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Tourists practice making traditional kyrgyz cheese snacks during the initial sustainable tour by the greentour project.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

FROM A SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE:

HELVETAS' EXPERIENCES

CONNECTING RELATED ECOSYSTEMS

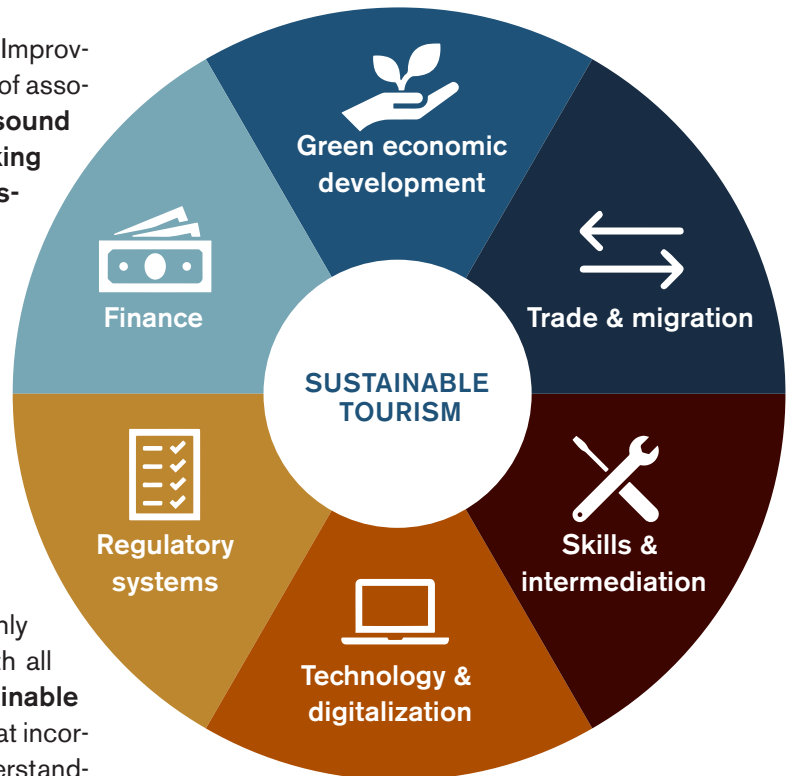
Tourism is not isolated from other sectors. Improving the conceptualization and implementation of associated development projects depends on a **sound understanding of their environments and linking projects to an analysis of interrelated ecosystems.**

There exists a growing directory of programs that use market systems approaches for tourism¹, but it is not clear how well they serve this purpose. This value proposition evaluates Helvetas' tourism experiences through a systemic lens, proposing a new framework for overcoming current limitations of tourism projects.

In Helvetas' view, tourism should not only become sustainable but also contribute, with all its opportunities, as an **instrument for sustainable development**, applying a holistic approach that incorporates environmental and social issues. Understanding the interactions of tourism with other systems is required to **enlarge the scope of possibilities** and enhance its full potential to create jobs that include disadvantaged groups and valorise natural and cultural assets.

Rather than implementing stand-alone tourism projects, we propose to consider **interconnected schemes** that facilitate growth. This paradigm shift promotes our vision of the potential of tourism to act as a stimulus to influence a broader change and avoids the risk of making a problem sectoral. Improving supporting functions or framework conditions will positively impact sectors that share similar challenges.

To provide guidance for future interventions, **Helvetas' tourism projects worldwide** have been analyzed according to their relationship to six transversal working areas and to which extent they can contribute to each area's improvement.



¹ https://beamexchange.org/practice/programme-index/?q=&selected_facets=sector_exact%3ATourism#listing-tab

BEYOND SECTORAL DEVELOPMENT:

TOURISM CROSS-CUTTING SYSTEMS

Sustainable tourism can occur as a result of solving failure within the tourism sector. But it also requires that challenges are addressed in interrelated areas.

Similarly, tourism can indirectly benefit from the upgrade of these interrelated areas, and improvement within the tourism ecosystem can help to solve bottlenecks in these connected systems.

GREEN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

According to the United Nations Environment Programme², a green economy is defined as low carbon, resource-efficient and socially inclusive. As a system, it embraces **economic opportunities with resource optimization and reduced environmental impact**. Examples of this can be energy efficient constructions, waste management and business income tributary to a healthy, secure and socially cohesive

² <https://www.unep.org/regions/asia-and-pacific/regional-initiatives/supporting-resource-efficiency/green-economy>



© Helvetas Guatemala

Birdwatching in the volcanic chain of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala



Ukuch Ixcanul in Guatemala: Environmental conservation as a starting point

Since 2019, Helvetas has worked on nature conservation in the western Altiplano of Guatemala. Our activities focus on consolidating more resilient, better conserved and better-connected forested landscapes in 7 municipalities of the volcanic chain of Quetzaltenango. The project contributes to the good governance of municipal and community forests as the socio-ecological basis for sustainable development.

Demonstrating the value of these landscapes was essential to convincing local communities to take responsibility for their care. The community-based tourism (CBT) sub-sector – encompassing ecotourism, ethno-tourism and birdwatching – had high potential but had not yet received much attention, especially considering that 72 % of the region's population lives in poverty and there are strong migratory tendencies for young people who can no

longer find land and sources of income. Hence, Helvetas supported micro-enterprise capacity development, strengthened a more inclusive management of existing forests while incorporating traditional organizational structures, established local financial mechanisms for payment of ecosystem services (PES), and created a regional community tourism route with functional value chains linked to providers of tourist services and products.

Unlike many CBT projects, the primary goal was not contributing to socio-economic development and generating income for the local population. The main focuses were the preservation of 14,500 hectares of land, the promotion of agrobiodiversity and the conservation of native forest diversity. CBT was used as a vehicle to enhance biodiversity conservation, ultimately achieving a 20 % increase in families' income.

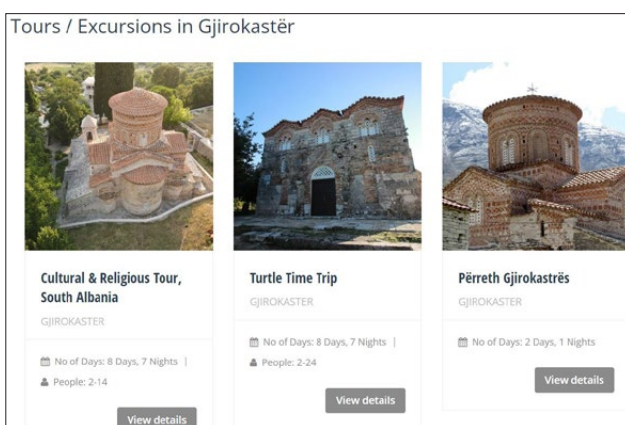
TRADE & MIGRATION

The trade and migration system is defined as the **exchange of goods and services and the movement of people across international borders**. These flows are related to tourism and can affect it positively or negatively.

Migrant laborers are common in the hospitality industry, causing brain drain but also making important social and economic contributions to both host and origin countries. They facilitate trade, establish networks of entrepreneurs across borders, send remittances that can create funds for investment, simplify the transfer of business know-how or promote a destination. Furthermore, as the main target of heritage tourism, well-established diaspora has an important role in cultural preservation and community cohesion.



Heritage and cultural tour, UNESCO Gjirokastra, Albania



Tours and excursions



Attracting diaspora tourism in Albania and Bosnia

In 2020, **international tourism recorded a 60–80% decline**, with variation between countries. Some destinations (cities, single-segment destinations, international tourism) have been more affected than others (e.g., nature destinations less than 1-day drive from major cities). The Western Balkans did not escape the trend, and Helvetas supported these countries' projects in the tourism sector, such as Market Makers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and RisiAlbania.

The disruption of the pandemic forced tourism actors to rethink: **where is our market now?** The answer produced a drastic **shift to a national market** with communication and marketing to support sales and save the summer season. Domestic tourism is often an **underestimated segment, which represents 75% of the tourism economy in OECD countries**. Influencers and travel bloggers were mobilized to convince residents to come; destinations and businesses highlighted their outdoor activities and nature; and travel vouchers and discounts were launched to stimulate demand.

But hospitality is not a transaction: while providing a short-term response, stakeholders should not forget the long-term relationship. This is particularly true for **the diaspora, which offers many advantages**, such as visiting in off-season or for cultural/religious events, travelling to their home-grown rural areas rather than touristic hotspots, having extra buying power and promoting their homeland abroad. Understanding this potential has led projects to try to capture this segment and respond to their needs. In fact, to attract the diaspora, **many approaches are similar to marketing domestic tourism**. For both, motivational factors can include visiting local friends and family, homeland attachment, the search or reinforcement of identity (cultural or heritage tourism), the discovery of own country and culture, or the support to local economy and jobs. But whereas communication strategies can be similar, distribution channels should normally differ. For example, by using diaspora magazines or specific online channels to reach this segment abroad.



Results-based financing (RBF) ties the disbursement of funding to the achievement of clearly specified and verified results or outcomes, usually related to **vocational training and subsequent employment**. It emphasizes the value-for-money principle, with strong potential to upscale and train masses in a region or a country.

In the Amhara region of Ethiopia, Helvetas implements the Skills and Knowledge for Youth (SKY) project to increase employability and labor market insertion of disadvantaged youth, to create more jobs (self-employment), and to empower youth. A results-based financing mechanism has been successfully introduced to foster employability and, ultimately, **gainful employment**. The regional TVET Bureau is strongly supporting the members of the stakeholder platform in curriculum and training module development by assigning experts and experienced trainers from public TVET colleges to oversee facilitation for self-employment (provision of working place, loan service) and the selection

of youths for training.

In the first phase, about **2,000 young women and men accessed gainful wage- or self-employment through quality training** and job placement, as well as business support for self-employment. In the second phase, 3,000 youth will be trained and find employment. In addition, the results-based financing mechanism will be regionally upscaled amongst a diverse set of private training providers in several towns in the Amhara region and beyond.

Through **differential pricing for social inclusion**, which provides a higher age for women and extra support for women with family duties, SKY eases the inclusion of women to the tourism industry. In addition, SKY promotes the participation of young people with special needs (e.g., single mothers, people living with HIV, internally displaced people, and youth with disabilities). If gainful employment is achieved by a graduate, the training providers receive a social inclusion incentive.

SKILLS & INTERMEDIATION

Skills development is of utmost importance to the development and competitiveness of any sector. Tourism education should incorporate Destination Management Organizations (DMO), travel agencies, tour operators, transportation, guiding, visitor attractions, accommodation and Food & Beverage. Beyond the technical and classical hygienic-sanitary competencies, soft skills and customer orientation appear to be a competitive advantage to envisage a career in the sector and for a destination to deliver quality host-focused service. Similarly, digital, social and green skills gained in importance for various occupational levels in the sub-sectors.⁴

However, before the training itself, career guidance and matching services are required to increase the attractiveness of tourism and hospitality education and as an industry career. The biggest challenge remains to persuade students and their families to choose this path, since jobs generally have small annual earnings and low levels of education. Labor-intensive and inclusive tourism offers great potential to tackle unem-



© Patrick Rohr

Cooking class in Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

ployment, but it can also be a risk regarding the type of work. To mitigate this menace, involving international companies, with advanced human resources regulations, to participate in training delivery, raising awareness about decent jobs⁵ or promoting continuous education should be considered.

4 <https://nexttourismgeneration.eu/challenges-and-the-importance-of-skills-in-tourism-sub-sectors-during-and-after-covid-19/>

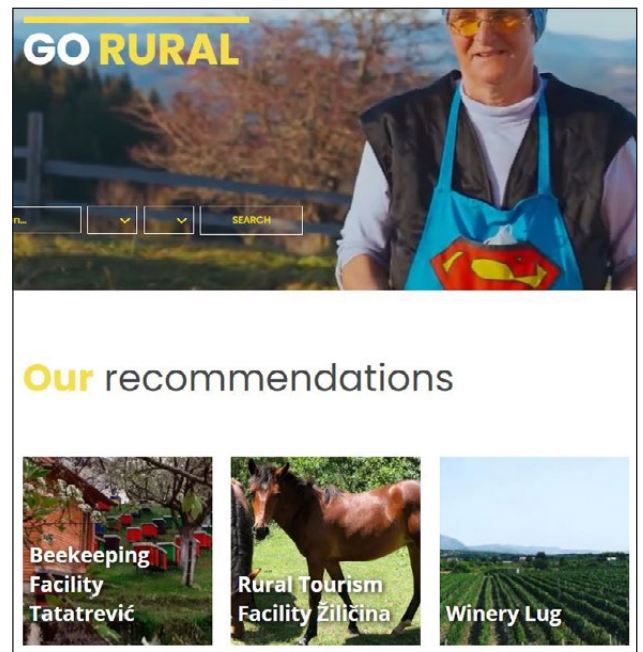
5 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_546337.pdf

TECHNOLOGY & DIGITALIZATION

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated some ongoing changes, for which digitalization is probably the best example. **Tourism was at the heart of this shift.** During this period, digital tools were essential for managing the crisis, to stimulate domestic demand and to cooperate.

Data was needed to understand new consumption patterns and provide an effective response based on evidence for making informed decisions, for proper steering and to monitor the actions taken. All three levels (destination, business and customer) of the value chain need to be interlinked for advocacy, to coordinate policy response and to propose alternative products to domestic tourists.

Combining the organization of the tourism ecosystem with the emergence of a platform economy brings the possibility to create an enabling digital tourism environment.⁶ In this view, Helvetas takes advantage of new technologies following the nine guiding principles of digital development⁷.



Web platform to stimulate rural tourism, Bosnia and Herzegovina



MarketMakers in Bosnia and Herzegovina Web platform to stimulate demand

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, MarketMakers aims to advance rural tourism by launching a comprehensive set of activities and a multifunctional web page (www.rural.ba) that contributes to an increase in the number of visitors and income for rural tourism service providers. The implementation of the stipulated activities enables MarketMakers partner Balkantina to take on some roles of a destination management organization (DMO) for rural destinations and thereby contribute to a systemic change in the development of agri-tourism in the country.

To soften the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on the tourism sector, stakeholders in rural areas adopted a systematic approach to the development of their destinations, including **the creation of attractive tourism products for local residents** through a combination of available services: accommodation, agricultural farm products, culinary and

wine experiences, sport and outdoor activities and visits to rural household. The establishment of local identities has put the destinations on the touristic radar and was supported by investment in marketing and promotional services.

Balkantina can hence significantly contribute to sustainable tourism development in rural areas, providing creative assistance in combining existing services, **initiating a collaborative approach among local stakeholders**, and creating a channel that links touristic services to potential consumers. In the medium to long-term (following the containment of the COVID-19 pandemic), the intervention will also contribute to making rural destinations more attractive to international visitors.

⁶ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/f528d444-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/f528d444-en#figure-d1e9585>

⁷ <https://digitalprinciples.org/>

REGULATORY SYSTEMS

Improving framework conditions and strengthening the regulatory environment demands an integrated approach to **coordinating policy development in a coherent and consistent manner** to ensure that tourism policies are effective and contribute to sustainable tourism.⁸

Governments bodies that are willing to support the sector do not always have access to updated information. **Organizing stakeholders and facilitating information flows** are as important as including social and environmental actors and consulting indigenous communities on a regular basis.

Land use planning, labor, health and food safety, environment, consumers, or the protection of cultural heritage are the main spheres to be regulated, **not by increasing bureaucracy but by simplifying processes**. Overlapping taxes, levies and fees is costly to enterprises and can bring institutional challenges across multiple government entities, at local and national levels. On the other side, the lack of regulation causes social, environmental and economic impacts on individuals and local communities, ultimately jeopardizing the survival of the activity.



© CBT Kyrgyzstan

Strengthen and empower local structures for bottom-up policy changes, Kyrgyzstan



Community-Based Tourism Association in Kyrgyzstan Advocacy for free visa regime

Since early 2000, Helvetas has supported sustainable tourism development in Kyrgyzstan, but bringing travelers to rural areas was a major challenge. Some solutions were identified, such as big marketing campaigns, incentives, or the facilitation of transportation. But the easiest and most cost-effective change to was at the policy level: to simplify the visa regime to enter the country. Since Kyrgyzstan is competing with other destinations, easier access would bring more tourists overall and increase the ones coming to remote locations.

Actors in the sector were not organized. Helvetas established Community-Based Tourism (CBT) groups, which were united through an association, the Kyrgyzstan Community-Based Tourism Association (KCBTA). This association was created in 2003 with several goals, including to lobby for the interests of its members (CBT groups, but also individuals) present in rural areas. As soon as KCBTA was well-recognized by the businesses, the group gained the government's attention and a dialogue was established at two levels:

- Between the association and the rural tourism businesses
 - Between the association and the government.
- The association was hence a catalyst between a variety of different stakeholders and policy makers. Two assemblies per year were held where local actors could present their challenges and needs. As such, advocacy campaigns were not led by the project but by the local partners themselves. Decentralization was a good way to broaden the network, stimulate interest of a wide range of actors and support new policies across a wide geographic area.

In 2012, the government finally adopted a free regime for visas. After the removal of this barrier, more regional countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) developed similar policies and e-visa processes, following the trailblazing shift of Kyrgyzstan. This contributed to a new regional dynamic, positioning Central Asia as a region with easier access than before.

⁸ <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/tour-2010-4-en.pdf?expires=1620555540&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=710147BBA0470FB10994C778EBC95790>

FINANCE

Investment and financing have an important role to play in the **transition to low carbon and socially inclusive sustainable tourism development**.⁹ Access to proper resources can support infrastructure updates for energy efficiency, improve water and waste management, maintain cultural heritage or stimulate innovation. Funding should be sufficient but, more importantly, financial flows should reach where they are needed.

Governments can **mobilize funding and define objectives for the sector, but access to credit remains a priority for Micro, Small and Medium**

Enterprises (MSME) to respond to the multiple needs of an often-fragmented tourism sector. The domestic development banking sector and commercial lending agencies must become more familiar with market opportunities offered by the tourism.

Natural areas should be managed under financial schemes, **increasing funding streams, which will enable them to operate independently**, with visitor fees and expenditures reinvested. If the private sector is benefiting from these natural attractions, it should also contribute through appropriate financial mechanisms.¹⁰



© RisiAlbania

Session on rural businesses accessing finance with the Association of Banks in Albania (AAB), Albania

9 <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/tour-2018-7-en.pdf?expires=1620557831&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=C-C3304639DE14724ED7718E6711150F3>

10 <http://www.oas.org/DSD/publications/Unit/oea78e/ch08.htm>



RisiAlbania: Linking investment to rural SMEs

EU and Albanian government **funding has been made available for rural business grants** as a way of promoting rural development. Some obstacles exist, such as the lack of awareness and **weak linkages between funding agencies and rural businesses** (such as homestays) that require **investment to upgrade their infrastructure** and receive international tourists.

Helvetas facilitated a cost-sharing scheme with a tour operator that brought travelers to these regions, but little interest was shown by the operator, who did not want to play this financing role. Still, facilitating the collaboration between tour operators and accommodation providers was key to reach funding. It was a catalyst for local companies to apply for financial support to grow their businesses and to create the linkage to business advisers to assist with proposals.

RisiAlbania connected business development service (BDS) consultants with tour operators. The operators are best positioned to identify rural businesses in need of funding that can be included in their packages. Since finding viable recipients for grants continues to be a challenge for these funds, the BDS providers examine the businesses and then **assist them with their funding applications**. This is a win-win-win, with travel operators benefiting from **funding going to their rural partners to improve and expand their services**, rural businesses having access to financing, and BDS consultants finding viable rural businesses to assist. The grant-giving and funding bodies also benefit from **reduced risk**, with the added assurance that an upgraded or expanded rural business has a strong link to the international tourism market.

PATHWAYS ACROSS THE TOURISM VALUE CHAIN

THE DESTINATION STORY (MACRO LEVEL): A JOURNEY IN KYRGYZSTAN

Supporting effective Destination Management Organization (DMO) is vital for sustainable tourism development. In 2000, Helvetas started working on rural tourism (green economic development) in Kyrgyzstan. At this time, there was little confidence in this sector – both from individuals and the government. When project staff started discussions on community-based tourism, local villagers found it hard to believe that travelers might have interest in visiting these remote locations.

Improving living conditions of rural populations by helping them generating income through tourism required capacity building and creating awareness of job and business opportunities (skills & intermediation). Involving existing MSMEs in vocational training (skills & intermediation) was key, but many were skeptical that it would benefit them over the long-term, since qualified workers usually migrate (trade & migration) to Turkey or Russia, creating manifest brain drain.

Efficient DMO entails appropriate structure that involves a broad range of stakeholders. Helping them to get organized and building their capacities (skills & intermediation) was vital to improving framework conditions (regulatory system), but further evidence was required to convince policy makers. At the bottom of the pyramid, the CBT groups themselves involved social and environmental actors (green economic development). Having them included in the roots of the mechanism helped to prevent potential opposition at higher levels and provided strong arguments for lobbying (regulatory system). The use of media (technology & digitalization), through several articles, was also instrumental.

Collecting figures and statistical data (technology & digitalization) to demonstrate sector growth, lobby for an increase in government budget allocation (finance), and show economic benefits were as important as presenting studies and examples of other countries having adopted similar measures. The adaptation of policies (regulatory system), such as a free visa regime in 2012, were essential to remove



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Community-based tourism in Alai and Chon Alai, Kyrgyzstan

entry barriers and boost investment (finance) for infrastructure development. CBTs already implemented various activities, such as a concept for protected areas or the coordination of the value chain in collaboration with state agencies, but Helvetas' support was essential in developing their capacities in advocacy (regulatory system) by delivering trainings, providing concrete tools and building understanding of the process (skills & intermediation).

After the removal of this visa barrier, neighboring countries (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) adopted similar policies (regulatory system) and e-visas (technology & digitalization), following the pioneer shift of Kyrgyzstan. This contributed to a regional dynamic, fostering larger investments (finance) and positioning Central Asia as a region with easier access where travelers could experience a diversity of countries and products.

In 2016, the same actors, already organized and experienced but also a lot more powerful, developed

a new advocacy campaign against Visa and Registration Department registration requirements (regulatory system). Times had changed and new digital tools (technology & digitalization) were available. Stakeholders started collecting signatures, organized roundtables and criticisms were observed on social medias. Within 10 days, the government removed this new regulation (regulatory system).

On 28 June 2018, the concept of "Kyrgyzstan is the country of the green economy" (green economic development) was approved by the resolution of the Jogorku Kenesh and adopted (regulatory system). Measures to implement sustainable practices in tourism are also indicated in the Development Program and the Implementation Plan for the green economy in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2019-2023. This led to some destinations becoming certified as Green Destinations and listed in the top 100 sustainable destinations of 2023.¹¹

¹¹ https://www.helvetas.org/en/switzerland/how-you-can-help/follow-us/blog/highlights/Kyrgyzstans-Path-to-Becoming-an-Award-Winning-Sustainable-Tourism-Destination?utm_source=M365&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=202301_en_unlocking-tourisms-potential_highlights_awareness&utm_term=#ms-dyntrrid=T1DZ1dPoQJk43wdTknmk31hYISHX318Flwb_EEOM8

Today, Helvetas implements three projects in Kyrgyzstan:

- [EU SWITCH-Asia GREEN TOUR](#) accelerates the transition of Kyrgyzstan to a green economy (green economic development) by increasing the sustainability and competitiveness of tourism;
- [SECO Sustainable Winter Tourism](#) increases competitiveness of the winter tourism value chain by proposing value-added services, year-round. It builds local capacities (skills & intermediation) and improves framework conditions (regulatory system);

- [SDC Bai-Alai](#) increases employment and incomes (green economic development) by facilitating trainings for youth and women (skills & intermediation).

As tourism numbers grow, initiatives are now emerging to redefine policies (regulatory system) that restrict the number of travelers in specific areas to preserve the environment.

THE SME STORY (MESO LEVEL): A JOURNEY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

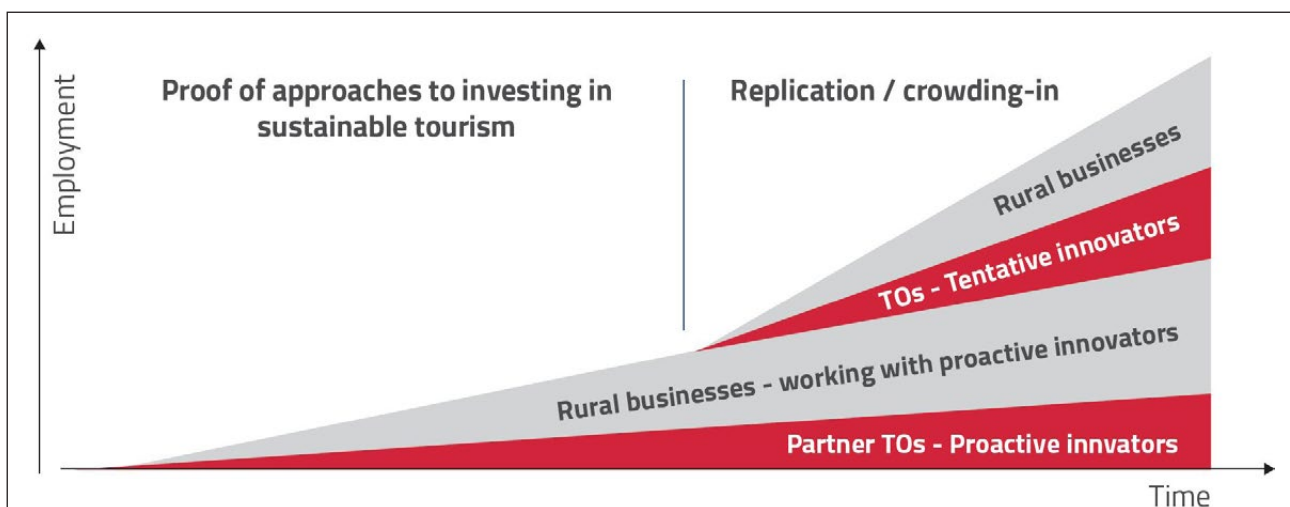
Helvetas' activities in the Western Balkans focus on vocational skills development and career orientation (skills & intermediation) to improve matching between youth capabilities and employers' requirements. In working on the whole labor market and providing information about different professions, projects quickly realized that youth interests and employment opportunities were converging towards the tourism sector.

RisiAlbania, which empowers private training providers for life-long learning, also identified tourism as a promising sector. The project supported innovation in tourism training (new courses and learning methodology) and value-added services (recruitment

and career orientation) through a website of mentors (technology & digitalization). The objective was to help businesses participate in the training and encourage local service providers to fill the required functions for market-oriented training and recruitment, ultimately aiming at system change.

Similar challenges were addressed through non-formal training in North Macedonia, facilitating relevance, accessibility with the promotion of a digital and blended training model (technology & digitalization), and quality of the training offer by involving private actors.

The informality of family businesses is an opportunity for young people, since sustainable tourism



Vision for employment creation, RisiAlbania, Gavin Anderson, 2021

12 <https://mentor.al/>

13 Balkan Colours: <https://www.balkancolours.com/> and Blagaj Climbing <https://blagaj-climbing.com/>



Climbing in Blagaj, Bosnia and Herzegovina

can provide them with quality and secure jobs and reduce migration to other European countries (trade & migration). Entrepreneurship support services are equally required for entrepreneurs to start their own income-generating activities. To accompany them in domestic and international promotion, at the business and destination level, projects have built linkages and provided financial literacy (finance) to strengthening access to funding – especially for women. Involvement of national tour operators served as a catalyst to open new tourism routes and diversify experiences. These innovations gave the foundation for growth of new areas of tourism (green economic development) and to stimulate sustainable employment generation through the wider adoption across the industry.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this translated into supporting the creation and branding of new climbing routes with a high potential for attracting domestic and international tourists. Key support to stakeholders in developing sustainable adrenaline tourism included: unifying safety standards (regulatory system), educating maintenance workers, organizing a professional climbing guide training program (skills & intermediation), establishing a system of evaluation of the environmental impact (green economic

development), and launching a tourism monitoring system as valuable source of information (technology & digitalization). Creating synergies between local and national stakeholders (Blagaj Climbing, Balkan Colors, Eco Center Blagaj) resulted in joint efforts regarding nature (flora and fauna) preservation. Sustainable mechanisms resulted in re-investing (finance) part of the profit for numerous actions like endangered species preservation or riverbed maintenance (green economic development).

If strengthening stakeholders of the tourism ecosystem improves the whole supply chain, improving their coordination is equally important. In Albania, the project gathered businesses from the region to identify a pressing need of developing a promotional website (technology & digitalization). Once they rallied around that cause, the project supported them to establish an entity where both municipalities and the private sector participate to manage tourism-related needs. Since its registration in 2019, the association now has over 50 members. And besides its core services of product development and marketing, it has started a silent revolution in the region by promoting business formalization (regulatory system).¹⁴

The project MarketMakers also supported the commercialization of these products with the creation of a bilingual online platform (Odmoriu BiH – Destination BiH) (technology & digitalization) to channel domestic tourists and enable customers to directly book custom-made packages consisting of combinations of touristic services offered by different partners. The B2C platform is managed by a marketing agency that offers under-developed but high-potential touristic destinations. This open space for rural service providers actively advises and supports local businesses to right-size and re-engineer their offers towards responsible travelers (green economic development).

Supporting businesses in rural areas to access investment (finance) through public funds and grants helped new entrepreneurs and raised the quality of the products and services, hence contributing to a more competitive, attractive and job-creator sector. Combining rural development and tourism by supporting agri-tourism activities (green economic development) encourages diaspora to co-invest in their region and sometimes even to settle there in retirement (trade & migration).

In Armenia, similar issues in the labor market were observed during the implementation of the RECONOMY project. Despite a steady supply of an educated workforce, employers complain that they cannot find people with the right skills; hence, vacant positions remain open or filled with unqualified staff (skills & intermediation) that forces them to make significant capacity building investments (finance). Cooperation between the various market players and an effectively functioning skills development system (regulatory system) is required to help reduce unemployment and create more and diverse opportunities for unemployed youth and women.

14 <https://www.helvetas.org/en/switzerland/how-you-can-help/follow-us/blog/highlights/Sustainable-Tourism-Isnt-Just-Good-for-the-Environment>



© Antonio Raicic

Community-Based Tourism in Ha Giang Province, Vietnam

THE CUSTOMER STORY (MICRO LEVEL): A JOURNEY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

What will tourism recovery look like? Who will be the post-Covid traveller? Let's try to define the tourist of the future on a journey through Vietnam.

The global pandemic revealed the need to better take into account local demand from the start, implement Covid-safe measures and share up-to-date information about how these were implemented. Educating service providers (skills & intermediation) by sharing COVID-19 protocols (regulatory system) adapted to

their context and enhancing their digital literacy (technology & digitalization) were priorities.

If online content maintained aspirations to travel, non-contact tourism emerged out of the widespread social distancing. A more autonomous traveler is now used to technologies (technology & digitalization) after the removal of customer touchpoints. This disruption also accelerated some ongoing changes and revealed new areas to explore for traditional tourists now looking for nature and less crowded places. Such awareness-raising translated in a shift in traveler behavior, including a willingness to spend more



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Trieu Menh Quyen and Trieu Mui Lieu and Trieu Tra My at the entrance of their homestay

for carbon off-setting and community empowerment. This search for added value generated locally is likely to remain over the long-term, requiring more sustainable management practices of service providers (green economic development) and attractive customer-centered packages.

Understanding new consumption patterns and connecting players of the tourism ecosystem is a must for upselling and cross-selling new and tailored products and services to attract indigenous and international visitors. Digitalization (technology & digitalization) cannot bring tourists in when borders are closed. But it can support adaptation, customer relationship building and responding to new needs.

While willing to explore remote and untouched locations, the new generation of travelers are likely to still expect high-quality service that can be reached only through the skills development (skills & intermediation) of indigenous residents.

To this end, Helvetas supported local actors to develop Community-Based Tourism (green economic development) in Ha Giang Province in Vietnam. The project, which was carried out with the Center for Rural Economy Development (CRED), built the capacities (skills & intermediation) of young women and men, associations and public institutions in partnership with fair tourism providers based in Hanoi to jointly create responsible tourism offers for international and local individual tourists and in small

groups. The basis was respect for local culture and the environment, while creating sustainable income opportunities and occupational diversity in rural areas as an alternative to agriculture or internal labor migration (trade & migration), especially among the younger generation. Local tourism plans were elaborated and integrated into socioeconomic development plans, thereby promoting local governance (regulatory system) through participation, transparency and accountability. The project, implemented from 2015–2019, is now being transferred to local public and private actors after the creation of a social enterprise, Vietnam Responsible Tourism Organization¹⁵. The organization works with different CBT groups to improve living conditions in remote mountain regions by developing a sustainable and responsible tourism model that utilizes local natural and cultural resources and values (green economic development).

Throughout Vietnam, many locals previously benefited from remittances from migrant laborers (trade & migration) in the hospitality industry, but many lost their job because of the pandemic after a few years working in luxury hotels. They are now back to rural areas with the necessary knowledge for excellent customer service and the motivation to set-up their own business. Entrepreneurship support and access to credit are required for investment (finance). Public subsidies, budget allocation and recovery measures are equally important for the transformation of the sector and to promote innovation.

¹⁵ <https://www.vietnamresponsibletourism.com/>



© Vietnam Responsible Tourism

Trekking the Rice Terraces and Minority Villages of Hoang Su Phi, Vietnam



© Jonathan Widmer

Homestay food in Tan Phong, village Vietnam

But to make sure that future investment is responding to new market trends and customer expectations related to sustainable practices, policy development (regulatory system) and instruments for green finance should accompany this transition to a green, low-emissions and climate-resilient tourism economy (green economic development). Development projects can act as a catalyst by offering guidance to policy makers, facilitating dialogue between public and private stakeholders and sustaining valuable networks to enhance framework conditions (regulatory system).

In this view, Helvetas continues to be involved in the development of community-based tourism as part of the USAID Vietnam Biodiversity Conservation Program (in a consortium with World Wide Fund, International Union for Conservation of Nature and Fauna and Flora International). Covering five provinces of central Vietnam, Helvetas has the overall responsibility for the conservation-friendly enterprise development component (green economic development), targeting forest-dependent communities bordering national parks. Since job opportunities are limited (skills & intermediation) in the target areas and many households are indirectly involved in illegal hunting and logging, self-employment through entrepreneurship for former hunters and loggers and their families is necessary. These target groups will receive both vocational skills training (skills & intermediation) and

support to start a family-run business (green economic development). Funding will be provided to both the predominantly male hunters and loggers and their spouses or partners, with specific efforts to ensure financial equity and participation in financial decision-making for women (finance).

Various key drivers are likely to impact the recovery of tourism. Managing those concerns is key to driving a turnaround in tourism in Vietnam, especially considering that 72% of the total population of the target region lives in poverty and there are strong migratory tendencies of young people who can no longer find land and sources of income (trade & migration). To promote job creation in rural areas through inclusive growth (skills & intermediation), MSMEs need to respond to customers' expectations and embed sustainability aspects in their operations (green economic development), along with the preservation of cultural values, traditions and heritage, resource efficiency, environmental protection and mutual understanding and peace.



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