

125 Experiences of Co-Designing Tourism Product Strategy for Tourism Destination: Bottom-up approach

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Introduction

Management issues of tourism destination highlight collaboration among involved stakeholders, their engagement in planning processes, functions and responsibilities, particularly hot item is sales of tourism destination and tourism products (Mariani et al. 2013; Mackay et al. 2020).

The purpose of the paper is to show development process of tourism product strategy development initiated by bottom -up approach.

Study area

The territory of Latgale region is in the eastern and south-eastern part of Latvia. 260,226 people live in this region (2019) and the area is 22.5% of the territory of Latvia. The region stands out with its untouched natural resources: Rāzna National Park, nature parks, lakes, rivers and the hilly terrain.

In most economic indicators, Latgale region ranks last among the regions of Latvia. The offer of the tourism and leisure sector is mainly a source of additional income for the locals and not their main occupation.

In conditions when the economic development in the region is relatively lower, but there are natural resources, incl. specially protected nature areas, it is rather difficult to achieve a common understanding of tourism development and management. The Latgale Region Tourism Association has been operating in the region since 1994, as well as the Latgale Planning Region, the functions of which are regional development and investment attraction. In addition, there are also six local action groups, and until June 2021 there are 21 local governments in the region, so there are on average 20 tourism information centres or points in the region. The Nature Conservation Agency (NCA) has Latgale Region Administration, the company "Latvia's State Forests" (LVM) has two regional offices in this region.

In autumn 2019, local action groups initiated the development of the Latgale region business development strategy "Development of companies'

tourism services", which is planned to be integrated into the community-led local development strategies of local action groups, thus envisaging activities for tourism product development in the period until 2027. The main sections of the strategy:

- Analysis of the current situation, including SWOT analysis, demand analysis - in the form of a survey, interviews with entrepreneurs, tourism object managers.
- Latgale tourism service providers, perspectives, face-to-face and online workshops.
- Action plan to achieve the goals, 5 focus group seminars.
- Strategy implementation performance and monitoring indicators.

Methodology

The authors of this article planned, organized and developed this strategy as well as they have obtained experience in elaboration of tourism development planning documents for other areas. The methodology of the strategy development included intensive involvement of stakeholders, mainly entrepreneurs, tourism specialists in municipalities and representatives of local action groups.

The authors of this article as tourism industry experts participated in seminar cycles with local entrepreneurs, local action groups, conducted surveys, interviews and visits (34 different tourism service providers) at Latgale tourism industry companies in cooperation with students of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences. There were used as secondary data as national statistics, other statistics, review of policy planning documents.

An online survey of entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs was conducted. An online survey of the local inhabitants of Latvia was conducted with the main aim of finding out the demand for services in region.

Description of destination

There are 583 tourism and leisure companies (2020) have been registered in Latgale region (tourist

accommodation, catering services, travel agency and tour operator services, guide, rental, cultural and sports events service providers).

At the end of 2019, according to statistical data, there were 96 different types of tourist accommodation (CSB, 2020). About a third (31.4%) correspond to the type of guest houses, 22.3% are holiday homes, there are relatively fewer campsites (3.9%).

According to the information provided by the Latgale Tourism Association "Ezerzeme", there are 34 nature trails in Latgale. Work has begun on the development of a long-distance hiking route (1060 km) in Latgale – Ezertaka ("Lake trail"). Rāzna National Park is one of tourism attraction magnets of Latgale.

Discussion and conclusion

Each strategy requires a responsible institution and a team that implements and monitors the planned actions. In the Tourism Product Development Strategy for Latgale Tourism Destination, actions were divided into two groups: 1) priority groups of tourism products to be developed and 2) support actions for the development and provision of tourism products.

In particular, the development of the group of supportive actions was the most complicated and required the search for compromises between the involved parties. The development of the strategy was initiated by the local action groups (bottom-up

initiative), but at the same time the implementation and responsibility for several actions applies to higher level. In planning, the hierarchy of development document drafting follows a top-down approach. Consequently, this experience is different when a regional development strategy is developed from the bottom up. Turning to higher-level institutions with initiatives and actions requires courage. However, it can be concluded from the discussions during the development of the strategy that there is a lack of mutual communication between the developers of various tourism projects.

With the increasing digitalisation of services, including tourism, tourism management structures should keep pace with the times and transform (Hartman et al. 2020). If we talk about the development of nature tourism services in Latgale region, it would be equally important to involve the NCA and LVM in discussing various tourism issues.

In tourism, local inhabitants of Latvia primarily see this region as an opportunity to relax in nature, which is a great value, which is especially appreciated in the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In conclusion, it must be acknowledged that the process of developing the strategy highlighted the problem of cooperation and coordination in sustainable tourism planning at the regional level, both in cooperation among institutions and among companies, especially near water bodies.

References

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