Integrated Sustainable Development of the Southern Coastal Region
Creating prospects, protecting heritage and nature

The challenge

Albania is a country rich in natural and cultural heritage. The southern coastal region is no exception. The 150 km long coastline of the Ionian Sea, typically Mediterranean, comprises mountains, natural rivers and cultivated lands. These are matched with an abundance of cultural heritage, some dating back to Illyrian times; striking cultural landscape and old traditional villages, which are characteristic of this area as well as a huge asset for economic development.

The main economic sectors in the region are agriculture and tourism. Agriculture activities consist mainly in the production of olive oil, citrus fruits, vegetables and livestock breeding, though the average gross income of a farmer in the prefecture of Vlore, is relatively low. On the other hand, tourism is a growing industry in Albania.

The Albanian Coast and especially the Southern Coastal Region has experienced intensive beach tourism during the months of July and August in the last years; while the rural population, especially in the hinterland, has not substantially benefited from these activities. Additionally, the lack of a clear development perspective has driven rural people to abandon the countryside and move towards the coast or migrate outside the region.

What the Project is all about?

Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ), the “Integrated sustainable development of the southern coastal region” program is supporting the rural population, mainly in the municipalities of Vlore, Himara and Konispol, to benefit from economic development with a focus on rural, culture and nature tourism.

The project is working closely with partners at local and central government level, the community and tourism actors, to devise solutions that create prospects for its 60,000 inhabitants, paying special attention to the countryside, the conservation of the historical and cultural assets and the preservation of nature.

The program has 2 main pillars/outputs. The first is related to territory and planning, building on the Integrated Cross-Sectorial Plan of the Coast (supported by the program as well); developing mechanisms on urban conservation and models to revive the old traditional villages. The second component is focused on the development of models for sustainable tourism and integration of products into the tourism value chains, taking into special consideration means to increase income for women.

Additionally, the program contributes in drafting local tourism strategies for 3 municipalities of considerable rural areas in coordination with the Local Development Plans process.

The benefits

Key actors at national and local level, through the support of the program, have a common understanding about how the region should be developed. This is a pre-condition to ensure that public and private investments take place in a coordinated and coherent way. Eventually this will create prospects for the people in the countryside and improve the quality of life for all citizens.

Tourism development in the southern coastal region can be built on the abundance of natural beauty, cultural landscape, historical traces, traditional villages, the sea and the mountains. Because of this variety of the natural and cultural context, different target groups of tourists can be attracted into the area. Eventually, this helps in diversifying the economy; contributing to higher incomes and poverty reduction.

Rural communities are supported in: identifying sustainable tourism related economic activities; gaining knowledge about rural tourism service standards; understanding and valuing the cultural heritage as an asset for economic development; initiating small businesses.
While supporting rural tourism and promoting the region in the international market, the project also contributes in protecting historical and natural resources in the area, as key assets for a long term tourism perspective. Finally, the project helps building an institutional context at local and regional level to further develop and maintain touristic offers.

Results

Historically, the population of rural areas has not been an active participant in the planning processes of development strategies. Therefore the project has supported local fora, to assure close collaboration with the end beneficiaries: the local communities and the private sector actors in the evolving rural tourism sector.

Results are:
• A regional spatial development plan for the southern coastal region is in place, and is based on a common understanding of national and local stakeholders for the sustainable development of the region; the program is supporting the key partners in improving their capacities for developing a ‘monitoring system’ for the implementation of the plans and territorial development.
• Three municipalities in the region have tourism strategies in place for the development of a diversified tourism economy;
• Through trainings, exposure to successful models abroad and by providing expertise, municipalities in the region and the National Tourism Agency now have better understanding of the operation and management of Tourist Information Offices and of Destination Management for the region of Vlore;
• The local community and other stakeholders have better knowledge on sustainable tourism;
• Different models and products for rural tourism, such as hiking and mountain biking trails, villages guide books for culture tours, outdoors events/festivals, are used by local communities, local tour operators and municipalities to enhance income from tourism;
• A “South Outdoor Festival” was organized end of April/early May 2017 with the aim to foster expansion of the season through events; approximately 1000 people participated and more than 20 outdoor activities were offered in this event;
• Guesthouse owners in the region are trained on Rural and Mountain Tourism: Quality Criteria for Accommodation; and then further supported through subsidy schemes;
• A regional brand and logo to foster joint marketing of the destination is being developed;
• The region appears more in international media as a tourist destination;
• German tour operators (specifically from the association of “alternative travels”) have included the southern coastal region in their offers for 2017 and upcoming years;
• Sustainable Economic Models for the Conservation and Revitalization of Traditional Villages in Himara are elaborated;
• Awareness about cultural heritage among local community is raised with village conservation guidelines and other support.

In 2017, businesses in the tourist sector in the region reported a much earlier start of the season than in previous years while increasingly tourists became interested in exploring diversity of the natural and cultural assets of the region.

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