International Report

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Learning Seed

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REVISION HISTORY

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REFERENCED DOCUMENTS

ID	Reference	Title
1	2023-1-CY02-KA220-YOU-000154272	Proposal document
2	Focus Group National Reports	National Reports

1. The MineTOUR Project

Project Summary

MineTOUR foster to empower young individuals from rural areas to become active citizens and engage with civic societies, while promoting local tourism of their hometowns and safeguarding their cultural heritage through the use of digital means. MineTOUR aims to promote active citizenship and youth engagement with civil society through digital tools that encourage local tourism in rural areas. The project seeks to enhance digital literacy, raise awareness of local cultural heritage, and develop soft skills among participants. Community involvement, sustainable tourism practices, and increased youth employability are key objectives. Additionally, MineTOUR will establish a stakeholder network to sustainably promote active citizenship and local tourism beyond the project duration.

Project Objectives

The initial objective of the project is to encourage young individuals from rural areas to actively participate in the development and promotion of local tourism, fostering a sense of pride and ownership in their hometowns. Subsequently, project aims to equip them with digital tools for effective promotion and engagement with civil societies. Through the provision of necessary resources and networks, project's goal is to empower them showcase hometowns and foster local tourism. Additionally, the purpose is to promote cross-cultural exchange and collaboration among rural youth in Europe for diversity appreciation and shared learning experiences. Final objective is to Raise awareness of sustainable and socially responsible tourism practices.

Results

- A toolkit for young people
- Minecraft Worlds for Tourism
- MineTOUR Interactive Map

Project Target Groups

Direct:
- Young people aged 18-24 especially from rural areas
- Youth workers providing trainings and support to people from rural areas

The project also foresees the reach and involvement of indirect target groups:

- Include people over 24 living in rural areas
- NGOs providing non-formal education and training or organizing actions for active citizenship
- Public authorities promoting civic engagement and E&T opportunities
- Tourism and/or HORECA organizations
- Virtual tourists and potential visitors

- Gaming companies
- European, national and local networks
- Higher education institutions with a focus on tourism and/or civic engagement actions
- Policy makers
- The general public

Project's internal team.

2. Glossary

Sustainable tourism: Sustainable tourism encompasses practices that consider and mitigate the current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts of tourism. It aims to strike a suitable balance between the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, ensuring its long-term sustainability for visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005).

Ecotourism: Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented. It typically occurs in natural areas and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas" (Fennell, 1999: 43. Ecotourism: An Introduction).

Local and community-based tourism: is a type of travel that places an emphasis on the involvement of regional groups in the planning and administration of travel-related activities. In addition to promoting sustainable tourism practices and aiding local economies and cultures, this kind of tourism seeks to give tourists a more genuine and immersive travel experience (source: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/local-community-based-tourism-iqbal-uddin-abbasi) .

Digital literacy: involves the ability to use a diverse range of digital technologies in a competent and sensitive way to retrieve information, communicate and solve fundamental problems in different areas of life. It is based on fundamental ICT skills, including the use of the computer to retrieve, evaluate, store, create, present and exchange information, as well as to participate in collaborative online networks via the Internet.

Main digital skills:

Computer Operation

Internet Navigation

Email Management

Microsoft Word

Online Search

Basic Troubleshooting

Online Security

Social Media Usage

Basic Data Privacy

Cultural heritage: Cultural heritage includes artefacts, monuments, a group of buildings and sites, museums that have a diversity of values including symbolic, historic, artistic, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological, scientific and social significance. It includes tangible heritage (movable, immobile and underwater), intangible cultural heritage (ICH) embedded into cultural, and natural heritage artefacts, sites or monuments. The definition excludes ICH related to other cultural domains such as festivals, celebration etc. It covers industrial heritage and cave paintings (source: https://uis.unesco.org/en/glossary-term/cultural-heritage)

Rural Area: A rural area is an open swath of land that has few homes or other buildings, and not very many people. A rural area's population density is very low (source: https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/rural-area/) .

Rural development: The development of rural areas is a significant component in social and economic activities. It is very important for optimizing the allocation of rural production and living factors, promoting the integration of urban and rural areas and sustainable development to identify the characteristics and main types of regional rural development (source: https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/13997) .

3. European and partner countries' context

The European Union is committed to making its tourism sector more sustainable and environmentally friendly. Through initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the "Fit for 55" package, the EU is pushing for greener policies and legislation. This includes cooperation between industry, destinations, and government to address economic, social and environmental impacts. By promoting sustainable practices such as smart mobility and biodiversity conservation, the EU aims to reduce tourism's environmental footprint while boosting competitiveness. In addition, the EU is supporting the digital transition of the tourism sector, focusing on upgrading the skills of the workforce and promoting innovative digital solutions for businesses and destinations. Data management is also a key focus, with efforts to create a governance framework for data sharing and exploitation. Overall, these efforts aim to increase the resilience and sustainability of EU tourism in the face of challenges such as climate change and pandemics.

3.1 Cyprus

Cyprus has one of the oldest histories and cultures in the world, with evidence of civilisation dating back 9,000 years. Its geographical location at the crossroads of Europe, Asia and Africa has influenced its unique culture, which has evolved over millennia. The island's cultural heritage includes a wealth of archaeological sites covering various historical periods, from ancient civilisations to Byzantine, Roman and Ottoman influences.

The Department of Antiquities of Cyprus is charged with the safeguarding and preservation of the island's rich archaeological heritage, including excavation, conservation of artefacts, preservation of monuments and protection of cultural artefacts. The Cyprus Museum in Nicosia houses an extensive collection of Cypriot antiquities, providing information on the cultural development of the island from the Neolithic period to Roman times.

Regional archaeological museums, site museums, folk art museums and ethnological museums throughout Cyprus offer visitors opportunities to explore the island's diverse cultural heritage. Many ancient monuments and archaeological sites are open to the public, allowing visitors to immerse themselves in Cyprus' rich history.

Cultural life in Cyprus is vibrant, with governmental and non-governmental organisations promoting literature, music, dance, visual arts and cinema. The annual Kypria arts festival showcases both local and international talent, making cultural entertainment accessible to a wide audience.

However, Cyprus' cultural heritage faces challenges, especially in the occupied northern part of the island. Ancient monuments, churches, museums, libraries and private collections have been targeted, resulting in the irreparable loss of cultural treasures.

Efforts to recover stolen objects and to raise awareness for the preservation of cultural heritage are continuing to identify and repatriate looted objects. Despite these challenges, Cyprus' cultural heritage remains a testament to its rich history and a reminder of the importance of preserving cultural treasures for future generations.

3.2 Greece

Greece has made significant efforts to align its tourism development with sustainable practices, as outlined in the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Despite the challenges it faces, such as the

economic crisis, pandemic COVID-19 and regional conflicts, Greece is committed to "building back, better and greener". This commitment includes prioritising sustainable tourism as a key element of national development.

In support of this objective, Greece has established various legal and non-legal frameworks that promote sustainability in tourism. These include:

- National Strategy for Adaptation to Climate Change: Developed in 2016, this strategy addresses the impacts of climate change in various sectors, including tourism.
- National Strategy for the Circular Economy: Implemented in 2018, this strategy aims to reduce waste and promote sustainable practices, with a particular focus on tourism-related activities.
- Ministry of Environment and Energy's National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP): this plan outlines specific targets and measures to achieve climate and energy goals by 2030, including sustainable tourism development.
- Destination Management Plans (DMPs) for Santorini and Rhodes: These plans, developed in cooperation with the EU and the EBRD, focus on sustainable development in key tourism destinations.
- These projects, developed by the European Commission and the European Commission, are key priorities for tourism in these regions: Initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable practices in both the public and private sectors, including the promotion of international sustainability standards.
- Environmental legal frameworks: laws aimed at protecting the natural environment and promoting sustainable development, such as the Waste Directive and the Greek Climate Law.
- Greece 2.0 - National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRP): This plan, launched in 2021, includes investments and reforms to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and strengthen resilience, with benefits for the tourism sector.
- Greece's Strategic Plan for Tourism Development: this plan, which is currently under preparation, will cover various aspects of sustainable tourism development, including green infrastructure and crisis management.
- INSETE Tourism Strategy and Action Plan 2030: A collaborative plan to improve Greece's tourism offer, with a particular focus on environmental protection and sustainability.

Overall, these initiatives and frameworks reflect Greece's commitment to promoting sustainable tourism development, in line with international agreements and frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Greece's tourism sector is known for its hospitality and competitive visitor experience, particularly in terms of safety, transport and the behaviour of its residents. The sector is heavily dependent on international tourism, with the majority of visitors coming from European countries, as well as notable emerging markets such as China, South Korea, Canada and India. However, domestic tourism tends to have lower spending levels compared to international visitors.

The country boasts a diverse tourism product, which includes sun and sea tourism, marine activities such as cruising and sailing, cultural and religious tourism, city holidays mainly focusing on Athens and MICE tourism. Despite the resilience of the sector in terms of recovery

from the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns have arisen about its environmental and cultural impact, resulting in efforts to promote lesser-known destinations.

The tourism industry makes a significant contribution to the Greek economy, directly employing a significant part of the workforce and indirectly influencing various economic sectors. The interconnection between tourism and the maritime and energy sectors is notable, with maritime transport supporting tourism needs and the energy sector providing the necessary resources. However, there is a growing demand for sustainable tourism practices, including investment in renewable energy, to mitigate environmental impacts.

Greece's rich cultural heritage, including 18 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, attracts numerous visitors every year, contributing to the investment in cultural preservation. In addition, the country's natural beauty, with its varied landscapes and rich biodiversity, is an attraction for tourists interested in nature-based activities.

Private sector initiatives in Greece focus on adapting tourism businesses to more sustainable models. Projects such as the digital transformation of the "smart island" of Naxos and the Aegean Innovation Centre NEORION aim to improve infrastructure and promote sustainability. Other initiatives, such as iSea's efforts to preserve the sea and the Hellenic Chamber of Greece's "Greek Breakfast" programme, promote responsible tourism practices.

In the public sector, initiatives such as Clean Blue Paros and Renewable Tilos demonstrate efforts to reduce plastic waste and switch to renewable energy sources. Mixed public and private initiatives, such as Rhodes Co-Lab and the GR-eco Islands National Initiative, aim to promote sustainability and innovation on a larger scale.

In Greece, there is also a strong uptake of sustainability certifications in the tourism sector. Certifications such as the Blue Flag and the Green Key recognise businesses for their environmental responsibility, while programmes such as Travelife help companies improve their social and environmental impact.

3.3 Spain

Spain is developing a Sustainable Tourism Strategy for 2030 through the Secretariat of State for Tourism. This initiative aims to address sector challenges and promote socio-economic, environmental, and territorial sustainability. By engaging stakeholders and autonomous communities, Spain seeks to transform its tourism sector sustainably and maintain its global leadership position. The strategy aims to enhance competitiveness, preserve natural and cultural assets, ensure equitable benefit distribution, and align with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The need for a new strategy arises from the evolving tourism landscape, despite Spain's longstanding prominence in the sector. Previous strategies, focused on "sun and beach" tourism, require updating to tackle new challenges and embrace sustainable practices.

Key principles of the proposed model include sustained economic growth, preservation of natural and cultural heritage, social benefits, participatory governance, and adaptability to change. The strategy outlines five strategic priorities: collaborative governance, sustainable growth, competitive transformation, engagement with tourism stakeholders, and effective marketing and intelligence for tourism products.

Cultural tourism has gained importance as researchers and policy makers recognise the link between culture and tourism. Although cultural tourism accounts for 40% of international tourist arrivals, only 5-10% of travellers are specifically seeking cultural experiences. In

Europe, more than half of tourism activity is driven by cultural heritage, suggesting the potential of the sector. In Spain, cultural tourists numbered around 24 million in 2014, contributing significantly to both domestic and international leisure travel revenues.

The definition of cultural tourism is complex, as it includes various motivations, such as the search for authenticity and learning experiences. The sector has evolved beyond traditional museums and monuments to include a variety of cultural products such as heritage tourism, gastronomic tourism and event tourism.

Cultural tourism in Europe has shifted from a focus on natural sites to a broader vision that incorporates performing arts, crafts and intangible heritage. Travellers now seek to immerse themselves in experiences of local cultures, leading to interactions with local people and their way of life.

Cultural tourism is attractive for research because of its continued growth and its role in revitalising mature destinations and creating new ones. The European Commission and the Council of Europe give priority to cultural tourism for its contribution to the sustainability of tourism.

The study of Spanish Institute of Tourism Studies focuses on cultural tourism on the Spanish Mediterranean coast, analyzing the factors that influence the behavior of cultural tourists and the differences between cultural and general tourists. Data from the Spanish Institute of Tourism Studies reveal information on tourist profiles, trip characteristics and activities.

Key findings include:
- Cultural tourists show similar demographics to general tourists but participate more in cultural activities.
- Cultural visits, events and other activities are popular among tourists, with cultural visits being the most prevalent.
- Cultural tourists tend to visit in spring and summer, with longer stays compared to general tourists.
- Overall satisfaction is high among cultural tourists, particularly those involved in cultural events, gambling and theme parks.
- Cultural activities, gastronomy and gambling attract higher spending, while cultural events and other cultural activities lead to longer stays.
- Gastronomy and health activities attract the most repeat visitors, while theme parks and cultural events attract fewer repeat visits.

These findings provide valuable information for destination management and tourism development strategies.

3.4 Romania

Tourism plays an important role in Romania's economy, contributing 3.0% of total GDP in 2019 and supporting 6.3% of total employment. However, the COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the sector, causing a 61% decrease in international arrivals in 2020 compared to 2019. Despite an initial recovery in 2021, international overnight stays remained 65.4% below pre-pandemic levels.

Domestic tourism became a driver of recovery in 2021, accounting for 91.2% of total accommodation nights. While domestic tourism recorded a 44.4% decline in 2020, it showed signs of improvement in 2021, although still 20.2% below pre-pandemic levels.

The Ministry of Entrepreneurship and Tourism oversees tourism governance in Romania, focusing on developing strategies, promoting tourism at home and abroad, strengthening destinations and products, developing infrastructure and regulating tourism services. The Tourism Advisory Council and the National Tourism Label Council facilitate cooperation between the public and private sectors in promoting tourism.

Tourism policies and programmes in Romania aim to support the recovery from the effects of the pandemic. Among the measures taken are state aid schemes for affected tourism enterprises, the extension of the validity of travel vouchers and the inclusion of tourism-related initiatives in the national recovery and resilience plan. The National Strategy for Tourism Development, the National Strategy for the Development of Ecotourism and the Strategy for the Development of Spa Tourism provide frameworks for sustainable tourism development.

Recognising the importance of cultural tourism, Romania has launched a cultural-tourism route recognition programme, resulting in the recognition of 116 routes by 2022. These routes aim to highlight cultural assets, stimulate local economic and social development, promote sustainable tourism and increase cooperation between counties. In addition, Romania has cultural routes in the Council of Europe network and transnational routes, further enhancing its cultural tourism offerings.

Overall, Romania's tourism sector is facing challenges due to the pandemic but is implementing strategies and programmes to support recovery and promote sustainable tourism development, especially in the areas of culture and ecotourism.

The Ministry of Economy, Energy, and Business Environment has introduced a voluntary system to recognize Cultural Routes in Romania. The first recognized route, the Route of the Wooden Churches in Bihor County, highlights the country's rich cultural heritage. These routes must span tourist attractions across multiple counties, promoting collaboration and tourism development. Romania's involvement in the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes program since 2013 has provided valuable insights and opportunities for cultural tourism development. Recognizing and certifying Cultural Routes at various levels aims to boost Romania's tourism competitiveness and promote sustainable economic growth. With eight Cultural Routes traversing its territory, Romania is firmly integrated into Europe's cultural heritage network, enhancing its appeal as a destination of cultural significance.

4. FOCUS GROUPS

This Work Package, foster the development of a toolkit that aims to equip them with the relevant knowledge and skills about how to become active citizens and to motivate them to engage with their societies by becoming their hometown ambassadors themselves. The toolkit will include educational materials in the form of interactive multimedia resources (videos, infographics, interactive presentations) that touch base on specific skills that will motivate them to learn more about their culture and be able to promote it using digital tools.

4.1 Definition of a FOCUS GROUP

Focus group is a method of data collection. Data are collected through a semi-structured interview process conducted at the team level. Focus groups are set up by the team leader. Focus groups are generally used to collect data on a specific issue.

A FOCUS GROUP can be used as a method to:

a) collect primary data

b) assist in the development of survey and interview guides

c) verify research findings from other methods.

4.2 FOCUS GROUPS of MineTOUR

The focus groups conducted to verify the needs conceived at pre-application stage. The methodology of the focus groups conducted through semi-structured interviews and the partners involved the project direct target group (young people 18-24 from rural area & Youth workers providing trainings and support to people from rural areas).

The purpose of our project, MineTOUR, is to address several key needs:

- Engagement in Civic Society: We aim to increase youth participation in voluntary activities, especially in rural areas, to address the democratic deficit and promote social cohesion.
- Rural Development: By promoting local tourism and cultural heritage, we strive to create economic opportunities, jobs, and community development in rural areas.
- Digital Literacy: Our project seeks to improve digital skills among young people, particularly in rural areas where access to digital resources may be limited, thereby bridging the digital divide.
- Sustainable Tourism & Cultural Heritage: MineTOUR aims to promote sustainable tourism practices to preserve cultural heritage and contribute to the social and economic well-being of rural areas.

4.2.1 Methodology

The FOCUS GROUP of every partner consisted of people from the direct and indirect target groups. Focus Group's participants were in the same room (& online) at the same time, with

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the purpose of engaging in a discussion on a specific topic and the discussion in each focus group conducted using a Semi-Structured Approach.

The main objective was to record both spontaneous and informal responses as they are more in tune with reality.

This type of interview presents flexibility: a) in terms of modifying the content of questions according to the respondent, b) in terms of delving into certain topics with participants deemed appropriate, c) in terms of the order in which questions are asked, and d) in terms of adding or removing questions or topics for discussion.

- The duration of every focus group was 120 minutes.

4.2.2 Introduction of the Focus groups

Organizations prepared for focus group sessions by creating engaging presentations or events, triggering participant motivation. These sessions began with informative introductions to the topic of discussion, followed by interactive activities such as group exercises or multimedia presentations to encourage critical thinking and active participation. This approach promoted a dynamic atmosphere conducive to productive brainstorming and collaborative problem-solving.

4.2.3 The objectives of the Focus Group

- Validation of the needs identified at the pre-application stage among young people aged 18-24 living in rural areas.
- Gathering knowledge and perspectives from youth workers providing training and support to rural young people.
- Promote spontaneous and authentic responses through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility to explore issues and modify questions as needed.
- Assess how individuals perceive and engage with local tourism in their community.
- Identify key attractions and points of interest from a local perspective.
- Identify key aspects of sustainable rural development from participants' perspectives.
- Explore challenges hindering sustainable rural development within the community.
- Identify essential digital skills necessary for success in the digital age.
- Understand challenges faced in acquiring and improving digital skills.
- Define sustainable tourism and its significance within the community.
- Identify existing sustainable tourism practices and their benefits.

4.3 Profile of interviewed persons

Country	Name	Gender	Occupation
Greece	Roksana Kidon	Female	Self-employ/Traveller
Greece	Ioannis Georgilas	Male	Firefighter
Greece	Eirini Kolovou	Female	Gym Trainer/Youth worker
Greece	Dimitra Leivaditi	Female	Dialectician/Youth Worker

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Greece	Aleksandros Karatzoulis	Male	Expert in touristic sector
Greece	Marina-Christina Vasilopoulou	Female	Youth/ employee
Greece	Eleni-Anna Vrazitikou	Female	Youth/ employee
Greece	Kleanthi Gialesaki	Female	Youth/ employee
Cyprus	Andria Nikolaidou	Female	Red-Cross/Youth Section
Cyprus	Angeliki Ilia	Female	University of Macedonia
Cyprus	Anna Christou	Female	CARDET
Cyprus	Katerina Panagi	Female	CARDET
Cyprus	Andri Tiggou	Female	Open University of Cyprus
Cyprus	Miranda Ioannou	Female	University of Macedonia
Cyprus	Michaela Protopappa	Female	INNOVADE
Cyprus	Kyriakos Grigori	Male	University of Cyprus
Cyprus	Vicky Pavlou	Female	European University
Spain	Isabel Martinez Perez	Female	Economy degree and Master student of innovation start-ups
Spain	Lucía Lozano Falaguera	Female	Babysitter (20 years old)
Spain	Paula Bernat	Female	HHRR
Spain	Sara Candel	Female	Student (23 years old)
Spain	Alex Monzo Santana	Male	Economy degree
Spain	Borja Martinez	Male	Project Manager
Spain	Yaiza Martos	Female	Translator
Spain	Naiara Julian	Female	Project Manager – Moderator
Romania	Cristina Mihaela Voican	Female	Volunteer It's Possible Association & BioTechnical Students Association
Romania	Allesia Stoika	Female	Volunteer

			It's Possible Association
Romania	Valcea Larisa Bianca	Female	Volunteer It's Possible Association
Romania	Boangher Danut Alexandru	Male	Volunteer It's Possible Association
Romania	Adelina Maria Oprica	Female	Volunteer It's Possible Association
Romania	Denisa Gabriela Antonescu	Female	Volunteer Europe Direct Teleorman and It's Possible Association
Romania	Diana Nicoleta Petcana	Female	Volunteer Kiwanis
Romania	Adina Ursulean	Female	Center for Education and Human Rights
Romania	Melania Coman	Female	Project Coordinator INCDT - MineTOUR

4.4 Focus Groups' Analysis

Based on the detailed descriptions given of the focus group discussions held in Cyprus, Romania, Spain and Greece, it is evident that each session was meticulously organised to facilitate inclusive and productive dialogues. These discussions were conducted online, ensuring accessibility and convenience for all participants. Each session was supported by a moderator and note-taker to ensure accurate recording of the discussions. Participants gave their consent, either verbally or in writing, to record the proceedings, ensuring transparency and respect for privacy.

The primary goal of these focus groups was to gather diverse perspectives and ideas on various topics related to MineTOUR. As we analyse the findings from these sessions, we will explore the common themes and unique ideas that emerged, providing a comprehensive understanding of the topics discussed. This analysis will further guide the development of strategies and initiatives based on the direct experiences and suggestions of participants, with the goal of enhancing the effectiveness of MineTOUR 's outcomes and contributions to each local community.

4.4.1 Demographic data and background

Each group consists of diverse participants, including youths, volunteers, members of NGOs, and individuals with expertise or interest in environmental issues and tourism.

In Cyprus, participants were primarily youths from rural areas, adults with experience in environmental topics and tourism, and youth trainers.

In Romania, the participants were mainly young people aged 18-24 from rural or urban areas, volunteers, youth workers, and members of the general public involved in local community activities. Most respondents had proficiency in English and digital literacy skills, with a focus on using online platforms and social media networks.

In Spain, participants were predominantly under 23 years old, students with a keen interest in tourism and environmental issues, and representatives from NGOs offering non-formal education and youth training programs.

In Greece, the group consisted of youth involved in empowerment and entrepreneurial efforts, experienced youth workers, a firefighter with a focus on sustainable tourism, an avid traveler, and an expert in the touristic sector. Participants had a good command of English and Italian, with varying degrees of proficiency. They acknowledged a knowledge gap in emerging technologies related to tourism and expressed a desire for tools to promote local cultural heritage effectively.

These demographic profiles provide valuable insights into the diversity of perspectives and experiences within each focus group, which likely contributed to rich and varied discussions on topics related to tourism and environmental sustainability.

4.4.2 Local Tourism (Understanding – Community Engagement)

The insights gathered from the focus groups reveal common themes and unique perspectives regarding local tourism, community engagement, and barriers to development. Here's a composite summary:

- <u>Understanding and Importance of Local Tourism:</u>

Participants across all regions recognize local tourism as vital for promoting community strengths, heritage, and economic growth.

They emphasize showcasing local attractions, cultural heritage, and natural beauty to attract visitors and boost the local economy.

There's a consensus on the positive impact of responsible tourism practices on both the environment and local communities.

- Challenges and Barriers:

Common challenges include limited funding, resistance to change among residents, lack of awareness about rural attractions, and difficulty in accessing remote areas.
Participants highlight communication problems, limited access to technology, and inadequate promotion by public authorities as significant barriers to local tourism development.

- Community Engagement and Solutions:

Suggestions for promoting local tourism include organizing small-scale events, creating personalized souvenirs, and leveraging digital tools such as social media and VR simulations.
Participants stress the importance of involving various stakeholders, including SMEs, NGOs, and youth, in promoting local attractions and collaborating on tourism initiatives.
They advocate for greater community involvement through initiatives like workshops, cultural events, and information sessions to raise awareness about local tourism opportunities.

- Technology's Role:

Technology is seen as a valuable tool for promoting local tourism, with participants emphasizing its role in information dissemination, online booking platforms, virtual tours, and interactive maps. However, challenges such as infrastructure limitations and competition with larger tourist destinations need to be addressed to maximize the potential of technology in local tourism promotion.

Overall, the focus groups highlight the importance of community engagement, collaboration among stakeholders, and leveraging technology to overcome barriers and promote sustainable local tourism development across diverse regions.

4.4.3 Sustainable Rural development (Motivation – Challenges)

Incentives for sustainable rural development:

Participants from Cyprus underline the importance of addressing the demographic challenge of rural depopulation by providing incentives for young people to participate in rural development initiatives. They stress the vital role of sustainable tourism in promoting rural development and advocate support from both the government and the private sector. In Romania, sustainable rural development is seen as the preservation of traditions while maintaining economic and environmental progress. Participants stress the importance of conscious progress, involving all stakeholders to respect the local environment and cultural

heritage. In Spain, sustainable development is identified with environmental care, with particular emphasis on waste management and circular economy practices. Participants advocate sustainable transport and economic exploitation initiatives, such as the promotion of local cheese production to stimulate tourism. In Greece, participants recognise the need for a balance between economic development and environmental protection in rural areas. They stress the importance of infrastructure development and sustainable land use practices to promote long-term sustainability.

Challenges to sustainable rural development:
Common challenges include lack of local authority involvement, limited financial resources and the resilient mindset of local people towards change. Participants highlight the need for integrated tourism offerings, innovative approaches and technological solutions to address these challenges. Furthermore, in Greece, participants mention the lack of incentives, awareness and opportunities for sustainable rural development, together with difficulties in implementing modern innovative ideas due to limited access and traditional mindsets.
Innovative approaches and technologies:
Participants in all regions see technology as a critical tool for promoting sustainable rural development. Ideas such as digital platforms to promote tourism, augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) experiences and video projectors are mentioned as potential solutions to enhance engagement and attract visitors. In addition, initiatives that promote circular economy practices, sustainable transport and local economic exploitation, such as cheese production, are highlighted as ways to promote sustainable rural development.

Participants underline the importance of community engagement, innovative solutions and technological developments to address challenges and promote sustainable rural development. By addressing these challenges and utilizing innovative approaches, communities can work to achieve economic prosperity while preserving their cultural heritage and natural environment.

4.4.4 Digital Skills and Resources

Across Cyprus, Romania, Spain, and Greece, participants emphasize the importance of digital skills in today's world and recognize the challenges and opportunities associated with digital literacy in rural areas.

- Essential Digital Skills and Resources:

Participants in Cyprus highlight the necessity of understanding technology and training rural individuals in digital skills, emphasizing the importance of not leaving underprivileged

communities behind digitally. They suggest methods such as seminars, European programs, and partnerships with private companies and government bodies to promote digital literacy.

In Romania, participants note the prevalence of smartphones and emphasize skills such as video calling, social media usage, and software proficiency. They acknowledge challenges in learning digital skills, including teacher explanations and software affordability.

Spanish participants highlight basic digital skills like using mobile devices and Microsoft systems but identify challenges such as Wi-Fi quality and limited coverage in rural areas. They suggest improving internet infrastructure, implementing digital education programs in schools, and allocating more funds to education. Greek participants stress the need to introduce basic technological skills to the public and promote access to innovative technology tools. They emphasize the importance of digital literacy for employability and career progression and suggest promoting trainings through social media and online platforms.

- Challenges and Strategies to Reduce the Digital Divide:

Challenges include limited internet infrastructure, financial barriers, and the need for effective teaching methods. Participants suggest strategies such as improving internet infrastructure, implementing digital education programs, and offering free and open trainings accessible to all.

Participants emphasize the importance of interactive and non-formal learning activities to enhance retention and make digital skills training more engaging. They also highlight the role of communities and educational institutions in promoting digital literacy through social media and online platforms.

- Role of Digital Skills in Employment and Career Advancement:

Digital skills are seen as essential for work quality and career advancement. Participants recognize the advantages of technological proficiency and the need to adapt to technological advancements.

Social media and apps are commonly used for managing finances, networking, and accessing training and updates. Participants believe that digital skills will become increasingly important for thriving in everyday life and advocate for providing digital skills training to older populations as well.

Participants underscore the importance of digital skills in rural development and emphasize the need for inclusive and accessible digital literacy programs to bridge the digital divide and empower individuals and communities in rural areas.

4.4.5 Sustainable tourism practices

Across Cyprus, Romania, Spain, and Greece, participants advocate for sustainable tourism practices that minimize environmental impact, support local economies, and preserve cultural heritage.

- Definition and Importance of Sustainable Tourism:

Sustainable tourism is defined as a practice that reduces environmental impact while positively impacting the community. It emphasizes job creation, local economic support, and environmental and social responsibility. Participants stress the importance of awareness and informed action in achieving sustainability in tourism.

- Current Sustainable Practices:

Current practices include individual actions like using reusable items and community-driven initiatives such as recycling programs and environmentally friendly hotel practices. To assess effectiveness, methods like questionnaires, surveys, and data collection are suggested, along with community discussions to foster idea exchanges and policy development.

- Challenges and Obstacles:

Challenges include resistance to change, pollution, and the need to balance economic interests with environmental and social responsibilities. Participants stress the importance of involving residents in decision-making processes and educating tourists about sustainable behaviors.

- Role of Local Authorities and Tourism Agencies:

Participants emphasize the role of local authorities in proposing policies, providing support and information tools, and promoting local tourism. They suggest that involvement all year round is crucial for the success of sustainable tourism practices.

- Measuring Impact and Preserving Local Knowledge:

Participants propose various methods to measure the impact of sustainable tourism practices, including economic benefits, mindset changes, and the state of natural and cultural attractions. They also emphasize preserving local knowledge and cultural practices through seminars, workshops, festivals, and digitalization.

- Innovative Approaches to Sustainability:

Innovative approaches include educating younger generations, organizing exhibits and workshops, and utilizing digital tools such as 3D technology and audio-video guides. Participants stress the importance of integrating sustainable practices with local knowledge and cultural heritage.

- Specific Sustainable Tourism Practices:

Examples of sustainable tourism practices suggested including organizing routes highlighting cultural and gastronomic aspects, promoting sustainable accommodations, and offering workshops allowing visitors to participate in traditional artisan activities.

Participants across these regions emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism practices in preserving natural and cultural heritage, supporting local economies, and fostering responsible travel behaviors. They highlight the need for collaboration between stakeholders, education, and innovative approaches to ensure the long-term sustainability of tourism.

4.4.6 Summary

Cyprus, Greece, Spain and Romania all underscore the pivotal role of digital technology in promoting and implementing sustainable tourism practices. They recognize the enthusiasm of young people for engaging with tourism and emphasize the need to balance technological advancements with preserving traditional elements. These regions advocate for a mix of technology and face-to-face events to promote and sustain local tourism effectively.

The discussions in Romania highlight the significant role of digital technology in daily life, particularly among young people, and its potential to promote local tourism, enhance visitor experiences, and support community engagement. They emphasize the importance of maintaining a balance between virtual interactions and real-life experiences.

Similarly, participants in Spain emphasize the critical role of technology in facilitating communication, enhancing accessibility to information, and managing resources effectively in sustainable tourism practices. They advocate for the use of digital tools, such as social networks, to promote destinations while preserving cultural heritage and minimizing negative environmental impacts.

These regions stress the importance of embracing innovation while upholding principles of sustainability to ensure the long-term viability of tourism destinations and the well-being of local communities. Sustainable tourism practices not only enhance the visitor experience but

also contribute to the protection of biodiversity, the empowerment of local communities, and the promotion of responsible travel behaviour.

5. Recommendations

5.1 Method recommendations

- <u>Interactive Workshops:</u>

Conduct interactive workshops where participants can actively engage with the content and learn through hands-on activities.

Use group exercises, role-playing scenarios, and problem-solving tasks to encourage collaboration and critical thinking.

Incorporate multimedia elements such as videos, presentations, and interactive tools to enhance the learning experience.

- <u>Case Studies and Best Practices:</u>

Include real-life case studies and examples of successful sustainable tourism initiatives from different regions.

Analyse the key factors contributing to the success of these initiatives and identify best practices that can be applied in other contexts.

Encourage participants to discuss and reflect on the challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from each case study.

- <u>Guest Speakers and Expert Panels:</u>

Invite guest speakers and subject matter experts to share their insights and experiences in sustainable tourism.

Organize panel discussions where participants can interact with industry professionals, local community leaders, and environmental advocates.

Provide opportunities for Q&A sessions and open dialogue to address specific questions and concerns raised by participants.

- <u>Online Learning Platforms:</u>

Develop online learning modules and courses that participants can access remotely at their own pace.

Use multimedia resources, interactive quizzes, and discussion forums to facilitate engagement and knowledge retention.

Provide additional resources such as articles, research papers, and webinars for further exploration of relevant topics.

- Field Visits and Practical Training:

Organize field visits to sustainable tourism destinations, eco-friendly accommodations, and community-based tourism projects.

Allow participants to observe sustainable practices in action, interact with local stakeholders, and gain firsthand experience.

Facilitate practical training sessions on specific skills such as waste management, cultural interpretation, and eco-tour guiding.

By incorporating these methods into the development of training materials, you can create engaging and effective learning experiences that empower participants to implement sustainable tourism practices in their communities. Tailor the approach based on the preferences and needs of the target audience to maximize impact and promote long-term behavior change.

5.2 Content recommendations

1. *Sustainable Tourism*

Sustainable tourism is a way of travelling that takes care of the planet, the people and the traditions of the place. When we learn about sustainable tourism, we gain the tools to take action and share our love of travel while making sure we protect the places we visit. It is a journey that makes us feel connected to the world around us and leaves a positive impact behind.

2. *Digital Literacy & Financial Literacy*

At a time when technology is playing an increasingly important role in every aspect of life, digital literacy is truly essential. It's like having a "map" to navigate a world full of digital information and tools. Digital literacy training gives people the power and confidence to deal with technology successfully and safely. It also equips them with the ability to critically evaluate the information they find online, promoting critical thinking and judgement. All of this adds up to a set of skills that are essential to master in order to live successfully and safely in this digital age.

3. *Digital Skills for Sustainable Tourism*

Digital skills are increasingly important in tourism. With them, individuals and businesses are optimising communications, delivering personalised experiences, and promoting sustainable practice. Training in these skills enhances the competitiveness of businesses and promotes sustainable tourism, especially in areas with a strong cultural heritage.

4. *Community Engagement*

Community involvement is crucial for the sustainable development of tourism. With training in community participation, people can be involved in tourism planning and decisions, creating

positive relationships between tourists and locals. This makes tourism development more balanced and equitable, strengthening local communities.

5. Innovative Approaches in Local Tourism

Promoting local tourism strengthens the local economy, preserves cultural heritage, and reduces the ecological footprint of travel. With education in this area, people learn how to showcase the unique features of the local area, encourage local consumption and foster community spirit. Innovation is driving progress in the tourism sector, allowing businesses to adapt to changing consumer preferences, but also young people to develop innovative solutions that enhance the sustainability and promotion of their local cultural heritage. By training in innovative approaches, professionals acquire the skills needed to develop new ideas and implement them successfully.