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## INVESTIGATING STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES ABOUT LOCAL DEVELOPMENT AND BUSINESS STRATEGIES

Stakeholders play a relevant role in determining the success of the actions for local development: without the involvement of local actors it is very challenging to obtain significant results. The involvement of stakeholders enables decision makers to identify priorities of action for relevant actors and to identify existing gaps between offer and demand in the tourism market, which is a crucial point for improving competitiveness of local enterprises. The presented case study refers to the implementation of a participated planning process (The European Charter for Sustainable Development in Protected Areas) in a tourist destination. In order to support the definition of a participated strategy for sustainable tourism development, that has to be implemented both by public and private actors, three levels of analysis were integrated: objective analysis, subjective analysis (questionnaires, one-to-one interviews and development of a common vision for the future according to EASW method) and strategic analysis. The paper illustrates the process and the main results of consultation, highlighting some evidences of the positive influence of stakeholders involvement in the planning process.

### 1 Introduction

Stakeholders play a relevant role in determining the success of the actions for local development: political processes are complex processes involving a multitude of actors and are built up not only on factual and objective information, but also on power, interests, ideas and institutions (Behringer et al, 2000), so without the involvement of local actors in local planning it is very challenging to obtain significant results (Newman et al., 2001).

Investigating stakeholders' perspectives enable decision makers to identify priorities of action for relevant actors and to identify existing gaps between offer and demand in the tourism market, which is a crucial point for improving competitiveness of local enterprises. Moreover, the involvement of stakeholders in the definition of an action plan for local development can help to enhance the involvement of private sector also in the phase of implementation, assuring cooperation and a better sharing of responsibilities between public and private actors.

On the other hand, if not based on objective data about the local situation and the objective constraints that can influence the action (e.g. technical feasibility or economic availability) and if not linked with policy objectives and targets at the higher level (e.g. regional policy), participatory planning can lead only to a "virtual" exercise, with no effective results on local development. In addition, a participatory process with no real outcome on the local situation can result in the loss of credibility from local institution and in the lack of confidence and then of commitment by local actors. Then the most effective way of involving the stakeholders in the planning process seems to be the integration between the results of forum consultation and expert analysis, which can also help mutual understanding between different positions (e.g. institutions and local community), community capacity building and the creation of a network between public and private stakeholders (Stagl, 2006, Vasquez et al., 2006).

The presented case study refers to the implementation of a participatory planning process, the European Charter for Sustainable Development in Protected Areas, in a tourist

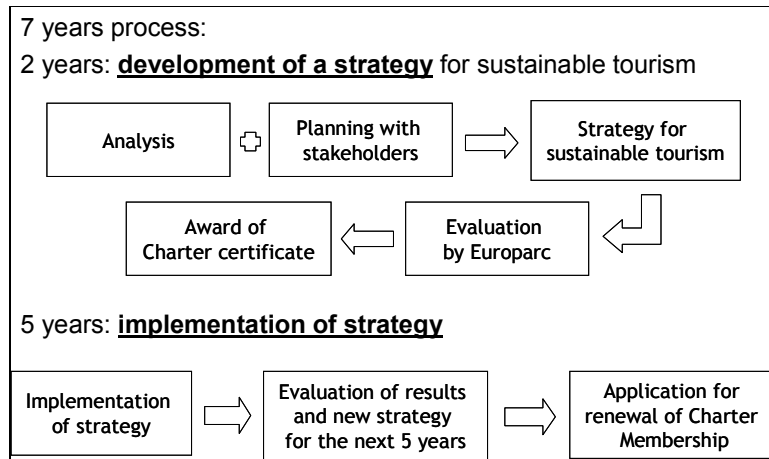
destination. The methodology developed for the implementation integrates stakeholder consultation and objective analysis based on expert knowledge, referring to Integrated Environmental Assessment and Participatory Integrated Assessment theory in the definition of the methodology (Behringer et al, 2000, Hisschemoller et al., 2001).

To investigate priorities and expectations of local stakeholders, the project team established a consultation process, performed also through questionnaires surveys, submitted to: tourism operators, tourists and local residents. The aim of the research was twofold: firstly, to identify attitudes and expectations about the development of tourism activities in the area; secondly, to highlight priorities of each category of stakeholder and verify if there was a correspondence between the targets of tourist offer and tourist demand. As mentioned before, the results of the questionnaires constitute a part of a wider evaluation of the tourism market in the area, composed by a three-stage analysis: objective analysis, subjective analysis (questionnaires, one-to-one interviews and development of a common vision for the future according to EASW method) and strategic analysis (to assure the coherence of the final strategy with local and regional objectives and targets about local development). The three levels of analysis were integrated to support the definition of a participated strategy for sustainable tourism development, that has to be implemented both by public and private actors. The investigation about stakeholders' perspective helped to identify the gaps that exist between offer and demand in the tourism sector and to identify possible areas of intervention to enhance the quality of local tourism activities and to improve the competitiveness of the offer and the quality of the tourist experience in the destination considered.

## **2 Methodology**

### ***2.1 The process of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas***

European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is a participatory planning instrument, promoted by Europarc (the European Federation of Parks) to enhance sustainable tourism in protected areas; signers of the European Charter are committed to implementing a local strategy for 'sustainable tourism', furthering cooperation and implementing joint actions with local partners (Europarc Federation, 2005). The process of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is planned to last 7 years: first two years are for the development of a strategy of action for sustainable tourism, the next five years are for the implementation of this strategy. At the end of every step there is an evaluation by Europarc: the first one is for the award of Charter Certificate to the protected area and the second one is for the evaluation of results and the renewal of Charter membership (Figure 1). It is important to notice that, according to the European Charter procedure, the strategy for sustainable tourism has to be based on the results of an analysis of local situation (environmental, economic and social aspects, related with tourism sector) made by experts, and the results of the consultation and planning process done with local stakeholders.



**Figure 1:** European Charter process

This structure of the process represents one of the most interesting features of the European Charter: the second stage evaluation by Europarc, necessary to renew the Charter certificate, implies that all the actors involved have to ensure their commitment also in the implementation phase, which is a crucial step of this kind of projects. One of the weaknesses of Local Agenda 21 processes, highlighted also by some researches about participatory processes effectiveness, is that in most cases the commitment of public and private bodies ends after the compilation of the Action Plan, with the risk of undermining all the work done before.

The Charter text provides also eight principles to address the whole process and the definition of the strategy of action. The eight principles are:

1. Protecting natural and cultural heritage
2. Meeting visitor needs – granting quality of tourist experience
3. Improving the communication about the area
4. Developing tourism products relating to protected areas
5. Provide appropriate training to protected area managers and tourism operators
6. Maintaining local quality of life
7. Providing benefits to the local economy
8. Managing visitor flows to prevent and reduce impacts

Accordingly to these principles, the aim of the process is the development of new tourism products related to the protected areas, while protecting natural environment and granting benefits and a good quality of life for local residents.

The European Charter combines economic, cultural, social and environmental aspects as a basis for the definition of future scenarios of local development. The phases of the Charter include: economic, social, cultural and environmental diagnosis of the area, with a focus on specific characteristics, strengths and weaknesses; consultation of local stakeholders about their vision of sustainable tourism development for the area; participatory planning; definition of action strategies for sustainable tourism development and, ultimately, implementation of these strategies. The whole consultation process is designed to improve cooperation and capacity building between local stakeholders, both in the public and private sectors (Castellani et al, 2007).

## **2.2 Stakeholders involvement in European Charter planning process in Alpi Lepontine**

The tourism system of a destination is directly and indirectly influenced by various kind of stakeholders, which can at the same time affect the development of the destination and be affected by tourist activities<sup>1</sup>, either if they are part of it (e.g. tourism operators or hotel managers) or not (e.g. local residents) (Tsaour et al, 2006). Within this context, the communication between all actors has a crucial role in determining the success of every strategy for improving the tourist system, helping to identify possible weaknesses and to address the needs of stakeholders, improving the ability of the destination to fulfil the needs of everyone involved, i.e. to improve social sustainability and to obtain better results. Following this perspective, the involvement of stakeholders in the planning process for the definition of the strategic lines of action for the future development of the destination in a sustainable way, as happens within the European Charter process, can provide useful information about what are the key issues to be considered in order to improve the quality and the sustainability of the local tourist system (Logar, 2009). The comparison between the vision of the destination emerging from tourists and from tourist operators surveys, for instance, can help to identify the existing gaps between offer and demand, which represent a key point to be addressed in order to improve quality and competitiveness of the destination, in a efficient way (i.e. investing in actions that, according to what expressed by tourists, will provide a positive result).

Moreover, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is an interesting mechanism for involving stakeholder in the planning process, especially because it meets the necessity of widening the concept of participation from pure consultation, that provides information for the development of the strategy, to an active involvement of all the actors in the definition of a detailed action plan for the following 5 years and in the implementation of these actions, commonly shared by public and private actors. This feature of the process helps to assure that the action plan defined during the participatory planning will be successfully implemented in the future.

The case study presented in this paper refers to Alpi Lepontine protected areas, which applied to the European Charter in 2006 and have been awarded with the Charter certificate in 2008; they are now at the second stage of the process, which is the implementation of the strategy and action plan, and that will be followed by an evaluation by Europarc in 2012, necessary to renew the certificate for the following 5 years.

Strategy and Action Plan for sustainable tourism in Alpi Lepontine are the result of an important activity of participatory planning, based on the integration between objective data (collected and systematized in a diagnostic report), subjective data (coming from the analysis of the perception of three basic categories of stakeholders concerned with tourism development: local community, tourism operators and tourists, surveyed through questionnaires, and from the topics of the focus groups) and strategic analysis about tourism policies and strategies at local and regional level.

The consultation of stakeholders in Alpi Lepontine implementation of the European Charter was organized as follows (Figure 2):

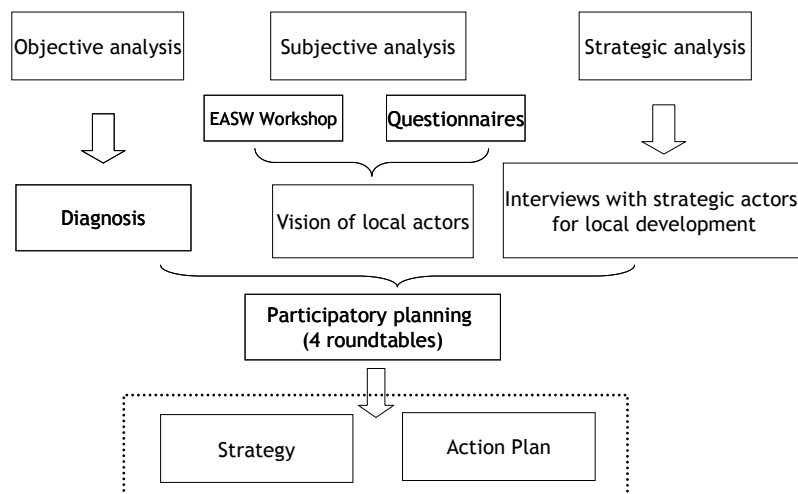
1. opening meeting to present the project and inform the local community about the European Charter process and the objective of the local Mountain Community about sustainable tourism development of the area;

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the attitude of residents towards tourists can affect their feeling about the tourist experience and influence their will to come back again, while the proactiveness of hotel managers and tourist operators in investing in new services and improve the offer can influence the possibility to enlarge the market share and improve the quality of the offer, rising the revenues from tourist activities; on the other hand, if the tourism flow is not adequately managed by local authorities, this will result in conflicts between tourists and the local community and can affect the quality of life of residents.

2. EASW workshop with the participants to the opening meeting, to investigate stakeholders priorities and concern about tourism and to develop a common vision about sustainable tourism development in Alpi Lepontine;
3. questionnaire surveys submitted to three relevant categories of stakeholders (residents, hotel and restaurant managers, tourists), with the aim of enlarging the perspective about the common vision (including also people that didn't participated to the first meeting) and of highlighting the point of view of each specific category (e.g. tourists point of view, in comparison with hotel managers' one);
4. forum consultation for participatory planning of the Strategy and Action Plan for sustainable tourism development in Alpi Lepontine.

In addition, members of the project team conducted one-to-one non structured interviews on specific topics with relevant subjects of the area, such as provincial tourism and environmental authorities and representatives of local organizations, with the aim of integrating the strategic analysis based on institutional documents and plans with updated information about the priorities and the activities of local and regional administrations on tourist development and environmental protection.



**Figure 2:** Scheme of the implementation process developed for Alpi Lepontine

1. In September 2006, the project team held an opening meeting in the Visitor Centre of the Riserva Naturale Lago di Piano to present the process to the population and to perform a first analysis of local perceptions about sustainable tourism and local development. Every relevant person directly or indirectly involved in tourism activities was invited, in addition to associations for sustainable tourism, local press staff and the local community at large. The meeting was organized in two sections: the first section consisted in the presentation of the characteristics and conditions of the implementation of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas: the aim of this section was to involve local stakeholders and to make them aware of the opportunities given by this process.
2. In the second section of the same meeting there was a workshop regarding the perception of local threats and trends; according to the EASW (European Awareness Scenario Workshop) method, participants were asked to list five threats and five opportunities about tourism in the area of Alpi Lepontine in order to develop two possible scenarios - one positive and one negative - for the next ten years. The results of the

workshop were analysed and then clustered to identify the main topics of tourism in the Alpi Lepontine, referred to the European Charter principles.

3. Three different type of questionnaires, with closed and opened questions, were submitted to tourists, tourism operators and residents to provide further insights about some focal aspects of the local tourism system and to investigate their opinion about tourism in the area. More in detail, the surveys dealt with the following issues:
  - a. Questionnaire submitted to residents:
    - i. Knowledge of sustainability and sustainable tourism concepts
    - ii. Interest in environment and sustainability issues
    - iii. Attitude towards tourists
    - iv. Value judgement about quality and sustainability of local tourist offer
    - v. Suggestions about action needed to improve the offer and possible markets to be promoted
  - b. Questionnaire submitted to tourism operators:
    - i. Information about their activity (type and age of the hospitality structure/restaurant, nr of employees, services offered, etc.)
    - ii. Information about the characteristics of tourists visiting their structure (age, country of origin, length of stay, etc.)
    - iii. Knowledge and promotion about local heritage and tourist attractions (e.g. possibility for tourists to have practical information and suggestion for their visit, promotion of local food)
    - iv. Attitude towards sustainability and sustainable tourism
    - v. Implementation of best practice about energy and water saving, environmental certification and other actions to improve sustainability of the structure
    - vi. Suggestions about action needed to improve the local tourist offer
  - c. Questionnaire submitted to tourist:
    - i. Information about them and their holiday (age, country of residence, length of staying, type of accommodation, mean of transport used to reach the area)
    - ii. Elements that make the destination attractive in their opinion
    - iii. Level of satisfaction about the visit in Alpi Lepontine
    - iv. Knowledge of sustainability and sustainable tourism concepts
    - v. Interest in environment and sustainability issues in planning their holiday
    - vi. Suggestions about action needed to improve the local tourist offer
4. The vision developed in the first meeting, integrated with the results from the questionnaire surveys, addressed the selection of the most relevant topics for the planning process, discussed in 4 roundtables. The Forum consultation began in March 2007 and involved four categories of stakeholders:
  - Tourism operators
  - Local administrators and NGOs
  - School operators<sup>2</sup>
  - Farmers and trade associations

The decision to organize roundtables according to the type of participants (i.e. not to the topics discussed) had the aim of allowing the definition of commonly shared proposals

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<sup>2</sup> Schools were involved firstly because one of the possible new tourist markets identified was educational tourism and, secondly, because in the area there is an high school for hotel and tourist managers, that need to be valorised and could represent an important strength for the local tourism system.

and to create a network of subjects sharing the same goals, as asked by stakeholders in the first meeting. On the basis of this structure, the main topics of the planning process (according to the principles of the European Charter) were handled by the roundtables in relation to the fields of action and the needs of participants.

This kind of organization allowed to have forum meetings with small groups of people (around 20-30), enabling everyone to participate actively to the discussion and to provide his contribution for the identification of the lines of action and the definition of the strategy. Moreover, during the first meeting of each roundtable, the experts introducing the discussion made a brief presentation of the results of the objective and strategic analysis as a starting point for the debate; participants were asked to express comments and suggestions about them in order to have also a subjective feedback on this technical documents. To address the discussion, during the meetings some purpose of actions were presented, referring to the principles that mainly related to the interests of the group composing the consultation board: participants were asked to express their opinion about the actions presented (assigning a priority value to each action) and suggested additional actions themselves, with the aim of defining a commonly shared baseline about current situation and future targets for the planning activity.

The final outcomes of the whole participatory planning process for sustainable tourism development in Alpi Lepontine are the strategy for sustainable tourism ("Via Regina, discovering the past for a sustainable future", Tarelli et al, 2008), that illustrates the strategic lines of action for the future defined during the planning process, and the Action Plan for the year 2008-2012, consisting in more than 100 actions that have to be undertaken in order to obtain the renewal of the Charter certificate at the end of the five years, in 2012.

Considering that the Action Plan covers a mid-term period and includes a wide number of actions, there could be the risk of a failure of the implementation due to the complexity of the task and maybe to insufficient human and economic resources from the institutional body who is the leading responsible of the project (in this case, the Mountain Community). To avoid this risk, the entire Action Plan was created in close partnership with local stakeholders, asking them to ensure their commitment also for the implementation phase: a preliminary feasibility study was performed for every action planned, with the aim of highlighting the resources needed (economic, human, technical, etc.), the existing (or possible) source of funding and the public or private subject that will hold the responsibility of the project. This last aspect is necessary to ensure that the involvement and the commitment of the local community, the economic sector and the local NGOs that participated to the planning phase will continue during time, improving cooperation between local stakeholders and creating a lasting connection between public and private bodies (as pointed out also by OECD in 2009).

The document that illustrates the Action Plan displays for each action:

- the European Charter principle to which it refers;
- the role of the Mountain Community in that action (lead partner of the project or partner of a project which has another lead partner);
- the time-schedule planned for the realisation of the project;
- information about periodicity: action undertaken yearly; project lasting more some years; action planned for only one year;
- total cost of the execution for the period of implementation of European Charter;
- information about yearly structure of the costs and quote of the cost already funded or to be funded.

Furthermore, the Mountain Community asked to all relevant actors responsible for the implementation of the Action Plan to testify their commitment signing a formal protocol for the implementation of the strategy during the period 2008-2012.

### 3 Results

#### 3.1 The vision of stakeholders

Table 1 illustrates the results of the EASW workshop, that constitutes the basis for the development of a common vision about sustainable tourism development in the Alpi Lepontine area. The statements expressed by people interviewed have been firstly clustered according the Charter principle to which they refer, and secondly summarized to identify some fields of action to address the discussion about the planning of the strategy and action plan (numbers in brackets stands for the number of sentences listed by interviewed people for every issue).

PRINCIPLE		LOCAL PERCEPTION	FIELD OF ACTION
Protecting natural and cultural heritage		Need of conservation/preservation of natural heritage	Environmental protection (19)
		Need to increase the surface of protected areas	
		Need of improving the quality of water resources, currently in bad conditions	
		Relevance of valorisation of cultural, artistic and natural heritage	Valorisation of local heritage (9)
		Need of restoration of traditional architecture	Valorisation of local strengths (20)
		Point of interest in the territory: landscape/natural beauties, climate conditions, protected areas, peacefulness, variety of tourist offer, cultural and architectural heritage	
		Need to identify new tourist routes	
	Opportunity to organize excursions in mountain areas (e.g. valorisation of trails that link the villages)	Tourist path and routes (9)	
Improving the communication about the area		Need of improving the information points in the area	Promotion and information about the territory (15)
Improving the communication about the area		Need to promote the territory in different ways (internet, magazine, leaflet,...)	Promotion and information about the territory (15)
		Need of specific promotion for mountain areas	
		Possibility of promotion among tourists of Como lake	
		Opportunity of organising events to attract new tourists	
Promoting local products		Need of promotion for local products	Promotion of local products (2)
		Need of improving wine and food tourist offer	
Granting quality of tourist experience		Need to avoid mass tourism	Quality of tourist offer (12)
		Need of improving the quality of tourism structures	
		Need of granting a good relation between quality and price	Prices (4)
		Possibility of an agreement among restaurants for a tourist menu	
		Need of improvement of bicycle path	Tourism facilities (9)
		Need of parking area for camper vans	
		Need of periodic maintenance of trails	
		Establishment of structures for sport and leisure	
		Need to create new parking	
		Need of facilities for ski mountaineering	Training for tourism operators (6)
		Need to provide appropriate training for young people interested in working with tourism	
	Need of training on foreign languages for tourism operators		
Provide appropriate training to protected area managers and tourism operators		Need of environmental education for tourists	Environmental training and consciousness (5)
		Need of environmental education for school students	
		Need of raising awareness among tourism operators	
		Need of raising awareness among agriculture operators	
		Need of actions to create environmental awareness in the local community	
Managing visitor flows to prevent and reduce impacts	Maintaining local quality of life	Problems with maintenance of drainage system	Drainage system (2)
		Need of a good urban planning to avoid high urbanisation	Urban planning (11)
		Need to limit the building of new hospitality structures and second houses	
		Need to assign the task of urban planning to a subject apart from Municipalities (to avoid the authorization for new buildings to get tourist income in return).	
		Need of order and neatness in the territory of CMAL	Order and neatness (7)

		Need of cleaning and maintenance for the trails and for the lake	
		Problems arising from the characteristic of local road system (in general)	Mobility (25)
		Problems of congestion and safety on Statale Regina road	
		Need to improve public transport (also navigation)	
Working in partnership involving all stakeholders		Lack of cooperation among public administrations and between public administrations and local stakeholders	Cooperation (12)
		Lack of cooperation among tourism operators (need of association, brands)	
		Low attitude toward tourists	People attitude (4)
		Low level of entrepreneurship and innovation (due to commuting to Switzerland)	

**Table 2:** results of the EASW workshop

The main topics highlighted by the local community as possible concerns related to tourist development are: “mobility” (which suggests that traffic congestion could be a problem for the area and that sustainable mobility has to be promoted) and “valorisation of local strengths”, especially of natural, traditional and cultural heritage, which is linked with “environmental protection”, and testifies the consciousness, among the local community, about the importance of preserving the local heritage to ensure the sustainability over time of the entire system. Other relevant topics to be considered when defining the strategic lines of action for tourism planning are “urban planning” (the population expressed a concern about overexploitation of the territory and excessive urbanisation) and the necessity of providing appropriate “tourism facilities” (e.g. bicycle paths, trails, parking area for camper vans, structures for sport and leisure) to improve the quality of the tourist experience and to limit the impacts of tourist presence in the area, especially where the protected areas are involved. This last topic is an example of one of the issues that have been addressed both by the local community and by the tourists (see also the results of questionnaire survey to tourists in section 3.3).

### 3.2 Roundtable meetings

Table 2 illustrates the structure of the forum consultation, listing of topics discussed during the meetings, chosen according to the input coming from objective, subjective and strategic analysis and to the suggestions of the participants.

The final forum was organized to present the strategy and action plan to all the people that were involved in the roundtables, to the strategic actors at regional level and to the whole community, with the aim of collecting their feedback about planning results and of making them aware of the progress in the process and to keep their motivation alive.

ROUNDTABLE	STAKEHOLDERS	TOPICS
R 1	TOURISM OPERATORS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of natural and cultural heritage</li> <li>• Actions for environmental safeguard (renewable energy, sustainable use of water resources, soil and air)</li> <li>• Private actions for environmental conservation</li> <li>• Environmental education to tourism operators and protected area staff</li> <li>• Managing tourist flow</li> <li>• Improving the quality of tourism offer</li> <li>• Tourist promotion</li> <li>• Development of new tourism routes</li> </ul>
R 2	LOCAL DECISION MAKERS, LOCAL NGO AND OTHER ASSOCIATIONS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of natural and cultural heritage</li> <li>• Actions for environmental safeguard (energy, sustainable use of water resources, soil and air)</li> <li>• Quality of life</li> <li>• Managing tourist flow</li> <li>• Tourist promotion</li> </ul>
R 3	SCHOOLS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conservation of natural and cultural heritage</li> <li>• Environmental education for students</li> <li>• Environmental education to tourism operators</li> <li>• Development of new tourism routes for educational tourism</li> </ul>
R 4	FARMERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Valorisation of local products</li> <li>• Tourism promotion</li> </ul>
FINAL FORUM	ALL THE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Presentation and submission of the Strategy and Action</li> </ul>

	SUBJECTS INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS	Plan arising from the participated planning process; gathering of formal support for the implementation of the Action plan from the stakeholders.
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**Table 2.** structure of the forum consultation

### 3.3 Questionnaires survey results

#### 3.3.1 Questionnaires to residents

The survey involved 3% of local population (337 people interviewed). One of the first questions submitted to residents was about their knowledge about ecotourism and sustainable tourism concepts: the answers were almost equally divided between “yes” (49%) and “no” (50%). However, what is important to notice is that the concept are more familiar to people aged over 40 than to young people: this should be considered when thinking about sustainable development of the local tourist system, and might suggest to improve education about sustainable development and sustainable tourism in local schools, especially the high school for hotel and tourist managers, to ensure that the new tourists entrepreneurs in the future will foster and improve the work began with the European Charter project. The same result emerges about their personal attitude towards environmental and sustainable themes in general.

Regarding economic and social benefits coming from tourism, more than 80% of the respondents says that tourism activities have a relevant role for the local economy (54% “very important”, 33% “quite important”), even if most of them are conscious also about the negative effects that tourism generates on the area (40% of people stating that tourism brings negative effects: 14% “road traffic and pollution”, 11% “over production of waste”, 8% “disturbance”, 6% “crowding”, 1% “loss of local identity”).

The opinion of residents about the efficiency of local administrators (i.e. the local Councils and the Mountain Community) in managing the tourism system highlights some elements of satisfaction but also some concerns about their action. Considering this result, the implementation of a participatory process for tourism planning seems to be very important, as a way of promoting the dialogue and the cooperation between local administrators and the local community, with the aim of finding strategies for tourism development able to improve the quality of tourism and, at the same time, the satisfaction of residents, i.e. their attitude towards tourism activities and tourists.

Finally, the last part of the questionnaire (consisting in open questions) was about suggestions from residents to improve the fruition of the area and, more in general, to improve the quality and the performance of the local tourist system. The interviewees in their answers stressed the need to preserve the nature, landscape and cultural heritage, seen as important elements that constitute the attractiveness of the territory and also the necessity to address the problem of mobility, reducing road traffic through the improvement of public transport services, the creation of bicycle paths, etc.

#### 3.3.2 Questionnaires to tourism operators

Questionnaires were submitted to all the tourist structures of the area; with a response rate of 20%. The first part of the survey among tourism operators had the aim to integrate the information about the characteristics of the local accommodation and service system collected through institutional documents (e.g. statistics from the Provincial Tourist Office) with information about the age of the structures, the characteristics of the services offered, the connection with the territory, etc. The figures emerging from the survey describe an accommodation system composed by small structures, with few employees, often family-managed; most of the structures is open all-year, even if 86% of respondents say that most of the tourists come during the summer period. One of the strengths of the local hotel managers is the knowledge of foreign languages (70% of the structures has employees speaking at least two foreign languages), which is particularly important in Alpi Lepontine area, where about 90% of residential tourists come from outside Italy.

Starting from the high importance given by residents to the local natural and cultural heritage as a factor of attractiveness for the destination, one of the questions investigated the role of hotel managers in promoting local heritage among their guests: 52% of interviewees declared that they systematically provide tourist information to their guests and 81% of them usually inform the tourists about the local protected areas, providing maps on hiking routes, practical information about sport and recreational activities in nature, etc.

Regarding the attitude of hotel managers towards environmental and sustainability issues and the implementation of best practice to improve sustainability of the structure and to reduce water and energy consumption and waste production, 52% of the sample assessed to have implemented water and energy saving actions in the structure (especially photovoltaic panels, 36%). 81% of the tourism operators interviewed doesn't know anything about eco-labels and environmental certification for tourism sector, even if 33% declared to be interested in them.

Finally, tourism operators were asked to provide their vision about the local tourism system and their suggestions for improvement: one of the most cited issues was the necessity to improve hospitality and attitude towards tourists from the local residents, that testify a certain level of conflict between tourism activities and the local community existing in the area; other interesting issues are "keeping the family-management of the structures", which could be the sign of a willingness to preserve the destination from the exploitation of mass tourism and the "colonization" by big hotel companies coming from outside the area, and "need of training for tourism operators", that testify the will of improving their skills (and therefore the quality of the offer), to be competitive with non family-managed structures.

### *3.3.3 Questionnaires to tourists*

Questionnaires were submitted to about 40 tourists, both in the protected areas and in other tourist areas (near the lake or in the mountain). According to the results of the survey, tourists are attracted from Alpi Lepontine mainly because of the possibility to spend a relaxing holiday in contact with nature (31% indicated "landscape" and 31% "natural resources" as the main reason for choosing Alpi Lepontine as a destination); the main activities performed during the holiday are "walking in the mountain" (33%) and "visiting natural areas" (26%). Most of the tourists reach the area using their private car (81%) mainly because of the lack of appropriate public transport connections; the problem of mobility, also within the area, is one of the more critical aspects pointed out by tourists as a reason of dissatisfaction during the holiday. In contrast, one of the most appreciated aspect of the area is the quality of food in restaurants, even if 25% of tourists expressed dissatisfaction about the scarce possibility to find local food products: this is an important information for local producers, because it testifies the possibility to enlarge market share for their products. Also the opinion about hospitality structures in Alpi Lepontine is positive (90% answered "good" or "sufficient").

Some useful information to address the planning process came from a question about what tourists consider fundamental for improving the fruition of the destination; there were two major aspects emerging from the answers: the need of improving communication to tourists, both with more signals on the mountain trails and on the tourist routes and the need of increase practical information available to tourists (especially in foreign languages, due to the high percentage of foreign tourists), in order to improve their knowledge about local resources and to make them able to choose the best option for their holiday, in relation to their needs and interests.

Finally, there were some questions about the attitude of tourists towards ecotourism and sustainable tourism and the importance of adopting measures to improve sustainability of tourism structures: 66% tourists in Alpi Lepontine are familiar with the concepts of sustainable tourism and ecotourism and 56% of the interviewees declared to consider "very important" the presence of sustainable measures in the hospitality structure (the percentage rises to 64% when considering only foreign tourists). Comparing these figures with the ones about the environmental consciousness of hotel managers and their knowledge about eco-labels and environmental certifications, it is possible to highlight an example of the existing

gaps between offer and demand, that emerged from consultation and that was addressed in the definition of the strategy for sustainable tourism development.

### **3.4 Strategic lines of action**

Considering the outcomes of the participatory planning process, it was possible to identify some relevant issues that are the most strategic and commonly shared lines of action for local sustainable development, focusing on sustainable tourism and environmental conservation, as stated by the European Charter.

Main project fields can briefly summarised as follow:

- Promotion of a cultural route developed along Via Regina (the main road, which has historical origins and links all the communities in the area) and in connection with the Territorial Museum System (network of local museums). **Historic and cultural routes**, valorised also by literary awards inspired to the poetry of Antonio Fogazzaro and to the sites of his dwelling place. These routes could help to develop **educational tourism**, with the aim of deseasonalizing the tourism flow in area and of raising awareness about the heritage of Alpi Lepontine among local school and local people.
- A “fil rouge” of a project linking Alpi Lepontine and Canton Ticino (in Switzerland), to which the area borders on, through tourist routes of **sustainable mobility**:
  - a. bike tourism. In the territory of CMAL the bicycle path, for tourism and leisure purpose, follow the track of an ancient and dismissed railway and is a way to connect the three lakes (Como, Piano and Lugano). Currently, the bicycle path is from Grandola to Porlezza; the next step will be the extension till Menaggio and then the connection with Swiss bike path network. There is also a new project, promoted by ASL (local sanitary agency), to create “Open air itineraries”, including also the bicycle path;
  - b. promotion of transnational mountain trails between Italy and Switzerland in protected areas. There are some trails already existing, e.g. Via del Ferro.
  - c. improvement of navigation service on Lugano lake to link the two sides of the lake. The first target is to assure a boat service to the village of S. Margherita (today accessible only by private boats or by foot) and then to restore the cable railway to Intelvi valley. Moreover, a good boat service on Lugano lake, added to the new part of the bicycle path, would allow bikers from Ticino to reach the bicycle path in Porlezza by boat, then going to Menaggio by bike and then reaching by boat (on Como lake) the bicycle path in Bellagio or the one planned from Varenna to Lecco.
- Valorisation of **local products**. One of the most important tasks for the sustainable development of Alpi Lepontine is the creation of a short weaving factory and the valorisation of local food products. The most relevant action in this field is the restoration of the ancient “crotto” of Castel S. Pietro, a building located along the bicycle path, which will become the central office for promotion of local food products; this action will be undertaken by the Mountain Community in cooperation with the local school for hotel and tourism managers. Furthermore, some other activities to promote local products will be organised and extended in the whole territory: the annual event called “Traditional flavours of the two lakes: Como and Ceresio” and a new event as a “Fair of local crafts”, to support the discovery of traditions and to promote local handcraft.
- The combination of tourist activities and environmental conservation, achieved through the development of **guest hospitality** (a system of small existing structures, like b&b rooms, agritourism and second houses, with a unique reception system); these action, that include also the restoration of vernacular buildings, both public and private, to create an offer of charming hospitality structures and the identification of adequate structure to host organized groups of tourists, has the aim of avoiding the construction of new buildings and to prevent the extreme urbanisation of the area.

Besides, the Mountain Community will promote the diffusion of **Ecolabel for existing hospitality structures**.

- **Environmental conservation**, both in protected areas and in the whole territory, with a special attention for biodiversity conservation and the maintenance of mountain trails (with the aim to set clear routes to orientate tourists and avoid uncontrolled impacts on the whole area). It is also foreseen the development of an Informative System to integrate environmental, managing and infrastructural aspects and make them available for the planning of local tourism development.
- Specific projects about **renewable energy** and **energy saving**, with particular reference to accommodation structures.
- **Communication campaigns** to improve information and promotion of the area, especially for foreign tourists: creation of web sites, multilingual leaflets and signals, integration and diffusion of existing information.
- Organization of events linking **sport and environment**, to promote new tourism products related to nature and protected areas, in an “environmentally friendly” way.

Furthermore, all the actions will be developed with special attention to the definition of path that can ensure the fruition also for peculiar categories of users (old-aged people, people with disabilities).

### **3.5 The Action Plan**

The Strategy for sustainable tourism development in Alpi Lepontine includes an Action Plan for the period 2008-2012, consisting in more than 100 actions, equally distributed during the five years. The actions planned refers to all the 8 areas of intervention designed by the European Charter principles and are designed to address the strategic lines of action identified in the Strategy. The stakeholders that ensured their commitment for the implementation of the action plan are more than 30 (including local councils, agencies for environmental protection, tourism entrepreneurs, associations for the promotion of local traditions and NGOs), and constitute the core group of a wider network of actors, involved in the sustainable tourism development of the area

### **3.6 The outcomes so far**

Alpi Lepontine is currently in the second year of implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan and about 70% of actions planned for the first year (2008) has been put into operation; some of the action planned has not been yet realized because of various factors such as unavailability of sufficient funds and delay in administrative procedures (e.g. authorization for building activities), and their implementation will be shifted in 2009-2010.

However, what is more important about the outcomes of the project is that the work done together by all the public and private stakeholders involved in the process helped them to establish a long-lasting cooperation for the development of the territory, that is resulting in new operational projects for the implementation of the Strategy. Alpi Lepontine Mountain Community is now involved in two important projects for sustainable local development: the first one is an INTERREG project with Switzerland and the other one is an integrated project for sustainable local development of the whole provincial area, involving local, provincial and regional actors. Thank to this two projects, Alpi Lepontine is enlarging the network of actors involved in local development processes and will be able to implement the Action Plan set for 2008-2012.

## **4 Conclusions**

The methodology designed for the European Charter implementation in Alpi Lepontine, that integrates stakeholders involvement with scientific assessment, helped to develop an information flow among experts, institutions and the local community, that, starting from the existing knowledge about the area, integrated with objective and strategic analysis done by

experts and stakeholder consultation, led to a common vision about local sustainable tourism development. This vision constituted the basis for the planning activities and helped to identify local priorities for the policy agenda, and, subsequently, the definition of a commonly shared Strategy and Action Plan involving a panel of actors, both public and private bodies, that are formally committed to its implementation. The Action Plan is likely to be implemented successfully because of the fact that it comes from the contribution of relevant actors of the area and that each action has been carefully designed, identifying the proper responsible subject source of funding. This aspect represents a first positive outcome of the stakeholder involvement, granting a higher commitment of local actors in respect to a top-down strategy developed only by local institutions.

Even if it is rather difficult to measure the value added by participatory processes to local planning, it can be argued that in Alpi Lepontine case study there are some evidence of the positive influence of stakeholders involvement in the European Charter process. Firstly, this experience helped to create a partnership that will constitute the basis for further cooperation in the realization of actions for local sustainable development (as it is already happening with the two projects presented in section 3.6); secondly, local actors are more likely to share responsibilities and actively participate to the actions for local development, because this activities go in the direction of what they suggested as more relevant for local development. Moreover, the active involvement of local entrepreneurs, especially in tourism sector, could help to promote local economic development (i.e. to avoid depopulation of the areas due to unemployment) and to prevent mass tourism exploitation by big foreign companies, that often don't provide any economic revenue to the local community and that can be less interested in preserving the local heritage and environment, due to the fact that, if the area becomes unattractive, they can move to another one. In this context, the integration of a subjective and a strategic analysis allows to identify relevant issues able to strengthen the relationship between internal (local managers etc) and external actors. The European Charter audit scheduled for 2012 defines a temporal target for the implementation and provides an occasion for a more detailed evaluation of the process outcomes: Europarc will verify that the actions has been effectively implemented and that the cooperation between stakeholders is still alive and proactive in fostering and renewing the Strategy objectives. Furthermore, the project team planned to renew the assessment of some of the sustainability indicators developed for the objective evaluation made at the beginning of the process (Tourism Carrying Capacity and Sustainable Performance Index, see Castellani et al, 2007 and Castellani et al, 2009 for details) in order evaluate the changes in the situation and to measure the effects of the actions implemented.

## **5 Acknowledgments**

The Authors would like to thank Dr Marcheggiani from Polytechnic University of Marche for processing the results of questionnaires surveys to residents and tourists and Lombardy Region for funding the activities.

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