

Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas - Case of Kelmend

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Doi:10.5901/ajis.2015.v4n3s1p481

Abstract

Natural and Cultural Heritage preservation is an important issue toward sustainable development. This paper is focused on Kelmend - a region lying in Northern Albania in the cross border area with Montenegro. Its beauty and greatness is because of the natural heritage which constitutes the main advantage for its future development. Kelmend Region represents a typical alpine landscape with high peaks and deep valleys and with a rich biodiversity. The environment protection and the preservation of natural heritage is the most important aspect toward the sustainable development of the area, but cultural heritage is also as much important. It reflects an authentic complexity which is at risk. The article tries to explore this second issue: the socio-economic sustainability based on cultural heritage. Despite the rich and unspoiled natural and cultural heritage certain factors limits the effective management of the area. The tangible and intangible culture is not protected and is adapting everyday to the consumers' needs being so under the threat of standardization. Through qualitative methodology we argue the possibility of using the past as a resource for the future in this specific area.

Keywords: Cross Border Area, Cultural Heritage, Mountainous Area, Sustainable Development.

1. Theoretical Framework

The Albanian rural area is distinguished for a rich and diverse rural heritage of immense values and exploitation possibilities, but by far the studies concerning this heritage have been mostly of ethnological nature and do not refer to the role that the valorization of rural heritage might have in the development of tourism in these areas (Laci, Kola). Landscape planning or development policies based on cultural heritage have mostly been an issue of study in Albania coastal areas where archaeological sites or potential exist and where environmental areas of exceptional value are also present (see Polese F, 2009) . Cultural resources have began recently to be taken in consideration by the economists and Ost argues that cultural resources have been analyzed and integrated in economic theories or research only recently because of the difficulties in dealing with qualitative or subjective matters (Ost 2009).

An examination of the linkages between sustainable development and the cultural heritage should start by recognizing the important role that the latter plays in society (UNESCO 2013).

As defined by UNESCO:

The cultural heritage is a powerful asset for inclusive economic development, since it attracts investment and ensures green, locally based, stable and decent jobs relating to a wide range of sustainable activities in areas such as conservation, construction, food production, traditional healing and pharmacopoeia, crafts of all kinds and the arts in general, not to mention tourism. These jobs rely on human and other resources that cannot be moved out of the communities concerned, and when compared with other sectors of activity they offer economic opportunities to all groups within society, including women and young people (UNESCO 2013, 3-4)

It is important to realize that heritage is not a fixed thing, but rather a process, so its preservation has to be based on preserving the conditions of the possibility to engage in these processes rather than fixing something (Winiwarter 2015, 29). Culture and heritage are renewable resources (Wall 2009, 31). The recognition that sustainability can only be a dynamic equilibrium, as the biosphere and human society are evolving brings up an important issue, the question of

evolution and its role in the sustainability-oriented management of cultural heritage (Winiwarter 2015, 33).

The article analyzes the cultural potential of the region seen as *cultural capital* which is dynamic and in evolution. According to Throsby recent research in the application of economics to the analysis of cultural heritage has been concerned to provide a theoretical foundation for the economic interpretation of heritage. In more formal terms given by him: *An item of cultural capital can be defined as being an asset which embodies or yields cultural value in addition to whatever economic value it embodies or yields* (Throsby 2009, 15).

2. Objectives

Through this article we aim to stress out that cultural heritage is an integral part of Kelmend population and interacts with the biological diversity. The first is often neglected while the latter is often highlighted. We argue that these two elements are complementary to each other and should be seen as such if we aim for the sustainable development of the area. The cultural heritage demonstrates the inextricable link between cultural and biological diversity, which rather than existing in separate and parallel realms, interacts with and affect each other in complex ways in a co-evolutionary process (UNESCO 2013, 2). Tangible and intangible cultural heritage are revealed as potential resources for incomes and employment through, mainly but not only, tourism development.

3. Discussion Home is of God and Guest

The inhabitants of Kelmend depend directly on nature for their livelihood through the exploitation of meadows for their livestock and a few agricultural activities. Remittances after 1990 have been another important element for their economic, social and physical well-being. More than any other economic activity, tourism has intricate relationships to natural and cultural heritage, as it depends on the availability and quality of such resources. At the same time tourism may lead to the degradation of those resources, ultimately eroding the potential for sustaining tourism (Girard-F L, Nijkamp P 2009, 4). Based on the incomes from the out-migration, the resident population is trying to provide touristic accommodation which is still in the first steps. In the ethno-cultural aspect Kelmend Region possesses a rich tangible and intangible national culture which helps in making a complex touristic offer. The growing interest of the tourists for this unexplored area has fostered the development of the touristic infrastructure not always in accordance to an environmental friendly concept

Every single element of tangible and intangible culture are an important asset for the development of cultural tourism, especially material and immaterial values inherited from the past. It can be distinguished some main objects, traditions and values some of which are still vivid in the every day life and some of them are fading.



Topographic Relief Map of North Albania

Vermoshi Municipality consists of 8 settlements, villages, where the houses are scattered everywhere, at different hypsometric levels. *Building heritage* in this rural area consists of alpine-type bungalow homes, houses of a tower type with special architectural value in a regional and national level as well and comfortable new homes built after the 90s. This mosaic of authentic, archaic and modern values displays a potential factor for tourist attraction.

Another ethno-cultural element that has generated a special kind of tourism are *wedding ceremonies*. They are mainly at summer when the members of the family, relatives and friends come from abroad giving rise to the visiting friends and relatives seasonal tourism. These ceremonies are a reflection of the traditional colourful clothes, values and mores.

In the mountainous area of Kelmendi, like generally in Northern Albania, social life has been organized according to the *Lekw Dugagjini Canon* which has influenced the cultural background of the population. One of the main cultural attributes of it is the concept of *hospitality*. Hospitality is a habit that exceeds the bounds of tradition, it is deep in the mentality of people. One of the basis of this concept is that "*Home is of God and guest*" and to meet this tradition to the guests is reserved a warm welcome accompanied with a rich gastronomic menu with traditional dishes and drinks of Kelmend area. A few years ago, this cultural value has served more as a complementing element in the formation of the regional cultural profile, while recently this virtue is being explored as a pull factor to the tourists in order to benefit economically from it. Many guesthouses are organized as familiar businesses with this concept as a focus. They offer, besides accomodation and food a warm communication in English, hounds for hunting companion, hiking guides etc. All the family is involved in serving and helping the tourists. They are served with different gastronomic specialities, with meat and cheese dominating. The tradition of cheese production has been preserved for long and *Kelmend cheese* is well known in overall Albania.

As already mentioned, the main type of economic activity is farming. This activity is based on natural pastures where have been built seasonal modest residences, stan. In these settlements summer tourists, who prefer the direct contact with the farming life and practice, can taste its untreated products in an original form, such as milk, cream, cheese, buttermilk, roasted meats etc. These practices may be the first steps toward agrotourism which is very little known in the area.

Another integral element of the ethno-cultural rural offer are the traditional clothes. *Xhubleta* - the national women costume known not only in the area but in the whole region- and the doublet, *çakshira* - men clothes - are preserved from generation to generation. Currently they are used mainly from the old generations and little known and appreciated from the young ones.

The rural heritage of the area is displayed also in the historical and cultural objects such as: Tamar Bridge, The Vukli Castle ruins and the caves, as that of Vukli which provides data for an early population of this area, since the Neolithic Period.

Intangible cultural heritage which should be seen as a attractive potential toward sustainable development. It is expressed in the songs, dances or festivals which are a well kept wealth transmitted from a generation to the other and a significant authentic part of this region identity. One of these festivals is *Logu i Bjeshkëve*. This was a religion based festival and it used to be known as the *Shna Prenda* or *Bajrak* festival. After a long period of interruption this cultural event began to be organized since 1998 on the second Saturday of August, in Lëpushë Village. The main element of this folk manifestation is the runaway with the most beautiful girls of the area in order to choose the *Mountains Miss* (Miss Bjeshka). It is a real and colourful performance of traditional costumes, songs and dances. This festive event is part of the intangible cultural heritage which should gain greater attention since its meaning is more than simply a ritual. The festival days are in August, when most of the migrants visit their home country as a temporary return to their roots. Translocal migrants maintain relations to their home communities in various ways that do not include physical movements between states and across borders, but also flows of ideas and messages, beliefs and values (Leutloff Grandits, Pichler 178). This is a typical summer festivals when many migrants from different western countries, especially USA where they are mostly settled – gather and celebrate. It is also an opportunity for men coming from abroad to choose a spouse so this festival becomes a mean to intensify the transnational network among neighbours and friends. It becomes also symbol of the dedication to the local culture and tradition.



Logu i Bjeshkeve Festival, 2015

The inhabitants of the area are known as good processors of wool and wood. Their artisan products can be used not only to meet everyday life needs but also as a touristic offer. They are rated for their practical and decorative functions or handicraft products in form of souvenirs for touristic demand. Albanian folk motives, nature or historical elements have been drawn or carved by craftsmen in the form of landscapes, eagles, musical elements, photo frames etc. on wood surfaces. The market they are oriented to is limited, mainly inside Albania, in Shkodra, Durrës or Tirana, and a very few of them abroad. We can say the same for the wool products: rugs, tapestries and carpets with motifs of many different colors. The combined fantasy motives and colors have made these products very popular and used in the interior design of the region generating so some economic effects for Kelmendi families.

Analyzing this complexity of rural elements we can conclude that Kelmend offers a rich potential of tangible and intangible culture. The integrated management of natural and cultural heritage is an important pillar toward sustainable development and should be taken in consideration in the development strategies.

Despite the beautiful nature and the rich cultural potential, the area faces economic and social problems like: *modest economic development, low standard of living, traditional land cultivating and old agriculture means, decreasing of the population, remote infrastructure, poor employment possibilities, lack of touristic promotion and fading of the traditions.*

4. Results

Kelmend Cultural Heritage is at risk as a result of different phenomena like out-migration, inequalities between the urban and rural population, globalization etc. We argue that it is important to pay more attention to the cultural heritage – sustainable development nexus in the development strategies and beyond. Culture is a domain where the concept of sustainability can be applied, in that development paths for an economy can be seen as being culturally as well as ecologically sustainable (Thorsby 2009, 14).

Heritage links and provides continuity between the past, the present and the future (Wall, 2009, 31) and we see the inhabitants of this region as the main actors involved in this process. To think in a sustainable approach for the region means also to fill the gap between the generations in order to keep this continuity. Developing tourism as the main activity linking natural and cultural heritage is the main pillar for the future development of the area, but this development should not lead to the degradation of the region trying to get financial resources as soon as possible. Cultural capital cannot be studied and analyzed without taking in consideration natural resources. Cultural capital which has been inherited from the past can be seen to have something in common with natural resources, which has also been provided to us as an endowment; natural resources have come from the beneficence of nature, while cultural capital has arisen from the creative activities of human kind. (Thorsby 2009, 16). Policy makers in the context of policy analysis have to value cultural heritage in order to achieve its valorization: to add new values to the existing ones. Therefore valuation represents a crucial step in the management of cultural heritage (Girard-F L, Nijkamp P 2009, 4).

Heritage should be managed sustainably if it has to make an enduring contribution to society. This means that it should be considered in a broad context, including economic, environmental and socio-cultural as well as institutional and political dimensions (Wall 2009, 43). The cultural heritage of the area needs to be recognized not only from the

inhabitants, but in a broader context. It possesses some authentic traditional values that have to be protected if we want to enhance them toward diversified economy and income resources. This can be achieved by filling the gap between researchers, local authorities, central government and local communities.

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