GENERATING THEMATIC ROUTES BY INNOVATIVE PROJECTS SYNERGY

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Abstract: This paper describes a model project that can help support SMEs in tourism, by developing and promoting cultural tourism. The project title is „Generating TRIPS” (Generating Thematic Routes by Innovative Projects Synergy). The project aims to conceive, design and develop an adequate „info-infrastructure” (a platform) with a set of business models and a set of best practices, all synergically integrated in order to offer support to the SMEs in the field of tourism services for addressing better and better the increasing demands of tourists for a diversified tourist experience.

Key words: thematic routes, project, business models

1. Short description of project
The long-term trend of shifting tourism demand from mass tourism to more tailor-made customized tourism for the individual traveler is already here in UE. It is accelerated by development of the internet and especially of the mobile internet.

Enhancing the competitiveness of the EU tourism industry plays an important role for the attainment of the EU’s Growth and Jobs Strategy goals.

In this context, it is important for the tourism sector to successfully address a number of challenges, including ageing society, growing global competition, sustainability concerns and evolving demand patterns for specific forms of tourism but it is crucial to help and to sustain the SMEs in tourism to face these challenges.

The project „Generating TRIPS” is based on theoretical and practical results of the research project „Oltcultour”, having the aim to support the catalysis of a cultural tourism market in “Northern Oltenia” Region of Romania, developed by a consortium lead by the „Constantin Brancusi” University

Practically, we started from the challenge of how to give value, using a bottom-up approach, to the enormous potential for the development of grassroots of EU (cultural) tourism, id est, how to generate a genuinely European tourism phenomenon that give sustainable, ethical and social life to local knowledge, skills and heritage assets, and to promote lesser known European destinations and Europe itself as a destination for a quality tourist (cultural) experience.

The general economic objectives
- a better, diversified, sustainable and authentic tourist experience
- a mechanism (based on mobile web) for a better and quicker generation of new/alternative thematic routes
- an adequate and personalized „info-infrastructure” (a platform) for each tourist enterprise (firm, tourist SMEs) involved in the project, with
  - a set of business models
  - a set of best practices
- an effective generation of 3 new local tourist routes and one trans-national European cultural route, in a grassroots, bottom-up approach

The project is based on the natural qualities (attributes) of a tourist for being curious and for being an explorer. The tourist is endowed by the project with what he needs to become also an experimenter and a reporter. By „walking / searching with a purpose”, by „participating to the cultural tourism experiences”, and by „direct reporting what he have experienced” to a special web-site attached to each cultural route, developed in connection to the generic network platform, he will contribute to the generation and development of a European cultural route.

The project addresses, first of all, the needs for diversified (cultural) tourism experiences of the tourists and, secondly, the needs for creative-innovative integrated tourist services of the small firms providers.

Also, by self generating the tourism (cultural) routes, the project will address the needs for integrating within the platform the SMEs providers and also the need to cluster them into a creative-innovative suppliers of cultural tourism experiences.

Our previous applied research project „Oltcultour” showed us that the cultural tourists are poorly served by the normal tourist services providers, and that the SMEs tourist providers need to be helped in clustering and coordinating them in order to become viable in the competitive tourism market.

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The process of generating a ‘generating thematic routes’ is a process of ‘double enaction’: the first is ‘the strong/hard enaction’ by which a platform is conceived and realized and has the function of supporting the generation process; the second is ‘the weak/soft enaction’ by which a ‘seed’ is created and has the function to start and to catalysis the process.

**The generic societal objectives**

The project "generating thematic routes", by its design and its implementation process, addresses and contributes in an innovative, effective and efficient way to the most problematic societal issues within the European tourism (cultural) market:
- the lack of coordination at European level in the development and promotion strategies of the Touristic (Cultural) Routes;
- the weak marketing strategies and almost no joint promotional initiatives;
- limited human and financial resources of the networks managing the routes; low degree of exchange of good practices, etc.

The project "generating thematic routes” allows, by its generic feature and by its capability for both horizontally and vertically integration, to (**generic societal objectives**):
- to highly differentiate the European tourism offer and to increase the number of EU touristic (cultural) routes (also sub-routes)
- to bring into the tourist market less known touristic (cultural and natural) heritages.
- to make the tourism SMEs involved more viable and more competitive by exploiting the authenticity and sustainability of diversified regional / local cultures and traditions as well as natural beauties

Of course, we hope that our project may become the start of a benefic process for developing the EU (cultural) tourism market.

The main benefits of the project are:
- A better, diversified, sustainable and authentic tourist experience
- A better and quicker generation of new/alternative thematic routes
- A highly differentiated European tourism (cultural) offer
- An increase the number of EU touristic (cultural) routes (also sub-routes)

**1.2. Innovative character in relation to the state-of-the-art**

Tourism generally, and cultural tourism in particular has not performed well in the arena of authenticity and sustainability of development. This makes imperative the authentic development of tourism, not only for the sake of the tourists and market forces, but also for the integrity of the community and those who live that culture. Not only is it necessary to retain some of the features of the past that have created the culture in question but the recognition of transformational mechanisms that will eventually generate new forms and adaptations of that culture.

Tourists will be interested in the dynamic properties of culture if it is revealed and presented to them in an authentic and meaningful way. Creative strategy designing must become as important as marketing and they are important not only for economic innovation but also for social, institutional and/ or organizational innovation

As a matter of fact, at the same time with the deepening of the economic crisis, the specialists noticed that it is also a political, social and even civilization crisis, so it is necessary that this crisis should be dealt with not only at the economic level, but at social, political and civilization level, too.

Beside the classical role/function of market of efficiently allocation of resources and the functions of facilitation of exchange and reduction of transactions costs, there is also a view of a market as a complex evolving device that promotes division/specialization of labour, learning/ innovation and economic growth/development, which takes place within a cultural environment.

In this context of a socio-cultural economy, understanding the (economic) creativity (innovation) as a collective phenomenon and not only as an individual activity, that involves the role of things/artefacts as mediators of human action, as well as external forms of knowledge, gives new insights and perspectives to the problem of generating a (creative / innovative) market.

Thus in a more and more complex, globalized world, in a period of deep changes, it is preferable, as a matter of fact, it is necessary that the innovative-entrepreneurial action should be considered under the imperative “to innovate in order to transform the present non-sustainable human civilization into a sustainable civilization based on knowledge.”

The project starts from the specificities of the concept and model of Regional Creative System as an extremis of the concept and model of Regional Innovation System. We show that effective and creative/creativity policies and actions should be in place to maximize the beneficial development impact of tourism and its deep linkages with the creative economy. This means to treat more carefully the concept of "emergent authenticity" which advocates that authenticity is historically and socially “emergent” rather than static: “a cultural product, or a trait thereof, which is at

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one point generally judged as contrived or inauthentic, may, in the course of time, become generally recognized as authentic, even by experts”.

1.3. Contribution to advancement of knowledge / technological progress
Synthesizing, our project „Generating TRIPS” (Generating Thematic Routes by Innovative Projects Synergy) integrates the creative (the perspective of “creative economy”) response of the tourist service provider enterprise (tourist SMEs) to a genuine demand for an authentic experience (the perspective of “experience economy”) using the new instruments of the (mobile) internet (the perspective of “web2.0, economy2.0 and marketing2.0”) 

The issue of supporting the SMEs in a low-innovation field (tourism) to better contribute to the sustainable development of a area/locality/region involve a rethinking and reconceptualising, in order to integrate, in the new vision of designing the generation if development, ideas as it follows: sustainability, viability, (social) diversity, harmony.

The modalities of growth of an area/locality/region vacillates between two visions (paradigms), one of “spontaneous-anarchic individualist” type and one “collective rigid planned” type. Each of these two types of growth attained the limit of non-sustainable and a new vision (paradigm) is necessary of (re) thinking not of a growing but of an organic development to lead to a modality of “Client-supplier/community generative-designed” type.

Our project is enlisted in the field of the idea of “Client-supplier/community development”, (seen as a process of enlarging and development of the ability of both individual and collective action of a supplier-client community, and also as a response for the improvement of the community as a whole in different fields: physical, environmental, social, economic, political etc.) in connection with the idea of “economic development” (seen as a process of creating the prosperity through mobilization of human, financial, physical- natural etc. resources to acquire markets products and services).

1.4. Quality and effectiveness of methodology
The project adopts an action-research methodology. So the activities have a iterated feature. They may be iterated many times, depending on how the environment will react.

We adopted the action-research methodology because it is the most appropriated methodology for this type of project and because this project is build on the results of a recently developed research project, within the Romanian National Plan II for research, development, innovation (RDI), realized by the OLTCultour Consortium, led by Constantin Brancusi University (CBU), Targu-Jiu, Romania – “research for conceiving a generic network platform to support and to catalyze the generation and the development of a cultural tourism market in Northern Oltenia Region”, which it was also developed using the action-research approach within the complexity paradigm.

The well-known specialist in action-research, Peter Reason, observed when he saw the features of the new economic science presented by Robertson, that there is a close connection between the participative action-research and the new economic science.

James Robertson defines four features of the new economics⁴:
- It should empower the people to take their fate into their own hands
- It should preserve systematically the resources
- It should include qualitative values aand ethical choices in economic life
- it should admit that fact that our first concern does not refer to the wealth of nations but to a sole global economy that should be reconceptualized, re-designed and re-structured towards a multi-level, descentralized and pluralist one

the features of the action-research:
- the main aim of the action-researchy is to bring practical knowledge to contribute through alteration to the growth of peoples’ wealth…action without reflexion is blind while the theory without action is pointless
- any action-research is participative and any participative research has to be action-researchy; thus the action-researchy becomes possible only “with”, “for” and “by” individuals and communities, implying all the stakeholders
- the process of investigation is as important as the results of a action-researchy, being an evolutive process
- the action-researchy is emancipatory, leading not only to a new practice but also to the development of new abilities in order to create knowledge

It follows that these two intercessions, the new economics and the action-research are similar and are oriented towards a renewal of the old approaches which are no longer adequate, being in the crisis.

As a matter of fact from the dialogue of the action-research and the new economics, a variety of action-research emerged called „the research of the network action-research”; it is a methodology of action-research, implying people, places and technology and which attempts to answer the challenges emerged from the changing of

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⁴ James Robertson, The new economics of sustainable development, The Old Bakehouse, 2005
nature, interaction of community with the social aspect, through the birth of informational society based on knowledge, a network-society.

The action-research takes into consideration both the human aspect and the technologic aspect of social networks (communities of practices, communities of interests, traditional communities etc.). Thus technology is oriented towards practice, towards the human way of being, becoming more and more ergonomic, more oriented towards human and better centred on applications. In fact the social communities (either traditional or network-type) operate as systems of social education, in which people connects to solve the problems, to share ideas, to establish terms, to build tools and to develop relationships from man to man.

In addition, if we take a look at the way in which different innovative enterprisers performed along the few centuries of capitalist development, we notice that in fact their intercession was a action-research sui generis. As a recent example, from Jessica Livingston’s book *Founders at Work: Stories of Startups*, we notice that the innovative enterprisers with successful stories practised an intuitive, unconscious and un-formalized action-research. In innovative starts-up nothing goes by the plan and they need perseverance and adaptability so that the process of attempt-error, of intention-accomplishment, inherent to this stage, may be regarded as one of action-research.

The economic growth, from the perspective of economics is in the fist place, the result of endogeneous changes in technology, tastes and preferences, leading thus to changes in production and utility, the main driving force being creativity and the economic agents’ innovation.

The theories of complexity regard the economic agents (entreprisers, companies, corporations) as complex adaptable systems, whose interactions, evolutions and dynamics are diverse, difficult to predict, contradictory, even paradoxical at some scales. Within this perspective the innovation emerges as a natural, endogeneous, intelligible phenomenon of economic activity.

Being „fluid, flexible and dynamic”, innovation is considered in this period of profound crises and radical changes, as the most important successful economic factor. Enterprisers, economic agents and regional economies which have already developed the innovation abilities will be those who will exit from the crisis strengthened.

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