

Regional Economic Development and Tourism in Peripheral Regions: an Actor-Oriented Analysis of Trekking Tourism in the Piedmont Alps (Italy)

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Dr. Luisa Vogt
Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL
Unit Economics and Social Sciences
Subunit Regional Economics and Development
Zuercherstrasse 111
CH-8903 Birmensdorf
Switzerland
Ph +41 44 7392 804
luisa.vogt@wsl.ch

Abstract: Paradigms in regional policy have changed in the past few years. Regional policies no longer focus upon rural regions but instead concentrate on areas where growth is likely, and therefore on agglomerations. This policy shift implies that the structurally rather weak, rural peripheral regions have to become responsible for autonomously valorizing their potentials. Often named potentials are an attractive landscape or an intact nature, which serve as basis for a tourism development. However, in view of the large and global pressure of competition, and given the increasing expectations of tourists for quality of tourism services, suitability of tourism as a motor of regional development must be queried. One of the reasons that tourism may not be the ideal motor is that rural small tourism firms are known to be particularly challenged by structural weaknesses.

Taking the trekking tourism project “Grande Traversata delle Alpi” (GTA) in the Piedmont Alps (Northern Italy) as an example, I studied the prospects of regional development by tourism in a peripheral laggard region. For the sake of generating inputs to regional development, a tourism project has to be competitive. So, the present study assesses GTA’s competitive situation by analyzing all of the factors influencing competitiveness on the micro and meso level, and examines the actions related to these competitive factors. This analysis focused on the logics and strategies of actions of all (potentially) involved actors in order to explain the reasons for the state of competitiveness. This heuristic presents a conceptual contribution to regional development analysis on the basis of Mayntz’ and Scharp’s actor-centered institutionalism.

Guideline-based interviews were employed to identify the respective logics and strategies of actions and, along with a survey of 320 GTA trekking tourists, served to reveal GTA’s competitive situation. Interview participants were 50 actors from the field of regional and tourism politics on different scales in Piedmont, and 34 GTA-accommodation providers. Results show that Piedmont *regional* policy actors lack material and authoritative action resources, such as those required for assuming responsibility for mountain trails management. In contrast, *tourism* policy actors do have enough resources but they do not positively affect GTA’s competitive situation due to opposed preferences. For example, on the Piedmont level, no marketing is done for GTA, for trekking tourism, or even for the Piedmont Alps as a summer destination. GTA’s competitive situation is also influenced by the competitiveness of accommodation providers regarding services around room and board. In this case, individual resources emerge as being crucial for the quality of services and for their own performance. GTA’s status quo could benefit from accommodation providers taking over central tasks with the properties of public goods, such as mountain trails maintenance. However, a combination of lack of preference, lack of resources, and an institutional arrangement characterized by mistrust and strong individualism, lead accommodation providers to not assume any tasks cooperatively. Therefore, a large share of the approximately 3500 GTA overnight stays in the surveyed accommodation was due to the efforts of exogenous actors, namely two Germans who have an “identitary” interest in the GTA project and have taken over information policy in German-speaking countries.

The study concludes that tourism is suitable as an instrument for regional development of rural peripheral regions if, and only if, exogenous actors assume certain responsibilities. These actors, such as public authorities, have to be aware of the logics of actions of all involved actors. Furthermore, they must possess both resources (individual resources are more important than financial ones), and preferences for particular actions. Devolution in terms of a total retreat of public authorities from the challenges of rural areas will result in politically tolerated abandonment of certain regions.

Keywords: Regional Development, Tourism, Actor-centered Institutionalism, Piedmont/Italy

1 Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a transition in regional policy away from cohesion policy towards growth policy (ARL 2006, BBR 2005, Kramar 2006). This policy shift can be accredited to two developments which necessarily must be understood as they determine the future of laggard regions.

On the one hand, basic conditions for governmental actions changed dramatically, as globalization accelerated socioeconomic structural change leading to high unemployment and low economic growth, and increased regional competition which results in enhanced regional disparities (Elsner 2000, Fürst 2000). On top of that, nations are confronted with a multitude of challenges when trying to achieve objectives such as the mitigation of social exclusions or regional disparities and the improvement of the competitive performance of regional economies. These objectives are especially difficult to meet as the room for national economic-political maneuver declines (Voelzkow 2000). Room decreases due to fiscal crises as well as due to the renouncement of national regulation mechanisms which is a consequence of the internationalization and liberalization of the economy. In this context, governments find no other way than to react with devolution of responsibilities to the regional scale and with a denationalization of public tasks (Thierstein 2002). Therefore, states start to tolerate inequalities and, considering the matter from a different point of view, regions have to become responsible for autonomously getting competitive in the global market (Gustedt 2005).

On the other hand, the focus on growth policy and the neglecting of cohesion concerns can be explained by scientific findings regarding the reasons for divergent spatial structures and for the conditions for regional economic growth. The so-called “New Economic Geography” found regional growth clusters *inter alia* by economies of scale and agglomeration effects (Krugman 1998). The “New Regional Growth Theory”, emanating from mainstream economics as well, bases them mainly on learning effects that increase knowledge in a specific area if they take the properties of local/regional public goods (Martin/Sunley 1996). A Californian school of economic geographers attaches great importance to the transaction costs matter (Scott 1996): Spatial proximity between enterprises can reduce these costs for coordination and supervision of transactions as, via untraded interdependencies between these actors, opportunistic behavior and uncertainty can be excluded. So, the free market tends to generate agglomerates. A third strand of works focuses on social and institutional determinants of economic growth (cf. e.g. Camagni 1999, Storper/Scott 1989). These scholars argue that in a global, knowledge-driven economy economic success of certain regions is owed to temporary immobile and hardly replaceable relations such as local/regional tacit knowledge or institutional rules. Interdependencies and trust create territorial networks which have the potential to support innovation and entrepreneurship. From a regional policy prospective, the insight that knowledge and economic growth is generated in agglomerations leads to the conclusion that a divergent and unequal spatial structure might be optimal for the development of the *national* economy (Frey/Zimmermann 2005). Therefore, from an *economic efficiency* point of view, the promotion of structurally weak regions can not longer be justified. Instead of that economic growth of (potentially) strong regions should be favored.

This policy change implies that e.g. the structurally rather weak, rural peripheral regions have to become responsible for autonomously valorising their endogenous capacities. Potentials often named are an attractive landscape or an intact nature, which serve as a basis for tourism development (BBR 2005). While many facets

of tourism such as the economic, social and ecological effects (for an early reference see e.g. Kaspar 1996, Krippendorf 1999) or the characteristics of small tourism firms (Shaw/Williams 1998, Page et al. 1999) are intensely discussed, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the suitability of tourism as a motor of regional development. This neglect astonishes even more as many regional policy makers act on the assumption that tourism functions as a panacea everywhere. Hence, this paper develops a framework for analyzing the factors of success and failure of a local/regional tourism project for regional development and assesses the competitive situation of a tourism destination taking the trekking tourism project “Grande Traversata delle Alpi” (GTA) in the Piedmont Alps (Northern Italy) as an example.

The paper first introduces the conceptual framework. Second, GTA and the GTA region are presented. Third, the competitive situation of GTA is evaluated by analyzing selected factors influencing competitiveness on the micro and meso level. Finally, some conclusions about the prospects of regional development of peripheral rural regions by tourism are drawn.

2 Conceptual framework and research design

A tourism project has to be competitive in order to generate inputs for regional development. In this context competitiveness is understood as the success of a long-run profitable valorisation of resources, a long-run generation of positive tangible and intangible effects and, herewith, of a long-run welfare of a region (Vogt 2008). Competitive factors mentioned in the literature are summed up in figure 1. In tourism sciences only comparatively few scholars engage in considerations on competitiveness though tourism specific approaches are necessary: tourism possesses some peculiarities such as the additive character of tourism services which in part are public goods. They together make up the holiday experience. Furthermore, in tourism, “space” – be it the staged landscape, be it accessibility, be it the spatial concentration of tourism service-providers – is much more important than in other industries. One of the most cited scholars in the competitiveness context is Poon (1993), even though her “model” is limited just to policy recommendations in the context of a global, more and more challenging tourism industry. Hence, her recommendations are not very useful for further-reaching considerations. Crouch and Ritchie (1999) interviewed tourism experts and integrated their statements in a comprehensive concept, from which several factors found their way into figure 1. Porter (1998) analysed competitive advantages of nations; some tourism scientists applied this model to destinations and obtained useful results (e.g. Smeral 1998). Some of his points are included in the figure, such as the determinant “cluster”, in the graph specified as “milieu” according to the above mentioned “creative milieu”-theorists. Finally, Keller’s (2005) considerations about approaches regarding competitiveness are noteworthy; in contrast to the former scholars he does not list competitive factors but differentiates between three kinds of “views”. The market-based view focuses on the tourism industry; the resource-based view centres on tourism enterprises and firms respectively while the space-based view looks at the destination. In the present study, the suitability of tourism for a bottom-up regional development is considered; accordingly, only those competitive factors which are shaped in the region itself are of interest. Therefore, figure 1 distinguishes between factors on the macro-scale and determinants on the micro- and meso-scale; only the latter ones can be changed and influenced within a destination.

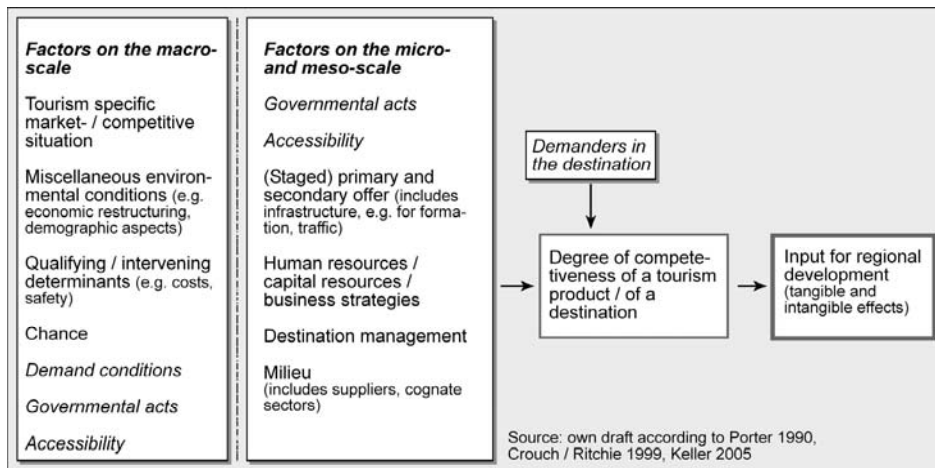


Figure 1: Competitive factors of tourist destinations

This list of competitive factors can be regarded as a starting point. For an understanding of the degree of competitiveness of a tourism project, the actions “behind” the micro- and meso-level determinants have to be focused on. Who acts? How do the actors act and why do they act that way? Therefore, competitiveness has to be decomposed via the logics of actions and the strategies of the involved individual and legal persons.

According to the actor-centered institutionalism of Mayntz and Scharpf (1995, Scharpf 1997), political decisions can be seen as the result of interrelations of actions of individual and corporative actors. In line with this assumption, regional development and the degree of competitiveness of a tourism project/destination can be regarded as the outcome of interrelated actions (cf. figure 2). In terms of game theory, a multitude of actors plays an interactive game with players choosing their moves depending on the respective capacities/resources to act, perceptions and preferences, contemporaneously depending on the context of actions as well. The result is also subject to the form of interaction. Is there an anarchical context with unidirectional actions? Are there definite hierarchies with, for the most, little scope to act? Are there institutional rules in terms of network relations which allow negotiations?

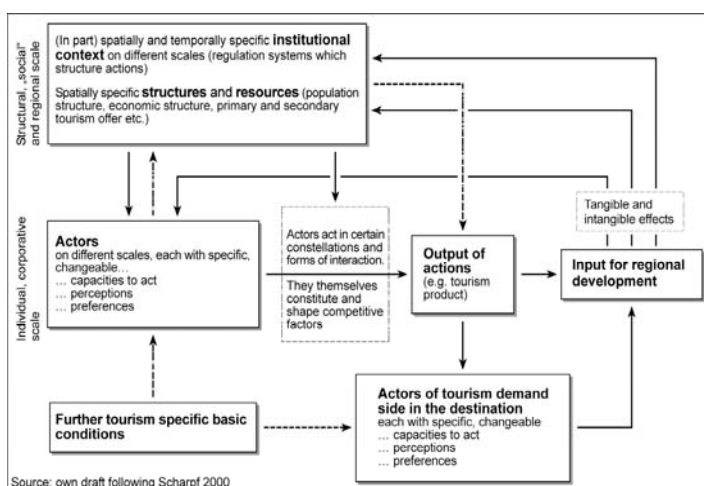


Figure 2: Conceptual framework for the empirical analysis: a framework oriented on actors and actions

Actors can be characterized by capacities to act and orientations of actions which differ from actor to actor. Capacities to act open up the possible range of actions. These resources are comprised of individual, material and authoritative components. Individual factors include the physique, human resources and social capital or also charisma, while material resources show themselves e.g. in capital investment or in privileged access to information. Authoritative resources are the institutional competences public actors get assigned by norms. It is quite important to note that capacities to act are changeable; they might increase e.g. by learning. The selection of an action from the range of possible actions is guided by specific orientations in terms of perceptions and preferences. In the present study, perceptions are neglected due to the assumption that perceptions are quite similar. Preferences interest much more; these are not substituted by assumptions (e.g. by that of a *homo oeconomicus*) but identified empirically. Scharpf (1997) subdivides them in self-interests, norms, identities and orientation at interactions. As a further precondition and in contrast to scholars such as Giddens (1985) actors are conceived not only as individuals but as collective and corporative actors as well.

Furthermore, figure 2 shows the institutional context and spatially specific structures and resources. Institutions are formal and informal regulation systems in different areas and on different scales. As mentioned beforehand, these factors influence, but do not determine, actors, their acting and inter-acting. Spatial structures, i.e. the population, economic and supply structure as well as the tourism profile, affect action strategies as well. The further tourism specific basic conditions can be presumed as unchangeable by actors in a destination. However, they have to be considered if actors want to keep their capacity to act.

The immediate results of actions are the “outputs of actions” which are arranged as mental intermediate step between the actors around the tourism offer and the input for regional development. This dimension comprises all sorts of outcomes beginning with tourism offer elements and ending with legal regulations of authorities. Following the arrow, the parameter “actors of tourism demand side in the destination” emerges. These actors, tourists, make demands on individually specific elements of the output. They are listed separately due to their exceptional position. The degree of competitiveness of the tourism product and of the destination manifests itself only in the extent of the demand. Most possible economic impacts take effect only through the presence and consumption of the demanders in the destination. These economic impacts and the input for regional development respectively, show itself in a multitude of effects and value components which become effective with single actors, with structures and which, last not least, can affect the institutional context on a micro and meso scale.

Therefore, for assessing competitiveness, actors have to be focused more than anything else as these shape the output consumed by tourists which generate economic effects. How have the actors and their actions been assessed in the study reported?

The study involved semi-structured, guideline-based qualitative interviews with 50 actors from the field of regional and tourism politics on different scales in Piedmont, and 34 GTA-accommodation providers. Furthermore, the author accommodated herself in five GTA-accommodations (so-called “posti tappa”), each for several days, and addressed herself to participatory observation. These interviews and observations were employed to identify the respective logics and strategies of actions and, along with a survey of 320 GTA trekking tourists, served to reveal GTA’s competitive situation. Additionally, written documents and

programs, texts of laws, and communication policy products, *inter alia* of tour-operators from abroad, have been analysed.

3 Case study: the GTA and the spatial structure of the study region

Before investigating the competitive situation of GTA and the reasons behind, the GTA-project and GTA-region are to be introduced (cp. for the following Vogt 2008). The GTA is a trekking trail in the Piedmont Alps starting close to Lake Maggiore and ending in the Ligurian Alps (cf. Figure 3a, b). The idea of an Alps crossing trail has been adopted from France in the 1970s. At the end of the 1960s a “Grande Traversée des Alpes” has been created in the French Alps where – in contrast to other hiking trails – each stage led down to the valley so that trekking tourists stayed at accommodations in the traditional settlements. One of the objectives of this project was regional development in these valleys through tourism expenditures.

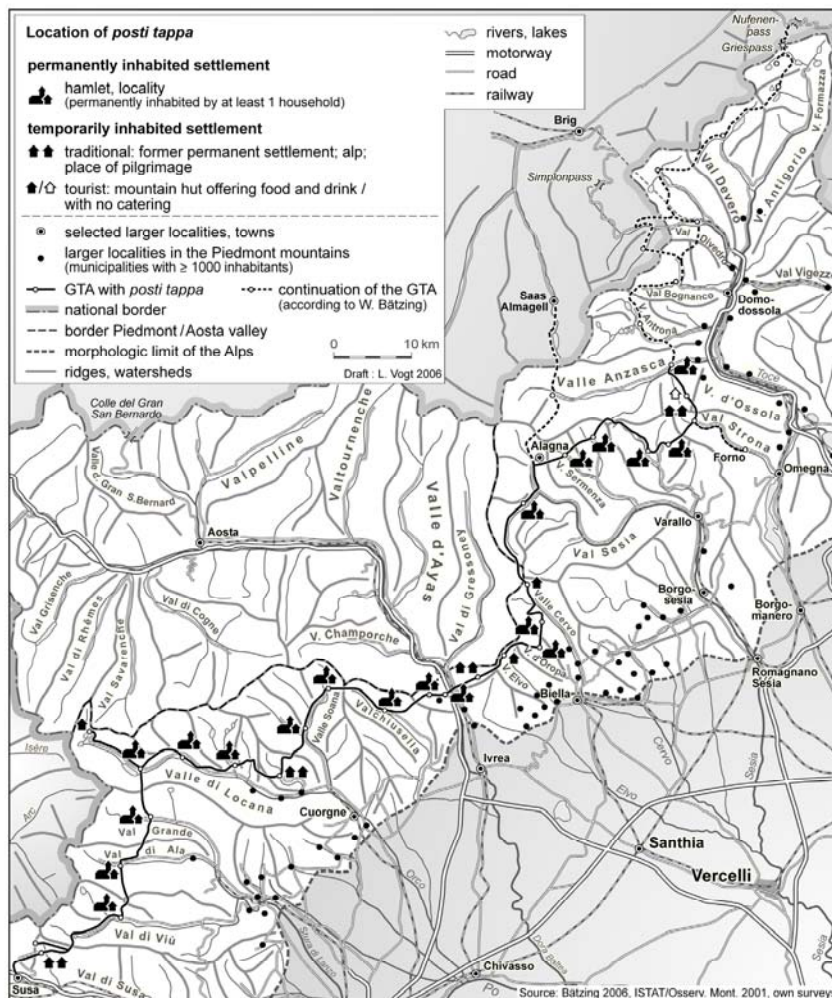


Figure 3a: GTA – the Northern part

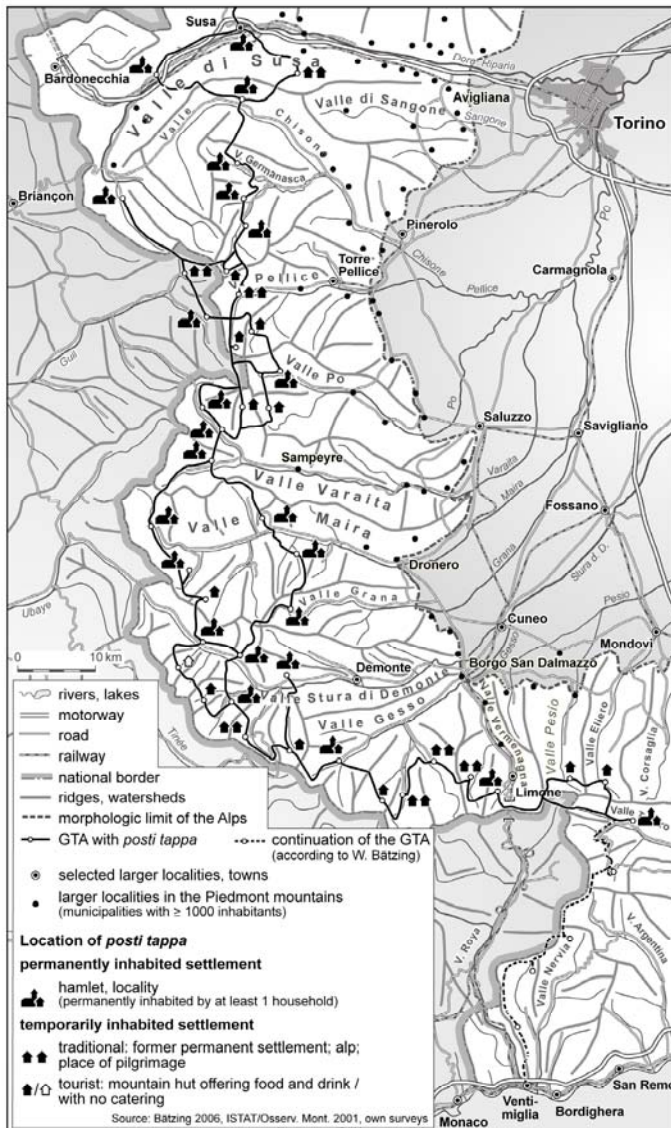


Figure 3b: GTA – the Southern part

In contrast to the French project the Italian project was initiated by individuals, mostly alpinists from Torino, the Piedmont capital, and not by public actors and associations such as the Alpine Club as in France. On a volunteer basis, these individuals engaged in detecting a route with accommodations at the end of each daily stage. This effort is not to be underestimated as the accommodation offer in the Piedmont Alps beyond the few tourism locations is rather small, and hotel keepers, if any existed, were not interested in guests staying just for one night. However, other locals did not necessarily have any interest in a tourism profession. Nonetheless, the founders were able to convince sufficient hoteliers, innkeepers and some locals to prepare a mountain-hut-like dormitory or rooms especially for GTA tourists. In the first ten years, the GTA association also looked after the mountain trails management and publicity.

After a promising beginning, enthusiasm of the founders' circle decayed in the 1980s while commitment from Germany increased. Bätzing, later on professor for geography at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, a

lover of the Piedmont Alps, decided to do public relations for the GTA and wrote a hiking guide which is regularly updated to date (Bätzing 2006, 2006a). Thus, trekking tourists from German-speaking countries discovered the GTA. Without the demand of these tourists, GTA would not have been frequented any more. To date, tourists from German-speaking countries present more than 80 % of all GTA trekkers.

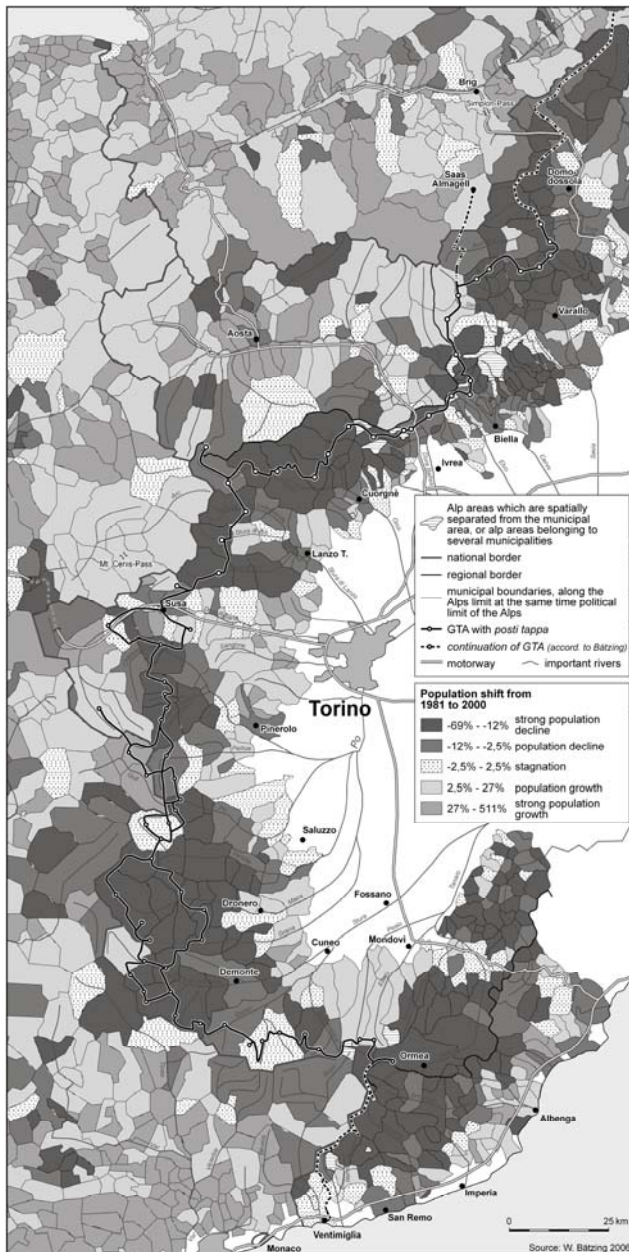


Figure 4: Population change in the Piedmont Alps from 1981 to 2000

While GTA is leading for about 1000 km (including all optional trails) through the Piedmont Alps the study area has been narrowed down to the Southern part of the GTA, from the Susa valley (known from the Olympic Winter Games 2006) down to the Ligurian Alps. To what extent is this area structurally weak? Population growth can act as an indicator for economic performance. Figure 4 shows that, in the period from

1981 to 2000, population in municipalities close to the Alps limit increased. However, municipalities in the upper valleys lost inhabitants. Due to a decline of population caused by inabilities to cope with structural changes and hence emigration since the second half of the 19th century, population concentrates on few larger localities in the meantime. Smaller hamlets are often inhabited only temporarily. Therefore, in the upper valleys population density is very low; less – and mostly very much less – than 40 inhabitants/km² live there, and these persons are quite old. For example, in one of these (mostly very small) municipalities there are 31 senior citizens and only four children. At first glance, structural weakness does not refer to the economic structure itself as unemployment is quite low in the Southern Piedmont Alps. However, most inhabitants of the upper valleys who are economically active work in the lower valleys and outside the Alps respectively.

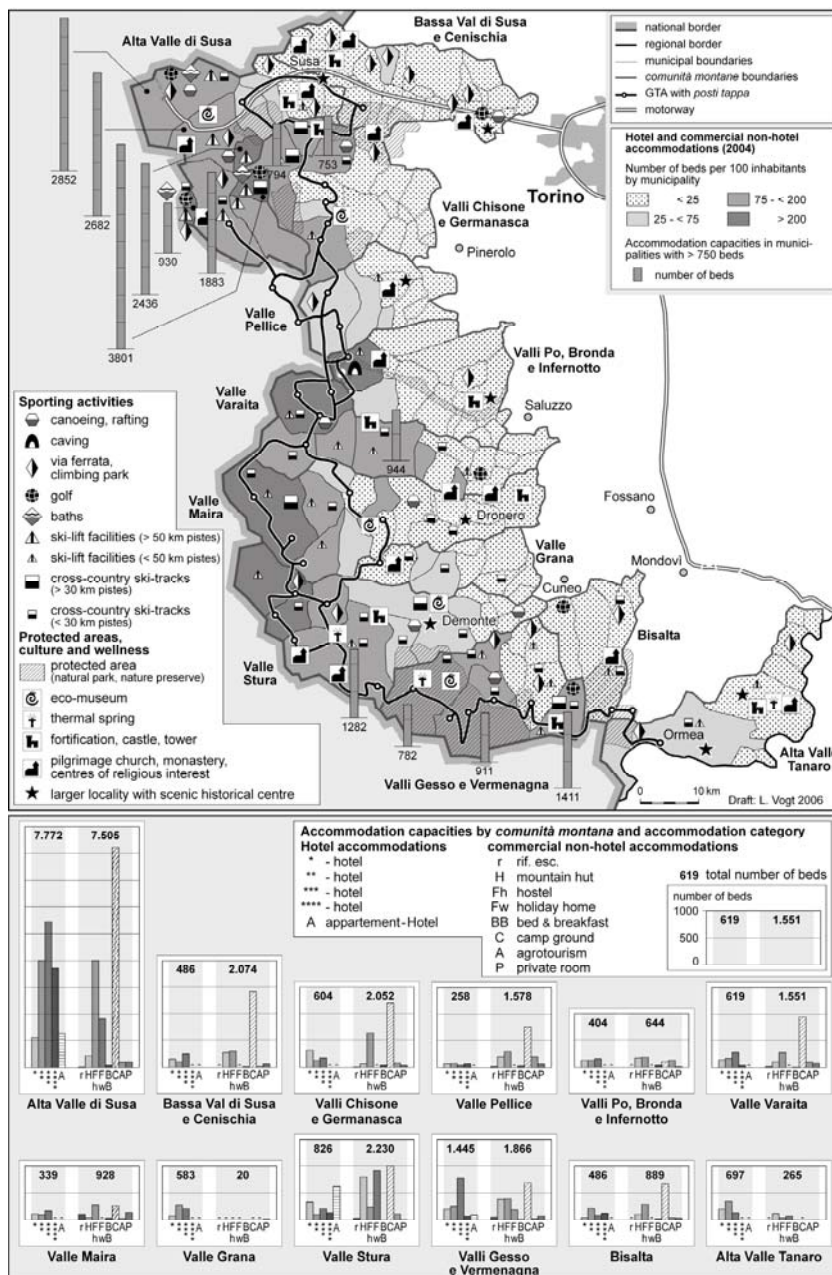
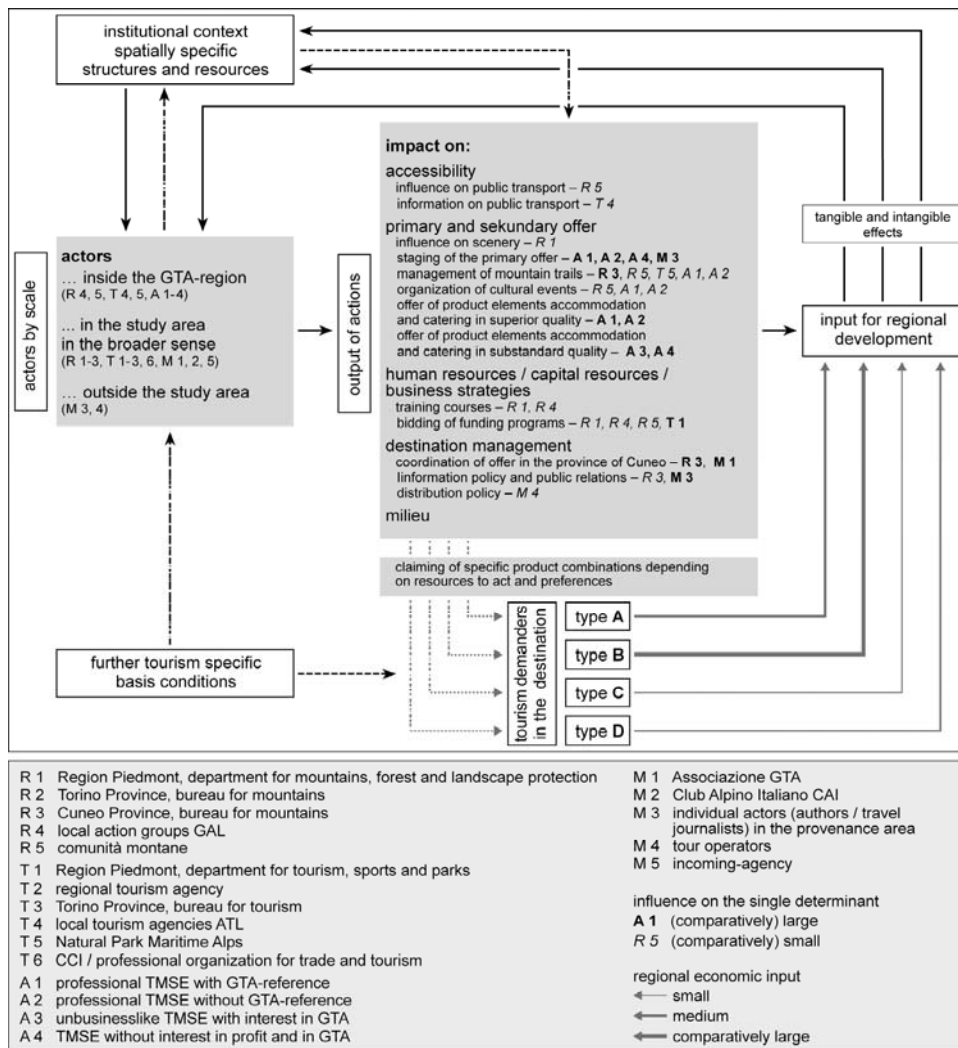


Figure 5: Tourism offer in the GTA region

In the GTA-region itself most jobs are in the tertiary sector. Nonetheless, tourism does not play a major role as just 7 % of workplaces are situated in this branch. However, the higher located the municipality is, the more important tourism becomes. Figure 5 illustrates the tourism offer. Accommodation capacities as well as the altogether scarce recreation infrastructure are concentrated on the upper valleys. With this background, competitiveness is to be investigated.

4 Case study: Analysis of competitiveness through an actor-centred approach

Figure 6 combines figure 1 and 2 and depicts the GTA game, actors and their chosen actions. In the left box, actors who are relevant and who possibly are relevant for GTA are ordered by scale. The output box in the middle presents the output of actions concerning GTA's competitive situation directly or indirectly. In the following, a few items of this box are presented. Due to shortage of space, only mountain trail management and offer of accommodation and catering from the block "primary and secondary offer" as well as destination management of GTA are considered.



Source: own draft

Figure 6: Actor- and actions-oriented examination of factors of success and failure of the GTA

Trails are a fundamental element of the GTA trekking tourism product. In Cuneo province GTA hiking trails are walkable all through and are well marked while a few GTA trails in Torino province are kept so badly that trekking tourists are likely to get lost. Trails are a public good as nobody can be excluded from utilisation, and rivalry is – at least in the Piedmont Alps – no matter. As such, there is no incentive to produce it and maintain it privately. However, mountain trails need a specific management which includes – after creation of marked hiking trails – *inter alia* the maintenance of paths and markers. In the German, Austrian and Swiss Alps public bodies and non-profit organisations such as the Alpine Clubs take over this task but in Piedmont responsibilities are unclear. No law assigns competences to whatever public body or to a public-private institution. Starting from normative instructions it could be assumed that the department for mountains, forest and landscape protection of Piedmont Region looks after this matter, as one of its institutional objectives is the economic valorisation of the Piedmont Alps. However, due to little authoritative capacities and due to scarce financial resources, capacities to act are modest. The government agency is not able to designate responsibilities e.g. to provinces, mountain area corporations or municipalities. Moreover, the department can not provide any financial aid to these bodies for financing respective measures. Therefore, if the agency was to organise trail management, it would have to engage in time-consuming negotiations with provinces etc. in order to resolve the problem. However, the department is one of the least powerful among the departments of Piedmont Region and hence, it prefers actions with rapid public effect and with speedy visible results in order to demonstrate its effectiveness and its right to exist. This is the reason that there are no endeavours to approach the problem.

The only actor who really looks after mountain trails is the bureau for mountains of Cuneo Province. This office obtained special national funds only for mountain trails management and, hence, had material resources at its disposal *inter alia* for repairing the trails and maintaining the markers. These funds were spent for GTA as the last active member of the GTA association is based in Cuneo Province. Due to this lobbying the bureau for mountains developed a respective preference and, finally, decided to engage in mountain trails management. Preference is also shaped by another factor, the spatially specific structures and institutions. One third of the province's population lives in the mountain area and 27 % of the gross regional product is obtained there. So, for Cuneo Province's policies mountain areas and their inhabitants are quite important – in marked contrast to Piedmont Region or Torino Province where just a very small part of population lives and works in the mountains.

A further central competitive factor is presented by the *quality of accommodation and catering*. These services are utilized by most of the trekking tourists. The judgements of trekking tourists and own observations show that accommodations do not always fulfil the tourists' requirements. The arrangement and quality of offer is one of three criteria which were used to classify GTA-innkeepers (cf. figure 7). Type 1 and type 2 are capable of competing and therefore able to perform services for GTA in the medium and long term. These innkeepers are involved in a serious strategic and operative management and they do it in a comparatively effective way. Moreover, their accommodation and catering services are well looked after, in part even really very good. Sanitary arrangements and beds – usually in dormitories, but more and more in single and double rooms as tourists' requirements increase – are clean, dining-halls evoke a specific cosy ambiance, and meals that are typical of the region have often obtained prizes. The innkeepers are hospitable and care about the guests' well-

being. Situation is completely different with type 3-businesses. From the outside, accommodations still look quite well-kept; on the inside, however, guestrooms and sanitary arrangements are very simple and partly even unacceptable. Dining-rooms and lounges often leave a better impression; meals, however, are substandard. Prototypically, type 3-innkeepers act on the assumption that “Germans can easily be satisfied” and do not feel any necessity to improve the offer. These actors manage it to survive in the market only because they often act in a sort of monopolistic situation with no concurrence in the same hamlet or locality. Furthermore, they benefit from older Italian tourists staying at the hotel or visiting the restaurant with little demand elasticity. Type 4-accommodations and their providers are a special case; frequently, these are non-profit organizations that offer accommodation facilities due to a volunteer commitment. Therefore, accommodations usually are very simple but innkeepers are quite hospitable.

	Type 1 – Professional TMSE with GTA-reference	Type 2 – Professional TMSE without GTA-reference	Type 3 – Unbusiness-like TMSE with interest in GTA	Typ 4 – TMSE without interest in profit and GTA
Criterion I: strategic and operative management				
Market analysis	rudimentary	rudimentary	no	no
Strategic considerations	rudimentary	rudimentary	no	no
Positioning in the market	target groups: "classic" demanders, <i>inter alia</i> tourists interested in sporting activities	target groups: "classic" demanders, <i>inter alia</i> tourists interested in sporting activities	target groups: "classic" demanders and GTA-tourists	target groups: GTA-tourists, pilgrim tourists, parochial youth associations
Tactical marketing	rudimentary, e.g. communication policy occurs only on a regional scale	rudimentary, e.g. foreign demand is targeted only via tour operators	no	scarcely
Criterion II: operative business / arrangement of offer				
Offered Services	accommodation mostly in appropriate quality, catering in superior quality including emotional additional values (partly staging of the primary offer), partly maintenance of the mountain trail infrastructure as well as organization of cultural events	accommodation and catering in superior quality including emotional additional value (partly staging of the primary offer), partly maintenance of the mountain trail infrastructure as well as organization of cultural events	accommodation and catering in substandard quality, rarely with additional value of "authenticity"	accommodation and catering in substandard or average quality, partly with emotional additional value (e.g. staging of the primary offer)
Criterion III: GTA-reference				
Interest in GTA as a market segment	(comparatively) large	very small	large	(very) small
Takeover of destination management tasks for the GTA	no	no	no	no

Source: own draft

Figure 7: Classification of GTA innkeepers

What are the reasons for these different kinds of strategies? The difference between these actors does not consist of different material resources which could be thought to decide on neatness and hospitality. Instead, on the one hand individual resources are lacking – in part even for realizing the low quality of the offer or more generally, for perceiving the reasons for the missing competitiveness of the own business. On the other hand, an exclusively orientation to *economic* self-interest with an effort to maximize gains in the short-term is typical for type 3-innkeepers. In a marked contrast, type 1 and type 2 innkeepers are not only interested economically but have lifestyle interests as well. They consider the decision to live and work in the mountains as “*scelta di vita*”, decision of lifestyle. Moreover, type 1 and type 2 innkeepers have also sufficient individual resources at their disposal. These resources are characterized by individual combinations of knowledge achieved on different ways and an intuitive vocation for the management of a business.

The next competitive factor tourism theorists regard as decisive is *destination management*. This concept is based on the assumption that destinations are the competitive units in tourism. Destinations are understood as the

area tourists choose to travel to. In destinations, all tourist services are offered which make up the holiday experience. Therefore, if these services are offered by different service-providers, coordination is necessary in order to get a homogenous product. In a classical understanding, a destination management should take over a range of tasks: caring for general principles for tourism planning and for planning itself, providing missing offers, especially common goods, doing marketing and lastly representing interests. Regarding GTA as destination, a GTA destination-wide management could be thought to secure trail management and quality control of accommodations, to develop common policies regarding product, promotion and place.

Based on traditional normative expectations of rôles tourism organisations could be assumed to take over a destination management for their area of competence. The most suited scale for destination management usually appears to be the level of local tourism agencies with a competence area that is smaller than provinces, but larger than municipalities and mountain area corporations. However, on the one hand local tourism agencies partly lack material resources for destination management and on the other hand these actors do not possess sufficient authoritative capacities to take over responsibilities for the whole destination as municipalities appreciate their autonomy. Tasks of local tourism agencies are not specified by law, and this is the reason that mainly communication/promotion policy is done and nothing else. However, this communication policy does not include GTA. The local tourism agency of the Alps of Cuneo does not consider trekking and hiking tourism as important market segments and prefers instead focussing marketing activities on bike tourism in the Alps. The reason for this is not an assessment of respective demand side but a consequence of the preferences of the director of the tourism organisation: he is keen on bike sports (several roads in the Cuneo Alps are used by the *Giro d'Italia*). Therefore, preferences of the personnel lead to a neglecting of “classical” summer mountain tourism activities such as alpinism and hiking tourism (and this although the Cuneo Province bureau for mountains fosters this sort of tourism). The local tourism agency Montagnedoc with competences for the Northern part of the study area has either little interest in GTA. In contrast to the Cuneo agency, hiking tourism and alpinism are promoted. However, due to the demand behaviour of the “classical” Piedmont Alps tourists in summer – they relax by doing nothing and spending the holiday with family and friends with some of them enjoying day trips with hiking –, long distance hiking is not regarded as relevant. Furthermore, both local tourism agencies expect prepositions for new or unusual marketing activities such as PR for GTA from actors from outside as capacities to act and to invent different strategies are limited. Thus, GTA is not promoted as no actor represents GTA-interests vis-à-vis local tourism agencies.

Promotion activities for GTA could be located at the Region Piedmont level as well, as GTA crosses the whole Piedmont Alps and on this way more than one local tourism agency competence area. Interestingly, the department for tourism, sports and parks as well as its operative arm, the regional tourism agency completely neglect mountain tourism in summer, hiking and trekking as market segments. The reasons are threefold: first, Piedmont is quite unknown as tourism destination in Italy; therefore positioning is done with market segments thought to be the most attractive ones holding respective demand potential – not including summer mountain tourism. Second, as mentioned beforehand, mountains and their inhabitants and the mountain economy, usually do not possess an effective lobby. Hence, on a regional level, only a couple of mountain tourism locations concentrated on very few areas and having comparatively large leisure facilities are

promoted – *nota bene* they are promoted only as winter sports destinations: the ski area syndicates form the most powerful lobby. The third reason is mainly caused by path dependency. Tourism in the Piedmont Alps developed in the 1960s as a private non-hotel accommodation tourism that did not require any marketing efforts. To date, this kind of tourism suffers from a major crisis. Nonetheless, nothing is done as the situation is judged as too tricky for a quick (or any) solution. Thus, traditional (mass) tourism locations in the Piedmont Alps being ignored, “unconventional” niche tourism in the most peripheral parts of the Alps, such as GTA tourism, with an uncertain, and never evaluated market potential are completely disregarded.

Figure 6 shows that GTA innkeepers are not involved in any destination management tasks. Actually, an involvement could seem conceivable as these actors benefit most from GTA. An adjustment of annual opening periods, a definition of minimum standards, even trail management, and the organisation of a shuttle bus service or a development of a GTA package tour could be possible jobs. This missing commitment can be explained by three factors: First, across all types of innkeepers and accommodation providers, resources in terms of time and know-how in order to organise destination management tasks on their own or together with innkeeper-colleagues are missing. Second, respective preferences are frequently lacking (cf. figure 7). For example, type 1 innkeepers are interested in the market segment GTA; however, even type 1 regards the benefits of cooperation as disproportioned to time and effort. Type 2 innkeepers also do not decide to take over any tasks or to activate collaboration although they partly consider destination management for GTA as necessary. The preference for an economically cost-efficient input of time and money outbalances an identity interest in GTA. In turn, type 3 actors even lack resources to identify this option to act while type 4 is not interested in profit and can not be expected to initiate any valorisation of GTA. Finally, the non-commitment is owed to the interactions and the institutional rules for interactions. Cooperative interactions in a market-based and by tendency anarchic context need mutual confidence. However, such a confidence frequently does not exist due to a high number of possible interaction partners and a strong solitary individualism. Moreover, the large spatial distances and the orography of the Piedmont Alps make face-to-face contacts, which might foster confidence, difficult.

Therefore, the only actors involved in destination management tasks are on the one hand the Cuneo Province bureau for mountains and the last active member of GTA association – they organise an annual meeting of GTA accommodation providers in Cuneo province to exchange information –, and on the other hand individual actors from outside, from the German-speaking world. Bätzing, and following him and his guide books, several German-speaking journalists, do information policy for GTA.

Summing up, it can be concluded that only very few actors are actively involved in the GTA game and influence GTA’s competitive situation in a positive way. Lacking resources but also missing respective preferences are responsible for the actual situation. Moreover, actions regarding GTA are chosen one-way and actors scarcely interact directly. Therefore, the output of actions is a result of the interplay of unilaterally chosen actions.

Tourism demand, tourism claiming of the “output of actions” and the following regional input of the GTA project are discussed elsewhere (Vogt 2008); so, input for regional development is just presented in a nutshell: GTA innkeepers earn on average 1500 EUR per season with season being limited to midsummer. However,

more important than this number is the perception of the contribution of GTA to the income. Type 1 and type 3-innkeepers consider GTA induced income as quite important; GTA tourism usually forms one of several economic pillars. On the other side, GTA trekking tourists constitute only a very little customer segment of type 2-businesses. Similarly to type 4-innkeepers, GTA revenues are accounted as unimportant. Beyond tangible effects, tourism could produce intangible effects such as an improvement of infrastructures or the creation of a positive image with a unique selling proposition. In case of GTA, to date none of possible intangible effects occur.

5 Conclusions

Which conclusions from the case study and this actor-centred approach can be drawn regarding the nexus tourism and regional development in rural peripheral regions?

- History and geography matter. Spatially specific structures and institutions on a micro and meso scale that can be changed at best in the long run have to be considered as a given. So, taking an informal institution as example, it will be a large challenge to plan a decentralised tourism project that needs an intense collaboration of many actors if there is no climate of confidence.
- Actors being able to produce public goods are needed. This refers e.g. to mountain trails management or to destination management tasks. A common provision of these goods by private actors, i.e. micro and small tourism firms, fails because of missing capacities to act, different preferences and due to the lacking institutional arrangement for cooperation. Cooperation is most likely in small-scale areas where free-riding is proscribed and where trust might emerge. However, as spatial proximity does not automatically lead to an atmosphere of confidence or a creative territorial network, an actor – usually a public actor “from outside” – is necessary who is able to provide these goods.
- An intervention from outside is even necessary for private goods in specific cases. For example, accommodation is in part substandard. At short notice, regulations could be used as a remedy. In the long term, a governmental actor with sufficient capacities to act is necessary. This actor is to increase resources to act of no longer competitive tourism firms by further education programs.
- Overall, the minimum requirement for a regional development with tourism is an exogenous actor that possesses sufficient authoritative, material and individual resources and respective preferences in order to fulfil a coordinating and lobbying function or even to perform tasks having the character of public goods. In the medium term, such an actor could be financed by a public-private-partnership. This message is not good news as it means that a total governmental retreat and an abstinence imply large and in most cases too large challenges for rural peripheral areas. Tourism does not work as panacea in structurally rather weak areas, and these regions are over-challenged by the task of autonomously valorising their potentials with tourism.

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