

## SUSTAINABILITY IN TOURISM: AN ORIGINALITY AND HOSPITALITY BUSINESS IN ITALY

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*The aim of the paper is to verify if the organizational model of the albergo diffuso satisfies the requirements of sustainability when offered to tourists who are increasingly interested in the history and culture of a territory. The qualitative research method adopted uses a case study approach based on two case studies of alberghi diffusi (Yin, 2009). These are analysed by focusing on the business and organizational model of the albergo diffuso. The albergo diffuso is a more valid and sustainable hospitality business alternative to traditional Italian hotels. It is not just a different kind of hotel with historical, cultural and artistic associations but a project to promote the history and culture of an area which can have a major impact on competitiveness, economic growth, and local social and environmental development. In future research, the study will focus on a wider sample analysis, with a qualitative examination in different geographical areas.*

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**Keywords:** *Entrepreneurship, sustainability, destination management and governance, competitive advantage*



## INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades, tourism has played a strategic role in economic growth. In 2014, the contribution of tourism to the Italian economy was 160 billion euro, equivalent to 10.3% of GDP. In the European economy, tourism amounted to 8.7 % of the total, with more than an 8.5% increase in jobs; globally, tourism has resulted in an increase of GDP of 9.5 % and an 8,9% increase in jobs (ONT, 2015). The importance of tourism is not only economic, but also cultural, social and educational; the tourist industry has been growing at an impressive rate since the second half of the twentieth century. The flow of international arrivals were more than 1,184 million in 2015. Some 50 million more tourists (overnight visitors) travelled to international destinations around the world last year as compared to 2014 (UNWTO, 2015). In Europe, international arrivals reached 609 million, 29 million more than in 2014. Central and Eastern Europe (+6%) bounced back from last year's decrease in arrivals. Northern Europe (+6%), southern Mediterranean Europe (+5%) and Western Europe (+4%) also recorded positive results, especially considering the many major destinations they involve (UNWTO, 2015).

Tourists are becoming more sensitive to their leisure time experiences and are more interested in authenticity and having closer relations with the local population (Smith and Robinson, 2005; Valeri *et al.*, 2016). The need to satisfy their very different needs in a sustainable way has led to the development and success of specific business formulas - in particular, the phenomenon of alberghi diffusi.

The albergo diffuso is an original innovative model of Italian hospitality. Although still limited in number, the structures are being widely developed and are becoming appreciated for their originality also at an international level (Confalonieri, 2011). An albergo diffuso is hotel accommodation situated in the centre of a small medieval town or village where there is a lively sense of community; the hotel is not in a single building, but consists of two or more separate nearby lodgings that provide guests with normal hotel services. It has to conform to the following requisites: 1) it is run directly by an individual owner as a private business; 2) hotel services and reception area are provided to all guests staying in the various 'scattered' lodgings; 3) rooms are decorated in a consistently authentic and local style; 4) the hotel is professionally managed in order to offer an authentic experience to the guests, and is part of a genuine community. This type of hospitality business also aims at conserving existing buildings which otherwise might end up abandoned or derelict. The

rooms and reception are located in the center of an existing inhabited community, while food and drink are provided in a separate locale common to all the lodgings.

If we are to understand and control the dynamics emerging in the tourist industry, we need to analyse the problems of governance and management in the tourist destination itself (Hristov, 2015). It is therefore crucial that tourist businesses are aware of and can evaluate the external environment, and provide professional and responsible answers (Baggio *et al.*, 2010; Gopal, 2014). This can be a possible source of creativity for more sustainable development (Choi and Sirakaya, 2006; Jamal and Stronza, 2009; Balkytė and Tvaronavičienė, 2010; Hall, 2010; Romagosa, *et. al.*, 2013; Valeri, 2015). Therefore tourism businesses must pay attention to the needs expressed by tourists visiting their competitors' tourist destinations in order to devise consistent strategies (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Efstratios and Kitrinou, 2011).

This paper is divided into three parts: the first will focus on a review of tourism sustainability literature, with particular attention paid to governance issues and the management of tourist destinations, seen as a vehicle for the creation of value and for sustainable development; the second part will present the *albergo diffuso* organizational model, studying its distinctive features (the number of housing units, the Italian geographical distribution, their historical and cultural character). The third part will consist of the analysis of two important Italian *alberghi diffusi*: *Al Vecchio Convento* and *Val di Kam*, located respectively in the Emilia Romagna Region and in Sicily, which are particularly dynamic regions from the tourist/cultural point of view.

We have chosen these two regions because 25% of all Italian hotels are to be found in Emilia-Romagna and Sicily has the largest number of tourist districts in the country (10 out of a total of 39): the districts of Catania, Palermo, Taormina and Messina, the urban areas of Agrigento, Ragusa and Siracusa, and the prospective districts of Trapani, Sciacca and the Aeolian Islands.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In a globalized competitive environment, tourist destinations must act in a decidedly more entrepreneurial way than ever before (Crouch and Ritchie, 2000). It is no longer sufficient to manage the relation between the tourism system and the tourists; it has become mandatory to govern the

relations between all stakeholders in the tourism sector, who, in various ways, contribute to tourism (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Scott *et al.*, 2008; Baggio *et al.*, 2010). The competitiveness of a tourist destination, therefore, is dependent on the competitive capacity of each undertaking / tourist organization within it, compared to other competing tourist destinations, both national and international. This necessarily implies that each tourist destination comprises not only the individuals operating within the borders of its the territory. It is above all important to define an authority of governance, whether public or private or mixed, that is able to develop a strategic plan that upgrades not only the business but also the attractions of the area (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003; Valeri and Baiocco, 2012).

An analysis of national and international literature on the theme of sustainability is very interesting as it allows us to grasp the breadth and depth of the scientific debate on the subject. The basic problem to be solved is to understand if sustainability is more or less accepted as a philosophy based on a responsible interpretation of a complex and highly interdependent system such as the modern tourism enterprise. We need to find a systematic literature review attempting to outline the state of the art and identify certain major areas of research on which scholars have focused their interest.

As part of the international scientific debate, sustainability is a key success factor in the achievement of competitiveness of enterprises over time (Gladwin *et al.*, 1995; Ryan, 2002; Liu, 2003; Dwyer *et al.*, 2009; Ruhanen *et al.*, 2010; Bramwell and Lane, 2011). Sustainable development is defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition of sustainability in the Brundtland Report (1987) can be applied to a wide range of economic and social conditions, whether they are emerging or developing. The definition includes three fundamental aspects of sustainable development: *economic efficiency*, *social efficiency* and *environmental efficiency* (Buckley, 2012). Sustainable tourism development tries to balance the economic returns of tourism with the conservation of the non-renewable resources consumed by the tourist industry (Jovicic, 2011). The impact of tourism on the natural environment in which it takes place is quite considerable in terms of the need for infrastructure and facilities which change the landscape forever, the rival use requirements of available resources, the need for goods and services and unavoidable intercultural encounters. Consequently, when an area decides to develop its tourist sector, the whole local development model is affected and the area has to make choices as to how it assigns resources, what its production goals are,

and the extent to which social and business changes involving the local population are desirable.

Part of the literature on the subject of sustainability investigates the relationship between orientation to sustainability and financial results related to business development dynamics. Specifically, the literature provides conflicting views on the relationship between sustainability and financial performance. Many authors argue for the positive side of the relationship, understood as the company's ability to generate a high economic value; others claim the existence of an ideal level of sustainability, others remain neutral on the subject (Mackey *et al.*, 2007; McWilliams *et al.*, 2006; Epstein, 2008; Epstein *et al.*, 2010). As regards the relationship between ethics and business conduct, the literature questions the possibility of an interpretation of business ethics. There are various proposals from several experts of potential models capable of introducing ethics into the activities of enterprises. However, other studies on the role of Institutions argue that they have the responsibility of mediating between local conditions and the behaviour of firms. According to this definition, any tourist phenomenon qualifies as sustainable when it manages to protect the environmental resources in the middle-long term, safeguarding the identity, values and the cultural heritage of the population (Landorf, 2009). This means that the process will not impoverish the territory and compromise the quality of the environment, nor change the social and cultural balance by generating high stranded costs for facilities and infrastructure (De Bruyn, 2003).

In addition, tourism is sustainable, and at the same time also responsible, when it recognizes the host communities' right to be protagonists in their territory's economic and social development (Valeri, *et al.*, 2016). As a multidimensional phenomenon (Jafari, 1987), tourism plays a crucial role in sustainability development (Gössling *et al.*, 2009; Dwyer *et al.*, 2009). The implementation of sustainability is supposed to preserve environmental resources from the uncontrolled development of tourism facilities and infrastructure, by attempting to promote the use of renewable resources, conserving energy conservation and reducing pollution (Pacheco-De-Almeida and Zemsky, 2007).

Innovative and sustainable tourism projects cannot ignore the creation of organizational environments which allow the sharing of new knowledge between enterprises and external environments. Governance and management of tourism firms have a responsibility to create an environment which is conducive to the development of new cost-effective and socially

acceptable tourism services, protecting the local resources (Schianetz *et al.*, 2007).

Therefore, when the competitiveness of tourism enterprises is measured on their ability to give unique experiences to tourists, it is the responsibility of the governance and management of these enterprises to focus on actions that will create value for tourists, with the purpose of:

- a) improving the quality of accommodation and tourism services;
- b) enhancing the quality of tourism based on intangible resources, integrating it with social, economic and environmental aspects of the territory;
- c) promoting and enhancing the local intangible cultural heritage.

This requires sustainable organizational models, indispensable for the creation of innovative tourism services, which will be able to engage and remunerate all the stakeholders. Such processes must be able to enhance and consolidate the system of relationships between the different stakeholders involved. It presupposes cooperation between tourism enterprises and tourism service providers in a co-evolution project that will require innovative processes, some clear and transparent relationships with all the parties involved and a proactive and reactive role played by tourism enterprises alongside the host communities. When a tourism firm aspires to be sustainable it should not stay isolated from its background; it should create instead a wider network with other firms and with all the stakeholders it has (Volgger and Pechlaner, 2015).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

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Start each new paragraph with indent like this. Make sure not to change the type of letters/fonts or the formatting of the paper. The work follows the qualitative methodology of the multiple case study research of Robert Yin (2014). This article discusses the results of a comprehensive empirical survey on two alberghi diffusi, located in Emilia Romagna and in Sicily, very dynamic regions, where entrepreneurial success is possible for young companies who care about sustainability. The

survey aims to show how ‘scattered’ hospitality represents a sustainable model of hospitality which is different from the traditional forms of local hotels. The study was carried out in several distinct stages:

- a) analysis of academic studies, congress papers and other articles, including non-specialist material;
- b) analysis of web sites and institution databases, trade associations and coordination structures;
- c) analysis of interviews with the General Manager of Italian Association Hotels. The questions were posed to help understand the evolutionary dynamics of the needs of tourists;
- d) analysis of interviews with the entrepreneurs of two alberghi diffusi. These are small businesses located in small local territories, and are analysed from a cultural and organizational viewpoint. Because of their special characteristics, these hotels can be considered as micro-territorial contexts within the Italian regions;
- e) analysis of the entrepreneurial and organizational model of the albergo diffuso.

Data collection is based on direct interviews with entrepreneurs of alberghi diffusi, through a semi-structured questionnaire. The questionnaire depends on the character of the person interviewed. The interviewer’s attention focuses on both verbal and non-verbal communication. This is because the effectiveness of an answer does not only depend on its literal meaning as it is said but also on the way the message is perceived, caused by the influence of non-verbal communication factors. The semi-structured interviews conducted were based on broad categories that have already been investigated to show the differences between the two alberghi diffusi, relating to the business sphere, the environmental sphere, the organizational sphere and the process sphere. In this research the same determinants are investigated by analysing the following main points: 1) the geographical location, 2) the number of housing units, 3) the historical - cultural identity and architecture of the housing units in each albergo diffuso, 4) the organizational aspects and style of leadership, 5) the initial motivation of the business.

The questionnaire was administered during the month of February 2016. The fact that the questionnaire was analytical has not constrained the interviewer to use a more rigid framework in dialogue with the entrepreneurs. They were free to tell their story and describe their firm’s performance, and this enabled the interviewer to propose questions on

specific topics and to further homogenize the data collected. The analytical aspects treated are the result of the continuation of our previous research on the *albergo diffuso* theme. Therefore, these factors can be observed and revisited in the light of our research question: *does the organizational model of the albergo diffuso meet the sustainability requirements to satisfy a clientele who are increasingly interested in appreciating the history and culture of an entire area?*

## DISCUSSION

The *albergo diffuso* is an original Italian business model. The idea of ‘scattered hospitality’ goes back to the 1976 earthquake in Friuli Venezia Giulia, where whole villages of Carnia were converted into tourist facilities. *Diffuso* means that the enterprise is integrated into the socio-cultural reality of the place. The buildings that house the hotel services and accommodation, as well as their furnishings are all authentic and pre-existing (nothing new is built, only carefully restructured) (Paniccia *et. al.* 2010; Valeri, 2011). In 2015 there were 120 *alberghi diffusi* in Italy, classified as follows: a) 65 located in historic towns, b) 23 in historic residences, and c) 31 in old farmhouses (Alberghi Diffusi Italian Association, 2016).

The *alberghi* have an average number of 18 rooms and 30 beds. The highest concentration is located in Central Italy where there are 45 units; 23 units are located in southern Italy, 21 units on Sicily and Sardinia and 30 units located in Northern Italy. It is remarkable that Sardinia, the first to put the idea into practice, has 6 units of which 5 are historic villages transformed into *alberghi diffusi*.

In terms of space, *alberghi diffusi* are organised horizontally, since the bedrooms consist of single houses in the medieval town centre, restored and restructured in keeping with local architectural traditions.

Some hotels are spread through a historic small mountain village or hill-town; sometimes the structure of the hotel extends to cover a large part of the village, becoming an example of an authentic experience in which the village and its inhabitants, the farmers and artisans who live there become part of the experience of hospitality together with the guests. Other hotels are set up in a rural or mountain area which, while not constituting a historic village, is, however, a locality rich in local colour; still other hotels also are located in the centre of small or large cities.

From the technical and organizational point of view, a second common feature is that the bedrooms are all located within the pre-existing units. They are of different sizes, independent, and at a distance generally not more than 200/300 meters from the main building, which acts as reception and an information centre.

Unlike in traditional hotels, the restaurant is considered an ancillary service and is usually absent; however, in most of the cases analysed, we found that this activity is given special attention in some alberghi diffusi where there are annexed farms, sometimes of considerable size; the restaurant business then plays an obvious role in the socio-cultural as well as the economic sphere. Similarly, the information service to tourists is often supplied by small libraries, mini-museums, lessons on local cuisine, etc. These services are very different from the more traditional management activities of standard hotels (reception, information, accommodation, catering). During periods of increased tourist influx, some alberghi diffusi offer rented accommodation in houses owned or rented by residents, in addition to the homes owned by the hotel. The different historical, cultural and architectural features of the lodgings that make up the hotels we studied (old houses in a historical village, farms, detached agricultural buildings) and their equally varied dissemination in the area are very important distinctive elements, not only compared to other traditional formulas but also within the hotel segment of the alberghi diffusi business.

In the paper two case studies are examined, selected from within the universe of the alberghi diffusi. They are both small businesses in territories that are different from each other. The hospitality models can be regarded as micro-businesses in territorial tourist destinations in Emilia Romagna and Sicily, both of which have major tourist flows. The alberghi diffusi under study are located in historic villages and can be considered 'young' examples of entrepreneurial success.

The survey was conducted by means of a questionnaire administered to selected alberghi diffusi owners and aimed at analysing the structural and distinctive features of every hotel studied (the geographical location, the number of housing units in each albergo, their historical - cultural identity and architecture; the organizational aspects, style of leadership, and the initial motivation behind the business). Each albergo diffuso description is accompanied by statements made by the owners during the administration of the questionnaire.

*The Al Vecchio Convento* albergo diffuso

**Q: What is an albergo diffuso?**

*A: It is an original hospitality model of environmental tourism development. Guests are offered a life experience in the historical centre of a town or village while still being provided with all tourist services; guests are accommodated in houses and rooms that are no more than 200 metres from the centre of the hotel, where they will find the reception and other important areas. The albergo diffuso is also a sustainable model of territorial development. In fact, to build these particular hotels it is not necessary to build something new but only restore or restructure existing structures.*

The *Al Vecchio Convento* albergo diffuso is an initiative by Italian private entrepreneurs with thirty years' experience in the restaurant industry, who in 2007 decided to convert into a hotel a prestigious building dating to 1940, until then used as a restaurant. The renovation work lasted seven years and involved mainly the residents on-site and local cultural institutions interested in the requalification of the real estate. The hotel structure extends horizontally within the village for an area of 10 hectares or 10% of the total area of the village. The hotel consists of 7 units for a total of 25 rooms, which represent 61% of the total capacity of the village (41 rooms) and 0.2% of the carrying capacity of the Forli-Cesena tourist destination (18,674 rooms) (Istat 2014). As regards the type of rooms, two consist of the main building and the annex that are owned by the entrepreneur, the other five rooms are rented by the inhabitants residing in the village. This is a good example of cooperation between the entrepreneur and the residents who are attentive to the development of the area. The services offered by the albergo are considered to be an authentic experience, in which the inhabitants and local artisans interact with hotel guests in a series of events organized on site, such as painting classes and ceramics, along with typical local fairs and festivals.

**Q: Is the territory able to attract tourists?**

*A: It is; in fact the area attracts mostly foreign tourists, especially when it manages to blend cultural events with stunning scenery, food and wine. For example 'Chef sotto il Portico' is a festival that attracts hundreds of visitors interested in tasting many dishes from ten world-class chefs.*

The hotel's clientele is predominantly international (30 % Italian and 70 % non-Italian) and comes not only from European countries (Netherlands, England, Belgium and Germany), but also from the United

States, Russia, New Zealand and Brazil. In 2014 the number of arrivals registered in the hotel was 650. During the same period, the average stay of tourists was 3 nights. The data show that the Al Vecchio Convento hotel still does not constitute a strong tourist attraction because it is newly established and because it is located near well-known tourist destinations that have high tourist flows.

**Q: What more could we do to win over tourists?**

*A: It would be useful to train operators in a practical way. It would be helpful to make a better use of the excellence of Emilio Romagna, as is the case with Parmigiano cheese and Ferrari cars. It would be useful to focus on product quality and hospitality. The rich cultural heritage and food and wine of a territory become innovations when it's possible to find a modern way to return to the traditions of the past*

The *Val di Kam* albergo diffuso

**Q: What is an albergo diffuso?**

*A: Every albergo diffuso has its story and this is inevitable, because we are revitalising something that already exists. These business initiatives can help reduce the depopulation of villages, and allow them to take on a new identity.*

**Q: What is the thinking behind the establishment of an albergo diffuso compared to other Italian tourism formulas?**

*A: The guests in an albergo diffuso are interested in discovering the history, culture and traditions of a small medieval town. The tourists who decide to stay in an albergo diffuso want to experience these historical traditions. If they want a holiday where they are in contact with the natural environment, they will choose an agro-tourism or farm holiday. The two formulas are two distinct forms of tourism business.*

The Val di Kam Albergo diffuso was founded in 2002 by an Italian businessman with experience in banking and insurance. The albergo was created to save the village of Sant'Angelo Muxaro in Sicily (AG), which was being slowly abandoned for years. Sant'Angelo Muxaro has an area of 64.55 square kilometres, and is located on a hill at an altitude of 335 meters above sea level. The village has a certain importance as a prehistorical (12th

century BC) archaeological site. The Val di Kam albergo exists in a kind of symbiosis with the territory.

**Q: What idea lies behind Italian alberghi diffusi?**

*A: It comes from a strong desire in small Italian villages to see their culture, traditions, food and wine take their place within a wider historical and cultural heritage.*

The hotel structure extends horizontally within the village over an area of 3,700 square meters, or 30% of the total area of the village. This albergo diffuso consists of 4 housing units, 20 rooms and 60 beds, which represent 40% of the capacity of the village (80 rooms) and 0.6% of the carrying capacity of the tourist destination of Agrigento (3,185 rooms) (Istat, 2014). The services are provided by seven hotel workers who are all residents in the borough.

**Q: You opened this albergo diffuso eleven years ago – how are things today?**

*A: It's going fine, especially with foreign tourists who like to live in the small towns of the Apennines, which is an area that is still largely undiscovered. These places often lack beds and we offer visitors empty apartments located in Portico.*

The clients of Val di Kam albergo diffuso are Italians (30%) and foreigners (70%) coming from the Netherlands, Spain, France and Germany. In 2014, the number of arrivals registered at the hotel was 660 units. During the same period, the average stay of tourists was 2 nights. As regards the village of Sant'Angelo Muxaro, the Val di Kam albergo is able to attract tourist flows to the history and cultural traditions valued by the local authorities, who are always attentive to the protection of the territory.

## **RESULTS**

This paper aims to answer the following questions: *does the organizational model of the albergo diffuso meet the sustainability requirements to satisfy a clientele who are increasingly interested in appreciating the history and culture of an entire area?*

From the analysis of the interviews conducted with the owners of the alberghi diffusi that we have chosen as case studies, and with the General Manager of the Italian Hotel Association (see below), we learnt that these two hotels were the most typical examples of the model. They have a horizontal structure made up of some existing buildings that are part of the local culture; they base their competitive advantage on a close integration with the territory and on the exploitation of local resources. In addition, they are located in buildings of cultural and historical interest, far from mass tourism destinations, preserving the local identity and the original architecture. They are particularly suited for the emerging needs of the tourism sector: by staying in these two alberghi diffusi tourists can become an active part of the host community. The interviews showed that our case studies can positively meet the requirements of sustainability.

In order to protect and enhance the local setting, historic buildings were restored in the traditional architectural style, using reclaimed building materials (*environmental efficiency*); in these hotels generous use is made of local food and wine, they promote nature, artistic and food trails, allowing tourists to actively participate in the initiatives publicized by tourism associations (*social efficiency*). At the same time, the alberghi diffusi contribute to the development of the villages they are in, boosting their products, history and traditions: after the positive experience of their stay in the villages, tourists will keep buying the typical products they found there during their vacation, bringing competitive advantage to the territorial economy (*economic efficiency*).

Nevertheless, alberghi diffusi have often failed to exploit the potential offered by the local tourist resources and the increasing numbers of socially responsible tourists. The cause of this situation may reside in:

- 1) existing regulations are inadequate to deal with a proper development of local and national tourism;
- 2) the government has a poor record of taking action in favour of efficient and effective management of tourist flows;
- 3) the government lacks the initiative to encourage the development of tourism in outlying areas.

**Q: Could the ambiguities inherent in these inadequate regulations have an effect on this form of hospitality business model?**

A: *The albergo diffuso is a sustainable model of Italian hospitality, which works when it tries to develop itself in small villages with the aim of improving the lifestyle and promoting the products of these areas. Over the*

*years several legislation proposals have been criticized for their alterations to the original albergo diffuso model. For example, in Molise, a bill was blocked because it tried to support the recognition of alberghi diffusi as 'decentralized' hospices for people who are no longer self-sufficient. In general, our fear is that others will take advantage of the success of this hospitality formula.*

(GM - Italian Hotel Association)

Today, national and regional regulations simply consider alberghi diffusi as a special category, and describe their characteristics summarily, specifying minimum requirements and the conditions for issuing the necessary authorizations.

**Q: In which regions has legislation been implemented to allow the creation of alberghi diffusi? What kind of problems have emerged?**

*A: This happened in every Italian region, except Molise, which has a special regulation on the albergo diffuso system. In fact, there have been problems due to the fact that each region has acted independently from the others in the matter. Sometimes regulations appear to be not so perfect and it took 15 years to get 19 regulations passed (GM - Italian Association Hotels).*

Therefore, it is the decision makers' responsibility to promote actions aimed at the development the territory. They also have the responsibility to encourage the development of both local and national tourism systems, to increase the competitiveness of Italian tourist destinations. This is not easy to achieve, because it requires huge investments of human and economic resources and the involvement of the public sector, and that would be difficult for small businesses like alberghi diffusi.

## **CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS**

This paper aims to contribute to recent studies on the topic of alberghi diffusi, and tries to suggest some ways for tourism entrepreneurs and policy makers to improve their performance. The article addresses a very recent issue, for which there is yet no official quantitative measurement; so the discussion provides an opportunity to indicate how innovation would be

significant in gaining a competitive advantage in the tourism sector, starting with the improvement of the regional regulations.

The alberghi diffusi we analysed can be considered a valid and sustainable hospitality business alternative to traditional Italian hotels. Their originality lies in their structure and means of service delivery, the emphasis on authentic experiences and the involvement of all its participants. In fact, they are not merely 'scattered' hotel accommodation with historical, cultural and artistic add-ons, but a programme aimed at promoting the history and culture of an area that can have a great effect on competitiveness through the development of the local economy, as has been demonstrated by certain examples of excellence. It can also be seen from the study that the albergo diffuso model assumes a) respect for and protection of the environment, especially of the ecosystem and biodiversity - the structures and tourist activities have minimum environmental impact; b) respect for and protection of the traditional culture of the local population; c) the tourist-oriented activities are shared by the local population; d) they also share in the social and economic benefits derived from tourism.

Within historic villages, tourism cannot become a mass phenomenon. However, it can play an important role in propagating local and regional interests in a new context that relies on the small tourist business in its role of a driving force for a healthier and more sustainable development of more territories and more and more local communities (Emanuel, 2012). From the legal point of view, clear and consistent rules in the field of alberghi diffusi are still lacking. In regions with a higher concentration of these, there is no proper regulation. The limitation of the paper is that the analysis included only two alberghi diffusi out of the Italian total. In a future development of the paper it would be interesting to make a comparison between the alberghi diffusi in Italy and similar business models in Europe, in order to identify their specific characteristics and their potential for competitive development.

Future research will further clarify the relationships between the albergo diffuso model and the pursuit of sustainable goals by the businesses involved in developing the project. Another aspect that could be analysed in future would be how the local communities perceive the benefits offered by the alberghi diffusi; in other words, it would be interesting to find out if the local people feel themselves part of this project for improving the value of their territory. Finally, it would also be interesting to assess the actual value created by the alberghi diffusi, for themselves and for the territory, and propose empirical models for establishing lasting partnerships between the actors of both the tourism industry and the community.

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