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*CORRESPONDENCE

Dorotea Ottaviani,
✉ dorotea.ottaviani@unibo.it

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Achieving the SDGs through cultural tourism: evidence from practice in the TExTOUR project

Dorotea Ottaviani*, Claudia De Luca and Hanna Elisabet Åberg

Department of Architecture, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Tourism has become an important engine for development, especially in more remote areas. The potential of cultural tourism for sustainable tourism developing was explored in the H2020 funded TExTOUR project. A total of eight territories developed action plans based on their local heritage for sustainable tourism development. This article situates the actions created through the participatory TExTOUR approach are framed within larger global initiatives, to the Sustainable Development Agenda and the UNWTO pillars of the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, to show how TExTOUR has contributed to sustainable development through the means of cultural tourism. The results of this article show that local communities can contribute to global goals through cultural tourism strategies. In particular, these areas show that cultural tourism can support, safeguard and enhance heritage and promote positive economic growth through job creation.

KEYWORDS

cultural tourism, SDGs, sustainability, remote areas, participation

Introduction

Remote areas have often been seen as lagging behind urban areas in terms of creativity and innovative thinking (Bell and Jayne, 2010; Labianca and Navarro Valverde, 2019). At the same time, the appeal of intact and traditional cultural elements in more remote areas offers great opportunities for sustainable tourism development. This creates great opportunities but demands that the development takes into account all aspects of sustainability to ensure that this development is not based on profit-making over people. The original idea of cultural tourism underlines an approach to tourism that takes into account the place and the needs of the local people (Solima and Minguzzi, 2014). The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), defines cultural tourism as a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's main motivation is to learn about, discover, experience, and consume the tangible and intangible cultural attractions of a destination (UNWTO, 2017). Cultural tourism is now one of the largest and fastest-growing global tourism markets today, accounting for an estimated 39% of all general tourism activities (OECD, 2009; European Commission, 2019). Culture is an invaluable aspect of sustainability. In particular, recent literature considers it to be one of the fundamental pillars on which sustainable development should be based together with the economic, environmental and social pillars (Nurse, 2006; Dessein et al., 2015). The

interdependence between culture and sustainable development was acknowledged by the UN in 2015, when culture was recognised as an important aspect of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In the same year, tourism was added to three of the SDGs: SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth), 12 (Responsible consumption and production) and 14 (Life below water) (UNTWO, 2015; McLoughlin et al., 2018). These were decisive factors in highlighting the significance of culture in tourism, as well as a key to promoting a sustainable approach to the development of cultural tourism.

This paper explores how local communities, working with a participatory methodology, can contribute to global sustainable goals through the implementation of sustainable, inclusive, and innovative cultural tourism strategies.

The outcome of this paper builds upon ongoing work in eight case studies, functioning as pilot areas in the H2020-funded TExTOUR project¹ (Social Innovation and TEchnologies for sustainable growth through participative cultural TOURism). The aim of the project is to create a framework to help remote and isolated regions develop sustainable, innovative, and smart cultural tourism through the use of a bottom-up, participatory methodology. The methodology was co-developed and implemented together with the local communities in eight pilot areas in eight countries across Europe and two beyond the borders of the European Union: Italy, Germany, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Portugal, Spain, Ukraine, Poland, Estonia, Cyprus and Lebanon. While the pilots are geographically diverse, they also come from different cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds.

The overall objective of this study is to contribute to exploring how the TExTOUR participatory methodology has contributed to sustainable cultural tourism development. The actions developed within the participatory TExTOUR approach are framed within larger global initiatives linking them with the Agenda for Sustainable Development and UNWTO's Pillars, to show how TExTOUR has contributed to sustainable cultural tourism development.

How can tourism contribute to sustainability?

According to Richards and Hall (Richards et al., 2000), achieving sustainability in tourism involves the continuous improvement of the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of communities, all of which must be seamlessly integrated with environmental stewardship. Therefore, addressing the needs of

local people is essential for cultural tourism to be sustainable. Engaging in participatory processes serves as the primary approach to gathering and collaboratively developing initiatives with the community. In remote contexts, participatory processes have been increasingly explored in recent decades. The importance of community participation in rural development has long been well-documented and researched. Researchers such as Uphoff (de Luca et al., 2020; Uphoff, 2020) argue that the active involvement of rural communities in decision-making processes and development initiatives leads to more sustainable and effective outcomes in remote areas. Berkes (Berkes, 2009; Westley, 2010) discusses how involving local communities in natural resources management can promote sustainable practices and biodiversity conservation. Von Haarena et al., suggest that any interventions should be carried out through discussions with landowners (von Haaren et al., 2014), informing and influencing local policy (Valencia-Sandoval et al., 2010). Participation in remote areas is seen as a means of empowering communities, improving the effectiveness of development initiatives, and addressing the unique challenges faced by isolated populations. Research in this area often highlights the importance of context-specific approaches that take into account the social, cultural, economic, and environmental characteristics of remote regions (de Vente et al., 2016).

As stated by Albornoz-Mendoza and Mainar-Causapé (2018), it is imperative that stakeholders understand and adhere to the principles of sustainable tourism in order to safeguard authentic tourist destinations for future generations. This means not only involving stakeholders in participatory processes but also ensuring their awareness of and dedication to the sustainability objectives of these processes. Facilitating a shared understanding of sustainability principles among the various stakeholders within the tourism industry is of paramount importance for advancing responsible and sustainable tourism practices. It is now widely recognised that the involvement of coherent segments of local communities and stakeholders in the planning of sustainable tourism has become essential for the promotion of sustainable development, especially in European projects such as the one examined in this study (Cole, 2006; Jukić et al., 2019).

Despite the long-standing presence of collaboration and participation in the tourism discourse (Bramwell and Lane, 2000), putting collaborative principles into practice has always posed challenges, as it is a time-consuming activity and involves managing different perspectives (Mustapha and Azman, 2013). In addition, participatory methods may require additional resources, the power imbalance between stakeholders may hinder open and honest participation, there may be different levels of knowledge and expertise, and stakeholders may be resistant to change (Mubita et al., 2017). Furthermore, effective communication is critical and consensus on design decisions can be difficult to achieve (Cargo and Mercer,

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2008). Finally, the scalability of participation on a large scale can present logistical challenges (Leurs, 1996).

Community participation is highly recommended and now considered essential to ensure that the benefits of tourism are aligned with the needs of the host communities and to promote and acceptance of tourism development (Cole, 2006). The ultimate aim of a participatory approach is to balance the power dynamics between all parties involved and to create a mutually beneficial situation for all people affected by tourism development (Ozcevik et al., 2010). The implementation of participatory models in the tourism sector is important for advancing the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals specifically address sustainable consumption and production, inclusive and sustainable growth, sustainable cities, and communities, and the responsible use of marine resources.

Critically enough, the concept of sustainability within the tourism industry has often been criticised as vague (Sharpley, 2000; Mundt, 2011) and the means to understand and measure the potential sustainability of cultural tourism are varied (Cottrell et al., 2004; Ko, 2005).

The literature highlights the role that tourism can play in sustainable development. Drawing on a range of academic perspectives, this analysis highlights the multifaceted nature of tourism's contributions to economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainability. First, tourism can act as a catalyst for economic growth (Richards et al., 2000). Income generated by tourism activities can be reinvested in the local economy thereby promoting long-term economic stability and growth (WTO, 2004). Second, tourism revenues often support the conservation and preservation of natural and cultural assets (Gössling, 2006). Funds from tourism can be used to maintain a range of such as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and heritage sites, thereby facilitating the long-term protection of resources. Subsequently, cultural exchange through tourism promotes intercultural understanding and appreciation (Dahles and Bras, 1999). Responsible tourism practices promote the preservation of local traditions, languages, and customs, thereby safeguarding cultural diversity (Baltà Portolés, 2022).

On the side of community empowerment, sustainable tourism prioritizes community involvement and benefits (Buckley, 2012). By engaging local communities in decision-making processes and ensuring they share in tourism-related benefits, empowerment is achieved (Mowforth and Munt, 2016). Moreover, sustainable tourism practices encompass a range of measures aimed at reducing the environmental impact of tourism (Richards et al., 2000). These measures include responsible wildlife viewing, waste reduction, energy-efficient infrastructure, and eco-friendly transportation options (UNEP, 2022). Additionally, tourism provides educational opportunities that enhance awareness about conservation and cultural heritage (Macleod et al., 2010). Tourists gain a deeper understanding of

local ecosystems and cultures through guided tours, interpretive centres, and immersive experiences. Tourism can encourage responsible travel behaviours, including respect for local customs and the minimization of waste (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2011). Supporting businesses that prioritize sustainability is promoted as a means to minimize negative impacts. In addition, to cater to tourists, destinations often invest in improved infrastructure (Papatheodorou, 2021). This includes upgraded transportation networks, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services, benefiting both residents and visitors. Furthermore, tourism can provide an alternative income source for communities previously engaged in unsustainable practices (Bushell and Eagles, 2007). This shift reduces pressure on vulnerable ecosystems, fostering long-term environmental stability. Similarly, the pursuit of sustainable tourism drives the development and adoption of innovative technologies and practices (Buckley, 2012). Eco-friendly accommodations, green transportation options, and waste-reduction strategies exemplify this trend. Finally, on the governance side, Tourism can support the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to environmental and cultural conservation (Cowie and Ison, 2017). Tourists may contribute financially or volunteer their time to support these organizations during their travels and governments and international bodies can establish regulatory frameworks and certification systems to promote sustainable tourism practices (WTO, 2004). These frameworks include eco-labels for accommodations and comprehensive protected area management plans. Conversely to all said so far, it is not to be forgotten how the literature highlights how tourism can also be the root of unsustainable development if not correctly address (Tosun, 1998; Lerpold et al., 2021; Barakazi, 2023).

Consequently, this article aspires to explore the specific role of cultural tourism and how it can contribute to a more globally sustainable world.

Conceptual framework

Sustainable development is defined by the UN as a development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations” (United Nations General Assembly, 1987). At the core of sustainability lies the harmonization between economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental and cultural protection.

Sustainable development is a socio-economic and environmental paradigm that represents an ongoing, deliberate, and interconnected endeavour to achieve a harmonious coexistence between human societies, their economic and cultural activities, and the natural world. It recognizes the intrinsic linkages between economic growth, social equity, cultural thriving, and ecological stability, aiming to foster an enduring equilibrium among these dimensions.

Building on this complex idea, the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) launched a framework of common goals across the globe. The SDG agenda has shaped a shared understanding of sustainability that both functions as guidance for development as well as a measure to evaluate existing schemes.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 global goals established by the United Nations in 2015 as part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These goals are designed to address a wide range of social, economic, and environmental challenges facing the world and provide a shared blueprint for a more sustainable and equitable future. Each goal is accompanied by specific targets, typically 8–12 targets, and indicators to measure progress. The targets are either outcome targets (circumstances to be attained) or means of implementation targets.

These global goals are characterized by their universality, applying to all nations regardless of their income level, and their recognition of the interdependence of various development aspects. This interconnectivity is underscored in academic literature, which emphasizes the need to address economic, social, and environmental challenges in an integrated manner to achieve sustainable outcomes (Le Blanc, 2015; Nilsson et al., 2016).

The time-bound nature of the SDGs, with a target date of 2030, is consistent with the urgency underscored in academic research regarding pressing global challenges, including poverty (Alkire et al., 2013), inequality (Milanovic, 2016), climate change (Pachauri and Meyer, 2014), and biodiversity loss (IPBES, 2019).

Furthermore, the multi-stakeholder approach inherent in the SDGs aligns with academic discussions on the importance of partnerships and shared responsibility among governments, civil society, businesses, and academia in achieving sustainable development (Kanie and Biermann, 2017; Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2019).

From a tourism perspective, the UN's World Tourism Organisation (UNTWO) launched its guidance to establish a more sustainable approach to tourism. The UNTWO lists five Pillars of sustainable tourism that are all considered interlinked with a set of SDGs (UNWTO, 2018). By achieving these Pillars local territories are ensuring sustainable tourism as well as contributing to a more sustainable development globally, i.e., through the SDGs. The pillars provide a framework for promoting responsible and sustainable tourism practices globally.

Through each Pillar, UNTWO suggests and identifies areas for action and offers specific recommendations for governments, businesses, and individuals. UNWTO list the Pillars of sustainable tourism are the following:

- Pillar 1: Sustainable economic growth
- Pillar 2: Social inclusiveness, employment, and poverty reduction

- Pillar 3: Resource efficiency, environmental protection, and climate change
- Pillar 4: Cultural values, diversity, and heritage
- Pillar 5: Mutual understanding, peace, and security

At an EU level, funding has been launched in the last years under the umbrella of H2020 and Horizon Europe to better support sustainable tourism development, one of these was granted to the TExTOUR project. TExTOUR aims at co-designing pioneering and sustainable cultural tourism strategies to improve deprived areas in Europe and beyond.

Building on the development of a participatory methodology, the TExTOUR project aspires to produce replicable guidance for sustainable tourism development. The method that was developed within the project consists of a series of steps where the pilot areas co-plan and co-develop with their stakeholders and local communities a series of actions for sustainable tourism development in their areas. The progressive steps constituting the methodology include four workshops focusing on 1) the definitions of the goals and the values that are considered important for the development of sustainable tourism in the pilot area, 2) the co-creation of actions that will provide innovative sustainable tourism activities for the areas, 3) the development of a Business Model Canvas, adjusted to include reflections on sustainability, inclusion and technological and social innovation and 4) finally a workshop to define the KPIs and the target that the actions will have to achieve within a certain time-frame to assess and monitor their development. Within these workshops, the eight pilot areas developed several sustainable cultural tourism related actions each. In total, there were 24 actions created and developed. Those actions include ideas as heritage related routes, traditional culinary schools, vademecum for citizens and tourists, creative workshops for immigrants, artistic events, Protected Designation of Origin for local products, digitalization of heritage resources, and art residencies, among the others, This paper can contribute to the conversation on how cultural tourism can support the achievement of the SDGs, and the five pillars promoted during the International Year of Sustainable Tourism.

Materials and methods

Case study application

Firsly, a short presentation of the different pilots' characteristic may provide a clearer insight about the diversity of the contexts into which the co-development of the sustainable cultural tourism development actions happened. The first pilot, Crespi d'Adda in Italy is an industrial heritage site located in a peripheral area. Crespi d'Adda is a genuine, ideal and picturesque village, built by the Crespi Family in the 1800s and 1900s for the employees (and their families) of the textile factory that stands

right next to the village. Crespi d'Adda—described as an “exceptional example of the company town phenomenon, the most complete and best-preserved in Southern Europe”—received a spot on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995. The village is the perfect model of an architectural complex that illustrates a rather significant historical period: that of the birth of Italy's modern industry.

The second pilot, Narva, Estonia, refers again to a former industrial heritage site but it is located in an urban area and it faces the difficulties of a cross-border area with Russia. Narva pilot-case focuses on the post-industrial Kreenholm district, and includes also its socio-cultural and economic effects on the city and cross-border scale. Narva Kreenholm is a remarkable textile industry complex from mid-19th century, which did grow significantly during Soviet regime. The collapse of Soviet Union and global shift of textile industries generated large share of vacant spaces of Kreenholm district (about 30 ha), which is extensively part of high-value cultural heritage.

The third pilot, Umgebindeland, is a region across the borders of Germany, Poland and Czech Republic. The cross-border cultural landscape has historically developed in the late Middle Ages and was also characterized by modern industrialization represents a connecting element between the regions.

The fourth pilot represents as well the cross-border challenges as it focuses on the Ukrainian part of the Via Regia which is the oldest and longest road link between the East and the West of Europe connecting eight countries from Russia and Ukraine in the East to the Atlantic coast in the West.

The international and cross-border dimension, and its relation to the co-existence of different cultures and presence of religion, cultural or ethnic minorities, is yet at the core of the fifth pilot, Trebinje in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The city is a border city in Bosnia-Herzegovina, placed on less than 35 km from Dubrovnik (Croatia) and 80 km from Kotor (Montenegro).

The sixth pilot are the historic silver and lead post-mining facilities in Tarnowskie Góry in the Upper Silesia Region of Poland. Cultural tourism in Tarnowskie Góry and in Upper Silesia is promoted on the basis of post-industrial heritage, diversity of historical and cultural landscapes (heaps, post-mining water bodies, mine towers, etc.) and architecture, as well as regional traditions referring to mining customs (uniforms, rituals, dialect).

The seventh pilot is a cross-border area situated between north of Portugal and Spain based on archeological sites (pre-historic and historic sites) in the Côa Valley (Portugal) and Siega Verde (Spain).

The last pilot documents the cooperation of Anfeh (Lebanon) and Fikardou (Cyprus) through TExTOUR project, aiming at adjusting cultural tourism through the use of modern technologies in a way that improves its contribution to the maintenance and development of places and surroundings in both villages.

Secondly, a description of the participatory methodology that was undertaken by the pilots can provide a clearer context of the model used to co-create the actions that will be discussed in this paper. The TExTOUR methodology comprises of five steps that were undertaken by the pilots with their stakeholders and supported by the technical partners in the EU project. The first step required the participants to map the cultural heritage assets existing in their areas, providing an assessment of the level of under or over exploitations of them. The second activity requested the stakeholders and local communities to co-create a number of ideas of cultural tourism actions that could be applied in their context. With actions are intended any activities, processes, services, and products that enable the sustainable development of cultural tourism and that are co-created and co-implemented by stakeholders and local communities. The third step of the TExTOUR co-creative methodology implied the consult by the technical partners to the pilots to shortlist the number of actions created in the second workshop to make sure to remain only with actions that would be valid in terms of economic feasibility, partnerships created, environmental, social and cultural sustainability, and social and technological innovation. Once the actions were shortlisted they underwent the third step which related with the breakdown and analysis of the different aspects of them to confirm their feasibility, this was made with the use of a Business Model Canvas (BMC) appositely adapted for the project which provided, beyond the usual steps of a traditional BMC inputs related to sustainability, impact and social and technological innovation. As the actions completed this process, they entered the last step of the process which was related the selection of consistent KPIs and targets for them to ensure the possibility to monitor their advancements in the co-implementing phase. This process was applied uniformly in each of the pilots undertaking this initiative, although, as mentioned before, the pilots where very different among them both in terms of context and cultural heritage conditions and in terms of the initiators of such activities.

The actions created at the end of such participatory process were included in a set of strategic documents, as explained more in detail below, one for each pilot, which addressed a holistic vision for the territories and their development and resulted from the participatory process to develop sustainable, inclusive and innovative cultural tourism actions.

Research model

The actions coming from the pilot areas have been studied in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals and also to the Five Pillars promoted during the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. [Figure 1](#) gives a visual insight into the research flow. The decision to match the actions from the project with the SDGs and the Five Pillars builds on the idea to explore how collaborative-led actions can possibly be related to these and can foster reaching the goals and the pillars.



FIGURE 1
Map of the TExTOUR pilots.

The research uses three data sets: the 24 TExTOUR actions (de Luca et al., 2022), the 169 targets of Sustainable Development found within the 17 SDGs (UN, 2015), and the Five Pillars as promoted during the Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (UNWTO, 2018). The first part of the study draws, on the one hand, the links between the SDGs and the Five Pillars for Sustainable Tourism, as presented in the report developed by UNWTO in 2018 (UNWTO, 2018). On the other hand, it carries out a textual analysis of the actions implemented through the participatory process of each of the TExTOUR pilot areas. The 24 actions, defined in participatory cultural plans for each remote area, are analysed in terms of their potential to contribute to each of the 169 SDG targets.

It should be noted that the “Five Key Areas Promoted by the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development,” from which the five pillars are derived, is not the most recent document, having been published in 2017. The cultural tourism industry, and tourism in general, has changed rapidly in recent years. For example, COVID-19 has changed the way many city dwellers look at more remote places and forms of tourism (Munjal, 2019; Pitkänen et al., 2020). On the one hand, this makes the discussion of cultural tourism as a means of sustainable development in remote areas even more relevant. On the other hand, it may call for an updated version of the Five Pillars.

Methodological framework

This research is based on a text analysis of the action plans presented above (*Research model* section). Each pilot action was read through individually and qualitatively analysed for its

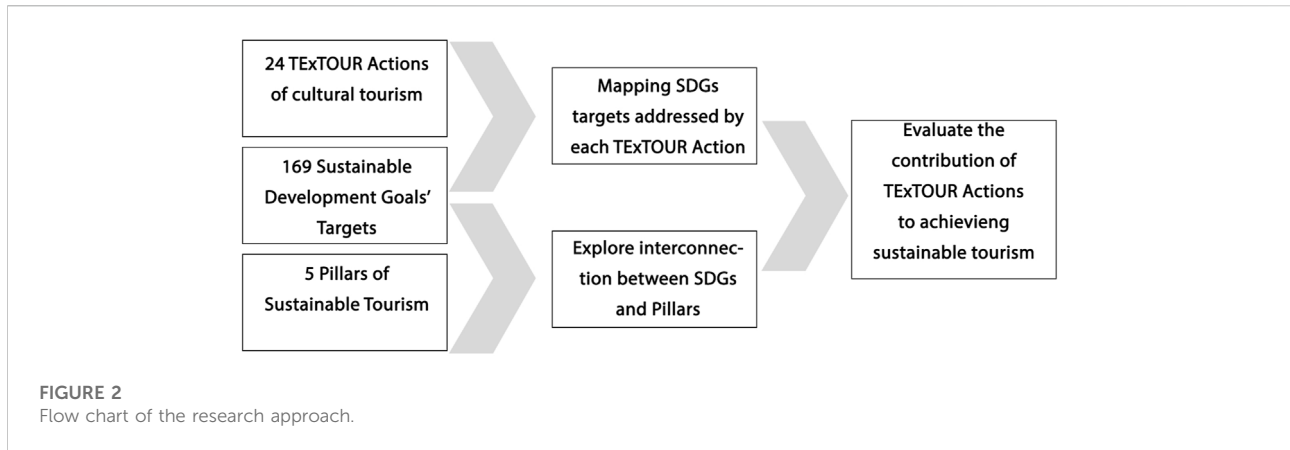
potential to contribute to one of the SDG sub-targets. The analysis was carried out independently by two researchers, and then compared with each other. Inconsistent results were reviewed by a third researcher. The total number of subgoals per pilot was counted (Figure 2).

Each action contains the following information: 1) a description of the action; 2) the heritage resources affected or included in the heritage resources concerned or included in the action proposal; 3) categories of heritage-based tourism that would be implemented by the action; 4) objective and target of the action; 5) main stakeholders involved and their roles and contribution, breakdown of specific activities included in the action, ICT integration, beneficiaries of the action (community, tourists, specific social groups, etc.); 6) social innovation of the action, inclusion, partnerships established (PPPs, voluntary agreements, etc.); 7) sustainability of the action, impact of the action on the heritage resources concerned or included in the action proposal; 6) social innovation of the action, inclusiveness, partnerships established (PPPs, voluntary agreements, etc.); 7) sustainability of the action, impact of the action, selection of monitoring KPIs; 8) consistency check (consistency with higher level regulations or conditions of the site, i. e.g., UNESCO heritage status, regional regulations, national vision for the area, etc.); 9) resources, indicative costs and funding sources; and 10) channels for communication and dissemination of the action and dissemination of the action. The analysis involves checking a set of keywords/phrases from the different SDG targets in the action documents.

By finding the matches and by examining the links between local actions and global initiatives, the study could verify if and how the participatory TExTOUR cultural tourism actions contribute to sustainable development.

Results

In this section, the links between the TExTOUR pilot actions and specific targets of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are explored. Of the 17 SDGs, the TExTOUR cultural tourism actions could potentially contribute to the achievement of 8 of the goals (see green rows in Table 1): Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all; Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns; Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development; Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage



forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels; 16 of the 169 targets were addressed by the actions. 9 of the 17 SDGs were not at all addressed by the TExTOUR actions (marked in red in [Table 1](#)): Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere; Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture; Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages; Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all; Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all; and Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

The cultural tourism actions contributed the most towards achieving Goal 11 (Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable). Within Goal 11 there were in particular four targets that were addressed by two actions or more:

- 11.4 Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage (12 actions)
- 11.a Support positive economic, social, and environmental links between urban, peri-urban, and rural areas by strengthening national and regional development planning (5 actions)
- 11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible, green, and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities (3 actions)

The second most addressed SDG was Goal 12 (Ensure responsible consumption and production). There was mainly one target that contributed to achieving this goal, addressed by two actions or more:

- 12.b Develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products (8 actions)

The third most addressed SDG is Goal 8 (Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all). There was mainly one target that was addressed by more than two actions:

- 8.9 By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products (5 actions)

Another five goals were addressed through the TExTOUR actions: Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all; Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation; Goal 15. Protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; and Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. There were no more than two targets within these SDGs.

As mentioned above, a link between the SDGs and the Five Pillars has been identified ([UNTWO, 2017](#)). Consequently, the SDG targets addressed by the TExTOUR pilot actions are interlinked with the Five Pillars promoted by the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, as shown in the figure below. 13 of the 16 targets addressed by the TExTOUR pilot actions are linked to the five pillars (see [Figure 3](#)). However, three targets would not contribute to the pillars (target 9.3, target 9.1 and target 14a).

It was Pillars 3 and 4, which focused on *Resource efficiency, environmental protection, and climate change*; and *Cultural values, diversity and heritage* that were mostly enhanced

TABLE 1 Summary of pilot contribution to SDGs.

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	Sum
Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	1	—	3	—	1	—	—	2	7
Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	2	3
Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	7	3	3	1	1	3	2	1	21
Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	4	—	—	3	3	—	—	—	10
Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Goal 15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1	2
Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels	1	—	—	2	—	—	—	—	3
Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

through the TExTOUR actions. Moreover, there were just two actions that addressed the fifth Pillar focused on *Mutual understanding, peace, and security* via the SDGs. However, as shown in Figure 3, the least affected Pillar was *Social inclusiveness, employment, and poverty reduction*.

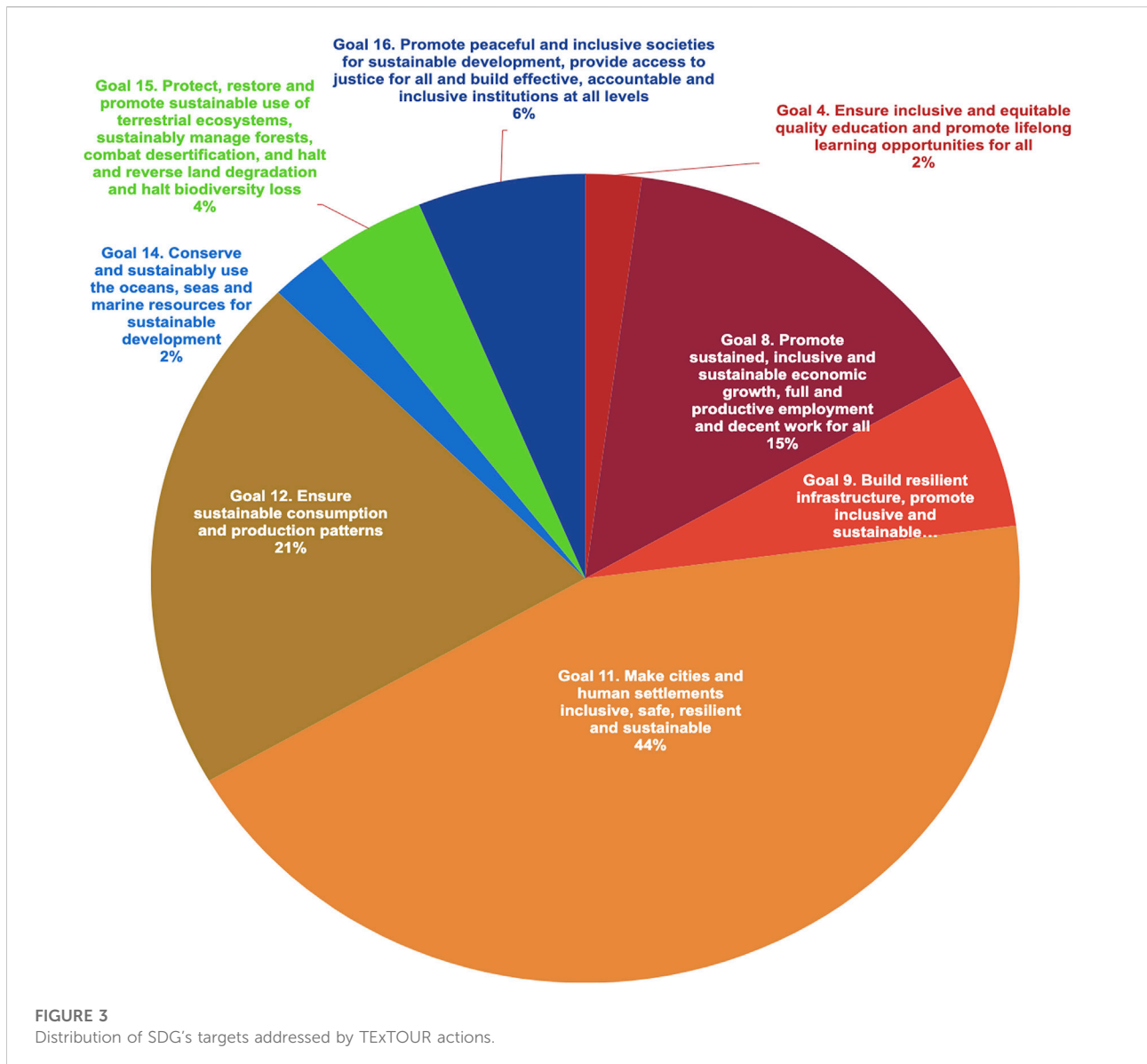
Discussion: relevance of co-created sustainable cultural tourism actions in achieving sustainable development

The outcome of this article suggests that cultural tourism developed with a participatory paradigm and when focused on inclusiveness, innovation and sustainability, can contribute to the fulfilment of SDGs and consequently of the five Pillars for Action defined by UNWTO. As shown in Figure 3 all five Pillars have been addressed by the TExTOUR Action plans although not all the SDGs targets have been met by the actions. It should be noted that SDG 11 “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” is the goal that has been contributed to the most by the 27 actions, specifically four targets were

implemented by the actions, 11.3; 11.4; 11.7; and 11.a. This could possibly be a result of the participatory methodology itself (Ottaviani et al., 2023), as it had stressed particularly the importance of inclusivity and social innovation which has resulted in many of the actions characterised by elements of inclusion, safety, resilience, and social sustainability. A participatory process supports increased trust among stakeholders, conflict reduction, and shared responsibility (Byrd, 2007).

Moreover, scholars like Westley et al. (Paris and Sisk, 2007) have argued that social innovation often emerges from the active participation of individuals and communities in problem-solving processes. This concept is rooted in theories of participatory development and community engagement.

In this way, inhabitants become the main actors and decision-makers in the planning, development, and management of resources needed for the tourism industry (Simpson, 2008). A sustainable cultural tourism must promote local needs and not only visitor’s needs with a long-term perspective. It is generally known that there is a need to invest in more remote areas to attract and retain residents.

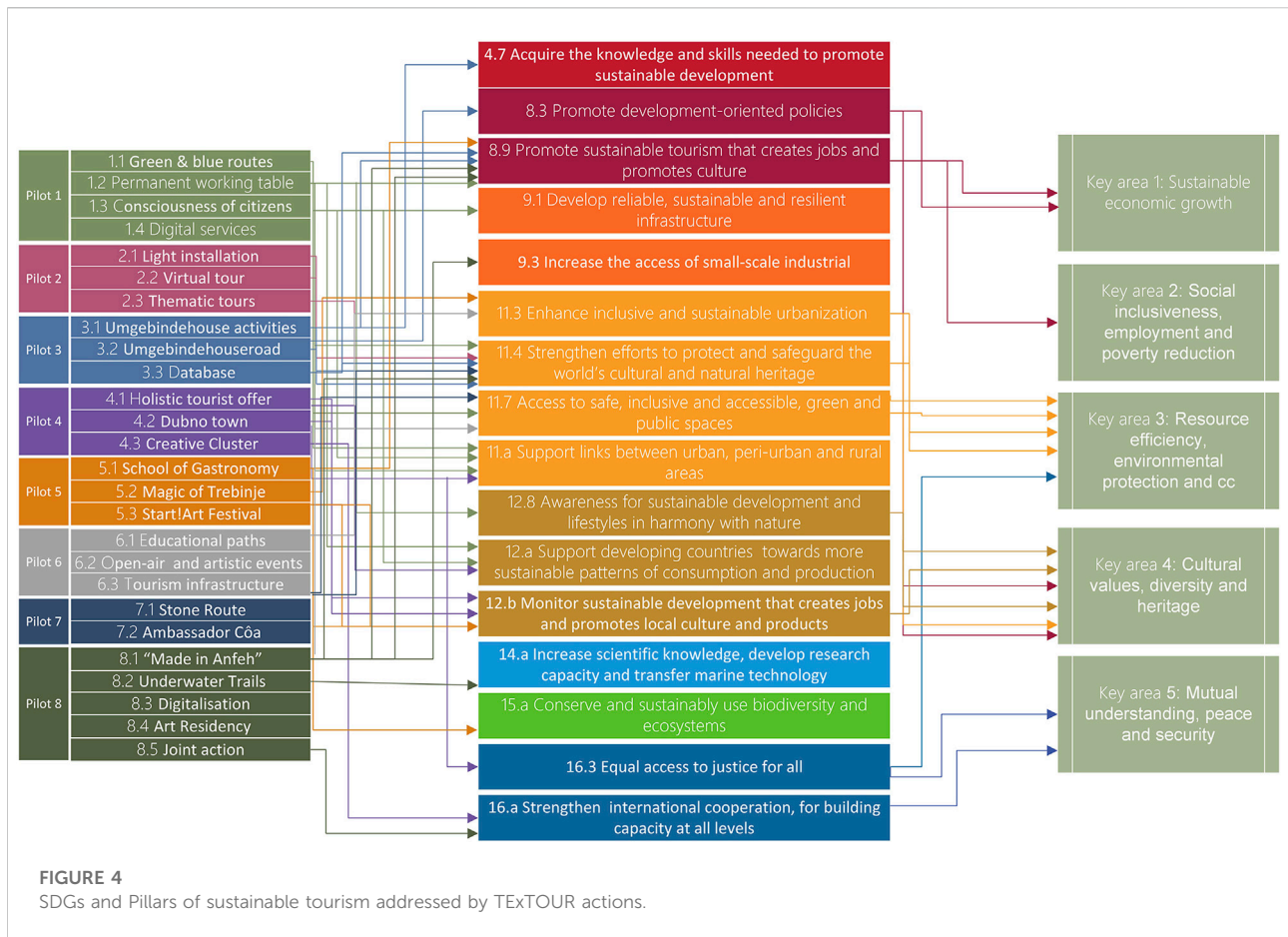


Services and infrastructure are essential to achieve a renaissance beyond temporary tourism in remote and rural areas and to this aim (Åberg and Tondelli, 2021) the analysis of actions indicates that actions that promote long-term investments for infrastructure establishments would feed into more SDGs rather than pure tourism activities.

Similarly, SDG number 12 “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” results as the second most relevant goal, possibly highlighting how the cultural actions aim to set new habits for more sustainable and aware paths for consumption and production systems. That is likely the result of ensuring that the co-design process would include reflection and consciousness towards every impact that the actions would have, be it social, economic, cultural, or environmental. Academics have examined how participatory approaches in

environmental education can lead to greater awareness and action for sustainability (Sterling, 2010).

EU-funded projects such as TExTOUR promote and support improved opportunities for cooperation and, over time, contribute to long-term harmony (Sousa, 2013). In theory, cross-regional cooperation should promote a better social understanding across borders. Although there are a number of cross-national pilot projects as case studies, there were only two actions that fed into the Pillar on *Mutual understanding, peace, and security* as well as the SDGs connected to peace (Goal 16) and Global partnership (Goal 17). The given impact deriving from the actions may be more indirect, laying the ground for future opportunities in terms of strengthened cross-border collaboration. Although the study focused on tourism, participation is a universal solution from many perspectives.



For example, peace and conflict scholars often emphasise the role of participation as a means of building and sustaining peace (Lederach, 1997). Participation is seen as a tool for inclusiveness in decision-making processes. Inclusion of diverse voices and marginalized groups in political, social, and economic processes can help prevent conflicts that arise from exclusion and inequality (Lederach, 1997). This means that although the focus of this particular study was to see how cultural tourism development can contribute to improved livelihoods, the findings suggest that it can also identify issues of wider significance.

By leveraging unique cultural assets and heritage, remote areas can attract visitors, stimulate economic activities, and enhance the overall wellbeing of local communities (Munjal, 2019). The outcomes of the study suggest that a high number of actions feed into SDG 11.4—Strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage. As Nurse (Nurse, 2006) suggests it should be regarded as fundamental prerequisites for a thriving society. The promotion of sustainable development can serve as a facilitator for nurturing culture itself. Yet, to achieve the Pillar of Sustainable Tourism on cultural values, diversity, and heritage more emphasis should also be put on more targets within the sustainable consumption and

production patterns (SDG 12). Cultural tourism can make a substantial contribution to the SDGs by further encouraging responsible consumption and production patterns. By promoting sustainable practices and showcasing local traditions and craftsmanship, cultural tourism initiatives can inspire visitors to adopt more environmentally friendly behaviours and support local economies that go beyond direct tourism impact. This, in turn, contributes to sustainable economic growth and the preservation of natural resources (Figure 4).

Conclusion

This paper has explored how cultural tourism actions, developed through participatory processes, potentially contribute to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals and how these further fit within the Five Pillars promoted by the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. The results suggest that cultural tourism can contribute to global sustainable development in making cities more inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable, better ensure responsible consumption and production, and promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. With the help of remotely

located territories, this paper points towards that cultural tourism can be a valuable actor in promoting and enabling sustainable development in more rural and inaccessible areas.

The outcomes of this study suggest that cultural tourism has the potential to foster sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth when developed by means of inclusive participation-led methodology. By promoting cultural exchange, supporting local artisans and entrepreneurs, and generating employment opportunities, cultural tourism initiatives can help create more equitable and prosperous societies. In conclusion, the study highlights the significant role that participatory cultural tourism initiatives can play in advancing sustainable development and aligning with the SDGs. By contributing to the creation of inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities, promoting responsible consumption and production, and fostering sustained economic growth, cultural tourism emerges as a valuable actor in sustainable development efforts.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize that cultural tourism can serve as a transformative force in rural and inaccessible areas, unlocking their potential and enabling sustainable development in these regions. The research shows how cultural tourism has the capacity to bring significant and positive changes to these areas. It can help revitalize and preserve cultural practices, encourage local entrepreneurship, and stimulate economic and social development. While rural and inaccessible areas often face challenges such as limited access to markets, economic isolation, and a decline in traditional livelihoods the research shows how cultural tourism can reveal previously untapped resources and opportunities in these remote regions. Moreover, cultural tourism can highlight the unique cultural assets and natural attractions of these areas, making them more appealing to tourists. This can lead to economic diversification and growth. Cultural tourism can contribute to sustainable development by creating jobs, generating income for local communities, promoting cultural preservation, and supporting environmental conservation efforts. It aims to benefit the local population while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and culture. The research has demonstrated the positive outcomes of cultural tourism in rural and inaccessible areas. These findings are interesting because they provide earlier evidence of the benefits of cultural tourism and can inform policy decisions, community initiatives, and investment strategies. In summary, the research

underscores the transformative potential of cultural tourism in remote and rural regions. It highlights how this form of tourism can stimulate economic growth, empower local communities, and contribute to the sustainable development of areas that might otherwise remain economically marginalized or isolated.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusion of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Author contributions

CDL reviewed the article. DO and HA wrote the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author disclaimer

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