Sustainability and the small destination: The EDEN project in Italy

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Abstract | The central hypothesis of this paper is that the quality of urban life, the collective well-being and the sustainability can become competitive factors in local tourism development policies with particular reference to small destinations. The present work shows how competitiveness of small destinations moves away from a paradigm that considers the concept of growth being synonymous of development. The development concept is broader and more comprehensive than that of growth, as it involves ethical and cultural aspects that lead it back to the improvement of quality of life. Thus, ‘degrowth’ (Latouche, 2003; Martinez-Alíer, Pascual, Vivien & Zaccai, 2010; Schneider, Kallis & Martinez-Alíer, 2010) and the ‘alternative growth’ (Layard, 2005; Van den Bergh, 2009; Van den Bergh & Kallis, 2012) are new paradigms of growth, which highlights the challenge that destinations have to face in order to switch from a quantitative to a qualitative pattern. The latter puts quality at the heart of development, as a leverage of competitiveness and social well-being of local communities. The smaller destinations are areas most suited to development paths in which quality is a transversal factor and not the prerogative of a single sector. These destinations are more oriented to undertake sustainable development paths in which the quality, social capital and innovation play an important role in all areas such as the economy, the environment and cultural heritage, creating added value capable of reinforcing the entire territorial system. In this framework the EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) project is an initiative promoted by the European Commission to promote models of sustainable tourism development for small destination throughout the European Union. This paper analyses the EDEN project experience in Italy, by identifying the distribution of candidate destinations in the various regions and the type of proposing subjects, opening up prospects of future research aimed at understanding the concrete effects of the EDEN project on the sustainable tourism development of the small destinations.

Keywords | Small destinations, Sustainable tourism development, EDEN project, Italy.

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1. Introduction
This paper analyses the relationship between sustainable tourism development and the small destinations. Such destinations are able to recuperate and valorise local identity, to narrate their history and traditions through cultural heritage. They put quality at the centre of development as a lever of business competitiveness, of the social solidity and well-being of the local community with a view to sustainable endogenous and lasting development.

In recent years the economic literature has concentrated on the study and analysis of the socio-cultural characteristics of the territory and of the local environment. The territory intended not only as a physical factor becomes able to play an 'active' role. New policies for territorial development no longer concern just competitiveness but increasingly also habitableness and the concept of sustainable development. The sustainability of development is divided into three components: economic growth, dynamic equilibrium of the environment; social balance, cohesion and inclusion (Caroli, 2006) and presumes a virtuous integration and co-evolution of such sub-systems (Camagni, Capello & Nijkamp, 2001; Giaoutzi & Nijkamp, 1993). Recently in certain areas of Italy, various territories considered to be on the margins of strong and consolidated systems have initiated local development paths concentrating on identity, local history, the recovery and enhancement of cultural wealth and identifying in the quality of life of the territory the drawing factor of their development.

In this renewed framework the EDEN (European Destinations of Excellence) project is an initiative promoted by the European Commission to promote models of sustainable tourism development for small destinations in the whole European Union. This paper analyses the experience of the project EDEN in Italy, through the identification of candidate destinations in the various regions and the type of themes they propose, opening perspectives of future research that aim to understand the concrete effects of the project EDEN on the development of sustainable tourism in small destinations.

Palavras-chave | Destinos de pequena dimensão, Desenvolvimento sustentável do turismo, Projeto Eden, Itália.