**Recomendations of the STEP project**

 overcoming challanges for improving touristic crossborder cooperation between Elbasan and Polog regions

*Skopje, June, 2020*

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# General overview and purpose

Both the Elbasan region in Albania, as well as the Polog region in North Macedonia, are regions that have not been associated as touristic hotspots in the past or the present. But with their vibraint offer, rich history and existing touristic capacities, these regions do have a great opportunity to develop a unique touristic offer, especially for tourists seeking a less standard tourist experience.

In the course of the implementation of the Smart Enhancement Tourism Project (STEP), the project team has gathered data from the mentoring component of the project, collected feedback on the four focus groups and the four training sessions that were organized, as well as from maintaining regular contact with STEP members and other relevant stakeholders since. In turn, the project team has come across many of the challenges that the providers of touristic services face in maintaining and advancing their businesses. As an additional effort to voice their challenges and to support the improvement of the conditions of the touristic service-providers in the Polog and Elbasan region, the STEP project team presents a set of recommendations to the relevant authorities, grouped in the following categories:

1. Infrastructural challenges
2. Standardization and strategy
3. Marketing challenges

# Infrastructural challenges

## Roads and accessibility

The respective local and central governments need to plan resources for the **development of the infrastructure in the region of Polog** (Tetovo, Gostivar, Mavrovo and Rostusa) **and Elbasan** (Peqin, Elbasan, Librazhd, Gramsh, Cerrik, and Gjinar), in order to enable bussinesses that have a concerete offer and capacities to satisfy incoming tourists to thrive instead of having difficulties in brining tourists in. This is, indeed, among the main challenges for STEP network members, who despite their satisfactory capacities to absorb tourists, face the physical obstacle of inaccessibility.

## Lack of public services

Local authorities must **plan and operationalize facilities for paramedic services to improve the sustainability of businesses in both regions as well as make tourists feel safe in these touristic destinations**. Case in point – Popova Sapka, which once was a great ski center in North Macedonia now lacks medical services and medical personal, as a touristic destination which is often visited by both local and incoming tourists. This is causing serious damage to the image of the touristic region, as there is lack of emergency service for the tourists that needs such services.

**It is necessary to establish a functional security system for visitors to the region.** With simple examples from surrounding countries or in countries with more diverse mountain tourism, it is necessary to react nationally and establish networks of local rescue units, on the mountain and inaccessible terrain. The services need to work according to ICAR international standards. (International Commission for Alpine Rescue). **Protection for rescue directorate should coordinate the creation of local rescue units, in order to provide to the tourists quality support during the tourism activities.**

In the scope of public services, waste management is a serious problem in both regions, leaving room for the creation of illegal landfills that destroy the very nature that is the attraction of these regions. **Local authorities need to provide a systematic solution to the problem of waste management hand in hand with being stricter in administrating sanctions**. It is a recommendation for the local authorities of the municipalities within these regions, to make local feasibility study to identify the landfills in their territory and to propose a strategy for cleaning these surfaces. The Center fortheDevelopment of the Polog Planning Region, and the Council of County of Elbasan based on the local regional feasibility studies of the municipalities, should create a comprehensive strategy for cleaning those landfills, as well as too.

## Cross-border simplified hiking procedures

Since cross-border hiking has become more frequent recently, and in the future it will be an increasingly more popular practice, it is necessary to **establish a system for simpler and electronic registration of guests from the Border Police.** The current situation is that the procedures are lasting to long and in written procedure and the period of requesting the permissions should be shortened in one day period of time, and electronically. This problem can be resolved and regulated by the Ministries of Interior Affairs of the respective countries by establishing new joint procedures.

## Mountain tourism infrastructure and superstructure

The Center for the Development of the Polog Planning Region and the Council of the Elbasan Country should prepare a study for the development of the mountain tourism on both sides of the border..

This study needs to contain information that will address the history of the problem, the activities carried out so far for action in mountain tourism and future plans with project activities in certain segments of mountain tourism infrastructure and superstructure.

To clarify, bellow is a list of the segments needed to be included in this study:

- Access roads / communal infrastructure / urbanization

- Mountain trails, bicycle paths, off-road roads, freeride trails, ski touring, ski cat and the like, their categorization, valorization which will result in directions for editing and signaling.

- Plans for construction of mountain lodges and shelters

- Location of camping places with directions and plans for functioning

- Locating rural areas in which this type of tourism will develop

- Opportunities for creating adventure parks and locations with plans and directions.

- Mapping of hostel, hotel and restaurant services in the region that are aimed at the development of mountain tourism.

* Improvement of marking for adventure tourism

Adventure touristic capacities have pointed out that a better quality of marking of mountain terrain should be held in order to be in line with global advanced standards. Most available marking are done by touristic service-providers without significant support from the local authorities.

**Municipalities should create a database with all markings of mountain trains and to share with respective regional Centers for Development, in order to increase the visibility of these assets. The next step is analysis for new markings in these regions, and operationalizing them in the field.**

## Improvement of border quality

Building the cross border cooperation is quite difficult for STEP members seeing how all three border crossings are connected with regional roads which are not well maintained. **The respective Ministries for Transport in both countries need to be proactive in building better infrastructure to develop a better cross border cooperation not only between the regions themselves but between North Macedonia and Albania altogether.** Therefore, it is highly recommended to improve the quality of the access to the border line Qafa e Thanes (Qafasan), from both sides in the part Struga – Qafa e Thanes, and the part of the regional road Prrenjas – Librazhd, as well as the damages of the road nearby border and in the free zone.

#  Standardization and cooperation

## Standardization of touristic capacity standards

All data gathered suggest that most STEP members do not operate under the same standards of business, and are unfamiliar with a lot of sets of touristic standards in the world.

For this purpose, we created the STEP certificate of compliance which is a minimal set of standards that STEP members need to comply with in order to be a full member that will be included in the iTop platform.

Further efforts by the Governments via their responsible ministries should be taken to improve the standards in both regions. **This means that Governments, Touristic Chambers and Agency for promoting and supporting tourism in Macedonia (APSM), need to work closely with local businesses on finding a common ground on how to set achievable standards that are in tune with global standards.**

Also the existing standards (e.g in North a rulebook on the manner and closer criteria for obtaining the Mark in the rural households in the rural areas) should be promoted and tested for the start end procedures, since in several regions there were significant problems to take the Mark (Tetovo municipality).

## Lack of Destination Management Organization (DMO)

Both regions lack a clear DMO which will serve as a gathering point for all business, and will be key in promoting each region. Most business owners are not familiar with the concept itself, and it contributes to both regions being underdeveloped in their touristic sector.

Although the region stands out for its tourism potential by hosting 3 interesting thematic routes (Gastronomy, Culture, Health & Wellness) consolidated with attractions and tourist services the lack of a DMO is evident. The information about the destination is fragmented and so is the tourist offer. **The establishment of a DMO (Destination Management Organization) would give a substantial impetus to improving the promotion of the country and businesses. Such an issue remains to be addressed to the Ministry of Tourism (Albania), the National Tourism Agency (Albania), Ministry of Economy (North Macedonia), Agency for promotion and support of tourism in Macedonia.** STEP is creating the grounds, but administration on both sided of the border should appoint staff to carry out tasks and take responsibilities.

For this purpose, it is recommended that the respective ministries in both countries should create strategy for creation of DMO for both regions, governed by local or regional structures in order to promote constantly the tourism in these regions. By having proper DMOs, local touristic businesses can provide greater value to both the local community and incoming tourists as well.

The regions of Elbasan and Polog are lagging behind their marketing efforts compared to other regions in their respective countires, such as Ohrid in North Macedonia, or Vlorë in Albania. Among the main reasons for this is the lack of a unified marketing approach between the municipalities, promotional agencies and other stakeholders in promoting the regions. **Local governing bodies, with the help of local bussinesses, must establish a single entity (DMO) for information and promotion for each region,** instead of many smaller segregated efforts that and undertaken by businesses themselves or projects such as STEP project and this will bring to standardization of marketing efforts.

## Stimulation of business

STEP network members in both regions feel that the assests for stimulation of the touristic capacities in the regions are not well managed and small businesses do not get a proper share of the assets. The share of the municipal budgets dedicated to promoting the regions is very small and should be increased in the future in order to stimulate the local touristic business communities in developing their capacities further.

**We recommend that the municipal tourist tax be used exclusively for development projects for tourism, as so far, it enters in the general municipal budget (in the case of North Macedonia). Additionally, it is highly important that these taxes are collected more efficiently.** The municipalities should assigna municipal tourism inspector and ,where not appropriate or not possible, they shouldassign a regional tourism inspector in cooperation with neighboring municipalities.

## Improvement of capacity building programs

Many STEP network members were not familiar with the standards and practices of digital marketing and digital communication, in general, before the start of the project. Even though a lot of progress was made, and a number of members received direct help in training as well as outside of training session by STEP staff; additonal projects such as STEP would aid local bussineses with developing their capacity. This is also valid for touristic standards building programs, DMOs, etc.

A key takeaway from the project in this point is also that most businesses do not have active e-commerce environments to increase their business from incoming tourists. The iTop platform is such a platform that can help businesses develop their e-commerce efforts and learn the basics of e-commerce.

**We recommend that to the municipalities and regional centers create follow-up programs and projects to increase practices of digital marketing and digital communication among the touristic entities, in coordination with APSTM to increase the visibility of e-marketing for the national and international markets for these entities.**

## Promotional strategy

Both regions lack a certain promotional strategy on both local and central level of government. The municipalities and central governments of both countries lack a definitive touristic and promotional strategy, under which regional businesses can rely. STEP as a project has a good basis to develop such a strategy with direct cooperation with stakeholders in both regions. **Investments in promotional content, brand building as well as focused promotional efforts for the regions themselves need to be undertaken by municipalities.**

## Safety standards displayed and certified in exchange of fiscal incentives

 Under the new circumstances created by the pandemic the businesses that provide hospitality services will have to apply new protocols of safety and operation. Such measures will increase the operational costs therefore businesses should be supported by various fiscal incentives in order to balance the unplanned imperative investment they have to make from now on. **Businesses on both sides of the border should address this issue to the pertinent and responsible ministries such as Health, Tourism, Economy or Finances.**

## Work Force training on post Covid - 19 measures

There are five professions in the field of travel and tourism services in Albania for which standards have been compiled and approved by the respective authority: the National Agency of Vocational Education Training and Qualifications (NAVETQ), Manager, Tour guide / guide, Chef, Bartender and Waiter. These five form the basis for drafting the description of the profession, curricula and the learning programs. Under the new conditions created, this standard will be enriched with the updated section on safety in all operations, therefore, the training of the staff that actually work in the tourism businesses remains to be one of the most critical aspects of the ongoing work progress. **It is important to demand the establishment of an ‘army’ of TOT-s (trainers of trainees) that will train the staff and ensure a cascade effect towards the implementation of these crucial measures.** This initiative is imperative for the service industries. It requires both commitment by the businesses and concrete measures taken by the state. Businesses should be supported with such a service. They may address the respective ministries, and donors, i.e Ministry of Economy covers professional training issues in Albania.

# Marketing challenges

## Lack of promotional content

Both regions have limited promotional materials for promoting their regions. For this purpose the STEP project has created 9 videos of promotional charcater as materials that will promote the iTop platform and the regions themselves.

**Local authorities need to support the creation of promotional content as videos, pictures and flyers to enhance the promotion of their respective regions as touristic destinations. Also, they should consider additional tools for promotional content, as give grants to the interested stakeholders to create inovative promotional materials for the respective regions.**

## Capacity building in marketing management

A lot of STEP network members from both regions do understand the necesity of marketing and updating their own digital marketing strategy to 2020 standards, but a lot of them lack the proper skills of managing marketing campagins for their own products/services.

The STEP project offered direct help to members and some took advantage оf the program and had results in improving their efforts. But more initaitives like this one are needed in order to train current businesses to update and maintain their level of marketing efforts to a global standard. **Local governing bodies need to build programs in cooperation with local and other experts in order to provide a method for capacity building in the marketing management part for local businesses. By improving their capacities, these businesses can in turn provide a greater value to the local community.**

## Improving of data collection practices

Businesses don’t quite yet understand the importance of the data collection process with methods such as small surveys, reviews etc. In addition to the trainings that businesses should receive, a key focus point should be the data collection policy of their businesses both online and offline in order to improve their services based on the feedback they get from tourists. **This can be easily provided by local governing bodies, NGOs and other stakeholders, through interactive workshops with local marketing experts that can easily teach local business on the proper data collection and analysis techniques and, therefore, the next step for the local authorities will be implementing such an action.**