Building Island Communities of Practice for Achieving Local Sustainable Cultural Tourism Objectives

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Abstract. The prevalence of a series of megatrends and challenges such as climate change, overtourism and health crisis, have demonstrated even more the necessity to shift from the current mass and overcrowded, spatially concentrated tourism models to less crowded, more spatially dispersed, and secure environments. This tendency pushed island destinations to rethink their tourism profiles. Nonetheless, the majority of island communities depend on tourism for their economic well-being, which requires rethinking the highly appreciated island tourism destinations' strategies towards more sustainable models. According to European policies and academics, alternative forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism, seem to be the solution for achieving this objective, also by including participatory practises in local communities. Starting from these considerations, this work presents the ongoing ISL project (Forming interdisciplinary Island Communities of Practice operating for sustainable cultural tourIsm models). This paper describes a general overview of the ISL Project which purpose is to offer innovative high quality participatory tools to (i) promote awareness and mobilise local communities and stakeholders on their cultural identity, cultural awareness and their social and historical heritage and (ii) support social and territorial cohesion of island communities at a local and trans-island/transnational level by promoting participatory cultural tourism schemes.

Keywords: Sustainable Cultural Tourism; Participatory Practices · Islands Communities · Terrestrial Cohesion · Local Development · Governance

1 Introduction

The sustainable tourism movement has steadily entered the international policy agendas during the 60's and 70's as an immediate response against the impacts of overtourism during the post-was period. Nowadays sustainable tourism seems to be one of the top

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priorities of the international and European policy scene, as the concept that covers the complete tourism experience, including concerns for economic, social and environmental issues as well as attention to improving tourists' experiences and addressing the needs of host communities [1]. Today, the emergence of a set of megatrends, such as climate change, overtourism, and the pandemic health crisis have emphasised even more to the urgent need to transform tourism options into this sustainable, and resilient model [2–8]. To promote environmental protection, cultural preservation, economic prosperity as well as public health safety, it has become clear that the prevailing mass and overcrowded tourism model needs to change to a less crowded and more spatially dispersed model [9–12].

These trends introduced island destinations [13, 14] to the center of attention for two significantly different reasons: (i) peripheral island entities are emerging as safe, isolated, attractive tourism alternatives competing with already established touristic islands; and (ii) as the majority of the island communities' prosperity is dependent on the tourism activity, highly appreciated island tourism destinations need to rethink and reorient their strategies towards the future.

According to different academics and policy statements, alternative forms of tourism, such as cultural tourism, may offer a solution to this problem [15–24]. Cultural tourism places a high emphasis on participatory practices [25–30], which are essential for recognising the value of cultural heritage and transmitting it to future generations, as has already highlighted by the Faro Convention [[31], Article 2b] and for ensuring citizen participation in decision making and management relating to the cultural and tourism field [32].

Despite the prevalence of participatory practices in development plans, local island community stakeholders still lack the knowledge and expertise essential to effectively plan for a sustainable future for their islands. For these reasons, this paper describes the experience of the project "ISL - forming interdisciplinary island communities of practice operating for sustainable cultural tourism models"; aspiring to promote bottom-up initiatives for island communities, as well as empower and form interdisciplinary groups of local actors to co-design sustainable tourism futures for their own islands. In particular, the paper explores how the following objectives may be achieved through the ISL project:

- To strengthen the capacity of partners to collaborate transnationally and through participatory practises.
- To provide islands new, high-quality participatory tools to promote active European citizenship.
- To promote awareness and engage local communities and responsible stakeholders with regard to their cultural identity, cultural awareness and their social and historical heritage.
- To foster team and community building on island level to co-design and co-create visions over a more sustainable cultural tourism future for their island.

- To support social and terrestrial cohesion of island communities at a local and trans-island/transnational level [33].

The innovative aspect of the ISL project lies on the methodology followed to address those objectives. In particular, participatory practices and the model of managing interdisciplinary teams is placed at the heart of the project empowering island communities to foster stable working teams to sustain and promote the sustainable place-based development of their island. In addition, the planned onsite actions and hands-on workshops as an engaging practice is also one of the innovative aspects of the project adding significant value to the actual impact of the proposed methodology.

This paper describes the methodology introduced by the ISL project, as well as the expected results foreseen during its implementation aiming at forming interdisciplinary island communities of practice (ICoPs) operating for sustainable cultural tourism models. Towards this end, the paper begins with a discussion on Sect. 2 about the formation of the Island Communities of Practice (ICoP). Subsequently, Sect. 3 focuses on benefits, impacts and results and finally, in Sect. 4, the results and the research's future directions are discussed.

2 Methodology for the Formation of Island Communities of Practice (ICoP)

The ISL project takes inspiration from Wenger E.'s idea of "*Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*" [34]. According to this reference, Wenger defines these communities as a group of people who share a common interest or enthusiasm in something they do and who learn to cooperate in order to improve their abilities and knowledge through regular interactions.

The ISL project seeks to encourage the promotion of more sustainable tourism practices as the common goal through the promotion of ICoPs. In order to accomplish this objective, the project intends to establish the notion of ICoP and encourage residents to create a variety of such groups in their regions. Figure 1 shows the selected case studies from three Mediterranean countries that will be addressed during the project and act as pilot cases. These islands are:

- *Leros island, Greece.* Leros has faced several challenges throughout history and is today regarded as a less privileged island community. However, there is a growing need for tourism revitalisation towards sustainable, local development.
- *Nicosia, Cyprus.* This case study is located on a country-sized island and is both an attractive tourism destination. Specifically, the case deals with Nicosia, a divided city consisting of many communities, including a majority of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities (OR Greek speaking and Turkish speaking Cypriots). This unique characteristic has given the city a distinct cultural identity, which currently requires more sustainable tourism options after the pandemic.
- *Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy.* Cagliari is an exceptionally attractive tourist destination in the centre of the Mediterranean, and it has been selected as a case study due to

the rising need for alternatives that emphasise local aspirations over prevalent mass tourism methods.

The ICoP groups are formed by island-based stakeholders active on the aforementioned islands that are able and willing to create interdisciplinary groups and work collaboratively towards a specific objective: to comprehend, appreciate, and envision the cultural tourism sustainable future of their respective islands.

The ICoPs can be formed by the following groups of stakeholders:

1. Representatives from Island Municipalities representing the decision-making level.
2. Professionals from the hospitality and tourism industry in the private sector.
3. Local cultural organizations, including both public and private entities.
4. Academics who can demonstrate a relationship with the study areas and provide significant research and theoretical background to the group.
5. Local associations and already existing groups that are active in fields related to the cultural tourism profile of their island.
6. Interested individuals of all ages.

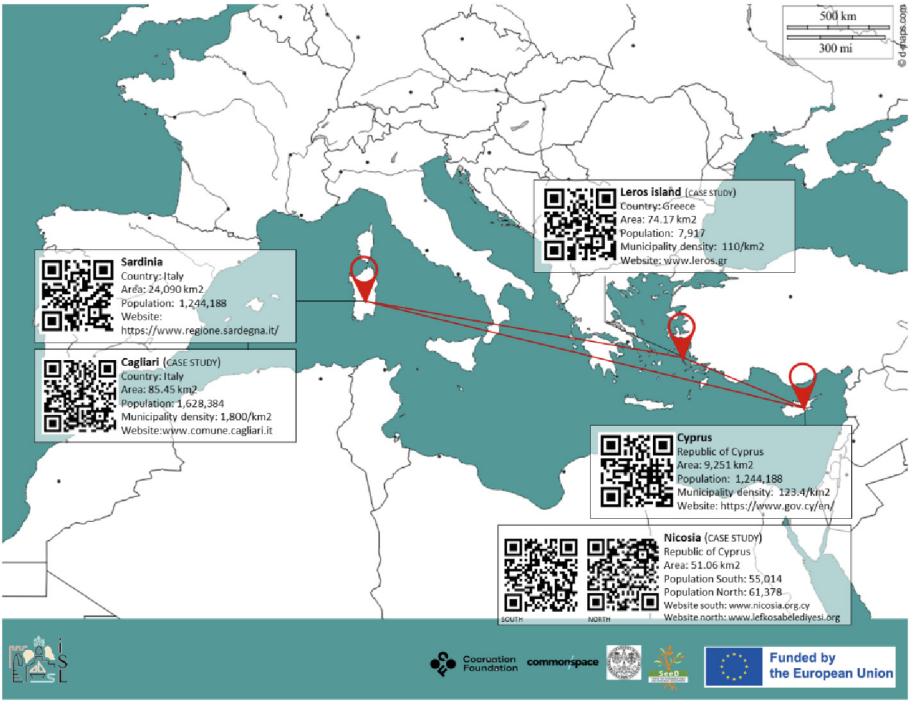

Fig. 1. Mediterranean Islands case studies

Local stakeholders, that will actively form ICoP groups, have several needs, including broadening the boundaries of democracy and acquiring a more active role in the decision-making process; strengthening cooperation among all the stakeholders in the cultural,

tourism, and policy-making fields, and creating an efficient collaboration framework that brings together professionals and citizens from different disciplines. These needs are closely related to the ICoP groups' objectives, which include being involved in decision-making processes, learning how to collaborate effectively, and finding solutions to overcome societal, economic, and environmental challenges arising from various crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the vision of a more sustainable and resilient future for island communities.

ICoPs have a common goal, even though each island may not necessarily have the similar ICoP structure. Each ICoP will have its own distinctive characteristics, such as different kinds of professionals establishing their own methods of cooperation, engagement, and interaction to meet local needs, expectations and governance systems. Some ICoPs may share a common physical workspace or a digital platform, such as communication through smartphones or regular online/physical meeting points.

ICoPs are initiated by four organisations, e.g., the ISL project partners. The selection of the partnership is based on partners' complementarity, experience, and alignment with the ISL project objectives, taking also into account the following criteria:

1. Their motivation to participate in the project and each organisation's goals, methodology, and interest in contributing to a more democratic and participatory decision-making process for the sustainable future of peripheral regions like islands.
2. The competence, expertise, and resources of each partner which contribute efficiently to the project outputs. The partners have strong project specific competencies and skills and dispose of qualified staff who will undertake the implementation of the project.
3. The contacts and the networking of each partner to maximise the impact and the distribution of the project.
4. Their geographic coverage, meaning their connection with island communities, as an asset ensuring a greater impact of the planned activities.

Following this process, partners from Germany (Cocreation Foundation), Greece (COMMONSPACE), Cyprus (SeeD) and Sardinia, Italy (University of Cagliari) form the ISL consortium as shown in Fig. 2.

To reach the project objectives, meet the target groups needs and produce high quality results, the project proposes a two-dimensional participatory scheme; promoting co-design sessions among the partnership members as well as through the active involvement of interested stakeholders that will be informed, participate and finally collaborate to form ICoPs in three countries. Toward this end, participatory workshops (among partners and in collaboration with local island stakeholders) are planned using a set of innovative participatory tools as described in more detail in the following section.

3 Benefits, Impacts and Results of the ISL Project

The ongoing ISL project has already shown great benefits in terms of both the local and transnational nature.

Locally, ISL has already identified informal groups, formal associations, decision making bodies and private entities related to tourism and cultural activities in the local

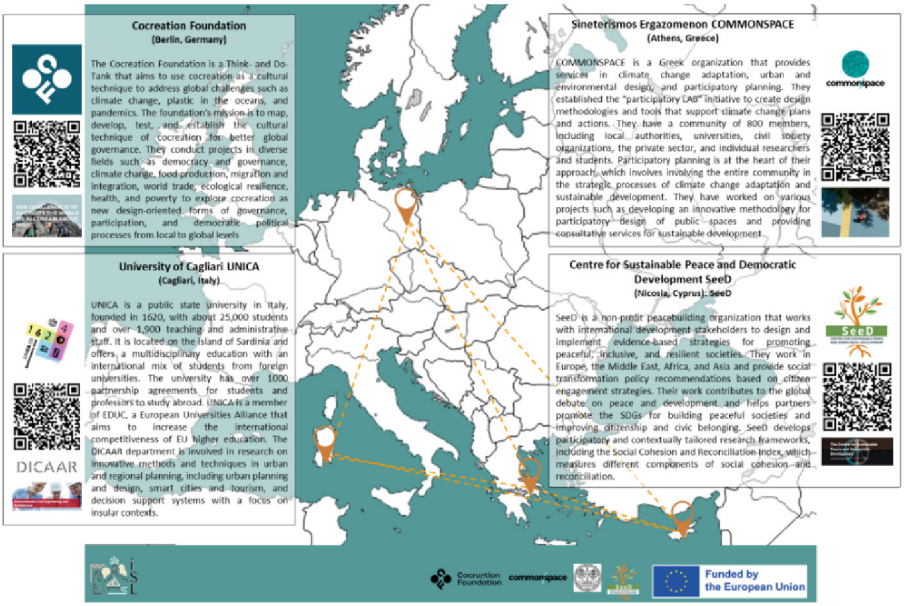

Fig. 2. The partners of ISL project.

and national level that will be hugely benefited from the ISL results. Practising the co-design process, activating local communities and raising awareness on issues related to more democratic processes is going to ultimately influence the way islanders are taking part in the decision-making process. A distinctive example is the direct involvement of the island Municipality of Leros, Greece, even in the proposal phase ensuring the actual use of the results at an administrative level during and after the end of the project. This action will also provide a valuable research ground from an academic point of view, as well as will inspire the co-design process integration in various fields such as education, environmental policies, etc.

At the transnational level, the ISL project has been a great opportunity for knowledge and expertise transfer and information and ideas exchange, as it comprises experiences from Germany (Cocreation Foundation), Greece (COMMONSPACE), Cyprus (SeeD) and Sardinia, Italy (University of Cagliari). Indeed, the interdisciplinary nature of the project has satisfied the need to shift towards more democratic and participatory decision-making practices. Furthermore, in agreement with EU report on Cultural Governance [35], the project promotes and develops participatory practices by meaningfully involving relevant stakeholders in all phases of the policy cycle from the identification of the problem to policy evaluation and recognising the added value of such engagement. Considering that sustainable tourism practices are a commonly accepted practice being researched and studied in all participating countries trying to overcome the impacts of the pandemic, transnational cooperation seems imperative for good governance choices to be revealed, knowledge exchange and discussions among participating partners and stakeholders to be achieved.

In addition, the methodology of the project and its multidisciplinary dimension is crucial and is meeting the needs of ICoP groups and the goals of the partner organisations:

1. Activating a shared and recognised knowledge on participatory methods.
2. Experience exchange among partners with different back-grounds, coming from different social and geographical contexts (e.g. Central Europe, South Europe).
3. Testing guidelines and good practices them in different contexts.
4. Actively engaging island communities at cross country level.
5. Project activities inspired and reinforced by innovative European practices.

Towards the achievement of the aforementioned goals and aspirations the project is designed in 2 phases, i.e. the pre-workshops' phase and Island workshops' phase. In particular:



Fig. 3. Internal training session for partners (designed and conducted by the Cocreation Foundation), Berlin, Germany, January 2023

Pre-Workshops' Phase: The objectives of this stage are mainly (i) to support the capacity building process of participating organisations to collaborate transnationally and through participatory practices, (ii) to create a set of innovative high quality participatory tools for islanders to support active European citizenship and the formation of ICoP and (iii) to gather the necessary information on the current situation of the study cases regarding the sustainability status, the cultural and natural reserve and the stakeholder

ecosystem. These objectives were achieved during the partners' internal training session held in Berlin in January 2023 (Fig. 3) through a common strategy action was built by the partners, who exchanged experiences, good participatory practices, and field experiences. This co-design session included ice-breaking questions, brainstorming sessions, inspirational walks, etc., which helped the partners to express and feed the discussion with valuable input. In addition, this first stage includes a practical guide on the step-by-step methodology in order ICoPs to be formed in 3 case studies included as pilot cases in ISL project (Leros in Greece, Sardinia in Italy, Nicosia in Cyprus), useful for shaping meaningful and engaging workshops.

This phase of the project, which was organised by the Cocreation Foundation (Germany), was indispensable for gaining significant knowledge on new participatory practices and the idea of co-creation design.

The achieved results of the pre-workshops phase in general are defined as follows:

a) INTANGIBLE results: (i) a stronger and collaborative partnership structure will be facilitated after the joint training session on the implementation and participation methodology enhancing team building and sense of cooperation; (ii) a knowledge base on the current situation of the study cases regarding the sustainability status, the cultural and natural reserve and the stakeholder ecosystem that is active in the area and can be approached in order to form the expected ICoPs for the benefit of the sustainable future of the islands will be obtained offering advantages in the involved partners and groups of participants.
b) TANGIBLE results: (i) an internal partners co-working/ training session will be held; while (ii) an Island Communities of Practice Guide (iii) 3 Participation plans, (iv) 3 Stakeholder environment mapping and analysis and (v) 3 case study analysis representing selected cultural aspects of each study region will be produced.

Island Workshops: The objective of this ongoing activity is strongly connected with the specific objective of the ISL project which aims to form an ICoP that allows islanders to visualize a profile of sustainable cultural tourism for their islands. In this context, this activity includes in total 6 workshops to be carried out in 3 EU island regions (Greece, Cyprus, Sardinia). Three of the four participating partners are connected with island regions and these areas are selected as the 3 case studies of the ISL project. The specific objectives of this activity are: (i) to foster the co-creation and co-design of local policy guidelines for the cultural tourism of the islands; (ii) to raise awareness of the benefits that co-creation processes could bring to the decision-making environment; (iii) to establish a fruitful foundation for the development of the ICoP and inspire them to continue working collaboratively.

The workshops, applied in the 3 participating islands in which the following actions will take place: (i) mapping of the community cultural capital" - evaluation of the existing cultural capital of the island by the participants - collection of empirical knowledge; (ii) building "Island Visions", for which mixed online and participatory tools will be used to carry out brainstorming sessions among the members of the "ICoPs"; finally (iii) 3 summary reports, one for each island, will be the conclusion of this activity. For the realization of each workshop a different set of participatory tools will be used in order to serve local needs and community characteristics. These could include: ice-breaking questions,

collective mapping, brainstorming sessions, collective walks, visioning sessions to name a few.

The expected results of this 2nd phase are the following:

a) INTANGIBLE results: (i) islanders will have gained significant knowledge on participatory practices regarding the estimation of the cultural potential of their islands, and the way they can sustainably exploit them towards more resilient cultural tourism choices; (ii) team building among participants of the ICoP will be fostered by learning a way to cooperate and work as teams over common problems and visions not only during the project but also in the future.
b) TANGIBLE results: (i) Island Communities of Practice (one in each country constituted from at least 5 local actors); (ii) 6 local island workshops; (iii) 3 workshop summary reports; (iv) at least 10 stakeholders in each country will participate in the designed island workshops and at least 5 of them will eventually form the local ICoPs; (v) at least 60 participants from 3 different countries in total. In more detail 10 stakeholders in each of the 3 countries will participate in each of the 2 workshops; (vi) high level of satisfaction among the participating stakeholders - evaluated through an after-workshop survey.

At the end of the project, the impact will be evaluated through a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) agreed by the ISL consortium measuring the expected results on a partnership and project level; ensuring at the same time the success of the project.

4 Discussion and Conclusions

Considering the goal of the small scale partnerships projects and the first objective of the ISL project set: "building capacity of participating organisations to collaborate transnationally and through participatory practices", the long-term development of the participating entities is of high importance in the project and the implementation of the project is beneficial for the following reasons:

- The international presence and extroversion of all partners endorse the competitiveness of the organisations as well as the significant upskilling towards team spirit, creativity, and innovation for the involved staff.
- The enhancement of participatory practices to be used by the partners not only during the ISL project but also in other activities they are involved in. Exchange of good practices and knowledge through their constant collaboration, training session and co-design of the methodology they will use is a great asset.
- Newcomers (Cocreation Foundation and SeeD) will get familiarised with the Erasmus plus programme and project management in general opening a new field of action having the support of the rest most experienced partners.
- The enhancement of organisations' experience by everyone's involvement in research and documentation practices regarding codesign and sustainable cultural tourism of regional/island regions.

- The development of strong connections with local communities as place-based and community-based actions will ensure better communication and trust-building between the staff involved and the group of stakeholders that will participate in the workshops.

Furthermore, forming ICoPs as the main target of this project is used to offer significant opportunities to people with different backgrounds to participate in democratic life and have a say on the future touristic development of their island. At the same time by emphasising on cultural tourism practices and their sustainable nature, participants are given the opportunity to get familiarised with local cultural identity, cultural awareness, and local social and historical heritage. Moreover, not only participants are engaged in participatory practices but also collaborative sessions among the partners to enhance team building and awareness on such methods are planned in the pre workshops phase.

ISL project enhances social and terrestrial coherence as well as inclusion by focusing on island communities and promoting participation practises of these generally considered inaccessible places, mostly owing to insularity.

People resident in remote regions lack the opportunity to attend co-creation events or such events lack impactful practices in island regions. Through the enrolment of the preparation phase, the implementation of the workshops and the joint dissemination event planned, groups of islanders will have the opportunity to gain appropriate knowledge and capacity to form "ICoPs" through hands-on working workshops; a practice that enhance team and community building through informal learning activities.

The aforementioned challenges also impose a strong barrier for the ISL partnership to ensure the successful creation and continuation of the proposed ICoPs as well as their sustainability in the future. To endorse this success ISL partners will provide support to the ICoPs' members, through constant awareness, guidance and support as well as the reassurance to promote further initiatives related to the support proposal ideas related to ISL context and the ICoPs' needs already established in all three island cases.

Additionally, ISL initiates an innovative educational aspect to all participating actors, including the partners and the target group, providing a co-creation scheme that will empower them to increase their capacity to think critically and creatively, to explore new ways of acting and making informed and adequate decisions.

Finally, the activities take place to secure the sustainability of the project are the following:

- The partners will continue promoting the project after its end through their sites.
- The partners will continue informing anyone interested about the project, after its end.
- The results of the project will be uploaded on partners' website; especially the results of the activities will be promoted and used in the future since their format and digital content can prerequisite it; project results will be also uploaded in the Participatory Lab Repository [36] developed by Commonspace (Greece).
- All project's digital means will form an important element of the project both during the development phases and beyond. Social media platforms are also now accepted as fit-for-purpose and robust communication channels with target groups and between target groups.

- All participants have agreed to continue the project as a large-scale partnership further developing and capitalising on the ISL results, involving more partners and island regions around the EU and beyond aiming at establishing ICoP as a methodology to give islanders the potentiality to form their sustainable future in their own terms; ensuring resilience against the unexpected crisis.

Currently the ISL project is in its initial phase haven't yet produce concrete results. The next steps include the implementation of all planned island workshops in all participating countries; ensuring at the same time the extended dissemination of the project context and results. Finally, steps to further elaborate on the project idea and results to projects corresponding to a larger scale as well as to a wider context of spatial distribution is already into place.

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Authors' Contributions. Koutsi D. devised the main conceptual ideas of the ISL project, and in collaboration with Mougiakou E., and Tsadari, S., structured the methodological steps of the project idea. Hörster S., and Flade K., designed and conducted the co-creation workshop of the project in Berlin. Garau C., and Degosus G., drafted the manuscript and prepared the figures included in this publication. All authors provided feedback and reviewed the final manuscript.

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