COMCOT – AN INNOVATIVE TOOL FOR IMPROVING THE COMPETITIVENESS OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM

THE EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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FOREWORD

The project "*An innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism*" (COMCOT) - was an international development project, funded by the Interreg IV A Central Baltic programme Southern Finland-Estonia sub-programme. The objective of the project was to improve the competitiveness of tourism with community-based development methods in Estonia and Finland. Practically, the project aimed to build high local ownership in tourism development by providing locals a chance to take part in planning processes and by developing skills and cross-border networks of the grass-root level activators. Furthermore, in addition to enhancement of grassroots tourism development and creation of new community-based tourism products, the COMCOT project also developed a tool for community-based tourism development that can be used in other areas as well. In order to achieve these objectives, the project brought together Estonian and Finnish tourism specialists, developers and entrepreneurs along with a team of development experts from the UK. During 2011-2013, a community-based tourism development process was tested in six different rural areas. This report presents the evaluation of the piloting process with its success stories and challenges.

The COMCOT partnership consisted of eight partners from Estonia and Finland. The lead partner of the project was Estonian University of Life Sciences. Other project partners were the University of Helsinki/Ruralia Institute, Evanter OÜ, the Development Association Sepra, The Association of Water and Environment of Western Uusimaa, Võrtsjärv Foundation, the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa and Maidla Municipality. We appreciate the contribution of the whole partnership and especially the pilot regions' dedication and hard work they have done in enhancing the community-based tourism development at the grassroots level.

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Authors

CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

The community-based tourism development process described in this report is based on wide experiences gathered during an international project called "An innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism (COMCOT)". The aim of the COMCOT project was gather together academics, international tourism consultants and community activists in order to improve the tourism potential in Estonian and Finnish rural areas. The project used a community-based approach whereby the ideas for tourism development were collected from the communities involved in the project and the same communities also implemented these ideas. By expanding the opportunities and knowledge base for local level actors, the project aimed at developing competitive tourism by simultaneously combining cross-border cooperation networks. Accordingly, the main objective of the COMCOT project was further divided into three more detailed practical aims as follows:

- assessing, developing and visualizing the tourism potential in the selected pilot regions,
- capacity building of the key people in terms of improving their networks, and
- creating and piloting a development tool for wider use.

The COMCOT project was an international development project funded through the EU (Interreg IVA programme) and partner organisations. The project was led by the Estonian University of Life Sciences. The COMCOT project included six pilot areas: three in Finland and three in Estonia. Characteristic for all the pilot areas was that tourism development was based on water – lake, river, sea or reservoir. The pilot areas in Finland were: the Lake Lohja archipelago and Porla area in Lohja, Pyhtää and Virolahti. In Estonia, the pilot areas were: Aidu mining area in Maidla, Lake Võrtsjärv and Setomaa.

This report is based on the evaluation of the community-based tourism development process piloted during the project. The key actors involved in the COMCOT project were asked to assess extent to which the COMCOT project met the expectations of the key actors, to identify the success factors for an effective community-based tourism development process, and to identify the perceived barriers that may hinder a successful community-based tourism development. Based on the experiences of the COMCOT project, a process description, a COMCOT tool was devised. The aim of this handbook is to guide other interested parties to apply similar processes to community based tourism development. The COMCOT tool thus describes the best practices learnt during the project as well as giving practical level information on how to proceed with each step of the development process. This guide can be found in the project web page: XXX.

Based on the results of the evaluation described in this report, ,the COMCOT project had important influence on tourism development in the pilot areas. The project was able to increase the scale and scope of local discussion on tourism development and enhanced communication between local actors and other stakeholders. The project and its community based approach also raised community participation levels through attracting new active people to take part in local development projects and contribute to local discussion.

An important contribution of the project was the provision of networking opportunities and it can be seen that sustainable connections between the Finnish and Estonian pilot region communities were established during the COMCOT project. Similarly, tourism skills of local key actors were enhanced through training sessions, study visits and case study experiences. The main challenge of the project iswas also related to the cross-border networking as the language difficulties, English being the common language for collaboration, prevented some local activists with poor English skills from taking part of the networking activities.

The COMCOT project also played an important part in the development of many different tourism products and services in the pilot areas. New tourism products were established and tested during the project – part of the work initiated during the project will bear fruit yet in future.

1. INTRODUCTION

Support from the local community members is one of the most important success factors in rural tourism development. One tourism company cannot alone influence on the atmosphere of the rural destination or shape the rural tourism experience. Often the first contacts the tourists have in the rural areas can be the staff of the local store or gas station. In addition especially in rural areas the companies, being typically micro companies, very rarely have products that they can implement alone without functioning local networks. It has been found out in several studies that social sustainability i.e. local acceptance has been one of the key success factors of the SMEs in rural regions in order to maintain successful business activities on the long run (e.g. Lähdesmäki & Suutari 2012, Matilainen & Keskinarkaus 2010).

Also due to the fragmented landownership in Finland and Estonia, in order to provide attractive environments and landscapes for the tourism, the community acceptance and support for the tourism activities is essential. This has been noticed at the national level in Finland and e.g. different kind of tools for landscape compensation like "landscape renting model" (*maisemanvuokrausmalli*) or recreational value trading (*virkistysarvokauppa*) have been developed in order to enhance the agreement based co-operation in this respect (Metsäkeskus Tapio 2008, MTK 2007). However, typically the landowners or local people that the tourism activities influence will not be fully compensated for providing local resources for the use of tourism. This highlights the need for the community-based approach in the development activities. Despite this important consideration, tourism development has, however, traditionally been very trade focused and production-oriented, often ignoring the views and ideas of local people.

The concept of community-based tourism has been seen as an alternative to traditional approaches to tourism development as it explicitly aims to benefit members of local community through capacity building and empowering them as a means to achieve community development objectives (Tolkach et al. 2013). According to Russell (2000) community-based tourism should fulfil the following three criteria: 1) It should have the support and participation of local people; 2) as much as possible of its economic benefit should go to people living at or near the destination; 3) tourism must protect local people's cultural identity and natural environment. Therefore, it has been suggested that community-based tourism is one way of delivering economic and social regeneration, while protecting local cultures against the rising tide of globalization.

Community-based tourism development thus embraces community members as an essential asset and resource in tourism development and aims to create sustainable tourism products and services. Therefore, community-based tourism is not simply a tourism business that aims at maximizing profits for its investors. Rather, it is more concerned with the impact of tourism on the community and its environmental resources. Community-based tourism should emerge from a community development strategy, using tourism as a tool to strengthen the ability of rural organizations that manage tourism resources with the participation of local people.

However, it has been recognised in several occasions that the development of community-based tourism with desired outcomes is not easy (e.g. Simpson 2008; Blackstock 2005). In some cases it may have actually harmed the community and local culture. Therefore, also strong critique has been presented towards it (e.g. Goodwin & Santilli 2009, Blackstock 2005). It should also be noted that most of the literature related to community-based tourism is focused on the context of developing countries or communities of indigenous people. Nevertheless, there is a clear need to consider the potential of community-based tourism also in the western rural context. Furthermore, there is also a need for suitable tools for implementing community-based tourism in these settings. The COMCOT project aimed to contribute to these challenges.

The COMCOT project (*An innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism*) was an international development project that brought together Estonian and Finnish tourism specialists, developers and entrepreneurs

along with a team of development experts from the UK. The project was initiated to help community's better exploit the expanding Central Baltic area tourism sector. While in many Finnish and Estonian rural areas, tourism has developed to be an important source of income, with this emerges the need for new sustainable, high-quality market-oriented products, which are linked together locally, regionally and internationally. There is also a need to improve competitiveness, increase integration with related sectors and raise community awareness of client expectations and the environmental impact resulting from increased tourism.

The COMCOT project gathered together academics, tourism consultants and community activists in order to improve the tourism potential in rural areas by adopting a community-based view on tourism development. In the project a community-based tourism development process was tested in practise in six different rural areas. The project lead partner was the Estonian University of Life Sciences (project website- http://pk.emu.ee/en/comcot). Other project partners were the University of Helsinki/Ruralia Institute, Evanter OÜ, the Development Association Sepra, The Association of Water and Environment of Western Uusimaa, Võrtsjärv Foundation, the Union of Rural Municipalities of Setomaa and Maidla Municipality. The three-year project ended in October 2013.

This report presents the evaluation of the community-based tourism development process conducted in COMCOT project. Accordingly, the main objectives objective of this report is to analyse the experiences from the project as it was seen by the key actors of the project and suggest improvements in order to contribute to the creation of actual community-based tourism development process guide: "*An innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism – A handbook*".

2.   THE COMCOT PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The COMCOT project is based on the ideas of community-based development which assumes from the outset that when decisions regarding tourism are made and executed locally, local people are more likely to take ownership towards the tourism development. In other words, by engaging local people in the tourism processes, they feel the resulting products and services as their own and thus the sustainability of the tourism activities is more assured. Still, local people are not always well aware of the tourism potential in their area, nor of the needs or the expectations of different kinds of tourists. For this reason, it is important to give local people the opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills in order to assure locally based successful tourism development. Accordingly, an objective of the COMCOT project was to enhance sustainable tourism development in rural areas by activating the local people to take the lead in the developments, feel ownership towards them and build their capacity to continue the work after the project ends. This objective was further divided into three more detailed practical aims as follows:

1) assessing, developing and visualizing the tourism potential in the selected pilot regions,
2) capacity building of the key people in terms of improving their networks, and
3) creating and piloting a development tool for wider use.

In following these aims, the first task of the COMCOT project was to bring local people together and identify the development needs and aspirations for each pilot region. The development ideas initiated in the local community meetings were then prioritized in such a way that the most interesting and promising ideas in each area were chosen for further consideration. As an essential part of this work, the chosen development ideas were visualized through 3D modelling and presented to the community - which gave an even broader audience of community members an opportunity to discuss the tourism plans and thus participate in the local development. In each of the pilot regions, the local community was provided with detailed external and objective information concerning the potential for developing tourism in their area, the needs and expectations of tourists as well as survey results of local tourism attitudes. The aim of this information was to facilitate local decision making regarding different tourism development ideas. During the COMCOT project, each pilot region was provided with a step-by-step action plan for guiding the local community on how to turn their tourism ideas into successful products and services. Furthermore, the project supported the communities in taking these development steps in the forms of research, capacity building and networking opportunities (at both national and cross-border levels).

One of the main objectives was to develop a practical tool for community-based tourism development and pilot it during the project. By creating new strategic thinking and innovative planning in communities and improving business skills, the project aimed to develop more competitive businesses and targeted products and services for existing and new clients while also helping entrepreneurs to improve their effectiveness in the development of new innovative products. Accordingly, the whole process of constructing community-based tourism development was closely monitored and the best practices are compiled as a tool which can be found in the form of guidebook from xxxxx. The tool can be used in enhancing community-based tourism in other rural locations.

The Comcot project was carried out in six pilot areas in Finland and Estonia. A characteristic of all the pilot areas was that tourism development was based on water – lake, river, sea or reservoir. The pilot regions were:

■ Võrtsjärv region: development of the lake-based tourism in the area,
■ Setomaa region: the development of tourism activities along the route "Seto Külavüü",
■ Maidla municipality: rehabilitating an old mining area to create a water tourism centre,
■ Lohja municipality: the development of the lake centre Porla and the Lake Lohja Island
■ Virolahti municipality: the development of the coastal area in Hurppu village and a fishing harbour in Klamila village,

■ Pyhtää municipality: the development of the old village centre of the municipality.

In each pilot region, a local coordinator responsible for the realization of the project aims at the local level. The coordinator was the person who first promoted the project in the local community and gathered together those interested in collaborating in tourism development. Furthermore, an essential part of the coordinators' role was to build and enhance team spirit and trust among local people in order to create a favourable atmosphere for common tourism development. Thus, the local coordinators maintained active communication between the project and the local community and organized local meetings where the tourism development aims and actions were deliberated and decided. In addition to the local coordinators, the project also utilized the expertise of two universities (the Estonian University of Life Sciences and the University of Helsinki /Ruralia Institute). The main roles of the university representatives were to facilitate local tourism development through the provision of external information and coordinating the process.

The COMCOT team also included of a group of external consultants (the Market Specialists company) who had broad international experience in undertaking community-based tourism development projects. Their role in the COMCOT project was to provide their expertise by guiding and assisting the local pilot regions through the process. The COMCOT development process for community-based tourism tested in the pilot regions and presented in this report was created through bringing together the experience of the Market Specialists consultants with the local knowledge of the local coordinators. The process initiated by this interaction was then piloted, tested and further developed in the COMCOT project. The chart of the process is presented in Figure 1.
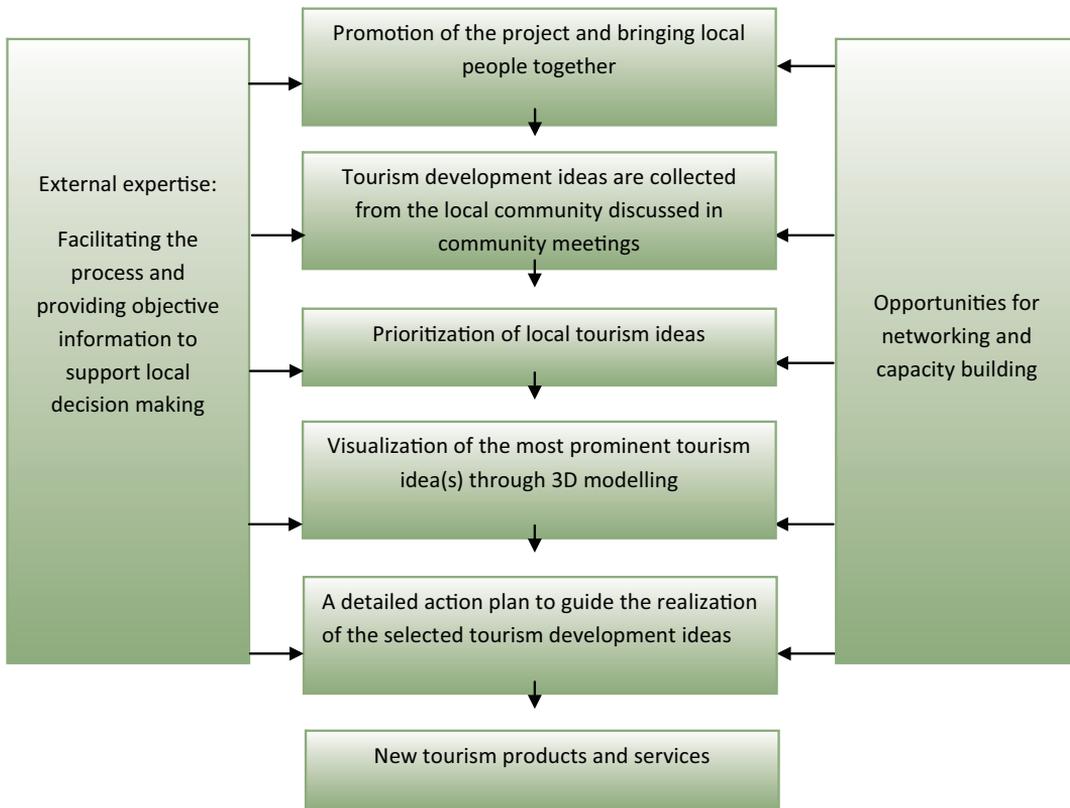

Figure 1. The model of the COMCOT development process for community-based tourism.

3. MATERIAL USED FOR THE EVALUATION

The main objective of the evaluation was to gather information on the COMCOT process description in a systematic way. This objective can be further divided into three specific aims, namely:

1) to assess the extent to which the COMCOT project met the expectations of the key actors,
2) to identify the success factors for an effective community-based tourism development process, and
2) to identify the perceived barriers that may hinder a successful community-based tourism development project.

The evaluation is based on the following information and participation processes:

■ Interviews with key people. In total 12 face-to-face or phone interviews were conducted – 6 in Estonia and 6 in Finland. In addition to the local pilot area coordinators, 1-2 other key people (based on their active involvement in the COMCOT project) were selected for interview in each pilot area. The interviews were semi-structured theme-based interviews (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide) and they lasted approximately 1-1½ hours each. The interviews were conducted in either Estonian or Finnish language. Afterwards, the main arguments and comments of each interviewee were translated to English to enable comparitive analysis.

■ Feedback was collected from the 3D visualization sessions arranged in each pilot region, the participants of the familiarisation visits and two networking meetings. A common questionnaire was used for all interviews; in addition, minutes of the discussions and comments during these sessions were collated and analysed for the evaluation process.

Water-based tourism development characterised all pilot areas

4. THE RESULTS OF THE EVALUATION

In this chapter, the results of the evaluation are discussed. The chapter is divided into 4 subchapter, each presenting the main phases of the community-based tourism development process. It should be noted that even though the phases here are separated from each other, in reality they were overlapping and closely linked together.

4.1 BRINGING THE KEY PEOPLE TOGETHER

The aim of the first phase of the COMCOT project was to provide an open platform for all those interested in tourism development to join the process. Accordingly, in each pilot region, the first task of the project was to gather people together and assure their commitment to the process - in particular all those groups of people, without whose contribution the tourism sector would not have a chance to develop in the area. In this phase the "core group" of local key people was formed. Indeed, this was this group that often took the main initiative in the many different activities during the process and was also interested in continuing the activities after the project. This group of key people was to an extent dynamic - new members came along and while some of the original key people moved to the background later on in the project.

In the COMCOT project, a number of methods were used to bring local people together and promote the project. Each pilot region coordinator used methods most appropriate in the local context. However, local coordinators did not rely on just a sole method but applied a combination of different methods in order to reach as wide an audience as possible. Indeed, the role of the pilot area coordinators and their networks were extremely significant in this phase and also influenced the kinds of groups that were able to form in each pilot region. The methods used to bring local people together at the beginning of the project included:

- newsletters, press releases, stories in the local newspapers,
- presentations (very informal) in different local meetings,
- personal contacts with the key people (face-to-face, phone, e-mail, etc.),
- spreading the word by using local key people as mediators,
- e-mail invitations to wider newsgroups and mailing lists.

PROMOTION OF THE PROJECT AIMS

The interviewees emphasized that the crucial phase promoting the project and engaging local people with the aims of the project is the responsibility of the local coordinators. However, according to some local coordinators interviewed, the objectives and procedure of the COMCOT project were rather vague to them in the beginning which made promoting the project among local people quite challenging. Thus, they recommended that before commencing with local promotion, it would be important to have a few meetings between the local coordinators and other project personnel to discuss the project aims and methods in more detail. In this way, the whole group can refine effective promotional arguments that can be used to approach community members since it is important that these arguments are carefully considered and clear. For example, in order to avoid misunderstanding, it should have been emphasized that the aim of the project was not to give local people money for their tourism operations per se but instead to give them new ideas and networks to help them pursue the actual tourism activities themselves.

Existing networks and local knowledge were the most essential resources when gathering people together. Hence, the local coordinators used face-to-face meetings, existing mailing lists and newsletters to reach the right people. It should be noted that the local coordinators did not consider that merely sending emails was sufficient to engage people in the project but usually personal meetings were seen as a rather more effective technique. Thus, in some pilot areas, it was a relatively easy and straightforward process to gather people together since the pilot area coordinators knew at

least a few people personally who were interested in local development issues. These interested persons could then further spread the message. In an area where personal contacts are lacking, one interviewee suggested an effective way to reach interested groups; stakeholders and potential recruits could be through other projects or events. Similarly, it is possible to organise open community meetings where the project is introduced to the local community. According to interviewees, this method is rather challenging since community participation in this kind of meeting maybe rather low. It should also be taken into account that reaching out to community members is a continuous process and should be maintained throughout the whole project. The size of the community may also pose a challenge for the promotion of the project since in a small community there may be simply too few people interested in common tourism development when compared to larger communities.

Since the personal contacts of local coordinators were acknowledged as an important means of gathering people together, there are risks that the project may become quite identified with the local coordinator. This may pose problems, especially if it results in work overload for the local coordinator. It should also be noted that even though the local coordinator's role at the beginning of the process is crucial, they should be able to delegate some responsibilities to other community members after the process has started. It is however, important that someone takes overall responsibility for leading the process. For successful community-based tourism development, all members of the community must be given an opportunity to express their opinions and ideas on tourism development but there still needs to be a nominated person(s) who will draw the necessary conclusions and take the reins. As one interviewee mentioned: "*It's great that there are open events for people to come and discuss tourism development but unfortunately things don't seem to progress without certain amount of leadership.*"

Local newspaper articles and advertisements were also considered as an effective means to promote the project – even though newspaper advertisements cannot replace the essential role of personal marketing efforts. A majority of the interviewees stated that the COMCOT project got quite a lot of media attention which has indeed attracted some new enthusiastic members to the local tourism development work. More generally, the media attention has raised a broader discussion on tourism development including among the local authorities. This is an important contribution of the project. The interviewed pilot area coordinators emphasized though that media attention is not an automatic result of a project but media relations should be taken care of. Thus, it was considered essential to actively inform the local media about the activities and events of the project.

The local coordinators considered that the COMCOT project was quite successful when communicating its aims and objectives to the larger community – even though they acknowledge that there would always have been room for larger numbers of active people. The main reasons for not reaching more people were considered to be: lack of interest towards tourism development or more broadly to collaborative development work, lack of time or more generally, lack of available people (i.e. many pilot regions were rather sparsely populated rural areas). Some interviewees stated that generally speaking it was more challenging to engage local entrepreneurs with the project than local authorities and other activists. In the case of entrepreneurs, a lack of time was given as the main reason for non-participation - even though the idea was considered interesting and had potential. For this group then, the promotion of the project should have emphasised, in a very practical way, the potential added value of the project to an entrepreneur's own business activities. In conclusion however, interviewees considered that the relevant stakeholders and key activists have been found in all pilot areas, and the project received the support from key players. Similarly, they emphasised that those participating in the project were the people who were really interested in tourism development.

COMMUNITY MEETINGS

Numerous of community meetings were organised in each pilot area throughout the project. These meetings were a very important method for building team spirit and trust among local participants and the timing of the meetings was also critical for maintaining the motivation and interest of the community. Thus, interviewees emphasised the local coordinators' ability to sense the needs of the community when organising meetings schedules - too frequent and they could have been challenging for some community members, while too seldom might reduce their enthusiasm.

According to the interviewees, it is important that community meetings should build upon one another and should avoid repeating the same topics each time. Similarly, all the activities should have clearly defined deadlines. In the COMCOT project, community meetings enabled people to create

Local community members discuss tourism development ideas in Pyhtää.

common goals for local tourism development work. Community meetings served as a platform for local people to express their opinions which were then recorded and discussed, local people were able to network with those who shared the same ideas and thus start working together towards their aims. In general, interviewees felt that the community meetings were rather successful, but although they were a place for brainstorming new ideas and solutions for the tourism development in the area, further processing of the ideas usually took place in smaller and more unofficial meetings. While the larger meetings have a role and a place, equally important were small group working groups in order to get things moving, often as a parallel process.

Naturally the willingness of key people to participate in community meetings and in the project more generally varied widely. Interviewees pointed out that lack of time was given as a major reason why interested community members could not always attend local meetings. Those being active in one development project were often active in other projects too, thus being rather busy. For this reason, people should know the meeting times well in advance. In the COMCOT project, some community meetings took place at rather short notice so some people were unable to make the necessary arrangements to take part in them. Similarly, people should know the agenda of the meetings well beforehand so that can decide whether or not to participate. In the business context, the articulation of benefits is especially important. Furthermore, in some of the COMCOT pilot areas there were many owners of summerhouses, they could not take part

in meetings if they were organised during the off-season. It should be remembered that summer residents can be an important asset when developing tourism.

Interviewees noted that some local people expected that the project would provide more opportunities to actually undertake developments together instead of discussing and planning. Indeed for some, this may have killed a part of the motivation to participate. In some COMCOT pilot regions tourism development was already more advanced than in others and making basic plans concerning tourism in the more advanced pilot regions may have been felt frustrating among community members. Based on the experience, it can be highlighted that community-based tourism development processes should be flexible enough to adjust to local needs. This matter was also perhaps a bit insufficiently emphasised in COMCOT project due to the pilot nature of the project.

A big challenge in local community meetings was the lack of language skills since to suit the needs of the foreign consultants many local community meetings were at least partially organised in English. According to the interviewees, the language problems sometimes restricted the development of a more interactive atmosphere with common discussions and planning which otherwise could have potentially been quite fruitful. Therefore, even the idea of the foreign experts bringing influences outside of the piloting countries were very much appreciated, the language problems should be taken carefully into consideration when planning the usage of external assistance.

A further challenge in community meetings was that the numbers participating in each meeting varied a lot and different people participated in different meetings. For this reason, continuity between local community meetings was not always the best possible and discussions were sometimes rather fragmented. It was thus emphasised that in order to make the local community meetings more successful, their structure and content should be kept as flexible as possible. As stated by an interviewee, it is frustrating for local community members if they have to work with a particular phase of the project even though they are not quite ready for that phase. Community meetings should therefore closely reflect the development phase of the community in order to be truly community-based in nature.

4.2 DEVELOPING THE ACTION PLAN FOR THE PILOT AREAS

One of the core assumptions of the COMCOT project was that local people do not always have all the knowledge they need on customers' needs and expectations related to rural tourism products. They may also be a bit "blind" concerning their own ideas and products, either not seeing their full potential or being too product orientated without understanding the true marketing potential of the products. The project therefore, sought to bring information to the process from outside including from international sources, to help stimulate new ideas and provide realistic assessment of existing ones. In COMCOT, an external consultancy (The Market Specialists Ltd) was hired to provide this external support. The consultants' role was to help the local community create an action plan related to community-based tourism development. The process of creating this plan involved support from the consultants which included guidance in collecting the ideas, prioritising them, and determining how they could be implemented practically. In order to support the prioritisation process, the consultants provided market information and surveyed the local community's attitudes towards tourism and presented this to the community. The consultants created a plan for the process and took a leading role in implementing it. The action plan process can be summarised as follows:

- Gathering development ideas from the local community,
- Analysis and prioritisation of the ideas,
- Collection of supporting material: business, community and market surveys,
- Creation of an action plan.

COMCOT partners visiting Kaunissaari Island

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THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING ACTION PLANS

The process of collecting and prioritising the tourism ideas was highly valued by interviewees since it generated many new ideas for local tourism development. All pilot regions understood the importance of the action plan and its central role as a basis for the development. According to feedback from key actors in the pilot regions there was, however, some room for improvement in the development of the action plans and this was largely related to the experienced inflexibility of this phase. On reflection it is likely this part of the project did not take sufficient account of the different starting points of the pilot regions.

Thus, if the area already had an action plan, the process should have commenced based on the existing plan rather than starting all over again. After all, it was usually the same group of people who had discussed and made the existing plan and it is not reasonable to ask them to do it again. In these pilot regions, it is sufficient to revisit the existing plan, update it where necessary with new ideas or information, possibly undertake prioritisation of the suggested activities in the existing action plan and continue from there.

The external consultants had an important role in guiding the pilot regions through the development of their action plans. The interviewees thought that there is a need for external assistance in this kind of project, since it is essential to get an outsiders' perspective and comments on the planned activities as well as their advice on the practical realization of the plans. It was also important for pilot area people to have the opportunity to learn about how similar tourism ideas are developed and experienced in other countries, i.e. to learn from other's experiences. However, the interviewees also emphasized that it is important for consultants to be flexible enough to adapt their activities according to the state of development in the pilot region. Likewise, the practical way of presenting things is something that was highly appreciated by local people; unlike theoretical lectures that were considered to be rather challenging to understand in English. For example, the case studies compiled and presented by the external consultants were thought to add value to local development work by giving useful and simple solutions to practical tourism challenges - even though the interviewees had hoped the consultants would have discussed the case studies in more detail considering the lessons to be leant for each pilot region.

Similarly, the interviewees thought that it would be utmost important that the consultants would provide new perspectives to their existing tourism development initiatives and ideas, i.e. very practical level solutions how to proceed with already on-going development work. This kind of approach would enable the "quick wins" for the local communities, which then could increase their motivation towards the tourism development. However, it could be somewhat risky, since the existing ideas are not necessarily considered from the community-based approach, rather than based on the interests of one or two persons.

A clear challenge to the exchange of expertise between communities and experts can be the language. In the COMCOT project, even though there were translators available at cross border meetings and those attended by experts, the interaction and between the experts and the local communities somewhat suffered from the lack of a common language. Even though some of the local key people were able to use English as a working language this was not case for all. Also the fact that all the material provided by the consultants was in English caused delays in responding to expert's reports as these required to be translated between languages. The language barrier caused some of the potential key people not to benefit from the project as much as they could have. On the other hand it stimulated some community members to improve their language skills.

This potential challenge related to language was considered in the planning phase of the process and the value added that foreign consultants could provide to the local communities exceeded the language challenges. Thus, if the external experts would have been from Finland/Estonia, their role would have been also different, since they would not have looked the development process so much from outside and the idea of using external experts especially was to bring information from outside of the partnership countries to be used in the project area.

The action plans were presented to local communities at community meetings and they were also made available online so that people could examine them at their leisure. Key components of the action plans were in some cases also included in newsletters distributed to key community members. Even though the action plans provided a good basis for the tourism development of pilot areas, it is still rather early to say, how widely they are exploited in development work yet. It should also be noted that action plans describe the situation at a particular point in time and as the circumstances and environment for tourism development changes over the course of time, the action plans should also be revisited and updated.

THE SUPPORTING SURVEYS

To support the development of the action plan, the external consultants helped to obtain some objective information to the local decision-making by planning three different kinds of surveys, namely:

- business survey,
- community survey, and
- marketing survey.

The role of the *business survey* was to give up to date statistics to the external experts concerning the local tourism companies. The aim of the *community survey* was to map out the wider community's opinion on tourism development in general and collect opinions from those people who did not directly participate in the several local meetings organised by the project. Additionally, the *market survey* was carried out to identify the tourism products for which there would be markets among foreign customers and what expectations foreign customers have towards Finnish and Estonian rural tourism products. All this information was also integrated into the action plans.

The most challenging survey of those mentioned above was the business survey, as the respondent rate was low. Even though the survey was conducted through phone interviews in some pilot regions, local entrepreneurs did not want to participate in it and the project personnel were unable to motivate the entrepreneurs. One reason given for their unwillingness to participate stemmed from cultural factors since some Finnish and Estonian entrepreneurs considered the questions to be too confidential to discuss with strangers. Since the survey was carried out at the very beginning of the process it is possible that entrepreneurs were not yet sufficiently committed to the process to feel confident enough to complete the survey.

The community survey, on the other hand, was seen as more successful and it was considered to be necessary and important. The interviewees thought that it is very important to engage the broader community in the development of tourism, to ask their opinions on tourists and places that could be open for visitors and those that should be restricted for local use only. According to the interviewees, it is also important that the results should be widely communicated across the community.

In some pilot regions the results of the community survey were also significant, since it showed that the atmosphere for tourism development in the area was quite positive. It also demonstrated to local tourism developers that they were not following the wrong path and actually had local support, although those being against the development seemed to shout the loudest. One issue relating to the community survey, however, was the number of the respondents since in some pilot areas the completion rate was not as high as hoped.

According to the interviewees, local entrepreneurs had highest expectations for the outputs of market survey. They were interested to hear what the Russians and Germans think about their products. They had also expected that the project would provide some form of product testing through the survey, although this was never an aim of the project. As a result of these heightened expectations, in some pilot areas, the key people were disappointed by the results of the marketing survey. The interviewees suggested it could have been undertaken without interviewing large numbers of respondents since there are tourism agencies in each country with pretty good knowledge of the needs and expectations of their own countrymen. Thus, instead of discussing with e.g. those agencies promoting tourism in Finland, there should have been discussions with similar agencies operating abroad. For example the Finnish interviewees thought that it is quite easy for businesses to get information from the Finnish tourism promoting agencies but much more challenging to get the same kinds of information from abroad and this is where the COMCOT project could have assisted the businesses more. When considering these opinions, they highlight how important it is to be extremely clear about the objectives of the project at the very beginning of the process. Especially since there were many actors involved, it probably should have been made clearer to everyone, what the objectives were.

According to the pilot area key people, one of the main challenges related to the COMCOT surveys was that local people were not eager to fill in the questionnaires due to the number of similar surveys they have already filled in during other development projects. Thus, the results of the surveys were not as informative and extensive as they could have been. Therefore, even though it is important to find out the opinions of the larger community, based on the experiences of COMCOT project, the methods to achieve this could be improved. It was also rather generally suggested by the interviewees that the questionnaires should have been shorter, simpler and more concrete. Furthermore, the timing of the marketing survey also raised some criticism among the project participants interviewed. Some of them thought that it would have been much more useful if the marketing survey was conducted after the communities had come up with some new products to introduce to the market. In this case the survey could have been focused espe-

cially on the selected products instead of more general information. This kind of information would probably have been more easily adopted by the communities to their product development. It takes more understanding of information processing to be able to utilise more general results. On the other hand, some of the respondents mentioned that the marketing survey results should have been available earlier for the prioritization process. In general, it was mentioned that the timing of the surveys seemed to be the main challenge also in two other surveys. In some cases, they were probably finalized too late to support the prioritization process, which was seen as a problem. The ideas might have been prioritized differently, if the opinions of the communities would have been on hand.

Even though all the people interviewed were considered to be active key people in their pilot regions, some of the interviewees did not recall any surveys being done during the project nor the results presented to them. In these cases the project personnel clearly failed to transfer the results from the surveys to some of the pilot regions. Since the results were provided to all, it must be noted that in some cases the language skills may be one reason for the fact that the survey results were not discussed that much in the pilot regions. Also the regional co-ordinators should probably have focused more on interpreting the results with the key people. Also the countries chosen for the marketing survey were not necessarily those that would held the most potential customer groups concerning the tourism products of the pilot areas and therefore the key people did focus to interpreting to all of the results that much.

Despite of the practical challanges presented above, it should be emphasized, though, that interviewees clearly acknowledged the importance and added value for community-based tourism development projects that could be derived from the surveys. Otherwise it is almost impossible to reach the proper objective understanding of the community's opinions. Mapping out these is one of the core objectives of community-based development.

4.3 VISUALIZATION – 3D MODELS TO SUPPORT DECISION MAKING

After the pilot regions had defined the development ideas (or alternatives) they wanted to take further, these ideas were visualized by using a 3D modelling. In the COMCOT project a new tool in participatory tourism planning was introduced for visualising the potential changes in the landscape caused by tourism development. This was a portable, immersive and real time 3-dimensional (3D) computer based visualisation program. Specialists from the Estonian University of Life Sciences constructed 3D models of each pilot area, added the new development ideas into the model and thus provided the local community a chance to have a virtual tour in the potential future landscape.

The aim of the 3D visualization was therefore to help local community members understand tourism related changes in their environment before they occur, to create discussion and activate the locals to influence and take part in the development, to help communities reach consensus and make decisions concerning the future tourism development and to strengthen the relationship between people and their environment.

According to the interviewees, the visualization process was considered to have been very successful and it worked well. Most of the people interviewed mentioned that they had no explicit expectations towards this phase, since the method was not familiar to them. However, the 3D theatre fulfilled its role in the process very well. The actual presentations were seen as impressive, effective, informative and fun, people were very positive about how they could "walk and fly" through the visualized landscape. As one of the interviewees stated conceptual and intangible ideas couldn't be presented easily to the wider community and the 3D presentations were an excellent solution. The modellers were also considered to be very professional and the collaboration between them and the pilot regions was effective.

In some cases, however, the 3D theatre was not used to assist the decision-making since these decisions had already been made prior to the visualisation stage. However, viewing the range of development options in 3D supported the community's feelings that the correct choices and decisions had been made. In other areas the 3D visualisation was timed to assist the local community decision-making process and it is clear the input from 3D visualisation is optimal when there are a number of potential scenarios for development and 3D visualisation provides an opportunity to see what they would look like in real life. However, it was also mentioned that it is rather early to say what kind of long term impacts the 3D presentations may have had in the cases it was used merely to raise discussion on tourism development in the area, i.e. how much they actually impacted to the decision-making e.g. concerning the land use of some areas.

3D Theatre presentation to a COMCOT partner community

Children watching the 3D presentation of Hurppu area

Even though the model was seen as an excellent tool to visualize the planning, the real challenge for the 3D is, however, that it is a relatively expensive methodology and is probably too costly to be used for small development proposals. Furthermore, some interviewees suggested that another challenging aspect of the 3D visualisation methodology was that the communities might lack the skills and resources for producing sketches or architectural drawings of different development ideas for use in the modelling process. For example, although a member of the community might have a proposal for a small romantic bridge if they do not have design skills, the idea would have a reduced chance to be a included in the 3D modelling. Thus, future projects should provide local people with the resources to transform their ideas into drawings suitable for the modelling in order to ensure that all the potential ideas are included in the visualisation.

Although it had been stated that the collaboration between the 3D theatre presenters and the pilot regions was effective some of the interviewees thought that the descriptions/speeches during the 3D presentations could have been livelier. This might have helped communities appreciate the versatility of the pilot areas better. In some pilot areas, it was also mentioned that the presentation room for the theatre could have been larger because of the build-up of heat. This is part was due to the need for a blackout in the presentation room and there are always challenges and compromises that must be made in order to get suitable facilities in suitable locations.

Some of the 3D presentations were combined with some larger events, e.g. the Apple Carnival in Lohja, Finland in order to attract more people to attend. Some, on the other hand, were held as independent 3D theatre events, which, according to interviewees seemed to be a better choice.

A separate event seemed to attract more people to the presentations because of the absence of competing activities nearby. It was also mentioned that in some cases the marketing efforts for the events could have been stronger. That the presentations were organized over two days rather than one was a good thing since it gave local people chance to select a suitable time to visit. The ways the 3D presentations were organized across pilot regions varied. While in some, the presentations ended in general discussion, in at least one; small workshops were organized following the presentations where the different development scenarios were discussed more in detail. Both methods of organizing were considered to have been successful.

In general, the 3D presentations drew a lot of media attention in the pilot regions and thus helped to create a wide discussion on the topic, which would not have been possible otherwise. Furthermore, even though the 3D attracted quite a lot of local people to the presentations, there could always be more young people involved in the process. As a matter of fact, 3D could also be a good method to engage young people in the local development issues.

Systematic feedback was collected from each of the 3D presentation. Participants were asked to respond to two open-ended questions:

1. Describe your own words your 3D experience and the clarity of the model.
2. What kind of advantages / disadvantages you found in the 3D model when compared to your previous experiences?

According to this feedback, local people were very satisfied with the organization and contents of the presentations. The following are examples of participants' views:

Describe your own words your 3D experi-ence and the clarity of the model:

Good and diverse, it gave excellent general view of the area, building complex and the overview of the area.
The experience was impressive, especially because the screen was curved and "surrounded" the viewer's closely.
It is easier to perceive than from a map.
You get a clear picture fast
An interesting and great experience. Usage of outsiders such as consultants is necessary to get a wider view to make the tourism successful.
Gives a possibility to consider changes in the area with a well visualized ground. The experience was interesting but not new.
Gives fairly good idea of the plans not about the reality. As a viewing experience it was not very pleasant I couldn't have taken more of it.
Illustrative, it illustrated well the differences between the current situation and the planned.
An impressive and illustrative presentation

What kind of advantages / disadvantages you found in the 3D model when compared to your previous experiences?

Moving in the model in different heights expands the image of the planned object, in addition the curved screen is really good.
Benefits: greater scale, you can see what is there in the surroundings and it is easier to place yourself in the environment. Weakness: You cannot take this home to have a better look at it.
Gives a better picture of the planned changes in the environment than structural drawings.
Just immense/fabulous! You get a clear picture of the planned possibilities in one look.
Benefits: the need for space for buildings and the opening of the view feels realistic. Small weakness: on the island the forest did not look very realistic.
It is possible to test different scenarios with a feeling of reality

As a summary it can be said that the overall feed-back of the use of 3D theatre was positive, it re-mains to be seen how communities reflect on the way the development looked in the visualisations when compared to the actual developments after they are implemented.

4.4 CAPACITY BUILDING OF KEY PEOPLE

The core concept at the heart of the project was to support the locally active key people to assume responsibility for and continue their development activities after project closure. In order to achieve this, there were two main set of activities imple-mented a) providing knowledge and skills for the locals, i.e. training them in topics related to the chosen development ideas and b) networking key people within the pilot area, between the pilot ar-eas and across borders. Networking was ongoing process throughout the project, but some specific activities related to this also were implemented, namely network meetings and familiarisation vis-its (FAM-visits). In order to understand which skills needed to be improved, a training needs analysis (TNA) was conducted and based on the results a series of mentored workshops was implemented to improve the critical skills.

TRAINING OF LOCAL PEOPLE/ MENTORED WORKSHOPS

There were several opportunities for people to im-prove their knowledge and skills but the participa-tion in the training sessions was not, however, very high. There were a number of reasons for this: in some areas there had previously been many train-ing courses provided for people in the context of other projects, these were very focused and good, and thus, the perceived need for new training was not so high. There has always been a challenge to get people actually participate in the training courses, even though the target group may under-stand the need and requirement for training – this especially the case with entrepreneurs. Interview-ees highlighted that training sessions should be very practical – otherwise local people would be reluctant to participate.

New methods of providing information and training for local communities, such as on-line

training courses via the Internet, could also be used to increase people's participation. Similarly, a form of network training newsletter could be one solution for providing learning opportunities e.g. practical tips and "bite sized" pieces of information/knowledge could be provided to entrepreneurs through e-newsletters. The timing of the training session is also something that should be carefully considered since some interviewees thought that the training should have taken place more towards the beginning of the project. The promotion of the training needs analysis and training courses on offer should be also carefully considered in order to encourage participation.

Furthermore, the interviewees stated that even though the idea of training as such is a good one, the training need analysis could be conducted in some other method than a survey. One reason for TNA being not so successful may result from local people being rather tired with surveys, similarly for some people the survey was too long and difficult to fill in. Instead of conducting surveys, one interviewee suggested that the external experts should also be involved in the process of identifying what kind of training the local community needs. Accordingly, the external experts involved in the project know the local skill level as well as local tourism objectives – for this reason they could be able to objectively assess what kind of necessary skills are missing in the community.   However, the problem is that in this case the training need analysis would be based just on interpretations of the external consults. If the key actors do not "confess" needing some skills or training themselves, it is very hard to motivate them to take part to one. Therefore, it is important that the needs for skills improvement are coming directly from them rather than is based observations of the outsiders. There might be room to think of different methods for this though, e.g. by discussing them in the joint meeting, which could have been considered as an alternative.

As previously mentioned, members of the community appreciated the training sessions organised in the project – particularly since they felt that they were practically organized and addressed their particular needs. In that sense the training needs analysis conducted was successful after all. In the following list, there are some examples of successful topics for training sessions and workshops (note: not all these sessions were organized in each pilot area, but just in those areas where need for this kind of training was seen necessary):

- Training for development project application writing: this course was seen as important and good. Although the numbers taking part in this training were limited through them, this knowledge will cascade to the wider community. Thus, this training will have even larger effects than we can estimate at the moment. The training was particularly relevant, since project knowledge among small business entrepreneurs and associations is often very scarce. And "the project world" is something that is the most common way for conducting rural development activities at the moment. It was also mentioned that the method through which the training was executed, learning by doing" was a really good since during it an actual application was written, which required the participants really to take the initiative.

- Tourism product development training including the design of tourism packages, planning of tourism routes, preparing local dishes: this kind of training was perceived as practical and useful, and the feedback was very positive. In the most successful cases, it led to real collaboration between different actors, and between the local actors and local LEADER group.

- The study tour to Scotland and learning from the Scottish experience in tourism development was very successful and a useful experience.

- The tourism English language course had great impact on the language skills of local people. The English language training was combined with customer service knowledge which increased the practicality of the language sessions. There was need for a Russian language course as well, but a suitable teacher could not be found.

- Facilitator skills, especially the facilitator meeting led by an external expert was considered as very good and practical providing the local key people tools to work in their own communities.

NETWORKING EVALUATION

In order to improve networking two major FAM visits were organized. In the first, the key people from the Finnish pilot regions went to Estonia to visit pilot regions and in the second, key Estonians visited Finland. In addition to this, two specific

community networking meetings were organized (one in Finland, the other in Estonia), in which the objective was to support the communities networking together and provide them with facilitating skills to continue the work in their own regions. Shorter visits were also linked with partner meetings to enable the key people to continue networking.

Most of the interviewees thought that there were sufficient opportunities for network building during the project and the networking opportunities had been well organized. The project enabled the creation of new contacts between people living in the same pilot area since there were people who had not known each other previously. There were also sufficient opportunities for cross border networking, indeed this was even mentioned as one of the best things in the COMCOT project. As an example some interviewees highlighted the first FAM trip to Maidla as a very eye opening experience since it showed how a small community could engage in big innovation. Thus, the visit to Maidla encouraged local people and local authorities from other pilot regions to engage in development work back home. The FAM visits and meetings with key facilitators between Estonia and Finland gave a lot

of new ideas for local development. The contacts found and networks built have continued after the end of the COMCOT project, although it is recognized that much of this is dependent on one's own networking activity. Many interviewees commented that there could have been even more cross-border networking (although this would have required significantly more funding).

It was also mentioned that the networking activities were sufficiently informal, and thus it was quite easy to get in contact with other pilot regions' members. Some of the interviewees even thought that the networking phase was actually even more successful than expected and participation in the Euracademy summer school in Tartu contributed positively to networking efforts. Similarly, the study tour to Scotland was considered to have provided an important contribution to network creation.

Language was a main challenge in networking. Some of key active people did not join the project or managed to participate properly due to limitations in their language skills. In Estonia this launched an intensive language course to improve English skills. In Finland on the other hand, those who could not manage with English saw it as too big a

A networking event between the Estonian and Finnish partners with bread baking

challenge to start then and there while others felt confident with the language. Cross border activities were also seen to encourage key people to understand that one does not have to be fluent with a language to join in with cross-border co-operation. Using interpreters in the meetings helped somewhat, but no proper cross-border co-operation can be created, if no common language exists. Therefore, perhaps in some events, the key people invited could have been selected more carefully, so that the people could have worked properly in the cross-border groups.

In order to have a concrete outcome from the networking, one of the interviewees suggested that a common tourism package between Finnish and Estonian pilot regions would have been a good idea. Although it did not come to fruition during this project, the contacts made during COMCOT could enable this to happen in future. This could also be an objective of a future project.

Following as an example a summary of feedback collected from participants during one of the FAM visits: the first visit of the Finnish participants to Estonia in May 2011. There were 15 participants on this visit, 11 of whom responded to the questionnaire. In general, the respondents considered the visit to have been very successful resulting in an overall grade of 4.2 (5 being the maximum). All the respondents mentioned that they got ideas from the FAM visit which could be used in their everyday work. They got ideas which could be used to develop their own areas/villages further.

What was the best during the visit?

- Getting familiar with tourism development in Vörtsjärv area
- Discussions with the others in the group
- Diversified selection places to visit, co-operation potential with Estonia
- Long tour, good weather, Maidla was interesting, as was the Vörtsjärv area.
- Surprisingly good group
- An opportunity to get to know the project partners and especially the Vörtsjärv pilot area and the Living Lakes organization.
- Benchmarking, what is done in other pilot areas and how.
- Meeting the people working with similar issues
- Getting familiar with the Living Lakes organization
- Getting familiar with the others project activities ⯈ broadens ones own points of view
- Getting to know the development plans in Maidla and Vörtsjärv areas. To see that there are similar problems and issues to solve in both Estonia and Finland.
- Develop the objectives and the content of the project together with the partners and other actors. Getting familiar with the other Finnish local level actors in the project.
- Networking, getting familiar with the pilot areas, nice people

What could have been done better? (comments listed in random order)

- More organized networking between the Finnish and Estonian local level actors.
- The pilot area actors present in the joint evening/dinner should have got to know each other better
- The schedule was maybe a bit too tight
- Tighten the schedule, participation in the seminar seemed unnecessary
- There could have been a small "inside seminar" in the programme in which all the pilots would have been presented and pilot area plans developed further
- Interpretation in Finnish would have helped to fully understand everything.
- The seminar in Vörtsjärv area maybe a bit too long?

Expectations towards the project's future activities:

- To plan and start the implementation of the Kaunissaari development plan at a practical level.
- Implementing the project's plan and constant evaluation of its usefulness. Do the practice and theory meet?
- Great expectations towards the external expert. The assessment and ideas from outside are needed in development process
- The active practical-level co-operation between the pilot areas
- The activation of ones own area and exchange of experiences and ideas with other areas
- To improve my project knowledge
- The mapping of the potential actors in the project and bringing them together at the earliest possible occasion (project personnel get easily get stuck with their usual working methods and new opportunities may not be seen)
- Hopefully the project helps to develop our area and activate the people in it. Maybe the landscape theater will be a good tool in this? It is not very easy to get the associations and people activated so that in the end something concrete would be achieved.
- To get on with the practical level activities in the pilot areas.
- To have a clear understanding of what tools and support the project can provide to the pilot areas.
- Practical implementation of development plans.

Similarly, the cross-border networking meetings organized for the pilot area facilitators got a very positive feedback. An external networking consultant led the network meeting and her contribution to the event was highly appreciated, not least because her practical participative approach gave the participants opportunities to discuss their own experiences in small groups. A constraint in this networking event was again language skills which made it challenging for some Finnish and Estonian participants to express and share their ideas with each other.

5. SUMMARY: THE SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES IN THE COMCOT PROJECT

Based on the evaluation interviews, the approach applied to community-based tourism development in the COMCOT project proved to be very successful in many aspects. The main factors contributing to this success are listed below:

- New people were encouraged to participate in local tourism development
- Discussion concerning tourism increased – particularly as a result of the 3D presentations
- Common goals for community tourism development have been established
- New ideas for tourism products and services have arisen
- Skills and knowledge in tourism have increased
- New networks, both nationally and cross border, have been established

Since the COMCOT project was a pilot for testing one approach to community-based tourism development, naturally there were some challenges in the process and room for improvement. For this reason, in addition to the success factors mentioned above, the evaluation also raised some points which should be taken into account when implementing a similar project in other areas. The key risks and potential solutions can be summarised as follows:

- Remember to take into account the stage of development of the area in question – don't repeat something already done!

- All the participants should know the objectives of the process as well as its progress – it's important to invest time in the creation of a common vision and understanding.

- Encouraging local people to participate in local development may take some time – try to be innovative in your methodology, be persistent!

- Community-based tourism projects are a dynamic process – things don't necessarily always go straightforwardly from one phase to the next, retracing steps can be a natural part of the process. You may also need to repeat some phases several times.

- The available resources for local development work are often rather limited – don't try to accomplish too much at any one time. Progress on even small things increases local people's motivation to be involved in the process!

- Everyone has to feel free to express their opinions concerning common developments – be sure that there is an open, democratic and encouraging atmosphere for discussions.

- Objective, external experts can greatly contribute to the success of the process – the comments and suggestions of these experts should, however, be accepted by community members.

- Community-based tourism development usually requires the development of new skills by community members - be sure that there are sufficient opportunities to learn new skills so as to safeguard the sustainability of the development. Learning from each other's experiences is also very important!

- Ongoing monitoring and evaluation enables flexibility in the process – don't be scared to make changes to the development plans if necessary!

- Community-based tourism development is based on trust – the process should be understood as a long-term investment in the community. Also do not underestimate the importance of proper networking to ensure long-term co-operation.

The challenges and issues faced by the COMCOT partner regions and the factors contributing to its success presented in this evaluation report form the basis for the development tool of community-based tourism, which has been published in the form of guidebook. In this guidebook the process

and its different phases are described in details in illustrative and practical level style. In addition the guidebook provides practical methods to implement each phase in the development process as well as highlights the potential risks in them and provides solutions, aiming especially to build high local ownership of tourism development by providing local communities an opportunity to take part in planning processes and by developing skills and networks of grassroots level activators. The guidebook can be found from: xxxxxxx

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tässä raportissa esitellään toimijoiden kokemuksia yhteisölähtöisestä matkailun kehittämisestä COMCOT-hankkeessa. COMCOT (*An innovative tool for improving the competitiveness of community-based tourism*) –pilottihankkeen keskeisenä tavoitteena oli edistää yhteisölähtöistä, sosiaalisesti kestävää matkailua Viron ja Suomen maaseutualueilla. Hanke pyrki kannustamaan paikallisyhteisön jäseniä ottamaan matkailun kehittäminen omakseen ja aidosti motivoitumaan matkailutoiminnasta pitkäjänteisesti, myöshankkeen jälkeen. Tavoitteen saavuttamisen näkökulmasta tärkeitä osavaiheita olivat pilottialueiden matkailupotentiaalin arviointi, matkailuideoiden kehittäminen ja visualisointi sekä osaamistarpeiden kartoitukset ja tarvittavien koulutusten organisointi. COMCOT kokosi yhteen paikallisyhteisön jäseniä, akateemisen tutkimuksen edustajia sekä matkailun konsulttiryhmän, jotka yhdessä pohtivat innovatiivisia tapoja yhteisölähtöisen matkailun edistämiseen. Siten alueiden toimijoiden välinen verkostoituminen ja muilta toimijoilta oppiminen näyttelivät keskeistä roolia hankkeen toteuttamisessa.

Hankkeen tavoitteena oli luoda laajemminkin hyödynnettävissä oleva yhteisölähtöisen matkailun työkalu/toimintatapa. Tätä toimintatapaa ja sen myötä syntyneitä matkailun kehittämisideoita testattiin hankkeeseen valikoituneilla pilottialueilla, joita olivat Lohja, Pyhtää ja Virolahti Suomessa sekä Vörtsjärv, Setomaa ja Maidla Virossa. Ominaista kaikille pilottialueille oli vesistöjen – järven, joen, meren tai keinotekoisen vesistön, hyödyntäminen alueen matkailun kehittämisessä.

Käytännössä COMCOT-hanke lähti liikkeelle paikallisten osallistamisella mukaan hankkeeseen ja aktiivisen toimijajoukon sitouttamisella toiminnan tavoitteisiin. Hankkeessa mukana olleiden matkailukonsulttien ohjaamina paikallisyhteisön jäsenet ideoivat vapaasti erilaisia alueelle sopivia matkailuideoita, joita eri kriteerein priorisoimalla löydettiin ne ideat, joita kukin yhteisö alkoi ensisijaisesti viedä eteenpäin. Priorisointiprosessin tueksi tehtiin markkinoita, yritysten ja paikallisyhteisön näkemyksiä selventäviä kyselytutkimuksia. Priorisointiprosessin perusteella jokaiselle alueelle laadittiin yksityiskohtainen matkailun kehittämissuunnitelma. Matkailun kehittämistyössä käytettiin hyväksi myös modernia 3D-mallinnustekniikkaa erilaisten matkailuideoiden visualisointiin. Tavoitteena 3D-tekniikan hyödyntämisessä oli kasvattaa paikallisyhteisöjen tietoisuutta suunnitteilla olevista ideoista, kuten siitä, miten ne sopivat osaksi ympäristöä ja jo olemassa olevaa infrastruktuuria ja samalla myös herättää keskustelua suunnitelmista.

Jotta yhteisölähtöisen matkailun kehittämiselle saataisiin jatkuvuutta pilottialueilla myös hankkeen jälkeen, yksi COMCOT-hankkeen tehtävistä oli kohdealueiden avaintoimijoiden matkailun kehittämiseen liittyvän osaamisen ja verkostojen kehittäminen. Toisin sanoen hanke pyrki vahvistamaan niiden paikallisyhteisön jäsenten tietoja ja taitoja, jotka ovat keskeisessä roolissa kestävän matkailutarjonnan luomisessa ja ylläpitämisessä. Tästä johtuen jokaisella kohdealueella suoritettiin koulutustarpeiden analysointi, jonka tarkoituksena oli kartoittaa osaamisen nykytila ja tulevaisuuden tarpeet. Koulutustarveanalyysin perusteella pilottialueilla järjestettiin erilaisia räätälöityjä koulutuksia, kuten esimerkiksi hankesuunnittelukoulutusta, matkailuenglannin kursseja ja matkailupakettien suunnitteluun liittyvää opastusta. Niin ikään COMCOT-hanke pyrki myös edistämään pilottialueiden toimijoiden välistä verkostoitumista, erityisesti kansainvälisen yhteistyön parantamista Viron ja Suomen pilottialueiden välillä. Tämän tavoitteen saavuttamiseksi hankkeessa järjestettiin erilaisia tutustumisvierailuja ja verkostoitumistapaamisia alueiden keskeisille toimijoille. Näissä tapaamisissa paikalliset aktiiviset toimijat saivat myös mahdollisuuden oppia toistensa kokemuksista yhteisölähtöisen matkailun kehittämisen saralla.

Nyt käsillä oleva raportti kuvaa pilottialueiden toimijoiden kokemuksia – niin onnistumisia kuin vastaan tulleita haasteita hankkeen aikana toteutetusta yhteisölähtöisen matkailun kehittämisen toimintatavasta. Raportin empiirinen materiaali on kerätty haastattelemalla 2-3 hankkeeseen osallistunutta avainhenkilöä jokaiselta pilottialueelta. Yhteensä tehtiin 12 haastattelua. Tämä lisäksi raportin materiaalina on käytetty 3D-esityksistä kerättyä palautemateriaalia.

Haastattelujen perusteella hankkeen avainhenkilöiden voidaan sanoa olevan hyvin tyytyväisiä hankkeen aikana syntyneisiin verkostoihin, uusien alueellisten toimijoiden aktivoitumiseen matkailun kehittämisessä, 3D-esitysten tarjoamaan visualisointityökaluun sekä hankkeen aikana kehiteltyihin erilaisiin matkailutuotteisiin. Samoin hankkeen tarjoamaa mahdollisuutta matkailun kehittämiseen liittyviän osaamisen kehittämisessä arvostettiin selvästi. Keskeiset haasteet hankkeen toteuttamisessa liittyivät siihen, että suuri osa verkostoitumisesta ja matkailukonsulttien kanssa tehtävästä työstä tapahtui englanniksi, joka esti joidenkin paikallisyhteisön jäsenten aktiivisen osallistumisen kehittämistapaamisiin. Kuitenkin suuri osa käytännönläheisestä kehittämistyöstä tapahtui yhteisön jäsenten kesken pienemmissä ryhmissä, mikä puolestaan mahdollisti sen, etteivät kieliongelmat täysin poissulkeneet ketään asiasta kiinnostunutta osallistumasta hankkeeseen.

Hankkeessa saatujen kokemusten perusteella raportissa nostetaan esiin muutamia tekijöitä, jotka tulisi huomioida menestyksellisessä yhteisölähtöisessä matkailun kehittämistyössä:

- Muista huomioida alueen aikaisempi kehittämistyö ja rakentaa uutta jo tehdyn työn perustalla – älä toista mitään mikä on jo tehty aikaisemmin!

- Kaikkien kehittämiseen osallistuvien toimijoiden tulisi tuntea hyvin toiminnan tavoitteet ja kulloinenkin kehittämisvaihe – yhteisen vision ja ymmärryksen rakentamiseen kannattaa investoida aikaa.

- Paikallisten toimijoiden rohkaiseminen mukaan kehittämistyöhön on joskus aikaa vievää toimintaa – pyri olemaan mahdollisimman innovatiivinen välittäessäsi viestiä kehittämistyöstä, tuo toimintatapaa esiin erilaisilla foorumeilla ja erilaisin metodein.

- Yhteisölähtöinen matkailun kehittäminen on dynaaminen prosessi – asiat eivät välttämättä aina mene sujuvasti eteenpäin vaan palaaminen aiempiin vaiheisiin on luonnollinen osa prosessia.

- Paikallisen kehittämisen resurssit ovat usein hyvin rajalliset – älä yritä sen vuoksi tehdä liikaa yhdellä kertaa. Edistyminen pienissäkin asioissa kasvattaa paikallisten motivaatiota osallistua kehittämistyöhön.

- Jokaisella paikallisyhteisön jäsenellä tulisi olla mahdollisuus ilmaista mielipiteensä kehittämistyöstä – siksi on tärkeää luoda kehittämistyön perustaksi avoin ja demokraattinen keskusteluilmapiiri.

- Alueen ulkopuoliset, objektiiviset asiantuntijat voivat tarjota paljon apua ja uusia näkökulmia kehittämiseen – on kuitenkin huomattava, että paikallisyhteisön jäsenten täytyy hyväksyä asiantuntijoiden näkemykset ennen kuin ne voidaan ottaa osaksi kehittämistä.

- Yhteisölähtöinen kehittämistyö vaatii yleensä uusia taitoja yhteisön jäseniltä – varmistu siitä, että kehittämistyön tueksi on tarjolla riittävästi mahdollisuuksia uusien asioiden oppimiseen. Toisten esimerkistä oppiminen on myös tehokasta tapa kehittää ja oppia uutta!

- Prosessin jatkuva arviointi mahdollistaa joustavuuden – älä pelkää tehdä isojakin muutoksia kehittämissuunnitelmaan jos arviointiprosessi niin osoittaa!

- Yhteisölähtöinen matkailun kehittäminen perustuu luottamukseen – kehittämistyö tulisi nähdä pitkänajan sijoituksena yhteisöön. Älä myöskään unohda verkostoitumisen tärkeää roolia kestävän kehittämistoiminnan varmistamisessa.

Tässä raportissa esitettyjen kokemusten pohjalta COMCOT-hankkeessa käytetystä työtavasta muokattiin parannettu versio: työkalu, joka kuvaa yhteisölähtöisen matkailun kehittämisprosessin sekä antaa käytännön vinkkejä sen toteuttamiseen. Tarkempia tietoja COMCOT-hankkeen aikana luodustakehittämismallista löytyy hankkeen aikana työstetystä opaskirjasta (xxxx).

COMCOT-hanke rahoitettiin Interreg IV A Central-Baltic –ohjelman Southern Finland-Estonia alaohjelman kautta. Hankkeessa oli mukana yhteensä 7 partneria Suomesta ja Virosta. Koko hankkeen koordinaattorina toimi Eesti Maaülikool Virosta ja alueellisina partnereina mukana olivat Võrtsjärve Foundation, Setomaa Valdade Liit ja Maidlan kunta. Suomen kansallisena koordinaattorina puolestaan toimi Helsingin yliopisto, Ruralia-instituutti ja kehittämisosiosta vastaavina partnerina Sepra ry (Kymenlaakso) sekä Länsi-Uudenmaan Vesi ja Ympäristö ry (LUVY ry) (Uusimaa).

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APPENDIX 1

COMCOT – EVALUATION OF THE COMCOT PROCESS OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

ACTIVATING LOCAL PEOPLE

- How well did the project reach the key people in the area? (*Why/what should have been done differently?*)
- How well did the project succeeded in activating local people?
  - What kind of methods were used to activate local people (*pilot area coordinators answer*)
  - What were the successful/unsuccessful methods?
  - Why some methods worked better than others?
- What were the main barriers for local engagement in community-based tourism?
- What could have been done differently when activating the local community?
- How well did the community meetings (= all those meetings where people were gathered together to discuss COMCOT issues) succeed in promoting the aims of the project?
  - Were the responsibilities in organizing community meetings clearly divided?
  - What were the main challenges of the community meetings?
  - Was the amount of community meetings enough?
  - Was the timing of the community meetings appropriate?
  - What were the main benefits of the community meetings?
- How well the project succeeded to collect the tourism ideas from local people?
- How well did the project manage to communicate its aims and objectives to the larger community?
  - Did all the important stakeholders have an opportunity to influence the project aims and objectives?
  - How well did the project manage to get the support from all the main stakeholders?
  - What could have been done differently to involve all the main stakeholders into the project?
  - Who had (should have) the main responsibility for engaging the larger community in the project?
  - Was there enough media attention for the project?
  - Who should be responsible for media relations?

DEVELOPMENT OF THE ACTION PLANS

- Was the prioritization process a successful method for collecting tourism ideas?
- What were the main challenges concerning the prioritization process?
- How well the different surveys succeeded to add value to the project? (Why?)
- What kind of expectations did you have concerning the actions plan?
  - How well did these expectations realize?
- How well the action plan reflects the wishes and expectations of the local tourism development?
- Did you a chance to influence the content of the action plan?
- What were the main challenges in the development of the action plan?
- How well local people are familiar with the action plan?

- How well is the action plan utilized in the development of tourism in the area?
- What are the main benefits of the action plan?

VISUALIZATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT IDEAS

- Which tourism development ideas were presented in 3D theatre?
- Were the most promising ideas selected for the 3D?
- How were the ideas development ideas selected to 3D?
- How well 3D visualized the selected tourism development ideas?
- What were the main challenges in relation to 3D?
  - How well the practical organization of 3D succeeded?
- Was the timing of 3D presentation good?
- How did 3D influence the development of tourism development?
- Were the results of 3D utilized in the development selected tourism ideas well enough?
- What kind of expectations did you have concerning the visualization process (3D)?
  - How well did these expectations realize?

TRAINING NEEDS ANALYSIS AND TRAINING

- How well has the project succeeded to enhance the tourism knowledge of the local people?
- How well the training needs survey succeeded to capture the needs of the local people?
- What were the main challenges concerning the training needs analysis?
- What kind of training session did you have in your area?
- Who was the initiator of the training sessions?
- Was there some kind of training theme that should have been considered when organizing the training sessions?
- How well did the training sessions manage to increase the skills of local people?

THE ROLE OF EXTERNAL EXPERTS

- What kind of expectations did you have concerning the role of external experts in COM-COT?
  - How well did these expectations realize?
- How well did the external experts manage to contribute to the local tourism objectives?
- How successful was the interaction between external experts and pilot regions?
- What were the main challenges concerning the role of external experts in the project?
- How innovative methods the external experts used in the project?
  - What would have been better methods?
- What kind of new ideas the external experts provided to the tourism development in your area?
- In general, do you think that it is important to utilize external expertise in community-based tourism development projects?

STARTING THE SELECTED TOURISM ACTIVITIES

- What are the main contributions of the COMCOT project for the tourism development in the area?
- Did the project lead to the development of community-based tourism ideas?
- How was the selection of the developed ideas made?
  - By whom?
- Did the project provide enough human resources to implementation of the ideas?
- What are the main challenges in the implementation of the selected tourism ideas?
- Did the project lead to the sustainable tourism development (the work will continue after the project is finished)?

NETWORKING

- Did the project provide enough opportunities to networking A) between the pilot areas and B) within the project partnership?
  - Did you get new networks during the project? With whom?
- Were the networking opportunities well organized?
- What are the main challenges concerning the networking?
- How has networking contributed to the local tourism development in your area?
- How sustainable you think that the networks are?

AT THE END

- Any suggestions how to make community-based tourism development more effective?
  - What should be added/deleted to the COMCOT way of doing?
- How has the project changed your community (if at all)?