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Talking Tourist Places, as the Innovative Platform in Tourism (Marneuli Municipality)

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ABSTRACT

The project EU4Business-Connecting Companies, managed by Euro-chambers and funded under the EU4Business initiative of the European Union, launched in 2009 to deepen and strengthen relations between the European Union (EU), its Member States, and its six Eastern neighbors (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) (EU4Business, n.d.) The project involved collaborating with two organizations: "Travel Agency Saba" in Tbilisi, Georgia, and "Movimento Life Beyond Tourism-Travel to Dialogue Srl Soc. Ben" in Florence, Italy. The primary goal of this collaboration was to promote cross-border cooperation and create a platform for joint activities and projects aimed at promoting tourism products at both local and international levels. One specific initiative mentioned was the implementation of the "Talking Places" program in specific Georgian heritage sites. The project also involved establishing agreements with local administrations to support these initiatives.

The research project titled "Marneuli Municipality Talking Tourist Places as a Tool for Green Economy of the Community" was oriented on the Kvemo Kartli region (Marneuli Municipality). The project included various research activities, such as conducting a needs assessment in the tourism sector. The

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ultimate aim was to encourage the local community to follow Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), create an eco-friendly environment, use a storytelling platform to promote local culture, and contribute to the international attractiveness of the region. Financial support for this initiative was guided by HEKS-EPER Georgia and the European Union. The project aimed to increase the average stay of visitors, enhance the visibility of less-known destinations, and promote cultural mindfulness and typical local products. Overall, it appeared to be a comprehensive effort to foster sustainable tourism development and economic growth in the target region.

Keywords: *Talking Tourist Places, Green Economy*

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პროექტი EU4Business-Connecting Companies, რომელიც ფინანსდება ევროკავშირის EU4Business ინიციატივით, 2009 წელს დაიწყო ევროკავშირის (EU), მის წევრ სახელმწიფოებსა და ექვს აღმოსავლეთ მეზობელს შორის ურთიერთობების გაღრმავებისა და გაძლიერების მიზნით (სომხეთი, აზერბაიჯანი, ბელორუსი, საქართველო, მოლდოვა და უკრაინა). აღნიშნული პროექტის ფარგლებში 2023 წელს 2 ორგანიზაციას შორის: ,,ტურისტული სააგენტო ,,საბა" (თბილისი, საქართველო) და ,,ცხოვრება ტურიზმის მიღმა/Movimento Life Beyond Tourism-Travel to Dialogue Srl Soc. Ben, (ფლორენცია, იტალია)" თანამშრომლობით შეიქმნა პლატფორმა ერთობლივი აქტივობებისა და/ან პროექტების სამომავლო განხორციელებისათვის, რომელიც მიზნად ისახავდა ტურისტული პროდუქტების პოპულარიზაციას ადგილობრივ და საერთაშორისო დონეზე. აღნიშნული ინიციატივა განხორციელდა ორგანიზაცია ,,ტურიზმი და რეალობა"-ს მიერ და მხარდაჭერა მიიღო საერთაშორისო ორგანიზაცია HEKSEPERWorld-ის მიერ ევროკავშირის „სამოქალაქო საზოგადოების გაძლიერება სოციალურ, ეკონომიკურ და პოლიტიკურ ცხოვრებაში თანაბარი და სრულყოფილი მონაწილეობისთვის" პროექტის ფარგლებში. პროექტის მთავარი ამოცანა იყო საუკეთესო პრაქტიკის დანერგვა, ე.წ. „მოლაპარაკე ტურისტული ადგილების" პლატფორმის შექმნა კონკრეტულ ტურისტულ ლოკაციაზე და მის მხარდასაჭერად ადგილობრივ ადმინისტრაციასთან მემორანდუმის გაფორმება, კერძო და სახელმწიფო სექტორების თანამშრომლობის წახალისება. კვლევითი პროექტის, „მარნეულის მუნიციპალიტეტის მოლაპარაკე ტურისტული ადგილები, როგორც საზოგადოების მწვანე ეკონომიკის ინსტრუმენტი", სამიზნე გეოგრაფიული არეალი იყო ქვემო ქართლის რეგიონი, მარნეულის მუნიციპალიტეტი. ტურიზმის სექტორში კვლევისა და საჭიროებების შეფასების შემდეგ შეიქმნა პლატფორმა ადგილობრივი კულტურული მემკვიდრეობის და პოტენციური ტურისტული ადგილების პოპულარიზაციისთვის,

რომელიც იმავდროულად ხელს შეუწყობს გაზარდოს ეროვნულ და საერთაშორისო დონეზე მიმზიდველობა, გააუმჯობესოს ნაკლებად ცნობილი მიმართულებები, დაიცვას მდგრადი განვითარების მიზნები (SDGs).

საკვანძო სიტყვები: *მოლაპარაკე ტურისტული ადგილები, მწვანე ეკონომიკა*

1. Introduction

The tourism industry, a vital part of global economic endeavor, has undergone significant transformations owing to the integration of innovative platforms utilizing information technology. These advancements aim to enhance the overall travel experience for tourists/visitors and streamline business operations at various levels, be it local, regional, or national level. Integrating modern technologies: , AR Wayfinding and AR Applications, Artificial intelligence (AI), Block-chain, QR codes, etc." is not merely about enhancing convenience; it also plays a crucial role in fostering sustainable development within the tourism sector. By adopting practices such as digital ticketing, reducing paper waste, and implementing eco-friendly initiatives, the industry contributes to environmental conservation. Local non-governmental and international organizations, self-governance entities, and municipalities steer the tourism industry toward positive growth. One noteworthy initiative was the EU4Business. EU4business Connecting Companies (EU4BCC) was a project managed by Euro-chambers and financed by the EU under the EU4Business initiative. EU4Business was an umbrella initiative encompassing all EU support to small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in the Eastern Partnership countries — Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The European Union supported SME growth by improving access to finance and business development services and by promoting better business regulation. (EU4Business: connecting Companies, n.d.) To ensure a deeper impact of the actions, the project was organized on a sector basis. In 2023 two SMEs - Travel Agency, Saba" and,, Life Beyond Tourism" started collaboration under the mentioned proposal. The 1-month initiative established between the hosting (Movimento Life Beyond Tourism-Travel to Dialogue Srl Soc. Ben, Florence, Italy) and outgoing (Travel Agency, Saba", Tbilisi, Georgia) participants under the support of EaP/EU4BCC/EU4Business was aimed at creating an alliance between 2 countries (Italy/Georgia) on tourism sector bases. The collaboration aimed to encourage cross-border cooperation and create a platform for joint activities, and projects focused on promoting tourism products at local and international levels. Specifically, the project aimed to implement the best practice "Talking Places" program in specific/target Georgian heritage sites and to arrange suitable agreements with the local administration to support it.

The objectives outlined by the SME Travel Agency "Saba" as an outgoing participant in international activities demonstrated a comprehensive strategy aimed at expanding its reach, understanding market dynamics, fostering partnerships, and incorporating innovative approaches. The agency planned to

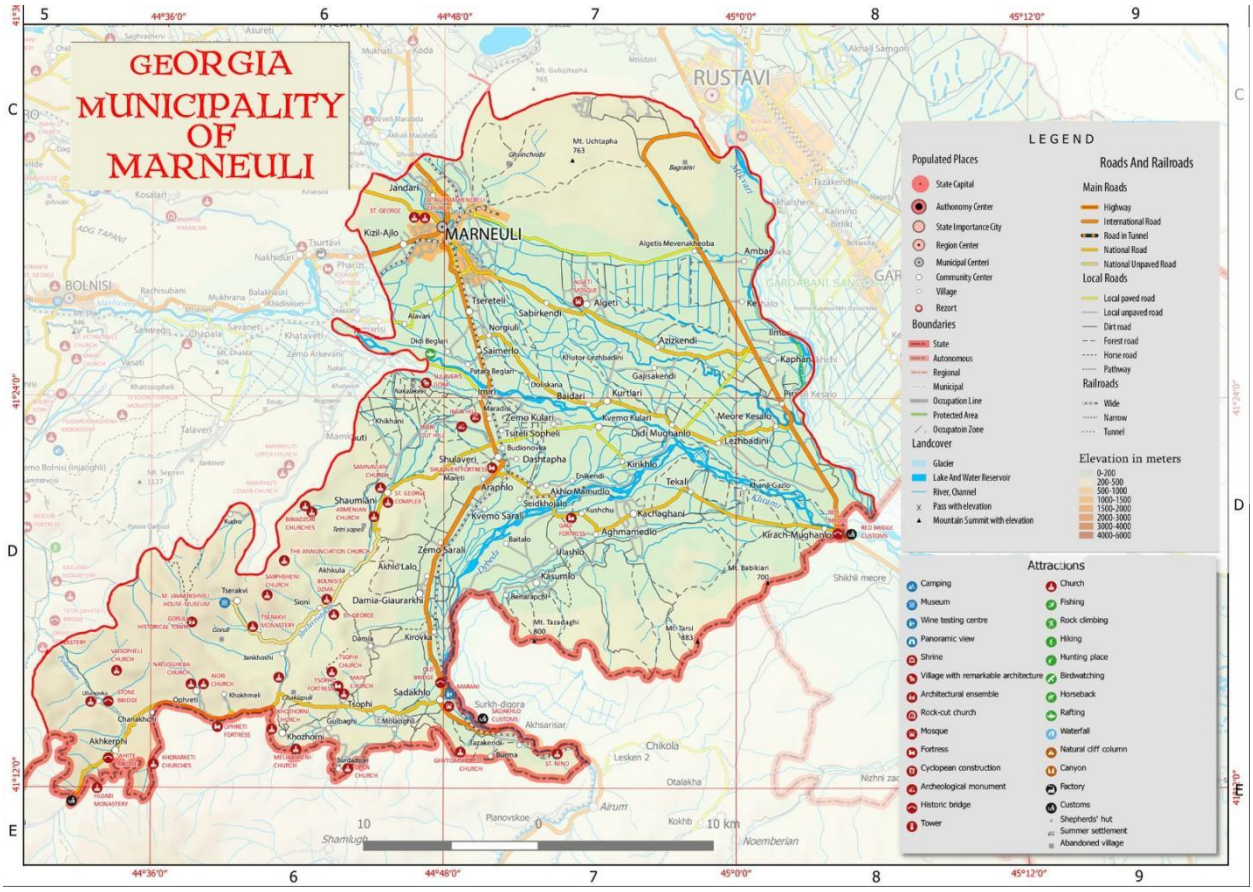
broaden its network by establishing connections with international stakeholders, to focus on building relationships that could potentially lead to collaborative opportunities and increase visibility in the global tourism industry. Staying updated on innovative methods and attitudes in the Italian tourism industry signified a commitment to continuous learning and improvement, suggesting a proactive approach to adopting new trends and leveraging them for product development and promotion.

The Objective of the SME Movimento Life Beyond Tourism-Travel to Dialogue Srl Soc. Ben" as the hosting participant was to expand connections beyond the immediate partner, reaching out to universities and local public administrations in Georgia. The focus was on promoting local tourism products globally, increasing interest and visitor flows for niche and special products, to enhancing the cultural and historical significance of the sites through dialogue and storytelling, aligning with the Life Beyond Tourism Movement's principles.

The successful collaboration of, Travel Agency Saba" and, Life Beyond Tourism" became the prerequisite for implementing the tourism sector research project for Marneuli municipality which was aimed at Identifying the challenges in the tourism sector in Marneuli municipality and proposing a model of "Talking tourist places" for the development of opportunities and working out recommendations through the active involvement of young people and female representatives of ethnic minorities. The call was announced by the international organization HEKS-EPER Georgia and the LNGO, Tourism and Reality" was approved to implement a pilot project for a target municipality in Eastern Georgia. (HEKS/EPER Georgia, n.d.)

Various literature/strategic plans (Kvemo Kartli Regional Development Strategy 2014-2021, Agri-Tourism Strategy for Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli Regions of Georgia, Strategy for Development of High Mountain Settlements of Georgia 2019-2023, “Strengthening Regional and Local Governance in Kvemo Kartli, Georgia” on behalf of UNDP Georgia) and internet resources were analyzed during the research period, which provided comprehensive insights/achievements and novelty into the tendencies/trends, problems/challenges, and future constraints within the industry. Based on analysis, the SWOT was worked out in which crucial issues for identifying key strategic initiatives were set, and focused/evidence-based recommendations and case studies (Properly for Marneuli Municipality) were proposed.

1.1. About Marneuli Municipality



Resource: (Marneuli municipality, n.d.)

Marneuli Municipality, located in the Kvemo Kartli region of Georgia, has a favorable geographic location that makes it a significant trade hub. Its proximity to the capital city, Tbilisi, and its position as a crossroad for several regional and international highways contribute to its importance in the trade, agriculture, and transportation sectors. As for the tourism industry/sector, it is less developed. However, the region has several resources/destinations with untapped tourism potential, which could attract visitors interested in history, architecture, and cultural heritage. Tourist attractions in and around Marneuli vary, namely: German Architecture in Tamarisi. Imiri Archaeological site where an ancient wine cellar has been excavated. The Kushchu Fortress - a historical archaeological site. Monasteries in Opreti and Akhkerpi are multicultural communities with unique traditions, art, and culture. With proper strategic investments and marketing efforts, Marneuli has the potential to evolve into a more prominent and diverse tourist destination. The combination of its historical sites, unique architecture, and cultural heritage would make it attractive for travelers looking for experiences beyond the well-trodden paths of towns and messy cities. (Devidze, Mikeladze , & Devidze, 2023)

1.2. Research Concept

The target geographic area of the research project was Marneuli municipality (Kvemo Kartli region), there are 18 settlements in the municipality (1 city, 16 communities, 75 villages) with 107 824 dwellers (2021). Some of the villages are mono-ethnic, and some are multi-ethnic. According to the development strategy of Kvemo Kartli region (Govenrment of Georgia, 2013) the main leading sectors are agriculture (The economy of the municipality is mainly based on the production of local agricultural products) and tourism, though tourism industry is less developed. Many less-studied and less popular tourist-recreational resources need to be collected. Developing a database of these resources and transforming them into tourist products can have multiple positive impacts, therefore the following measures must be taken into consideration: Conduct thorough research to identify less studied and less popular tourist-recreational resources in the community (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, 2019). Document the unique customs, habits, traditions, and intangible cultural heritage associated with these resources Engage the local community in the process, seeking their insights, stories, and perspectives. (პრეზენტაცია პროგრესისთვის, 2022) Collaborate with local communities to develop tourism products that leverage the identified resources. Design experiences that showcase the unique cultural elements and provide visitors with an authentic and meaningful experience. Utilize digital platforms, social media/networking, and cooperation with travel agencies/tour operators/tourism companies to land a wider audience. Emphasize the role of tourism in community development and economic empowerment. Foster collaboration with local authorities, NGOs, and relevant stakeholders to create a supportive ecosystem for sustainable tourism development.

1.3. Research Goal

The goal of the study was to discover the less familiar, less known tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Marneuli municipality and create a platform for enhancing the know-how, traditional knowledge, and expressions of the community in terms of tourism sustainable development and proposing niche product, Talking Tourist Places" as the tool for Green Economy of the community.

1.4. Research Methodology

During the research there were used qualitative and quantitative methods, like:

- ✓ Desk research/literature/internet resource review
- ✓ A face-to-face (Person to Person Approach) meeting with the representatives of an administrative-territorial unit of Marneuli Municipality (The Snowball method, interviews)
- ✓ Telephone interviews/Facebook Polls/Sending applications via emails- surveys
- ✓ Collecting data, creating SWOT Analyze
- ✓ Sharing International Experience/Reviewed models/samples
- ✓ Consultations with field experts at the local level

1.5. Research Objectives

- ✓ Open dialogue with local municipal authorities (Tourism Sector)
- ✓ Introduction of the concept of "Talking Tourist Places" as a pilot project for representatives of the municipality/local government
- ✓ Raising awareness about the "Talking Tourist Places" platform with the involvement of community representatives (Young people, female representatives of ethnic minorities)
- ✓ Organizing a workshop with the representatives of the community and conducting needs research in the direction of the tourism sector - about the "Top 10 must-visit tourist resources" in Marneuli Municipality
- ✓ Collecting the information and materials (Photo, audio, video) in English about priority tourist resources identified based on needs assessment
- ✓ Placing the model-plastic card of "Talking tourist places" at the info center in Marneuli
- ✓ Obtaining the support letter from the City Hall of Marneuli municipality to encourage similar projects in the future.

2. SWOT Analyze

Strengths	Weaknesses
✓ Rich historical-cultural heritage of communities (Tangible and Intangible cultural heritage) ✓ Multicultural environment and tolerant attitude ✓ Community identity and Indigenous lifestyle ✓ Geographical location	✓ Less developed tourism sector ✓ No promotion of tourist destinations ✓ Not adequate infrastructure supporting tourism development
Opportunities	**Threats**
✓ Creating tourism brands and niche products ✓ Platform, Talking Tourist Places" adjustment to target tourist destinations ✓ Promoting Marneuli Municipality as the target tourist destination at the national and international level	✓ Less investment and funding opportunities at the local/regional level ✓ Indifferent attitude of the local community/state authorities ✓ Political instability ✓ Pandemic

2.1. Risk Analysis

Risk	Risk rating* (High/Medium/ Low)	Mitigation measures
Less interest from the local population and local authority/self-governance	Medium	Consultations, case studies, rapprochements
Instability in the country	Medium or high	State policy, regulations

3. Research Results/Outcomes

„Talking Places" is ingenious as it invites territorial communities to build their narrative universe, without yielding to the flattery of the mainstream, but by involving locals in the story of their essence and identity. „Talking Places" is a real territorial marketing tool useful for tracing, sharing, and expanding the understanding of the territories for both international and local visitors. Through the NFC tags, it is possible to guide the visitor to discover the territory by indicating routes, companies, attractions, activities, and events. It helps visitors navigate unfamiliar locations. (Life Beyond Tourism , ო. გ.)

- ✓ Within the framework of the project, the implementer met with the members of the local government of Marneuli municipality and introduced the goals and objectives of the project.
- ✓ Round table meeting was arranged with community representatives.
- ✓ The needs of the tourism sector were investigated by the students of the Caucasus International University, International Black Sea University, and the University of Georgia.
- ✓ Photo, audio, and video materials about priority tourist places and/or resources were identified based on a needs assessment by the volunteers of the organization:, Tourism and Reality"
- ✓ The implementing organization received a letter of consent from the local government of Marneuli Municipality, confirming that "Talking Tourist Places" at various tourist locations will be included in the 2024-2025 tourism development action plan and strategy of Marneuli Municipality.
- ✓ The project report was presented at the international conference in Madrid, in 2023
- ✓ 5 representatives of Marneuli Municipality and 2 members of the LNGO, Tourism and Reality" participated in the Florence International Festival
- ✓ A memorandum of cooperation was signed between the organization, Life Beyond Tourism" and the municipality of Marneuli
- ✓ At the festival Marneuli municipality representatives were awarded a "Plastic Banner of Talking Tourist Places for Marneuli" with a QR code.
- ✓ All activities implemented within the project - by the action plan - were shared in chronological order on social networks.

3.1. Visual Evidences

The research results and outcomes were affordable for the target beneficiaries of the project, as well as for interesting partners for much more transparency via the following platforms:

Festival Report: (Texts, photos, videos, and interviews) https://www.lifebeyondtourism.org/the-world-in-florence-2023/?utm_source=Lista+FRDB&utm_campaign=5188049ac2-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2023_07_17_08_35&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_-5188049ac2-%5BLIST_EMAIL_ID%5D

Marneuli's presentation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQt-sXnknUE&t=5286s

Marneuli's cultural storytelling online: https://www.luoghiparlanti.it/en/luoghi-parlanti-itineraries/

Marneuli'sinterview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyfpxSW58_Q&list=PL88NNyTJ1AduCTKzXReY3pvK_Clm9zhKj&index=11&t=1s

Signature of the MoU with Marneuli Municipality
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5bvtFDUGyG4&t=15339s

Festival's YouTube channel, to review all interventions and presentations of the territories: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL88NNyTJ1AduCTKzXReY3pvK_Clm9zhKj

3.2. Talking Places Platform as a Trigger for Tourism Enhancement

Luoghi Parlanti is a service created by the Life Beyond Movement Tourism Travel to Dialogue as a storytelling tool for the territories to implement their attractiveness and visitors. It is a technology that tells the place. Talking Places combines traditional photographic and textual narration with NFC technology integrated into modern smartphones and offers information, insights, historical notions, and traditions to visitors. **(Life Beyond Tourism , n.d.)**

Photographic and Textual Narration: Traditional methods of providing information often involve text and images. Talking Places uses both photographic and textual elements to convey information to visitors. This can enhance the visitor's understanding and engagement with the content. (Luoghi Parlanti, n.d.)

NFC Technology: The integration of NFC technology is a contemporary feature that allows visitors to interact with the information using their smartphones. NFC enables short-range communication between devices, and in this context, it seems to facilitate a dynamic and personalized experience for visitors.

Information and Insights: The aim of Talking Places seems to go beyond basic information. By including insights, historical notions, and traditional elements, the experience becomes richer and more immersive. This approach can cater to a broader range of interests among visitors.

Modern Smartphone Integration: Leveraging the ubiquity of smartphones, Talking Places takes advantage of the capabilities of modern devices. Visitors can use their smartphones to access additional layers of information, making the experience more interactive and tailored to individual preferences.

4. Conclusion

Promoting the "Talking Tourist Places of Marneuli" as a community green economy tool is an innovative and sustainable approach to economic development. Implementing measures to strengthen green tourism in communities reflects a commitment to responsible and sustainable tourism practices. Marneuli can

position itself as a model for sustainable tourism development, contributing to the overall well-being of the community and preserving its unique identity for future generations. Active participation of community residents in promoting and preserving local stories, traditions, and cultural experiences is a must-do concern. A sense of pride among residents must be fostered by making them ambassadors for their community and encouraging them to share their knowledge with visitors. The representatives of the local communities will have the opportunity to utilize the existing potential resources at the local level and offer an exclusive, quality-oriented service. Via new platforms interest/motivation of young people living in communities will increase. Community dwellers need to be active participants rather than passive observers, they need to be the initiators of start-up projects for developing small businesses (Guesthouses, souvenir shops, agro-business, travel agencies, etc.) and creating job opportunities to mitigate the migration of young generation from villages to large cities, maintain sustainability and support to improve the socioeconomic conditions in communities. The awareness of Marneuli municipality as a tourist destination at the national and international level will be widespread. Inclusion and promotion of tourist destinations/attractions of Marneuli Municipality in tourist offers/packages will be encouraged in terms of receiving more flows of tourists and visitors.

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