Title of the Story: Destination Dahar: Revitalization of the authentic rural region through a sustainable tourism model and the valorization of local Amazigh culture

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Issues faced

Tourism in Tunisia is known as mass tourism based on coasts and Northern regions. But not the mountainous Dahar region of Southeast of Tunisia, located across three governorates (Gabes, Tataouine and Medenine) and eight municipalities. Dahar is one of the most remote, the most authentic and untouched regions of the country as well as one of the least developed and populated. Dahar counts 3000 years of human history of the Amazigh Berber Tribes which is seen in the many ancient Amazigh villages scattered around the region. The proud local Tamazight communities are still practicing their traditions, such as the art of weaving the colorful carpets or managing authentic oil mills, and lifestyle that was dictated to their ancestors by the arid climate of the region – to this day locals live in houses dug in caves, known as troglodytes, and use ancient techniques for water preservation.

Before establishing the Destination Management Organization (called FTADD) in 2018, Dahar was almost not known as a tourism destination and the little existing tourism flow was quite unsustainable – mostly day visitors from the neighbouring mass tourism destination Djerba were visiting region’s most famous sites, including filming locations of Star Wars movies. Local communities were not benefiting from tourism despite region’s great potential. The unique authentic Amazigh villages with its heritage and the entire region were suffering from depopulation process and slowly but surely dying. For example, Matmata in 1970 had 50,000 inhabitants and now it has only 5000. The same is found in the villages – they are either abandoned, including Guermassa and Douiret, which used to have the biggest populations back in 1950, or suffering from depopulation. Due to lack of jobs, local people, especially the young, were emigrating to look for economic opportunities outside of their home. Women participation in the local economy was also very modest. There was no institution in place that could help the local communities to use the great potential of the region for creating sustainable local employment and preserving their decaying heritage.

Methods, steps and tools applied

Dahar region and stakeholders from the local communities decided to develop sustainable tourism to revitalize the region, create quality jobs and economic perspectives for the local people and at the same time to preserve and promote local heritage and the natural and cultural landscapes through the initiation of authentic sustainable tourism model. For that purpose, with international support, the Destination Management Organization – Fédération Tourisme Authentique Destination Dahar (FTADD), was created in 2018 with a unique setup. It is a federation with currently 38 members who meet at the General Assembly twice a year to discuss the matters and take joint decisions. Members include local authorities, but mostly – small local enterprises, museums, and other local attractions. FTADD defined 10 guiding principles for the destination, written down in the destination’s Charter; principles include promoting the authentic tourism, preserving the local resources, valuing tangible and intangible heritage, craft, and original products, respecting the local culture as well as visitors. FTADD decided to develop tourism that builds on destination’s authentic culture, history, and landscapes and to offer authentic and sustainable experiences to visitors via Geotourism, Cultural tourism, Adventure tourism (hiking through Dahar mountains) and Astrotourism.

The DMO of the Destination Dahar was set-up with the close participation of the local Dahar people – before its implementation, 15 meeting and discussions with locals were organized in villages. Having this kind of close relationships with local people of Dahar was an essential step towards implementing the DMO, because they later came to ask for assistance, they put their faith in this organization to support them, improve their skills or support them in the set-up of touristic facilities.
To develop and strengthen the skills of the locals for sustainable tourism development, FTADD so far organized more than 20 different trainings. A great attention was on strengthening and valorizing the existing local cultural heritage and cultural landscape. FTADD assisted with the refurbishment of 21 authentic troglodyte and local housings in the authentic style of the Destination Dahar to welcome visitors; organized 2 training sessions in all 3 governorates on local gastronomy with a famous Tunisian Chef Belaid – 34 small guest houses and restaurant owners learned to value and cook local Amazigh dishes often known just by the eldest community members. Later FTADD published “The Menu of Dahar” consisting of only local dishes that are part of local heritage and are made of only local products that can be bought in the markets of Dahar. Since one of the main products of the destination is long-distance hiking, FTADD trained and offered hiking equipment to 23 local people who wanted to become mountain guides. Moreover, FTADD created partnerships with different associations in the destination that also work on generating local and fair employment and preservation of the authentic culture, e.g. Tazerbit and TATAOUI - two projects for local women empowerment that provide them the opportunities to produce and sell local agricultural and artisanal products. FTADD also supports local associations on organizing 30 different traditional festivals all over the year to celebrate the local Amazigh culture and traditions and to strengthen the community.

FTADD has been putting all their efforts to conserve the authenticity and the natural resources of the destination and to promote sustainable tourism practices among the tourism stakeholders. In June 2021, the Sustainable Tourism Charter for the Destination Dahar was adopted by all key community stakeholders of the Destination Dahar, the municipalities and the governorates. FTADD will oversee the further implementation of the destination guidelines and will be responsible for the dissemination of sustainability standards among its members (small local tourism businesses).

Key success factors

The key success factors are strong participation of the local communities, solid studies, good leadership and good treatment. Good study means understanding very well the destination and the community and drawing roadmap based on that; good leadership - the decision making process in FTADD is based on the concept "all ideas are good ideas", we listen to the team and members’ suggestions and we make the decisions together; and good treatment - we pay a lot of attention to our relationship with local people, authorities and service providers, we speak their language, listen to their problems and concerns and spare no efforts in solving them. Also, there is an extraordinary collaboration between the local people, authorities, service providers and the organization in charge of the destination. The shared goal, which is enhancing authentic tourism in Dahar, sharing and preserving the beauty of this region and strengthening the local economy helps to work together and keep everyone motivated. Moreover, focusing on authenticity and the richness of Dahar region instead of creating new products and resources was an essential success factor.

Lessons learned

In the beginning, it was a challenge to promote the whole region with a surface of 9312 km2 as one. Each administrative entity (3 governorates and 8 municipalities) was thinking of themselves as individual and separate from others and it was not easy to get them to work together towards a shared goal. It was also the case for Amazighian villages that FTADD brought together - they share the same culture and traditions, but never worked together towards a shared goal. To overcome this challenge, FTADD organized a series of meetings to show how much they have in common and the benefits of working together. Now it works well, all stakeholders work harmoniously and encourage each other.

Locals also lacked knowledge in organizing their business, some of them did not know how to treat tourists etc. For that, FTADD organized and is continuously organizing trainings to local enterprises on different topics – from hospitality to sustainable resource management to marketing (every service provider now has a website, social media pages).
Of course, the Covid pandemic has been a great challenge. For this, FTADD provided all the health protocol equipment to the service providers, assisted them with registering for Vaccinations as a priority group. We continue the trainings sessions in a virtual way, we promote more to local markets, but also presented the Destination Dahar virtually in ITB BERLIN 2021.

Results, achievements and recognitions

FTADD is the first DMO in Tunisia, being a role model and a lighthouse of sustainable tourism development in the country; WWF Tunisia presents the Destination Dahar as a model of sustainable development. Based on the model and experience of FTADD, other DMOs in Tunisia have been created, e.g., Djerba.

The project of the Destination Dahar and FTADD are only in its initial phase since it started in 2018. However, FTADD already reached great results working with local communities to revitalize the ancient and often abandoned villages and valorize the local heritage. So far 11 villages with 30,000 inhabitants have been involved in the sustainable authentic tourism model. In one year, before the Covid pandemics, around 800 new local jobs were created in these villages and in 2019, around 50,000 tourists came to Destination Dahar that benefited a network of small enterprises. Other local villages became inspired by this success and want to follow this model. Also, 90% of service providers in the region are now members of FTADD, while others are working on applying for it. Members include women, young people, local people with no education, retired people – they offer their visitors stays in their authentic troglodyte accommodation and invite them to experience their way of living.

The success we especially cherish is the women’s empowerment - 32% of the service providers of the Destination Dahar are women. They own guest houses, run weaving workshops, or sell their authentic products. For example, a local Amazigh woman called Jazia has now become an inspiration to other women – she runs her troglodyte guest house called “Tadarromt Home” and besides authentic accommodation she offers her visitors local cuisine, and workshops on local Amazigh heritage, such as weaving craft of local carpets and Amazigh gastronomy. Many local women are also part of newly opened craft workshops and boutiques - Tazerbit workshop includes 20 women producing original Mergoum carpets, TATAOUI - around 100 women of different ages and education who produce original local agricultural products as well as artisanal products, other workshops – 80 more local women. FTADD has helped to promote these products among the Guest Houses and visitors, e. g. breakfast served in Guest Houses includes one of TATAOUI products - "BSISA" dish; guest houses also use the carpets and other decorations produced by women.

FTADD continues to build on the strong initial results and to further work with the local communities for revitalization of this authentic rural region and celebration of its unique heritage through sustainable tourism development.

Additional references

https://destinationdahar.com/
https://geotourisme-dahar.com/
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCoFblPUeWuVo2cZ7WzOo5Q/featured
https://www.facebook.com/FTADDTN (official Facebook page of FTADD)
https://www.facebook.com/destinationdahartunisie
https://destinationdahar.com/modale-diversification-tourisme-tunisie/
https://destinationdahar.com/hebergementinsolites/ (Features of Dahar’s Troglodyte guest houses)
https://destinationdahar.com/accompagnateurs-randonnee/ (Currently active mountain guides of Dahar)
https://cutt.ly/tmFYSI7 (Article about the Destination Dahar by Ambiente Mediterran)
https://cutt.ly/2mFYX9f (Interview with EU MEDUSA project pilot region the Destination Dahar)
Video on the Good Practice Story, photos and charters shared via WeTransfer link