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DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES
OF A LOCAL PRODUCT BASED THEMATIC ROUTE
– THE CASE OF THE 4 TOWERS PROJECT –

The development of rural areas is a crucial challenge in our days. The revival of traditions and conventional jobs can be important tools for the progress of different regions and can help to attract more visitors. Showing traditional products and the life style can offer an extremely interesting, impressive experience for the visitor. Local products are also related to the matter of sustainability. Furthermore, other significant elements come also to the fore, like: local value creation, strengthening ruralities, job creation related to economic restructuring and changing attitudes.

Thematic routes can contribute to the touristic exploitation of yet untapped capabilities. The primary goal of these routes are education, dissemination of knowledge, the establishment of cooperation, the protection of the environment and the traditions; or the implementation of various development projects. They are beneficial for the local community from an environmental, social and economic point of view as well. They are capable of deflecting the mass tourism; most of them call for the use of environmental-friendly modes of transport. Further the benefit is realized at the local population, and they significantly contribute to the exploration, development and preservation of local values. Furthermore, these routes strengthen social cohesion and local identity and promote the survival of traditional knowledge.

In the framework of the 4 Towers Project different actions were initiated to draw attention to the work of local producers of the Hungarian–Croatian border region. Among others project partners collected local producers working in the region in one thematic route. In order to examine the acceptance and long-term sustainability of the 4 Towers thematic route an empirical research was carried out among affected local producers in the region.

In present paper our aim is to determine the elements, which can contribute to the successful establishment and operation of the thematic route. Further the research has measured the willingness of local producers to cooperate, since the common initiation and unity of the local community is inevitable in order to operate thematic routes successfully.

The emergence of local products in tourism

The development of rural areas; the revival of almost forgotten traditions and conventional jobs belong to the major challenges of the 21st century. Local products

and activities related to their production can serve as a good basis for the development of the region; and can attract more visitors. According to the 141/2008 Ministry of Agriculture (Ministry of Agriculture) Regulation the definition of the local product is: “*Locally produced materials, locally produced landraces or traditional, non-operational or manufacturing technology, process or specific region-specific technology process made products produced by micro or small business*” (141/2008 Ministry of Agriculture Regulation Art. 1. m).

Local specialties contain minimum 51% added value; supposing local labor and raw material. These products contribute to the job creation and retention, the preservation of traditions, the creation and development of the viable rural area; as well as to the widening of the touristic offer and making it unique (Molnár & Fehér, 2013; Gonda, 2014).

From the consumers’ side ethnocentrism and its relating conception is an important element of domestic product protection. According to consumer ethnocentrism consumers prefer local products because of moral and economic reasons (Malota & Berács, 2007; Malota & Mitev, 2013).

Besides traditional products the life style captures and arouses the interest of the visitor – this tendency can be observed mainly in case of foreign tourists. The presentation of these touristic products – which are based on local products and on presenting the life-style – can happen on different events, demonstration sites and live workshops. These are important tools to offer the visitor a unique and special experience; in a given case to present a real curiosity for them by showing the diversity of folklore and the region (Kóródi, 2005).

In case of local and handicrafts products there is a widespread target market; since for people living in cities the rural environment, the air, the landscape, the rural house and farm, the intimacy of a workshop can mean experience; while rural dwellers can show increased interest for the memories lived or heard from ancestors. The display of the products and the way of production can be the key in all cases (Kóródi, 2005).

The experience-centered and interactive involvement of local products in tourism is most probably at the gate of success (Örsi, 2002). According to Németh et al. (2013) and Németh & Pintér (2014) solutions preferring local interests and values become increasingly valuable. The success factors of these processes are the undertakings of those rural cities and settlements that try to find the development directions fit to local endowments – they result in sustainable investments in the long run. It is worth looking for undertakings that are willing to think in a different way (Birkner & Máhr, 2016, p. 48–49). The issue of local producers and products also comes to the fore in connection with sustainability and climate change (Lőrincz & Raffay, 2014).

It is impossible or hard to quantify those factors (local value creation, strengthening ruralities, job creation related to economic restructuring, changing attitudes) that have to be dealt with regarding the topic. Fehérvölgyi et al. (2012) emphasize – based on their empirical research conducted in the Hungarian–Slovenian–Austrian border region – that tourism contributes to the rejuvenation of local values and traditions. Tourism can be a key development field of border regions, because the common rage of countries can breakthrough the level of interest of tourists; while the national developments cannot have this effect.

The role of thematic routes nowadays

Thematic routes can be defined as follows: “These are tourism products, which row natural and artificial attractions based on a selected theme; and can be accessed by different modes of transport” (Rátz & Puczkó, 2002). The primary goals of these routes are education, dissemination of knowledge, the establishment of cooperation, the protection of the environment and the traditions; or the implementation of various development projects.

Rátz and Puczkó emphasize the importance and the special role of thematic routes as tourism products. The advantages of thematic routes include:

- only a small investment is needed to create the thematic road network,
- they can diversify the demand in time and space, since they are not necessarily seasonal,
- they can contribute to the touristic exploitation of yet untapped resources and capabilities,
- a new layer of demand can be gained for a specific type of tourism or for the destination itself (Rátz & Puczkó, 2002).

Another benefit of thematic routes is that they are advantageous for the local community from an environmental, social and economic point of view as well.

From an environmental aspect on the one hand it is capable of deflecting the mass tourism; since cultural thematic routes or routes based on local products are not located along the featured attractions; seeing that they want to connect less well-known destinations. On the other hand most thematic routes call for the use of environmental-friendly modes of transport: e.g. hiking, cycling, horse-riding.

From an economic perspective it is important, that the visitors of thematic routes appear in the tourism indicators of a region, like e.g. the number of guest nights; however, the actual measurement is difficult, since tourists are divided in space.

The benefit is realized at the local population in all cases; and local products and services can be sold easily.

Regarding the social aspects of the thematic routes it should be emphasized that this branch of tourism significantly contributes to the exploration, development and preservation of local values; furthermore, it strengthens social cohesion and local identity.

Finally, last but not least it promotes the survival of traditional knowledge and professions; the transmission of traditions (Pécs–Mecseki Borút, 2012).

Besides the above mentioned reasons, we must realize that tourism trends of our days support the reason for existence of thematic routes and attractions based on local products as well.

The main aspects of the formation of thematic routes

At the formation of thematic routes – with special regard to the ones built on unique heritage (e.g. local culture, lifestyle and local products) – several specific aspects should be taken into account. Among them the most important ones are authenticity (the authentic presentation of local life) and the existence of local initiatives.

As noted above; in case of rural developments the commitment and the intention of the local community is indispensable. It is nearly impossible to develop a tourism product like this by top-down initiations – since its uniqueness lies in the world vision and in the hospitality of the local population.

Further, the member states of the United Nations have agreed on the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015: its goal 11 is to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Thematic routes support the sustainability of settlements in cooperation with the local community and the tourism experts (Berkes et al. 2015).

The development of these kinds of touristic attractions needs some kind of cooperation; where both the enterprise side and the stakeholders of different communities (tourism associations, local governments and marketing organizations) can represent themselves and their interests (Nagy, 2012).

When formulating a thematic route, it is extremely important that it should strengthen the cultural identity of the community; further the topic should be easy to identify, well-known and obvious; finally it should not limit the attractions connected to the route too much (Rätz & Puczko, 2002). The appropriate marketing activity is also extremely important in case of newly established thematic routes. We should not forget about the different infra- and suprastructural conditions in case of thematic routes – like the examined 4 Towers Route –, either; which can guarantee the comfortable, experiential access to services and products for visitors (Michalkó, 2011). Regarding these conditions Michalkó mentions the importance of the diversification of means of transport; the need to mark the suggested means of transport (car, public transportation, bicycle, etc.) on the thematic route, it can or

even should be supported by modern communication technology (e.g. the application of GPS, mobile phones, modern “touch me” devices) (Michalkó, 2011).

However, most problems arise when it comes to the operation and maintenance of thematic routes. The most typical problems appear in the areas of financing and management. A typical problem regarding financial sustainability is that the route is established with the help of project money, but the operation of the route ceases very fast when paying the grant; since the background for financial sustainability is not created.

Taking membership fees or a common operation of a fee-paying service can be solutions to this problem; but there is a very low willingness to do this. This problem can also be solved by continuous project activity and the active involvement of the public sphere.

Similar problems can arise on the sphere of management. One or two devoted local actors are not enough for the coordination of a thematic route – originating from its character –; more actors are needed on more points: a team is needed. The destination can employ volunteers in certain fields (e.g. tour guides, tender writers); however, there are certain capabilities and competencies; which are essential in case of the communication team (Rátz & Puczkó, 2002). During the formation of thematic routes a common cultural image should be formed – which is based on the own cultural identity of the participants.

The possibility of the formation and the sustainability of 4 Towers thematic route

The municipalities of Nagykanizsa, Kaposvár, Cakovec and Koprivnica – with several decades of cooperation behind them – jointly submitted a proposal in the Hungary–Croatia Cross-Border Cooperation IPA Programme.

In the framework of the 4 Towers Project different actions were initiated to draw attention to the work of local producers of the Hungarian–Croatian border region. With this initiation they try to keep traditions and traditional products alive. Project partners collected local producers working in the region in one thematic route; further they had a chance to sell their own products at several events in both countries.

The methodology of the empirical research

In order to examine the acceptance and long-term sustainability of the 4 Towers thematic route an empirical research was carried out among affected local producers in the region.

Our aim was to determine organizational possibilities which can contribute to the successful operation of the thematic route. Further the research has measured the willingness of local producers of a destination to cooperate, since literature drew our attention to the fact that the common initiation and unity of the local community is inevitable in order to operate thematic routes successfully.

Within the framework of the survey research those local producers were contacted who work in the 30 km vicinity of Nagykanizsa, Kaposvár, Koprivnica. Data base used in our research was provided by project partners. 98 Hungarian and 30 Croatian local producers concerned (altogether 128 local producers) were reached with the help of the survey between September 2016 and April 2016. During the research statistical and econometric analyzes were applied in order to interpret the results and to explore the connections. The descriptive statistics is suitable for the quantified presentation and characterization of the studied phenomenon. The use of graphical tools supports the exploration of the research sample and the presentation of the prevalence rates in the dataset (Kerékgyártó et al., 2008).

Based on the nature of the data the cross-table analysis was chosen from the econometric analyzes. Cross-table is a statistical technique; which describes two or more variables in one table at the same time – the table shows the joint distribution of two or more limited number of categorized or limited value recorder variables (Molnár, 2015; Molnár-Barna, 2004).

The results of the empirical research

Local producers were asked among others about the thematic route established by the project. The first question was, if local producers heard about the evolving thematic route. 39% of the responders knew the thematic route, 22.5% of them had heard only about the project, but not about the thematic route. The more than one-third ratio seems to be good in the light of the fact, that the design and the marketing of the road only started at the beginning of 2015.

It is well-known, that a thematic road network can only be successful, if the affected persons are aware of its elements and preferences. However, the awareness is a necessary, but not a sufficient element of success. For the survival of the route the commitment and the trust of local producers is essential in the long run. Accordingly, we asked them what they think about the viability of the thematic route based on local products in the destination (*Fig. 1*).

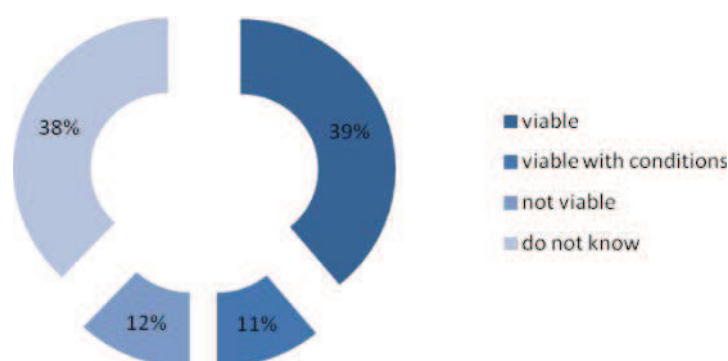


Figure 1: The assessment of viability of 4 Towers Thematic route according to the responder local producers (Source: empirical research, 2016)

39% of the responders considered the thematic route to be viable – we think, this result can be evaluated positively. According to 11% of the responders the thematic route can only be sustainable in the long run, if all actors take the goals seriously, appropriate means are used in the promotion, and local producers can ensure high quality throughout the year. Some of them mentioned, that similar tender projects are good initiations, but after their finish the producers’ community may not be able to fulfill the organization, coordination and marketing tasks; so they are incapable of maintaining the thematic route by themselves. Without the cooperation and professional relations of the local producers a thematic route is really not viable in the long run.

We also wanted to know, how much an external coordinating organ would contribute to the survival and development of a thematic route according to the responders. Since coordination has expenses, this organizatory work can only be imagined in return of a membership fee. In the consciousness of this according to 46.6% of the responders it would be a good solution to set up an organization like this. More responders – who answered with yes – mentioned that more can be achieved in an organized way, further it would be fortunate, if organizatory and marketing tasks would be carried out by experts. Some Croatian responders indicated that local producers do not have time for this; therefore an organization like this would be a good solution. The setting up of an external coordinating organization was opposed by 53.4% of the responders. In their case the two most common reasons were: “My product can only be sold by myself”, and “an outsider can never feel full ownership of tasks to be solved.” More Hungarian farmers assumed, that an organization like this is not needed; whilst Croatian responders named currently operating associations fulfilling similar tasks and because of this they do not consider the setting up of an organization like this necessary.

During correlations studies cross tableanalysis was performed between multiple variables.

It was surprising that the opinion of the two countries' responders has shown significant difference only in case of one question; so we can assess that Hungarian and Croatian local producers basically share similar views about the thematic route and the sustainability of their activity.

Significant difference was found in nationality regarding the need for the above mentioned coordinating organization. In this case there was a moderately strong correlation between the two variables; namely 44.1% of the Hungarian responders and 80% of the Croatian responders agreed on the need for such an organization and would consider it to be useful. In our view it can be explained by the fact that on the Croatian side more organizations function presently supporting the work of local farmers. As these organizations function really well, Croatian local producers trust their work.

Quite close, 0.59 Cramer V-value correlation was found in terms of the number of people working for the surveyed local producers, or what they think about the importance of the above-mentioned coordinating organization. The establishment of this organization was supported only by the 27% of the local farmers, who work alone. In case of institutions employing more, than 10 persons this ratio is 100%.

Examining the number of employees deeper we have assessed that another correlation can be detected between this variable and the awareness of the thematic route. In this case it was conspicuous that the farmers, who work alone and the producers who employ max. five persons know the project and the thematic route the best. In our view these farmers are more active and more open to cooperate; they are much more dependent on possible benefits gained during the cooperation. Accordingly, the project and the thematic route represent a good break-out opportunity for them.

During correlation analysis we have assessed that local farmers employing only a few employees are more open for the cooperation with other producers. However, employers employing more persons require the establishment of a coordinating organization much more. Based on this we can assume, that membership-fee deters smaller producers from the cooperation in organized framework.

The possible means of the sustainability of the 4 Towers thematic route

According to Gábor Michalkó (2011) during the operative establishment of a thematic route six aspects must be taken into account: market research; the exploration of natural and cultural values; creating a strategic plan; stakeholder involvement; the branding, finally, the definition of the management and operating conditions.

In *Table 1* the interpretation of these operative goals are presented in the case of 4 Towers thematic route.

Table 1: The operative steps of the development of the 4 Towers thematic route
(Source: own compilation based on Michalkó, 2011)

Operative goals according to Michalkó	Realization in case of the 4 Towers thematic route
<p>The established route must be based on serious market research, during this target groups and their constantly changing needs are identified.</p> <p>It should make sure that local plans and strategies fit to the latest tourism trends.</p>	<p>In case of the 4 Towers thematic route the needs of local producers and their willingness to cooperate were examined. However we find it expedient to carry out a consumer query in the future, which can provide useful information regarding the expected local products by the target audience and the design of the thematic route.</p>
<p>A thorough examination is needed to explore the natural and cultural values of the affected region for touristic use. With the help of this we can determine the criteria which must be fulfilled to connect the different natural, cultural factors into the thematic route; it ensures the quality and the unified experience of the thematic route.</p>	<p>Since in case of thematic routes it is not always sufficient to build the tourist road network around/on a group of products, we recommend that partners should broaden the elements of the thematic route and not only local producers, but also other natural and cultural attractions (e.g. attractions relating to folk traditions and making local products) should be included in the 4 Towers experience chain.</p>
<p>The special market possibilities of the region must be examined thoroughly; then it must be incorporated into a macro-level, national strategic plan to ensure that it fits into the tourism planning practice and activity of the region.</p> <p>It is very important to have consultations between local and regional organizations about the strategies and the future course of action.</p>	<p>All four cities involved in the 4 Towers project have touristic attractions and plans for developing tourism.</p> <p>In the interest of the sustainability of the thematic route it has to be integrated into these urban or tourist destinations strategies, development plans, otherwise the initiative will not receive enough attention, and the target audience may forget about it when the project is completed.</p>
<p>The number and size of the participating enterprises has to be determined on the affected route – their active participation has crucial importance in the success of the thematic route; since they are the final transmitters of experiences for visitors.</p> <p>Service providers must supplement each other regarding the special endowments and</p>	<p>The biggest challenge the 4 Towers thematic route has to face is the activation of local producers.</p> <p>The composition of the portfolio of the involved enterprises and primary producers corresponds to the criteria formulated by Michalkó; but to maintain the interest further steps should be taken by all means.</p>

<p>the general services. Further they have to achieve that their participation should be ensured from the inception of the thematic route.</p>	<p>It is recommended as a tool that cities should invite 5–5-local producers from the vicinity of the partner cities to their major events or when the project is completed.</p>
<p>Members have to develop a clear brand regarding the affected route; then take it to the market tailored to the target markets and to the needs of the target audience.</p>	<p>In the framework of 4 Towers project a unified image has been developed. The local producers were categorized; further the press release and the logo were supplied to the local producers as well, so we can say that the brand is ready.</p>
<p>Members have to determine the management and operational conditions in order not to have problems in the maintenance of the thematic route. An accurate strategic plan is needed to develop the work plan and to organize daily activities. For this an operational plan is needed; in this framework the communication between the organization and members can be ensured. The responsibilities and the division of roles can also be clarified; the separation of the management and the members can be avoided, which would hinder the operation.</p>	<p>In our opinion the clarification of the framework of the operation is really an extremely important step in the interest of the sustainability of the route.</p> <p>At the same time the research results has made it clear that the responder local producers' willingness to cooperate is not appropriate yet. Therefore, we recommend for the project partnership that local producers should not only be contacted in connection with different events. Further the local producers' attention should not only be drawn to the potential sales opportunities in the project; but also to the long-term thinking. This awareness-raising should primarily be based on the presentation of the potentials of the cooperation between local producers. If the producers realize the benefits of cooperation, and formulate their common goals, we can imagine the possibility of the creation of a region-wide destination management organization that can stimulate the economy on both sides of the Hungarian-Croatian border.</p> <p>However, this initiative must be based on the action of the local producers' community.</p>

Closing remarks

The importance of thematic routes is strengthening in our country and in Europe as well. In a survey research local producers – concerned in the 4 Towers project – were asked in the Hungarian–Croatian cross-border region about their awareness of the thematic route and their willingness to cooperate. 39% of the responders knew the thematic route; further 22.5% of them had heard about the project, but not about

the thematic route. 39% of the responders considers a thematic route based on local products viable in the region; according to 11% of the responders it would only be successful under certain conditions. Most local producers seem to be open to cooperate; but only in a less formalized framework. 46.6% of the surveyed supports the establishment of an external coordinating organization.

Closing our paper concrete suggestions were listed about the operative steps of the establishment of the 4 Towers thematic route. These suggestions can contribute to the sustainability of the thematic route, further they can also serve as a good example for other rural areas aswell.

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