

# Stakeholders Engagement Processes for Co-Creation of Strategic Action Plans for Circular and Human-Centred Cultural Tourism in European Heritage Sites



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**Abstract** Sustainable cultural tourism can be a powerful means to enhance communities' wellbeing increasing economic wealth in currently less known and remote areas, as well as residents' awareness on local culture and cultural heritage, environmental preservation and social cohesion. However, tourism activities can threaten cultural and natural resources, especially in fragile natural & cultural areas. Sustainability-led innovation and creativity could contribute to ensure that tourism activity is conducted within a responsible framework, engaging local operators and stakeholders towards reaching shared objectives. The integration of a circular economy oriented approach in cultural tourism strategies can be beneficial to allow sustainable tourism activities which avoid depletion of natural resources, excessive greenhouse gas emissions, over-consumption of cultural resources. Local communities represent the owners and custodians of important natural and cultural resources, thus their active role in cultural tourism strategies development is fundamental to ensure their conservation, regeneration and valorisation over time. Engaging stakeholder groups already at the initial stage of designing changes, can contribute to the development of strategies aiming at implementation of community-based circular and human-centred actions in various areas. The paper describes the co-creation process conducted with various types of stakeholders in six European regions within the Horizon 2020 Be.CULTOUR project. Special attention was given to the process of activating local communities and making them co-create and co-initiative innovative solutions.

**Keywords** Circular tourism · Cultural tourism · Co-creation · Stakeholders engagement · Innovation · Sustainable cultural tourism · Human-centered approach · Action plans

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## 1 Introduction

Cultural tourism represents a particular tourism sector focused on the appreciation and valorisation of cultural resources, including cultural heritage in both tangible and intangible expressions. As a sub-sector of the whole tourism industry, cultural tourism can generate positive or negative impacts in cities and regions, depending on the way in which it is managed by destination managers and tourism operators, but also on visitors and residents behaviour. Sustainable cultural tourism should avoid the negative impacts of tourism activity, such as overconsumption of environmental and cultural resources, over-crowding, seasonality, commodification of cultural heritage, loss of authenticity and integrity of heritage sites, unfair distribution of economic benefits and other impacts. Particularly, cultural and natural resources should be conserved and maintained, ensuring that these resources are kept available for residents and visitors, as well as for future generations. Diverse research papers, international documents and initiatives underline the importance of sustainability in the tourism industry, which is one of the most relevant sources of jobs especially in European countries, rich in historic and cultural sites (European Union, 2022). However, the Covid-19 pandemic threatened the entire tourism sector due to travel bans and health issues, exposing the fragility of tourism worldwide. Moreover, the environmental crisis highlighted by recent research (Gupta et al., 2019; IPCC Climate Change, 2014; IPCC Global Warming, 2018; IPCC Special Report, 2019; UNEP, 2011; Watts et al., 2018) requires renewed attention towards the depletion of natural resources such as energy, land, water, materials, as well as climate altering emissions, biodiversity preservation and an overall better balance between human activity in all sectors and the need of regenerating natural resources (Fusco Girard & Nocca, 2020). To achieve a long-term sustainability without reducing the level of wealth for all people, many studies, policies and initiatives highlight the urgency to transition from a “linear” production and consumption model based on “take-make-dispose”, in all sectors, towards a “circular” development model (Angrisano et al., 2016; Ellen MacArthur, 2013, 2014, 2015a, b; The European Parliament New Circular Economy Action Plan, 2021; European Commission, 2019, 2021a, b) in which no wastes are generated, thanks to processes of reduction of natural resources consumption, recycling of materials and wastes, recovering, reusing, refurbishing. The ‘circular economy’ raised in the last decade from a niche sector of studies and experimentation to a potential solution to global issues, adopted by governments and private organisations worldwide, and fostered in public policies to accelerate the adoption of a more sustainable production and consumption model at the societal level. The circular economy has been recently explored in the tourism sector to reduce the environmental impact of tourism activity, from sustainable mobility to eco-hotels, ‘slow’ tourism models, renewable energy generation on site, water recovery systems, etc., evoking a ‘circular tourism economy’ (Bosone & Nocca, 2022; Nocca et al., 1845; Gravagnuolo & Varotto, 2021; Fusco Girard & Gravagnuolo, 2017; Patti & Messina, 2019; Manniche et al. 2017; Hanza, 2018; Sorin & Einarsson, 2020; Naydenov, 2018; Fusco Girard et al. 2019). Moreover, the circular economy can be relevant for cultural

heritage reuse and regeneration (see CLIC project—Circular models Leveraging Investments in Cultural heritage adaptive reuse, 2017) fostering the reuse of abandoned and underused heritage buildings and sites, and introducing circularity principles in construction and conservation interventions. The research studies and practice experiences of circular economy implementation in tourism and cultural heritage sectors led to the development of a new framework for circular cultural tourism which was implemented in the Horizon 2020 project Be.CULTOUR (Horizon, 2020 project, 2020), aiming at exploring and experimenting innovative ways through which the circular economy can contribute to the sustainability of cultural tourism destinations, contributing also to better balance between overcrowded and less known cultural destinations. However, a circular tourism economy, grounded on ecological economics, should also contribute to communities and people wellbeing adopting a human-centred approach where people and nature thrive in higher synergy.

This contribution aims to explore how less known and remote areas can become innovative circular and human-centred cultural tourism destinations, enhancing cultural and natural resources and engaging local communities in the transition towards a more sustainable and circular tourism organisation. Six pilot heritage sites in Europe (Aragon in Spain, Basilicata in Italy, Larnaca in Cyprus, Västra Götaland in Sweden, Vojvodina in Serbia, cross-border region Romania-Moldova) engaged actively to stimulate a collective reflection at local level on the objectives of a circular cultural tourism and the related actions to be implemented in specific heritage sites through a collaborative effort with local tourism operators, public bodies, cultural and creative industries, agricultural activities, research and innovation actors, as well as active citizens to co-design and co-implement a new sustainable and circular model of tourism in European cultural destinations.

## **2 Methodology: Stakeholders' Engagement to Co-Design Innovative Circular and Human-Centred Cultural Tourism Destinations**

Human-centred design in the innovation processes continually gains attention of the researchers and practitioners (Bosone et al., 2019; Fusco Girard, 2019; Giacomini, 2014a; Krippendorff, 2004; Munhoz et al., 2020). In relation to sustainability, a human-centred approach is crucial to ensure social relevance of the transformative ambitions and build an affirmative foundation for change that is not only implemented but first of all co-created by people themselves (European Commission, 2020a, b). The six pilot heritage sites of Be.CULTOUR project started a co-design journey to stimulate a collective reflection on the meanings and objectives of a circular and human-centred cultural tourism and how this model could support the sustainable development of less known and remote cultural heritage destinations. Strategic co-design experimentation was implemented in the pilot areas to set the what, why, and

how of circular and human-centred cultural tourism in the remote areas participating in the project.

The aim of the strategic co-design experimentation was to show the process of awakening creativity and empowering the ecosystems of local stakeholders, called to reflect on the relevance of cultural tourism as an opportunity for sustainable development of remote areas and to actively shape the path of their strategic development as circular cultural tourism destinations. The overall methodology adopted was grounded on solid research and experimentation previously conducted within other European heritage sites, and particularly within previous Horizon 2020 projects in which action plans or similar strategic documents for cultural heritage conservation in relation to environmental challenges were developed. This included other Horizon 2020 projects such as CLIC (CLIC Project, 2021), Open Heritage project (Open Heritage Project Organizing, 2019), ILUCIDARE project (ILUCIDARE, 2020), ROCK project ()).

The co-creation process was organized in three main steps, including: problem exploration, problem definition, problem solving (see Fig. 1). In all phases, a human-centred approach was adopted, focusing on stakeholders' and communities' needs and people wellbeing and health as a priority, strictly linked to ecosystems regeneration, as a key objective of every strategic design and policy in line with the circular economy approach.

The first phase of problem exploration was dedicated to the identification of specific challenges for circular cultural tourism in the target areas, identifying strengths and weaknesses in terms of cultural heritage valorisation, infrastructure development, accessibility, services and facilities, policies, investments and incentives beyond the tourism sector and including cultural and creative industry, agricultural activities in rural landscapes, circular economy sector, technological and social

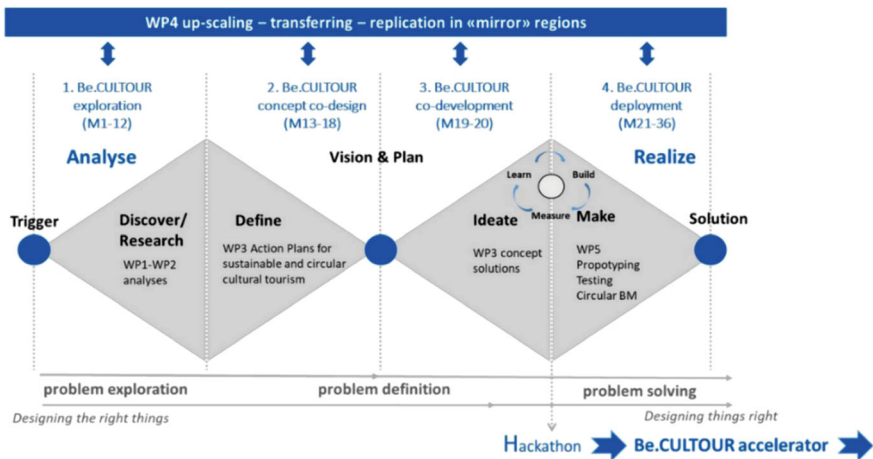


Fig. 1 Co-creation methodological framework in Be.CULTOUR. Source Gravagnuolo et al. (2021a, b)

innovation. After conducting an initial mapping of stakeholders, from the first phase onwards the project made efforts to balance different interests among the identified stakeholders. The second phase of problem definition focused on the co-design of possible solutions to overcome barriers and achieve specific objectives related to local challenges. In this phase, strategic Action Plans were co-created with local stakeholders in each pilot area, defining the targets to be reached and the monitoring framework. This strategic thinking and co-design exercise was particularly relevant as stakeholders were supported to strengthen their collaboration capacity through a series of facilitated co-design workshops during which diverse aspects of circular and human-centred cultural tourism were debated, analysed and synthesized into clear objectives and actions to be undertaken in the pilot sites. This was achieved through facilitated dialogue, consensus building, collaborative decision-making, adaptive management and transparent communication. The workshop organisers were provided toolboxes supporting facilitation. All exercises in the toolboxes were designed to overcome power imbalance as well as overcoming the challenge of limited resources in remote and smaller regions. Finally, the third phase of problem solving included diverse activities towards the implementation of the actions defined in the action plans, ranging from co-development of innovative solutions through hackathon and business acceleration process, as well as the implementation of collaborative actions by local organisations leading the action plan co-design process. This phase was important to start-up the action plans and test the feasibility of the proposed solutions, through a continuous monitoring, co-evaluation and feedback loop in the territories, which is fundamental to progress for turning 'usual' behavioural patterns into different actions that are able to contribute to intentionally reach the targets and objectives.

## ***2.1 The Human-Centred Approach in the Be.CULTOUR Strategic Co-Design Experimentation***

The human-centred approach provided a basis for new solutions towards circular cultural tourism in the Be.CULTOUR project (Bosone et al., 2019; Fusco Girard, 2019; Giacomini, 2014a; Krippendorff, 2004; Munhoz et al., 2020). It highlighted several aspects resulting from the empowerment of the people involved in the co-creation process (European Commission, 2020a, b). Local communities were considered to be experts in understanding of their place and potential and thus genuine cultural tourism attractiveness (in relation to opportunities as well as risks). People, organisations, individuals and communities, were involved in the design process in all pilot sites as holders of knowledge and awareness of the uniqueness of the area (Bosone et al., 2019; Gravagnuolo et al., 2021). At the same time, however, communities living in a given space need to see their surroundings with new eyes to restore local 'pride' and re-discover hidden 'treasures'. In working with various groups facing similar challenges, numerous approaches based on cooperation and analysis of

problems from the perspective of people experiencing them were applied. Examples include Action Research, Participatory Action Research, community-based participatory research. References were made to these methods during particular exercises (e.g. serious game, stakeholder mapping, iteration in various workshop co-design modules), however the general approach in the co-creation was more creativity and innovation oriented. This enabled the communities to think about cultural heritage as a means of re-establishing local identity, to consider themselves at the same time as service providers, beneficiaries and visitors in the region who are taking advantage of what it has to offer and are also shaping this offer by understanding how to meet the needs of people coming from other areas. The famous sentence *Belief in your creative capacity lies at the heart of innovation* by David Kelley (IDEO) served as inspiration for developing this concept of work on the ground, facilitated by the local coordinators with the support of mentors and experts. In this way, as highlighted in the literature on human-centred approach, reference was made to the users and simultaneously to the principles of design for all (Clarkson & Coleman, 2010), human-centred city (European Commission, 2020a, b). Objectives of using this methodology and also adapting elements of other approaches in particular exercises delivered during workshops (e.g. customer journey mapping, scenario development, role-playing) were fostering innovation, deepening awareness of the challenges resulting from the environmental crisis and developing unique answers that can be applied locally and also replicated in other less-known cultural tourism destinations.

With the strong focus on human-centred approach in six Pilot Heritage Sites, while developing the framework for the process involving real communities with their values, needs, working conditions and organisational culture, it was necessary to know the advantages and disadvantages of the methods and tools themselves (Brandsen et al., 2018; Watts et al., 2018). The questions connected to the empathy and ethics included the issues of how to centre attention on humans while solving environmental problems caused by humans, how to ideate rapidly giving the diverse participants with various skills and abilities the opportunity to contribute, how to deal with the authorship of ideas in open innovation, how to use the unique creativity of the participants of the process and taking a responsibility once the tasks foreseen in the project are completed. The solution to these problems was to develop a Community of Practice stimulating mutual trust and collaboration. This applied to both the relationships within the international community of practice generated by the Be.CULTOUR network and within the local stakeholder ecosystems. This whole process of *supporting the development* of the Action Plans can be intended as a meta-reflection of the process of the *development* of the Action Plans—iterative, enabling feedback loops, inclusive and affirmative. On the basis of interviews, documentation, discussion, bilateral talks and community meetings, problems were identified and specific solutions were sought.

### **3 Towards a Replicable Model for Co-Design of Circular and Human-Centred Cultural Tourism Destinations**

The aim of the strategic co-design exercise was to develop first concept ideas of innovative solutions for circular cultural tourism in the target areas. According to the human-centred approach, this phase was collaborative, inclusive, and iterative to ensure equal participation of diverse stakeholders. Local communities were working together to ideate concepts responding to the identified needs and reflecting to identify sustainable, circular solutions. The co-design process was developed in several sub-tasks:

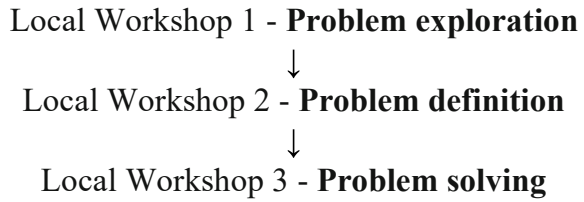
1. Building ‘Heritage Innovation Networks’ in Pilot Heritage Sites and mapping stakeholders
2. Organise Local Workshops (three in each Pilot Heritage Site)
3. Define the initial collaboration Pact (“Local Pact”)
4. Identify specific Innovation Areas of circular cultural tourism, as well as transversal innovation approaches and emerging trends, which are relevant for the pilot heritage site
5. Identify actions linked to potential innovative solutions in line with the Innovation Areas defined
6. Adopt the Action Plan and monitor progress

At the local level, the following Be.CULTOUR Innovation areas were taken into consideration while defining actions, sub-actions and innovative solutions: Rural co-living, Sensorial Heritage Experience, Contemporary Meanings of Heritage, Spiritual Travel Experience, Nature as Heritage, Industrial Heritage Experience, along with the following transversal innovation approaches: Circular tourism, Cultural Europeanisation, Human-centred, fair and responsible tourism, smart destination management.

#### ***3.1 Strategic Action Plans Co-Creation Methods***

Collaborative innovation has been defined as the pursuit of innovations through the sharing of ideas, knowledge, expertise and opportunities (Ketchen et al., 2007). It can encompass a broad spectrum of external parties (e.g. customers, suppliers, competitors, universities and research institutes) and cover a range of collaboration forms and approaches (Chesbrough, 2003), including alliances, partnerships, networks and cooperative agreements (Feranita et al., 2017). Research and practice stress the relationship between collaboration in tourism innovation and the implementation of sustainable tourism. In this context, collaborative innovation through co-creation and co-design of sustainable products, services and experiences is key for capturing needs of residents and visitors (Font & Lynes, 2018) and ensure ongoing engagement and interest. A review of research highlights the importance of collaborative

**Fig. 2** Workshops methodological scheme



innovation as a driver of (Marasco et al., 2018): superior performance (e.g. profitability) and innovativeness of tourism firms; new service market outcomes, new service development speed, quality of new services; democratized citizenship and creative practices for the innovation of urban tourism concepts/services; destination competitiveness through new or improved services and smart innovations; knowledge sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge among different stakeholders in networks; spin-offs and spill-overs.

In addition to the multi-stakeholder approach, the place-based dimension of collaborative innovation is crucial. Innovation takes place in a precise location, which suggests that the physical proximity of innovation players matters (Cohan, 2018; Misuraca et al., 2017). The strategic Action Plans were developed by the six communities primarily during the local workshops. The workshops provided a framework for the whole communities to meet and work together, while other activities (like community meetings and bilateral calls) included research partners and local coordinators. The entire process was conducted for one year including the preparatory phases, and the 18 workshops in total were delivered from November 2021 to June 2022. As shown in Fig. 2, the logic of the process followed three steps: problem exploration (workshop 1), problem definition (workshop 2), problem solving (workshop 3).

The Action Plans are therefore based on three pillars—diagnosis (of the local potentials, needs and challenges), mission (agreeing as an ecosystem of stakeholders—Heritage Innovation Network—on the path towards circular cultural tourism), and vision (concrete steps that will be implemented within indicated time frame). Additionally, the Action Plans:

- Contribute to the development strategies of pilot heritage sites and local governments
- Map the circular economy concept in the unique context of the local heritage and in connection to circular cultural tourism and beyond
- Refer to cultural Europeanisation, highlighting the European value of heritage in the pilot areas
- Valorise or re-valorise concrete intangible and tangible cultural heritage assets
- Use principles of human-centred approach (applied to both communities and visitors, all understood as beneficiaries of the revitalisation of the territory)
- Focus on Be.CULTOUR innovation areas
- Cover short-term and long-term perspectives going beyond the implementation of the project

- Be feasible in a given region and possible to be implemented by the local authorities or external stakeholders.

The process of Action Plans development was rooted in the preliminary work conducted to identify challenges and potentials of the heritage sites and overall cultural destinations, based on interviews to stakeholders, surveys to visitors and residents, statistical and territorial data collection and interpretation. This continuity was crucial in guaranteeing the relevance and importance of the Be.CULTOUR Action Plans in synergy with existing strategies and resources at territorial level, starting from building the knowledge framework and local context conditions. In this way it was also possible to identify stakeholders with various level of interest and influence on the project and approach them all, despite the power relations. Based on the identified gaps and potential, Action Plans contribute in innovative ways to existing plans and strategies and put the local communities at the centre of positive change.

In reference to the human-centred approach methodology, the workshop preparation process was based on the use of visual elements in co-creation exercises and processes (McKim, 1980; Norman, 2002). On the one hand, this meant using images in the materials. On the other hand, the goal was to encourage participants to form ideas in drawings, schemes, posters. In selected exercises local maps, newspapers, postcards and photos were used enabling visual storytelling fostering the co-creation process. Visual materials also served to widely disseminate the project approach and results (see Fig. 3). Within the Action Plans preparation process, the six pilot heritage sites were invited to interact on a collaborative digital board and reflect on the visual metaphor that best shows their experience in aligning bottom-up community plans with municipal, regional and national strategies. The exercise was inspired by the book *Images of Organization* by Alexander and Morgan (Alexander & Morgan, 1988) and concerned four selected metaphors (brain, machine, organism, instrument of domination) that illustrate complex relationships in a simple way. The aim was to provoke self-reflection of the participants and possible search for better ways of cooperation and communication between the various levels in the further work on Action Plans.

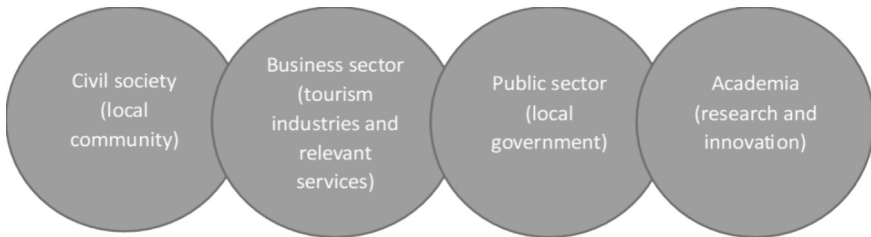
### ***3.2 Results of the Six Strategic Action Plans in the European Pilot Heritage Sites***

The core of the co-creation processes in human-centred approach during the Be.CULTOUR workshops was the empowerment of the communities involved in creating actions, based on the capacities and needs of representatives of various groups. Participants of workshops at the community level had the opportunity to address the development of circular and sustainable cultural tourism in the field of heritage via innovative activities, currently in the process of being implemented (2022–2023). In these community driven, bottom-up strategic visions, sustainability and circularity were “mediated” in two ways. First through culture as a means of



**Fig. 3** Visual co-creation in Pilot Heritage Sites. Copyrights: Be.CULTOUR project, pictures by local coordinators taken during the local workshops from left to right: Romania-Moldova, Vojvodina, Aragon)

regional development, embedded in the local history potential that can be economically and socially beneficial for the community and offering visitors a unique experience. Second, through capitalization of cultural tourism as a potentially sustainable business activity. In all six Pilot Heritage Sites, 148 actions in total were designed and proposed by the stakeholders (Aragon—6, Basilicata—19, Larnaca—13, Romania/Moldova—8, Västra Götaland—48, Vojvodina—54). As mentioned in the Action Plan from Basilicata pilot site, the human-centred approach was “*focusing on the relationship between people and with places, aiming at re-discovering and enhancing the “Genius loci” of the sites, from forests and astonishing lakes to cities and towns inhabited since ancient times*” (Ćwikła et al., 2022) (p. 283). This ambition, which additionally refers to the life-centred approach as well as to the departure from the conventional thought of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2017), is also reflected in other Action Plans (e.g., Aragon and Västra Götaland). In all six Pilot Heritage Sites, it was thus crucial to recognize the entanglement between cultural and natural heritage, temporary visitors and permanent residents (vulnerable social groups representatives) around identified assets and within the system of stakeholders (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4** Stakeholders’ categories involved in the co-creation process of the Action Plans

The issue of inclusion was not understood purely as “participation.” The aim was to tailor the actions to specific needs of different people. As a result of defining the path towards circular tourism, the benefits are to be felt both by the local communities and the visitors (e.g. in Romania/Moldova the “Stephen the Great VR route” action). In addition, the communities designing actions highlighted the importance of specific groups, including: education (in Romania/Moldova and in Basilicata), youth and ageing population (in Aragon and in Västra Götaland), women (travelling alone or gaining new opportunities to run their own business, taking over leadership roles which is considered not sufficient in Vojvodina and in Aragon), and diverse communities (in Vojvodina specific actions have been proposed to reflect on the inclusion and social cohesion).

Accessibility has been reflected in various ways in the actions in terms of marking the interesting spots in a simple yet communicative way, offering translation in several languages, including people with disabilities, creating friendly offers for families, minorities, diverse genders. Inclusion is rooted in European identity and history, from great ethnical variety (Vojvodina), through traces from the history (Jewish and Mudejar heritage in Aragon) to relative social homogeneity in a country with high percentage of foreign-born population (Västra Götaland). Each Pilot Heritage Site has a unique connection with European culture and contributes to its diverse identity (e.g. the legacy of Emperor Federico II in Basilicata and Stephen the Great in Romania/Moldova). In addition, the shift from linear to circular tourism was considered a financial opportunity to save resources and develop new businesses models enhancing economic opportunities for individuals and communities. The actions proposed in the six Pilot Heritage Sites reflected the Be.CULTOUR Innovation Areas and interpret the emerging trends identified in the project concept are based on unexceptional, engaging storytelling, authentic yet unusual understanding of heritage, and seek for place-based and people-based solutions. Those context-specific reflections on circular tourism aim at turning visitors into temporary residents and residents into temporary visitors. The stories told to explain ambitions towards circular tourism and beyond should bring benefits to communities, tourists, industries and businesses, and the environment.

One clear conclusion from the process across the pilots is that the co-design is key to unlocking innovation for circular tourism. Its success and influence, particularly regarding novelty for the tourism sector, lies therein with its governance structure allowing co-decisions and co-implementation. For further consideration in replication and upscaling efforts following trends highlighted by the Be.CULTOUR community of practice it could be inspirational to reflect upon the following aspects:

- *Highlighting nature in areas with unique cultural heritage*—Pilot Heritage Areas recognized as
- assets not only the intangible and tangible cultural heritage, but also the surrounding nature (e.g., the “Innovative Ecosystem Centre” in Aragon; the “Monticchio lakes paths and natural heritage valorisation in Rionero and surroundings” in Basilicata; “The Bison’s Land Heritage” in Romania/Moldova; in Vojvodina the “Monastery product development”).

- *Sensorial and experiential stays*—(e.g., in Basilicata “Astrotourism projects linked with ancient heritage sites and remains; in Västra Götaland “new winter experiences, skiing, skating, ice fishing”; Vojvodina’s. “Development of human-centred, total wellness tourism”; in Larnaca, spiritual journeys).
- *Digital environment*—The presence of digital tools, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, can be seen as opportunities and in the case of the Be.CULTOUR Pilot Heritage Sites this assumption contributes to fairly novel approaches. For example, the historic, religious assets in Vojvodina will be linked with sustainable tourism via digital presence. This idea combines two worlds: the virtual one as space for promotion of tourist destinations and the physical one as terrain for local entrepreneurs taking financial advantage of novel approaches to cultural heritage. In Larnaca the on-line tools have practical function facilitating the organisational processes while in Vojvodina herbs are to be used not only in culinary products but also be part of digital archive documenting the heritage of the region.
- *Hubs and labs for innovation, business, and entrepreneurship*—As stated in the document from Basilicata “*The strategic Action Plan of Vulture—Alto Bradano for circular cultural tourism aims at re-interpreting in innovative ways the rich tangible, intangible and natural heritage of this unique area of Basilicata to make it a driver of new attractiveness and wellbeing for residents and visitors*” (Ćwikła et al., 2022) (p. 284). In Västra Götaland the actions on “Attracting new inhabitants by interpretation campaign” and in Vojvodina “Business Hub Establishment in Sremski Karlovci” should create new opportunities for entrepreneurs and businesswomen (and businessmen). In Larnaca a living lab will be created as an open, innovative ecosystem enabling further innovations in the areas and their implementation based on public–private–people partnership.

The key commonalities that have emerged from the Action Plans can be summarised.

by the following observations: reducing environmental impact, taking care for both residents and the visitors, striving for balance in exploitation of the assets and their protection, establishing new opportunities for just transition and resilient entrepreneurial models based on cultural and natural heritage in circular and human-centred cultural tourism. All Action Plans put people at the centre of actions, keeping in mind the crucial relation with nature, balance in developing innovative solutions and the boundaries needed to be respected. At the same time, all actions are embedded in the local circumstances which influence their uniqueness in cultural, economic and social aspects. Thus, some actions are more natural heritage oriented (Aragon), some are rooted in the historical stories (Basilicata), other in focusing on the needs of the residents (Västra Götaland), several are based on comprehensive strategies of development (Vojvodina), other aim at defining new goals and opportunities for the communities resulting from shift towards circular tourism (Larnaca) and some are using archetypal figures from the past in shaping the newest European history attractive for visitors (Romania/Moldova). Furthermore, all Action Plans are contributing to the existing ambitions aiming at sustainable development in the given regions (Table 1).

**Table 1** Overview of chosen strategic documents Action Plans are contributing to. *Source* Ćwikła et al. (2022, p. 56)

Pilot heritage site region	Strategic document	Level
Aragon	Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2030	Regional
Basilicata	Touristic Promotion Plan (2021–2024)	Regional
Larnaca	Cyprus Action Plan for the transition to a circular economy 2021–2027,	National
Romania/ Moldova	National Sustainable Development Strategy SDD2030 (Romania), various regulations of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Environment (Moldova)	National
Västra Götaland	Regional Development Strategy 2021–2030, Västra Götalands Smart Specialization Strategy (3S), Regional Cultural Strategy 2020–2023	Regional
Vojvodina	National and Provincial Policies and Legislation, EU Framework for Sustainable and Cultural Tourism	Various

### 3.3 Key Achievements and Future Outlook in Six Pilot Heritage Sites

The project focused on stakeholder engagement and the integration of circular economy principles to create a more inclusive, resilient, environmentally friendly as well as innovative and inspiring cultural tourism models. Key achievements can be summarized in the following way. The project successfully engaged various stakeholders, including local communities, tourism businesses, government agencies, cultural and research organizations. Regular consultations, workshops, and webinar were organized both at the project level and at the local coordinator level to ensure active participation and collaboration during co-creation and co-implementation phases. Stakeholders were involved in decision-making processes, allowing them to contribute their local knowledge, cultural heritage, and concerns. This participatory approach fostered a sense of ownership of the co-created Action Plans and cooperation among stakeholders.

The resulting Action Plans promoted the adoption of circular economy principles within the cultural tourism strategies of remote European destinations. This involved reducing waste, optimizing natural resources use, enhancing skills and capacities between tourism operators and stakeholders, adopting green and slow mobility systems in the areas, and encouraging sustainable practices. Local businesses were stimulated to co-implement specific measures such as waste recycling, energy-efficient infrastructure, and sustainable sourcing of goods and services. This happened while rethinking the potential of the cultural and natural heritage assets.

Last, but not least, Action Plans particularly focused on preserving and enhancing the less-known cultural and natural heritage of these remote European destinations. Cultural heritage recovery, regeneration and valorisation involved mapping cultural

and natural assets, identifying intangible cultural practices, and developing sustainable tourism and place-branding strategies that aim to respect local traditions and values, avoiding commodification processes of local cultural heritage, often at the risk of disappearing due to abandonment and neglect. Plans for allowing cultural visitors to discover local heritage were developed, including use of digital infrastructure to actively engage with local communities, learn about their traditions, and contribute to their preservation.

Compared to initial context situations, it could be observed as an increase in knowledge and awareness of stakeholders on circular economy, networking and collaboration benefits, innovation and strategic planning. New EU funded projects and local initiatives were starting, such as the Single Market Programme “TRACE” (SMEs transition towards a European circular tourism ecosystem) running in 4 out of 6 pilot heritage sites, engaging tourism operators and stakeholders in transitioning to circular economy updating and enhancing their skills and business model and accessing environmental certifications. Moreover, a series of cultural initiatives and festivals were launched under the Action Plans implementation, and new financial resources were attracted to territories for developing bike-sharing projects and bike routes, digital supporting tools for enhanced visit to cultural and natural sites, as well as intangible heritage recognition and valorisation.

Clearly, the launch of several initiatives does not ensure that all objectives and results will be reached, however it can be foreseen that the enhanced capacity and knowledge of stakeholders in the target areas will be key for monitoring, adjusting and implementing sustainability and circularity actions in the longer term, beyond the EU funded project timespan.

The next session discusses the strengths and barriers encountered during the co-creation process in the pilot heritage sites of Be.CULTOUR project, proposing conclusive reflections on next research needs towards a more circular and sustainable cultural tourism.

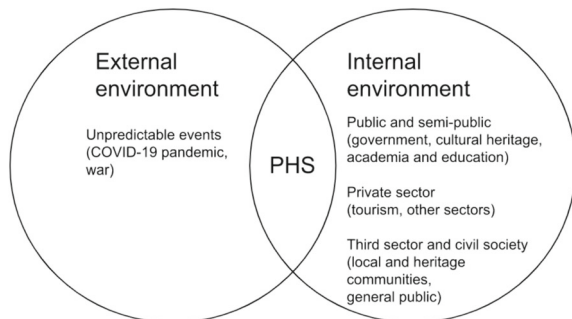
## **4 Discussion and Conclusions**

The outcomes of Action Plans can be used as a blueprint for similar initiatives in other remote European destinations. During the Be.CULTOUR project, replication and peer-learning was discussed with 16 additional cultural tourism ecosystems and 3 experienced advisor organisations (CreaTour network, Historic Environment Scotland, Future for Religious Heritage) to co-learn and exchange ideas and reflections. Further collaboration with tourism authorities and organizations at the regional, national, and international levels was fostered to facilitate the scaling up and replication of the project’s achievements and thus ensure longer term sustainability. Understanding the needs of the stakeholders and embracing emerging technologies and innovative solutions will be crucial for developing circular cultural tourism in remote European destinations.

Continuous education and awareness campaigns targeting both tourists and locals will play a vital role in promoting sustainable tourism practices. In Be.CULTOUR, this is part of the place-branding strategies tailored at the local level and developed with the stakeholders. First ideas of tangible-intangible products and services rooted in natural-cultural heritage are not only results of human-centred approach as business strategy (Giacomin, 2014b) but can also go beyond human-centred approach as creative strategies highlighting phenomena in the living systems (Jones, 2022) that are to be considered part of the circular cultural tourism. The holistic approach to these major challenges requires not only what can be provided within a framework of a project, based on proven methodologies, but needs to trigger actions fuelled by the cultural values, artefacts and assumptions the heritage is manifestation of. The already mentioned local knowledge needs further place-based and people-based sources of information. Thus, in relation to the research literature, the experience of the six Be.CULTOUR pilot heritage sites could be seen as an example of generating situated knowledge. Highlighting the better understanding of the local heritage with intuition and generational expertise in dealing with uncertainty from this point of view could be an added value of the project, arguing the limits of dualistic approach in perceiving and tackling climate change with innovative circular solutions in cultural tourism and beyond.

Throughout the period of work on Action Plans co-creation (Autumn 2021 to Summer 2022), research actors, local leaders and stakeholders were involved in the process, defining and implementing the methodology and tools to support the collaborative work. During the process, the project encountered various barriers and obstacles (natural in collaborative efforts) that were collectively addressed, taking into account the external and internal environments of the organizations and groups involved in the co-creation process. The external environment refers to the broader perspective encompassing organizations, individuals, and factors that influence stakeholder networks' functioning both during the project and beyond. On the other hand, the internal environment pertains to the relationships among stakeholders directly engaged in the Action Plans, including interactions during individual meetings and all three workshops (Fig. 5).

**Fig. 5** Stakeholders' categories involved in the co-creation process of the Action Plans



External environment had an influence on the process, from the covid-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine, at the border of Romania-Moldova pilot heritage site. The uncertainty is often discussed at the local levels with the authorities and for example tour operators or other professionals from the tourism industry.

Despite the Action Plans implementation is currently not concluded, some considerations on the methodology and results can be made.

First, it should be noted that stakeholder engagement requires time, resources, and expertise. However, stakeholders, particularly local communities and small businesses, may have limited resources and capacities to actively participate in the co-creation process. This issue entails the local innovation ecosystem, which should be progressively enhanced at the European level shifting the focus from big innovative cities to small urban areas and remote, rural contexts. Between the pilot areas, diverse levels of engagement and advancements could be observed in Be.CULTOUR project. The relationship between the local innovation ecosystem, the capacity of collaboration and level of trust, and the results obtained will be objects of further exploration to identify the main drivers and barriers of co-creation processes for circular cultural tourism in remote and rural areas. So far, peer-learning and exchange of best practices was observed to be very beneficial to enhance the level of knowledge of stakeholders and small businesses who could have difficulties in becoming more innovative and entrepreneurial.

Another issue could be related to the lack of continuity in the long term. Sustaining the participants' initial level of engagement proved challenging due to the extended co-working period spanning several months. However, the workshops were designed to be inclusive, allowing for new participants to join and contribute. Additionally, in some areas multiple projects can be ongoing involving local stakeholders. Thus, participants often have to allocate resources to other activities. Private enterprises and start-ups faced greater difficulties in this regard compared to public organizations. To accommodate the needs of this group, the workshop dates, times, and formats were adjusted accordingly, with some exercises conducted online and others in person. The local coordinators and facilitators made continuous efforts to maintain participants' involvement, overcome biases, and foster an inclusive environment. For instance, additional webinars and consultations were organized to demonstrate the project's ability to adapt and respond to changing circumstances and requirements.

An important issue during the co-creation process concerned reaching not only the 'usual suspects' but also other stakeholders. For this purpose, a stakeholder ecosystem mapping was carried out, repeated and deepened during the workshops, opening the invitation to smaller businesses, minority cultures and diverse social groups, both individuals or representatives of diverse organisations. The resulting Action Plans show a mix of small-scale actions conducted by informal groups and more infrastructural investments fostered by the authorities. The needed synergies to carry out the actions at all levels are continuously monitored and object of discussion with the local coordinators, adjusting and integrating the efforts during all phases of implementation taking into account the needs of diverse community groups. At the end of the co-creation process, participants could commit to a 'Local Pact' as an expression of interest in further collaboration.

The utilization of co-creation processes in developing strategic Action Plans can serve as valuable tools to initiate a reflection based on values in cultural tourism destinations. These processes aim to identify the objectives (what) and the underlying motivations (why) for achieving them. The initial reflection phase was considered essential and emerged as the most crucial step prior to devising actions and solutions. It played a significant role in fostering shared values among stakeholders and establishing a consensus on the desired future development of the cultural tourism destination. Community engagement and participatory decision-making can enhance opportunities for collaboration, however it should be also taken into account that the diverse stakeholders involved may have diverse interests, priorities, and perspectives. Balancing these interests and finding common ground can be challenging. For example, local communities may prioritize cultural preservation, while tourism businesses may focus on economic growth. However, apparently conflicting interests could be put in synergy through creative solutions. Instead of adopting “business as usual”, creativity and innovation was fostered in all pilot heritage sites to combine heritage conservation, communities’ needs and economic opportunities. Moreover, exercises such as ‘future newspaper’ and other visualisation techniques proved to be a valid support to enhance stakeholders’ capacity to identify common objectives and pursue them over time, sharing similar visions. Clearly, stakeholders’ engagement could be not enough to ensure that co-created action plans are implemented in the long term. Institutional commitment at the local and regional level could greatly contribute to stimulate mutual trust and cooperation, stimulating further investments in terms of human resources, capacity building, and financial support.

Also, lack of knowledge and understanding of circular economy, sustainable cultural tourism, cultural heritage regeneration, collaboration and innovation, could hinder not only the implementation, but also the effectiveness of the co-creation processes. Thus, initial knowledge sharing activities involving researchers, public officers, innovators and diverse community groups would be largely beneficial to enhance local capacity (human capital) and increase the likelihood of effective and feasible action plans preparation, enhancing their implementation over the longer term.

Finally, availability of reliable data and data management and interpretation capacity at the local level can be key to support action plans choices, monitoring and review processes, adjusting targets, resources and timing based on evidence of the impacts and effectiveness of diverse actions, projects and initiatives. In remote areas, data management can be particularly challenging, as less data are available compared to large cities or well-known tourism destinations. However, a focused effort in retrieving and analysing data should be foreseen to allow better management and understanding of ongoing processes.

The experience of Be.CULTOUR pilot heritage sites in co-creating strategic action plans for circular and human-centred cultural tourism can be a relevant background for other less known and remote destinations to co-develop collaborative strategies for cultural tourism innovation, enhancing cultural heritage regeneration, people wellbeing, and generating long-lasting local economic wealth grounded on a circular ecological economy model to benefit people and nature at the same time.

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