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TOURAL

Multidimensional model of tourism verticals driving the sustainable balanced growth among rural & remote grids and urban clusters of rural regions, fostering macro-regional cooperation

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This deliverable is the Report policy pathways for TOURAL regions and macro-regions. The report describes a pathway approach for TOURAL Project Regions & Macro-Regions/Sea-Basins and proposes 1 policy pathway per TOURAL macro-region.
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Executive Summary

The present document is the **deliverable D2.2 "*Policy Pathways for TOURAL Regions & Macro-Regions*"** of the TOURAL project, funded by the European Commission's European Research Executive Agency, under its HORIZON Coordination and Support Actions programme.

The main objective of this document is to provide a report on a **structured approach** which should lead Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and the Black Sea Basin to the implementation of the best policies interventions and the best scenarios for the promotion of sustainable tourism in rural destinations, leveraging existing strengths while addressing critical gaps.

The deliverable D2.2 builds on insights developed in WP2 deliverables D2.1 *Identified Good CCT Practices & Stakeholders Cooperation Level in Adrion & Black Sea* and D2.5 *Preliminary Analysis of TOURAL Co-"Work" Processes*, as well as in the **co-work processes** adopted in **T2.3** for the Living Labs, and in **WP3 deliverable D3.1 *TOURAL UCCST Models***.

Particularly, based on the inputs from Tasks 2.1, 2.5 and 3.1, D2.2 proposes a policy-pathway for each TOURAL UCCST destination (pilot-site level) following the "co-work" methodology and processes provided by Task 2.3 and consolidates them at the level of **1 policy-pathway for the Adriatic Ionian Macro-region** and **1 policy pathway for the Black Sea Basin**.

Offering a clear step-by-step approach and identifying policy pathways, this deliverable will serve as a guiding document for policymakers, regional tourism authorities and other stakeholders to effectively support policy transitions in rural tourism for achieving a balanced tourism growth.

Moreover, the policy pathways established in D2.2 can provide essential guidance for designing and optimizing the UCCST model foreseen in WP3, by addressing key regional challenges, and also can impact WP4 by providing policy-based strategic direction for rural tourism business modelling and product development. Thus, D2.2 acts as a bridge between policy strategy and practical implementation across TOURAL work packages.

1. Introduction

TOURAL project proposes a model to support the touristic development of rural regions, balancing the growth of urban clusters with the untapped growth potential of remote and rural grid cells. It focuses on a multidimensional approach in terms of addressing the following complementary tourism verticals/niche sectors in rural and remote areas of Adriatic-Ionian and Black Sea areas:

- underwater (UW)
- cultural & nature heritage tourism (UCNHT)
- cultural & creative tourism (CCT)
- cultural science tourism (CST)
- silver tourism (SLT).

TOURAL's scope of interventions includes 3 regions from the Adriatic-Ionian macro-region (Italy, Croatia, Greece), and 3 regions from the Black Sea Basin (Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine).

One of the core objectives of TOURAL project is to design a **policy-pathway** for each **TOURAL UCCST destination**, following a **policy co-design process** with an **integrated role of local stakeholders and communities**.

Pillars for fostering UCCST Tourism in TOURAL Rural Regions are:

a) Synergizing **Smart Specialization**[1] and **Circular Economy**[2] to move towards a dual green and digital transition of tourism sector in TOURAL regions;
b) Fostering **multi-level cooperation** aimed at both expanding links among more developed touristic hubs and less touristic rural grids within TOURAL project regions and developing joint strategies at macro-regional level to create multi-destination UCCST tourism offerings;
c) Implementing **policy-driven interventions at tourism hub arrival points of major tourism destinations** to incentivize tourists to explore the multi-destination UCSST tourism offerings of TOURAL rural regions and the broader macro-region;
d) Implementing measures to **strategically promote less touristic UCCST destinations**.

Through a "policy pathway" approach, the goal of the deliverable 2.2 is to design **an adaptive roadmap for achieving the goal of fostering sustainable rural tourism by driving policy change**. This involves raising awareness, leveraging economic, social, and environmental opportunities, and encouraging collaboration among stakeholders. Recognizing that "one-size-fits-all" solutions are ineffective, this approach emphasizes context-specific pathways tailored to the unique characteristics, challenges, and opportunities of each region.

1.1. Deliverable Scope

The deliverable D2.2 Policy Pathways for TOURAL Regions & Macro-Regions is a report which describes a pathway approach for TOURAL Project Regions & Macro-Regions/Sea-Basins.

The purpose of D2.2 is to identify the main steps needed to allow a change of policies for the development of rural sustainable tourism.

Starting from inputs from other WPs' activities (mainly WP2, WP3 andWP6), D2.2 identifies a structured and iterative process for a pathway approach which should lead TOURAL regions to the implementation of the best policies interventions and the best scenarios for the promotion of sustainable tourism in rural destinations. Particularly, based on the inputs from Task 2.1, D2.2 proposes a policy-pathway for each TOURAL UCCST destination (pilot level) following the "co-work" methodology and processes provided by Task 2.3 and consolidates them at the level of 1 policy-pathway for the Adriatic Ionian Macro-region and 1 policy pathway for the Black Sea Basin.

[1] In 2010, the European Commission called on national and regional governments to develop Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) for research and innovation (R&I) to encourage all European regions to discover their competitive advantage. With Smart Specialisation, research and innovation are mainstreamed -for the first time as tools for regional development.
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/s3-community-of-practice/about_en

[2] CEAP is the EU's new circular action plan which paves the way for a cleaner and more competitive Europe.
The European Commission adopted the new circular economy action plan (CEAP) in March 2020. It is one of the main building blocks of the European Green Deal, Europe's new agenda for sustainable growth. The EU's transition to a circular economy will reduce pressure on natural resources and will create sustainable growth and jobs. It is also a prerequisite to achieve the EU's 2050 climate neutrality target and to halt biodiversity loss.
The new action plan announces initiatives along the entire life cycle of products. It targets how products are designed, promotes circular economy processes, encourages sustainable consumption, and aims to ensure that waste is prevented and the resources used are kept in the EU economy for as long as possible.

1.2. Deliverable Structure

The deliverable D2.2 "*Policy Pathways for TOURAL Regions & Macro-Regions*" consists of four chapters:
Chapter 1 includes deliverable scope and deliverable structure.
Chapter 2 presents the methodology used in creation of the document derived from the relations with other tasks and deliverables.
Chapter 3 presents the proposed structured and iterative process for the TOURAL Policy Pathway.
Chapter 4 summarizes the document in a common conclusion.

2. Relations with other tasks and deliverables

The approach adopted for authoring the report on policy pathways for TOURAL regions and macro-regions is based on the interconnections with other WPs, tasks and deliverables.

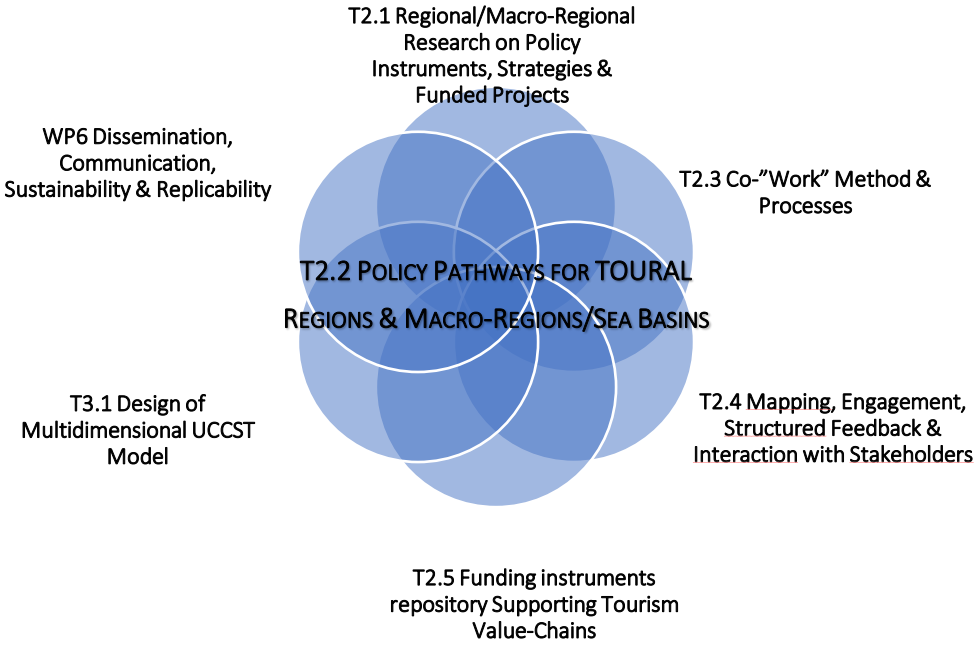


Figure 1 - TASK 2.2 INTERCONNECTIONS WITH OTHER WPS, TASK AND DELIVERABLES

As the purpose of the report is to map out the necessary steps for a future, context-aware policy shift towards sustainable rural tourism in TOURAL rural areas, a step-bystep approach has been adopted focusing on understanding the current policy landscape, identifying barriers and opportunities for change, and outlining the key steps for a successful transition towards sustainable rural tourism development.
This approach, builds on insights developed in WP2 deliverables D2.1 *Identified Good CCT Practices & Stakeholders Cooperation Level in Adrion & Black Sea* and D2.5 *Preliminary Analysis of TOURAL Co-"Work" Processes*, as well as in the co-work processes adopted in T2.3 for the Living Labs, and in WP3 deliverable D3.1 *TOURAL UCCST Models*. The approach, based on the interconnections among *T2.1 Regional/Macro-Regional Research on Policy Instruments, Strategies & Funded Projects*, *T2.3 Co-"Work" Method & Processes*, *T2.4 Mapping, Engagement, Structured Feedback & Interaction with Stakeholders*, *T2.5 Funding instruments repository Supporting Tourism Value-Chains*, *T3.1 Design of Multidimensional UCCST Model*, aims at supporting both strategic thinking and practical implementation at local and regional levels.

2.1. Methodology

The **methodology** adopted for authoring this deliverable was based on a two-pronged approach: **comprehensive desk research** and **targeted consultation with project partners**.
The desk research involved a systematic review of existing literature, relevant policy documents, statistical data, and previous project deliverables, in order to establish a robust foundational understanding of the subject matter. Then in-depth consultations with project partners, conducted through dedicated online meetings, has served to validate initial findings, gather more detailed information and ensure the report accurately reflects the collective knowledge of the consortium and TOURAL project objectives.
The integration of findings from both the desk research and partners consultation has ensured an evidence-based and collaboratively informed report.
The key findings, policy pathways and recommentations deriving from the above described methodology will serve as inputs for other TOURAL work packages, namely they can be used as a guidance for UCCST model design (WP3) and business strategies development (WP4).

The following figure describes the steps taken in authoring D.2.2:

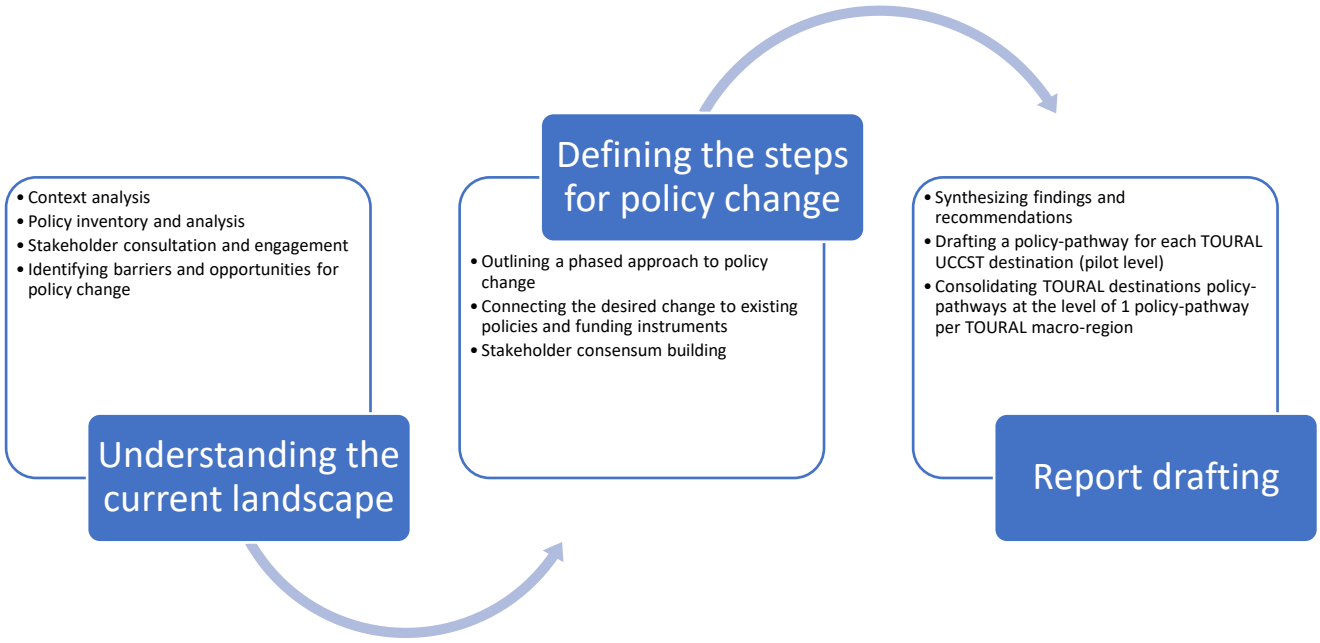


Figure 2 - VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF THE STEPS TAKEN IN AUTHORING THE REPORT ON POLICY PATHWAYS FOR TOURAL REGIONS AND MACRO-REGIONS

3. TOURAL POLICY PATHWAY

A **POLICY PATHWAY** refers to a sequence of strategic decisions, actions, and interventions taken over time to achieve specific policy goals. It's not just a single policy, but rather a planned progression of steps that adapt to changing circumstances and address potential obstacles along the way[3] [4].

A policy pathway can be described as a series of interconnected, adaptable, and strategic actions aimed at achieving specific objectives within defined timelines and involving multiple facets.

The following figure illustrates the key characteristics of an effective policy pathway.

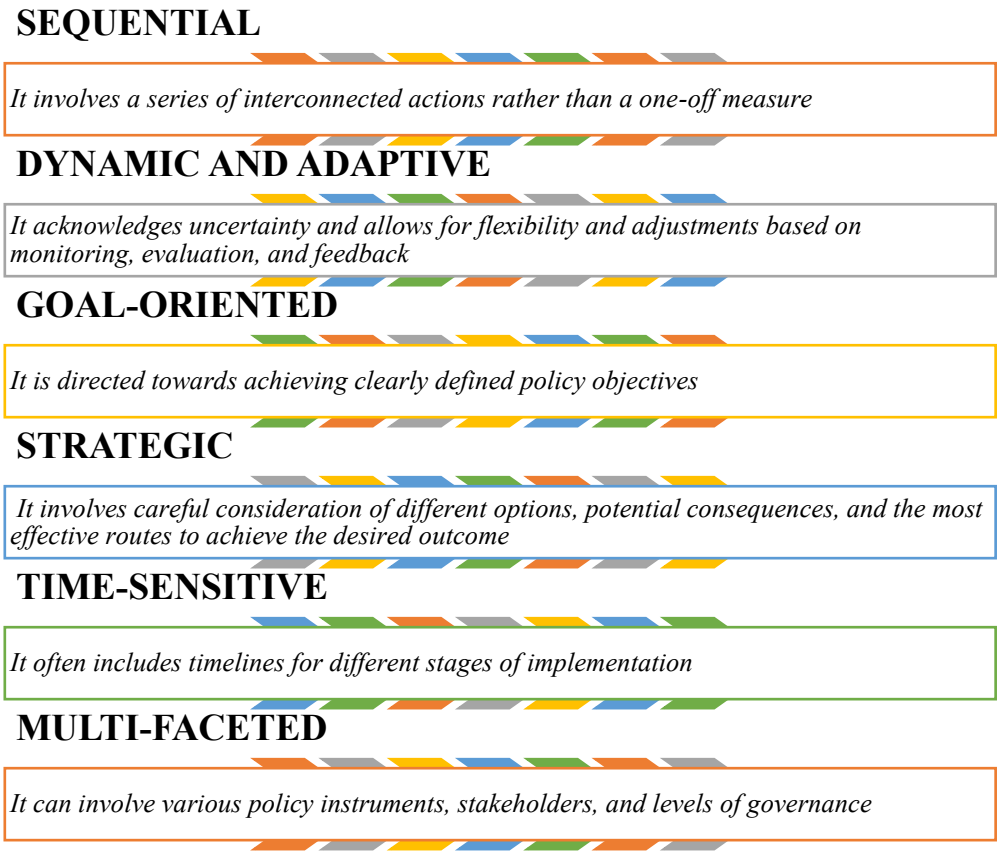


Figure 3 - KEY CHARACHTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE POLICY PATHWAY

[3] Bill Bramwell and Bernard Lane - Critical research on the governance of tourism and sustainability https://dacemirror.sci-hub.st/journal-article/71f8de368fbd74c38d0535e77cf96e51/bramwell2011.pdf
[4] Richard Sharpley and Lesley Roberts - Rural Tourism — 10 Years On
https://pages.mtu.edu/~asmayer/rural_sustain/rural_tourism/1_Sharpley%20&%20Roberts.pdf

The following table outlines a structured approach to developing a policy pathway, breaking down the process into three main phases; each phase involves specific steps designed to ensure a well-informed, effective and widely supported policy.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT ANALYSIS	**Define the Goal**: clearly identify the desired policy outcomes;
	Assess the Current Situation: deeply analyze the existing conditions, challenges, and resources available (e.g. data collection, stakeholder consultations, identification of gaps or barriers);
2. PATHWAY DEVELOPMENT	**Set Targets**: break the long-term goal into measurable short-term and medium-term targets to track progress over time;
	Develop Policy Instruments: identify tools and measures to implement the pathway (e.g. regulations, incentives, education programs, infrastructure development, etc.);
	Engage Stakeholders: collaborate with key stakeholders (e.g. government bodies, industry players, civil society, etc.) to ensure the pathway is inclusive and widely supported;
	Model and Evaluate Options: use scenario analysis or modeling to test different approaches and predict their outcomes;
3. DISSEMINATION	**Sharing knowledge**: disseminate and share lessons learned and best practices with other regions;

Table 1 - POLICY PATHWAYS STRUCTURED APPROACH – MAIN PHASES

What are the expected outcomes of a policy pathway?

The Policy Pathway approach is expected to lead to:

- ✓ Improved policy frameworks
- ✓ Increased stakeholder engagement
- ✓ Enhanced access to funding and resources
- ✓ Strengthened infrastructure and services
- ✓ Increased economic benefits

Checklist for creating a Policy Pathway

The following checklist is intended to be as a step-by-step guide for designing and implementing policy pathways for sustainable regional development. It is a concise and practical tool for policymakers to replicate the policy pathway model in general contexts.

PHASE 1 — Problem Definition & Context Analysis

Goal: Understand where you are and what needs to change.

1. **Define the Policy Objective**
   - Identify the ultimate goal (e.g., sustainable rural tourism, energy transition, social innovation).
   - Clarify expected outcomes and beneficiaries.
2. **Analyze the Current Context**
   - Gather data on social, economic, environmental, and institutional conditions.

- Identify gaps, barriers, and existing policy instruments.
- Map strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT/PESTLE).

3. **Engage Stakeholders Early**
   - Identify key actors: public authorities, businesses, academia, civil society, and communities.
   - Conduct consultations, interviews, or workshops to collect insights.
   - Establish a co-design or "Living Lab" approach.
4. **Diagnose Policy Gaps**
   - Examine existing frameworks, regulations, and strategies.
   - Identify duplication, inconsistencies, or missing connections between policies.

PHASE 2 — Pathway Development

Goal: Design a roadmap for achieving policy transformation.

5. **Set Targets and Milestones**
   - Break the long-term vision into short-term and medium-term measurable goals.
   - Ensure targets align with local, regional, and macro-regional strategies.
6. **Develop Policy Instruments**
   - Define concrete measures (e.g., incentives, training, digital tools, infrastructure investment).
   - Choose appropriate regulatory, financial, and educational mechanisms.
   - Integrate sustainability, inclusiveness, and innovation principles.
7. **Model and Test Options**
   - Use scenario analysis to evaluate potential outcomes.
   - Test policy combinations in pilot projects or simulations.
   - Adapt policies based on evidence from real-world testing (e.g., TOURAL pilot sites).
8. **Build Cooperation Networks**
   - Create mechanisms for public–private partnerships and multi-level governance.
   - Encourage interregional and cross-sector collaboration.
   - Formalize partnerships through agreements, MOUs, or joint action plans.
9. **Mobilize Funding**
   - Identify relevant financial instruments (EU, national, regional, private).
   - Align pathway actions with available funding programs.
   - Develop resource mobilization plans and timelines.

PHASE 3 — Dissemination & Implementation

Goal: Put the pathway into practice and ensure long-term impact.

10. **Implement Policy Actions**
    - Translate plans into operational measures.
    - Assign clear responsibilities to stakeholders.
    - Ensure monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are in place.
11. **Monitor Progress & Adapt**
    - Track performance indicators at each milestone.
    - Use feedback loops to refine actions and respond to new challenges.
    - Ensure continuous learning and policy adaptation.
12. **Disseminate Results**
    - Share lessons learned, best practices, and success stories.
    - Promote knowledge exchange across regions and policy levels.
    - Encourage replication through toolkits, workshops, and networks.
13. **Institutionalize the Pathway**
    - Integrate successful policy innovations into formal planning or legal frameworks.

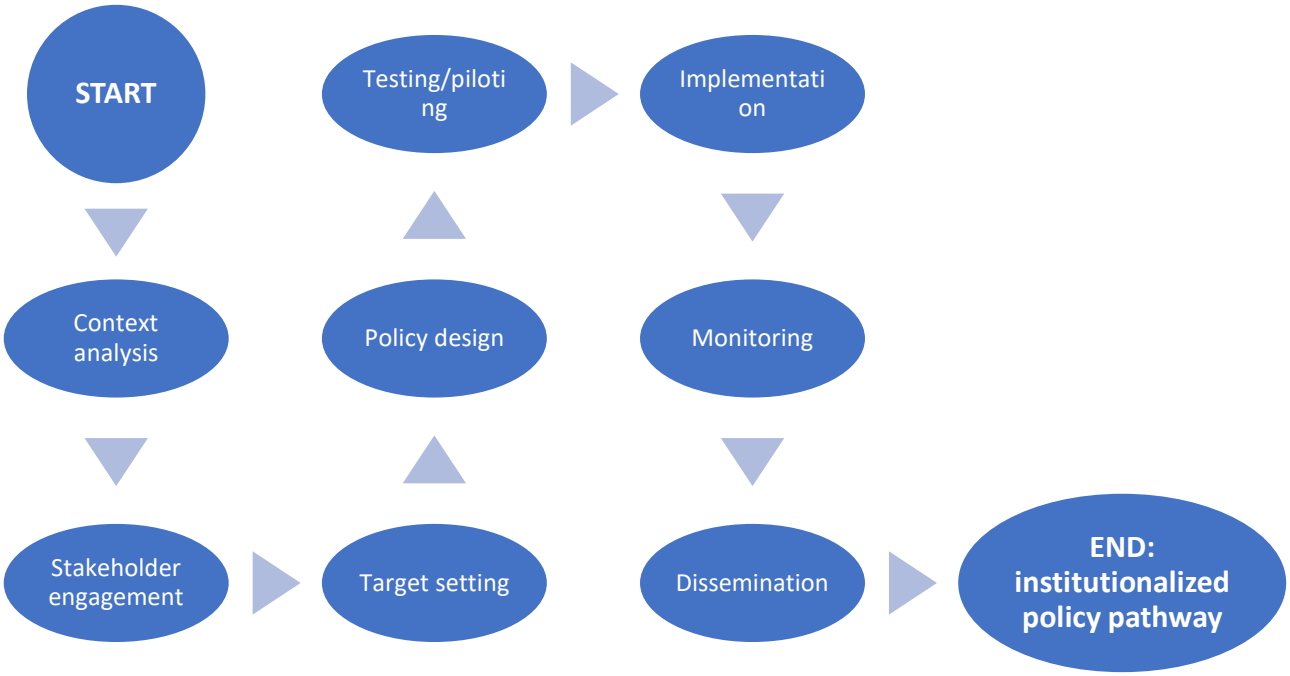
- Secure political commitment for long-term sustainability.

Final Output

A completed policy pathway should include:

- *Clear objectives and indicators*
- *Evidence-based context analysis*
- *Defined stakeholder roles*
- *Action plan with milestones*
- *Monitoring and evaluation framework*
- *Communication and dissemination plan*

Summary Flow



3.1. Why a policy pathway approach for TOURAL destination?

The development of rural tourism faces numerous challenges[5], many of which are a result of the lack of coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders and governmental bodies. One significant obstacle is the absence of intersectoral cooperation between all the entities and subjects responsible for the creation of a thriving environment for rural tourism development. Different stakeholders and policy makers often have divergent agendas and priorities, leading to fragmented efforts and inefficiencies in resource allocation. Without complementarity, knowledge,as well as cohesive collaboration, initiatives to support rural tourism may lack the necessary synergy to address complex challenges effectively. This lack of alignment results in duplicative efforts, conflicting policies, and missed opportunities for integrated planning and implementation

[5] Putu Devi Rosalina, Karine Dupre, Ying Wang - Rural tourism: A systematic literature review on definitions and challenges https://nscpolteksby.ac.id/ebook/files/Ebook/Journal%20International/Jurnal%20Tourism/Journal%20of%20Hospitality%20and%20Tourism%20Management/Volume%2047%2C%20June%202021%2C%20Pages%20134-149.pdf

Assuming that the **development of rural sustainable tourism is closely linked to the change of policies**[6], a pathway approach within the TOURAL project is the right choice to lead to the **implementation of the best policies interventions and the best scenarios in the context of each TOURAL UCCST destinations**.
A pathway approach is a way of thinking about and addressing complex issues by focusing on the sequence of steps, actions, or decisions that lead to a particular outcome or goal. It can be applied to different contexts and scenarios and its methodology helps to:

- Understand the steps involved in a complex process;
- Identify key decision points and potential leverage points for intervention;
- Anticipate potential challenges and opportunities along the way;
- Develop strategies that are sensitive to the dynamic nature of the issue.

Promoting sustainable tourism in rural destinations through a pathway approach involves a **structured methodology** aimed at balancing economic growth, environmental preservation, and cultural heritage.
The TOURAL Policy Pathway should start from the following questions:

- *What strategies can be used to promote sustainable tourism in TOURAL UCCST destinations?*
- *What policies can be implemented to support transformation toward sustainable rural tourism development?*
- *What are the potentials and best-case scenarios for sustainable rural tourism development?*

By adopting a pathway approach, destinations can move beyond ad-hoc initiatives and develop a coherent and strategic framework for achieving truly sustainable tourism that benefits both visitors and local communities while safeguarding the environment and cultural heritage for future generations. A pathway approach for TOURAL UCCST destinations would involve considering the unique natural and cultural assets of the region, the needs of the local population, and the potential for tourism to contribute to the area's long-term well-being in a responsible manner.

Proposed structured, iterative process for the TOURAL Policy Pathway
The following chart visually explains the main steps of the adaptive roadmap to achieve a policy change in TOURAL areas. More details are illustrated in the following paragraph:

Figure 4 - ITERATIVE PROCESS FOR THE TOURAL POLICY PATHWAY

[6] Lenka Soták-Benedeková, Jana Rybárová, Dana Tometzová, Andrea Seňová and Radim Rybár - Comprehensive Analysis of Rural Tourism Development: Historical Evolution, Current Trends, and Future Prospects https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/17/3/1045

3.2. PHASE 1 - TOURAL regions specific context analysis

The development of policies aimed at promoting sustainable rural tourism often suffers from a lack of quality statistical data. Effective policymaking requires accurate information and analysis to identify trends, assess needs, and evaluate the impact of interventions. [7] [8] Without robust data, policymakers may struggle to develop targeted strategies and allocate resources efficiently, obstructing the advancement of rural tourism initiatives. Therefore, in order to develop the pathway, an in-depth context analysis should be conducted.
2021 Eurobarometer Report[9] on attitudes of EU citizens towards tourism shows that the three most important factors influencing travel destination choices are the '*cultural offerings at the destination*' (44%), followed by '*natural environment in the destination*' and the '*the price of the overall trip*' (both 43%). All other answers have a significantly lower percentage. A socio-demographic analysis of the responses to this question showed that respondents' age is related to their reasons for choosing a destination to visit. The main differences are observed between the 15-24 age group, on the one hand, and the three older age groups, on the other hand. For respondents aged 15-24, the natural environment is on average a less important aspect when choosing a destination compared to older age groups – 36% of the youngest group mention this factor, compared to 43–44% among older respondents. In contrast,, the price of the trip is a much more important aspect for the youngest respondents, especially when compared to those aged 55 and over, 54% of those aged 15-24 mention this aspect, compared to 35% of those aged 55 and over. Similarly, 'activities available at the destination' are more important to younger respondents. 40% of those aged 15–24 consider this aspect important, compared to only 23% of those aged 55 and over.

The same research showed that large majority of EU citizens (82%) say they are prepared to change at least some of their travel and tourism habits to be more sustainable, and 15% say they are not prepared to do so. Socio-demographic analysis shows that, compared to their male counterparts, female respondents are somewhat more willing to change their travel and tourism habits to be more sustainable by taking the various actions described. For example, 58% of female respondents are ready to consume locally sourced products on holiday, compared to 53% of male respondents. And 37% of women are prepared to choose transport options based on ecological impact, compared to 34% of men. In line with these results, male respondents are more likely than female respondents to say that they are not prepared to change any of their travel and tourism habits (16% vs 13%). Compared to their younger peers, older respondents are less prepared to change their travel and tourism habits to be more sustainable. Among those aged 55 and over, 18% say that they are not prepared to adjust their travel and tourism habits, compared to 15% of those aged 40-54 and 11% of both those aged 15-24 or 25-39. Correspondingly, younger respondents are more willing to take most types of actions. For example, 41% of those aged 15-25 and 39% of those aged 26-39 are prepared to choose transport options based on ecological impact, compared to 34% of those aged 40-54 and 32% of those aged 55 and over.

As for rural tourism, rural areas have for many years enjoyed considerable popularity among tourists in the EU. Although rural tourism declined significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, it regained its popularity quite quickly[10]. Moreover, up to 2016 the number of nights spent at tourist accommodation in rural areas surpassed the number of stays in cities, as well as in towns and suburbs. As data in the figure below shows, the impact of COVID-19, although visible by the drop in the number of visitors, was less significant than in urban areas. Rural areas seem to be recovering quicker, attracting higher numbers of visitors (also in the post-pandemic period), proving the resilience of the rural tourism sector.

[7] Wookhyun An, Silverio Alarcón - How Can Rural Tourism Be Sustainable? A Systematic Review -https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/18/7758
[8] OECD Tourism Trends and Policies 2024 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-tourism-trends-and-policies-2024_80885d8b-en.html
[9] European Commission (2021) Flash Eurobarometer 499 – Attitudes of Europeans towards tourism https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2283
[10] UN Tourism (2023). International Tourism Highlights, 2023 Edition

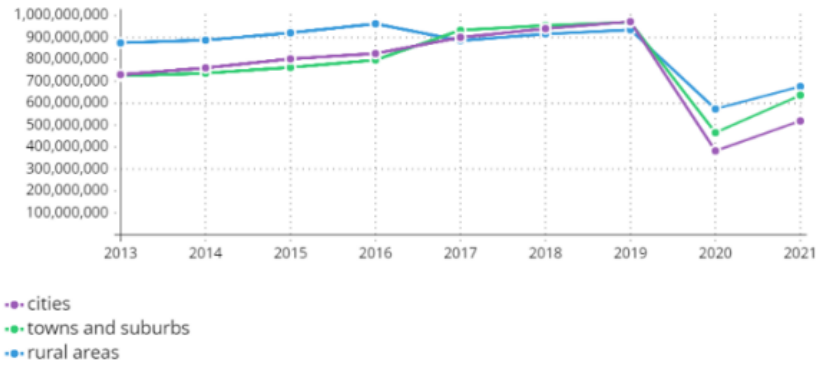


Figure 5 - NIGHTS SPENT AT TOURIST ACCOMMODATION

Source: CASE own elaboration, based on Nights spent at tourist accommodation by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States (Eurostat database).

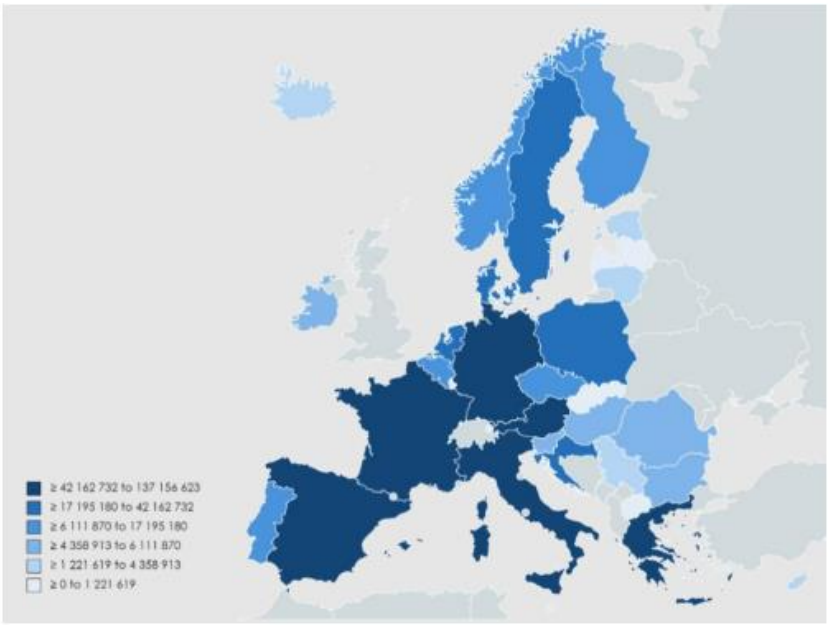


Figure 6 - NIGHTS SPENT AT TOURIST ACCOMMODATION ESTABLISHMENTS

Source: CASE own elaboration, based on Nights spent at tourist accommodation by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States (Eurostat database)

When analysing the data, one has to bear in mind that rural tourism activities might be somewhat underestimated. Many farm accommodation enterprises are financially integrated into the agricultural activities of the farm, with profits from accommodation set off against possible losses on the farm. An accurate assessment of job numbers also poses difficulties – as many inhabitants of rural areas work in multiple jobs, sometimes in different sectors[11]. Tourism levels also vary across EU Member States.

In 2021, rural areas accounted for 43.8% of beds in tourism accommodation in the EU (the remaining 33.8% of beds were in towns and suburbs and 21.4% in cities). Rural areas also saw 37% of all nights spent at tourist accommodation, compared to towns and suburbs, which accounted for the remaining 35 % and cities for 28 %.

[11] EP (2013). Industrial Heritage and Agri/Rural Tourism in Europe.

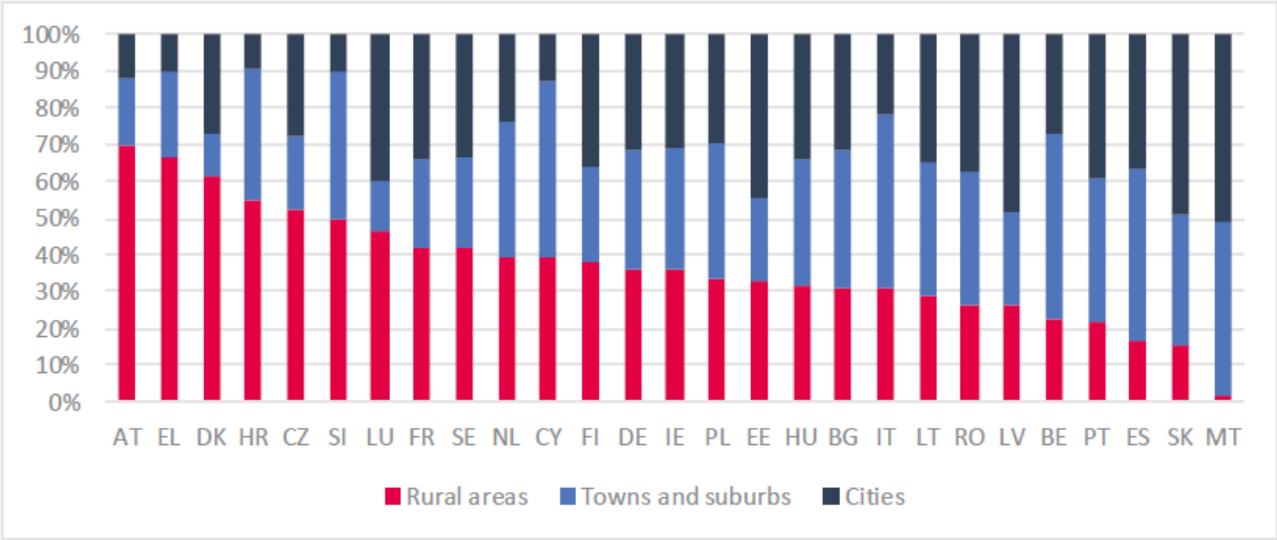


Figure 7: SHARE OF NIGHTS SPENT AT TOURIST ACCOMMODATION IN 2021 (DATA SOURCE: EUROSTAT) [12]

When it comes to absolute numbers, the Member States with the largest number of beds in rural areas were France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Greece, Austria and Croatia, with most of them (with the exception of Italy and Spain) also having more beds in rural areas than in cities, towns or suburbs. These were also the Member States with the largest number of nights spent at tourist accommodation in rural areas.

In contrast, lower levels of nights spent in rural areas are noted in Malta, Luxembourg, Slovakia, the Baltic States (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania), but also in Iceland, Serbia and Cyprus[13].

As a result, the real share of rural tourism in the rural regions might be slightly underestimated.

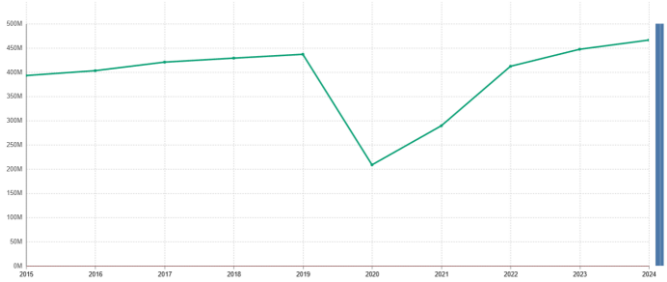


Figure 8: TREND OF NIGHTS SPENT AT TOURIST ACCOMODATION IN PILOT SITE COUNTRIES (EXCEPT UKRAINE) -2021 [14]

According to the Commission, rural tourism activities are gaining in attractiveness, with new preferences for low-density, remote destinations and an increase in more sustainable and eco-inclusive consumer behaviour, especially among younger generations[15]. This trend is prevalent all around the world. As the UN Tourism study has shown, all countries across the 78 surveyed expect rural tourism to grow in importance: 95% of responses from the 19 EU Member States estimated the prospects for rural tourism as “much better than now” or “better than now”[16].

The EU’s rural areas, home to 137 million people and covering over 80% of its territory, are vital to Europe’s identity, food production, natural resource management, and cultural heritage. However, they face challenges from globalisation, urbanisation, demographic decline, and limited access to services and infrastructure.

[12] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/751464/EPRS_BRI(2023)751464_EN.pdf
[13] Nights spent at tourist accommodation by degree of urbanisation in EU Member States (Eurostat database).
[14] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tour_occ_ninatdc/default/bar?lang=en
[15] EC (2021). Tourism capacity, expenditure and seasonality in Europe by urban-rural typology and remoteness
[16] UN Tourism (2023). Tourism and Rural Development: A Policy Perspective.

The European Commission's long-term vision aims to revitalize rural regions by leveraging green and digital transitions, lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic, and tailored local strategies. It promotes inclusive growth, improved quality of life, and stronger rural voices in policymaking. Rural areas are key to achieving the EU's Green Deal, Digital Decade, and Sustainable Development Goals, and must be supported to ensure balanced and fair development across all territories. [17]

The **TOURAL policy pathway approach** can be applied to the 6 different, yet complementary, **regional pilot sites**, that is the rural regions with remote characteristics identified within the project and belonging to 2 macro-regions:

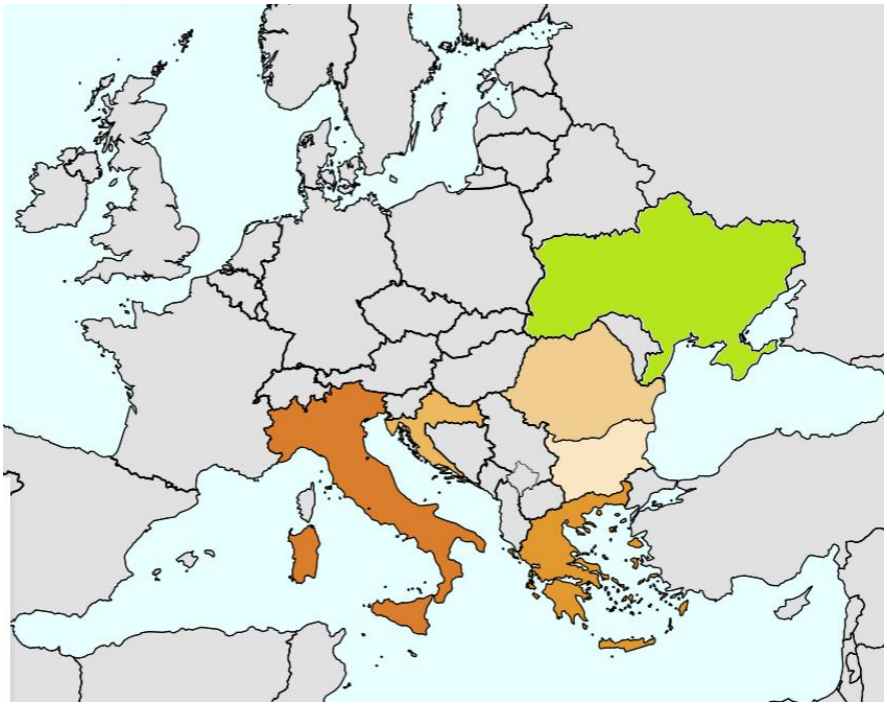


Figure 9: PILOT SITES'S COUNTRIES

[17] A long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas - Towards stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0345

PILOT SITE North Sporades Rural & Remote Region

North Sporades Rural & Remote Region, Greece (Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region) [18] [19] [20]

This unique rural and remote region within Greece comprises three distinct islands: the urbanized Skiathos, the more rural Skopelos, and the highly remote Alonnisos. This composition presents a fascinating blend of characteristics and development dynamics:

Category	Current conditions - Summary
Demographic Conditions	Total population: ~13,606. Skiathos (urban) has 6,160 inhabitants, while Skopelos and Alonnisos (rural) have 7,446 inhabitants. Skiathos has high population density (328 inhabitants/km²), while Skopelos (49.2 inhabitants/km²) and Alonnisos (42.6 inhabitants/km²) are sparsely populated.
Economic Conditions	Economy depends on fisheries, agriculture, and tourism. Skiathos has mass tourism with an airport and large hotels, while Skopelos offers family-oriented tourism. Alonnisos benefits from Marine Protected Area, supporting nature-based tourism and conservation. Cultural Science Tourism and ancient shipwrecks add to the re-gion's economic strengths
Environmental Conditions	Rich marine biodiversity, including endangered Mediterranean monk seals. The National Marine Park of Alonnisos and Northern Sporades is the largest marine protected area in the Mediterranean, safeguarding rare flora, fauna, and underwater archaeological sites. Skiathos is urbanized, while Skopelos and Alonnisos remain pristine. "Under Water Cultural Natural Heritage (UWCNH)" tourism highlights marine significance.
Cultural & Natural Heritage	The region boasts a wealth of cultural landmarks, including Byzantine monasteries, traditional architecture, and over 300 churches across the islands. Skopelos is home to the iconic Church of St. John, featured in the film Mamma Mia. Alonnisos hosts the Bronze Age settlement of Palamari and ancient shipwrecks accessible via guided diving tours. Skiathos celebrates the legacy of writer Alexandros Papadiamantis, whose house is now a museum. Cultural festivals, local crafts, and maritime traditions enrich the islands' identity.
Social Conditions	Cultural Science Tourism fosters social engagement. "Silver tourists" are a targeted demographic. Efforts to reverse brain drain emphasize long-term social and economic resilience.
Key Challenges	Short tourism season (especially in Skiathos), need for higher-quality tourism, global competitiveness, retaining young talent, and improving connectivity to urban clusters.
Key Strengths	Diverse tourism assets ranging from urban to rural settings. Unique natural and cultural heritage (Marine Protected Area, UNESCO site, ancient shipwrecks). Potential for niche tourism. Strategic location within Adriatic-Ionian macro-region. Sustainability-driven development vision.
Development Dynamics	A balance between Skiathos' established tourism sector and Skopelos & Alonnisos' emerging nature- and culture-based tourism. Focus on sustainable tourism, attracting high-value visitors, and leveraging marine and cultural assets to enhance competitiveness. Emphasis on youth retention, regional capacity building, and multi-destination tourism packages.

Table 2 - FEATURES OF NORTH SPORADES RURAL & REMOTE REGION, GREECE

[18] https://www.city-facts.com/
[19] ELSTAT 2000-2006. http://www.gnto.gov.gr/sites/default/files/files_basic_pages/Analisi_touristikis_kinisis_2001-2010.pdf
[20] Mattarocci G, Siligardos G. Tourism_in_Greece_main_characteristics_in_foreign_and_internal_demand. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228761917_Tourism_in_Greece_main_characteristics_in_foreign_and_internal_demand

PILOT SITE Province of Teramo

Province of Teramo, Italy (Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region) [21] [22] [23]

The Province of Teramo, situated in Italy, presents a diverse rural and remote region characterized by a rich tapestry of natural landscapes, historical towns, cultural heritage, and culinary traditions. While tourism is established along the coastal areas, there's a growing interest in sustainable and experiential activities within its rural and remote inland territories. The area presents the following characteristics and development dynamics:

Category	Current conditions - Summary
Demographic Conditions	Total population: ~31,348. Rural municipalities (Atri, Cellino Attanasio, Isola del Gran Sasso) house 16,810 inhabitants (53.62%), while the urban cluster of Pineto has 14,538 inhabitants. Pineto has a high population density (381.47 inhabitants/km²), while Atri (92.18 inhabitants/km²), Isola del Gran Sasso (53.21 inhabitants/km²), and Cellino Attanasio (43.94 inhabitants/km²) are more sparsely populated. Isola del Gran Sasso and Cellino Attanasio are identified as remote areas facing accessibility challenges.
Economic Conditions	Coastal areas have developed tourism infrastructure, particularly with Underwater Cultural Heritage (UWCH) sites. Rural areas are increasingly focusing on niche tourism (trekking, biking, hiking), with strong cultural and culinary assets. However, there are disparities in employment opportunities between coastal and rural areas, limiting economic growth inland.
Environmental Conditions	The province boasts varied landscapes, including coastal areas, hills, green valleys, and the highest peaks of the Apennine Mountains, offering nature-based tourism opportunities. The Gran Sasso massif, part of the National Park, is a major draw for ecotourism and biodiversity. Coastal areas have significant underwater cultural heritage assets, while the rural regions present strong ecotourism potential.
Cultural & Natural Heritage	Teramo's heritage spans millennia, from ancient Roman ruins to medieval hilltop villages. The city of Teramo itself preserves Roman amphitheaters and early Christian basilicas. Atri is renowned for its cathedral and Renaissance frescoes, while Civitella del Tronto hosts one of Europe's largest Bourbon fortresses. The region's culinary traditions—such as timballo, pecorino cheese, and Montepulciano d'Abruzzo wine—are deeply tied to its cultural identity. Natural heritage includes the Gran Sasso e Monti della Laga National Park, offering alpine ecosystems, rare flora and fauna, and panoramic hiking trails. Integrated conservation efforts are underway to protect both historic centers and fragile natural sites.
Social Conditions	Historical towns recognized among the most beautiful in Italy strengthen cultural tourism potential. Weak collaboration among tourism providers presents a challenge. Plans to expand tourism offerings to new demographic groups (elderly, disabled visitors, young people, digital nomads) show an awareness of evolving tourism trends.
Key Challenges	Underdeveloped infrastructure in rural areas, lack of tourism-related skills and knowledge, weak collaboration among tourism providers, uneven distribution of tourism between coastal and rural areas, and limited employment opportunities inland.
Key Strengths	Rich natural and cultural landscapes, including mountains, coastal regions, and historical towns. Strong gastronomic traditions. Increasing demand for sustainable tourism. Unique underwater cultural heritage assets. Potential for diversification towards new tourist demographics.
Development Dynamics	The region aims to balance the well-developed coastal tourism sector with the emerging rural tourism market. Strategies focus on improving infrastructure, enhancing tourism-related competencies, fostering collaboration, and creating a more equitable tourism economy. Emphasis is placed on digitalizing cultural heritage, promoting tourism to diverse groups, and strengthening regulatory support for rural tourism development.

Table 3 - FEATURES OF PROVINCE OF TERAMO, ITALY

[21] https://www.tuttitalia.it/
[22] https://www.istat.it
[23] Antonietta Ivona, Sustainability of Rural Tourism and Promotion of Local Development, MDPI https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/13/16/8854

PILOT SITE Island of Pag / Village Šimuni

Island of Pag / Village Šimuni, Croatia (Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region) [24] [25]

The village of Šimuni, situated on the southwestern side of the island of Pag in Croatia, represents a distinct rural and remote region characterized by its fishing village identity, natural bays, and developing tourism sector. Located between the larger centers of Novalja and Pag town, it serves as a quieter alternative, particularly appealing for family summer vacations. The area presents the following characteristics and development dynamics:

Category	Current conditions - Summary
Demographic Conditions	Total population: ~8,398. Low population density (29.55 inhabitants/km²). Šimuni is a small village with 164 inhabitants and a slightly higher density (51.87 inhabitants/km²). Classified as entirely rural and remote, with no urban clusters.
Economic Conditions	Economy centered on fishing, with a central bay for boats and fresh fish sales. Significant nautical tourism through ACI Marina Šimuni (150 berths, 30 dry berths). Seasonal tourism focused on family vacations. Challenges include lack of employment diversity, need for sustainable development beyond agriculture, and plans to foster SME entrepreneurship.
Environmental Conditions	Location in three natural bays highlights coastal beauty. Marina infrastructure supports marine tourism. Plans for Underwater Cultural and Natural Heritage (UWCNH) tourism development. Vision for transforming into a smart sustainable destination. Vision for transforming into a smart sustainable destination. The island's unique "moonscape" terrain, shaped by the bora wind and salt-laden air, supports rare endemic plant species and dramatic coastal vistas. Nearby Kolansko Blato, a protected ornithological reserve, offers rich biodiversity and birdwatching opportunities.
Cultural & Natural Heritage	Pag Island is renowned for its UNESCO-listed Pag lace, a centuries-old needlework tradition passed down through generations. The village of Šimuni retains its fishing heritage, with daily fresh catch markets and traditional cuisine rooted in local ingredients. The island is also famous for Paški sir (Pag cheese), a hard sheep milk cheese with a distinct flavor shaped by the island's wild herbs and rocky pastures. The nearby town of Pag features Renaissance architecture, saltworks dating back to the 9th century, and the planned medieval city designed by Juraj Dalmatinac. Cultural and Creative Tourism (CCT) initiatives aim to highlight these assets through festivals, artisan workshops, and heritage trails.
Social Conditions	Strong local identity as a small fishing village. Family-friendly tourism atmosphere. Efforts to improve tourism stakeholders' skills through reskilling and upskilling. Interest in developing Cultural and Creative Tourism (CCT) and Silver Tourism to attract diverse groups.
Key Challenges	Underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of diverse employment opportunities, limited tourism offerings beyond nautical and summer family vacations, need for sustainable development beyond agriculture, and seasonal tourism dependency.
Key Strengths	Beautiful coastal environment with three bays, strong nautical tourism infrastructure (ACI Marina), peaceful and family-friendly reputation, potential for UWCNH tourism, and vision for smart sustainable development. Rich cultural traditions (Pag lace, cheese-making, saltworks) and proximity to historical towns enhance the region's appeal.
Development Dynamics	Plans to diversify economic activities through sustainable tourism and SME entrepreneurship. Focus on enhancing skills, leveraging underwater cultural heritage, and transforming into a multi-destination tourism hub. Strategies aim to address infrastructure gaps, broaden tourism offerings, and reduce seasonality impact. Emphasis on integrating cultural heritage into tourism experiences and promoting eco-friendly practices.

Table 4 - FEATURES OF ISLAND OF PAG / VILLAGE ŠIMUNI, CROATIA

[24] N. Smolej-Narančić, A. Chaventré And P. Rudan, Anthropometric Variation and Population Structure of the Island of Pag, Croatia https://www.jstor.org/stable/41464976

[25] Damir Magaš, Contribution to the knowledge of the geographical characteristics of the Pag island, https://morepress.unizd.hr/journals/geoadria/article/view/153

PILOT SITE Nessebar

Nessebar, Bulgaria (Black Sea Basin) [26] [27] [28] [29]

The region of Nessebar in Bulgaria presents a unique combination of a densely populated tourist agglomeration along its southern coast and large, sparsely inhabited rural areas inland. This duality shapes its demographic, economic, environmental, and social conditions, as well as its development dynamics:

Category	Current conditions - Summary
Demographic Conditions	Total population: ~29,097. Rural areas (Sveti Vlas, Obzor) house 15,897 inhabitants (54.50%), while the urban cluster of Nessebar has 14,853 inhabitants. High population density in Nessebar (419.06 inhabitants/km²) due to urban and coastal tourism focus. Sveti Vlas (109.63 inhabitants/km²) and Obzor (59.19 inhabitants/km²) reflect lower densities.
Economic Conditions	Tourism-driven economy, particularly along the coast. Rural areas rely on small-scale agriculture and seasonal resort employment. "Ancient Nessebar" UNESCO site attracts cultural tourists globally. Vision to diversify economic activities through sustainable tourism. The rocky peninsula of Nessebar supports rare coastal ecosystems and migratory bird habitats, contributing to its ecological significance.
Cultural & Natural Heritage	Ancient Nessebar is one of Europe's oldest towns, with over 3,000 years of continuous settlement. Originally a Thracian settlement (Menebria), it became a Greek colony in the 6th century BC and later a major Byzantine center. The town preserves remarkable monuments including the acropolis, Temple of Apollo, medieval fortifications, and over 40 historic churches — many built between the 5th and 14th centuries. Wooden houses from the 19th century reflect Black Sea architectural traditions. The town's layered history and preserved urban fabric earned it UNESCO World Heritage status. Cultural festivals, folklore events, and local crafts (e.g. embroidery, honey production) reinforce its identity. The surrounding region also offers natural salt spas and archaeological diving sites, supporting UWCNH tourism development.
Environmental Conditions	Natura 2000-protected areas emphasize biodiversity. Coastal natural beauty boosts tourism. Mass tourism causes overcrowding and pollution during peak seasons. Plans to develop Underwater Cultural Natural Heritage (UWCNH) tourism.
Social Conditions	"Ancient Nessebar" UNESCO site strengthens cultural identity. Concern about preserving local identity amid tourism expansion. Vision to boost tourism income while maintaining destination appeal. Focus on creating high-skilled jobs and diverse employment opportunities.
Key Challenges	Overcrowding and pollution from visitors, during the high season / summer months, seasonality limiting year-round employment, lack of high-skilled tourism jobs, limited diverse employment, need to protect local identity, and sustainable heritage management.
Key Strengths	UNESCO World Heritage site, Natura 2000 biodiversity zones, favorable climate and natural attractions, potential for UWCNH tourism, and commitment to sustainable tourism development. Rich architectural and archaeological heritage, vibrant cultural life, and strategic location on the Black Sea.
Development Dynamics	Balancing coastal tourism expansion with rural development and heritage conservation. Strategy includes diversifying tourism offerings, extending seasons, improving employment quality, and leveraging cultural and environmental assets sustainably. Emphasis on integrating cultural heritage into tourism experiences, protecting fragile ecosystems, and promoting inclusive tourism models.

Table 5 - FEATURES OF NESSEBAR, BULGARIA

[26] https://www.city-facts.com/

[27] Viorel D. Popescu ,Laurentiu Rozylowicz ,Iulian M. Niculae,Adina L. Cucu,Tibor Hartel - Species, Habitats, Society: An Evaluation of Research Supporting EU's Natura 2000 Network https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0113648

[28] Mst. Umme Salma Nila, Carl Beierkuhnlein, Anja Jaeschke, Samuel Hoffmann & Md Lokman Hossain - Predicting the effectiveness of protected areas of Natura 2000 under climate change https://ecologicalprocesses.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s13717-019-0168-6

[29] Lorenzo Ricci, Michele Di Musciano, Francesco Maria Sabatini, Alessandro Chiarucci, Piero Zannini, Roberto Cazzolla Gatti, Carl Beierkuhnlein, Anna Walentowitz, Alexandra Lawrence, Anna Rita Frattaroli, Samuel Hoffmann - A multitaxonomic assessment of Natura 2000 effectiveness across European biogeographic regions https://cris.unibo.it/bitstream/11585/954498/3/Ricci%20et%20al.%20-%202024%20-%20A%20multitaxonomic%20assessment%20of%20Natura%202000%20effecti.pdf

PILOT SITE Danube Delta (Tulcea County, Romania) / LAG, Danube Delta, area / Sulina

Danube Delta (Tulcea County) / Danube Delta LAG - Sulina, Romania (Black Sea Basin) [30] [31] [32] [33] [34] [35] [36] [37] [38] [39] [40]

The Danube Delta region in Tulcea County, Romania, is a vast rural area famous for its rich biodiversity, unique landscapes, and diverse cultural heritage. It consists of two main zones for rural tourism:

1. the wetland and coastal zone, focused on fishing and mass summer tourism, offering recreational, balneary, and cruise experiences;
2. the hilly and plateau zone, centered on agriculture, viticulture, and pastoralism, supporting gastronomic, ethnographic, historical, and religious tourism.

The Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (DDBR), a UNESCO World Heritage Site and major European ecological area, includes the delta, lagoon complex, and Black Sea coast, home to over 5,400 species. Despite its ecological and cultural value, the area remains economically poor, with an aging population reliant on fishing, farming, and livestock. Villages feature distinctive architecture with white and blue-painted houses and fishing motifs. The region has around 15,000 residents, including ethnic minorities (notably Russian Lipovans).

Although it faces demographic and economic challenges, the lack of heavy industry preserves its landscape. However, complex governance involving multiple ministries and limited coordination hinders effective regional development and management.

The area presents the following characteristics and development dynamics:

Category	Current conditions - Summary
Demographic Conditions	Total population of Danube Delta LAG's territory: ~16,851 across six remote villages and Sulina (at the time of submitting the application). Sparse population density (7.52 inhabitants/km² in the Danube Delta LAG; 11.40 inhabitants/km² in Sulina – with 3,757 inhabitants). Entirely rural and remote with no urban clusters.
Economic Conditions	Tourism, commerce, and subsistence agriculture are primary economic activities. Service sectors, crafts, and non-agricultural production are underdeveloped, indicating diversification potential. Extraordinary biodiversity supports nature-based tourism. Vision focuses on improving economic opportunities and developing new tourism value chains.
Environmental Conditions	Largest remaining natural delta in Europe; UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and Ramsar site. Entire region falls within Biosphere Reserve law, emphasizing environmental protection – the way the Reserve is governed – and tourism managed inside of it – represents a complex of relations between protected area provisions, economic growth, divergent interests and tourism practices. Coastal border (76 km) adds potential for coastal tourism. Strong focus on natural heritage conservation and sustainable tourism development has to be undertook – aligning with all strategic documents at European and national levels.

[30] https://www.city-facts.com/
[31] Luminita Lazar, Steliana Rodino, Ruxandra Pop, Rachel Tiller, Nele D'Haese, Peter Viaene, Jean-Luc De Kok - Sustainable Development Scenarios in the Danube Delta—A Pilot Methodology for Decision Makers https://www.mdpi.com/2073-4441/14/21/3484
[32] Romania: Danube Delta Integrated Sustainable Development Strategy https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Feature%20Story/ECA/Romania/Webpage%20-%20Danube%20Delta%20Integrated%20Sustainable%20Development%20Strategy%20NOV-DEC14%20FOR%20PDF.pdf
[33] https://www.revistadestatistica.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/A3_RRS-4_2024.pdf
[34] https://managementjournal.usamv.ro/pdf/vol.23_4/Art24.pdf
[35] https://www.rce.feaa.ugal.ro/images/stories/RCE2014/papers/SoareZugravuTurekSoare.pdf
[36] https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/263050/1/ICEADR-2021-p268.pdf
[37] https://www.balkantrails.com/danube-delta-europes-best-preserved/#elementor-toc__heading-anchor-11
[38] http://www.strategiimanageriale.ro/images/images_site/articole/article_d11cc2877e02d88209c664e34545e26d.pdf
[39] https://revistadeturism.ro/index.php/rdt/article/view/506/471
[40] https://www.cultura.ro/sites/default/files/inline-files/Strategia%20nationala%20privind%20protejarea%20monumentelor%20istorice.pdf

Cultural & Natural Heritage	Sulina, Romania's easternmost town, blends wild nature with multicultural history. Once a strategic port under Ottoman and European control, Sulina preserves architectural remnants from its cosmopolitan past, including the Old Lighthouse Museum and the Maritime Cemetery — a unique site with tombs of sailors from various nations. The region's cultural identity is shaped by fishing traditions, Orthodox Christian heritage, and ethnic diversity (Lipovans, Ukrainians, Greeks). Local crafts, folklore, and cuisine — especially fish-based dishes — reflect a deep connection to the delta's rhythms. Cultural tourism is supported by festivals, heritage trails, and initiatives to digitize and interpret local history.
Social Conditions	Unique cultural traditions deeply intertwined with the natural environment. Limited access to services affects community well-being. Vision emphasizes improving quality of life and fostering cooperation between policymakers, public, and private actors to support sustainable tourism growth.
Key Challenges	Underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of diverse employment opportunities, limited access to essential services, restricted tourism offerings, remoteness, low population density, and unexplored cultural and natural heritage assets.
Key Strengths	Exceptional environmental heritage (UNESCO Biosphere Reserve & Ramsar site) and cultural heritage, rich cultural traditions, strong potential for nature-based tourism, access to the Black Sea for coastal tourism.
Key Weaknesses	Lack of strategic documents at regional / local level (tourism, cultural heritage) - - no clear tourism vision. Discontinuity in tourism and tourism related policies at national and regional levels. No tourism strategy for DDBR. Lack of measures regarding the implementation of the national strategy for cultural heritage. Lack of collaboration between stakeholders in cultural field. Lack of funds for rehabilitation of the cultural and historical sites. Regarding natural and cultural heritage of Tulcea region (including DDBR), currently there is no integrated, common, coherent analysis, to generate sustainable public policies for the the Danube Delta region coastal area.
Development Dynamics	Focused on leveraging natural and cultural heritage to boost economic opportunities and quality of life. Overcoming remoteness and service limitations through stakeholder cooperation, new tourism value chains, and sustainable tourism initiatives. Protecting and promoting environmental and cultural identity is central to future development.

Table 6 - FEATURES OF DANUBE DELTA (LAG DANUBE DELTA, TULCEA COUNTY) / SULINA, ROMANIA

PILOT SITE Kutsurub Rural Region

Kutsurub Rural Region, Ukraine (Mykolaiv oblast) (Black Sea Basin) [41] [42]

The Kutsurub rural region, situated on the banks of the Dnipro-Buzka estuary in the Mykolaiv oblast of Ukraine, is characterized by its exceptional natural resource potential, mild climate, preserved virgin steppe areas, and rich history. Notably, it is home to the ruins of ancient Olbia, a significant Hellenic-Scythian state of the Northern Black Sea, with parts of the site now submerged. The area presents the following characteristics and development dynamics:

Category	Details
Demographic Conditions	Entirely rural and remote, with no urban clusters. Total population: ~8,945. Kutsurub county (six villages) covers 174 km² with 4,654 inhabitants (density: 26.75 inhabitants/km²). Parutyne county (six villages) spans 127.85 km² with 4,291 inhabitants (density: 33.56 inhabitants/km²).
Economic Conditions	Potential for green, rural, gastro, and underwater tourism development. High poverty level among rural population. Limited entrepreneurial experience hinders economic growth. Vision to foster macro-territorial cohesion and build tourism-related partnerships for economic improvement.
Environmental Conditions	Rich natural resource potential with preserved virgin steppe areas. Located on the Dnipro-Buzka estuary, offering coastal and riverine tourism potential. Possible underwater tourism assets. The Adzhigol Ravine, part of the Emerald Network, is a protected area of high biodiversity, hosting rare bird species and endemic flora. Vision emphasizes preserving regional natural and cultural heritage for sustainable development.
Cultural & Natural Heritage	The region is home to the ancient Greek polis of Olbia, one of the most important archaeological sites in the Northern Black Sea. Founded in the 6th century BCE, Olbia was a major trading hub between Greek settlers and Scythian tribes. Today, the National Historical and Archaeological Reserve "Olbia" preserves ruins of temples, fortifications, and burial mounds, some of which are partially submerged, offering potential for underwater heritage tourism2. The area also features traditional crafts, folklore, and culinary practices rooted in steppe culture. Nearby natural parks such as Biloberezhia Svyatoslava and Kinburn Spit enhance the region's eco-tourism appeal. Cultural tourism initiatives aim to digitize heritage assets and promote local identity through festivals, museums, and educational trails.
Social Conditions	Presence of ancient Olbia ruins, highlighting strong historical heritage. Tourism infrastructure and business development remain underdeveloped. Vision aims to integrate cultural heritage into regional tourism planning. Remote location and poor road quality impact accessibility.
Key Challenges	Severe damage due to military invasion, high poverty levels, lack of entrepreneurial experience, absence of coordinated tourism development, underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of employment opportunities, limited tourism services, and accessibility issues.
Key Strengths	Exceptional natural resource potential, historical and cultural heritage (Ancient Olbia), diverse tourism possibilities (green, rural, gastro, underwater), commitment to heritage preservation, and focus on collaboration and learning.
Development Dynamics	Facing major challenges due to conflict, but recognizing potential in tourism. Strategy includes fostering macro-territorial cohesion, learning from best practices, and systematically developing tourism once stability is restored. Key focus areas: cultural heritage valorisation, environmental conservation, infrastructure improvement, and partnership-building for long-term regional resilience.

Table 7 - FEATURES OF KUTSURUB RURAL REGION, UKRAINE (MYKOLAIV OBLAST)

[41] https://www.city-facts.com

[42] Exploring Pathways For Restoration Of Lower Dnipro Riverecosystems, Ukraine, After Blasting Of Kakhovka Dam In 2023 https://uwecworkgroup.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Presentation-for-the-web-site-Simonov_Exploring-pathways-for-restoration-of-the-Lower_Dnipro-SERE-2024.pdf

The TOURAL pilot projects hold significant importance for the advancement and understanding of rural tourism, particularly in the context of fostering sustainability, resilience, and innovation in diverse European regions. Rural tourism itself is crucial for promoting sustainable development, preserving local cultures, and building economic resilience within communities. However, to fully realize its potential, it requires strategic approaches and well-tested methodologies. This is precisely where pilot projects, like those undertaken by TOURAL, become invaluable tools.

These pilot projects serve as real-world testing grounds, embodying and contributing to the structured process of policy pathway development as follows:

Contribution to Problem Statement and Context Analysis

TOURAL's pilot projects directly contribute to the "Problem Statement and Context Analysis" phase. By operating in diverse rural contexts, they provide crucial, real-time data and insights into existing conditions, challenges, and available resources related to rural tourism. They help in:

- **Assessing the Current Situation:** Through practical implementation, they offer deep analysis of existing conditions, identifying specific gaps, barriers, and opportunities that might not be apparent in theoretical studies. This hands-on data collection and stakeholder engagement within the pilot areas are essential for defining the true scope and nature of the problem.
- **Defining the Goal:** The experiences and findings from these pilot projects can help refine and clearly articulate the desired policy outcomes for sustainable, resilient, and innovative rural tourism, ensuring goals are realistic and impactful.

Role in Pathway Development

The core function of the TOURAL pilot projects aligns perfectly with the "Pathway Development" phase. They are instrumental in assessing, refining, and adapting innovative strategies in practice:

- **Developing Policy Instruments:** The pilot projects act as laboratories for testing various policy instruments (e.g., tailor-made tourism packages, integration of local communities, development of learning experiences, use of digital tools) in a controlled environment. This allows for the identification of which regulations, incentives, or educational programs are most effective for rural tourism.
- **Engaging Stakeholders:** By involving local communities and other stakeholders directly in the pilot projects, TOURAL ensures continuous collaboration. This hands-on engagement fosters inclusivity and builds widespread support for the developed strategies, which is vital for their successful implementation.
- **Modelling and Evaluating Options:** The real-world nature of pilot projects allows for practical "modelling and evaluation of options." Instead of just theoretical predictions, the projects provide empirical evidence on the outcomes and impacts of different approaches, enabling refinement and adaptation based on actual performance. They help in setting measurable short-term and medium-term targets by demonstrating what is achievable on the ground.

Facilitating Dissemination

Finally, the TOURAL pilot projects are a key driver for the "Dissemination" phase. Their very purpose is to provide well-tested methodologies that can be shared and replicated:

- **Sharing Knowledge:** The experiences, successes, and challenges encountered within these pilot projects generate invaluable lessons learned and best practices. This practical knowledge is then disseminated to other regions, promoting knowledge exchange and encouraging the replication of successful, sustainable, and innovative rural tourism models across Europe.

In essence, the TOURAL pilot projects are not just isolated initiatives; they represent a living demonstration of the policy pathway development process, providing the empirical evidence and practical insights necessary to build robust, adaptable, and effective policies for the future of rural tourism.

The following table summarizes the main features demonstrating how TOURAL pilot sites contribute to shaping effective policy pathways:

REAL-WORLD TESTING & VALIDATION	Pilot sites serve as practical laboratories to test theories, methodologies, and policy approaches in sustainable rural tourism. **They reveal practical challenges and facilitate context-specific solutions.**
CONTEXT-SPECIFIC INSIGHTS & TAILORED APPROACHES	Pilot sites acknowledge regional diversity, from Greek islands to war-affected Ukraine, ensuring strategies are integrated and adapted to local conditions rather than applying a generic approach.
IDENTIFYING & SHARING BEST PRACTICES	Positive outcomes from pilot projects serve as models for other rural regions. Challenges drive innovation in tourism products, services, governance, and technology, benefiting wider rural tourism efforts.
BUILDING LOCAL CAPACITY & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT	Direct community involvement builds local capacity and ownership. Pilot projects strengthen collaboration among stakeholders, fostering long-term sustainable tourism networks.
INFORMING POLICY DEVELOPMENT	Lessons from pilots support evidence-based policymaking at local, national, and European levels. Challenges highlight policy gaps and the need for new instruments to aid rural tourism.
RAISING AWARENESS & PROMOTING RURAL TOURISM	Pilot projects enhance visibility for participating regions, showcasing them as attractive destinations. Successful initiatives challenge perceptions of rural areas as solely agricultural.
CONTRIBUTING TO BROADER GOALS	The focus on sustainability aligns with European/global goals on environmental protection, economic viability, and social inclusion. Strengthening rural tourism supports regional cohesion and reduces disparities.

Table 8 - TOURAL PILOTE SITES RELEVANCE IN SHAPING EFFECTIVE POLICY PATHWAYS

3.3. PHASE 2 - TOURAL Policy Pathway Development

3.3.1. Regional Pathways

From the multilevel analysis of UCCST/CCT tourism, elaborated under Task 2.1, the Pilot Sites Analysis, elaborated under Task 3.1, the Pilot Sites' main needs analysis elaborated under Task 2.5 and the results of the co-work processes adopted under Task 2.3[43] through the setting up of living labs in each pilot region, regional **policy pathways at pilot level** for the development of rural sustainable tourism in rural areas have been identified.

They are proposed in the following tables:

[43] GAPS, PROBLEMS and POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS have been reported in the tables as resulted in the PRELIMINARY QUESTIONNAIRES: Priorities, Challenges and Solutions in the Pilot Sites developed under Task 2.3 (during the period March-April 2025)

North Sporades Rural & Remote Region, Greece

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON /YEAR-ROUND TOURISM	Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists	Regional programs for rural tourism Charter for Sustainable Tourism Cross-border initiatives National financial instruments (VAT reduction for tourism) EU funding for rural tourism enterprises	**Partially** – policies focused more on year-round tourism incentives
IMPROVEMENT OF TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS - ACCESSIBILITY	Reduced visitor numbers, isolated rural communities, accessibility challenges	Improve inter-island transport; develop multi-modal travel solutions Development of tourist learning experiences through digital engagement tools	RIS3 Regional Transport initiatives Macro-regional transport strategies	**Yes** – Policies for transport infrastructure improvements and better connections
AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE PROVISION	Difficulties in attracting elderly visitors (Silver Tourism)	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources	EU funding for rural tourism infrastructure Accessibility policies in tourism planning	**Yes** – Policies ensuring accessible healthcare for tourists and locals

Table 9 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE NORTH SPORADES RURAL & REMOTE REGION, GREECE

Province of Teramo, Italy

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON /YEAR-ROUND TOURISM	Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists	European Rural Network (RRE) supporting rural development EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region National Strategy for Inner Areas Regional tourism incentives	**Partially** – policies focused more on year-round tourism incentives
IMPROVEMENT OF TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS-ACCESSIBILITY	Limited accessibility, discourages tourism growth, restricts visitor experience	Invest in better roads, public transport, and digital infrastructure. Development of tourist learning experiences through digital engagement tools	Regional tourism regulation National Strategy for Inner Areas	**Yes** – More targeted investment policies for rural infrastructure, including transport and digital connectivity
DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION NETWORKS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM	Lack of coordinated tourism experiences, reduces visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources Foster regional partnerships, joint promotion efforts, tourism clusters for collective marketing	Memorandum of collaboration at the regional level	**Partially** – Additional policies encouraging structured tourism networks among local stakeholders.

Table 10 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE PROVINCE OF TERAMO, ITALY

Island of Pag / Village Šimuni, Croatia

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON /YEAR-ROUND TOURISM	Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists, such as artists, scientists and silver tourists	National tourism laws; Interreg Euro-MED program; Sustainable tourism development strategies Financial support from regional authorities for tourism development	**Yes** – Policies to incentivize year-round tourism and off-season activities
RAISING RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE RICH, UNDERVALUED HERITAGE OF THEIR PLACE	Low visibility of heritage assets, limited accessibility for general tourists	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources Development of tourist learning experiences through engaging activities with locals and the use of digital tools (e.g. mobile apps)	European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN) Cultural route initiatives	**Yes** – Policies to promote heritage awareness and education
DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH TRAINING	Limited career opportunities in specialized tourism fields, reliance on seasonal low-skilled labor	Development of training programs for professionals in tourism Foster SME entrepreneurship	National tourism laws; Financial instruments for tourism businesses	**Yes** – Policies fostering high-skill job creation in tourism
PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES FROM THE INFLUX OF TOURISTS	Threatened natural resources and sustainability	Promote off-season tourism and expand tourism offer Integrate sustainability measures in new tourism projects	National Strategy for Sustainable Tourist Development	**Yes** – Stronger policies for environmental protection and sustainable tourism

Table 11 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE ISLAND OF PAG / VILLAGE ŠIMUNI, CROATIA

Nessebar, Bulgaria

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON /YEAR-ROUND TOURISM	Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists, such as artists, scientists & silver tourists	Tourism Development Strategy;	**Yes** – Policies incentivizing off-season tourism activities
DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH TRAINING	Limited career opportunities in specialized tourism fields, reliance on seasonal low-skilled labor	Trainings to upskill and reskill the tourism operators in the field of UCCST (Upskilling aims to teach employees new skills to optimise their performance / Reskilling aims to train employees to adapt to a different post within a company, project, etc.) Development of training programs for professionals in tourism Foster SME entrepreneurship	National training programs for tourism skills development EU entrepreneurship programs	**Yes** – Policies fostering high-skill job creation in tourism, archaeology, and heritage management
DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION NETWORKS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM	Lack of coordinated tourism experiences, reduces visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources Foster regional partnerships, joint promotion efforts, tourism clusters for collective marketing	Black Sea Sustainable Rural Tourism Program	**Yes** –Policies encouraging structured tourism networks among local stakeholders

Table 12 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE NESSEBAR, BULGARIA

Danube Delta LAG (Tulcea County) / Sulina, Romania

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON /YEAR-ROUND TOURISM	Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists, such as artists, scientists & silver tourists, and integrating local community and traditions activities Promote off-season tourism and expand tourism offer Marketing and intensively promoting the communities Strenghtening cultural heritage promotion and protection	Common Maritime Agenda for The Black Sea (CMA 2019) European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) No tourism strategy at local / regional level. National Strategy for Tourism Development in Romania 2024 - 2035 Integrated Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Danube Delta (2030) Leader Program for Romania 2021 - 2027 National Strategy for Historical Monuments Protection 2022 – 2032 – no measures applied on Tulcea County territory	**Yes** – Policies incentivizing off-season tourism activities **Yes** – Policies to promote heritage awareness and education **Yes** – Policies to protect cultural heritage (historical sites with international and national value)
PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES	Threatened natural resources and sustainability	Development of tourist learning experiences through engaging	Romanian Government Decisions no. 983 / 1990, no. 284 / 1994	**Yes** – Policies for balancing tourism with environmental preservation

FROM THE INFLUX OF TOURISTS	activities with locals and the use of digital tools (e.g. mobile apps)	Law no. 82 / 1993 & Action Plan of DDBR (updated, modified)
	Integrate sustainability measures in new tourism projects	Law no 49 / 2011
	Implementation of a study regarding carrying capacity on those areas in which the tourism pression has been noticed, together with monitoring the indicators by a specialized entity.	UNESCO Biosphere Reserve protections – Man and Biosphere Programme; Ramsar site regulations Ramsar Convention, EU regulatory frameworks
	Awareness regarding the value of natural and environmental heritage, besides the necessity of a permanent protection of these assets, both at the level of tourists / visitors and their guides and local population.	Natura 2000 Regulations Prioritised Action Framework for Natura 2000 in Romania[44] European Council Directives with regard of natural habitats conservation (92/43 EEC, 2009/147,…) Decisions of EC 2009 / 92 – sites of community importance for the Black Sea biogeographical region Interreg NEXT Black Sea Basin Program

[44] https://www.mmediu.ro/app/webroot/uploads/files/RO%20PAF.pdf

			Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development – study case Danube Delta / Natura 2000 – 2010 (old; unimplemented) Study about carrying capacity in DDBR (old; unimplemented) – need for a new study.	
DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION NETWORKS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM	Lack of coordinated tourism experiences, reduces visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism	Foster regional partnerships, joint promotion efforts, tourism clusters for collective marketing Distribute and recommend the partners' products/services, in a cooperative logic. Create more intermunicipal products with the cooperation between local authorities and private entities to identify business opportunities and promotion by tourism operators. Define tourist circuits, including historical and cultural itineraries, which associate companies with various activities. Organizing info-trips in which all the partners are involved –	Plan for Sustainable Tourism Development – study case Danube Delta / Natura 2000 – 2010 (unimplemented) Tulcea County Council Development Strategy Integrated Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Danube Delta (World Bank, 2015) LEADER Program The EU's Strategic Approach to the Black Sea Region [45] EU Strategy for Black Sea (2025)	**Yes** –Policies encouraging structured tourism networks among local stakeholders

[45] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/170d9b3a-d45f-4169-80fa-9adb753c0921_en?filename=EU%20Strategic%20Approach%20Black%20Sea%20Strategy.pdf

	with the aim of developing an offer of products/services and distinctive experiences of the existing offers in the region.	

Table 13 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE DANUBE DELTA (LAG DANUBE DELTA, TULCEA COUNTY) / SULINA, ROMANIA

Kutsurub Rural Region, Ukraine

GAPS/PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED	IMPACT	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING POLICIES & STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
IMPROVEMENT OF TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS-ACCESSIBILITY	Limited accessibility, tourism growth restrictions, inadequate visitor experiences	Improve transport networks, upgrade lodging facilities, develop sustainable tourism infrastructure	National Programme for Resilience; EU Tourism Policy	**Yes** – Increased funding and regulatory frameworks supporting rural infrastructure development
DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH TRAINING	Limits tourism potential and visitor satisfaction	Trainings to upskill and reskill the tourism operators in the field of UCCST (Upskilling aims to teach employees new skills to optimise their performance / Reskilling aims to train employees to adapt to a different post within a company, project, etc.) Development of training programs for professionals in tourism Foster SME entrepreneurship	Creation of Regional Touristic Organizations	**Yes** – Policies fostering high-skill job creation in tourism, archaeology, and heritage management
TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE INTERVENTIONS	Reduced tourism revenue, negative visitor experiences, environmental degradation	Infrastructure upgrades and eco-friendly lodging solutions	EU Tourism Policy, Interreg Black Sea Basin Programme	**Yes** – Policies supporting sustainable tourism infrastructure expansion

Table 14 - REGIONAL POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE PILOT SITE KUTSURUB RURAL REGION, UKRAINE (MYKOLAIV OBLAST)

In essence, the six pilot sites face a range of interconnected challenges hindering the sustainable development of rural tourism, often related to infrastructure, economic diversification, seasonality, service quality, collaboration, and the preservation of their unique heritage and environment. The Kutsurub region faces the most severe challenges due to the war conflict as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

3.3.2.Consolidated Policy Pathways

Given the policy-pathways identified across the six pilot projects, the following tables consolidate the key gaps, impacts, potential solutions, existing policies, and the need for new policies across the two main TOURAL areas: Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and Black Sea Basin using the PESTLE methodology[46].
Each gap/problem has been then linked to relevant external factors that influence tourism policies, economic stability, social dynamics, technological advancements, legal frameworks, and environmental concerns. This PESTLE-based analysis can help stakeholders assess tourism-related challenges systematically and develop comprehensive solutions aligned with the macro-regional and sea basin policy frameworks.

ADRIATIC – IONIAN MACRO-REGION

GAPS/PROBLEMS	PESTLE FACTOR	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING SUPPORTING POLICIES/STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON / YEAR-ROUND TOURISM ***Impact:*** *Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season*	**POLITICAL** *Policies focus on incentives but lack structured strategies for sustainable off-season tourism* **ECONOMIC** *Limited economic activity leads to employment instability; tailored tourism packages can boost financial sustainability.* **ENVIRONMENTAL** *Encouraging off-season tourism can help distribute visitor impact, reducing stress on natural resources.*	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists	Charter for Sustainable Tourism, EU funding for rural tourism enterprises, Regional programs for rural tourism, Cross-border initiatives, National financial instruments (e.g., VAT reduction for tourism)	**Partially** – Policies focused more on year-round tourism incentives
IMPROVEMENT OF TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS – ACCESSIBILITY ***Impact:*** *Reduced visitor numbers, isolated rural*	**POLITICAL** *Requires macro-regional transport policies for infrastructure investment and interconnectivity.* **ECONOMIC** *Poor transport options restrict visitor numbers, impacting local economies; investments could drive regional business growth.*	Improve inter-island transport; develop multimodal travel solutions	RIS3, Regional Transport initiatives, Macro-regional transport strategies	**Yes** – Policies for transport infrastructure improvements and better connections

[46] A PESTLE analysis is one technique for examining how outside factors, including political, economic, social, technological, legal, and environmental factors, influence your brand. https://www.atlassian.com/work-management/strategic-planning/pestle-analysis

communities, accessibility challenges	**ENVIRONMENTAL** *Environmentally friendly transport alternatives could mitigate ecological damage caused by accessibility challenges.* **TECHNOLOGICAL** *Technological advancements in multimodal transport solutions could improve accessibility.*			
AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE PROVISION ***Impact:*** *Difficulties in attracting elderly visitors (Silver Tourism)*	**SOCIAL** *Elderly visitors face accessibility challenges; policies ensuring healthcare provision could promote Silver Tourism.* **LEGAL** *Tourism planning requires accessibility policies to ensure inclusivity and healthcare availability.*	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources	EU funding for rural tourism infrastructure, Accessibility policies in tourism planning	**Yes** – Policies ensuring accessible healthcare for tourists and locals
DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION NETWORKS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM ***Impact:*** *Lack of coordinated tourism experiences, reduces visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism*	**POLITICAL** *Existing memorandums offer collaboration, but stronger governmental backing is needed.* **ECONOMIC** *Disjointed business efforts reduce visibility; fostering tourism clusters could encourage private sector investment.* **SOCIAL** *Weak coordination among stakeholders reduces local community involvement in tourism.*	Foster regional partnerships, joint promotion efforts, tourism clusters for collective marketing	Memorandum of collaboration at the regional level	**Partially** – Additional policies encouraging structured tourism networks among local stakeholders
RAISING RESIDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE RICH, UNDERVALUED HERITAGE OF THEIR PLACE	**SOCIAL** *Limited visibility of heritage discourages community engagement; integrating traditions into tourism fosters cultural appreciation.*	Integration of the local community and traditions into the tourism industry	European Destinations of Excellence (EDEN), Cultural route initiatives	**Yes** – Policies to promote heritage awareness and education

Impact: *Low visibility of heritage assets, limited accessibility for general tourists*	**TECHNOLOGICAL** *Investment in digital heritage platforms can make cultural sites more visible and accessible.*	for better promotion of local natural & cultural resources		
DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH TRAINING ***Impact:*** *Limited career opportunities in specialized tourism fields, reliance on seasonal low-skilled labour*	**ECONOMIC** *Seasonal low-skilled labour is prevalent; training programs can enhance high-skill job opportunities.* **SOCIAL** *A lack of career prospects in specialized tourism leads to reliance on seasonal workers; structured educational programs could address this.* **TECHNOLOGICAL** *Online education platforms can enhance workforce skill levels and improve job opportunities.* **LEGAL** *National tourism laws exist, but stronger policies for skill development and job creation are required.*	Development of training programs for professionals in tourism; Foster SME entrepreneurship	National tourism laws, Financial instruments for tourism businesses	**Yes** – Policies fostering high-skill job creation in tourism
PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES FROM THE INFLUX OF TOURISTS ***Impact:*** *Threatened natural resources and sustainability*	**ENVIRONMENTAL** *High tourist numbers threaten environmental sustainability; stronger regulations and sustainability measures are needed.* **LEGAL** *Legal frameworks should strengthen environmental regulations to prevent over-tourism and natural degradation.* **POLITICAL** *National strategies exist, yet stricter environmental protection policies must be enforced.*	Promote off-season tourism and expand tourism offer; integrate sustainability measures in new tourism projects	National Strategy for Sustainable Tourist Development	**Yes** – Stronger policies for environmental protection and sustainable tourism

Table 15 - CONSOLIDATED POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE ADRIATIC-IONIAN MACRO-REGION

THE BLACK SEA BASIN

GAPS/PROBLEMS	PESTLE FACTOR	POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS	EXISTING SUPPORTING POLICIES/STRATEGIES	ARE NEW POLICIES NEEDED?
EXTENSION OF THE TOURIST SEASON / YEAR-ROUND TOURISM ***Impact**: Limited economic activity and unstable employment outside peak season*	**POLITICAL** *Policies incentivizing off-season tourism could increase economic stability* **ECONOMIC** *Seasonal tourism limits economic opportunities; tailor-made tourism packages could boost income stability* **ENVIRONMENTAL** *Rising visitor numbers pose environmental risks; eco-friendly lodging solutions and off-season tourism could reduce ecological pressure*	Tailor-made tourism packages to attract diverse tourists, such as artists, scientists, and silver tourists	Tourism Development Strategies, Common Maritime Agenda for The Black Sea (CMA 2019) European Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) – June 2025	**Yes** – Policies incentivizing off-season tourism activities
DEVELOPMENT OF SKILLS RELEVANT TO THE TOURISM SECTOR THROUGH TRAINING ***Impact**: Limited career opportunities in specialized tourism fields, reliance on seasonal low-skilled labour*	**ECONOMIC** *High reliance on low-skilled seasonal workers; fostering high-skill job creation and SME entrepreneurship would improve workforce stability* **SOCIAL** *Training initiatives can strengthen career prospects and improve service quality* **LEGAL** *Existing national training programs require stronger policy backing for specialized education in archaeology and heritage management*	Trainings to upskill and reskill tourism operators; development of training programs for professionals in tourism; foster SME entrepreneurship	National training programs for tourism skills development, EU entrepreneurship programs	**Yes** – Policies fostering high-skill job creation in tourism, archaeology, and heritage management

DEVELOPMENT OF COOPERATION NETWORKS BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM ***Impact**: Lack of coordinated tourism experiences, reduces visibility and attractiveness of rural tourism*	**POLITICAL** *Existing strategies support collaboration, but additional policies could enhance stakeholder coordination* **SOCIAL** *Strengthened stakeholder partnerships could enhance social cohesion and community-driven tourism development*	Foster regional partnerships, joint promotion efforts, tourism clusters for collective marketing	~~Black Sea Sustainable Rural Tourism Program~~	**Yes** – Policies encouraging structured tourism networks among local stakeholders
PROTECTION OF NATURAL RESOURCES FROM THE INFLUX OF TOURISTS ***Impact**: Threatened natural resources and sustainability*	**POLITICAL** *Regulations like UNESCO Biosphere Reserve protections help, yet more structured frameworks for balancing tourism with conservation are needed* **ENVIRONMENTAL** *Rising visitor numbers pose environmental risks; eco-friendly lodging solutions and off-season tourism could reduce ecological pressure* **LEGAL** *Ramsar site regulations and EU frameworks guide conservation, but enforcement and adaptation to rising tourist numbers remain gaps*	Development of tourist learning experiences through engaging activities with locals and digital tools (e.g., mobile apps); promote off-season tourism; integrate sustainability measures in new tourism projects	UNESCO Biosphere Reserve protections, Ramsar site regulations, Ramsar Convention, EU regulatory frameworks	**Yes** – Policies for balancing tourism with environmental preservation
IMPROVEMENT OF TRANSPORT CONNECTIONS – ACCESSIBILITY	**POLITICAL** *National Programme for Resilience supports rural infrastructure, but policies ensuring long-term investment would be beneficial* **ECONOMIC**	Improve transport networks, upgrade lodging facilities, develop sustainable tourism infrastructure	National Programme for Resilience, EU Tourism Policy	**Yes** – Increased funding and regulatory frameworks supporting rural

***Impact**: Limited accessibility, tourism growth restrictions, inadequate visitor experiences*	*Inadequate visitor experiences due to limited infrastructure; improved transport networks could stimulate tourism and local economies* **TECHNOLOGICAL** *Smart tourism solutions, such as digital heritage promotion, could make destinations more accessible and appealing, Interactive tourism tools could enhance visitor engagement and sustainability awareness* **ENVIRONMENTAL** *Poor accessibility impacts tourism and can lead to environmental degradation; sustainable tourism infrastructure is critical*			infrastructure development
TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE INTERVENTIONS ***Impact**: Reduced tourism revenue, negative visitor experiences, environmental degradation*	**ENVIRONMENTAL** *Sustainability of tourism infrastructures can lead to environmental improvements and reduce environmental harm* **ECONOMIC** *Investments in tourism infrastructures with long-term sustainability can guarantee revenue generation and local economic benefits, as well as enhancing destinations' appeal and support economic diversification*	Develop sustainable tourism infrastructure and eco-friendly lodging solutions	EU Tourism Policy, Interreg Black Sea Basin Programme	**Yes** – Policies supporting sustainable tourism infrastructure expansion

Table 16 - CONSOLIDATED POLICY PATHWAY FOR THE BLACK SEA BASIN

The above identified policy-pathways should be considered within a comprehensive and integrated strategies for sustainable rural tourism development, drawing inspiration and lessons learned from the experiences of the TOURAL pilot sites.

3.3.3. Leveraging Funding Instruments for Sustainable Rural Tourism Transformation

Based on the inputs of the deliverable D2.6: "*Preliminary Identification of Funding Instruments*", resource mobilization is also an important part in supporting the TOURAL Policy Pathways development phases.
A critical enabler for the effective implementation of the TOURAL Policy Pathway is the alignment of policy actions with concrete financial support mechanisms. As the pathway progresses from visioning and target setting to concrete planning and execution, ensuring access to appropriate funding instruments becomes essential for both public authorities and private stakeholders in rural tourism ecosystems.
Deliverable D2.6, which provides a comprehensive mapping of funding instruments at European, national, regional, and sea-basin levels, offers a strategic foundation to guide the "resource mobilization" dimension of the Policy Pathway. These instruments are not only financial levers but also policy tools that can signal priorities, catalyze innovation, and enable sustainable transitions in rural tourism models.
Key EU-level programmes such as Horizon Europe, LIFE, and Creative Europe can be directly linked to TOURAL objectives, particularly in the development of sustainable tourism offerings, digital transformation, and the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage. For example, Horizon Europe supports the integration of cultural and creative sectors with digital innovation, which can be instrumental in developing immersive tourism experiences or enhancing visibility for remote destinations. Similarly, the LIFE Programme aligns with environmental priorities within the TOURAL regions, encouraging tourism models that integrate biodiversity conservation and circular economy practices.
At the sea-basin level, Interreg programmes such as ADRION, NEXT MED, and Black Sea Basin offer a fertile ground for macro-regional cooperation. These instruments can be leveraged to support joint tourism development actions, co-branding strategies across borders, and capacity building for sustainable governance models.
National programmes also play a significant role in localizing pathway implementation. For instance, Italy's ISMEA Agritourism Fund and the National Villages Plan provide tools to support small-scale rural tourism entrepreneurs and heritage-based revitalization. Similarly, Greece's ESPA and Greece 2.0 programmes align with TOURAL's goals through their focus on digital transformation, skills development, and sustainable infrastructure. Other countries in the TOURAL consortium—Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Ukraine—also offer a variety of tailored national and regional funding programmes that can be used to operationalize localized elements of the pathway.
Moreover, coordination between the pathway implementation and funding access mechanisms to ensure that the above mentioned instruments are effectively mobilized can be enhanced through local stakeholder capacity building, technical assistance on proposal development, and structured matchmaking activities between project ideas and funding opportunities.
Integrating this funding perspective into the Policy Pathway development ensures that the transition to sustainable rural tourism is not only strategically planned but also financially feasible, equitable and scalable. Funding instruments, when aligned with well-defined policy objectives, become accelerators of impact - helping TOURAL regions not only envision the future, but concretely build it.

3.4. PHASE 3 - TOURAL Policy Pathway Dissemination

Stakeholder engagement is a crucial and integral part of effectively **disseminating policy pathways for rural tourism**. It refers to the process of involving individuals, groups, and organizations who have an interest in or are affected by the development and implementation of these policies.

In the context of the TOURAL project and its pilot sites, meaningful stakeholder engagement is crucial for disseminating policy pathways that are not only effective and sustainable but also deeply rooted in the local context and supported by the community.

Stakeholder engagement within the TOURAL project follows a structured, **multi-phase approach** to guarantee inclusive participation and foster sustainable rural tourism development.
It is a **multilayered process** designed to ensure comprehensive participation from different sectors and governance levels. In fact, it involves a Quadruple Helix approach, engaging Policy, Industry, Academia, and Society, while also integrating local, national, and macro-regional perspectives[47].

Through this approach, the following TOURAL stakeholders have been identified:

The most important rural tourism stakeholders (project level):

- Relevant national ministries (Tourism, Culture, Environmental Protection, Sea/Maritime Affairs)
- State Agencies for Tourism Development
- Local and regional self-government (regions, counties, cities, municipalities, districts, oblasts)
- Local/regional/national tourist boards/organisations/committee
- Destinations management and product management company
- Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts
- NGO in tourism and culture
- Universities and secondary education institutions
- Institutions in culture
- Institutions for nature protection (national parks, nature parks, protected habitats)
- Tourism business (accommodation providers, travel companies, catering, agencies, excursion support, etc.)
- Producers of craft products (wineries, cheese factories, souvenirs and handmade goods, etc.)
- Companies that manage public transport (train, bus, tram, ferry, boat)
- Specialized unions and associations (hotel owners association, associations of cities and municipalities with the aim of promoting a specific area or product…)
- Local action groups
- Local and regional population
- Tourists / Visitors

The most important rural tourism stakeholders (pilot level):

Pilot Site	Stakeholders
Region-1 **North Sporades** **Greece**	• Tourist committee of the Municipality • The Hotel Owners Association The tourism professionals (apartments, restaurants and cafeterias, bars, diving centres, local shops, tour operator offices etch) • Region of Thessaly • Ministry of Culture • Ministry of Tourism • Travel Consultants Mazi IKE
Region-2 **Province of Teramo** **Italy**	• Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Crafts of Chieti Pescara • Gran Sasso Chamber of Commerce • SAGA - Abruzzo Airport Managing Authority • Municipalities • National parks, regional park and marine protected area

[47] TOURAL Deliverable D2.3 Stakeholders' Engagement Plan v.1

	• LAGs and FLAGs • Tourism consortia, business networks and cooperatives • DMCs – Destinations Management Companies • PMC – Product Management Company • ENIT (National Agency of Tourism) • U.N.C.E.M. (National Union of Mountain Communities)
Region-3 Island of Pag / Village Šimuni Croatia	• Zadar County • Municipalities and Cities • Tourism workers (accommodation facilities, restaurants, services) • Agricultural producers • NGO • Zadar Airport • University of Zadar • High school • Local communities • The Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Republic of Croatia • Ministry of Culture and Media of Republic of Croatia • Croatian National Tourist Board • Visitors and tourists
Region-4 Nessebar Bulgaria	• Municipalities • Tourist NGOs • Universities • Secondary Scool for Tourism in Burgas and Nessebar • Burgas Airport • Companies participating at the value chain. • Local Initiative Fishing Group Nessebar-Mesembria • Via Pontika Festa Association • Local sports associations and clubs • Nessebar Painters' Society • Neesebar Teachers' Club • Association "For Obzor" • Schools and Kindergartens • Museums, community centres and other cultural institutions on the territory of the municipality • Representatives of local and regional media • Municipal experts and specialist • Citizens and inhabitants of the municipality • The neighbouring/adjacent municipalities as a partners in a projects or other initiatives; • Ministry of Tourism, • National Tourist Organisations • Government bodies
Region-5 Danube Delta LAG, Tulcea County, Romania	• Tulcea County Council • Municipalities (communes) and cities (Tulcea, Sulina) – public authorities • Administration of Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve (ARBDD) • Local institutes acting in researching and development fields (Eco-Museal Reseach Institute - Tulcea, National Institute for Danube Delta Research and Development - Tulcea) • Regional Agency for Development (South-East Region) • Association for Intercommunity Development – I.T.I. Danube Delta, Tulcea • Representatives of national / governmental bodies acting in tourism field

	• Accommodation facilities (hotels, floating hotels and other types of ships, urban and rural pensions, villas, cabins, bungalows, hostels, holiday villages or camping sites, boarding houses, and youth camps) • Local and regional business (travel companies, accommodation, catering, transport companies) • Producers of craft products (local wineries, cheese factories, souvenirs and handmade goods, etc) • Local initiative fishing and rural groups (FLAG DD, others acting on Northern-Dobroudja territory) • Agricultural producers • Private travel consultants • Non-governmental organizations on LAG DD territory /Danube Delta area • Residents of LAG DD • Representatives of local and regional media • Visitors and tourists
Region-6 Kutsurub rural region Ukraine	• Residents of the Kutsurub rural territorial community (main service providers and beneficiaries of the project) • Residents of Mykolaiv Oblast (visitors and recreationists) • Local authorities (Kutsurub rural territorial community, Mykolaiv district state administration, Mykolaiv regional military administration) (replenishing budgets of various levels, creating tourist and recreational infrastructure, and attracting investment) • National Historical and Archaeological Reserve "Olbia", NNP “Biloberezhya Svyatoslav” (preservation of territories and objects of natural, historical and cultural heritage) • Local and regional business (travel companies, accommodation, catering, transport companies, excursion support) (creation of new jobs, filling budgets) • Producers of craft products (local wineries, cheese factories, souvenirs and handmade goods). • The public (public figures and organizations) (control, monitoring and expert evaluation of decisions). • Specialized unions and associations (protection of interests, promotion of development through support of entities in providing financial, informational, and advisory assistance). • Scientific and educational institutions (higher and secondary education institutions). • Public authorities (Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine, Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources of Ukraine, State Agency for Tourism Development of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine). • Organizations and associations of tourism entities (National Tourist Organization of Ukraine (NTOU), Association of Travel Industry Leaders of Ukraine, All-Ukrainian Association of Guides, Association of Incoming Tour Operators of Ukraine, Ukrainian Association of Travel Agencies, Ukrainian Adventure and Ecological Tourism Association, All-Ukrainian Association of Gastronomic Tourism, Hospitality Industry Association of Ukraine, Ukrainian Federation of Employers in Tourism, Union of Rural Green Tourism of Ukraine and others). • Scientific and educational institutions (conducting scientific research and practices) • Non-governmental organization

Table 17 - TOURAL RURAL MAIN STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholder engagement within the TOURAL project is based on **co-work processes** aimed at raising awareness and engaging them to co-design, co-create and co-validate pertinent approaches for the sustainable development of UCCST at both policy and operational levels.

The TOURAL project integrates co-work processes[48] using a **Living Labs (LLs) methodology** to foster collaboration, co-design, and co-validation of tourism policies, business models, and services across rural and remote areas in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and Black Sea Basin. This methodology aims to involve local communities, industry players, policymakers, and academia in tourism development, ensuring that solutions align with real needs and priorities.

The **TOURAL policy pathway dissemination phase** will integrate the stakeholder engagement process, thus ensuring that policy recommendations and solutions are effectively communicated and adopted by the key actors across multiple levels. This approach guarantees that the findings from regional pathways and the consolidated pathways for the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and the Black Sea Basin are widely disseminated and actively embraced by stakeholders.

4. Conclusions

Rural tourism plays a **critical role** in the **economic diversification** of remote areas, generating employment, preserving cultural heritage, and fostering local entrepreneurship. Unlike mass tourism, **rural tourism offers an experiential, community-driven model** that enhances visitors' understanding of local traditions, ecosystems, and historical significance. However, challenges such as **limited accessibility, lack of structured governance, and fluctuating demand** require **systematic policy interventions** to unlock its full potential

The D2.2 *Policy Pathways for TOURAL Regions & Macro-Regions* outlines a structured approach for implementing the best policies interventions and the best scenarios for the promotion of sustainable tourism in rural destinations in the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and Black Sea Basin.

A **policy pathway approach** ensures that **rural tourism development is not fragmented but strategically aligned with broader macro-regional goals**. By adopting this approach, TOURAL helps policymakers and stakeholders **design interventions tailored to specific regional challenges**, ensuring **long-term sustainability and stakeholder-driven implementation**.

By following a **step-by-step framework,** through the identification of key challenges - including seasonality, infrastructure limitations, environmental concernsand stakeholder fragmentation –, the report presents tailored regional policy pathways aimed at addressing these gaps recognizing potential solutions and determining if new policies are needed.

Through its three-phased methodology, the document sets out concrete steps to:

1. Analyze regional contexts to understand tourism barriers and opportunities,
2. Develop policy pathways that align with existing frameworks while proposing new interventions,
3. Disseminate policy recommendations through stakeholder engagement, knowledge exchange, and funding alignment.

With regard to **regional pathways** identified for each TOURAL pilot site, the main points and key findings can be summarized as follows:

- **Addressing seasonality and accessibility**: many TOURAL pilot destinations face economic instability due to seasonal tourism and poor transport connections. Solutions include tailored tourism packages and infrastructure investments;
- **Strengthening local collaboration**: a lack of structured cooperation limits tourism visibility and impact. Encouraging stakeholder networks and joint promotion efforts is key;
- **Enhancing skills and sustainability**: workforce upskilling, sustainable tourism practices and the protection of cultural and environmental heritage are crucial for long-term success.

[48] Under Task 2.3 ("Co – Work Method & Processes"), **processes to facilitate co-work** with the relevant stakeholders have been developed.

Additionally, the structured approach adopted for the **consolidated pathways** for the Adriatic-Ionian Macro-Region and the Black Sea Basin led to the following main findings:

- **Macroeconomic and environmental sustainability**: policies should incentivize off-season tourism, improve rural connectivity, and integrate sustainability measures, including digital engagement tools;
- **Policy-driven tourism development**: strengthening governance frameworks through stakeholder cooperation, cultural preservation and the creation of high-skill jobs is crucial to promote a destination;
- **Funding alignment and resource mobilization**: effective implementation relies on securing access to EU, national, and regional funding programs to ensure financial sustainability.

This deliverable will serve as a guiding framework for policy-makers, tourism stakeholders and local authorities, ensuring that tourism models evolve in a sustainable, resilient, and innovative direction. Also, it will directly support other TOURAL work packages by providing guidance for UCCST model design (WP3) and business strategies (WP4).

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