

IMPACTOUR ReDiscover Europe Workshop (Europe Day, 9 May 2021)

Consensus: concluding declaration

Tourism, and in particular Cultural Tourism, was a growing sector, with 15% of annual growth and employing one out of ten people all around the world, until COVID-19 suddenly struck every sector in the global ecosystem. However, this was not the first time the tourism sector had been adversely affected. One can recall the 9/11 attacks, the SARS pandemic or the 2009 global economic crisis where tourism sector always managed to come back stronger and healthier. It always managed to recover by being resilient, optimistic, daring and innovative.

Suddenly, the whole world went from an ‘over tourism’ condition to a ‘no tourism’ state... Now is the time to evolve towards a sustainable tourism situation. It is the time to promote a circular economy in touristic destinations, moving away from “take-make-disposal” models towards waste reducing and recycling models, locally reinvesting tourism revenues. The challenge of recovery is an opportunity to reset our defaults: we (all together) must rethink and adopt a communities-centric approach built on visitors-locals relationships and responsible infrastructure. In the future paradigm relationships between visitors and locals will be far more important, and those relations start long before the actual visit...and hopefully will endure in time...

During the crisis, 90% of countries fully or partially closed down their UNESCO World Heritage properties, cutting off a major source of their income and revenue. Mechtild Rössler, Director of the UNESCO World Heritage Centre said in her keynote address, ‘The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on cultural tourism in Europe has been unprecedented. New models and approaches are required for a resilient and sustainable tourism recovery that supports communities, creates jobs, promotes culture, and protects heritage and its transmission.’

Culture has been known to be, at the same time, a driver and an enabler for sustainable development. For its cultural richness, this is particularly true in Europe, whether one considers global or local ecosystems. This most treasured resource is of utmost importance for the sustainable development of education, economy and tourism. Cultural Tourism emerges as the key driver to merge development, growth and protection of Cultural Heritage, whilst bringing a new local communities-centric approach. Every sustainable action should ensure good conservation practices, trustworthy heritage benefits and local economic support.

Cultural tourism sites are undergoing many existential threats, such as increased risk of looting and vandalism, business closure, lack of confidence, travel restrictions, economic recession and huge uncertainty about the future. In order to become resilient and sustainable, the Cultural Tourism sector must put its efforts into environmental conservation and development, reconstruction of degraded sites, responsible traveling and local communities’ engagement.

As local communities are the primary beneficiaries of sustainable Cultural Tourism, it is of utmost important to developed their sense of natural and cultural pride, being themselves, not copying others.

The International Monetary Fund expects a 6% recovery following the pandemic, after experienced a 3% downgrade. This recovery is already occurring locally. It should be noticed that, even before COVID-19 pandemic, domestic tourism was six times larger than international tourism. The Cultural Tourism ecosystem must be prepared to catch up with the economic recovery, supported by three fundamental pillars, as addressed on the IMPACTOUR Re-Discover Europe Workshop: data, people and technology.

Data and the use of data is fundamental to improving information quality and exchange between sectors and between stakeholders inside the Cultural Tourism ecosystem. The information that can be extracted from so-called ‘smart’ data is of fundamental importance when evolving towards a collaborative economy framework. Multisector and multidisciplinary approaches involving local communities (Cultural Tourism providers), users (tourists) and connection intermediaries (digital platforms) are vital, enabling every decision to be supported by recorded evidence and analysis of good practices.

Local communities, in particular local SMEs, cooperatives or CCIs (Cultural and Creative Industries), can act as incubator sites of people-centric innovation and Cultural Tourism entrepreneurship. Acting locally and thinking globally they will engage all in society – children and young people, women, senior community members and minorities – in order to reach out to new markets and tourists, creating new emotional bonds strongly founded on local cultural roots. This brand-new generation of entrepreneurs, based on resilient lifelong learning strategies, should be strongly supported by time-deep knowledge and cutting-edge technologies. Deep respect and engagement of local communities is of utmost importance because they can act as unique incubators of accessible people-centric innovation within Cultural Tourism, moving forward towards social inclusion and cohesion, thus promoting shared identity and unity.

The pandemic has increased, to levels never conceived before, the use of digital tools. Multidisciplinary approaches are needed in order to make digital Cultural Tourism an attractive and sustainable activity, providing tourists with new experiences, urging them to visit the sites and providing benefits by engaging positively with local communities and stakeholders. Cross-sectoral decision-making platforms, such as the envisaged IMPACTOUR Tool, will play a fundamental role in future business models.

Digital transformation is the basis for a new diversity paradigm, where new offers and markets will come into place. Cultural Tourism new markets and new tourist profiles will undoubtedly consider new indicators where quality outperforms quantity. Often forgotten, accessibility issues will provide huge benefits for the Cultural Tourism ecosystem.

The three themes of the 2021 Europe Day workshop concluded:

- Data: the world is emerging smarter from COVID – no longer growth at any price; tourists are more informed before travelling; tourism should no longer be consumption but considerate;
- People: tourists are more holistic in their awareness of communities and climate impact; expectations of accessibility in all stages of tourism experiences are more holistic and inclusive; domestic tourism will feature more strongly in the road to recovery and future patterns of life;
- Technology: the legacy of COVID will be hybrid visits – digital complementing reality; dynamic management of capacity (quantitative) will enhance experiences (qualitative) for visitors and host communities.

This is no time for nuances. The IMPACTOUR partners and workshop participants have expressed a commitment to be optimistic, daring and innovative, to Rediscover Europe and to rethink Cultural Tourism, working towards a more resilient and sustainable future.

For the RECOVERY of Europe, cooperation of all of us is needed because we are #StrongerTogether and #UnitedInDiversity.

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