling an urgent call to action for comprehensive support and strategic planning.](#)

Beyond being merely associated with issues of marginality, degradation, and abandonment, these territories are recognized as having potential for revitalization and development. This potential can be unlocked with support policies and strategies that enhance the perception of places and their use through interconnections between sustainable tourism and cultural heritage [16].

Facing these challenges, the role of local authorities remains central in supporting these processes, as policies can balance short-term economic benefits and impacts with

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long-term sustainable development strategies [17]. The territorial asymmetries issue, linked to economic-social inequalities and the need to integrate sustainable development into cultural heritage tourism, requires synergies between territorial enhancement policies and those of subsidiarity [18], i.e. a harmonization between guidelines at national level and planning policies at local level.

Furthermore, cultural peculiarities linked to local resources could strengthen the identity and the economy of the local communities, by creating new jobs, increasing the residents' quality of life and the visitors' enjoyment, improving the image of the city and attracting new investors.

According to Europa Nostra [19], modeling and building a local identity becomes a "competitive advantage" that uses the concept of the so-called economy of uniqueness, in coherence with the UNESCO Recommendations [20] both on historical urban landscapes. Landscapes are the result of a historical stratification of cultural and natural values and attributes, continuously expanding beyond the notion of "historic center" or "ensemble", to include a broader urban context and its geographical location.

Some studies (i.e. [21]) also underlined that strategic approaches for the sustainable development of these currently "fragile areas" can be based on the involvement of the local community in the decision-making processes, accompanied and supported by awareness campaigns, educational and information programs, collaborative platforms organized by and for the community, to promote their own sense of identity and connect to their culture.

Furthermore, other research topics were addressed towards the demand side and its preferences [22], [14]: the preferences of users of these areas were detected, not only in relation to traditional tourist experiences, but also to itineraries which enhance the material and immaterial values of these territories.

This system of values is bequeathed to future generations and translates into components of individual and collective utility and increases the collective well-being and quality of life [23].

Furthermore, in the last few years the research project of national interest (PRIN 2017) "B4R - Branding4Resilience" widely contributed to the debate on the potential of branding in addressing resilient territorial development strategies in four Italian inner territories. The B4R research project also developed a methodological approach based on integrating different qualitative and quantitative tools and methods to analyze fragile territorial contexts and define sustainable enhancement projects [9].

In particular, cross-dimensional exploratory analyses were performed and tested to structure coherent and updated knowledge bases able to support the activation of tourist and cultural strategies and/or the interaction among different stakeholders involved in real decision-making processes [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29].

The research themes of the debate just mentioned constitute the references on which the methodological proposal and its application to the Sardinian context (Italy) were based, illustrated in the following sessions.

3 Methodological Approach

In the considered framework, this paper proposes a methodological approach, which combines a participatory process (activated through a survey based on the application of a Conjoint Analysis Model) aimed at designing a tourist itinerary with the B4R Exploration approach, aimed to analyze the territorial potential of "fragile" territories by means of spatial analyses based on cross-dimensional indexes and indicators.

Figure 1 shows the methodological approach to macro-phases and micro-phases, highlighting a process that can be used in the initial phases of decision-making processes to support the design of public strategies.

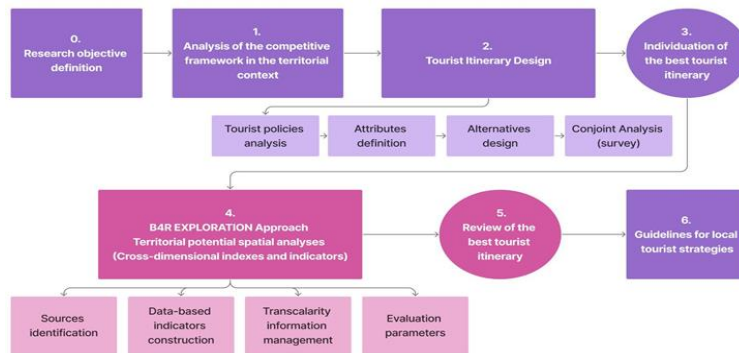


Fig. 1. The methodological approach (Source: Authors' elaboration)

Establishing the research objective (**Phase 0**) is essential for delineating both the geographical boundaries and possible thematic or methodological constraints.

The analysis of the competitive framework in the territorial context (**Phase 1**) is based on activities of data collection and knowledge construction, to understand the characteristics and peculiarities of the area (cultural heritage, natural resources, territorial planning and "intangible" heritage). The outputs of this phase consist of: 1) understanding the territory's vocation, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses, 2) identifying a user base interested in undertaking this type of experience, and choosing alternative ways of enjoying the cultural heritage of the sample area.

In the tourist itinerary design process (**Phase 2**), the analysis of local tourist policies and the definition of attributes and alternatives are fundamental micro-phases to structure a survey and apply the Conjoint Analysis (CA) technique to estimate the value of a public good, the willingness to pay (WTP) in evaluation processes, and the levels of utility and preference for potential final users [30], [31], [32], [33], [34] and [35], in direct and implicit manner through the use of this attribute.

As described in Coscia and Pasquino [14], the Conjoint Analysis (CA), coined by Green [30], is used to indicate methodologies aimed at analyzing multi-attribute scenarios: in these cases, the multi-attribute nature of cultural assets, lends itself very well to carrying out an estimative analysis of such assets. The technique was applied in the form Conjoint experiment (CE) [based on the RUM model](#) [36]: this involves the user indicating which product they prefer within a set of products with different attributes (Most Preferred Choice). Furthermore, the inclusion among the other attributes of the “cost” element allows the WTP not to be detected through a direct question (as happens in CV), but rather in an indirect and implicit manner through the use of this attribute.

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The designed alternative itineraries are presented to both residents and visitors: the outcomes entail identifying and formulating the “best tourist itinerary” encompassing individual activities evaluated with the highest marginal utility (**Phase 3**). To verify and eventually modify the “best tourist itinerary”, territorial potential spatial analyses can be performed by means of cross-dimensional indexes and indicators (**Phase 4**). This phase can be carried out by defining a series of evaluation parameters (opportunities and threats) specific for each analyzed territory, whose presence may suggest modifications to the chosen route as including new stages that can serve as attractions for different types of tourists. As the B4R Exploration approach suggests [9], [24], [25], these indexes and indicators can be organized and structured into four exploratory dimensions, each addressing specific themes to emphasize significant trends within the identified sample area. These data-based analyses can be performed by building a Geographical Information System (GIS) that through the use of multi-scale geo-referenced data allow the construction of synthetic spatial indices and thematic maps [37] useful to highlight the territorial potential and to eventually modify the “best tourist itinerary” (**Phase 5**).

Only through geographic information, it is indeed possible to simultaneously observe phenomena belonging to significantly different scales and cognitive dimensions (e.g., tourism and geomorphological risk, hospitality and administrative vitality), enabling the assessment of their risks and benefits, and re-thing development strategies and design solutions.

Once the best tourist itinerary is validated or revised, some guidelines for local tourist strategies can be outlined in order to support local authorities in the activation and development of enhancement strategies and actions (**Phase 6**).

4 The Focus Area (FA): the territorial area of the Anglona Coros (Italy)

Following the Strategic Regional Plan², the present research analyzes the Italian area of the Anglona Coros in the North of Sardinia, assumed as Focus Area (FA). The FA, though lacking direct access to the sea, is strategically located near pivotal hubs like

² The Strategic Regional Plan (2028-2021) predicted for all Region the ZES (Zona Economica Speciale), see: https://www.regione.sardegna.it/documenti/1_231_20181221121007.pdf and <https://delibere.regione.sardegna.it/protected/44771/0/def/ref/DBR44772/>

the city of Sassari, Alghero airport, and Porto Torres harbor. Despite the presence of architectural heritage and landscape value, it remains relatively underdeveloped and unknown. The FA corresponds to the historical sub-regions of Anglona and Coros, characterized by a diverse landscape that transitions from predominantly flat zones intersected by a complex hydrographic network for agricultural cultivation and grazing, to rugged terrain marked by extensive outcrops of rock, often forested or covered in scrubland. At present, this territory includes 17 municipalities (Osilo, Nulvi, Tergu, Martis, Laerru, Sedini, Bulzi, Santa Maria Coghinas, Perfugas, Erula, Chiaramonti, Ploaghe, Codrongianos, Ittiri, Cargeghe, Muros, Florinas) and spans across 827.25 km². Following the endorsement of the Regional Rural Development Plan (2007-2013), the Anglona-Coros Local Action Group (Gruppo di Azione Locale - GAL) was established, comprising local private and public stakeholders following European regulations [38].

The socio-economic challenges hinder the optimal appreciation and protection of the cultural and natural heritage in the FA, despite its abundant offerings such as touristic offer and natural sources. Recognizing the full spectrum of cultural assets (architectural and natural elements) is crucial for unlocking their economic potential. The area is increasingly leaning towards promoting slow tourism, highlighting immersive experiences within the territory and encouraging meaningful interactions with local residents and their surroundings. A closer analysis of the territory reveals a rich historical, archaeological, cultural, and identity-based heritage spanning various epochs, from Paleolithic settlements through the Nuragic period to the Early Middle Ages. Notably, the Northern Sardinia region houses 70% of the island's Romanesque churches, some of which are already part of a visitor itinerary supported by the European Regional Development Fund INTERREG (Itinerario Romanico). The region also boasts diverse natural assets, ranging from leisure-oriented areas like parks and the natural thermal baths of Casteldoria currently closed to the public - to sports focused areas with challenging terrains, cliffs, and caves, exemplified by the SIC site Grotta de Su Coloru.

5 Results

The proposed methodological approach was tested on the identified FA, managed by the Anglona Coros GAL, which was selected due to its fragile socio-economic context. It is worth mentioning that the Regional Rural Development Plan categorized the FA as a "rural area facing comprehensive development challenges" and highlighted its condition of "extremely critical" demographic disease (SMD) in various municipalities.

Examining the ISTAT data from the period 2014-2021 reveals a notable increase in extra-hotel accommodation capacity, particularly since 2019. Regarding visitor arrivals and stays in 2021, the area recorded 13,918 stays (in 2018, pre-COVID period, were 2,950) and approximately 3,000 arrivals (in 2018 were 1,127). Tourist influx is understandably concentrated in the summer months, notably August, with some presence in June and October. The foreigners' Average Stay Index stands at 5.4 days and the Italians' one stands at 4.1 days.

Therefore, the stakeholders' preferences and evaluating the fragile socio-economic characteristics of the territorial context

Commentato [c6]: We have reported some synthetic context data on the tourist presence in the area and the trend. See point 8, paper review Form

5.1 Tourist itineraries design and marginal utility evaluation through a CA model

The design of alternative tourist itineraries was based on a thorough and comprehensive analysis of the competitive framework, which included consultations with some key stakeholders operating within the area. A participatory process was activated through a survey based on the application of a CA model, aimed at investigating both willingness-to-pay metrics and user preference curves. To discern users' preferences, four principal attributes were identified to describe valuable characteristics of the area, with a particular attention to cultural heritage assets, understood both as natural and historical resources and intangible resources related to local traditions (i.e. handicrafts, local festivals, and customs, etc., see [39], [14]).

These four attributes were structured into three levels, as outlined in Table 1. The combination of these attributes and levels led to the creation, by means of IBM SPSS27 software, of nine alternative tourist itineraries for enjoying the FA.

Table 1. The tourist itinerary attributes and levels (Source: Coscia and Pasquino, 2023)

CULTURAL HERITAGE	SPORT, GREEN, FITNESS	FOOD AND WINE	TRANSPORTATION
Conservation and protection of cultural heritage in the state of fact	Conservation and protection of green areas in the state of fact	No food and wine experience	Transportation vehicle to be provided by the user
Enhancement of the Nuragic period itinerary	Enhancement of recreation places and green areas	Enhancement of stops for tasting of traditional dishes	Use of a shuttle
Enhancement of the Medieval era itinerary	Enhancement of places for sports activities	Experience inside a local business	Use of an electric car

ATTRIBUTES + LEVELS COMBINATIONS

↓
9 ALTERNATIVE TOURIST ITINERARIES

Subsequently, the alternatives were evaluated by means of a survey, which was completed by a sample of 600 respondents (301 GAL residents and 299 tourists) who expressed their preferences on them. The Itinerary n. 6 (see Fig. 2) emerged as the best one on the basis calculation of utility values and the related economic surplus [14], [39].

This itinerary expects the conservation and protection of the cultural heritage, the enhancement of outdoor sports activities, the local businesses' involvement, and the implementation of electric cars to be used within the area.

These results from the CA model application outlined key elements consistent with possible tourist strategies and actions to be developed by local authorities.

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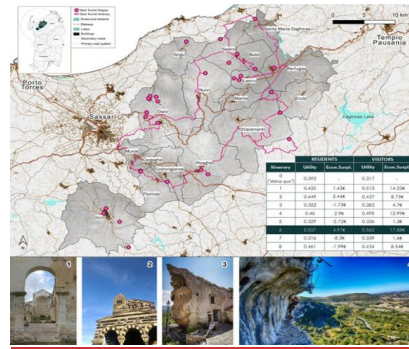


Fig. 2. The best tourist itinerary in the FA (Itinerary n. 6). (Source: Authors' elaboration). Architectural heritage images: 1) San Nicola di Sinis Church, Sedini (Source: Francesca Pasquino, April 2023), 2) Basilica of Saccargia, Codrongianos (Source: Francesca Pasquino, January 2023), 3) Domus de Janas, Sedini (Source: Francesca Pasquino, April 2023), 4) Hiking in Osilo (Source: www.informati-sardegna.it).

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5.2 Review of the best tourist itinerary through the B4R Exploration approach (territorial potential spatial analyses)

The consistency of the best tourist itinerary, that emerged from the CA model application, was tested by applying the B4R Exploration approach, based on territorial potential spatial analyses, in order to identify opportunities and threats not emerging neither from the analysis of the competitive framework nor from the CA model and to verify and, if necessary, modify the identified itinerary. In particular, the approach was performed by applying some cross-dimensional indexes and indicators related to the Dimensions n.1 and 2 of the B4R Exploration approach [9], [24], [25].

The B4R Dimension 1 issues ("Infrastructure, landscape and ecosystems") focused the attention on the FA infrastructural networks and connection and highlighted the presence of inadequate and obsolete infrastructures. Since it is located far from the sea, the Anglona Coros territory lacks efficient connections, especially during the summer season, isolating the municipalities from seasonal tourist flows. Furthermore, currently there are no direct connections via public transport to Fertilia airport and Porto Torres harbor and only 7 of the 17 GAL municipalities have a railway station. The municipality of Santa Maria Coghinas does not even have a bus station, making it impossible to reach the municipality by public transport. As regards sustainable mobility, the "Sassari-Ozieri" cycle path, as part of the "Ciclovía della Sardegna" project developed by the Sardinia Region and the regional transport company ARST, passes through the municipalities of Muros, Cargeghe, Codrongianos and Ploaghe.

The B4R Dimension 2 issues ("Built and cultural heritage, settlement dynamics") outlined the richness of the FA cultural sites, folkloristic heritage and architectural assets and related to the Paleolithic, the Nuragic period, as well as the Middle Ages.

Furthermore, the analyses highlighted the presence of valuable naturalistic elements that, unfortunately, are often neglected in terms of conservation and promotion. The landscape and naturalistic assets, such as natural parks, lakes and spas, could constitute tourist attractions to be redeveloped and made accessible to the public, thus encouraging new forms of sustainable tourism. The spatial analyses also pointed out the accommodation facilities present in the area in terms of number of beds.

Based on these observations, the following 4 evaluation parameters were established to verify and modify the best tourist itinerary that emerged from the CA model application:

- Proximity (< 3 km) to municipalities with a high presence of numerous accommodations;
- Proximity (< 1 km) to municipalities with a low level of cultural offerings;
- Proximity (< 1 km) to the access of parks and protected natural areas;
- Proximity (< 1 km) to other existing tourist itineraries or isolated attractions.

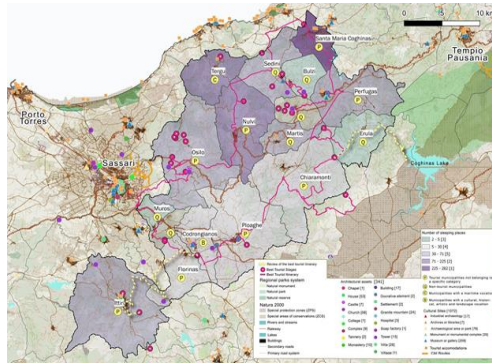


Fig. 3. Review of the best tourist itinerary based on territorial potential spatial analyses (Source: Authors' elaboration).

— A positive value to one or more of these evaluation parameters suggested possible deviations in order to include other tourist strategic attractions.

In particular, the analyses performed by applying the B4R Exploration approach suggested two specific deviations, which could review the tourist itinerary n.6 and foster tourist development even in municipalities with a weak socio-economic context characterized by a low tourist offer (see Fig. 3).

— The tourist itinerary n.6 was identified as the fastest route capable of connecting all the municipalities in the area, with the exception of Tergu, Martis and Ittiri. Therefore, the first proposed deviation was aimed to include the municipality of Ittiri, where there are Romanesque churches, which deserve to be enhanced and enjoyed by tourists.

The second proposed deviation consisted of including the municipality of Erula as a possible starting point to visit and enjoy the Coghinas Lake and the neighboring Limbara Natural Park. This proposal was aimed to encourage an increase of the provided

sports and leisure activities in this valuable natural environment, as well as to foster the opening of new accommodation facilities, which are currently lacking in this municipality.

By considering these new stages, the proposed tourist itinerary should last 3-4 days, starting from Osilo and including overnight stays in Ittiri and Erula before going back to Osilo.

This itinerary can be considered a strategic action that the GAL should develop and implement to enhance the Anglona Coros area from a tourist, cultural, environmental and economic point of view.

6 Conclusion

The FA investigation, traditionally perceived as a marginal territory, however, has highlighted many potentials that are not currently known, in particular if seen from the perspective of sustainable cultural tourism policies. Therefore, these initial explorations and findings have significantly advanced research in several dimensions and in particular:

- definition and knowledge of inner areas: within the Italian national context, the research has explored and understood the phenomenon of an area affected by territorial imbalances expanding the panorama of Italian research in this field, thanks to the experimentation on this territory of an integrated methodology, which has never been applied until now

- methods and tools: the research has experimented with and integrated qualitative-quantitative approaches to the investigation of territories through multidisciplinary perspectives capable of grasping the different conditions of marginality, the gaps to be identified and the different trajectories of transformation in different contexts. The integrated exploratory investigations highlight numerous potentials for analysis and support for decision-making even in contexts such as the sample FA, where information and databases are sometimes incomplete or not systematized and interoperable.

- approach to sustainable cultural tourism strategies: the research emphasizes the need for strategies that consider the varied needs of the different targets, protecting the system of values that these territories express through their *genius loci*, in order to implement glocal, collaborative and complementary visions between territories. In particular, for the FA it brought out some elements for the construction of some planning and territorial governance strategies: 1) the need to invest in infrastructure in a sustainable way (electric cars, cycle tourism, etc.), 2) the importance of processes of loyalty to the tangible and intangible heritage of residents through the "discovery" of their territory not in a "hit and run" mode, but in a slow mode with stopovers and overnight stays, 3) the centrality of strategies for deseasonalization of tourism, not only summer tourism and seaside

- processual and strategic approach: The research advocates for overcoming the opposition between top-down and bottom-up actions, reinterpreting the collaborative modality and also enhancing the action of actors such as the GAL, who can represent those

intermediate bodies indispensable for awareness-raising actions and involvement of local communities.

With these multiple perspectives, the conditions of marginality and fragility, that emerged from the phase "CA process linked to Exploration", are analyzed, in order to provide a methodology to support decision-making: this methodology can constitute the tool capable of reactivating the dialogue with the Public Administrations of the FA and with all the stakeholders. For the FA, the municipalities of the GAL have already shown interest in the results of this preliminary exploratory phase and can become actors in the decision-making process and in attracting financing and funds through proposals for sustainable itineraries.

Furthermore, the integrated methodology has shown further possibilities for refinement and synergy between the CA process and the cross-dimensional exploration analysis, which can be tested together from the early stages of the methodology: this will constitute a future development of the research.

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