07. QEPARO, THE PILOT AREA
As a result of desk studies, speaking with local contacts, numerous interviews with stakeholders from the Albanian government, NGO’s, and national tour operators, the options of locations for applying the concept of circular and inclusive place making into practice, were narrowed down to two places in the south of Albania. During a visit to both area’s Qeparo proved to be an almost perfect match to the criteria.

Representative of the ASCU (Albanian Savings and Credit Union) and owner and manager of a local supermarket, Mr. Fotaq Bufi explained a family oriented approach to tourism, small scale agriculture and relatively undeveloped upper Qeparo. He also showed a strong willingness and ambition to work on sustainable development in the area and indicated the presence of entrepreneurs that were motivated to go along in that development. This proved to be right during the mission that followed in March.

But what do we know about Qeparo? How does it fit into the Albanian context? Here is some general information and a rough SWOT analysis based on desk studies and observations.
Qeparo, The Pilot Area
Qeparo is part of a project by German Development Corporation GIZ to promote sustainable tourism. The project has invested heavily in making the area accessible for alternative ways of tourism, mainly focussed on an international market. As part of this, for example bike-routes were mapped and marked, brochures were developed, an image campaign launched, and local entrepreneurs were trained in different skills.
Bike Routes
SWOT Analyses

Strengths

Small Scale Tourism

For years Qeparo has been a place where families go for holiday. The local community have kept out big developers and noisy clubs. This has resulted relatively small number of large investments until last year when a new promenade was constructed.

Qeparo also lies at a point where the four typical territorial zones of Albania come close together. It is thus a perfect starting point for the development of a sustainable tourism model that can strengthen the Riviera, strengthen Qeparo and serve as an example for other parts of Albania.

12 Miles Sea zone
Consider the activity and users as an important part for the municipal plan

Coastal Zone
Ports, harbours, coastal activities, natural sensitive areas (lagoons and wetlands)

Urbanization Zone
City of the first belt, strengthen agriculture to support tourism with food production (foot hills, hills and valleys)

Hinterland
Cities that influence tourism with cultural heritage such as Gjirokastër, Berat, Elbasan

Five zones concept of national territorial plan
Qeparo, The Pilot Area
Diverse Landscape / Diverse Potential of Tourism Products

Qeparo is located in a blessed territorial position, which provides the village area with a broad diversity of landscape typologies. In general the Albanian southern coast is characterized by a unique declination of Mediterranean climate and landscape. Here in fact, mountains are very close to the coast, and the mountainsides steeply dive into the sea; other areas in the Mediterranean have hills next to the seaside, as in Liguria (Italy) or Provence (France), but few have such high peaks so near to the water.

Small Scale Agriculture

The absence of large scale agriculture has its downsides from a one dimensional, economic point of view. However for the development of a integrated circular model for local development it is an advantage. Each individual agro entrepreneur can have a role in creating added value for integrated tourism product. The scale of agriculture and tourism allow for closing local chains: local farmers supplying tourism and tourism adding local farm or production experience to their product portfolio.

Limited Urban Development

Unlike other villages and cities along the Albanian Coast, Qeparo has seen relatively modest development in the past years. This has established the village as a preferred location for high-end local visitors, especially families. The local territorial plans, currently under review but not expected to change significantly, support this position in limiting construction basically to the areas currently build up (yellow). This leaves to be expected that the urban fabric will consolidate and densify but also that large areas along the coast, such as the agricultural valley of Qeparo will be free from permanent construction. It is also foreseen to establish an Eco Camping in the Area (T3, see also Case D6).

Functional zoning plan of Qeparo and surroundings
**Weaknesses**

**Bad Infrastructure**

Good infrastructure does not only increase safety, it also increases everyday comfort. With good infrastructure children are able to play outside and the tourists have a comfortable walk to the beach instead of going by car. A good example of the negative effects resulting from the focus on car traffic in recent infrastructure developments are the sidewalks blocked by trees, which makes it impossible for pedestrians, let alone someone with a stroller or wheelchair, to use it.
No Guidelines for Building

Qeparo owes its beauty to the landscape and architecture that blends into the surrounding landscape, using local materials such as stone and wood. It is this quality that will make high end tourist visit and make the tourist come back. By building hotels and houses that do not fit in this balanced environment the intrinsic value of Qeparo is endangered.
If Albania wants to move ahead and attract more diverse, more high-end tourists, a change of attitude towards public space needs to take place. Waste management, maintenance of façades, infrastructure and public green facilities must be taken seriously. Management of public space is one of the key enabling factors for development of Qeparo as well.

A certain scale of agriculture is necessary to provide for the needs of the local community as well as visitors. Furthermore a good balance between agriculture, landscape and real-estate is crucial in a sustainable development model. For both reasons, it is important to have a clear picture of land ownership of the numerous parcels of land in and around Qeparo. In many cases it is not clear who owns the land. In other cases more than one claim exists. Yet, in other cases owners are abroad and hang on to the land for speculative reasons.
Lack of Vision on Tourism Services and Products

When entering Qeparo there is a visible lack of vision and tourism strategy for the village and the surrounding area. The business is focused too much on the summer months. There are a great number of hotels and bed and breakfasts but these are hardly visible and there is no cooperation between the different service providers. For the guest, Qeparo is also not recognizable as one destination. There is a lack of product development considering the customer journey and a respective communication. There is no recognized standard for services and accommodations.

Lack of Professional Workforce

Young people move away from the village and only come back for high season. This prevents them from developing and working on their future in the village. A number of young people from Qeparo have indicated that if they saw sufficient opportunities they would move back to where their roots are.

Lack of Cooperation

In order to make any initiative work, sustainable cooperation is essential. The history of clans and families and a traumatic period of forced cooperation during communism have left Albanians with an individualistic approach of business with obvious consequences. This is one of the biggest challenges in Albania and Qeparo is no exception. People tend to not work together and are suspicious of people from outside of their family or personal network.

“It was almost impossible to find a cook for our restaurant Veranda, one of the biggest problems is that all young people want to make a fortune as soon as possible.”

- Marinela Papajorji, Restaurant owner in Qeparo

Qeparo, The Pilot Area
SWOT Analyses

Opportunities

Future Entry Point to Riviera

When the new road between Vlora and the Riviera is finished, Qeparo will be right at the new entry point to the coast. This position will provide Qeparo with a unique opportunity. As a first stop, it can play a role in informing visitors of all that the Riviera has to offer. When considered the other way around, it is the exit point for tourists returning to the north and thus can be a place where tourist buy local products to take home.

Shifting of International Demand for Tourism Destinations

Due to safety issues and changing demand, international tourists are on the move. Countries such as Turkey and Egypt are experiencing a decline in number of visitors. These tourists will obviously look for other destinations. By reaching and triggering the right segments of these travelers, the Albanian Riviera can benefit from these trends. The effects of this trend are already evident. For example, Dutch Tour operator Sawadee experienced a 100% increase of organised holidays to Albania over 1 year.

Upcoming Forms of Tourism such as Adventure and Culinary Tourism

Qeparo has an opportunity to position itself as a culinary destination or as a gateway to adventure activities in the hinterland. Both of these types of tourism are on the rise in Western Europe and in Albania there are signs that domestic travellers are starting to appreciate these as well. There is a clear interest in slow food restaurants, juice bars in Tirana, food festivals, a rising demand for rafting, hiking and cycling etc. Arber Togani (winner of Master chef Albania and member of the expert team) has shown that the potential of the area is enormous.

Upcoming Demand for Sustainable and Healthy Products and Services

The culinary and traditional trends in Tirana, but also the increasing public debate on urban development, quality of education, and energy consumption show that there is a growing awareness and demand for sustainable and high quality produce and experience. Starting assumedly with the upper class, highly educated Albanians from Tirana and Durres, this trend can be expected to reach a broader population soon.
Return migration from Greece (and Italy)

The Albanian diaspora is the migration dynamic that, after the fall of the communist regime in 1992, hit the country depriving it of a big part of its human capital. In just a few years, more than 800,000 Albanians migrated mainly towards Greece, Italy, Turkey, Germany and the United States. After the 2008 financial crisis, Greece and to a lesser extent Italy, lost their economical appeal to Albanians who did and are still (partially) coming back to their own country. Such return migration can be temporary or permanent; this human capital of ‘natives’ coming back will only stay if the economical conditions will allow them to achieve a certain well-fare and not force them to move, once again.

Today Qeparo, as many other villages in the coastal area, is facing the return migration, and has the opportunity to invest in it, revitalizing the economy with new forces. Tourism and agro-tourism and the landscape with all of its products can be the starting point for new prosperity.
Development of Local Cuisine

There is potential for development of a local and traditional cuisine. Trends in Tirana show growing demand for traditional food experience. There are a number of restaurants and hotels that could provide this traditional food experience in and around Qeparo.

Hotel Riviera

The Hotel is located on the beach, offering great views and a nice ambience. It has its own restaurant located on the ground floor, which is open not only to guests of the hotel but also for other visitors. The location, the interior and the stone oven create an enjoyable atmosphere.

Hotel Te Stefi

Located next to the beach is Hotel Te Stefi with a beautiful canopied restaurant that faces a promenade. Here you can enjoy a meal while enjoying the stunning view.
Qeparo Bakery

In this bakery one can find many delicious pastries. According to locals, it is also the place to find the best bread in the whole Riviera area.

Veranda Bar Restaurant Qeparo

The Verdana Restaurant is the first place you see when you enter Qeparo. It is a well known and favored location for coffee and food in the area and is suitable for groups of all different sizes. It welcomes everyone to sit and rest and it is open all day, all year long.
Crossing Border Trips
Cross Border Potential

Tourists often visit Albania as part of a larger tour that includes neighbouring countries. On the other hand, there is a large population of Albanians in neighbouring countries. This, along with the fact that the European Union’s pre-accession assistance often focuses on cross-border projects, to foster peace and understanding in historically tumultuous areas like the Balkans, suggest the design of links and routes to destinations outside of the country.

For example, the recent establishment of a hiking route in the north of Albania ‘Peaks of the Balkans’ crosses Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo is a great success.

Via Egnatia, an ancient Roman trade route between Durres and Istanbul, is under development and appears very promising, following the success of transcontinental hiking routes such as the Santiago de Compostela.

For sailors and cruise ships, since Albania is not yet part of the European Union, checking in at one of Albanian ports allows vessels to reduce the duration of their stay in European Waters.
SWOT Analyses

Threats

Lack of Enforcement of Regulations

Although regulations are often established, in several cases there is a lack of reinforcement and compliance. In Qeparo, we did, unfortunately, witness an extreme case.

During our trip, we learned from the local community about the presence of an old aqueduct that used to bring water, for irrigation, from the river in Borsch to the dry agricultural lands of Qeparo. The aqueduct doesn’t work anymore because the water level at the source cannot reach the channel. The water, in fact, is used by a Hydro Power Plant in Borsch to such an extent that the river cannot feed the irrigation infrastructure anymore. This situation is only possible because the company owns a contract that allows them to get around regulations. The power plant, in theory, can only use up to 70% of the water during autumn, winter and spring and 30% during dry season. The regulation is clear, and if respected it will not allow the dry aqueduct situation to happen.

Waste Management Issues

One of the most urgent improvements is the ubiquitous wastelands in the country. A seemingly simple problem however is complicated to solve in reality. A formal waste collection system is only in place for one year now and currently limited to collection on the main streets. On the positive side, Himara now has a functioning waste disposal site and that collection is gradually expanded. However, old habits cannot be changed quickly and residents often prefer to dump waste on a village site. This wasteland may be is out of sight for the city residents, but can be visible to visitors to the village.
Future Professional Workforce Move Away

From interviews with the young generation of Qeparo, we arrived at a clear picture of young people migrating to the capital and abroad. The opportunities offered locally are not enough to attract this essential group back to their place of birth. This is one of the most important factors for all future development. Each concept, idea or plan should consider the need to turn this development around and make people (at least periodically) move back to their hometown.

Climate Change

As mentioned before, climate change will lead not only to higher temperatures, but also to more extreme weather events such as longer droughts, as well as more frequent and heavier rains. This calls for making agriculture and the wider landscape more adaptive to such changes. Reforestation of the hills and mountains in the Riviera will contribute to reducing floods and erosion by capturing water. This source of water can also be used for irrigation. The droughts also call for renovating and improving irrigation systems that have deteriorated or are out of use. Better soil management, through increasing the organic matter in the soil, will also enhance the resilience of crops to droughts and may contribute to erosion prevention.
This report has been prepared in collaboration of CITYFÖRSTER, MVO Nederland and:

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