

D3.2.5 Report on TAKE IT SLOW cluster

PP6/VEN

1

1

Table of contents

1. Introduction: brief summary of the main objectives of the TAKE IT SLOW project and of activity 3.2.....	3
1.1. The TAKE IT SLOW project.....	3
1.2. Activity 3.2. - CB clusters of sustainable slow products & services based on natural and cultural heritage.....	4
2. The definition of the TAKE IT SLOW clusters.....	6
2.1. The best practices of sustainable, slow and smart products and the TAKE IT SLOW platform	6
2.2. The definition of the TAKE IT SLOW clusters starting from the best practices.....	7
2.3. Expanding the cluster beyond good practices	12
3. How to improve cluster activity, interaction and cooperation	15
3.1. Sharing experience through the TAKE IT SLOW platform	15
3.2. Sharing experience through online and offline workshops	16
3.3. Towards an official cross-border tourism network: the case of Club di Prodotto	21

1. Introduction: brief summary of the main objectives of the TAKE IT SLOW project and of activity 3.2.

1.1. The TAKE IT SLOW project

As explained in the project application, TAKE IT SLOW is designed to establish, manage and promote the Adriatic Region as a smart integrated, sustainable, accessible, year-round, green and slow tourism destination of the Mediterranean. The project focuses on protecting, valorizing, promoting and making accessible the main attractions on which tourism development in this area is based, such as natural as well tangible and intangible cultural heritage distributed along islands, coastal, inland and rural areas.

The project develops around 36 month activities and 11 partners in order to develop high-quality level of services and products of tourism value chain through smart specialization concepts stimulating innovation, knowledge, competitiveness, networking and cross-border partnership processes. TAKE IT SLOW develops a cross-border partnership platform of scientific, private and public sectors with 120 actors, a strategic framework, a methodology and monitoring system, marketing and promotion of tourism destinations, focused on 10 cultural and natural heritages, 10 ecolabel/green certifications and on the promotion of sustainable tourism and 7 natural and/or cultural heritage sites with improved accessibility put in place.

The TAKE IT SLOW project wants to contribute to a more balanced seasonality of tourism activities on natural and cultural heritage sites in the project area and to make natural and cultural heritage a leverage for sustainable and more balanced territorial development. Indeed, the Adriatic Region

is rich in natural and cultural heritage but, while in some destinations tourism is well developed and structured and even generate pressures from the environmental, social and economic point of view, (think of locations such as Venice and Dubrovnik); other destinations are younger in terms of tourism development. In addition, some destinations, in particular along the coasts and based on seaside and beach tourism, have to deal with seasonality. In general, in the overall area, there is the need to balance the tourism industry and the demand and the impact on natural resources and cultural heritage. Another major challenge is also linked to an inadequate institutional capacity to foster innovation, knowledge-based participatory and inclusive approach in decision-making process. There is the need to promote investments in product and service development, technology transfer, social and eco-innovation, networking, clusters and open innovation through smart specialization through the development of highly specialized and digitalized destinations. The project uses a bottom-up approach, based on the involvement of local communities through the methodology of participatory process in order to engage key stakeholders on local, regional and cross-border level in decision-making process for sustainable destination management.

1.2. Activity 3.2. - CB clusters of sustainable slow products & services based on natural and cultural heritage

Regarding in particular Work Package 3, of which this report (deliverable 3.2.3.) is part, the objective is to ensure quality management of the Adriatic Region as cross-border, integrated and sustainable tourism destinations based on cooperation, participatory approach of local communities and smart specialization concepts applied in tourism activities, especially for protection and promotion of common natural and cultural heritage. More in details, activity 3.2., to which this Deliverable it refers, wants to stimulate the development of cross-border clusters of sustainable slow products

and services which are based on natural and cultural heritage, in order to improve competitiveness of tourism products and services of the Adriatic region, especially of island, rural and inland project areas by boosting creativity, innovation, flexibility and knowledge in new product and service development process. As already mentioned, the implementation of activities is carried out through smart specialization, i.e. the transfer of innovation from the scientific community in order to develop the ability in tourism organizations and businesses to absorb and generate innovation for the development of new products and services. The creation of clusters around a set of specific smart, sustainable and slow products will contribute to fostering sustainable development; mitigating high seasonality pressure by improving the tourism offer in low-season periods; raising the level of competitiveness on national and international markets and moreover supporting a higher quality tourism.

In the field of the specific activity 3.2., project partners have:

- selected from each partner regions more than 90 best practices of sustainable, slow and smart products and services in tourism which represent a starting point for the development of clusters, and classified them according to a preliminarily defined set of tourism products (D.3.2.1);
- built the Slow Tourism Operator Database with the above mentioned best practices (D3.2.2);
- implemented in each partner region training innovative sessions, aimed at improving tourism businesses' skills and competences in tourism sustainable development and at supporting the creation of tourism business networks ("club di prodotto", networks, associations, enterprises) (3.2.3);
- developed a proposal for fostering the development of clusters among tourism businesses and organizations in the project area and stimulating interaction, networking, cooperation among participants (3.2.4 to which the present report refers).

2. The definition of the TAKE IT SLOW clusters

2.1. The best practices of sustainable, slow and smart products and the TAKE IT SLOW platform

As already mentioned, under activity 3.2., project partners have identified more than 90 best practices in the partner regions, among businesses, organizations, associations, projects and experiences of the tourism value chain. These best practices, that have been listed in the Slow Tourism Database – specifically built from the project - have been clustered according to a set of 10 specific tourism products, which have been preliminarily defined and shared by project partners (see the list in the following Table 1). Some best practices are specialized on a tourism product only, while other best practices have been assigned to two or more products, since they have a more differentiated offer or deal with more tourism experiences. The following table summarizes the 10 products and the number of best practices which have been included in each of them. It then gives an idea of the variety of operators, products and experiences on which the tourism offer of the Adriatic region is based.

Table 1 – Number of best practices per tourism product

Tourism products	N° of best practices
1. Ecotourism	8
2. Slow tourism	10
3. Experiential tourism	2
4. Rural tourism	12
5. Sustainable tourism	18

6.	Adventure tourism	4
7.	Gastronomy tourism	14
8.	Cultural tourism	21
9.	Accessible tourism	3
10.	Business tourism	5

All the best practices selected and included in the Database are listed and described also in the TAKE IT SLOW platform. This is a portal to browse all the "projects", "best practices", "training events", "studies and research" uploaded by the stakeholders along with the official partners of the TAKE IT SLOW project. For the moment the platform is accessible only by authorized users linked to the project partners.

In the section dedicated to best practices, every case has a dedicated sheet and it is presented with a brief description and with the main contacts (see at the Library in <https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/take-it-slow>). The platform users can scroll through all the cases, or select those of interest on the map.

The best practices selected by the project and the platform can represent the starting point for the development of clusters, as better explained in the following chapters.

2.2. The definition of the TAKE IT SLOW clusters starting from the best practices

The creation of cross-border clusters of tourism operators around a set of specific smart, sustainable and slow products represents an important tool for stimulating the involvement, commitment and cooperation of the main actors who build the tourism offer in each Adriatic destinations and more in general in the Adriatic region. Clusters has to be intended not only as a simple group of operators,

but as a place for exchange, discussion, sharing and as an “incubator” of ideas and new projects. In such a way, cross-border clusters can not only support the individual operator in improving its specific offer and in discovering new business opportunities, thanks to the exchange he can have with colleagues and other operators. They can also lead to foster the planning, innovation, sustainable development and competitiveness of tourism in Adriatic destination, thanks to the participation and sharing of intentions among operators.

Cluster creation and development means first of all to define the product categories with which to identify them and the subjects that can compose them. Product categories have to do with smart, slow and sustainable tourism products; while the subjects are those who are active in the tourism value chain of the project area.

Regarding in particular product categories, the proposal is to define 6 clusters, by reorganising and summarising the list of products used for categorising best practices. Indeed, as just underlined, several best practices are listed in more than one categories since their activity and offer have to do with more than one product. In addition, we have to remind, that from the customer’s point of view, the overall experience that a tourist lives at destination is often very complex and articulated and it is difficult to categorise it and make it coincide with a specific tourism product. In other words, it is difficult to distinguish the boundaries between one type of tourism and another. For example, tourists who want to discover and test food&wine local traditional products are usually interested also in visiting the places from which these products come from, i.e. the countryside, farms, etc.; as a consequence, gastronomy tourism is often combined with rural tourism. Or, thinking of slow tourism, according to its definition, it requires non only to move with alternative and less impactful means of transport, but also to “slow down” and to take enough time to experience and get to know the destination thoroughly, to meet people and locals, to feel involved. Likewise, experiential tourism means not simply to be a passive visitor, who merely observes and listens the explanation

of a tourist guide, but to feel involved, to try to do something, to feel like a local by participating in workshops, cooking lessons, etc. There is no doubt that these kind of experiences need time. As a consequence, slow tourism and experiential tourism have many characteristics in common.

Starting from these considerations, we have tried to bring the clusters back to some product categories understood in a broader sense. The 6 proposed clusters are listed in the following table, which shows for every cluster identified the correspondences with the products previously defined to classify the best practices. Some remarks are useful for a better understanding of the cluster proposal.

1. Regarding the “Cultural tourism cluster”, it refers to those experiences whose main motivation is the cultural heritage, i.e. the visit to cultural attractions, the participation to cultural events (art exhibitions, concerts, theatre shows, etc.) or other activities related to culture. However, this product is very articulate and includes tourism experiences that can be very different, for example urban and art city tourism but also tourism in less known small historic centres and villages.
2. Regarding the “Slow & experiential tourism cluster”, it includes slow tourism and experiential tourism, since these products have several characteristics in common, as explained above. However, experiential tourism is a concept that is transversal to several tourism products, also other ones than those listed in the table.
3. Regarding the “Rural & gastronomy tourism cluster”, it includes food&wine tourism and rural tourism, for the reasons explained above.
4. Regarding the “Green tourism cluster”, it refers mainly to those forms of tourism and products practiced in naturalistic places, of course in a way that respects and pays attention to ecosystem preservation: so ecotourism and sustainable tourism, even if also this last one

- should be transversal to all kinds of tourism development. This cluster includes also adventure tourism, since very often this kind of product is practiced in naturalistic contexts.
5. Regarding the “Accessible tourism cluster”, this concept should embrace the overall tourism offer and be a key asset for sustainable tourism development, since all products and services should be easily accessible by anyone, independent of its abilities. However, the decision was taken to create a specific cluster, which includes those tourism products and services which are able to satisfy people with disabilities and special needs.
 6. Regarding the “Business tourism cluster”, it was included in the list of clusters in order to take into account the decision of some project partners and stakeholders to select as best practices some operators dealing with business tourism, that for some destinations represents an important component of their tourism offer.

Table 2 – The TAKE IT SLOW clusters and the correspondence with the product categories using for classifying best practices

TAKE IT SLOW clusters	Best practices product categories
1. Cultural tourism	• Cultural tourism
2. Slow & Experiential tourism cluster	• Slow tourism • Experiential tourism
3. Rural & Gastronomy tourism cluster	• Gastronomy tourism • Rural tourism
4. Green tourism cluster	• Sustainable tourism • Ecotourism • Adventure tourism
5. Accessible tourism cluster	• Accessible tourism
6. Business tourism cluster	• Business tourism

Once the clusters have been defined, it is useful to clarify the subjects who can take part in them. As already mentioned, all those subjects who operate in the tourism value chain of the project area can be invited to join one of the proposed cross-border clusters, with the aim of being involved for contributing to the sustainable development and innovation of the tourism offer of their specific destination and in general terms of the Adriatic region, while at the same time receiving useful feedback to be used in the improvement of their own business. Given the complexity of the tourism offer, clusters should include a broad spectrum of tourism actors:

- all the private businesses and operators which offer tourism products and services, such as hospitality businesses, travel agencies and tour operators, tourism guides, transport companies, etc.;
- the private and public organisations in charge of managing the main tourism attractions of the Adriatic region destinations – cultural and natural sites, etc.
- other organisations and associations – in many cases in the field of the non-profit sector – whose activity is somehow linked to the promotion and valorisation of tourism attractions and products (for example associations engaged in preserving and valorising specific traditional products, folk traditions, know-how, etc.);
- institutions and public bodies at different territorial levels in charge of tourism planning and promotion;
- other actors.

It would be important that each cluster includes members from the different categories mentioned above, in order to ensure that the overall tourism value chain referred to the product represented by cluster is covered. Indeed, only involving all the different kind of actors, the clusters have the potential for contributing to the improvement, sustainability and competitiveness of the tourism offer. In addition, through the meeting and the exchange between operators who practice a

different activity (for example an accommodation business or a tourist guide with a travel agency, etc.), new hitherto unexplored synergies and business opportunities may arise.

In order to implement the cross-border clusters, the proposal is to start from the best practices already selected, by inviting them to take part to the most suitable cluster, according to their activity. In such a way, it will be possible to populate the clusters with a first base of operators and organisations from the partner regions. The clusters can be further enlarged in the medium term by inviting other operators and by stimulating cooperation among the members of each group, as better explained in the following chapter.

2.3. Expanding the cluster beyond good practices

A first base for implementing TAKE IT SLOW clusters is represented, as just explained, by the selected best practices. However, in order to make the clusters more effective for reaching the objectives for which they have been created, it would be useful to enlarge the number and variety of operators that are part of them. Several solutions can be put into practice for involving other tourism businesses and organizations from the partner regions to join the clusters.

- A first option is to extend the invitation to the several businesses, operators and organizations that have participated in the training sessions organized in each partner region. These learning activities have involved people who operate in different businesses and destinations of the Adriatic destinations; who develop different tourism products and address to different customer targets; who have different role and responsibilities inside the tourism value chain; and whose activity has a different social, environmental and economic impact on the destination.

Since these operators have already participated in the training sessions and are already aware of the project, it could be easier to convince them to support it. Since they decided to improve their skills on sustainable development and on the related topics through the training, they may also be particularly motivated in play their part in the change towards a more respectful and innovative tourism. In addition, the training, even if carried out online, has already given them the opportunity to get to know each other and exchange ideas and opinions, that could be further deepened and developed through the clusters. For all these reasons, they could represent a good target for expanding the base of the clusters, since they could be more willing to bring your own contribution.

- A second option is to engage the operators who have been involved during the process of definition and preparation of the Smart Action Plan that every partner region has to design with reference to a specific pilot area. The Action Plan should be developed including the broadest stakeholder base in the community for which it is intended, since multidisciplinary thinking is necessary in order to cover the widest possible range of activities, but also to receive community support in the adoption and implementation of strategic policies, measures and related activities. As a consequence, every partner region has promoted a participatory process, by involving several stakeholders, that can now be invited to take active part in the cross-border clusters. Also these subjects are interesting for the cluster implementation, since they are expected to be particularly motivated and already aware of the project objectives and activities.
- A third option is to launch a public call in all partner regions, addressed to all businesses, operators and organizations of the tourism value chain, and invite them to reach the cross-border clusters. Unlike the other two solutions, in this case the operators should be involved “from scratch”, therefore, they should receive valid reasons to leverage their motivation and convince them to contribute to the project clusters. It would be important, on the one hand,

to clearly highlight the merit and the value of the project for tourism development in the Adriatic region and specifically in their destination and the importance to pursue tourism sustainability and innovation in order to foster destination and business competitiveness. On the other hand, it would be useful to clearly explain the benefits that these operators could achieve for their own business and activity by participating in the cluster. So, it could be emphasized that clusters give the opportunity to networking; to exchange ideas and good practices; to meet colleagues and other operators with a different kind of business and from different destinations that could be interesting for networking and for developing joint actions and projects, for example in terms of product development and marketing.

Of course, all these benefits are valid also for the targets mentioned in the other two options and should be reminded when inviting these operators to join clusters. In addition, in all the proposed solutions, the objectives that the clusters should pursue and the implications for members should be clearly explained. In other words, what does it mean for an operator to be part of these clusters? What contribution should he make? What is required of him? The answers to these questions are important for ensuring clusters effectiveness and full operation.

3. How to improve cluster activity, interaction and cooperation

Once created the cross-border clusters, the following step is to implement the activity inside the them, by stimulating interaction, discussion, exchange and cooperation among members. The following chapters 3.1., 3.2. and 3.3. describes some proposals that go in this direction and that are based on a different level of involvement and willingness to cooperate among the operators that participate in each cluster. These options can support project partners in carrying out cluster activity during the project implementation but can also represent a sort of guidelines for the members of clusters for continuing cluster activity even after the end of the project.

3.1. Sharing experience through the TAKE IT SLOW platform

The first proposal is to further implement the TAKE ITS SLOW platform, first of all by presenting each cluster and also including the sheets of the other operators that will join the clusters, for example those who have participated in the training sessions, or who have been involved in the participatory process for the definition of the Smart Action Plan, or other ones who will be “recruited”.

The platform is currently accessible only by authorized users but it would be useful to extend the access also to these other operators who will join the clusters in order to make it a “virtual space” in which members can get to know and learn from each other. Regarding in particular this last aspect, the platform can indeed become a space also for exchange of ideas and good practices. The operators in each cluster could be for example stimulate not only to introduce themselves and their activity through a presentation sheet, but also to tell how they have developed new products or

implemented sustainable practices inside their business or faced new challenges such as covid-19, etc. Members of cluster could also tell about their projects, events and initiatives, thus giving an idea to the others so that they can be replicated in other destinations as well. All these experiences and stories could be collected not only in text format, but also through audio and video content, for example video interviews and podcasts.

The platform could be also enriched with a function that allows the members of each cluster to directly interact with each other; a sort of chat, with which members can contact another operator for asking questions, leave comments and suggestions, etc. However, this function could also be replaced by linking the social media account of each operator (for example Facebook), so as to speed up the exchange through a much better known and used tool such as social chats (for example messenger).

3.2. Sharing experience through online and offline workshops

The best way for fostering interaction and cooperation among cluster members is to create opportunities in which they can all meet together, such as conferences, workshops, round tables and other similar participative events. Thanks to the modern technologies available today, these events can be not just in presence, but also online and hybrids. These last two options are particularly suitable when participants come from distant places and different countries, making difficult and expensive to always physically meet in presence.

These participative events should be organised mainly by a Public Body (or equivalent), such as the Tourism Boards or the Development Agencies of the regions and destinations of the Adriatic Regions, starting from those who have been involved by the TAKE IT SLOW projects. These bodies could commit to having these initiatives included in their own annual or multi-year tourism plans,

in the field of specific actions aimed at fostering the innovation and promotion of the tourism offer thanks to multiregional/transnational cooperation. These initiatives could be ad-hoc created, according to a shared annual calendar, or could also be included in other events addressed to the tourism supply-chain that are already organised in the regions/destinations of the Adriatic area, such as business fairs. Usually, these events include in their agenda meetings and workshops among tourism operators and businesses in order to discuss about tourism trends, future challenges, etc.

Some of the selected best practices have already had the opportunity to meet and get to know each other during the events organised in the field of project activity. Think in particular of the TAKE IT SLOW - D3.1.5 Smart Tourism Conference, that was held on September 29th and 30th 2022 in Ancona and simultaneously online and organised by PP8/SVEM – Sviluppo Europa Marche s.r.l. There were 49 participants in the first day and 66 participants in the second day. The agenda of this conference also included a specific session dedicated to best practices, with the interventions of the representatives of six best practices from both Croatia and Italy, as listed below.

- Initiative and foundation of Ravni Kotari Tourist Board: it is the biggest Tourist Board in Croatia. It was established in 2019 and unites six municipalities and one town. The area represents the most fertile part of the Dalmatian coast, located in the hinterland of Zadar County, and it is characterized by several touristic assets, especially in wine and food sector, and it is well-known for the production of excellent traditional culinary products.
- Regional Natural Park “Dune costiere da Torre Canne a Torre S. Leonardo”: the Regional Natural Park Dune Costiere, from Torre Canne to Torre San Leonado, covers the territories of Ostuni and Fasano (Italy) on approximately 1,100 acres along eight kilometres of coastline and extends until the internal agricultural areas occupied by centuries-old olive groves and ancient farms. The main objective of the establishment of the Brand of the Park is to create a form of public-private government in order to experiment sustainable growth process of

the touristic offer. The collaboration with economic operators led the Park to obtain the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism.

- Colentum Archaeological Park - Argonauta Association: the Archeological Park Colentum is a best practice in terms of collaboration between the Argonauta NGO and the Municipality of Murter. It was created an archeological and recreational park on the territory of the Gradina Peninsula on the island of Murter. In this way the Colentum archeological site turned into a first-rate tourist attraction, and became a platform for the development of the cultural, educational, and recreational tourism of the island.
- Croatian linguistic front office – Associazione culturale Naš Život: an initiative of public offices in which staff could speak with citizen in the protected language with the aim to protect the local minority languages. In Molise Region there are 7 language counters (4 Albanian and 3 Croatian) with the aim to ensure the oral and written use of minority languages in the context of administrative, social, cultural services and their dissemination through the mass media channels.
- World Championship in Olive Picking - Postira Tourist Board: a unique event in the world that has been held in Postira, on Brač Island, since 2017. Its aim is to promote Postira as an olive destination that produces a completely natural, healthy and high-quality olive oil by respecting centuries-old tradition and high-quality standards, thus providing an authentic experience for tourists and a healthy and comfortable life for locals. This event won a multitude of awards, and among them the prestigious Creative Tourism Network International Organization Award for the best creative experience in tourism in 2019.
- Experience Local Flavours - Lago Verde Hotel: Lago Verde is located in the Valmarecchia area, in the Municipality of Pennabilli. It is a small accommodation facility managed by the family owners and located in the regional natural park of Sasso Simone and Simoncello. It is a green

hotel characterized for a sustainable management as photovoltaic panels and the use of local food products.

Other similar events could be organised in the coming period, structured with parallel sessions dedicated to each cluster in which the members can introduce themselves to other and discuss together. There are several formulas on which to structure the event. Some options are proposed below.

- Parallel sessions of interventions by each operator in which he describes what his activity is and/or brings a specific project/initiatives he has implemented that can serve as an example or inspiration for the other members; presentations may be followed at the end by a Q&A session, in which the other participants can make questions and considerations.
- Parallel sessions of round tables, in which cluster operators are invited to discuss about a specific theme, starting from their own personal experience and vision. Possible topics may be the evolution and future trends of tourism demand, with specific reference to sustainable and slow tourism products; or the innovation and development of sustainable business models and tourism products, in order to answers future trends; or the implementation of responsible practices inside the business; etc.
- Working sessions, in which the members of each cluster are divided into small groups (5-10 participants) and invited to discuss and work together around a specific theme/task related to develop some proposals for cross-border cooperation that supports both the improvement of their individual activity and tourism sustainable development in their destination and in the Adriatic region (for example, ideas and suggestions for implementing a network of tourism thematic events (a festival, etc.) that involves several Adriatic destinations, etc.).

- Sessions of individual workshops and “B2B” meetings, in which an operator can meet individually with another of the same cluster to share and discuss ideas about business opportunities and joint initiatives. Usually such an event requires to collect in advance for each operator both the names of the other participants with whom he would like to speak and the availability of this operator to meet those who are interested in knowing him. By combining this information – each operator’s willingness and interests – it is possible to organise a personal agenda for each participant with the planned meetings. This kind of events is very common and frequent during B2B fairs, in which businesses look for new business opportunities or want to confirm or strengthen the existing cooperation. With particular reference to cluster objectives and activity, this kind of events could stimulate networking and the development of forms of cooperation among tourism operators coming from different destinations of the same country or from different countries and with different activities along the tourism value-chain. For example, a tour operator or travel agency specialised in sustainable and slow tourism might be interested in meeting new businesses which propose tourism services to be included in its travel packages, for example sustainable accommodation, guided visits, engaging experiences, etc. Or vice versa, a tourism service provider (accommodation facility, tour guide, natural and cultural attraction) might be interested in meeting specialised niche tour operators and travel agencies for reaching new markets or increasing sales. Or, operators might look for other businesses with which to jointly develop new tourism products or initiate joint marketing actions (for example a partnership between an association of naturalistic tourist guides and a network of natural protected areas for creating a program of thematic visits, educational activities, workshops, etc. for visitors).

An event aimed at stimulating the interaction among cluster members can be based only on one of the above mentioned options or on a combination of them, including both “static” sessions (some

speakers and an audience that listens and eventually asks some questions) and more interactive and engaging sessions, in which participants are invited to discuss together and exchange ideas.

3.3. Towards an official cross-border tourism network: the case of Club di Prodotto

TAKE IT SLOW clusters can represent the starting point for developing in the medium-term a more formal, structured and operational cross-border network among tourism operators from the several Adriatic regions and along the tourism value-chain; a network that jointly promotes and develops sustainable and slow tourism products according to a set of shared values and standards and of course to tourists' needs.

A format that can be taken as a point of reference for building and formalizing the cross-border network is that of "Club di Prodotto" – Product Club. This term identifies a group of tourism businesses and operators of a destination (at the provincial, regional or interregional level) who act to conduct coordinated initiatives aimed at the joint development, qualification, marketing and promotion of a tourism product.

The Product Club represents a very consolidated and widespread tool in many tourism destinations. Operators see in this tool and in the cooperation with colleagues and other businesses of the value chain a way for developing their respective business activities, while at the same time contributing to the tourism destination development, in particular on some specific tourism products, for which the coordination of the entire value chain is essential for the quality of the tourism experience.

One of the main fundamentals of the Product Club is product and market specialization, since it is based on the cooperation of a group of tourism operators for jointly developing a specific tourism

product – usually a niche tourism product (for example bike tourism, family tourism, etc.) - and selling it on a well-defined market segment.

From the formal point of view, there is not a specific and official form that this group can take. There are very different clubs that take for example the form of an association, of an alliance or of a tourism consortium, etc. The important thing is that the group and its activity are officially recognized and that parties adopt a statutes and internal regulations, in order to define the shared values and objectives, the level of cooperation and the activities to be jointly carried out, without prejudice to the autonomy that each operator retains. For this reason, we can combine with the term Club of Product a very wide variety of aggregations.

In addition to product/market specialization, the Product Club stands out for the commitment of its members in the coordinated improvement and qualification of the offer, in order to ensure that tourists' expectations are met. For this reason, almost all existing Product Clubs have been equipped with documents such as decalogue and disciplinary, in which the partners have defined the common minimum standards that each of them undertakes to respect when developing the product and deliver the services.

Two elements that characterize the activity of the Product Club are customer satisfaction and team building. Regarding the first aspect, the mission of the Club to work on a particular tourism product implies a serious commitment to quality and an approach aimed at seeking homogeneous standards of service to which the businesses of the Club have to refer. The set of standards included in a Decalogue or disciplinary allows the associated businesses not only to qualify their offer but also to communicate to tourists their commitments in guarantying customer satisfaction.

As for the second aspect - team building - the disciplinary is not simply a list of criteria or norms to be applied, but it is also a tool for stimulating a process of exchanging good practices, learning from others, cooperation among associates. The success of the Product Club depends a lot on the internal

communication and interaction between the associated businesses and not only on the relationship with the customers. This aspect has an implication on the allocation of the Club's own budget, that should be used not only for collective marketing actions, but also for investing in quality improvement, product innovation, training and updating activities within the organization.

Regarding the budget, every Product Club defines in its statute the level of involvement of its associates and then the financial contribution that each one has to guarantee. Usually the inclusion of a business/operator in the Club is based on the compliance with the quality/product standards and on the payment of a membership fee (annually or upon renewal, usually every 2/3 years). The fee, which can be different according to the kind of partner, is then reinvested by the Club for jointly internal and external activities, thus ensuring the survival and full operation of the Club.

The Product Club brings benefits both to customers/tourists and to its members. Regarding customers, tourists who are interested in the specific product on which the Club is specialized can rely on:

- a set of selected service providers who meet certain standards in the production and delivering of that tourism product, by providing greater reliability and quality assurance;
- a tourism offer which is perfectly in line with their needs and requests.

Regarding the members, they can benefit from:

- shared guidelines for the development, marketing and promotion of their product;
- a greater visibility and better image on the market, thanks to the easier recognition of the brand as a recognized system of values;
- a more effective and widespread promotional-commercial activity, especially at national and international level on the target markets;
- a greater power towards intermediaries thanks to the network;

- ad hoc training activities;
- coordination, technical and administrative assistance.

The Product Club can then represent an interesting and valid tool for stimulating cooperation among the actors of the tourism value chain for product qualification, development, innovation but also sustainability, meeting at the same time customers' expectations and satisfaction.

Of course it is not an easy process to build a successful Product Club which is able to last over time. This depends on how motivated and committed partners are; on how much they recognise the benefits brought by the cooperation for their own business; on how willing they are in investing in shared actions, by paying the membership fee. The process of building a Product Club can be even more challenging if the area on which the club's activity insists is very large, as in the case of the TAKE IT SLOW project. This would be a transnational Product Club and the tourism destination is not a single location, but a collection of different tourism destinations, that however are united by the fact that they are long the Adriatic region. If cooperation is demanding between operators of the same destination, it is even more challenging between operators from different countries, each with different tourism offer-systems and also a different national legislation.

Starting from each TAKE IT SLOW cluster, an option which may facilitate the process, is to develop more than one Product Club based on sub-groups of operators which operate in a more restricted area/destination (for example a regional or interregional area). Each Product Club would be autonomous from the others in defining its official form and in carrying out its activities but all should in some way be guided by the same values and committed towards similar standards and should promote themselves under the umbrella of a wider transnational cooperation, based on the TAKE IT SLOW cluster.

Although developing a successful transnational Product Club will require a lot of effort, we can see this form of cooperation as a point of reference to aim for, by starting with some kind of less formal agreement around some shared values and a first set of standards to commit to.