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Barriers to Stakeholder Involvement in Sustainable Rural Tourism Development—Experiences from Southeast Europe

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Abstract: Participative planning approaches are vital to sustainable development in rural areas. However, stakeholder involvement also faces many barriers. In this Danube region case study, barriers to stakeholder involvement across eight rural regions are investigated. With the standardized conditions provided through an ERDF and IPA funded EU project, special attention could be paid to socio-cultural barriers, specifically concerning perception of sustainability and conflicts of interest. The effects of these barriers to the planning process are seen in the comparison of awareness concerning overall goals, indicators and the regional self-assessments. The implications for planning and management in rural tourism areas find that the perception of sustainability varies greatly, perceived deficiencies increase awareness and that crucial indicators need to be understood by stakeholders beginning a participative planning approach.

Keywords: rural tourism; stakeholder involvement; participative planning; rural areas in the Danube area; sustainable rural development

1. Introduction

With interest in stakeholder participation growing, there have been both advocates and opponents pointing out the benefits and pitfalls this approach can have on tourism development. Tourism offers an especially interesting backdrop for participative planning methods, since there is such an array of potential stakeholders. While some authors perceive an extensive stakeholder involvement as the ultimate precondition for a successful and integrated strategy, others highlight the difficulties and the limited professional outcomes. Some supports for stakeholder involvement praise the approach for its communication and collaboration abilities in planning well-accepted tourism strategies and for its ability to avoid conflict arising during implementation [1]. Wilson et al. [2] see it as a major factor for success, specifically for rural tourism development, in the way it brings those directly and indirectly involved in the tourism sector together. Fraser et al. [3] note that the benefits of participation are felt most strongly if stakeholders are truly incorporated into decision making and final results, and are made more relevant for policy makers. Opponents to this approach are sceptical as they find involvement to be tokenistic [4] or even a simplistic way of creating an illusion of responsibility [5]. Considering this variety in opinion, the perception may also be the result of the respective planning approach and significantly influenced by the circumstances, the timeframe and the provided framework.

Interreg, also known as the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) uses programmes such as the Danube Transnational Programme as a financial instrument to assist regions in implementing joint projects between member states. It fosters regional exchange, peer learning and bottom-up development processes. The aim of Interreg is to bring regions together to focus on sustainable

solutions and ultimately lead to shared solutions to common issues in economy, environment and society and to improve the creation and implementation of European policy. The European Union pays special attention to funding opportunities for participatory processes which are seen as an essential element [6] through Interreg. Within the Danube Transnational Programme, projects seek to use tools that will support small-scale pilot actions that will ensure long-term sustainable development.

It is within the Interreg Danube Transnational Programme that the project INSiGHTS—integrated slow, green and healthy tourism strategies—was funded and developed to assist partners in eight European countries to create and implement strategies that ensure long-term tourism development that protects local natural and cultural resources. To follow this objective, three thematic pillars were focused on: Integrated tourism management, coordinated tourism supply and promoting a healthy and eco-conscious lifestyle. The planning process to achieve these goals was supposed to be obtained through intensive stakeholder involvement. More information on INSiGHTS is provided in Section 3. The paper at hand presents and analyses the respective participatory process in the eight partner countries against its contribution to sustainable tourism development and barriers against it.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Stakeholder Involvement and its Benefits

In its most basic form, a stakeholder is defined as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives” [7] (p. 46). In tourism planning, stakeholder involvement is typically characterized by great diversity, embracing representatives of the tourism industry, tourists, entrepreneurs, communities, administrative bodies and non-governmental organizations, experts and the local population. Amongst tourism projects the variety of stakeholders can be just as diverse from project to project as the methodological approaches and necessary time involvement. Therefore, stakeholder involvement takes shape in many different forms with typology ranging from tokenism to citizen control [8]. Through categorisation and analysis of these stakeholders, the appropriate ones can be chosen for involvement [9–11]. In our context, we defined stakeholder in tourism as people who have an interest in the regional development and may profit from their regions’ development in a direct or indirect manner. According to Waligo et al. [12] these stakeholders are classified as “primary stakeholders.” In our definition we are following Murphy’s Community Approach [13] who underlined that beneficial partnerships are essential for tourism planning and that it is imperative to recognise stakeholders when managing tourism more sustainably and take account of their different perspectives on the issue (see [14–16]). Following this approach, stakeholders should not be recipients of sustainable tourism planning initiatives but active participants and drivers of the planning process [12]. This approach also takes into account that tourism development can result in heavy exploitation of local resources, enhance gentrification and influence the local quality of life [17,18]. Norton [19] along with Wall and Mathieson [20] underline that local stakeholders (and not tourists) need the opportunity to discuss issues that influence the quality of their lives and need to be sufficiently empowered to do so. Therefore, the primary stakeholders in this study exclude tourists and concentrates on those with interest in regional development.

The benefits gained through stakeholder involvement is, according to the literature, a more transparent and better-accepted tourism strategy and results [21]. It increases equity of decision-making and incorporates marginalized groups. It helps to understand the diverse range of (potentially conflicting) interests and navigate the regionally specific issues. Furthermore, it is a tool for education to generate understanding of regional issues and politics [22]. Participation is instrumental in development and execution of strategy if it leads to trust and understanding among the diverse range of participants [9].

Hartley and Wood [21] identify 10 criteria to evaluate the conditions under which the benefits of stakeholder involvement can best be achieved: Communications, fairness, timing, accessibility, information provision, influence on the process, competence, interaction, compromise and trust. Under

these conditions, bringing stakeholders together can lead to an integrated and regionally appropriate planning strategy that will address unique selling points and products, and will benefit the region as a whole. By actively contributing, the variety of stakeholders understand the planning process from beginning to end, which increases acceptance. But as Prell et al. [23] (p. 15) state: “This variety of personality and people which is clearly the most important strength of participatory modelling is also its largest weakness.”, indicating that there continue to be barriers to the process that hinder its success.

2.2. Barriers to Participatory Processes

Few efforts have been made to directly identify barriers to stakeholder involvement in tourism planning or conditions that benefit its success. Tosun [22] made a first attempt at categorising barriers while Hartley and Wood [21] investigated conditions that would benefit involvement according to the Aarhus Convention. The fact that clear barriers are listed and explained makes them stand out in the stakeholder literature. Both papers address the issues arising when the methodology of stakeholder involvement is put into practice. Where in theory the design of such a process enforces democracy and transparency, all too often one is confronted with tokenism and manipulation, typologies categorised as nonparticipation by Arnstein [8]. Hartley and Wood [21] and Tosun [22] have gone beyond the theory and identified barriers to the practical implementation of stakeholder involvement.

Tosun [22] identifies barriers in three categories: Operational, structural and cultural (see Table 1). While his paper concentrates on tourism destinations in development, the presence of these barriers in rural regions is mentioned as well. Operational limitation includes centralised administration, lack of coordination and lack of information. Structural limitations are made up of the attitudes, expertise, domination by the elite, legal system and human resources. Additionally, Tosun sees high costs and lack of financial resources as potential structural barriers. Finally, cultural limitations play into barriers as well. In eastern European countries, this includes a lack of participatory experiences in local planning and decision making. Limited capacity of the poor, apathy and low levels of awareness also hinder local participation.

Table 1. Barriers to stakeholder involvement for tourism planning in rural regions (categorised after Tosun [21] and expanded through Hartley and Wood [22]).

Operational Barriers	Structural Barriers	Cultural and Personal Barriers
Lack of information on planning and legalities	Poor legal framework & regulatory constraints	Low capacity of poor
Weak administration	Lack of access to resources	Apathy
Poor coordination	Lack of expertise	Low awareness
Poor execution	Lack of training	Mistrust
Failure to influence process	High costs	Domination by elite
		NIMBY

In further investigation of conditions for stakeholder involvement, Hartley and Wood [21] identify eight barriers. They agree with Tosun [22] that regulatory constraints, lack of information, and low levels of awareness or knowledge of planning are to be considered a hindrance. They add further barriers: mistrust, failure to influence the process, poor execution of the method and poor access to legal advice. Finally, they see the effects of the “Not in my backyard” (NIMBY) syndrome to be a barrier, especially where interests diverge and consensus difficult to achieve.

While Tosun’s [22] barriers are concentrated on the frameworks and surrounding conditions, Hartley and Wood [21] address barriers that are more directly felt by the stakeholders themselves. Therefore, these two sets of barriers complement each other. Combining Hartley and Wood’s [21] barriers with those Tosun [22] has established, a list of 16 identified barriers falling into three categories after Tosun that affect stakeholder involvement in rural tourism planning is obtained

The framework presented in Table 1 assists in analysing and structuring the experiences and outcomes of case studies on stakeholder involvement in tourism destinations. Case studies have been analysed on barrier to stakeholder participation in tourism. Since the amount of cases in rural tourism is rather limited, case studies in urban settings have been included. An investigation of recorded barriers to stakeholder involvement gave insight into the variety of regions and categories of barriers that are most evident in practical work with stakeholders. The theoretical analysis of these case studies illustrates the frequency of barriers and which solutions may have already been found to tackle them. The findings on barriers reported in tourism related case studies are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Case Studies and their barriers.

Case Study analysis	Operational Barriers					Structural Barriers				Cultural and Personal Barriers					
	Lack of information	Weak administration	Poor coordination	Poor execution	Failure to influence	Poor legal framework Regulatory constraints	Lack of access to resources	Lack of expertise	Lack of training	High costs	Low capacity of the poor	Apathy	Low awareness	Mistrust	Domination by elite conflict of interest
Thrace region, Turkey [24]	X**	X	X			X		X				X			X
South Kynouria region, Greece [25]	X	X	X					X	X			X	X		
Kenya [26]	X	X	X			X	X	X	X		X				
Cusco, Peru [27]			X	X	X**			X	X	X		X			X
Calvia, Spain [15]			X		X	X		X	X				X		
Abai village, Malaysia [28]			X*						X				X		
Port Douglas, Australia [29]				X	X									X	X
Jumma and Kashmir region, India [30]										X	X				X

* In long-term implementation, loss of motivation. **: lack of strategic vision.

The highest number of barriers were identified within the operational barriers category. The largest named issue being poor coordination followed by failure to influence the planning process. Poor coordination can stem from underlying issues such as lacking financial resources or time constraints. It can also consist of failing communication leading to an uncoordinated approach that does not lead to acceptable results. A failure to influence the planning process reflects poor implementation of participation and indicates non-participatory approaches in its design.

Amongst the structural barriers lack of expertise and lack of training were identified as being the most challenging. The lack of knowledge on methodology and content continue to affect planning processes negatively. If there is no expertise, there is no leadership within the process or for the stakeholders. A lack of expertise is a barrier that causes inappropriate solution measures and poor planning strategies.

Apathy and a lack of motivation lead among cultural and personal barriers. Not only is commitment required of stakeholders, but also interest in development, time investments and the

willingness to engage in dialogue. Equally difficult is the issue of domination of elite, under which conflict of interest was also grouped, as conflict of interest usually leads to the more dominating party being able to push their ways forward. Mistrust and lack of access to resources did not appear to be hard felt barriers in these studies. Low capacity and poor execution are not often mentioned as barriers. What has not been mentioned in the analysed case studies are differences that local culture has on perception of planning related issues such as climate change adaptation or gender issues.

Planning frameworks highlight an additional barrier that strongly influenced the process: An outcome-oriented versus process-oriented approach. The style of approach influences the perception of both stakeholders and politicians following short-term aims without a long-term mentality. Such an approach is detrimental for the planning process, does not lead to sustainable outcomes and will lead to further problems down the road.

Furthermore, the role of the respective planning bodies differs within the analysed studies. The planner himself can become a barrier to the process if there is conflict between their role as a planner or expert and their role as process moderator. In changing approaches, the planner needs to see their function clearly as a moderator and guide as opposed to an expert influencing the decision making [31].

While several authors of case studies [24,28–30] identify some solutions to the barriers dealt with in the mentioned regions such as structures that encourage collaboration and coordination, linking stakeholders into the planning process, promotion through tourism organisations, capacity building amongst locals and understanding the prevailing power structures, Tosun [22] and Hartley and Wood [21] summarize the needs quite precisely. Hartley and Wood [21] identify early and effective involvement of stakeholders as a key factor. Additionally, information should be easily accessible and understandable by providing access to documents, discussion and public opinion. Results from participation should be taken seriously and considered in outcome decision-making, if the stakeholders are not already directly involved in the final decision-making. Most importantly policy changes should be implemented to encourage participation and allow a sufficient amount of time for the process. A simplification of the process would allow greater transparency and increase enthusiasm. Tosun [22] adds that decision-makers need to change their attitudes and behaviours towards participation and use specific and deliberate strategies at all planning levels, from local to international, to tackle barriers.

Due to the European funding and the support provided by knowledge providing partners, the INSIGHTS project keeps the operational and the structural factors constant and, as a result, these are of little to no influence. This allows a greater study of the influence of the respective socio-cultural conditions in the pilot regions. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research questions: Which are the cultural barriers that constrain stakeholder involvement in this south-east European case study? How do these barriers influence the perception of sustainability goals and the respective stakeholder engagement in tourism development?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Case Study Areas in the Danube Transnational Program

The INSIGHTS projects contribute to the current debate on stakeholder involvement by creating and using a methodology specifically designed to engage stakeholders and avoid structural and operational barriers. Analysing current theoretical standings and issues arising in other case studies, guidelines were designed to contribute to stakeholder involvement [32–34]. Links to the Self-Assessment Manual [34], Regional Visions: Integrated Development Concepts on Sustainable Tourism Guidelines and Template [33], and the Strategies for Integrated Development Concepts on sustainable Tourism Guidelines and Template [32] can be found in the supplementary materials at the end of this paper. The design addresses the early and effective involvement of stakeholders [21] and the development of a framework also addresses operational and structural issues identified in the case studies and literature [3,9,12,21,22,24,35]. The framework encouraged collaboration and coordination

of stakeholders throughout the planning process. The guidelines were designed to deliver outputs that could directly flow into planning outcomes.

INSiGHTS worked in eight regions. The presented paper uses this unique opportunity to analyse eight parallel tourism planning processes within a European Union funded project under standardised conditions in order to better understand typical barriers and examine strategies to overcome constraints. The results are of particular interest because INSiGHTS partners are mainly located in south-eastern European countries. The differences in meaning of stakeholder involvement in planning traditions across these regions are expected to become visible. Considering south-eastern European planning traditions are rooted in their post-communist history, meaning they are centralised and follow a more top-down tradition, cooperation with stakeholders is more of a challenge [36,37]. The applicability of the results may also be able to strengthen planning processes in similar European Union funded projects.

The regions working in this project are located in rural areas of the Danube Transnational Programme region and consists of partners from Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia (Lead partner), Slovenia and Serbia. They share a common interest in developing new tourism products that will be attractive to visitors and increase sustainability. At the same time, each region has individual natural and cultural resources that create unique issues and a unique project environment (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Interreg Danube Transnational Programme area (2019).

3.2. Planning process

The planning process and the related stakeholder involvement which will be analysed in this paper were carefully designed and consists of tailored planning tools. To achieve the set objectives and ensure long-term regional development over the course of the two and half year runtime, participatory guidelines on self-assessment, vision development, strategy building and product development were

provided [32–34]. They anticipated possible barriers. These guidelines were designed to be transferable among regions while also strengthening the local focus on individual and unique issues at hand.

Clearly phrased guidelines were used to introduce stakeholders into the planning process in the INSiGHTS piloting regions. Broken into three parts, these guidelines were short, straightforward, and especially designed for users who do not come from a planning background. Among a detailed step-by-step narration, they also included templates. All guidelines which include template tables can be found on project website [38]. The template tables were used by project partners in their self-assessment and vision development. This approach broke the overlaying objective—creating long-term and sustainable tourism strategies—into manageable steps for those who were conducting such a task for the first time. The templates provided a clear understanding of the task at hand and introduced the partners to long-term planning. It was agreed that this methodology would ensure awareness raising and generate greater understanding amongst the partners for both the planning process and of the long-term goals they were aiming to achieve in their regions.

In a first meeting regional stakeholder groups were set up. The groups roughly consisted of between 25 and 50 people in each region. Piloting regions incorporated regional stakeholders from municipal government, statistical institutions, destination management organisations (DMOs), small and medium enterprises, interest groups, ministries, sports clubs, mountain rescue and development associations to name a few. Masterclasses and regional empowering stakeholder workshops held twice throughout the project were the meeting point and discussion forum in which participants could come together.

Regional stakeholders contributed concrete information and evaluation in various planning steps. Firstly, all stakeholders discussed and agreed upon common goals which were based on development goals set by the World Tourism Organisation, the European Union and the United Nations SDGs. This laid the foundation for further analysis. For the Status Quo Analysis [39] information was provided through indicators listed in the guidelines. While some indicators were mandatory, others could be selected from or were optional. During the analysis of strengths and weaknesses, stakeholders incorporated local knowledge on cooperation, management structures, built heritage and current visitor experience. These were the basis for following discussions on socio-economic and environmental development. After full understanding of the current state was achieved and with the previously chosen common goals in mind, a joint vision development and corresponding strategy were developed with the stakeholders [33,34].

3.3. Methodological Design

From the beginning typical operational barriers listed in Table 1 were eliminated: Information on planning and the legalities were compensated through knowledge providers of the project. Coordination and execution were organized and compensated any weak administration that may have otherwise occurred. The process-oriented approach provided continuous direct influence from stakeholders into the tourism planning process.

Similarly, the structural barriers were analysed and significantly reduced. Through knowledge providers being present, resources, expertise and training were given and available. The co-funding from European Union funds (ERDF and IPA) meant that costs were not a burden to the process either. Lastly for structural barriers, the legal and regulatory frameworks for tourism were studied in each of the regions. While there are many frameworks at EU, national and regional level to be abided to, they were not identified as constraining [40].

During the establishment of INSiGHTS, all project partners willingly joined and were aware of the desired objectives and outputs. By nature of participation NIMBY, mistrust and apathy were not relevant cultural barriers and were therefore not considered in the analysis. The following results thus concentrate on barriers such as awareness, domination or conflict of interest. The barriers that defined stakeholder involvement during INSiGHTS were all to be found in the “cultural and personal barriers” grouping.

4. Results

Since the typical structural and operational barriers were avoided by the cooperation program and the methodological design, the following results focus on the two strongest barriers identified as describing stakeholder involvement in this case study

- Low awareness [15,24,25,28]
- Domination and/or conflict of interest [24,27,29,30]

4.1. Low Awareness of Major Elements for Sustainable Tourism Development

Since the whole planning process in the eight pilot areas focuses on sustainable tourism development in the respective countries the awareness of overarching goals was analysed. In order to do this, the respective partners were asked about the importance of sustainability goals listed below in their planning environments. This was done via the self-assessment manual [34] by project partners in cooperation with their regional stakeholder groups. Within the meetings the data collected on overall goals and self-evaluation were examined. The overall goals reflect the values and aims of the INSIGHTS project and were categorised into five thematic fields relevant to tourism development:

- Destination strategy, cooperation and management structures.
- Environment and land use heritage.
- Socio-economic benefits and regional development.
- Socio-cultural built heritage.
- Quality of visitor experience and product development.

To establish consensus among stakeholders the first step was to examine each of the 32 overall goals and decide to what extent it should be a goal in their region. If stakeholders agreed that a goal was very important, the awareness was high. If the stakeholders in a pilot area did not recognise a goal as important then the awareness was evaluated as low (Table 3).

Looking at the five thematic fields one can see that overall the destination strategy and the quality of the visitor experiences including product development were perceived as major goals. The awareness of the project partners and their stakeholders is high in these two fields and there is an understanding of the importance of the included aspects. The socio-economic area holds medium to high awareness across all stakeholders.

Surprisingly low and overall quite diverse were the awareness levels concerning the environment and land use heritage as well as the socio-cultural and built heritage. Several pilot areas and their stakeholders ranked the goals lower than the other thematic fields. Thus, they were not aware of the importance of these aspects for sustainable tourism development in their region.

A closer look taken at the goals perceived with low or very low awareness. It showed that the least awareness for environment and land use heritage could be found in the indicators “climate risk avoidance” and “reducing resource consumption”. In addition, the indicators “contribution to events”, “gender issues”, “gentrification” and “cultural impact” held the lowest levels of awareness in socio-cultural and built heritage. The partners were obviously not aware of possible impacts on their cultural life, gentrification and gender issues tourism development could have. However, all provided goals were accepted as crucial elements of a sustainability tourism development by at least one partner. In order to understand the barriers related to specific sustainability goals and respective cultural differences the indicators which showed the highest diversity among the partners were analysed in detail (Table 4).

Table 3. Awareness overall goals agreed upon.

Sustainability Goals	Indicators	Awareness	
Destination strategy, cooperation and management structures	The region has a strategy concept	Very high	1
	Sustainability goals are supported	Very high	1
	DMO development	Low	4
	Destination management initiatives and visibility	High	2
	Destination learning	Medium	3
Overall awareness for destination strategy:		high	0 2,2
Environment and land use heritage	Protection of natural resorts / protected area	Medium	3
	Protection of habitats	High	2
	Land use heritage	Medium	3
	Reduce resource consumption	Very low	5
	Climate change adaption and sustainable mobility	Low	4
	Climate risk avoidance	Very low	5
Overall awareness for environment issues:		low	0 4,4
Socio economic benefits and regional development	Economic benefits	Medium	3
	Reduction of seasonality	Medium	3
	Tourist's expenses	High	2
	Gentrification ownerships of tourism infrastructure	High	2
	Availability and quality of services	Medium	3
Overall awareness for social economic benefits:		medium to high	0 2,6
Socio cultural and built heritage	Maintain and awareness of cultural heritage	Very high	1
	Local food	High	2
	Built heritage	Medium	3
	Awareness and use level	Medium	3
	Contribution to events	Very low	5
	Gender issues	Very low	5
	Security	Low 4	4
	Socio-cultural disturbance	Low 4	4
	Gentrification by increasing housing costs	Very low	5
	Perception of cultural impacts	Very low	5
Overall awareness for socio-cultural and built heritage:		Low	0 3,7
Quality of visitor experiences and product development	Visitor satisfaction	Very high	1
	Unique selling proposition	Medium	3
	Inclusive offers	Medium	3
	Improves infrastructure for outdoor recreation	Low	4
	Infrastructure for outdoor experience and environmental education	Medium	3
	Recommendation	Very high	1
Overall awareness for quality of visitor experience:		Medium to high	0 2,5
Legend:	1	very high awareness: goals are supported by all partners (8)	
	2	high: supported by 7	
	3	medium: supported by 5-6	
	4	low: rejected by 3-4	
	5	very low: rejected or little support by 5-7	

Table 4. Analysis of low and very low awareness per goal by region.

Goal	Desired Condition	BG	HR	DE	HU	RO	SK	SI	RS
Improved infrastructure for outdoor	The number of infrastructure for main outdoor recreation activities are monitored, maintained, and in a good condition	med	high	high	med	low	high	high	high
Security	The crime rate is not influenced by tourism	high	med	high	high	low	low	high	high
Destination Management	There is an organisation in the destination which serves as a connector between different stakeholders, groups, and local organisations. The role and importance of destination leadership is clear	med	high	med	high	med	med	high	high
Climate change adaption and sustainable mobility	Tourism contributes to strengthen climate change adaptation and environment-friendly mobility	med	med	med	high	high	high	med	high
Socio-cultural disturbance	The share of visitors in relation to the local residents is perceived as adequate	high	med	low	med	high	low	high	high
Contribution	Tourism taxes contribute to the organisation of events	low	high	low	high	low	high	high	med
Reduce resource consumption	Tourism contributes to save energy and environmental resources	med	med	high	med	med	high	med	high
Gender issues	The share of men and women employed in tourism is equal/similar	med	med	med	high	med	med	high	high
Gentrification	Effects by gentrification such as increasing number of second homes or increasing costs for homes are limited	med	high	high	high	med	low	med	n/a
Perception of cultural impacts	The majority of visitors believes that they are low-impacting the destination identity	med	low	high	high	med	low	high	med
Climate risk avoidance	Tourism infrastructure considers possible risks due to climate change	low	med	med	med	med	low	med	high

High Awareness	(high) the partner believes this is an important sustainability goal
Medium Awareness	(med) the partner believes this is partly an important sustainability goal
Low Awareness	(low) the partner believes this is not a goal of importance

The European Union specifically promotes sustainability goals in tourism based on its policy documents including “Action for more sustainable European Tourism” [41], “Agenda for a sustainable and competitive European Tourism” [42] and “Europe, the World’s No 1 Tourism destination—A new political framework for tourism in Europe” [43] and by related guidelines, such as the European Tourism Indicator System [44]. Hence, it is to be expected that the extent of acceptance and awareness of sustainability goals depends on the guidance of this European influence. Therefore, the results by the Croatian, German, Hungarian, Slovakian, and Slovenian partners were compared with the Bulgarian, Romanian and Serbian partners as the first group of regions have been part of the European

Union for a longer time and have therefore been more exposed to the EU's policy influence. However, the comparison did not show a significant influence of European policies and respective guidance.

As the results in Table 4 show the awareness on sustainability aspects of the respective local stakeholders, it becomes evident that the lowest levels of awareness concerning major sustainability elements were predominantly found in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia. Croatia and Germany were in a mid-range while Hungary, Slovenia and Serbia showed a higher awareness than the other piloting areas. The results presented underline that the local stakeholders are often not aware of European policies and that the processes are guided by the local exchange among stakeholders at a regional level.

4.2. Domination and/or Conflict of Interests

The awareness of sustainability goals may be influenced by current situation and existing conflicts of interest or dominating subjects in the respective region. Therefore, the partner regions were asked to conduct a self-assessment based on the criteria and indicators presented in Table 3 and to summarize their current performance according to the five thematic areas in regard to the goals. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Regional Self-Assessments in INSIGHTS 2018.

Pilot Region	Destination Strategy, Cooperation & Management Structure	Environment and Land Use Heritage	Socio-economic Benefits and Regional Development	Socio-cultural and Built Heritage	Quality of Visitor Experience and Product Development
Bulgaria	++	+	++	++	+
Croatia	+	+	+	++	+
Germany	+	+	-	++	+
Hungary	-	+	++	+	++
Romania	++	++	++	++	+
Slovakia	+	++	-	++	-
Slovenia	+	+	+	+	+
Serbia	+	-	-	+	-

Legend: ++ good performance; + fair performance, improvement required; - deficiencies.

The comparison shows that all partners evaluated their socio-cultural and built heritage well. In fact, it was the only category in which none of the self-assessments showed deficiencies. This category is felt to be performing well and is not in need of any major improvements. Concerning the thematic field of Environment and Land Use Heritage all except Serbia felt that the current performance was fair to good and no strong improvements were necessary. Serbia indicated deficiencies in this field. This may explain the overall low awareness concerning gentrification or resource consumption.

Very critically seen on the other hand are the socio-economic benefits and regional development. Three partners (Germany, Slovenia and Serbia) even perceive significant deficiencies here.

A challenging field is also the quality of visitor experience. Most of the case study partners felt that they could improve their current offers and attempt to further tourism product development. Slovakia and Serbia indicated strong deficiencies in current visitor experience and tourism products. Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Romania and Slovenia indicated the current situation to be fair, with room for improvements. Only Hungary indicated content.

Only two partners state a good performance concerning their destinations strategy and the management structure: Bulgaria and Romania. Hungary indicates deficiencies.

Amongst the partner regions there is a clear tendency towards identifying deficiencies in socio-economic benefits and regional development and in quality of visitor experience and product development. There were also thematic fields that showed medium to high awareness in regard to their importance for sustainable tourism development. Interestingly, destination strategy and environment and land use heritage showed very similar self-assessments.

A conflict of interest arises between economic and environmental issues, leading to the domination of regional economic aspects such as socio-economic benefits and product development. Socio-economic benefits, destination strategy and product development scored low in the self-assessment and had high levels of awareness. Environment and land use along with socio-cultural and built heritage scored high in the self-assessment and low in awareness.

Most partners, except Romania and Slovakia, are quite critical in their self-assessments and state that they are currently not addressing sustainability goals in an entirely sufficient manner. So, it came as a surprise to find that despite current global dialogue only 50% of the regions also saw climate change adaptation and sustainable mobility as an important goal. Only three regions identified reduction of resource consumption as a goal and only one region saw climate risk avoidance as a current development goal. There appears to be a disconnect between acknowledging the importance of sustainability itself and which local goals can be set to achieve sustainability regionally.

5. Discussion

5.1. Methodological Considerations

The methodological design of INSiGHTS and the related case studies in different countries were an excellent opportunity to research specific barriers to stakeholder involvement and study how to overcome them. The unique opportunity within the frame of a European Union funded project could implement many recommendations identified in section two of this paper to break down barriers, such as coordination and capacity building but also the early involvement of stakeholders [21].

Defining primary stakeholders in a manner which excluded tourists and focused on stakeholders with regional development interests ensured that Hartley and Wood's [21] recommendations to directly incorporate stakeholder outputs into planning outcomes successfully contributed towards the development of sustainable regional tourism strategies. By conducting policy roundtables with this group of stakeholders, steps towards improving future tourism policies at regional, national and European level were taken. Thus, the remaining barriers, in this case two predominantly socio-cultural barriers and how to overcome these, could be studied in-depth.

As the case studies in section two showed, this study too confirmed the existence of well-known barriers. Specifically to this case study, low levels of awareness and conflicts of interest or domination were the prevailing topics. The process-oriented methodological design was flexible and transferable to adapt to the needs of the local stakeholders. While not abolishing all barriers through design, the process allowed for anticipation of barriers and opportunity to overcome them within the project implementation.

5.2. Perception of Sustainability

While generally accepting sustainability as an important dimension of development on the surface, in further discussion with project partners described in the Status Quo Synthesis [39], sustainability was deemed to be an issue to be tackled at national or even international levels. Sustainability was perceived as an issue that while relevant, did not apply to the partners' realm of action. This attitude offered an explanation for the positive self-assessment and very low level of awareness. Recognising the issue lying in the perception of sustainability, INSiGHTS rose awareness of self-responsibility and points of action that could be integrated in destination management and product development.

Thus the perception of sustainability amongst project partners and the regional stakeholders was shifted and awareness heightened, confirming Tosun's [22] interpretation of stakeholder involvement as a means to educate stakeholders and Reed et al. [9] perception of it being instrumental in generating understanding of planning content amongst a highly diverse range of participants. Gaps in awareness of major elements of sustainability were filled through INSiGHTS in the process of sustainable tourism strategy development.

5.3. Influences on Engagement in Tourism Development

The presented results indicate that current dominating perception has an influence on the evaluation of sustainability goals and therefore also influences how regions engage in tourism development. The rather positive self-assessment of environmental and land use heritage as well as the socio-cultural and built heritage may have led to a lower awareness and ranking of corresponding goals. The indicators characterised by a rather critical self-assessment such as destination strategy and management, socio-economic aspects and the quality of visitor experience and product development, also achieved high awareness. A good or fair performance may lead to the impression that there is no further need to analyse or develop within these thematic fields.

Typical arguments dominating the discussion of tourism development in rural areas such as economic benefits, destination management, and product development play a major role in the self-assessment [34] but also in the related awareness and planning process towards sustainable tourism development. The domination of certain thematic areas over others impacts the overall development. Consequently, important socio-cultural aspects or environmental impacts could remain unconsidered, overlooked and underdeveloped.

Through allocating time and ensuring that all major elements of sustainability were understood by stakeholders in a manner that made it manageable and implementable at their local and regional realm of action, the benefits of stakeholder involvement such as avoiding conflict of interest [1], making content relevant for policy makers [3] and bringing those directly and indirectly involved in rural tourism together [2] were achieved.

5.4. Implications for Tourism Development Planning and Management in Rural Destinations

First and foremost, the understanding of sustainability differs significantly across rural regions. Although to some extent all regions in Europe work within the same European sustainability policies, the perception of these and implementations they carry are received differently at the regional level. Furthermore, the national policies and regional strategies play into overall goals being followed. As shown in this case study the perception of what constitutes sustainability and perceived responsibility varies from region to region. Therefore, the major aspects of sustainability which play into sustainable tourism planning and increasing awareness need to be made clear to participating stakeholders. Similar awareness levels should not be taken as a given fact, especially when working internationally.

Secondly, circumstances perceived to be intact and functional reduce stakeholders' awareness levels. Perceived deficiencies increase awareness. This is seen in the constant conflict of interest between economic development and environmental sustainability. While environmental aspects are currently being perceived as intact, domination of socio-economic development goals will lead the development if the process is not readjusted to strongly incorporate environmental goals. It is important to increase stakeholders' awareness levels concerning sustainability and integrate sustainable practices into the development processes from the onset.

Finally, studying crucial indicators and importance of certain goals is an important measure to conduct before starting a self-evaluation in project development or planning processes in rural destinations.

6. Conclusions

In conclusion, INSiGHTS was able to avoid structural and operational barriers through tailor-made yet transferable guidelines which offered continuous planning support to the project partners and their stakeholders in the piloting areas. The process-oriented approach in methodology left only the barriers of low awareness and conflict of interest to be tackled.

While at international and European levels there is an abundance of sustainable tourism policy, there is low awareness for environmental and socio-cultural sustainability at a local level with the regional self-assessment in this case study showing content in these areas. Therefore, it was found that

the destination management, product development and socio-economic goals were dominant in initial tourism development strategies.

Recognising the differences between self-assessment and thematic awareness levels, regions were assisted in overcoming these barriers and in developing strategies that were more durable for a sustainable future. The process-oriented design of the guidelines made this possible.

For both planners implementing the guidelines and for stakeholders applying them, the benefits of using guidelines were reflected in the incorporation of outcomes into the process and resulting sustainable tourism strategies. While the guidelines were developed for INSIGHTS partners, they have a transferrable character that has yet to be put to trial in other regions.

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