

# ROME: A DIFFICULT PATH BETWEEN TOURIST PRESSURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

*Tourism is considered to be an effective policy for urban development and for re-launching areas in industrial decline. The increase in the number of tourists is often considered to be a sort of indicator of success of a certain policy. This is not always and necessarily true. The growth of the number of visitors cannot be considered to be positive in se, without taking into account the quality of the tourist experience and the visitor yield. Tourist presence can contribute to the improvement of economic and social conditions of some of the residents but it can also provoke the increase of environmental stresses. If the negative effects exceed the advantages, historic centres suffer of an alteration of their environmental, economic and social structure. The paper takes into account those internal contradictions of urban tourism in the case of Rome. Results are based on interviews with the main «stakeholders» and «shareholders» of the tourist activities.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tackling the tourism issue in a context like Rome is quite difficult and risky, because of the danger of being trivial. Rome is, indeed, one of the most famous destinations worldwide and one of the most dreamt of at international level; one of those places that one cannot do without visiting at least once in the life; this is because of the high concentration of

history, art, cultures combined with all the opportunities offered by the many conferences, fairs and exhibitions, with all the opportunities for shopping, medical visits, education, business. In short, Rome is a place that always offers a good reason for a visit.

In the year 2009 Rome registered 11,808,688 arrivals and 29,147,428 overnights in tourist accommodations (ETBL 2010), showing – as highlighted by Montanari in this special issue – a better capacity to face the global crisis, if compared to other destinations. In spite of this, the dominant issue in the public discourse – and, even more in the private one – is the need to increase the number of tourists. Thus, the aim – implicit and publically declared – of public authorities is to sustain the tourist demand and operate in order to increase numbers. Pursuing this aim, however, totally neglects the problems of sustainability generated by high flows; it, also, ignores the diseconomies generated in a precious and fragile historic centre, which is the case in Rome.

In this paper, results are presented of a research carried out in the metropolitan area of Rome in the framework of the PLACE project (see Porfyriou in this special issue). The research has identified the emerging nodes and critical situations; it has been developed jointly with the cities of Brussels (see Dieckmann in this special issue) and Madrid (see Valenzuela in this special issue).

The paper is organized as follows: in the second paragraph the methodology is illustrated. In the third paragraph a review of the impacts of urban tourism is outlined. In the fourth paragraph the results of field work are reported. Conclusions follow.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Qualitative analysis has been used for a long time in the field of tourism. This is particularly useful when imperceptible phenomena linked to tourism, the data of which are difficult to collect, have to be examined. In a former paper (Montanari and Staniscia 2009) the debate concerning the usefulness of quantitative and qualitative approaches in the tourism research has been faced. The need of a complementary use of both

approaches has been highlighted as much as the need to adapt them to the reality investigated.

In this piece of research two soft methods have been used: (i) environmental scanning, (ii) interviews with key informants. The first method has been used to carry out a review of the existing literature on urban tourism and the state of tourism in Rome, while the second one has been used to analyze in detail some important issues in Rome.

Following the methodology proposed by Mitchell et al (1997) and applied by Currie *et al.* (2009) for the definition of stakeholders, several key informants have been identified. This method proposes a classification of stakeholders based on three attributes: (i) power, (ii) legitimacy, (iii) urgency. They can be classified as in *Table 1*.

The key informants identified for this research belong to the following groups: (i) public authorities involved in the protection of cultural goods and tourism (definitive stakeholders); (ii) tour operators (dominant stakeholders); (iii) NGOs for the environment and heritage protection (dependent stakeholders); (iv) small size retailers (demanding stakeholders).

Analysis was conducted at three spatial levels: (i) Rome metropolitan area, (ii) city of Rome, (iii) Rome districts with tourist appeal: historic centre, Trastevere (once a popular district within the historic centre), San Lorenzo (early XX century working class district) EUR (1942 World Exhibition Area, nowadays residential and office district).

Interviews have tackled the main issues arisen from the general and specific literature review. They are: (i) the increase of number of tourists, (ii) the quality of tourists' experiences, (iii) the quality of life of residents. These three themes will be discussed in detail in the fourth paragraph.

### 3. THE IMPACTS OF URBAN TOURISM

When discussing about tourism in the socio-economic analysis, the first ideas concern its effects on GDP and employment. The question is which part of the national and local wealth is generated by the tourist industry, and also which part of the employment is due to it.

Tab. 1  
Stakeholder types.

ATTRIBUTES	CLASSIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS	IDENTIFICATION TYPOLOGY
Power	Latent stakeholders	Dormant stakeholders: while holding power, they lack legitimacy and urgency, therefore power is often unused.
Legitimacy		Discretionary stakeholders: holding no power or urgency to influence the organization.
Urgency		Demanding stakeholders: holding urgent claims yet lack the power or legitimacy to influence the organization.
Power and legitimacy	Expectant stakeholders	Dominant stakeholders: they have legitimate claims and the ability to act upon these claims by the power they hold.
Power and urgency		Dangerous stakeholders: lack legitimacy yet have the power and urgency to influence the organization.
Legitimacy and urgency		Dependent stakeholders: lack the power to carry out their urgent legitimate claims and therefore have to rely on others' power to influence the organization.
Power, legitimacy and urgency	Definitive stakeholder	Definitive stakeholder: holding all three attributes the stakeholder has the ability to influence the organization in the immediate future.

Source: Currie *et al.* 2009.

A basic assumption is that with an increase in the number of tourists – i.e. the demand – a growth of the supply will follow – i.e. GDP and employment produced –. This assumption is correct from an accounting perspective only if social and environmental costs are not included. This assumption is therefore valid if our accounting system makes reference to a «fordist» model, typical of the modern era, in which costs and revenues are considered only with reference to enterprises, leaving the territory out. The tourist sector, however, is a peculiar sector that includes the territory in its production process (Staniscia 2006). This fact does not allow us to consider the territory as an externality as could happen – and it would be preferable if it did not – in the industrial sector. In the postmodern context – and in the tourist sector – territory is «the» main factor of production. It is «the» reason why tourists take the decision to move. If territory were therefore compromised and violated by the intensity of tourist flows, and deteriorated to the point of being destroyed; any possible tourist demand would fail. This is, of course, an extreme case, used as a paradox in order to underline the need to consider the impacts of tourism.

This theme has long been discussed among scholars (see, among the others, Buckley and Witt 1985, 1989; Jansen-Verbeke 1992; Van der Borg 1992; Glasson 1994; Sykora 1994; Montanari and Muscarà 1995; Van der borg *et al.* 1996; Gilbert and Clark 1997; Chang 1999; Fotsch 2004) with reference to numerous case studies in several territories at international level. Impacts can be traced back to four main types (Staniscia 2008): (i) economic impacts, (ii) social impacts, (iii) cultural impacts, (iv) environmental impacts.

Let's try to imagine what could happen in an urban area if there were an increase in the number of tourists. The impacts described above will be analyzed separately.

- (i) There will certainly be a growth in employment and in the revenues directly and indirectly generated by the tourist industry. Income distribution will depend upon the type of demand, which means the type of tourists. At the same time, in touristically successful urban areas there would be an increase in the prices of products – and thus in the cost of life for residents – and an appreciation in the value of real estate. This would happen since a competition in

the use of urban spaces and products would take place between residents and visitors/tourists. What would be then the net effect in the urban economy as a whole? Specific estimates should be made case-by-case, but it can certainly be affirmed that some individuals would be advantaged – estate owners, owners and employees in tourist enterprises, owners and employees in economic sectors connected with tourism –, while some others would be disadvantaged – residents not operating in the tourist sector, students and city users operating in activities not connected with tourism. A positive consequence deriving from a growth in the number of tourists would be the increased capacity of the city to attract investments. Successful cities, from the perspective of tourism, are able to activate virtuous processes of attraction also in other sectors, such as construction. A negative effect, on the other hand, would be a substitution effect: some economic sectors might be replaced by the tourist activities.

- (ii) If we focus now our attention on the social sphere, several phenomena can be noticed (Fotsch 2004). The first one is the *standardization* of the urban space. Cities that become similar since they all adopt the same strategies: urban regeneration of their degraded areas, of their brownfields, waterfront regeneration, construction of buildings for cultural use – such as museums, music halls, conference centres – pedestrianization of historic centres, organization of open air events, open air markets, permissions for *dehors*. Such a process undermines urban identity since it homogenizes spaces and reduces uniqueness. The second one is the *commodification* of urban spaces. That is a consequence of the changes occurring in the use of buildings bought by important shops and hotel chains, often the luxury ones, in every touristically successful city. Streets become filled with the same windows all around the world, hunting for shopping tourists who, apparently, look for the same goods everywhere. In this way products of the local history and tradition lose ground and so does local identity. The third one is the *distortion of the local history*. This occurs when cities invent tales merely for marketing purposes as, for instance, with the myth of Lapland, home of Santa Claus. Sometimes stories are totally invented, and sometimes they are tales based on some real elements. In any case the final aim is to create

an attraction that otherwise would not exist. The fourth one is the *gentrification* of historic centres. The substitution process of working classes in some historic districts – for instance, Trastevere, Testaccio, San Lorenzo, in Rome – by the middle class and the substitution of traditional economic activities – such as the local handicraft – with leisure activities. Gentrification processes are, at the same time, cause and effect of the development of tourism in cities and some specific districts. A further social risk is the increase in the number of crimes. A positive effect, in fact, of the presence of tourists in some historic centres is its contribution to keep alive areas that would otherwise be abandoned. Let us think for instance of «minor» historic centres in Italy. But that is not the case of capital cities such as Rome.

- (iii) An increase in the number of tourists and in tourist attractions in a city would certainly improve the cultural offer and museum activities. At the same time, though, cultural heritage is in danger since it could be over-used. Thus, even the cultural impact on the city and its residents is controversial: improvement and development on the one hand, risk of consumption and deterioration on the other.
- (iv) Finally an increase in tourist demand generates many negative impacts on the environment: air pollution, noise, changes of smells, urban congestion, increase in waste. On the environmental side no positive effect can be registered. Urban environment is thus the key element to keep in mind when evaluating the sustainability of the tourist flows, and the related costs should be included in tourism accounting.

#### 4. TOURISTS IN ROME. AND WHAT ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY?

##### 4.1. *Numbers: tourists, visitors and residents in the historic city*

Tourism is considered to be an effective policy for urban development, as well as for re-launching metropolitan areas in industrial decline. The increase in the number of tourists (those who stay overnight in hotels

or other accommodation) is often considered incorrectly to be a sort of indicator of success of a certain policy, and therefore of a certain political leading group or politician. A tendency towards an increase in the number of arrivals can be registered, regardless of economic, political and social crises that can delay but cannot stop the growth. The UNWTO has calculated that in 2007 the number of international arrivals exceeded 900 million, and has estimated that in 2010 the figure will exceed 1,000 million; UNWTO also estimates that national tourist flows could be 5-6 times higher (Montanari 2008). It is not possible to evaluate the dimension of all other flows (VFR, commuting, consumer oriented migrations and production oriented migrations connected with tourism), as it is not possible to generalize, if not through an *ad hoc* survey, the concentration of flows in time and space. It has been calculated, for instance, that in Florence in 2006 the number of city users (those who everyday enter the city in order to produce or consume) was twice the number of residents: certainly not all of them can be strictly considered tourists, although a large part of them has clearly similar attitudes and consumption habits.

The theoretical analysis of the impacts has underlined the dangers of an excessive number of tourists. Thus, key informants have been asked: (i) what would be the consequences of an increasing number of tourists; (ii) how a sustainable visitor flow management could be implemented in order to improve the situation; (iii) how would they regard a more widespread distribution of the cultural offer in order to reduce the tourist pressure in the most visited districts.

There have been varied reactions among the different groups and, in particular, at the different scales of analysis. Public authorities at the metropolitan and communal scale seem to be oriented to a policy for incrementing the number of tourists. In 2007 the Mayor of Rome announced that tourists had exceeded the threshold of 20 million; in the same way he has predicted that in 2011 the threshold of 30 million will be exceeded. Public actors at the metropolitan and communal scale seem to interpret the tourist field as just one of the economic sectors; thus, policies have to be oriented to sustain the demand in order to sustain the supply, i.e. the enterprises. They do not seem to be taking into account the fact that the territory is part of the experience of tourism or,



even better, that territory is «the» experience; they seem to ignore that its excessive use would lead to a deterioration and, as a consequence, to the loss of the primary resource for tourism. Public actors seem not to be taking into account the carrying capacity of the city of Rome that, even if high, is nonetheless limited.

Public actors at the district scale seem, on the contrary, to be conscious of this. Persons interviewed – maybe because of a higher and direct contact with residents – are aware that an increase in the number of tourists will bring economic advantages to the tourist or tourism connected enterprises, but it will bring enormous disadvantages to the residents, i.e. their electors. The latter look for peace and quiet and the possibility of using the public spaces without any interference. When interviewed, public actors have highlighted that even cultural events – organized for the visitors as well as for the residents – are perceived as a disturbance of public quietness. The rate of intolerance of residents is increasing.

The representatives of the small size retailers believe they are even damaged by an increase in the number of tourists. They have highlighted that the increase in tourist demand is really an increase in mass tourism and visitors moving on a daily basis. These people do not have a high spending capacity and they just «consume» the territory from an environmental point of view, without «refunding» it from an economic point of view. Those tourists, indeed, belong more and more to the kind «here today, gone tomorrow» even in Rome (Venice and Florence have a long tradition in this). Retailers have underlined that this kind of tourism is advantageous for the owners of fast coffee houses and of low quality restaurants; souvenir shops and stalls may also be added. But high quality shops, those that qualify the city and give it a distinctive character, do not take any advantage from that kind of increase.

The representatives of quality TOs and NGOs are on the same line of thinking: they do wish for an improvement in the quality of tourists – not a simple increase in their number – that would bring a lower environmental and social impact, a better use of the territory, and a higher spending capacity. They also believe that this would contribute to an improvement of the city's offer and to rewarding a quality supply;

the latter could be able to block the process of trivialization affecting the historic centre that is, little by little, moving even to other tourist areas. NGOs representatives, in particular, believe that, if it is not possible to stop the growing demand, at least nothing should be done to favour it. At the same time they recognize the need for the development of areas of the city that have a very high cultural value but only known by a little niche of tourists. NGOs therefore wish for a diffusion of the tourist offer that should not count on the organization of events but on the use of tourist resources located out of the traditional circuits.

#### 4.2. *Quality of the tourist experience in the historic centre*

As it has been shown in the previous paragraph, the increase in the number of visitors in the historic city without any kind of planning cannot be considered to be useful. The growth of the number of visitors cannot be considered to be positive *in se*, without taking into account two main variables: the quality of the experience and the visitor yield. What is the economic value of each visitor? For each new visitor there are new benefits but, at the same time, new costs. There are visitors who, regardless of their income, do not cost much to the tourist area: they move lightly, they are characterized by a weak environmental and social footprint, they bring more advantages than costs. More frequent is, indeed, the case of visitors whose costs for the territory are more than the advantages. A new model of fast tourism – based on a scarce knowledge of the places – is going to develop in Rome: the knowledge of places is substituted by a shallow recognition of consumer symbols of the city. In this case, fast tourism is fed by fast culture, fast food and fast shopping. The historic city risks not being unique and unrepeatable, since triviality and globalized repeatability are enhanced. The visitor yield curve follows the quality of experience curve; quality of experience, thus, has to be the final aim if advantages for both the public and private sector have to be obtained.

Key informants have, then, been asked to express their ideas about the processes of: (i) standardisation, (ii) trivialization, (iii) homologation that may be taking place in the Rome area.

All the interviewed key informants have agreed in recognizing that the three feared risks are real in the case of Rome. Public actors have highlighted that – in order to avoid processes of standardization and trivialization – they are setting out policies at the district scale aimed at sustaining the local uniqueness and specificity. Those policies are addressed to sustain the local handicrafts and to keep under control the expansion of commercial activities specifically destined to tourist consumption. In San Lorenzo district, for instance, the municipality is supporting the brand «made in san Lorenzo». This is an initiative promoted by a network of local craftsmen aimed at distinguishing the true products of the local handicraft from those of global production, often imported from countries with low manpower cost and sold as local souvenirs. For the commercial activities, the municipality has developed actions of control of open spaces occupied by chairs and tables of bars and cafes.

The representatives of the small size retailers and TOs have emphasized the tendency of the European cities towards homologation in order to comply with the wishes of mass tourists. Those representatives have explained that they have to struggle between the temptation to comply with such demand – in order to increase the number of their customers – and the wish to keep a high commercial quality and tourist offer – in order to develop a niche product –. In spite of the fact that public actors declare they have implemented quality policies at the district scale, paying respect and attention to their citizens-electors, both small retailers and TOs report ineffective public policies that, in fact, are favouring the massification of the supply in order to comply with the massification of the demand. Those representatives complain about the lack of care for the public goods and a state of neglect of the city, due to an intentional choice of not making controls. It could even be a lack of capacity to control. In any case this leads to a general degradation.

The representatives of NGOs have expressed their fear of homologation and commodification of the tourist city and have shown the actions they are implementing in order to face the public actor and to raise the citizens' awareness. NGOs warn that if processes of homologation, standardization and trivialization continue, Italy – and, thus, Rome – will lose much in its tourist competitiveness. Global capitals of

emerging countries are, in fact, in the forefront of this issue. Italian cities can survive only if they base their competitiveness on the uniqueness and unrepeatability of their offer, which is the opposite of standardization.

#### 4.3. *Quality of life of residents in the historic city*

Residents are in competition with those who temporarily visit the city (tourists, visitors, commuters, migrant workers) for the use of spaces and services. Competition takes place, in particular, in the use of buildings because of the increase in the demand for non residential uses. In the tourist areas, a significant change can be noticed also in commercial spaces, since the number of shops selling products for occasional customers is increasing due to higher profits. Changes take place because of an excess of demand; this generates higher prices in the real estate and product markets; those create an increase in the cost of life. Beyond a certain economic level it is difficult for traditional residents to maintain their homes in the tourist areas where gentrification processes take place. Tourist uses can contribute to the improvement of economic and social conditions of some of the residents but they can also cause an increase in environmental stresses (air, water, wastes, noise, landscape, smell); in addition they make access to public transports difficult for residents. If negative effects exceed advantages, historic centres may suffer from an alteration of their economic and social structure. This weakens the tourist offer of historic cities where locals – with their habits, uses, and customs – are part of the cultural heritage.

Given this premise, key informants were asked to give their opinion about: (i) the main environmental problems caused by the increase of tourist flows, (ii) the main changes induced by tourist flows that can weaken traditional economic activities, (iii) the changes induced by tourist flows that can revitalize traditional economic activities.

Local authorities have declared they are taking care of the quality of life of residents. One of the main problems they have is acoustic pollution caused by the presence of visitors when, especially at night, they leave the restaurants, pubs and cafes, only to occupy the streets

and squares and keep people awake. Initiatives aimed at controlling the acoustic pollution and at integrating the resident population and visitors have been manifold, for instance by using the squares for cultural initiatives organized by the municipality and managed by cultural and environmental associations. Those initiatives have favoured the meeting of residents and visitors. Other initiatives have been aimed at rediscovering the collective memory of the district through the memory of the residents, especially the elderly people. That memory has been proposed to the visitors. Knowledge generates respect.

NGOs and TOs have shown their concern for the loss of local identity determined by the fact that the residents are escaping. They agree with the public actor in noticing the difficulty of living in places often «submerged» by visitors and tourists, with prices not suitable for the daily life, in an environment used and consumed everyday by a large number of persons exceeding the carrying capacity and not paying the price for it. The representatives of NGOs and TOs highlight the risk of a substitution effect already taking place in tourist areas. In many tourist spaces, offices and shops substitute the residents that are unable to pay high prices for living and rent. Tourist areas are, thus, losing their human resources.

Small size retailers report a process of disappearance of traditional shops as a consequence of the disappearance of the residents: there is a substitution effect of tourist shops with a low quality supply on the traditional shops with high quality supply. There are, thus, two different but converging trends: a residential use of buildings is substituted by an economic use; high quality offer is substituted by low quality offer keeping high prices. That is touristification!

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The research has shown that stakeholders – public authorities, TOs, shop owners, NGOs – are aware of the risks generated by an increase in the number of tourists, of the consequences on the quality of the tourist experience, on the quality of life of the residents. But it seems

that, beside the specific knowledge of risks and impacts, there are specific interests of different groups that could be in conflict. They can be described as in *Table 2*.

*Tab. 2*  
*Potential conflicts among the stakeholders.*

Conflicts among:	Public authorities (various levels)	NGOs	Shop owners (quantity oriented and quality oriented)	TOs (mass and niche)
Public authorities (various levels)	*			
NGOs	*		x +	*
Shop owners (quantity oriented and quality oriented)	+		x	
TOs (mass and niche)		x		*

Source: authors' own elaboration.

Legend:

*Subjects of potential conflicts*

\* Numbers: tourists, visitors and residents in the historic city;

x Quality of the experience of the users in the historic city;

+ Quality of life of residents in the historic city.

It can be asserted that conflicts depend upon different spatial scales. The Public actor risks indeed to be in conflict with itself insomuch as it implements incoherent policies at the metropolitan-communal scale and local-district scale. The same could happen to TOs and commercial entrepreneurs, because of the opposing needs of niche tourists and mass tourists, because of the contrasting characteristics of quantity-oriented and quality-oriented shops. Finally there are NGOs that do not have internal conflicts since the same values persist at the different spatial scales. But they are in conflict with all the other stakeholders.

What can be asserted here is that the future of Rome in terms of tourism – and its survival as original historic city – will depend upon the

balance of interests and strengths that, at the different scales, stakeholders will be able to find.

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## RIASSUNTO

*Il turismo è considerato come una efficace politica per lo sviluppo urbano e per rilanciare aree in declino industriale. L'aumento del numero dei turisti è spesso considerato una sorta di indicatore del successo di una certa politica. Questo non è sempre e necessariamente vero. L'incremento del numero di visitatori non può essere considerato come positivo di per sé, senza prendere in considerazione la qualità dell'esperienza turistica e il «visitor yield». La presenza di turisti può contribuire a migliorare la condizione socio-economica di alcuni residenti ma può anche provocare l'aumento degli stress ambientali. Se gli effetti negativi sono maggiori di quelli positivi i centri storici subiscono un'alterazione della loro struttura ambientale, economica e sociale. Il presente saggio prende in considerazione le contraddizioni interne del turismo urbano nel caso di Roma. I risultati presentati si basano su interviste ai principali «stakeholders» e ai principali «shareholders» in diverso modo coinvolti nelle attività turistiche.*