



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Single Cycle Degree programme
in Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural
Activities

Final Thesis

Applying Impact Assessment Practices to Cultural Routes: the Case of Phoenicians' Route

Supervisor

Ch. Prof. Remi Wacogne

Assistant supervisor

Lo Schiavo Camilla, PhD

Graduand

Margherita Crociara

Matriculation Number 905672

Academic Year

2026 / 2027

Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

La sottoscritta Margherita Crociara, matricola numero 905672, iscritta presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Economics and Management of Arts and Cultural Activities (EGArt), autrice della tesi di laurea: “Applying Impact Assessment Practices to Cultural Routes: the Case of Phoenicians’ Route”, relatore Prof. Remi Wacogne, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall’art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall’art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

DICHIARA

Di aver fatto ricorso a tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale generativa per supportare vari aspetti della ricerca e della scrittura della tesi di laurea, in particolare

- *ChatGPT Free* è stato utilizzato come supporto alla revisione e al perfezionamento stilistico dei testi, con l'obiettivo di migliorarne la leggibilità e la qualità formale. In tutti i capitoli.
- *Google NotebookLM* è stato usato come supporto alla gestione della bibliografia e alla consultazione delle norme redazionali. In tutti i capitoli.

In nessun caso tali strumenti sono stati utilizzati per la generazione ex novo di contenuti testuali.

DICHIARA INOLTRE

che tutto il materiale generato dall'IA è stato attentamente verificato, rivisto e rielaborato dall'autore/dall'autrice, che si assume la piena responsabilità per la qualità, l'accuratezza e l'integrità scientifica del lavoro.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Remi Wacogne, for his guidance, and for the great availability he consistently demonstrated throughout the entire research process.

I am also deeply grateful to my co-supervisor, Dr Camilla Lo Schiavo, for helping me navigate the complex field of impact assessment, for her insightful comments and corrections.

My heartfelt thanks go to the Phoenicians' Route and, in particular, to its Director, Antonio Barone, for his warm welcome and for giving me the opportunity to participate in numerous meetings and activities promoted by the Route. Through these experiences and his invaluable suggestions, I was not only able to gather essential information for this thesis but also gained access to a network of experts whose knowledge and perspectives greatly enriched this research. Among them, I would especially like to thank Dr Giusy Cardia, who was always willing to assist me during moments of uncertainty, and the Center of Advanced Studies on Tourism Centro (CAST) of Bologna, particularly Dr Rebecca Rosetti, who provided an additional perspective on the topics addressed in this study.

Above all, I would like to thank my parents for their unconditional love, for always putting me first, and for giving me the freedom and support to pursue my interests and aspirations.

I am also grateful to my boyfriend, with whom I have shared both my undergraduate and postgraduate academic journeys, for his constant encouragement and support throughout these years.

Finally, I would like to thank all my friends: my lifelong friends, my fellow students from the master's programme, and the friends I met during my year at the dormitory in Venice.

Applying Impact Assessment Practices to Cultural Routes: the Case of Phoenicians' Route

Margherita Crociara

Abstract

Cultural Routes have increasingly been recognised as instruments for territorial development, heritage valorisation, cultural cooperation, and sustainable tourism. Despite their growing importance within European cultural policies, the evaluation of their impacts remains an underdeveloped field of research. This thesis investigates the feasibility, limitations, and potential of impact assessment practices when applied to Cultural Routes, with particular reference to the Phoenicians' Route, a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe.

Key words: cultural routes, impact assessment, Phoenicians' Route, Council of Europe, performance evaluation

Table of contents

1. Introduction	6
1.1 The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe	6
1.1.1 Evolution of the programme	7
1.1.2 Impacts and potential impacts of Cultural Routes	8
1.2 The Impact Assessment of Cultural Routes	9
1.3 Research overview and methodology	10
2. Literature review	12
2.1 The importance of an Impact Assessment of Cultural Routes	12
2.2 Impact and Impact Assessment: Definition and overview	13
2.3 Limitations of IA on cultural routes	20
2.4 The Complexity of Impact Assessment for Cultural Routes	24
2.5 From Challenges to Applications	25
3. Cultural Routes' Impact Assessment	27
3.1 Impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs' Innovation and Competitiveness	27
3.2 Socio-economic Impacts of the Camino to Finisterre	31
3.3 European Cultural Routes and sustainable development: the case-study of the Via Francigena	32
3.4 The Economic Impact of Pilgrimage in Galicia	33
3.5 Monitoring Sustainability Along Cultural Routes: The MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model	34
3.6 Effects of the Restoration of the Tuscan Segment of the Via Francigena on Tourist Overnight Stays in Traversed Municipalities and Neighbouring Areas	38
3.7 The network of the Way of St. James in Poland-genesis, development as well as religious, cultural and socio-economic impact.	40
3.8 Mapping hospitality in Friuli Venezia Giulia along the Romea Strata	41
3.9 Cross-case Synthesis and Emerging Patterns	42
4. The case study: the Phoenicians' Route	47
4.1 An Impact Assessment of the Phoenicians' Route: constraints and opportunities	50
4.1.1 The Feasibility of Impact Assessment for the Phoenicians' Route	50
4.1.2 Relevance as Foundational Principle of Impact Assessment	50
4.1.3 The Irrelevance of Impact Assessment in Major Destinations	52
4.1.4 The Conditions for a Feasible Assessment	53
4.1.5 From Impact Assessment to Performance Evaluation	54
4.1.6 Impact Assessment as an inadequate method to evaluate Phoenicians' Route	55
5. Conclusion	57
References	59

1. Introduction

The practice of impact assessment (IA) in the cultural sector has been gaining increasing importance within the European context, as it represents a significant tool for legitimacy, accountability, and feedback. For several years now, the Council of Europe (CoE) has also recognized the importance of such evaluation processes. In particular, with regard to the Cultural Routes Programme, the Council of Europe has acknowledged the value of impact assessment, and the scientific community has begun exploring methodologies and approaches for implementing effective evaluation frameworks.

Before proceeding, however, it is essential to clearly define what the Programme of Cultural Routes certified by the Council of Europe entails.

1.1 The Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe

The emergence of cultural routes as a recognised policy instrument has deep historical roots, as some itineraries had existed for centuries before being formally acknowledged, while others were deliberately constructed in more recent times. What remains constant across both cases is the centrality of heritage as a tool for the construction of collective identities.

Since the early 1980s, the CoE developed a programme based on cultural routes as a strategy for identity construction (Paquette, 2025). The programme rests on the conviction that cultural routes represent direct and universal means of implementing policies centred on the value of cultural heritage for promoting cohesive societies, the necessity for intercultural dialogue, and the right of access to culture for all. By linking local heritage to broader movements of ideas, and by encouraging collaborative grassroots initiatives, cultural routes give European citizens a sense of ownership and pride in their heritage as an element of a shared European patrimony (Berti, Denu & Mariotti, 2013).

In 1984, the first cultural route of the CoE, the Way of St. James, formally recognised the route and laid down the basic principles of the future programme (Paquette, 2025). It was precisely in those years that the Council of Europe became aware not only of the value the Way of St. James held for religious pilgrims, but also of its considerable touristic significance. This dual recognition prompted the idea of replicating the model, in a flexible and non-prescriptive manner, and extending it to other routes not tied to religious pilgrimage. Therefore, between 1987 and 1997, a total of five roads were recognised under this expanding framework (Paquette, 2025). The programme continued to develop institutionally: in 1998, the European Institute for Cultural Routes (EICR) was established as a partnership between the Council of Europe and the Ministry of Culture of Luxembourg. Crucially, the Council of Europe did not envision becoming the direct operator of cultural routes, but rather the administrator of a certification process granted to route projects insofar as they adhered to the Council's broader cultural strategy. A further consolidation came in

2013, when a new resolution introduced a series of amendments through the Enlarged Partial Agreement (EPA) on Cultural Routes.

Cultural routes have historically resulted from both peaceful and hostile encounters, yet they share a number of common dimensions that transcend their original functions, offering an exceptional setting for a culture of peace grounded in ties of shared history, tolerance, respect, and appreciation for cultural diversity (ICOMOS, 2008). In this sense, cultural routes constitute a unique example of cultural international cooperation that originates precisely at the grassroots level: they operate simultaneously at the level of the individual, the community and the wider European policy.

Berti, Denu and Mariotti (2013) underline that a cultural route may be understood as a complex cultural good and as a territorial project, encompassing different aspects of cultural expression and falling within the contemporary framework for interpreting heritage. As noticeable in this definition, it is important to note that in the case of the Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe the word "route" should not be understood exclusively in the restricted sense of a physical pathway, but rather in a more conceptual and general sense, as a <<network of sites or geographical areas sharing a common theme, taking different forms according to the identity of each site or area>> (Berti, Denu & Mariotti, 2013, 32). In fact, of the 25 new routes created after 2013 EPA, only two were designed around a historical trade route, the Danube Wine Route and the Transhumance Trails, while all others are built around a historical figure, a historical theme, an intangible heritage practice, or built heritage. In other words, most new routes consist of clusters of sites and spaces, where the itinerary serves as a proposition to connect and engage with the cultural environment (Paquette, 2025).

It is worth noting, moreover, that the landscape of cultural routes extends well beyond those formally certified by the Council of Europe, encompassing interregional routes recognised by national Ministries of Culture, routes acknowledged at the regional level, and purely local itineraries. Notably, while CoE certified cultural routes often have a “virtual structure”, other cultural routes are typically itineraries, where all the sites and areas are connected by a singular uninterrupted pathway. Even if the present research mainly focuses on the cultural routes certified by the Council of Europe, also some studies on other itineraries will be presented.

1.1.1 Evolution of the programme

As of today, the cultural routes officially recognised by the Council of Europe are 49, spanning all 47 member states as well as 13 signatory countries of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes. Among these routes, alongside the well-known Way of St. James, one finds the Phoenician Route, the European Mozart Ways, Iter Vitis, ATRIUM (Architecture of Totalitarian Regimes of the 20th Century in Europe's Urban Memory), the Romea Strata, and many others. Compared to their early configuration,

cultural routes have progressively extended their networks, which may now encompass municipalities and entire regions, associative and cultural stakeholders such as tour operators, museums and heritage sites, small and medium enterprises, as well as universities, schools, and research centres. This expansion of the network has proceeded in step with a broadening of the range of activities and projects that routes are able to undertake, responding to new contemporary challenges and increasingly participating in the implementation of European-funded projects.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the considerable heterogeneity that characterises the programme: significant differences exist among routes in terms of network size, number of members, scale and quantity of projects undertaken, and public visibility. These disparities are not solely attributable to the relative youth of more recently established routes; they also reflect the specific characteristics of each theme and territories involved, and not least the size and competencies of the teams responsible for managing each itinerary.

Nonetheless, most routes share at least an aspiration towards expansion, and the programme as a whole is in constant numerical growth. At a conference held in Aquileia on the “Euro-Mediterranean dialogue of the Phoenician Route”, which the author had the opportunity to attend, Patrizia Battilani, Professor of Economic History at the University of Bologna and an expert in cultural tourism who collaborates with the ATRIUM route, argued that cultural routes are increasingly establishing themselves as a new form of cultural institution, representing a major organisational innovation within the broader heritage landscape.

1.1.2 Impacts and potential impacts of Cultural Routes

Scientific literature and institutional reports consistently categorise cultural routes as strategic instruments for integrated territorial development, generating positive outcomes across economic, social, cultural, and environmental domains (Božić & Tomić, 2016; CoE of Europe, 2011; CoE, 2015).

From an economic standpoint, cultural routes serve as catalysts for regional growth and tourism diversification, possessing an immense potential for small and medium enterprise generation, clustering, and networking (CoE, 2011). By linking disparate attractions into a unified thematic framework, they increase the overall appeal of the tourism product and function as important strategies for tourism development (Božić & Tomić, 2016). In practice, this translates into concrete territorial benefits: cultural routes revitalise rural and peripheral areas by encouraging occupational diversification and providing the impetus to improve local infrastructures and services (Cavallaro & Costanzo, 2024).

In the socio-cultural sphere, cultural routes function as channels for intercultural dialogue and foster a deeper understanding of shared European history through the cross-border exchange of ideas and people (CoE, 2015). They provide a model for grassroots cultural cooperation that offers important lessons about identity and citizenship through a participative experience of culture (CoE, 2015). Moreover, cultural routes are devoted to preserve the rich tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Europe.

Regarding their environmental and territorial dimensions, cultural routes contribute significantly to the sustainability of travel and tourism (Božić & Tomić, 2016). By distributing visitors along a path rather than concentrating them in specific tourism hotspots, they facilitate the management of carrying capacity and reduce the negative environmental impacts associated with mass tourism (Božić & Tomić, 2016). At the same time, they guide and promote the protection of diverse, living cultural landscapes (Berti & Mariotti, 2015).

1.2 The Impact Assessment of Cultural Routes

Nevertheless, despite the broad scholarly and policy consensus regarding the significance of Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe as an instrument for territorial development and diffusion of European values (CoE, 2011; CoE, 2015; Interreg Europe, 2020), more than two decades after the inception of this programme, a relevant scarcity of tools to measure cultural routes' social, economic, and environmental impact persists.

The gap is not new, nor is the awareness of it: As early as 2011, the Council of Europe acknowledged the need for <<better performance and impact evaluation tools>> (CoE, 2011, 5). This concern was subsequently reiterated in the 2020 Routes 4U report on Policies for the Danube region, which called for efforts to improve methodological frameworks in order to provide better statistics regarding the Cultural Routes performance, including the development of sets of indicators for monitoring and evaluation of the Cultural Routes and notably assessing their actual and potential economic and social value in a more systematic manner (CoE, 2020, as cited in Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022).

The development of impact evaluation models is a persistent and structurally complex challenge. Mariotti (2015) has noted that data collection together with the definition of best performance indicators is a critical issue, arguing that the assessment of social, economic or cultural impact of Cultural Routes on the areas of interest requires a type of interdisciplinary research for which special tools of analysis, methodology and approach had not been formally developed yet.

Moreover, according to Gasparini and Villalobos (2022), the lack of an impact evaluation framework for cultural routes results in a constant "underestimation" of these multi-dimensional instruments as local development tools, a significant consequence given the broader role these routes are expected to play in regional and territorial contexts.

1.3 Research overview and methodology

For these reasons, the present thesis aims to further investigate this topic, not with the ambition of providing a definitive solution to the problem or fully addressing the existing research gap, but rather to systematize the knowledge produced thus far on the impact assessment of cultural routes and to derive useful insights from it. Accordingly, the first research question is formulated as follows:

How can the impact of cultural routes on the territories they traverse be assessed, and what opportunities and challenges does this evaluation processes entail?

Subsequently, the thesis focuses on the Council of Europe Cultural Route “Phoenicians’ Route” as a case study. The discussion on impact assessment will be applied to this route, for which such an evaluation has not yet been systematically conducted. In a manner complementary to the first research question, the objective is to highlight both the potential and the limitations of applying impact assessment methodologies to this specific cultural route. The second research question is therefore:

To what extent are existing impact assessment tools capable of capturing the value that the Phoenicians’ Route generates for the territories and communities that are part of its network?

More in detail, the present research is structured into three main sections. The first two are based primarily on a systematic literature review and answer to the first research question, whereas the final section, focusing on the Phoenicians’ Route, adopts a more empirical and exploratory approach and answer to the second research question.

The first section provides a theoretical overview of impact assessment, discussing its main characteristics and the different approaches developed to measure economic, social, cultural, and environmental impacts. Particular attention is then devoted to the principal limitations of impact assessment in the context of Cultural Routes, which subsequently serve as an analytical framework for the remainder of the study.

The second section examines the existing applications of impact assessment methodologies to Cultural Routes. The selected case studies are analysed with particular attention to the methods employed, the dimensions of impact considered, and the challenges encountered during implementation. The eight studies examined were not selected from a larger sample; rather, they represent all the cases that the author was able to identify through independent research and recommendations from experts in the field.

The final section focuses on the Phoenicians’ Route. After introducing its organisational structure, governance model, and operational characteristics, the findings emerging from the literature review are applied to assess the feasibility and relevance of impact assessment in the context of the route and to explore alternative evaluation approaches.

The research identifies several recurring challenges in the evaluation of Cultural Routes, particularly territorial heterogeneity, methodological fragmentation, and the scarcity of route-specific data. It also highlights the predominance of economic impact assessments and the concentration of existing applications on a limited number of routes. Finally, the case of the Phoenicians' Route suggests that traditional impact assessment may not represent the most appropriate evaluation framework, pointing instead towards performance evaluation as a potentially more suitable approach.

2. Literature review

2.1 The importance of an Impact Assessment of Cultural Routes

The ability to map social, economic and environmental impacts is <<essential for the sustainable development of Cultural Routes, quality management of their tangible and intangible heritage, and communication with citizens, taxpayers, political leaders, investors and other stakeholders>> (CoE, 2015, 101). Furthermore, impact evaluation has a significant importance in future planning, as it can give fundamental indications on how to direct future development, investments and improvements (Božić & Tomić, 2016). Finally, Page (2009) and Kunaeva (2012) observe that the ability to measure the potential and actual impacts of tourism on the host community is crucial to understanding community attitudes toward tourism, a challenge that applies with particular force to cultural itineraries, whose effects on local communities are by nature diffuse, long-term, and resistant to quantification through conventional metrics.

The growing importance of impact assessment (IA) for Cultural Routes is closely linked to broader shifts in public policy and funding regimes, particularly the increasing demand for evidence-based policymaking alongside sustained constraints on public expenditure following global economic downturns. Within this context, cultural initiatives are progressively required to demonstrate their socio-economic relevance to secure and maintain financial support (Khovanova Rubicondo, 2015). Cultural Routes, as transnational and territorially embedded policy instruments, are no exception to this trend.

Such initiatives are now required to demonstrate their contribution to societal well-being and to local, regional, or national economic development. Their contributions are commonly assessed through indicators related to skills development, employment creation, SME growth, and improvements in community well-being. (Khovanova Rubicondo, 2015).

The same authors underline that, within this framework, cultural heritage and cultural initiatives have traditionally been associated with non-economic outcomes such as place branding, identity reinforcement, and enhanced quality of life. However, over recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of their role as drivers of local economic development, innovation, and entrepreneurship. Cultural Routes, in particular, are increasingly framed within this expanded understanding, as they combine heritage valorisation with territorial development strategies aimed at stimulating economic activity and fostering transnational cooperation. Therefore <<External funding and support for the Routes is likely to be increasingly contingent on the extent to which they can demonstrate the contribution they make to local economic growth, especially in terms of business and employment>> (CoE, 2011, 62).

However, as Cicerchia (2021) sharply notes, these new developments are part of a growing condition in which <<art must earn its living>> (44). On the one hand, the legitimisation of cultural

investment increasingly requires the capacity to report and quantify results, with quantification often perceived as the most credible form of evidence. On the other hand, the actual availability of quantitative data suitable for measuring impacts remains limited and is often recognised as insufficient to capture the complexity of certain territorial policy interventions, such as Cultural Routes.

Before directly addressing the limitations of impact assessment (IA) in the context of cultural routes, it is first necessary to clarify what is meant by impact assessment, as well as to examine its applications and key characteristics.

2.2 Impact and Impact Assessment: Definition and overview

Before discussing the concept of Impact Assessment, it is first necessary to clarify the notion of impact itself. Indeed, any discussion of impact evaluation must begin by addressing a fundamental question: what is an impact, and what does it consist of? Although the literature provides a variety of definitions, they generally converge around a common understanding of impact as a long-term change generated by a specific intervention.

According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019), impact is defined as the long-term change in the conditions of people, institutions, or the environment to which an intervention has contributed, either partially or fully. This definition encompasses both positive and negative effects, as well as primary and secondary consequences, whether direct or indirect, intended or unintended (OECD, 2019; Rogers, 2014). Impact therefore extends beyond the immediate results of an intervention and concerns the broader transformations that occur over time as a consequence of a project's activities.

Within the context of social, cultural, and territorial development initiatives, impact is often understood as the portion of observed change that can reasonably be attributed to a specific intervention, over and above what would have occurred in its absence. This notion introduces the concept of the counterfactual, namely the hypothetical scenario representing what would have happened if the intervention had never taken place. Furthermore, impact is frequently associated with the concept of sustainability, meaning its ability to maintain long term benefits for individuals and the collective while keeping an economic and financial balance (Culture Indicators 2030, 2019).

The concept of impact is typically situated within the broader framework of the “Theory of Change” (ToC), a conceptual model that seeks to explain how and why a particular intervention is expected to generate desired results. According to Rogers (2014), a Theory of Change is a conceptual roadmap that explains how and why specific activities are understood to produce a series of results that contribute to achieving the final intended impacts. This theory typically consists of two parts: a theory about how change comes about (e.g., social or individual transformation) and a theory about how the specific intervention will

trigger that change. It is considered a fundamental building block for impact evaluation because it provides the framework for identifying what data to collect and how to analyse it.

Impact is contained within a Theory of Change as the final intended result in a causal sequence known as a results chain. The structure of this chain generally includes several levels:

- Inputs: The resources used (financial, human, material), in order for the organization to implement some activities.
- Outputs: The immediate products or deliverables (e.g., number of workshops held) of the activities.
- Outcomes: The short-term and medium-term effects or behavioral changes resulting from the outputs.
- Impact: The ultimate long-term change.

This results-chain framework constitutes a central analytical lens for the present study. It will be used to assess the extent to which existing methodologies actually measure impacts, as opposed to outputs or outcomes, thereby addressing the conceptual ambiguities that often characterise impact assessment practice.

Having clarified the meaning of impact, it is equally important to reflect on the concept of assessment. While impact refers to a change or effect, assessment concerns the process through which that change is examined and evaluated. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an assessment can be defined as <<the act of judging or deciding the amount, value, quality, or importance of something, or the judgment or decision that is made>>¹. In the context of impact assessment, this implies a systematic process aimed at determining the nature, magnitude, significance, and value of the changes generated by an intervention.

By bringing together all the definitions discussed above, it is possible to formulate a general understanding of Impact Assessment (IA) while distinguishing between its two principal forms: ex-ante impact assessment and ex-post impact assessment. Although both approaches share the objective of analysing the consequences of an intervention, they differ substantially in terms of timing, purpose, and methodological approach.

Ex-ante impact assessment is primarily concerned with anticipating the future consequences of proposed actions before decisions are made or interventions are implemented. In the literature, it is commonly defined as a <<process of identifying the future consequences of a current or proposed action>> (Partal & Dunphy, 2016, 2; Sagnia, 2004, 3; Ashrafi et al., 2022, 1). More specifically, it can be understood as a <<process aimed at identifying, predicting, and evaluating the potential impacts of a proposed intervention before any major decisions are taken or irreversible commitments are made>> (Jo et al., 2022,

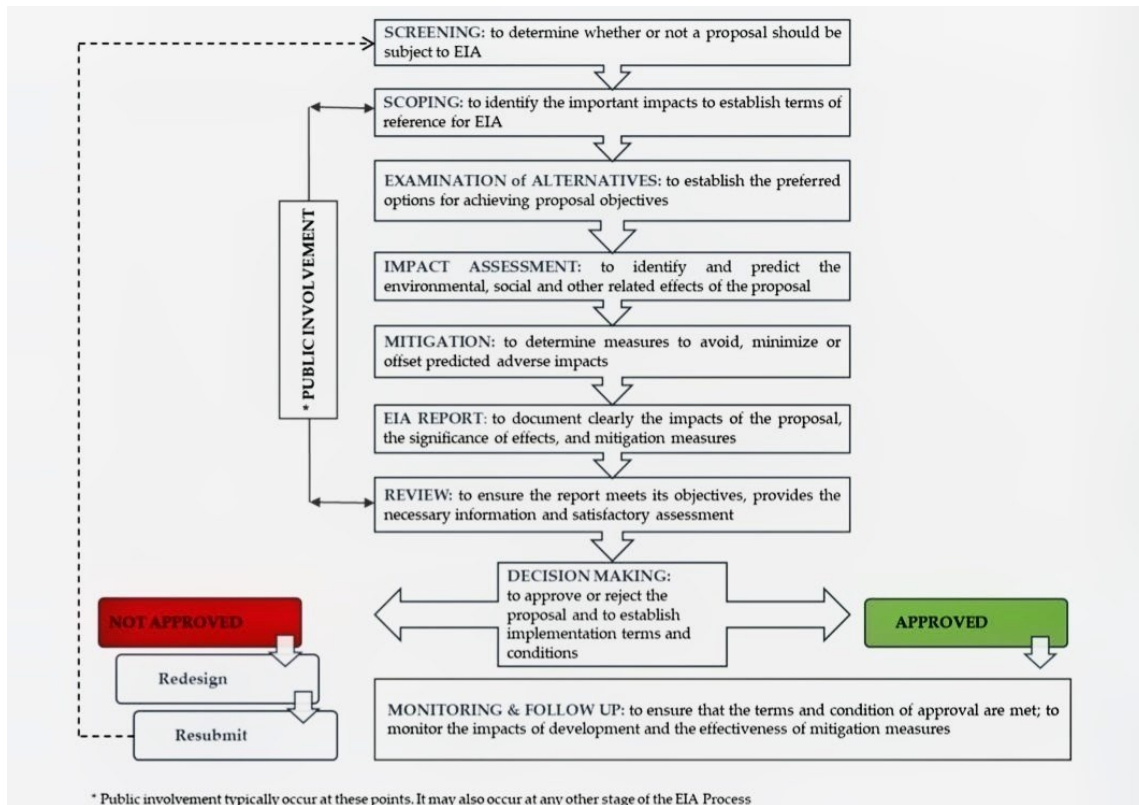
¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/assessment>

59). The purpose of such assessment is to anticipate both positive and negative consequences, thereby enabling decision-makers to mitigate adverse effects while enhancing potential benefits (Jo et al., 2022). From a methodological perspective, ex ante impact assessment begins with the identification of a need or problem requiring intervention. This initial phase involves defining the objectives that the proposed action intends to achieve and constructing a Theory of Change linking planned activities to expected outcomes and impacts. Its primary function is therefore prospective, supporting planning and decision-making by providing evidence regarding the likely consequences of alternative courses of action.

In contrast, ex-post impact assessment is undertaken after an intervention has been implemented and focuses on understanding the effects that have actually occurred. As Partal and Dunphy (2016) note, impact assessment is not exclusively a predictive tool; it may also be employed <<at the opposite end of the decision-making process, to understand what has happened as a result of a line of action>> (3). The objective of ex-post assessment is therefore retrospective, seeking to determine whether an intervention has achieved its intended outcomes and impacts and to identify any unintended consequences that may have emerged during implementation. This understanding is reflected in the UNESCO guidelines for IAs, which emphasise that impact assessment <<should start at the earliest consideration of a proposed action [...] and should continue during and after the development and execution of the action>> (Jo et al., 2022, 8). Methodologically, ex-post impact assessment differs from ex-ante in the fact that, rather than beginning with the identification of needs, ex post assessment starts from the analysis of inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes that have already occurred. Through the examination of quantitative and qualitative data, evaluators seek to determine the extent to which observed changes can be attributed to the intervention and whether these changes correspond to the intended impacts outlined in the original Theory of Change.

Despite their differences, ex-ante and ex-post impact assessments should not be regarded as mutually exclusive approaches. Rather, they represent complementary components of a broader evaluative process: Together, they provide a comprehensive framework for understanding, managing, and evaluating change.

Figure 1. Ashrafi et al., 2002. *Figure 1. The main steps of the EIA procedure.*



This figure illustrates that, as already noted, ex-ante and ex-post impact assessment methodologies are effectively employed in combination, with the aim of establishing a virtuous cycle of continuous learning and improvement.

The literature review conducted for this study reveals the existence of a wide range of impact assessment approaches, each developed to address specific types of interventions, sectors, and policy objectives. The following sections present those forms of impact assessment considered most relevant to the context of Cultural Routes. The purpose of this overview is not only descriptive but also exploratory for the first research question.

■ Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)

Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) represents one of the most established and influential impact assessment frameworks. It is generally conceived as a multidisciplinary and comprehensive approach to evaluating the consequences of development interventions. As Morgan (2012) observes, <<under the umbrella of EIA a number of specific forms have developed since the 1970s>> (6), highlighting its role as a broad conceptual framework from which several specialised assessment approaches have emerged.

The International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA, 2009) defines EIA as <<the process of identifying, predicting, evaluating and mitigating the biophysical, social, and other relevant effects of development proposals prior to major decisions being taken and commitments made.>> (19).

A further specification is provided by the 2002 toolkit UNESCO, who emphasise that EIA is fundamentally a project level assessment tool. In other words, it is designed to support the planning,

implementation, and management of individual projects.

- **Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)**

Unlike EIA, which operate primarily at the project level, Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is applied to higher levels of decision-making, including policies, plans, and programmes. According to the UNESCO toolkit, its purpose is <<to inform planners, decision-makers and affected publics on the sustainability of such decisions>>. (62).

SEA therefore adopts a broader and more strategic perspective. As noted by Wood and Djeddour (1989, as cited in Ashrafi et al., 2022) while project-level assessments focus on individual developments, SEA addresses the wider policy frameworks within which such developments occur. This characteristic makes SEA particularly relevant in situations where long-term territorial planning and governance processes are under consideration.

- **Social Impact Assessment (SIA)**

Among the various specialised forms of impact assessment that have developed within the broader EIA framework, Social Impact Assessment (SIA) occupies a particularly important position. Vanclay (2003) defines SIA as: <<the process of analysing, monitoring and managing the intended and unintended social consequences, both positive and negative, of planned interventions [...] and any social change processes invoked by those interventions>> (1). Moreover, he adds that social impact assessment should be an instrument of development towards more sustainable and equitable environments.

Within this perspective, a social impact is understood as an experience, either real or perceived, affecting an individual, family, household, community, or society (Vanclay, 1999).

Such a definition reflects an extremely broad understanding of the social dimension and effectively positions SIA as another umbrella concept capable of encompassing a wide range of social phenomena.

More recently, however, this broad interpretation has been questioned by several scholars. Cicerchia (2021), for example, has argued that if everything is considered social, then ultimately nothing is truly social (103). Consequently, recent contributions have sought to narrow the operational scope of SIA and to develop more precise methodologies and indicators capable of distinguishing specifically social impacts from broader societal effects (Partal & Dunphy, 2016; Cicerchia, 2021).

- **Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA)**

Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA) emerged from the recognition that cultural dimensions are often insufficiently addressed within traditional environmental and social assessment frameworks. In this regard, Sagnia (2004) defines CIA as: <<A process of identifying, predicting, evaluating and communicating the probable effects of a current or proposed development policy or action on the cultural life, institutions and

resources of communities, then integrating the findings into the planning and decision-making process>> (9).

The range of impacts considered within CIA includes elements such as values, belief systems, customary laws, languages, customs, economic practices, relationships with the local environment, social organisation, and traditions of affected communities (Sagnia, 2004, as cited in Partal & Dunphy, 2016, 3). This aspect highlights the partial overlap between Cultural Impact Assessment and Social Impact Assessment.

Cicerchia (2021) further argues that within the cultural sector, CIA operates in two complementary directions. On the one hand, it seeks to identify the impacts of cultural heritage and artistic activities on the cultural dimension of society. On the other hand, it examines the effects of cultural activities on other sectors, including economic development, education, social inclusion, and territorial governance.

- Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA)

Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) is a specialised assessment tool designed to evaluate the potential effects of human actions on the heritage values of a site or place. Particular attention is given to impacts on conservation values and, in the case of UNESCO World Heritage properties, on Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), the concept around which the methodology was originally developed (Jo et al., 2022, 59; Rogers, 2017, as cited in Ashrafi et al., 2022, 6).

HIA has become increasingly important within heritage management and conservation planning, providing decision-makers with a structured framework for assessing how development proposals may affect heritage significance and integrity.

- Economic Impact Assessment (EIA)

Economic Impact Assessment represents one of the earliest and most widely applied forms of impact evaluation. Within the cultural sector, economic impact analysis has been described as seeking <<to estimate changes in regional spending, output, income and/or employment associated with tourism policy, events, facilities or destination>> (Tyrrell & Johnston, 2006, as cited in CoE, 2011, 67).

The widespread diffusion of Economic Impact Assessment can largely be attributed to the communicative immediacy of its results and the relative ease with which economic indicators can be quantified and interpreted. In fact, compared with other forms of impact assessment that seek to evaluate social or cultural change, economic assessments often rely on readily available statistical data and produce outputs that are easily understood by policymakers, funders, and stakeholders. For these reasons, economic impact analysis continues to play a prominent role within cultural policy evaluation despite increasing awareness of its limitation.

- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) constitutes a specialised component of Environmental Impact Assessment. Its purpose is to evaluate <<the development impacts on the landscape and people's views>>, according to Ashrafi et al. (2022, 4). LVIA distinguishes between two related but separate dimensions: Landscape effects refer to changes affecting the landscape itself, including its character, quality, and physical attributes; Visual effects, by contrast, concern how such changes are perceived by individuals and the resulting effects on visual amenity (Wilson, 2002). This distinction is particularly relevant in contexts where landscape quality constitutes an important cultural, environmental, or tourism resource, as in the case of Cultural Routes.

- Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA)

Another particularly relevant approach for the study of Cultural Routes is Tourism Impact Assessment (TIA). TIA can be understood as a process aimed at identifying, predicting, and evaluating the potential positive and negative consequences of tourism development on the environmental, socio-cultural, and economic dimensions of a destination (Kunaeva, 2012; Sagnia, 2004).

This type of assessment is especially important in the context of heritage tourism, pilgrimage routes, and route-based tourism more generally. Kunaeva (2012), for example, highlights the relevance of TIA for the management of the Camino de Santiago, where walking routes require careful consideration of environmental pressures as well as impacts on local identities, traditions, and community life.

From a conceptual perspective, TIA may be considered a specialised subcategory of EIA. At the same time, it frequently overlaps with Cultural Impact Assessment and Heritage Impact Assessment, particularly when tourism development affects cultural heritage assets, local traditions, community identities, or protected heritage sites.

Overall, these impact assessment approaches represent the principal frameworks that have been considered relevant for the purposes of this study.

Although none of them has been specifically developed for Cultural Routes, each offers potentially valuable concepts, methodologies, and analytical tools that may contribute to the design of more comprehensive approaches to assessing the multidimensional impacts generated by Cultural Routes.

It should be noted that, for certain types of impact assessment, such as Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) and Cultural Impact Assessment (CIA), the literature predominantly adopts an ex-ante perspective, whereas for others, such as Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), ex-post applications are more commonly encountered. This distinction is largely attributable to the contexts in which these assessment approaches were developed and the specific needs they were intended to address.

For instance, HIA was originally developed by UNESCO as a tool for <<determining the impacts that a proposed action would have on the attributes that convey Outstanding Universal Value of World Heritage properties and other conservation/heritage values>> (Jo et al., 2022, 23). Consequently, its conceptualisation has been predominantly ex-ante in nature. More generally, both HIA and CIA emerged as instruments intended to support planning and decision-making processes before the implementation of projects or interventions. Their ex-ante orientation is therefore closely linked to the normative and policy frameworks within which they developed.

However, as previously discussed, ex-ante and ex-post evaluations should be regarded as complementary rather than mutually exclusive approaches. Indeed, many assessment frameworks originally designed for ex-ante application also incorporate monitoring and evaluation components aimed at assessing the accuracy of initial predictions and the effectiveness of implemented measures. The same principle applies in the opposite direction, as evidence generated through ex-post evaluations can inform future planning and decision-making processes.

Overall, impact assessment methodologies are continuously evolving, and their definitions and methodological frameworks are shaped by the dynamic institutional, regulatory, and operational contexts in which they are applied.

2.3 Limitations of IA on cultural routes

Having identified the gap in the existing literature concerning impact assessment models for cultural routes and having provided a foundational overview of impact assessment (IA) and its various typologies, it is now important to examine the limitations that have emerged in the literature regarding the evaluation of Cultural Routes. The question deserves careful consideration: why has this object of study proved so resistant to resolution, and why has its elaboration within the scholarly community engaged with these topics extended over so many years without producing a settled consensus? The purpose of this section is therefore to examine the main challenges and limitations associated with impact assessment in the context of Cultural Routes, with the aim of providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the obstacles that have emerged from the literature.

A substantial part of these difficulties derives from the highly dynamic, heterogeneous, and multi-scalar nature of Cultural Routes themselves. As Berti (2015) argues, a cultural route can be understood as a <<network of sites or geographical areas sharing a theme, taking different forms according to the 'identity' of each site or area>> (14). The concept of a route is therefore defined in broad and flexible terms, allowing

for a significant degree of variety in both structure and operation. Such diversity manifests not only across different Cultural Routes but also among the destinations and stakeholders that constitute a single route.

With regard to differences between routes, three main categories of Cultural Routes have been identified (Berti, 2013; Gasparini e Villalobos, 2022):

- Linear pattern routes, which means routes developed along a physical path, such as Saint James Way (better known as *Camino de Santiago*) and the *Via Francigena*.
- Territorial pattern routes, which means routes that involve entire territories associated by a common theme or character, such as the Routes of *El Legado Andalusi* (The Legacy of al-Andalus).
- Reticular pattern or archipelago routes, such as the Phoenicians Route. These routes correspond to a network of individual sites or aggregated elements, connected by a theme. These routes are sort of “virtual,” not characterised by territorial continuity.

Each typology generates distinct patterns of interaction between heritage resources, local communities, and territorial environments, thereby giving rise to different relational systems and development dynamics. This structural diversity has important implications for impact assessment, as evaluation frameworks that may be appropriate for one type of route may prove inadequate for another.

Beyond their differing spatial configurations, Cultural Routes also vary considerably in terms of their organisational and operational characteristics: there are significant differences in the network and management structures, development approaches, capacities and even quality standards regarding products and services.

Therefore, the economic and social impacts are not quantitatively or qualitatively the same for each route (CoE, 2011).

Consequently, the impacts generated by Cultural Routes cannot be assumed to be comparable across cases, nor can they be adequately captured through standardised indicators alone.

Significant differences also emerge within individual Cultural Routes. Drawing on a survey conducted among cultural route operators, the Council of Europe's research (2011) found that << differences do not only exist among the cultural routes but also between the different countries and even regions or single partners belonging to one cultural route >> (110). The report further emphasises that participating territories often differ substantially in terms of political systems, economic conditions, institutional frameworks, local governance structures, traditions and practices, and notably also in the initial assets and development conditions of the territories involved. As the authors observe, these differences are reflected in the ways in which individual actors and territories engage with and contribute to the route.

As a result, the economic and social performance of Cultural Routes is inherently uneven and context-dependent, and such variability makes it particularly difficult to compare performance across territories and networks, let alone deriving a single indicator of impact for the whole route.

These challenges ultimately raise fundamental questions regarding the feasibility of developing common evaluation frameworks for Cultural Routes. Indeed, as one respondent to the Council of Europe 2011 survey explicitly stated, <<It is impossible to create one common tool of measuring impacts that works for all members and activities>> (114). This observation encapsulates one of the central dilemmas of Cultural Routes impact assessment: while comparable and standardised assessment tools are often required for accountability and policy purposes, the intrinsic diversity of Cultural Routes necessitates evaluation approaches that are sufficiently flexible to accommodate the specific characteristics of different routes, territories, and stakeholders.

A further set of limitations highlighted in the literature relates to the methodological and operational challenges associated with evaluating the impacts of Cultural Routes. Even if the heterogeneity and diversity characterizing Cultural Routes are excluded from consideration, substantial difficulties persist. These concern the availability and quality of data, the methodological consistency, the attribution of observed effects, the temporal scope of impact assessment, and the measurement of intangible outcomes. Insofar as they are instrumental in defining the research question of the present study, each of these issues will be briefly examined in turn, beginning with the most significant: the non-availability of route-specific data.

As Cavallaro and Costanzo (2024) observe, the management bodies of each Council of Europe Cultural Route generally do not collect information capable of directly measuring the economic income generated within the territories crossed by the routes. Their evaluation activities tend to focus instead on dimensions such as governance, cooperation processes, networking capacity, and policy development. Consequently, direct evidence of territorial economic impacts is often unavailable, forcing researchers and practitioners to rely on indirect indicators and proxy measures.

This challenge is compounded by the inadequacy of existing statistical systems: regional and national datasets are not able to capture the specific effects generated by a Cultural Route and therefore provide only a partial basis for impact assessment. The literature emphasises that meaningful evaluation requires information collected at a much finer spatial and organisational scale, involving individual sites, local communities, tourism operators, and route partners (CoE, 2011). Therefore, when route managers do not undertake dedicated monitoring and data collection activities, the empirical foundations necessary for rigorous impact assessment are often lacking. In some cases, the problem is even more fundamental, as

certain regions lack sufficiently developed information systems in the field of cultural tourism, resulting in the absence of the basic data required to support any systematic measurement process (CoE, 2011).

The measurement of impacts is further complicated by the absence of common methodological standards across Cultural Route networks. Given, as already mentioned, the diversity of actors, territories, and governance arrangements involved, partners frequently employ different definitions, indicators, monitoring procedures, and reporting practices. This heterogeneity hinders the comparability of results and limits the possibility of aggregating data at the route level. Consequently, even when information is available, it often lacks the consistency necessary to support robust comparative analyses or the construction of shared evaluation frameworks across transnational networks (CoE, 2011).

Another limitation concerns the resources required to undertake impact assessment. Indeed, the development of monitoring systems, data collection procedures, and evaluation methodologies demands financial resources, technical expertise, and organisational capacity. However, not only these assets are unevenly distributed across cultural routes and their partners, but there is a general scarcity of these resources among the managers of the itineraries (CoE, 2011). In practice, the routes that are most in need of demonstrating their impacts may also be those least equipped to conduct rigorous evaluations.

Beyond issues of data and resources, the literature highlights significant challenges related to attribution. One of the most persistent methodological problems concerns in fact the difficulty of isolating the specific contribution of a Cultural Route from the influence of other factors operating within the same territory. (CoE, 2011). Tourist destinations are typically characterised by multiple attractions, overlapping development initiatives, and diverse visitor motivations. Consequently, determining whether observed economic, social, or cultural benefits can be attributed to the cultural route itself is often highly problematic. For example, a destination such as the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento attracts substantial visitor flows independently of its inclusion within the Route of the Phoenicians. In such circumstances, distinguishing the impacts generated by the Cultural Route from those produced by the destination's broader tourism appeal becomes extremely challenging.

More generally, the coexistence of multiple drivers of territorial development complicates the identification of clear causal relationships between route activities and observed outcomes.

The temporal dimension of impacts introduces an additional layer of complexity. Many of the benefits associated with Cultural Routes emerge only over extended periods and are therefore difficult to capture through conventional evaluation frameworks (CoE, 2011). Educational initiatives, intercultural exchanges, heritage awareness programmes, and community-building activities often generate effects that become visible only in the medium or long term. While earlier studies frequently discussed this issue in relation to delayed economic returns, contemporary perspectives increasingly recognise that social, cultural, and environmental impacts are equally relevant, and characterized by long gestation periods: Changes in

social cohesion, cultural identity, heritage appreciation, environmental awareness, or patterns of civic participation may take years to materialise, making it difficult to establish direct causal connections between specific interventions and subsequent outcomes.

Socio-cultural impacts are, in this sense, the most problematic dimension of Cultural Route evaluation. This is because, unlike economic indicators, socio-cultural outcomes are often intangible, subjective, and context dependent. They involve complex processes such as identity formation, community empowerment, intercultural understanding, sense of belonging, and perceptions of cultural heritage. Their assessment therefore requires methodologies capable of capturing qualitative dimensions that are not readily reducible to numerical indicators. Furthermore, socio-cultural impacts cannot be understood independently of the specific characteristics of the communities involved. Evaluation frameworks must therefore account for the particular socio-cultural conditions of individual communities, including their "carrying capacity" and their "limits of acceptable change" (Mansfeld, 2015, 73). Moreover, community perceptions of tourism and heritage development are not static; rather, they evolve over time as residents experience both the benefits and costs associated with increasing visitor flows and cultural activities. Measuring these impacts therefore requires capturing changing attitudes, perceptions, and values, which are often influenced by complex social, political, and cultural factors. As a result, socio-cultural evaluation necessarily involves a significant interpretative component, which complicates the assessments (Mansfeld, 2015).

2.4 The Complexity of Impact Assessment for Cultural Routes

This section has outlined the principal limitations identified in the literature regarding the implementation of impact assessment for Cultural Routes. The main challenges include the considerable diversity that exists both between and within Cultural Routes, the resulting difficulties in achieving methodological harmonisation, and the scarcity of route-specific data. The latter issue is itself closely linked to a range of underlying factors, including limited financial and organisational resources, difficulties in data collection, attribution problems, the long-term and delayed nature of many impacts, and the inherently intangible character of socio-cultural outcomes. Collectively, these factors contribute to making impact assessment a particularly complex and methodologically demanding undertaking.

On the basis of the evidence reviewed, it can be argued that the development of a fixed, universal, and fully comprehensive impact assessment framework applicable to all Cultural Routes would be both impractical and conceptually inadequate. The profound heterogeneity that characterises Cultural Routes, in terms of their thematic focus, governance structures, territorial contexts, stakeholder configurations, and

development objectives, makes it unlikely that a single evaluative model could effectively capture the full range of impacts generated across different routes and territories. Moreover, as highlighted by several authors and practitioners, the diversity of contexts and activities involved may render the creation of a universally applicable assessment tool virtually impossible.

A more feasible alternative would be the development of route-specific evaluation frameworks tailored to the characteristics, objectives, and territorial contexts of individual Cultural Routes. Such an approach would arguably offer greater sensitivity to local conditions and a stronger capacity to capture context-dependent outcomes. Nevertheless, this option also presents significant methodological challenges, particularly with regard to comparability, data availability, indicator selection, and the balance between standardisation and contextual adaptation.

2.5 From Challenges to Applications

This literature review has sought to provide all the elements necessary to address the research questions advanced in this thesis.

To this end, it first highlighted the importance of impact assessment for cultural routes as a tool of legitimacy, enabling access to funding opportunities and financial resources, as well as a mechanism of accountability in the dialogue with stakeholders and local communities. It then clarified the concepts of impact and impact assessment, outlining the main components and processes that characterize this evaluative practice. Finally, it examined the principal limitations and challenges identified in the existing literature regarding the assessment of cultural routes.

The following section focuses on the analysis of the relatively limited number of cases in which impact assessment methodologies, or approaches preparatory to impact assessment, have been applied to Cultural Routes. While most of these cases concern Cultural Routes certified by the Council of Europe, examples involving non-certified routes are also included as they are equally useful to the aim of the analysis.

This examination seeks to contribute to answering the first research question of the thesis, namely: *How can the impact of Cultural Routes on the territories they traverse be assessed, and what opportunities and challenges does this evaluation process entail?*

The analysis adopts a methodological perspective, paying particular attention to the data collection tools employed, the categories of impacts assessed, and the analytical models used to evaluate them. Each of the eight cases will be examined individually, with a discussion of the specific impact assessment

methodologies adopted, the extent to which these methodologies address the limitations identified in the literature, and the challenges that remain unresolved.

Finally, Section 3.9 will provide a comparative analysis of the cases examined. Drawing on the findings of the previous sections, it will reflect more broadly on the practice of impact assessment in Cultural Routes, identify the most persistent methodological limitations emerging from existing applications, and highlight recurring patterns and trends across the different cases. This comparative discussion will serve as a basis for assessing the current state of impact assessment in the field and for guiding the subsequent examination of the case study of Phoenicians' Route.

3. Cultural Routes' Impact Assessment

3.1 Impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs' Innovation and Competitiveness

A preliminary pivotal study conducted within the context of the Council of Europe Cultural Routes programme is "Impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs' Innovation and Competitiveness" (CoE, 2011). The study was launched by the Council of Europe in September 2010. Its objectives were to provide insights into the effects produced by transnational Cultural Routes certified by the Council of Europe on SMEs' performance, innovation capacity, competitiveness, and network and cluster development. It also aimed to examine the potential of Cultural Routes for promoting sustainable and quality tourism in Europe and to analyse the extent to which Cultural Route networks can benefit SMEs, especially those located in rural areas and lesser-known destinations.

The report constitutes a particularly significant contribution to the study of Council of Europe Cultural Routes and remains one of the most relevant sources for understanding their impacts. Given the focus of the present thesis, attention is concentrated primarily on the sections devoted to impact assessment.

The study consisted of two main components:

- an analysis of a number of transversal issues relevant to all Council of Europe-certified Cultural Routes and to the environments in which they operate.
- five case studies concerning the Hansa, the Legacy of al-Andalus, the Via Francigena, the Olive Tree Route, and Transromanica.

Within the report, a specific chapter is devoted to discussing practical ways in which Cultural Routes can begin to measure the value and impacts of their activities. The authors explicitly state that their primary focus is on economic impact, as this dimension is most closely aligned with the overall objectives of the study. At the same time, however, they acknowledge that other forms of impact are increasingly recognised as equally important within the cultural sector.

As a first step, the report classifies the activities undertaken by Cultural Routes into four broad categories: Heritage restoration and preservation; Raising awareness of cultural heritage; Marketing and business development; Commercialisation of cultural attractions and products.

For each category, the study identifies a number of more specific activities that may generate different forms of impact.

The report then briefly introduces three methodological approaches that can be used to assess the social, environmental, cultural, and economic impacts of Cultural Route activities. The first is the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) approach, developed by Elkington (1997). According to the report, this approach provides

a framework for measuring and reporting performance against economic, social, and environmental parameters.

The second approach is Social Impact Assessment (SIA). The report notes that SIA incorporates the assessment of environmental, social, economic, cultural, and health implications. Particular reference is made to the work of the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), which has developed a range of tools, checklists, matrices, and training materials intended to support organisations in identifying and evaluating the broad societal impacts of their initiatives.

The third approach discussed is the Balanced Scorecard. This framework is designed to incorporate different stakeholder perspectives, including financial, customer, internal business process, and learning and growth perspectives. Rather than focusing on a single dimension of performance, the Balanced Scorecard evaluates a combination of outcomes across these different areas.

After introducing these broader methodologies, the report narrows its focus to economic impact assessment, and particularly to event impact assessment. Four principal analytical tools are proposed: Break-even or profit/loss analysis; Return on Investment (ROI); Economic impact analysis; Cost-benefit analysis.

In addition, particular attention is devoted to multiplier analysis, which seeks to estimate the direct, indirect, and induced effects generated by economic activity. This methodology is presented as especially useful for understanding the wider economic repercussions of visitor expenditure within local and regional economies.

The report also identifies a number of economic impact indicators that may be used in the evaluation of Cultural Routes. Among the most important are visitor numbers and overnight stays, both of which are commonly employed as indicators of tourism activity.

Furthermore, the study discusses several methods for collecting the data required for impact assessment. (see Table 1). In particular, it highlights the importance of visitor surveys and business surveys as instruments for gathering information on visitor behaviour, expenditure patterns, business performance, and stakeholder perceptions.

The report subsequently addresses the issue of sustainable tourism development and proposes a series of indicators and measurement instruments associated with sustainable tourism criteria. For example, the indicator “Pressure” may be measured through instruments such as “visitor frequency” and “visitor numbers”. While “Social Impact” may be assessed through the “ratio of tourists to inhabitants” during both average and peak periods; and the “Condition of Fragile Ecosystems” may be monitored through “the observation of rare or threatened species and habitats”. Finally, dimensions such as “Inhabitants' satisfaction” may be evaluated through questionnaires designed to capture residents' perceptions and attitudes.

Table 1. Council of Europe, 2011, 257. *Appendix 3. Choosing appropriate models and methodologies.*

Activity type	Impact measurement model			Appropriate methodologies					
	CBA/ROI	SROI	Economic multiplier models	Visitor surveys	Business surveys	Traders surveys	Participant evaluations	Analysis of product sales	Analysis of web page hits
Heritage preservation	•			•					
Educational activities		•					•		
Cultural exchanges		•					•		
Events and festivals	•		•	•	•	•			
Marketing and promotion				•					•
Business support and training					•		•		
Development of tourism activities			•	•	•			•	•
Development and sale of tourism products	•				•			•	

The table was presented by (CoE, 2011) to explain the decision process necessary to evaluate the performance of several activities implemented by a typical cultural route. First, an impact measurement model was identified, and then the appropriate methodologies to collect the data were suggested.

Finally, the report presents an in-depth analysis of the five selected Cultural Routes. For the purposes of this thesis, however, only two of these cases will be discussed, as they are the only ones that contain explicit references to impact assessment procedures.

The first case concerns The Hansa Route. The study examines the impact of the annual Hansa Days on the economies of individual host cities, including Tartu and Osnabrück. The assessment focuses primarily on the short-term economic effects generated by the event, such as visitor expenditure and its contribution to the local economy, as well as on the potential of the event to enhance the long-term attractiveness of host cities as tourism destinations. The report also considers the broader impact of the Hansa network on business development and innovation. According to the authors, participation in the Hansa Days and other Hansa-related activities has encouraged several member cities to develop new tourism products, some of which have subsequently evolved into successful business initiatives.

However, the study also highlights a significant limitation: since business development and innovation had only recently become major objectives within the Hansa network, the data concerning the impacts of its cultural activities, particularly the Hansa Days, had not yet been systematically collected. As a result, it proved extremely difficult to quantify the value generated by these activities. The researchers attempted to estimate the short-term economic benefits of the Hansa Days using visitor numbers and expenditure data collected in a specific host city. Nevertheless, they concluded that measuring the longer-term impacts

of the event, as well as those of the Hansa's broader activities, was not feasible with the available evidence and would have required more extensive visitor and business surveys.

The second case concerns The Legacy of Al-Andalus Route. In this instance, an assessment was conducted through a combination of methodological approaches, including a literature review and online research, interviews and meetings with key stakeholders aimed at evaluating management practices and future development plans, and a survey administered to network members in order to collect information regarding SME involvement and performance.

However, the results obtained were neither quantitatively nor qualitatively detailed, largely due to the limited availability of collected data. Rather than providing a systematic measurement of impacts, the assessment primarily identified a number of areas in which the route appeared to generate positive contributions. In particular, the study highlighted the role of the Legacy of Al-Andalus Route in promoting intercultural dialogue, supporting SMEs and innovation processes, and fostering more sustainable forms of tourism development.

By contrast, the remaining three case studies, the Via Francigena, the Olive Tree Route, and Transromanica, contain no explicit discussion of impact assessment activities. A plausible explanation for this absence can be found in one of the recurring issues identified throughout the literature on Cultural Routes: the lack of systematic data collection by route management organisations. As previously discussed, the scarcity of route-specific data represents one of the principal obstacles to impact evaluation. This limitation, combined with the methodological complexity inherent in assessing the multidimensional impacts of Cultural Routes, likely explains why no formal impact assessments were presented for these three cases.

With regard to the relevant research question, this study is particularly significant because it provides methodological guidance covering all stages of the Theory of Change framework in the context of an economic impact assessment focused on tourism-related effects. First, it establishes categories of activities commonly associated with cultural routes and further breaks them down into specific actions from which territorial impacts, particularly those affecting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), can be derived. In this respect, the proposed framework could be adapted and tailored to the specific cultural route under evaluation.

The study then addresses the data collection phase by proposing a set of tourism-related economic indicators, alongside sustainability indicators of a social and environmental nature. Furthermore, it identifies questionnaires as the most suitable method for collecting such data. Once the data collection stage has been completed, it becomes possible to identify the outcomes generated by the activities of a cultural route and, through the models presented in Table 1, estimate their economic impacts.

The study also advocates for impact assessment approaches capable of providing an integrated picture of impacts, extending beyond purely economic dimensions. However, it offers no specific guidance regarding indicators or the collection of data, despite the fact that such aspects could equally be important for understanding the effects of cultural routes on the innovation capacity and competitiveness of SMEs.

Turning to the analysis of the cultural route case studies, the Hansa Route represents a virtual itinerary in which visitors may choose to visit the cities belonging to the network, but where no designated walking or travel route exists. Consequently, the assessment focuses on the economic impact of a specific event, the Hansa Days. This choice partially mitigates the problem of route-effect attribution, as it identifies a clearly defined and temporary driver of tourist attraction, making it possible to compare conditions during and outside the event period. Nevertheless, the issue of limited route-specific data remains, due to the absence of systematic data collection mechanisms.

In the case of Al-Andalus, the principal limitation lies in the complete absence of dedicated data collection. Rather than assessing impacts directly, the study evaluates the route's performance, thereby providing some indication of the outcomes generated by its activities. Long-term impacts are then inferred from these outcomes rather than empirically measured, resulting in a considerably weaker impact assessment.

3.2 Socio-economic Impacts of the Camino to Finisterre

A second particularly relevant contribution to the impact assessment is the study by Eva Parga-Dans "Socio-economic Impacts of the Camino to Finisterre" (2015). The research examines the socio-economic effects of the process of "heritagization" along the Santiago–Finisterre–Muxía section of the Way of St. James, focusing on how pilgrimage has transformed local productive systems and economic activities.

From the perspective of impact assessment, the study is particularly noteworthy for its methodological approach. Owing to the lack of pre-existing data, the author adopted a strategy of methodological triangulation, combining historical, ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological methods. The assessment was structured around two complementary dimensions: the analysis of demand and the analysis of supply.

The demand-side analysis relied on the register of *Fisterranas* (completion certificates) issued by the Finisterre Municipal Pilgrims' Hostel to reconstruct pilgrim flows and profiles between 1998 and 2010. This quantitative analysis was complemented by semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and participant observation, allowing the researcher to contextualise and interpret the observed changes.

The supply-side analysis focused on businesses serving pilgrims. A total of 105 establishments were identified and surveyed, including accommodation facilities, restaurants, and retail businesses located both along the route and in Finisterre. Particular attention was paid to the characteristics of these enterprises and their economic dependence on pilgrimage-related activities.

The findings indicate a significant economic impact of the route on local businesses. Specifically, 71% of establishments located along the route and 84% of businesses in Finisterre reported that at least 10% of their turnover derived from pilgrims.

The study also identified a process of economic restructuring towards the service sector, with a substantial proportion of tourism-related businesses being established between 2005 and 2010. Furthermore, between 70% and 100% of surveyed businesses relied on local suppliers, suggesting that the economic benefits generated by pilgrimage extend beyond individual enterprises and contribute to the wider regional economy.

At the same time, the assessment identified several negative impacts, including the growth of the informal economy, seasonal overcrowding, and tensions within local communities.

The study is interesting for the data collection methodology it proposes, which distinguishes between supply-side and demand-side data and relies on document analysis, interviews, and direct observation. Despite adopting a sociological and anthropological approach, the positive impacts identified are exclusively economic in nature. By contrast, the analysis of negative impacts adopts a broader perspective, taking into account not only economic aspects but also the perceptions of the local community.

3.3 European Cultural Routes and sustainable development: the case-study of the Via Francigena

This research paper (Conti et al., 2015) examines the role of the cultural route of the Council of Europe Via Francigena as a driver of sustainable development and territorial enhancement in the Tuscany region. It emphasises how cultural routes can promote forms of slow tourism, which are less invasive and more integrated into local economies than traditional mass tourism. In the case of the Tuscany region, the route is interpreted as a strategic infrastructure supporting the revitalisation of rural roads, historical paths, and “soft mobility” networks.

The study adopts a multidimensional approach to assess the socio-economic and environmental impacts of the route.

Three different estimation methods were combined:

- a) A counterfactual approach, which compares tourism trends in rural municipalities crossed by the Via Francigena with similar rural areas not located along the route over the period 1994–2012. Given the heterogeneous nature of the Tuscan Via Francigena, ranging from rural areas to major tourist cities, the analysis distinguishes between rural municipalities and established tourist destinations, and focused on inner areas.
- b) A multi-regional input output model, used to estimate GDP and employment (full-time equivalent units) generated by public investment and local tourism expenditure;

- c) The development of long-term evolutionary scenarios (up to 2022), based on tourism dynamics observed in comparable territories.

All three complementary approaches consistently indicate a positive impact on economic development linked to the enhancement of cultural and environmental heritage.

Notably, this study did not focus on the entire Via Francigena, but only on its Tuscan section. Although this is not explicitly stated in the study, it can be inferred from additional research that a systematic collection of economic and tourism-related data was carried out, funded by the regional authorities (in particular IRPET, Regional Institute for Economic Planning of Tuscany). This observation recalls one of the limitations highlighted in the literature, namely resource constraints, since the availability of extensive data collection appears to depend on the existence of dedicated financial support.

The three impact assessment models adopted in the study are all economic in nature. In particular, the first model, the counterfactual approach, effectively addresses the issue of route-effect attribution by isolating the specific impact generated by the Via Francigena. Moreover, this approach is especially interesting because it excludes well-established tourist destinations, where the contribution of the route would likely be statistically marginal, and instead focuses on rural municipalities, where its impact can be more clearly identified and measured.

3.4 The Economic Impact of Pilgrimage in Galicia

This study (Graave et al., 2017) implements an Input-Output (I-O) model to evaluate the macroeconomic significance of the Camino de Santiago within Galicia, Spain, for the year 2010. To address the research question clearly, the underlying econometrics are synthesized below. The authors isolate the impact of pilgrimage on Gross Value Added (GVA) and employment by tracking how the demand of services by the pilgrims generates a chain reaction of indirect transactions across the economic network via multipliers.

Because a direct, empirically observed transaction matrix for Galicia was unavailable, the authors mathematically estimate a regional table by downscaling the national Spanish I-O data. This regionalization is achieved through Location Quotients (LQ, that are statistical coefficients that adjust national technical coefficients based on the relative concentration and employment size of specific industries within the local economy). To capture structural uncertainty, the paper employs two distinct LQ techniques to produce a range of estimations rather than a single baseline figure.

The primary economic shock is derived from pilgrim expenditure data. The average pilgrim spends a modest €31 per day, resulting in a total stay expenditure of approximately €460 (significantly below the conventional leisure tourism benchmarks). However, the aggregate volume of 272,135 pilgrims generates

a substantial gross injection. After adjusting for direct imports and net product taxes, the net spending impulse is calibrated at roughly €111.5 million. Due to data limitations regarding exact consumer baskets, the entirety of this baseline demand is assigned to the "retail and travel services" sector, which serves as the primary node from which indirect spillover effects into secondary sectors are calculated.

Methodologically, the study acknowledges two limitations: the regional transaction matrix is a simulated proxy rather than a directly surveyed accounting ledger, and the underlying employment multipliers rely on broad labor market definitions. Results should therefore be read as approximations.

Regarding the economic impact assessment methodologies identified by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2011), namely break-even or profit/loss analysis, Return on Investment (ROI), economic impact analysis, and cost-benefit analysis; this study diverges by employing the Input-Output Model.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify that, as the authors themselves explicitly state, <<This paper analyses the impacts of tourism at a specific moment [...] rather than the impact of a change.>> (41). Consequently, the conceptualization of impact applied here differs from that utilized within a Theory of Change (ToC) framework, where these metrics would be more accurately categorized as outcomes.

3.5 Monitoring Sustainability Along Cultural Routes: The MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model

One of the most significant contributions to the field of impact assessment for Cultural Routes was produced within the framework of the BEST MED project (*Beyond Sustainable Tourism*), an Interreg Med initiative aimed at achieving integrated management and planning of Cultural Routes across eight Mediterranean countries, designed between 2019 and 2022 with the support of the CAST (Center for Advanced Studies in Tourism) at the University of Bologna.

Given its particular relevance to the research questions of the present study (Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022), this project warrants close and detailed attention.

It should first be noted that, although the territories involved were predominantly associated with certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, the research was designed to address a broader range of cultural routes, including non-institutional ones, to which its findings and tools are equally transferable.

The principal outcome of the BEST MED project was the development of the MED S&C Path model (*MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route model*), defined by its authors as <<a voluntary monitoring tool>> (Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022, p. 110), whose implementation rests on community participation and, more specifically, on the collaboration between route managers and stakeholders in conducting a self-

assessment of the route's impacts. The model is thus designed to monitor the sustainability of Cultural Routes as socio-economic drivers for their respective territories, while simultaneously strengthening multi-level governance and cooperation among all actors involved. In recognition of the limited financial and human resources typically available to organisations operating Cultural Routes, the model also envisages the active involvement of regional policymakers in the data collection process.

In terms of methodology, a dedicated toolbox was designed to operationalise the model, comprising: a step-by-step implementation framework; a self-assessment audit sheet organized in sustainability criteria; a list of core and optional indicators; questionnaires for both visitors and route managers, and an online platform for performance measurement and benchmarking.

The CAST team began by conducting a systematic review of existing initiatives concerned with data collection and management for sustainable tourism and with the sustainable management of cultural itineraries. Core criteria and indicators were drawn from these initiatives and, through comparative analysis, gaps were identified that the new model was intended to address. A significant finding of this comparative exercise was the widespread adoption of the ETIS (*European Tourism Indicator System*) toolkit across existing frameworks; accordingly, a number of ETIS indicators were integrated into the MED S&C Path model.

On the basis of this review, four dimensions were identified as constitutive of a Cultural Route's sustainability: Sustainable Management, Economic Sustainability, Socio-cultural Sustainability, and Environmental Sustainability. A non-exhaustive set of indicators was subsequently developed to guide the self-evaluation of performance across these dimensions. (see Table 2).

This was followed by the construction of the Step-by-Step Implementation Framework, a structured guide for assessing the sustainability of a Cultural Route, organised around the following stages: (1) the establishment of a working group comprising route operators, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders; (2) a self-assessment of the current sustainability level by the working group, using the Self-Assessment Audit Sheet and producing a percentage measure of compliance with the established criteria; (3) the identification of data gaps and the design of a participatory data collection plan, with responsibilities distributed among working group members, guided by the model's indicators and executed through the dedicated questionnaires; (4) data analysis; and (5) regular monitoring and evaluation of the sustainability dimensions identified as priorities, again requiring ongoing cooperation within the working group.

Table 2: Gasparini&Villalobos, 2022, 130, *Table 4. Criteria and Core indicators.*

Dimension	Category	Criteria	Indicator Reference #	Core Indicators
Sustainable Management	1. Cultural Route Planning & Management	Stakeholders involvement	1	Percentage of stakeholders' representation from each community/sector in the route's management structure
		Trained staff	2	Percentage of staff and volunteer adequately trained in tourism, heritage and sustainability
		Route's strategic plan	3	Percentage environmental, social, cultural actions recommended in plan which have been implemented
		Region's sustainable tourism strategy	4	Percentage of the destination with a sustainable tourism strategy/plan with agreed monitoring, development control and evaluation arrangement
		Visitors management	5	Number of tourists on a trail, at one time, in a given time period or season, per year. For example, by measuring the number of credential/ stamps given by local tourist offices
			6	Level of satisfaction by tourists, including perception of cleanliness
	2. Quality of Infrastructure	Infrastructure condition	7	Number of new infrastructure facilities developed related to the management of the Cultural Route
	3. Information & Promotion	Visitor information	8	Number of tourist information offices per tourist
			9	Number of public organisations dedicated to tourism which have included the route in their promotional material
Economic Sustainability	1. Economic contribution to local economy	Tourism flows (volume and value)	10	Number of tourists nights per month
			11	Daily spending per overnight visitor (accommodation, food and drinks, other services)
			12	Average length of stay of tourists (nights)
		Supporting local entrepreneurs	13	Number of SMEs in the tourism, culture and creative industries sector
		Employment and career opportunities	14	Direct tourism employment as percentage of total employment in the destination
	2. Seasonality	Tackling seasonality	15	Percentage of all occupancy in peak quarter or month
Socio-Cultural Sustainability	1. Preservation of Cultural Heritage	Protection of cultural heritage	16	Number of policies, strategies, action plans and tools in place to protect cultural heritage
	2. Accessibility	Accessible facilities	17	Percentage of attractions offering alternative access for those with mobility concerns
	3. Residents engagement & feedback	Residents consultation	18	Residents level of satisfaction with tourism is monitored through surveys and other systematic feedback mechanisms
	4. Gender equality	Gender equality	19	Women/men as a percentage of all formal tourism employment
Environmental Sustainability	1. Resource Management	Solid waste management	20	Percentage of destination area covered by solid waste collection services
		Sewage treatment (wastewater management)	21	Percentage of sewage from the destination treated to at least secondary level prior to discharge
		Water management	22	Water use: (total volume consumed and litres per tourist per day)
		Energy consumption	23	Percentage of businesses participating in energy conservation programs, or applying energy saving policy and techniques
		Sustainability certifications	24	Percentage of tourism enterprises using a voluntary certification/ label for environmental/quality/ sustainability or Corporate social Responsibility along the route
	2. Sustainable mobility	Low impact transportation	25	Percentage of tourists and same-day visitors using soft mobility/public transport services to arrive to and get around the destination
	3. Landscape & Biodiversity protection	Wildlife	26	Number of rules regulating activities such as hunting, fishing, etc.

This table shows the organization of sustainability concepts in dimensions, categories, criteria, and 26 core indicators. For example, in Socio-Cultural Sustainability is it possible to identify 4 categories, one of them is “Accessibility”, defined by the criteria “Accessible facilities” and described by the core indicator “Percentage of attractions offering alternative access for those with mobility concerns”.

The dimensions, categories and criteria form the “Self-Assessment Audit Sheet”, while the core indicators were used in the data collection step. Additionally, a set of optional indicators to adapt to the specific characteristics of each route was also included.

It emerges from the foregoing analysis that the MED S&C Path model constitutes a highly innovative tool. Of particular relevance is the formulation of a framework that can be implemented collaboratively by route managers and stakeholders, thereby fostering a participatory approach to evaluation and management.

In addition, when considering the issue of resource constraints, the model offers several advantages. It includes a practical guide, the Step-by-Step Implementation Framework, which is relatively easy to understand and apply. Furthermore, the costs associated with its implementation can be shared among the members of the route's working group. The model therefore not only evaluates the sustainability of route activities but is sustainable in itself.

The research focuses primarily on the collection, through interviews, and categorisation of data relating to the three dimensions of sustainability: economic, socio-cultural, and environmental. It also provides a wide range of optional indicators, which address the limitation of the considerable variability among cultural routes and allow the construction of an evaluation framework tailored to the specific characteristics of each route.

Moreover, the authors explicitly advocate for the collection of new, primary data rather than reliance on existing datasets. This position speaks directly to another limitation identified earlier in this review, namely the scarcity of route-specific data, coupled with the predominantly economic nature of the data that are currently available. In contrast, <<the aim of the model is to have an overall assessment of all three dimensions of sustainability>> (Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022, 118).

Another notable strength of the model is the inclusion of a phase of regular monitoring and evaluation, enabling stakeholders to learn from the collected data and continuously improve their activities. This reflects one of the principal purposes of impact assessment, namely the generation of feedback to support decision-making and organisational learning.

However, it should be specified that the purpose of this model is to evaluate the sustainability of route activities rather than their impact. While the sustainability of an organisation is also assessed through the evaluation of its impacts, the framework also includes a considerable number of performance indicators, particularly within the fourth dimension, Sustainable Management, but not exclusively. Consequently, only some of the proposed indicators capture the dimension of impact, for example, "direct tourism employment as a percentage of total employment in the destination", whereas others measure outcomes, such as "water use per tourist per day", or organisational performance, such as the "percentage of trained staff in tourism, heritage, and sustainability".

Furthermore, the distinction between outcomes and impacts is not always straightforward, and the study does not provide a model for translating collected data into a formal impact assessment. This is understandable, given that impact assessment is not the objective of the research.

Finally, and equally importantly, the issue of route-effect attribution remains unresolved. It is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which changes in indicators such as the "percentage of attractions offering alternative access for visitors with mobility concerns" can be attributed to the presence of the

route itself rather than to other external factors. For this reason, the framework appears more readily applicable in rural and peripheral areas, where the influence of the route may be more easily identified, than in cities or destinations that are already well-established on the tourism market.

It should finally be noted that the MED S&C Path model has not yet been applied to the Phoenicians' Route.

3.6 Effects of the Restoration of the Tuscan Segment of the Via Francigena on Tourist Overnight Stays in Traversed Municipalities and Neighbouring Areas

This working paper (Conti et al., 4/2022) provides a rigorous quantitative assessment of the causal effect of restoring and securing the Tuscan section of the Via Francigena, officially inaugurated in June 2014, on tourism flows and, partially, local expenditure. Focusing specifically on minor municipalities, the research decouples the overarching economic impulse into two distinct spatial mechanisms. The crossing effect captures:

- the direct effect manifested within the municipalities intersected by the physical path and
- the spillover effect, which means the indirect impact toward adjacent or neighbouring municipalities belonging to the same tourist district.

Subsequently, the empirical framework utilizes an extensive panel dataset featuring official ISTAT annual tourism arrivals and stay metrics spanning from 1998 to 2019. The timeline is divided into a pre-intervention window (1998–2008) and a post-intervention window (2009–2019). Crucially, minor municipalities are segmented into two distinct socio-economic macro-areas to account for structural heterogeneity:

- touristically weak areas, which comprise marginal districts characterized by modest tourism flows prior to the intervention such as Lunigiana and Amiata, and
- touristically strong areas, consisting of established, highly attractive districts like the Sienese area, and Val d'Orcia.

The causal effects are isolated using a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) estimator, also called counterfactual approach, combined with Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW). In observational studies, municipalities crossed by the Via Francigena often differ from non-crossed municipalities in historical, geographical, and morphological characteristics, making direct comparisons biased. Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW) addresses this issue by estimating a propensity score for each municipality, which means the probability of being crossed by the route given its observable characteristics. Observations are then

weighted by the inverse of this probability, balancing the treated and control groups and making them comparable, as in a randomized experiment.

The results show that the effects of the Via Francigena restoration differ according to the initial tourism development of the area. Indeed, in peripheral and economically weaker regions, the intervention helped counteract long-term decline: Municipalities crossed by the route recorded tourist stays that were 32.2% higher than the estimated counterfactual. While, in more established tourist destinations, the route reinforced an already positive growth trend: Crossed municipalities experienced a 16.4% increase in tourist stays relative to the counterfactual, generating substantial gains in absolute visitor numbers. In both cases, also neighbouring municipalities benefited, with a statistical increase of 10% circa.

In conclusion, this working paper demonstrates a high level of technical quality. It can be read alongside the earlier study on the Tuscan section of the Via Francigena (Conti et al., 2015), but in this case the study seeks to assess the effects of the route's restoration within the region. In fact, from a Theory of Change perspective, these effects correspond to outcomes rather than impacts. Specifically, the study measures changes in tourism flows and related outcomes, namely the number of tourist overnight stays, without directly assessing the economic impacts generated by these increases, which had instead been estimated in the previous research. For this reason, the authors consistently refer to “effects” rather than “impacts”.

Nevertheless, the paper is highly relevant, as it provides valuable evidence on one of the intermediate stages leading to impact assessment. From a methodological point of view, the counterfactual approach (or DiD estimator) adopted is consistent with that employed by Conti et al. (2015), including the useful distinction between less-established tourist destinations and more mature tourism areas. The main methodological innovation lies in the application of Inverse Probability Weighting (IPW), which substantially strengthens the study's causal inference and overall methodological rigor. By addressing the challenge of route-effect attribution, this approach constitutes a significant methodological advancement and offers promising avenues for future research on similar topics.

In addition, the distinction between direct and indirect effects is closely related to the multiplier operation discussed previously (CoE, 2011), as it highlights how benefits may extend beyond the municipalities directly affected by the intervention.

Finally, the evaluation remains primarily economic in nature, focusing on tourism-related indicators rather than broader social, cultural, or environmental dimensions.

3.7 The network of the Way of St. James in Poland-genesis, development as well as religious, cultural and socio-economic impact.

The specific objective of this study (Mróz, 2023), conducted over an extended period of 16 years, was to examine the reciprocal relations between the development of the Camino de Santiago and pilgrimage dynamics, with particular attention to host communities.

The research is based on extensive fieldwork, including observations and interviews with route coordinators, presidents of St. James Brotherhoods, members of associations and clubs dedicated to the Way of St. James in Poland, parish priests along the route, and local residents. The analysis of the collected material was conducted mainly through descriptive analytical and dynamic-comparative methods, while both qualitative and quantitative data were supported through cartographic representation techniques.

The study shows that the network of the Way of St. James in Poland has generated significant religious, cultural, and socio-economic impacts across the territories involved. Its development has largely been driven by bottom-up initiatives involving pilgrims, religious communities, clergy, and local associations, which have contributed to strengthening local identity, revitalising religious traditions, and fostering cooperation between communities and local authorities.

From an economic perspective, the Camino has stimulated local tourism and small-scale entrepreneurship through increased demand for accommodation, pilgrim hostels, restaurants, and related tourism infrastructure. In response, many municipalities have invested in shelters, cycling facilities, information centres, and public spaces along the route.

From a socio-cultural perspective, the network has encouraged a wide range of activities, including festivals, pilgrimages, concerts, exhibitions, conferences, sporting events, and educational initiatives, thereby increasing community participation and strengthening regional cooperation.

When analysing the role of this study within the context of the present research, a major limitation immediately emerges, namely the exceptionally long period required to conduct the study. This is relevant not only in relation to the time and resource constraints repeatedly highlighted in the literature, but also because, over a period of sixteen years, impacts are unlikely to remain constant. They may intensify, diminish, or even change direction altogether, thereby affecting the reliability of long-term assessments.

The study includes a data collection phase based on direct observation and interviews. However, no formal indicators appear to have been employed, which means that the data collected lack quantitative precision.

Consequently, rather than measuring impacts, the research primarily consists of observing impacts and the contextual processes within which they occur. Among its most valuable contributions is the identification of bottom-up initiatives and, more broadly, its attention to the relationship between local communities and pilgrims. In this respect, the study extends beyond a purely economic perspective and considers cultural and social impacts as well.

3.8 Mapping hospitality in Friuli Venezia Giulia along the Romea Strata

The 9th edition of the 2026 report “Italia, Paese di Cammini” (Italy, Land of Trails) (Terre di mezzo, 2026)² produced in collaboration with the Centre for Advanced Studies on Tourism (CAST) of the University of Bologna, collected 2025 sector data and more than 4,000 questionnaires completed by walkers on minor pilgrimage routes in Italy.

As in the previous article, also cultural paths and trails not certified by the COE were considered, in this case only in Italian territories.

The data collection was carried out in cooperation with Appennino Slow, Romea Strata, Cammini d’Italia, the European Association of the Via Francigena Routes, and SloWays. Within this framework, the Cultural Route Romea Strata was able to map the patterns and characteristics of tourist hospitality in Friuli Venezia Giulia along the route.

The study also estimated the economic impact of the Romea Strata³, quantified at approximately 8 million euros in 2025. The indicators used included the number of pilgrim credentials issued, average duration of the journey, estimated annual number of walkers, number of overnight stays, and total direct expenditure. The added value compared to 2024 was derived as well.

In relation to all pilgrimage routes considered, the report highlights that the 2025 data, compared with previous years, show increasing flows associated with a significant economic impact, particularly in Italy’s inland areas: the overall economic impact of pilgrimage routes on territories in that year was estimated at least 336.4 million euros, calculated through the application of the income multiplier method.

Overall, this study represents a more structured attempt at impact assessment compared to several previous cases, as it combines large-scale survey data with quantitative economic estimation techniques. In particular, it evaluates the strengthening of the economic impacts generated by the route on the territories involved in comparison with the previous year.

Developed by the CAST team following the BEST MED project, this initiative takes as its explicit point of departure the issue of route-specific data scarcity identified both in the preceding literature review and by Gasparini and Villalobos (2022) themselves. As such, it has contributed to the collection of original data that were previously unavailable. Nevertheless, its focus remains predominantly on the measurement of economic impacts, while broader social and cultural dimensions are addressed only indirectly through survey-based indicators.

² <https://www.terre.it/cammini-percorsi/i-dati-dei-cammini/italia-paese-di-cammini-il-dossier-di-terre-di-mezzo-tutti-i-numeri-del-2025/>

³ <https://www.romeastrata.org/>

3.9 Cross-case Synthesis and Emerging Patterns

At this stage, it is useful to synthesise the main findings emerging from the analysed case studies, considering both their differences and commonalities, in order to draw conclusions relevant to the research question.

First, it is necessary to highlight that the notion of impact adopted in the theoretical framework of this thesis, namely, impact as long-term change resulting from an intervention and situated within the broader perspective of the Theory of Change, is not universally shared across the literature. Studies that explicitly adopt a conception of impact consistent with this definition include Parga-Dans' analysis of the impacts of the Way of St. James in Finisterre, the 2015 study on the Via Francigena in Tuscany, Mróz's research on the cultural and socio-economic impacts of the Way of St. James in Poland, and the 2026 assessment of the Romea Strata. By contrast, all the other studies reviewed, while still relevant to the research question, present important conceptual divergences, as already discussed in the analysis of each case.

For instance, in the Council of Europe report (2011), two of the three multidimensional evaluation models proposed, the Triple Bottom Line Approach and the Balanced Scorecard, are primarily performance evaluation frameworks rather than impact assessment models. Similarly, the MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model focuses mainly on assessing the sustainability and performance of a cultural route or path. Nevertheless, both studies make frequent reference to the concept of impact. This is not surprising, as organisational or project performance can be partially assessed through the measurement of impacts. However, performance evaluation also, and perhaps primarily, includes the assessment of governance structures, decision-making processes, and the quality and quantity of implemented activities. While from a temporal point of view, the authors that employ the Input–Output model to evaluate pilgrimage-related effects in Galicia explicitly state, as already discussed, that it does not consider impact as an outcome of change; rather, it measures impact as a present condition.

The concept of impact therefore emerges as a particularly slippery one, difficult to define and operationalise consistently. This challenge is especially evident when assessing social and cultural impacts, whose temporal dimensions are often more difficult to establish than those associated with economic impact assessment.

This lack of standardisation in the understanding of impact is reflected in the considerable diversity of approaches and methodologies applied across the selected case studies. Such diversity stems not only from differing interpretations of what should be included within the scope of impact, but also from the heterogeneity of cultural routes themselves and from the specific research objectives pursued by individual scholars.

Furthermore, some studies have focused directly on impact assessment itself (Parga-Dans, 2015; Conti et al., 2015), whereas others have concentrated primarily on the preceding stage, namely the development of indicators and data collection frameworks (Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022).

That said, with regard to data collection methods, a certain degree of convergence can be observed. Structured and semi-structured interviews represent the most widely used research instruments, serving as the basis for the construction of both qualitative and quantitative indicators.

Another noteworthy pattern concerns the types of cultural routes analysed. The vast majority of the case studies reviewed (Parga-Dans, 2015; Conti et al., 2015; Graave et al., 2017; Conti et al., 2022; Mróz, 2023; Terre di Mezzo, 2026) focus on linear routes, with particular attention given to only two major itineraries: the Way of St. James, which possesses a strong religious significance, and the Via Francigena. This concentration is not coincidental but can be explained by two factors.

First, these are among the oldest and most internationally recognised cultural routes, largely due to their religious significance, especially in the case of Santiago de Compostela. Consequently, they attract large numbers of pilgrims, walkers, and tourists every year. This generates a greater interest in understanding and measuring the impacts that their presence produces on the territories they traverse and the surrounding areas.

Second, when the objective is to assess the impacts generated by a cultural route, linear itineraries provide methodological advantages. They allow researchers to collect information on visitors across consecutive territories and to observe more directly the effects of slow tourism on local communities and places. The impacts generated by linear routes tend to be more visible and, therefore, more readily measurable than those associated with other route configurations.

By contrast, the challenges become more evident in the case of archipelago-based cultural routes. The Council of Europe's 2011 study on the Hanseatic Route provides a clear example. In this context, the issue of route-effect attribution becomes particularly problematic, since tourists visiting the cities included in the network cannot easily be distinguished from other visitors who are not specifically interested in the route. Establishing such distinctions would require extensive survey campaigns involving substantial resources. The only exception concerns specific route-related events, such as the Hanseatic Days, where participation can be more directly linked to the cultural route itself, as discussed previously.

In addition, none of the impact assessments on linear cultural routes reviewed evaluated them in their entirety; rather, they focused on specific sections or limited stretches of the routes. This is due to the considerable resources required to collect and analyse data across an entire itinerary. Conducting an assessment at such a scale would be highly demanding in terms of time, financial investment, and human resources. An interesting avenue for future research would be to compare and integrate the various impact

assessments conducted along different sections of the Way of St. James. Such an exercise, however, would need to be approached with caution, given the significant methodological differences and varying conceptual frameworks adopted across these studies.

Another recurring pattern is the predominance of economic impact assessment frameworks. As argued by Gasparini and Villalobos (2022), this can be partly explained by the fact that most of the data currently available on cultural routes are economic in nature. Similarly, the 2026 study on several Italian pilgrimage routes, including the Romea Strata, suggests that economic data tend to be the most readily accessible and the easiest to interpret. Economic indicators are also generally more straightforward to collect, verify, and communicate to non-specialist audiences, including policymakers and funding bodies, who are often particularly responsive to quantifiable evidence of economic returns and territorial benefits. Consequently, assessment frameworks centred on economic indicators have tended to prevail over those addressing social, cultural, and environmental dimensions, despite the fact that these dimensions are equally fundamental to the objectives and values underpinning cultural routes.

The prominence of economic frameworks is also connected to a broader thematic focus that emerges consistently from the literature: the interest in measuring the impact of cultural routes in rural areas and inner peripheries. Since cultural routes are conceived as instruments of territorial regeneration, researchers and practitioners have concentrated mainly on developing indicator models capable of measuring benefits in less developed regions with valuable cultural assets that attract special interest tourists. This focus recurs frequently across the sources consulted (CoE, 2011; CoE, 2015; Božić & Tomić, 2016; Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022), and for most cultural routes, demonstrating their capacity to foster resilience in neglected communities is a primary objective (Klarić, 2025). This is illustrated by the studies on the Via Francigena and the Romea Strata, as well as by the "Ruralities" (2022–2027) and "Data4Rural" (2025–2028) projects, in which cultural routes such as the Romea Strata are involved. Ruralities⁴ aims to strengthen rural areas through green transition, innovative tools, and the development of local competencies; Data4Rural⁵ pursues the same goal through digital capacity-building in rural communities. The latter project also seeks to address another identified gap: the lack of reliable tourist data and their strategic use, specifically, micro and macro data on tourist flows, expenditure, and the qualitative assessment of services offered to walkers. This research trajectory is further confirmed by the launch, from March 2026, of a project at the CAST of the University of Bologna aimed at estimating the economic impact of cultural routes in inner and rural areas, directly connected to the Data4Rural initiative.

However, the potential benefits of cultural routes are not limited to less developed territories; they are relevant in heavily touristed cities as well. At the "19th Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue on the Phoenicians' Route" (19–21 March), which the author attended, Simone Quilici, director of the Archaeological Park of

⁴ ruralities-project.eu

⁵ [DATA4Rural – Empowering Rural Tourism Through Data](#)

the Colosseum in Rome, expressed interest in collaborating with cultural routes as a way to better distribute tourist flows currently concentrated at the Colosseum across the wider archaeological park. In this context, the slow and "quality" tourism promoted by cultural routes represents an opportunity that is equally important, though opposite in nature, to rural regeneration. In this case the interest is clearly on a social or environmental impact assessment, instead of economic. The reason this has not yet developed into a significant research strand is that the impact cultural routes can have on mass tourism remains minimal for now, and therefore extremely difficult to measure, primarily due to the problem of route-effect attribution. While the same issue, in case of IA applied to initiatives in rural and inner areas, is easier to solve, as there are fewer drivers of territorial development with respect to popular locations that could complicate the identification of clear causal relationships between route activities and observed outcomes.

Finally, in light of the arguments developed above and the broader purpose of the research question, it is worth reflecting on the notion of the "conceptual role of indicators" introduced by Gasparini and Villalobos (2022). Indeed, the authors argue that <<the process of discussing the concept of sustainable tourism helps understanding it and making it a more tangible one>> (109). In this sense, the conceptual role of indicators is understood as a "social learning process" (109), fostered through the sharing of responsibilities for data collection and analysis among cultural route managers, stakeholders, policymakers, and academic institutions.

Applied to the field of impact assessment, this perspective suggests that the process of defining what should be measured can be as valuable as the measurement itself. Establishing working groups in which relevant actors collectively discuss the objectives of the assessment, identify the dimensions of change that are considered most significant, and evaluate the tools available for data collection can represent an effective strategy for overcoming the conceptual ambiguity that often characterises impact assessment in the cultural routes sector.

This observation is particularly relevant in light of the findings discussed throughout this chapter. The diversity of definitions, methodologies, and indicators identified across the analysed case studies reflects not only methodological fragmentation but also the complexity of the phenomena under investigation. Rather than viewing this diversity exclusively as a limitation, the concept of the conceptual role of indicators invites us to consider the design of impact assessment frameworks as a participatory and learning-oriented process. As Gasparini and Mariotti conclude, <<this social learning process in effect can be considered a pre-condition for more direct uses of the information provided by the indicators>> (2021, as cited in Gasparini & Villalobos, 2022, 109).

From this perspective, impact assessment is not merely a technical exercise aimed at producing evidence, but also a collective process through which stakeholders negotiate meanings, priorities, and expectations regarding the role and value of cultural routes. Such an approach may prove particularly valuable in a field

where impacts extend beyond economic outcomes and encompass complex social, cultural, and territorial transformations.

4. The case study: the Phoenicians' Route

The case study selected to assess the applicability of impact evaluation models to cultural routes is the Phoenicians' Route (*Rotta dei Fenici* in Italian, hereafter RdF), one of the oldest certified Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe and the sixth to receive official certification. The choice of Phoenician civilisation as the title of the Route reflects a deliberate aspiration to draw on the constructive role played by this ancient civilization, who flourished at the transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age, in the ancient Mediterranean world. <<The Phoenicians, genial sailors and merchants, gave origin to a great civilization that asserted itself through an expansion towards the West, producing an intense exchange of manufactured articles, people and ideas and contributing in ancient times to the creation of a *koinè*, a Mediterranean cultural community and to the circulation of this culture>>⁶. According to the available historical scholarship, they are distinguished as the only people of their era to have engaged with neighbouring populations exclusively through peaceful interaction rather than armed conflict.

In light of this historical model, RDF pursues the following institutional objectives:

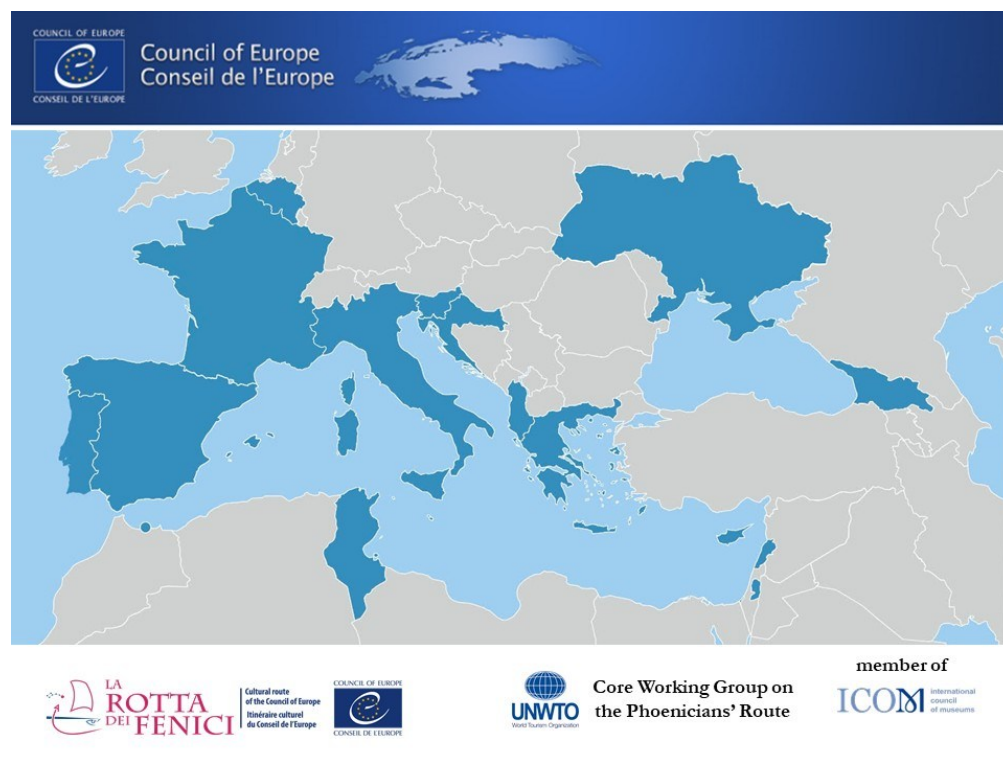
1. Enhancing knowledge of and disseminating awareness about European memory, history, and heritage as it relates to the Mediterranean, ancient civilisations, and intercultural dialogue.
2. Promoting Mediterranean culture and intercultural dialogue across Mediterranean regions and countries, encompassing their tangible and intangible historical heritage, landscapes, and natural environment.
3. Fostering sustainable and responsible cultural tourism through, inter alia, the valorisation of local identity and creative expression.
4. Strengthening the international network of the Phoenicians' Route and advancing the programmes, activities, and values of the Council of Europe.
5. Conducting research activities relating to tourism and culture, sustainable local development, and the associated expansion of labour markets, including engagement with younger generations.
6. Promoting and supporting the safeguarding of cultural landscapes and traditions linked to Mediterranean culture, with a view to preserving them as a common heritage shared by participating countries and regions.

RdF therefore encompasses all ancient Mediterranean civilisations rather than focusing exclusively on the Phoenicians themselves, taking inspiration from the latter's historically documented role as agents of peaceful exchange and intercultural openness. Within its mandate, the route also addresses the contemporary Mediterranean, in particular the preservation of both the tangible and intangible heritage of the Mediterranean civilisations belonging to its member territories. Intercultural dialogue constitutes the route's primary theme and is closely aligned with the broader policy objectives of the Council of Europe.

⁶ <https://fenici.net/>

The Phoenicians' Route is the third European maritime cultural route, following the Hanseatic League Route and the Vikings Route, and its structural configuration reflects this lineage. Unlike linear pilgrimage routes such as the Camino de Santiago or the Via Francigena, and consistent with the typology introduced by Berti (2013), RdF follows a “reticular” or “archipelago pattern”: it connects geographically dispersed sites under a unifying thematic framework.

Figure 2: Phoenicians' Route – Countries with network members. (<https://fenici.net/>)



This image shows the geographical distribution of RdF. The route spans eighteen countries. Its membership includes both Council of Europe member states and non-member states that have acceded to the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes, such as Lebanon.

In terms of its institutional history, the Italian Ministry of Tourism proposed the Phoenicians' Route as a Cultural Route of the Council of Europe in 1994. In 2003, the Route was accepted by the Council of Europe's Cultural Routes Institute as a pilot project in European cultural tourism and was formally admitted to the Cultural Routes Programme. The following year, 2004, saw the establishment of the International Association Phoenicians' Route (*Associazione Internazionale Rotta dei Fenici*) as the Route's governing body. Since 2016, the Route has attracted the attention of the United Nations World Tourism Organization through the creation of a dedicated Core Working Group.

From a governance standpoint, RdF is structured as an association headquartered in Selinunte, in the Province of Trapani. Its membership is composed of public bodies serving as ordinary members, including regional and provincial administrations; municipalities; autonomous cities; chambers of commerce; foundations; universities; parks; museums. All organised into a series of thematic sub-networks: the IUN

(Itineraries University Network), dedicated to scientific and academic activities; the EduNet, a network of educational institutions, principally upper secondary schools but also primary and lower secondary schools in the Sicilian context; and the MeMuNet (Mediterranean Museums Network), encompassing museums and archaeological, ethno-anthropological, cultural, and natural heritage sites. The association is governed by a steering committee and a scientific committee and is administered by a dedicated management team.

Over the years, since 2010, the Phoenicians' Route has expanded continuously, strengthening both the scale and quality of its network as well as the scope and ambition of its projects, as evidenced by initiatives such as the Erasmus+ QUEST project (2021–2024), Interreg Euro-MED ECO-SEAROUTES and Erasmus+ DEMO projects (2023–2027).

The Phoenicians' Route in particular promotes the development of innovative tools and methodologies, most notably the *Smart Ways* and the Community Heritage Hubs. A *Smart Way* is defined as a route of excellence combining the quality of a given territory's offering with the principles of sustainable tourism. Concretely, Smart Ways consist of itineraries of varying length that have been traced by RdF across its member territories and are designed to be traversed on foot, on bike and by car (sometimes even by boat, as in the case of nautical smart ways), examples include the *Antica Via Selinuntina* in Sicily, running from Syracuse to Selinunte, and the *Antica Fenicia* in Lebanon. Thus, while the itinerary as a whole operates as a virtual, thematic network, it encompasses within it a series of linear, on-the-ground routes. Within these Smart Ways, Community Heritage Hubs may be established: these are conceived as meeting points between visitors, service providers, and host communities, representing the *genius loci* of each territory and functioning as collectors of heritage, communities, and individual services. They serve to develop a territorially grounded quality offering, raising the service standards of the businesses and territories involved, in accordance with the principles of sustainability. They can also be crossroads of many routes certified by the CoE in the same territory.

Having introduced the Phoenicians' Route and established the conceptual tools necessary for the analysis, namely, the nature of impact evaluation and the ways in which it has already been applied to cultural routes, the discussion can now turn to the second research question, namely: To what extent are existing impact assessment tools capable of capturing the value that the Phoenicians' Route generates for the territories and communities that are part of its network?

4.1 An Impact Assessment of the Phoenicians' Route: constraints and opportunities

4.1.1 The Feasibility of Impact Assessment for the Phoenicians' Route

Any inquiry into whether impact assessment is feasible for the Phoenicians' Route, and into how it might be conducted, must begin from the structural features of the route that bear directly on the question.

As observed earlier, the Phoenicians' Route is an archipelago route, and this structure suggests a deep heterogeneity in several respects.

In the first place, the territories and communities along the route differ widely in their socio-economic conditions, cultural backgrounds, institutional frameworks, and exposure to geopolitical pressures. The route includes sites in Lebanon, Palestine, and Israel, for instance, places that have recently undergone political and social disruptions from which other sections of the Route have been spared. The contexts in which the Route operates therefore vary considerably across its extent.

The partners themselves likewise differ in size, capacity, and role, belonging to different cultural settings and operating according to different methods.

These differences are compounded by the uneven scale and tourism development of the individual destinations. Some, such as the Municipality of Eivissa (Ibiza) and the Archaeological Park of the Colosseum in Rome, enjoy international renown; others, such as the Municipality of Ajdovščina in Slovenia or that of Chiclana de la Frontera in Spain, remain little known. These places relate to tourism in fundamentally different ways and seek different outcomes from it. For example, an indicator such as “Tourism Pressure” is of considerable importance in a destination contending with overtourism, yet carries little significance in a rural or peripheral area whose principal difficulty is isolation and a shortage of visitors.

The Route is also nested in form. Running through the wider network are several linear routes, the Smart Ways, so that an archipelagic whole comes to contain linear itineraries within it. As the literature discussed notes, linear routes are more readily evaluated and call for methods distinct from those suited to territorial or archipelago routes.

4.1.2 Relevance as Foundational Principle of Impact Assessment

The intuitive approach to designing an impact assessment would be to begin from the choice of method, asking for instance whether Social Impact Assessment (SIA), Social Return on Investment (SROI), or counterfactual analysis might be applied to the route. To begin there, however, is to begin in the wrong place. The question of relevance is logically prior, and it is prior because of the resource constraints that the route encounters at the outset, at a stage as elementary as the gathering of data. Were resources unlimited, the question of whether a given measurement was worth undertaking would never arise. Since

they are not, priorities must be established, and to establish them is to ask, before all else, whether a given impact justifies the cost of its measurement.

These constraints emerge already at the most basic requirement of any assessment, the collection of tourism and economic data. Tourist flows within the areas traversed by the route can be traced in part through the travel agencies and tour operators that collaborate with it, among them Stippelli Travel to Learn and Viaggi del Genio, and through the many schools and educational institutions that organise study trips along the route, particularly within the Smart Ways. Not every visitor, however, arrives through an operator or a school; a substantial proportion travel independently, and of these the route possesses very little information. This constitutes one of the limitations already identified in the literature: route-specific data are scarce, owing to the absence of any systematic procedure for collecting them across the network, and the establishment of such a procedure would demand considerable financial and human resources.

The MED model offers one possible response, in the form of a collaborative self-reporting approach whereby managers and stakeholders gather data jointly. Archaeological parks, tourism boards, visitor attractions, and other bodies in direct contact with tourists could identify visitors drawn by the Phoenicians' Route through interviews and questionnaires, which, as the earlier chapter have argued, are well suited to this kind of inquiry, with interpretation centres and accommodation providers serving as further points of collection.

Even so, the undertaking would remain challenging. Even if every stakeholder agreed to cooperate for a period of at least three months, visitor-flow data would still represent only a fraction of the information required for even a basic economic impact assessment. As the case studies examined earlier demonstrate, additional data on product sales, overnight stays, visitor expenditure, and business performance would also be necessary. The problem of resources thus remains unresolved at the simplest level of data collection, and the more demanding questions of social and cultural impact would require a great deal more.

Because these costs are substantial and arise so early, they cannot be incurred indiscriminately. Whether they are warranted depends on whether the impact in question is relevant, and across a route of such diversity this can never be assumed.

The value of an impact assessment, in other words, depends less on the method adopted than on whether the measurement genuinely serves the aims of that place and of the route. It is to this question that the analysis now turns.

4.1.3 The Irrelevance of Impact Assessment in Major Destinations

In the route's larger and more frequented destinations, impact assessment loses its purpose on the economic plane and appears extremely problematic to implement on the socio-cultural and environmental one.

Consider the economic plane first. The Archaeological Park of the Colosseum, a recent addition to the route, offers a fitting illustration. To measure the economic benefit of tourism specifically generated by the Phoenicians' Route would, in such a setting, yield almost nothing of value. That benefit would be statistically negligible against the tourism economy of Rome as a whole and, more significantly, would bear little relation to the objectives of either the park or the route. The route exists to foster slow, responsible, and high-quality tourism and to mitigate the effects of mass tourism while safeguarding the authenticity of places and communities. The same holds for other heavily visited destinations in the network, among them the Balearic Islands and Ibiza.

It might be argued that, where economic assessment lacks practical relevance, social, cultural, and environmental evaluations could provide a more appropriate alternative by examining the route's contribution to the sustainability of local communities rather than its effects on visitor numbers or economic revenue. In major destinations, however, this alternative encounter a challenge of a similar nature. The issue is one of attribution: the overall influence of a cultural route is typically limited when compared with broader tourism dynamics, making it extremely difficult to isolate its specific contribution from the wider forces shaping the territory. For example, attempts to assess residents' perceptions of the type of tourism promoted by the route become problematic when such perceptions are largely dominated by the effects of overtourism. In this context, attribution is not merely a methodological challenge but a factor that calls into question the relevance of socio-cultural impact assessment itself. This observation was also confirmed during an interview with a manager of Romea Strata, who explained that evaluation activities conducted within projects such as Data4Rural and Ruralities focused primarily on rural and peripheral sections of the route, while major urban destinations such as Rome and Verona were excluded due to the impossibility of distinguishing the route's effects from those generated by the broader tourism system.

In settings of this kind, then, there appears to be no viable means of measuring the long-term territorial impact, whether economic, social, or cultural, of a comparatively small cultural-route project. What can be measured is something more circumscribed: the effect of this form of tourism upon the visitors themselves and upon the local actors who receive, manage, or otherwise engage with them, for example the artisans, guides, accommodation providers, and cultural operators involved in the route's activities. However, strictly speaking, these are not impact assessments at all, for they capture no long-term territorial change; they assess instead the route's performance and the outputs and outcomes it produces among those directly involved, a distinction that will prove significant in the conclusion.

Nor does the route's nested form afford any escape. A single Smart Way might be assessed by means of the methods devised for linear cultural routes, but the same irrelevance recurs wherever medium or large towns and sites are present, which is the case along every Smart Way.

4.1.4 The Conditions for a Feasible Assessment

It is therefore possible to identify two conditions that must hold jointly before an assessment is worth attempting. First, the cost of measuring the impact must be lower than the magnitude of the impact itself. The economic and social weight of the Via Francigena and the Way of St. James, for instance, was evident before any measurement was undertaken; the exercise proved worthwhile precisely because these routes had already been recognised as major engines of territorial development. Second, the cost must be lower than the benefit that the route's managers and partners derive from the exercise, that is, the feedback on their activities and, with it, the access to funding, the accountability, and the legitimacy that such feedback affords.

Across most of the route, neither condition obtains. The Phoenicians' Route remains a minor driver of economic, social, cultural, and environmental change, and in medium and large destinations it stands against full-scale phenomena that only substantial policy intervention could redirect. The cost of measurement would exceed by far both the statistical weight of the route's effect upon the area and whatever the assessment might return to the itinerary.

The two conditions outlined above are likely to be satisfied only in relatively small and lesser-known destinations, irrespective of their inclusion within a Smart Way, where participation in the Phoenicians' Route constitutes one of the main drivers of local development and territorial change. Although the implementation of an evaluation process would still require dedicated financial and human resources, these would be substantially lower than those needed for large-scale impact assessments. Consequently, the potential benefits generated by the evaluation, in terms of organisational learning could reasonably justify its costs.

This is also the single setting in which the problems of relevance and attribution recede, for here the route's contribution is at once meaningful and discernible.

Candidates are few, but the Municipality of Ajdovščina, and its town centre in particular, is a promising one. Ajdovščina is a small Slovenian town whose place on the route rests upon the tradition that the Battle of the Frigidus was fought nearby in 394 CE, between the Christian emperor Theodosius I and the pagans of the Western Empire; Roman remains survive there in consequence. What follows outlines, in broad terms and with limited knowledge of the locality, the principal steps of an economic and a socio-cultural assessment.

On the economic side, the analysis would begin by tracing the flow of tourists to the town's principal attractions, among them the Roman walls in the centre and the wine cellars for which the area is known. Interviews and questionnaires would establish whether visitors had come on account of the Phoenicians' Route, or of some promotion connected to it, and, where this was so, how long they intended to remain and how they spent. The same instruments would be applied to local businesses and to the tourist office in order to gauge the economic value of that flow. A multiplier-based calculation would then yield the economic impact, in its direct, indirect, and induced components. To verify the results, a counterfactual approach would be of value: a comparable municipality would be selected and the relevant differences, such as the presence and quantity of Roman remains, controlled for statistically by means of Inverse Probability Weighting, as applied in (Conti et al., 2022). This would permit the route's impact upon the municipality to be attributed with reasonable confidence, by comparison with similar towns outside the network.

On the other hand, the socio-cultural assessment would be less rigorous. Here the interviews would extend beyond tourists and business owners to other residents, addressing their perception of their historical and cultural heritage, their knowledge of it, and the importance they attach to it; direct observation, conducted with anthropological and sociological attention, would assist in interpreting a fragmented setting. The means by which a measure of long-term impact might be drawn from such observations remain unclear, however, and would call for considerable further inquiry. The control methods employed on the economic side would likewise prove difficult to apply, since they would require a parallel study of the control town's socio-cultural profile, entailing further expenditure of resources and the interpretation of intangible values that resist measurement.

4.1.5 From Impact Assessment to Performance Evaluation

The analysis has thus far remained within the terms of the literature, in which impact denotes something caused by tourism and pilgrimage. This is itself a narrow conception of cultural routes, which are also instruments of grassroots international cooperation, vehicles for a shared and active European citizenship, and custodians of the tangible and intangible traditions of their territories. To take this wider role seriously is at once to deepen the problem of relevance and to indicate its resolution.

As the Director of the Route has himself observed, the true mission of the Phoenicians' Route is understood less and less as the provision of a trail to be walked, and increasingly as a network of collaboration, a means of producing and disseminating knowledge on questions of culture and heritage that bear upon the well-being of European citizens. The route increasingly operates as think tank, and its strategy lies in the continual widening of that network within its thematic boundaries. What it seeks to transform, accordingly, is not only the territory by way of tourism but the performance of its member organisations, that is, the

manner in which, collectively, they confront the challenges of the present. Both the route and the Council of Europe behind it regard this collective dimension as central. New members continue to join in search of dialogue, and cultural and tourism operators and authorities display growing interest.

The route's activities fall into several broad lines: initiatives directed at young people; the safeguarding of the itinerary's historical, cultural, and artistic dimension; the promotion of sustainable, slow, creative, and experiential tourism in the territories involved; collaboration with other Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe, and with further cultural itineraries, in defence of shared values; communication; and the training of operators.

All of these activities operate either directly upon the territory or upon the actors who themselves work within it. Whatever the channel, however, their effect tends to amount to a single drop in a sea of other interventions: each actor within so vast a network contributes only modestly to impacts that are very broad, and the mark left by any one activity upon a territory takes shape slowly, frequently over decades. The link between activity and impact is, in this sense, faint and indirect, far removed from the immediate effect that a tourist's expenditure exerts upon a local economy.

It is here that the problem of relevance finds its resolution. An assessment seeking to establish the direct territorial consequences of the route's action would be addressed to the wrong object, for those consequences are diffuse, decades in the making, and impossible to attribute, the same irrelevance encountered earlier, now in its most general form.

A more profitable course for the Phoenicians' Route would be to move from the assessment of impact to the evaluation of performance. The shift is of benefit on two counts. It no longer demands the isolation of a large and measurable territorial impact, and so escapes the constraint of attribution; and it admits not only the route's tourism-related activities but also its governance and its work as an instrument of international cultural cooperation and of the diffusion of knowledge and good practice, the dimensions in which its value principally resides. These activities belong to a far larger framework of European policy, one that advances along many lines at once toward a general shift of paradigm equal to the challenges of the age. A performance evaluation makes it possible to do justice to such individual contributions by establishing the quality of each actor's actions. In this aspect, performance evaluation tools are also more capable, with respect to IA tools, to capture social, cultural and environmental effects.

4.1.6 Impact Assessment as an inadequate method to evaluate Phoenicians' Route

The findings of this chapter may be summarised as follows. The intrinsic diversity of the Phoenicians' Route precludes the adoption of any single, route-wide framework of impact assessment: the value of an assessment depends, in each territorial context, upon whether a relevant impact exists to be measured, a condition that cannot be assumed across the network as a whole. In the route's major destinations, its effect

proves both too limited and too closely intertwined with broader tourism dynamics to be measured or attributed, whether on the economic or the socio-cultural plane. A meaningful impact assessment thus remains feasible only in the rare instance of a small and little-known site in which the route may constitute a principal driver of long-term change. Yet once the route is understood according to its actual nature, as a network of cooperation and knowledge production whose influence upon the territory is exerted slowly and only indirectly, even this limited feasibility yields to a more general conclusion: for an itinerary of this kind, impact assessment is, in large measure, an inappropriate instrument. And, directing responding to the relevant research question, these sorts of evaluation tools are mostly unable to capture the value that the Phoenicians' Route generates in its territories.

This conclusion also accounts for a recurring feature of the application cases examined earlier, namely the frequency with which performance indicators were presented as measures of impact. The reason is that, for many cultural routes, the Phoenicians' Route among them, the only meaningful conception of impact that can be formed, short of measuring it directly, lies in an appraisal of how effectively the route operates and how faithfully it does so in accordance with the values of the Council of Europe. Performance thus constitutes, in practice, the closest available approximation of impact for itineraries of this type.

In the case of the Phoenicians' Route, this study accordingly recommends a performance evaluation in preference to an impact assessment. Where a more territorially grounded measurement is nonetheless sought, the only realistic option is a circumscribed one, the assessment of a single event or of a single small locality, and even in such cases the governing criterion must remain that of relevance: not whether an impact can be measured, but whether its measurement is valuable.

5. Conclusion

The present thesis aimed to investigate the feasibility, limitations, and potential of impact assessment practices when applied to Cultural Routes.

The first chapter sought to clarify the concept of impact, defining it as a long-term change generated by a specific intervention. This concept was subsequently situated within a Theory of Change framework to illustrate the temporal sequence through which different forms of change may occur within territories and communities.

Having established this conceptual foundation, the chapter then presented two complementary definitions of impact assessment: an ex-ante perspective, concerned with the anticipated consequences of an intervention, and an ex-post perspective, focused on the evaluation of impacts after implementation. Beyond these general definitions, the chapter also briefly discussed the main forms of impact assessment potentially relevant to the Phoenicians' Route. These included environmental, strategic, social, cultural, heritage, economic, landscape, and tourism impact assessments, reflecting the different domains in which impacts may occur.

Finally, in order to provide the theoretical framework necessary to address the research questions, the chapter reviewed the principal limitations identified in the literature regarding the evaluation of Cultural Routes. These include the limited availability and quality of data on tourism flows generated by Cultural Routes, the lack of methodological consistency in data collection and interpretation, difficulties in attributing observed effects to the routes themselves, the long-term nature of many impacts, and the challenges associated with measuring intangible outcomes, particularly social and cultural values.

The second chapter employed these theoretical considerations as an analytical framework for examining eight case studies in which impact assessment methodologies had been applied, either fully or partially, to Cultural Routes. The first case analysed was the Council of Europe's methodological guide (2011), which not only attempted to assess the impacts of some Cultural Routes but also reflected more broadly on the applicability of impact assessment and the methodologies available for this purpose. The analysis then examined three studies concerning different sections of the Camino de Santiago (Parga-Dans, 2015; Graave et al., 2017; Mróz, 2023), two studies on the Via Francigena in Tuscany (Conti et al., 2015; Conti et al., 2022), a national study on Italian pilgrimage routes (Terre di Mezzo, 2026), and the MED S&C Path Model (Gasparini & Villalobos).

Drawing on these experiences, the chapter identified several recurring trends. In particular, a clear preference emerged for the assessment of economic impacts, especially in rural and peripheral areas where Cultural Routes often represent significant drivers of territorial development. The Camino de Santiago and the Via Francigena also appeared as the routes most frequently analysed in the literature. Furthermore, the

review highlighted considerable diversity both in the methodologies adopted and in the very conceptualisation of impact, confirming the absence of a common evaluation framework within the field.

The final chapter applied the findings and considerations developed in the previous sections to the case of the Phoenicians' Route. The analysis once again highlighted some of the limitations identified in the literature, particularly the scarcity of route-specific data and the difficulties associated with route-effect attribution. In addition, it introduced the criterion of relevance as a key element in determining the feasibility of impact assessment. This criterion refers to the relationship between the considerable resources required to conduct an evaluation and the practical value that the resulting information may generate for both individual territories and the route network as a whole.

With the partial exception of small destinations where the Phoenicians' Route may represent a significant driver of local development, such as the municipality of Ajdovščina in Slovenia, the analysis concluded that impact assessment tools are generally ill-suited to capturing the value generated by the Route. Given that the route's contribution to territorial change is often relatively limited when compared to the influence of broader economic, social, and tourism dynamics, the costs and complexity of impact assessment frequently outweigh its potential benefits.

For this reason, the thesis argues that performance evaluation represents a more appropriate framework for assessing the Phoenicians' Route. Such an approach would allow for a more comprehensive and feasible evaluation of the route's activities, governance mechanisms, and cooperative functions, while also providing a more effective source of feedback and organisational learning.

Additional reflections emerging from this research concern the importance of the conceptual role of indicators, as introduced by Gasparini and Villalobos (2022). Rather than serving solely as measurement tools, indicators can also function as instruments for participatory reflection, encouraging stakeholders to discuss and collectively define what is meant by indicators, outcomes, impacts, and sustainability criteria. This approach represents a valuable means of fostering a deeper understanding of evaluation processes and promoting a shared interpretation of both impact assessment and performance evaluation.

Finally, recent developments within several Cultural Routes, and particularly within the Phoenicians' Route, have involved the planning of Community Heritage Hubs. These are conceived as spaces where local communities, service providers, cultural organisations, and multiple Cultural Routes can interact and collaborate. Beyond their cultural and networking functions, such hubs could also offer significant opportunities for data collection. Through interviews, questionnaires, and direct observation, they could facilitate the systematic gathering of information on visitors, local stakeholders, and community perceptions, thereby addressing some of the data-related limitations identified throughout this research.

References

- Ashrafi, B.; Neugebauer, C.; Kloos, M. (2022). «A Conceptual Framework for Heritage Impact Assessment: A Review and Perspective». *Sustainability*, 14(1), 27.
- Berti, E. (2013). «Itinerari Culturali del Consiglio d'Europa: Nuovi Paradigmi per il Progetto Territoriale e per il Paesaggio». *AlmaTourism*, 7.
- Berti, E. (2015). «Project Application, Assessment, Evaluation and Certification». Berti et al. 2015.
- Berti, E.; Denu, P.; Mariotti, A. (eds) (2015). *Cultural Routes Management: From Theory to Practice*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Berti, E.; Mariotti, A. (2015). «The Heritage of Cultural Routes: Between Landscapes, Traditions and Identity». Berti et al. 2015.
- Božić, S.; Tomić, N. (2016). «Developing the Cultural Route Evaluation Model (CREM) and Its Application on the Trail of Roman Emperors, Serbia». *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 17, 26-35.
- Cavallaro, M.; Costanzo, C. (2024). «Itinerari culturali e sviluppo economico». Messina, G.; Nicosia, E.; Porto, C. M. (a cura di), *Oltre la globalizzazione – Sud/South*. s.l.: Società di Studi Geografici, 697-702.
- Cicerchia, A. (2021). «Che cosa muove la cultura. Impatti, misure e racconti tra economia e immaginario». *Economia della Cultura*, 32(2), 312-13.
- CM/Res (2013)66, *Resolution Confirming the Establishment of the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes (EPA)* (2013). Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
<https://search.coe.int/cm?i=09000016805c69ac>
- CoE (Council of Europe) (2011). *Impact of European Cultural Routes on SMEs' Innovation and Competitiveness*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- CoE (Council of Europe) (2015). *Cultural Routes Management: From Theory to Practice*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Conti, E.; Iommi, S.; Piccini, L.; Rosignoli, S. (2015). *Itinerari culturali europei e sviluppo sostenibile: il caso della via Francigena*. s.l.: s.n.
- Conti, E.; Maitino, M. L.; Mariani, M.; Sciclone, N. (2022). *Effetti del ripristino del tratto toscano della Via Francigena sulle presenze turistiche nei comuni attraversati e dintorni*. Firenze: IRPET (Istituto Regionale di Programmazione Economica della Toscana). Working Papers 4.

Elkington, J. (1997). The triple bottom line. *Environmental management: Readings and cases*, 2(1997), 49-66.

Gasparini, M. L.; Villalobos, V. (2022). «Monitoring Sustainability Along Cultural Routes: The MED Sustainable Path and Cultural Route Model». *Handbook of Research on Cultural Tourism and Sustainability*. s.l.: IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 104-30.

Graave, E. J., Klijs, J., & Heijman, W. (2017). The Economic Impact of Pilgrimage: An economic impact analysis of pilgrimage expenditures in Galicia. *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage*, 5(3), 39-54.

Hosagrahar, J. et al. (2019). *UNESCO Thematic Indicators for Culture in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Analytical Report of the Consultation with the Member States*. Paris: UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

IAIA (International Association of Impact Assessment) (2009). *What Is Impact Assessment?* Fargo, ND: IAIA.

ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites) (2008). *Charter on Cultural Routes*. s.l.: s.n.

Interreg Europe (2020). *Policy Brief on Cultural Routes in Europe*. s.l.: s.n.

Jo, E.; Mackay, R.; Murai, M.; Therivel, R. (2022). *Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

Khovanova-Rubicondo, K. (2015). «Council of Europe Cultural Routes Networks Governance and Sustainable Development». Berti et al. 2015.

Klarić, V. (2025). *Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe: Country Mapping Document for Croatia*. Strasbourg: Enlarged Partial Agreement on Cultural Routes of the Council of Europe (EPA). <https://rm.coe.int/cmd-croatia-2025-en/488029b6ff>.

Kunaeva, M. (2012). *Sustainable Tourism Management Along the Camino de Santiago Pilgrimage Routes* [master's thesis]. Helsinki: Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences.

Mansfeld, Y. (2015). «Tourism, Community and Socio-Cultural Sustainability in Cultural Routes». Berti et al. 2015.

Mariotti, A. (2015). «Tourism and Cultural Routes: Clusters, Cultural Districts and Tourism Systems». Berti et al. 2015.

- Morgan, R. K. (2012). «Environmental Impact Assessment: The State of the Art». *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 30(1), 5-14.
- Mróz, F. (2023). «The Network of the Way of St. James in Poland: Genesis, Development as Well as Religious, Cultural and Socio-Economic Impact». *Host Communities and Pilgrimage Tourism: Asia and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore, 179-93.
- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2019). *Better Criteria for Better Evaluation: Revised Evaluation Criteria Definitions and Principles for Use*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/revised-evaluation-criteria-december-2019.pdf>.
- Page, S. J. (2009). *Tourism Management: Managing for Change*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Paquette, J. (2025). «The Council of Europe and Cultural Cooperation: Four Decades of Cultural Routes and Itinerary-Making». *Studia Europejskie*, 29(3), 221-31.
- Parga-Dans, E. (2015). «Socio-Economic Impacts of the Camino to Finisterre». *Heritage, Pilgrimage and the Camino to Finisterre: Walking to the End of the World*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 121-34.
- Partal, A.; Dunphy, K. (2016). «Cultural Impact Assessment: A Systematic Literature Review of Current Methods and Practice Around the World». *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 34(1), 1-13.
- Rogers, P. J. (2014). *Theory of Change. Methodological Briefs: Impact Evaluation*. Firenze: Unicef.
- Sagnia, B. K. (2004). *Framework for Cultural Impact Assessment*. s.l.: International Network for Cultural Diversity (INCD).
- Tyrrell, T. J.; Johnston, R. J. (2006). «The Economic Impacts of Tourism: A Special Issue». *Journal of Travel Research*, 45(1), 3-7.
- Vanclay, F. (1999). «Social Impact Assessment». *Handbook of Environmental Impact Assessment*, 1(1999), 301-26.
- Vanclay, F. (2003). «International Principles for Social Impact Assessment». *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 21(1), 5-12.
- Wilson, S. (2002). *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Wood, C.; Dejeddour, M. (1992). «Strategic Environmental Assessment: EA of Policies, Plans and Programmes». *Impact Assessment*, 10(1), 3-22.

