

**LOCAL ACTION PLAN ASSESSMENT
ACTIVITY 3.1.3**
The operative plans revised after 3 years of project

JREDS

Aqaba less known destinations

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Aqaba and the surrounding area

Aqaba sits at the northern tip of the 'Gulf of Aqaba', the northern-most part of the Red Sea, at the crossroads of the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe. The city has a rich history, having been inhabited for over 4000 years.

Aqaba is the only coastal city in Jordan, an otherwise landlocked country. Aqaba is a resort city and a port city, with tourism as major industry and undergoing a major expansion with new luxury neighborhoods, attractions, and hotels opening. The main attraction of Aqaba is, of course, its Red Sea coastline, and the beaches, and historical and cultural sites. But the city's center and markets are becoming increasingly attractive. Aqaba's location, close to Wadi Rum and Petra, and the border with Saudi Arabia and Egypt make it a popular base for touring the region, with trips available to a host of destinations.

Archaeological excavations are bringing to light ever more of Aqaba's rich history, which can be traced back as far as the Iron Age. Very little of the once extensive Byzantine town of Aila now remains as many of the stones from its buildings were later re-used for new settlements, and modern Aqaba now covers much of it, but traces can still be found.

The coastline of the Gulf of Aqaba extends for 27Km along narrow and very deep arm of the Red Sea with an average width of 20 Km reaching a maximum of 26Km. Over a length of 13Km, a discontinuous series of fringing coral reefs and reef flats are present with 150m wide. Despite the relatively small water body at the Gulf of Aqaba, but it hosts an extraordinary marine diversity with 157 scleractinian (reef-building) coral species and unknown species of soft coral were recorded, some of which are globally endangered, such as the red and black corals. In addition, more than 500 species of tropical and semi-tropical fish were reported from the Gulf of Aqaba. In addition, corals are accessible from the shore and characterized by high visibility and warm water temperature throughout the year.

Tourism Sector

Aqaba has a stray of luxury hotels, and it offers activities which take advantage of its desert location. Its many coffee shops and restaurants offer mansaf, Sayadia, knafeh, and baqlawa desserts. Another very popular venue is the Turkish bath (Hamam) built in 306 AD, in which locals and visitors alike come to relax after a hot day.

In 2006, the Tourism Division of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) reported that the number of tourists visiting the Zone in 2006 rose to about 432,000, an increase of 5% over previous year. Approximately 65% or 293,000 were Jordanians. Of foreign tourists, Europeans visited the Zone in the largest numbers, with about 98,000 visiting during the year. The division has financed tourism advertising and media campaigns with the assistance of the European Union.

Aqaba is one of the preferred destinations for internal tourism during holidays, particularly from Amman and Irbid. Aqaba has been chosen for the site of a new waterfront building project that would rebuild Aqaba with new man-made water structures, new high-rise residential and office buildings, and more tourist services to place Aqaba on the investment map and challenge other centers of waterfront development throughout the region.

The rapid developments in the economic activities and demographical growth, increase the pressure on the coastal resources of the Jordanian portion of the Gulf of Aqaba. This has led the government of Jordan, through the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, to undertake the management of the Aqaba Marine Park as a matter of urgency. Aqaba's brilliant coral reefs and marine life treasures are protected in Aqaba Marine Park, occupying 7 km of a preserved tapestry of shapes and colors on the south beach of Aqaba.

Established in 1997, Aqaba Marine Park's mission is to give visitors access to a world of underwater vibrancy while raising awareness and encouraging eco-friendly practices and sustainable tourism.

National Policies and Strategies in line with the project

Previous *Jordan National Tourism Strategy (JNTS)* has outlined four pillars as cornerstones for the Jordanian tourism industry. The four pillars include:

- Strengthening tourism marketing (enhance Jordan's image).
- Supporting product development and competitiveness.
- Developing human resources and providing effective institutional setups.
- Establishing an appropriate regulatory framework.

The National Tourism Strategy 2004 – 2010 and The National Tourism Strategy 2011 - 2015

The first was hailed as a success, since in this period Jordan strengthened its reputation as a destination for the tourist and the businessman alike. The National Tourism Strategy 2011-2015, which is considered as a continuation for the old one, acknowledged that “Jordan's strategic challenges facing tourism development are undoubtedly complex, involving multiple supply and demand factors”.

Accordingly, its vision for the coming period will be a distinctive destination offering diverse, year-round visitor experiences that will enrich the lives of Jordanians and their guests.

Jordan Economic Growth Plan 2018 – 2022

Develop tourism products and services that are highly competitive at the regional and international levels spanning all seasons of the year, by exploiting the available resources across the Kingdom's governorates, to increase the tourism sector's contribution to overall economic growth.

The sector policy is based on the following:

1. Developing tourism products (cultural, medical, environmental, religious, adventure, marine, educational, conventions, exhibitions and festivals)
2. Activating the leading role of the private sector
3. Maintaining a promotional policy that places Jordan as a distinct and competitive tourist destination in the region
4. Improving the management and operation of tourism sites and maintaining a high level of services
5. Continuously developing and marketing local tourism sites.

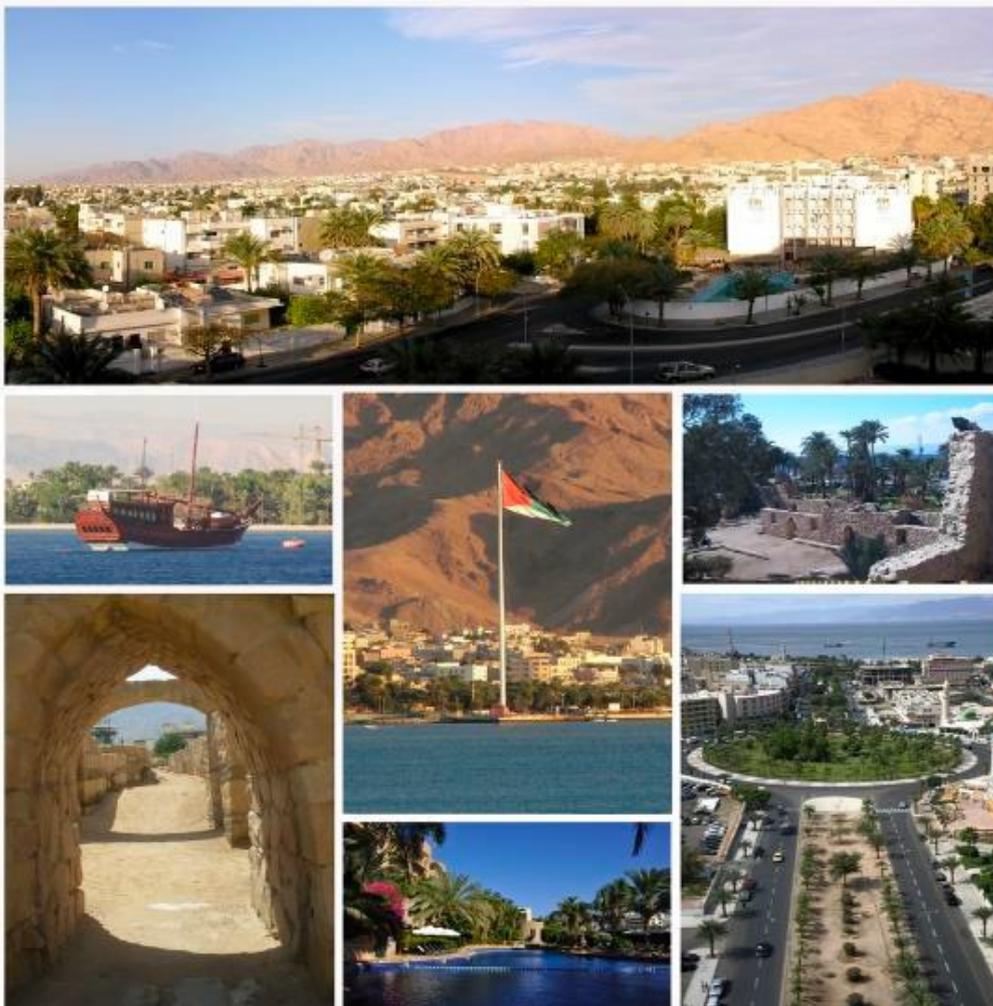
The Aqaba ecotourism development plan (UNDP, 2014)

Aqaba is a primary tourist destination for local and foreign tourists. Its potential has yet to be fulfilled. The major asset of Aqaba is its diverse tourist potential due to its unique location at the border of desert and sea, and at the crossroads of two continents; interesting topography of mountains and deserts; world-renowned coral reefs; sandy beaches with favorable climate; rich history and culture; clear linkages with Wadi Rum and Petra; and one of the key diving locations in the world.

According to the Tourism Marketing Strategy for Aqaba 2005-2010, the Aqaba Tourism branding was based on sea, sun, sand alongside to the golden triangle (Petra, Wadi Rum, Aqaba), while its marketing strategy was built around four product clusters: “Rest, relaxation, beaches and boats/Diving/Soft adventure and touring Aqaba as a Cruise liner destination”.

THE MAIN NEEDS IN THE AREA

- There needs to be a greater emphasis **on joint marketing programs** with international tour operators in conjunction with the JTB who has the expertise and relations with the international market and trade shows.
- Aqaba needs to elevate awareness for the convenience and practicality of **King Hussein International Airport** and find ways to integrate it into the Aqaba brand.
- There is a collective agreement on the part of the tourism industry that Aqaba needs **more events** of all sizes and themes to attract more tourists. Events are a great way to draw in new visitors to a destination and get past visitors to come back again and again. Based on Aqaba's brand foundation in people, nature, culture, and history there would be no limit to the amount of events Aqaba could deliver on.
- To fully leverage Aqaba's full range of assets, **local transportation** needs to improve, and service must be up to par. In particular, Facilities and Infrastructure for connecting tourists with the shore dive sites.
- Need of **infrastructures for people with special needs** on most sites
- Need to have additional technical support and consultation on the development and production of **advanced statistic** system for Aqaba – to be considered as a model for the rest of Jordan and implemented outside Aqaba by different relevant parties. In particular there are no smart gates or any other methods for calculating the **number of visitors**.
- Need to create **opportunities** to support **sustainable destination management**.
- Need to improve the **fishing experience** as tourism product.
- Need for creating Audio description tour for Aqaba to be linked with red bus tour.
- Need to create a platform and Documentation for all the local community experiences that can be shared with tourists.



METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

JREDS conduct two workshops with proposed stakeholders other institutions, I attached the report and many meetings with the primary stakeholders

Strength

- Strategic position and easy access to Aqaba and the tourist areas, both at national and international level
- Mild climate
- Richness of natural resources that allow outdoor and soft adventure tourism experiences.
- Aqaba's local and authentic tourism products
- Christian and Islamic heritage and pilgrimage sites
- Presence of active professional associations in tourism development process
- Easy procedures for visa (Most countries can get it when they arrive)
- The privacy, comfort, and safety of Aqaba city
- Low-cost new airlines allowing also to connect Aqaba with other tourist destination
- Widespread English-speaking citizens
- Hospitality of local community
- Presence of a mixture of civilizations and activities
- A tourist in other neighboring countries can easily plan to visit Aqaba.

Opportunities

- The presence of support and donors
- Forms of destination collaboration and destination management can contribute to enhance the visitor experience.
- Mobile platforms and apps becoming the primary engagement platform for travelers.
- Investment in sustainable and eco-friendly practices within the tourism industry
- Customers increasingly looking to experience a local's way of life.
- An independent tourist destination that receives from three sides (sea, air, land)
- Tourist services (hotels and restaurants)

Weaknesses

- Unavailability of public facilities qualified local transportation, comprehensive and good quality signages inside the selected sites, Lack of Unhygienic Public toilets, Wi Fi Connection, Public Library, more Public parks.
- The small area in Aqaba
- Limited coordination among governmental bodies and industry stakeholders on issues that impact tourism.
- Poor presentation, management and interpretation of cultural resources and key heritage sites
- Unavailability of public transportation
- Lack of activities for tourists especially at night
- Lack of reliable market research to guide decision making for tourism planning and marketing
- Lack of tourism and heritage products and promotion
- Travelers demanding more information and interaction.

Threats

- Political stability, safety, and security in the country/ region
- Authorities policy change
- Difficult and expensive air access to Jordan is a key challenge in attracting travelers
- Environmental situation (i.e. Aqaba city suffer from the flush floods and solid waste; while Reefs in Aqaba are suffering from sedimentation caused by construction, illegal fishing, physical damage from divers, boats and other recreational activities, and solid waste pollution.)
- High operational costs for tourism businesses due to taxation policies
- Irregular flow of tourists with high peaks and empty periods, which causes the movement of the port and ships to stop
- Strong regional competition on certain tourism products and market segments
- Relations with surrounding countries
- High summer temperatures
- Prices for transportation are not standardized (stopping the exploitation of tourists)

OBJECTIVES OF THE PLAN

The **general objective** of this Plan and JREDS activities is to increase the diversification and de-seasonalization of tourism destinations and services in Aqaba to foster the development of a sustainable cultural tourism segment in the area.

This will be done mainly through the **specific objective** of increasing the attractiveness of less known touristic destinations in Aqaba focusing on local cultural and heritage products and sites. To do this JREDS will connect these destinations with storytelling and practical activities for experiencing the tradition and history.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION

The targeted areas that were previously selected and approved are:

Tell Al- Khalifa:

the area of Tal al-Khalifa attests to the fact that Aqaba is inhabited from the first Iron Age to the Persian period (1st century BC), this site is the oldest currency instrument. This site has not been promoted as a tourist site, and it is not part of the tourism map in Aqaba or Jordan.

Islamic City of Ayla:

is an ancient Islamic city is located northwest of the current center of the city of Aqaba, and it is considered the first Islamic city, which was established outside the Arabian Peninsula.

Byzantine Church Ruins:

is a historic 3rd-century church located in the heart of Aqaba; probably one of the oldest church in the world.

Aqaba Castle (Aqaba Fortress):

is a fortress originally built by Crusaders in the 12th century and named Helim. Saladin recaptured Ayla (ancient Aqaba) in 1187 and the fortress was destroyed, until it was rebuilt in the early 16th century under the Mamluk Sultan Al-Ashraf Qansuh Al-Ghuri.

Underwater Military Museum Aqaba:

the underwater military museum considers the first underwater military museum in the world. In 2019, 19 pieces of hardware were sunk in 'battle formation' and includes tanks of different sizes, an ambulance, a military crane, a troop carrier, anti-aircraft guns and a combat helicopter. This location is relatively poor with marine organisms and poor with coral reefs, the main goal of this location to reduce the pressure on the natural coral reefs by creating new artificial sites.

VI Cedar Pride Shipwreck:

The Vessel, after a fire accident, in 1985 was towed to a position just off Aqaba Beach and deliberately sunk as a Scuba Diving attraction and Artificial Reef.

These sites are managed and supervised by the Department of Antiquities. As for the Cedar Pride "shipwreck" and underwater military museum sites, they are managed by the Aqaba Special Authority through the Directorate of Tourism and the Aqaba Marine Park.

Through CROSSDEV project, JREDS wants to promote these less known or unknown tourist destination by connecting them through storytelling, activating practical experiences to be coupled which are based on cultural tradition and heritage.

Following the same concept of appreciation of cultural sites and diversification of tourism, other sites in Aqaba could be integrated in the approach promoted by JREDS.

PARTNER ROLE

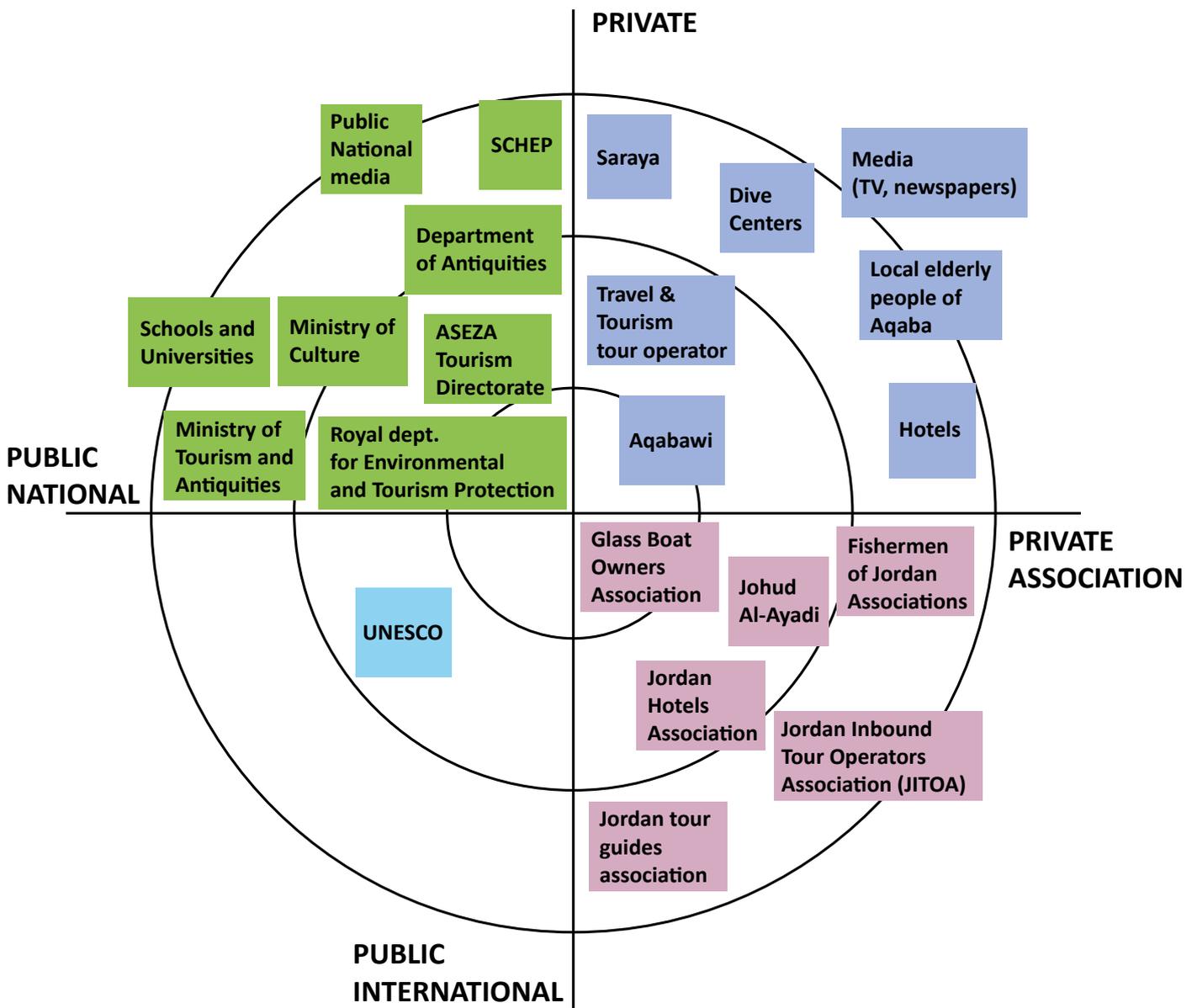
JREDS is national operator for eco-label in Jordan for tourism sector (green key, blue flag and eco-school), in this sense is a renown institution operating in environmental sustainability. JREDS with the support of the Aqaba tourism governance is developing opportunities for sustainable development along some selected less-known sites in Aqaba.

Stakeholders are identified and categorized according to the typology (public national, public international, private association and private business). Further, stakeholders identified are then prioritized according to the level of involvement and proactiveness in collaborating to achieve partner's objectives.

Among the **most involved** stakeholders are mainly public national authorities, reflecting the nature of the partner and the political context of the Country. Some association and private business are also highly involved in the activities.

At an **intermediate level** there is a good balance of public national authorities, private for-profit and no-profit actors involved in the implementation of the activities, and UNESCO as the only international public organization with an effective involvement in the project.

With a **limited level** of involvement but still quite engaged in the process there are a wide range of national public authorities, private citizens (old local citizens especially) and a couple of Tour Operators and Guides Associations.



The stakeholders that we will need to get involved in the future are:

- International institution in charge of culture, tourism and sustainable tourism so to exchange experiences and peer-learn
- International buyers and stakeholders.

How we consulted the stakeholders to develop and endorse the LAP

- A meeting to realize the SWOT analysis with a variety of local stakeholders and national public bodies (Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, Aqaba Marine Park (Aqaba Marine Reserve, Jordan Tourism Board, USAID Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project).
- Stakeholder Analysis Workshop with Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA), Directorate of Antiquities of Aqaba, Hyatt Regency Hotel, Aqaba University College, Al Hussein University, JREDS, Fishermen Association, Aqaba Diving Association, Movenpick Hotel Aqaba, Tourism Guides Association, Aqaba Development Company, and a tour operator company (Jordan Ecotourism).
- Field visits in the selected sites to identify the main needs and missing requirements to become tourist attractions.
- Two meetings with the Department of Tourism (ASEZA) to coordinate actions and priorities in the area.
- Meeting with USAID Sustainable Cultural Heritage Through Engagement of Local Communities Project (SCHEP), to discuss the training program for 10 local guide and cooperate with them to install the signage and the site rehabilitation.
- Meeting with Commissioner for Economic Affairs to discuss the local action plan and to promote the selected sites within CROSSDEV project and discuss any ideas to rehabilitate the touristic site in Aqaba beaches.
- Meeting with Ministry of Tourism to develop the CROSSDEV Project Local Action Plan, while reflecting about the effects of the COVID19 pandemic on the tourism sector.
- Meeting with Director General of The Department of Antiquities.

How we engaged the stakeholders during the whole project

- Educational Press Tour (June and September 2020)
- Women’s Dive Day organized with PADI (July 2020)
- Field Visits to the selected sites (June 2020)
- Best Handicraft Competition (December 2021)
- Workshop on traditional food on Tuna to raise awareness on local sustainable food (December 2021)
- Food Safety Workshop (December 2021)
- Tourism training Program for 12 local tourist guides several topics including English language, interpretation skills, communication skills and conservation (November-December 2021)



12.2019

Swot Analysis



June and September 2020

Educational Press Tour



July 2020

PADI Women’s Dive day
(85 women)



April 2021

Meeting with stakeholder



May 2021

Field Visit



December 2021

Best Handi Craft Comp



December 2021

Tuna Chef
Food Safety Workshop



Nov.-Dec. 2021

Tourism Training Pro

Main activities updates

Activity	Intended Outputs	Changes in respect to the original Plan	State of the Art
Two workshops with stakeholders and a workshop with people with disabilities	Inputs for SWOT and need analysis for people with disabilities	Activities with stakeholders and target group of visitors were delayed or cancelled due to COVID	Done
Field visits to selected sites with Ministry of Tourism and ASEZA	Identify needs of each site/area		Done
Meetings with Public national Stakeholders (i.e. tourism directorate, dept. of antiquities in Amman and Aqaba).	Share vision and actions in the Plan and build the base for cooperation		Done
Awareness activities with stakeholders - e.g. sustainable tourism event; press tour in selected sites with meetings after to discuss about the site; environmental sensibilization events; web campaign for students and local community about ecology and recycle competition; sustainable tourism event with workshop about traditional food.	Identify specific needs about sustainable tourism, next steps, marketing needs and foster stakeholders engagement with the project's values.	Delays because of COVID in organization of activities and field tours for students, universities, and local community. The plan now is to organize about 25 field tours for schools in Aqaba and for university students, communities.	Some are already done, other to be done in April 2022.
Training programme for different stakeholders	Empower the stakeholders and increase awareness about sustainable cultural tourism		In progress (partially done)
Sub-grants organization for local communities and service providers	Develop and increase the tourism products		In progress
Events targeted to women groups working with tourism and tradition/heritage/culture	Increase support and involvement of women groups - 6 courses will be done	Delays because the approval of the second sub-grant (experience tourism) is still pending	To be done
Promotion activities - many events with different targets e.g. diving for ladies	Dissemination and reach eventually international buyers		In progress

Unexpected (especially because COVID):

- public events and activities with hotels, schools and also visitors needed to be delayed or even canceled also because there were no tourists for about a year.
- Some activities were added to compensate for the difficulties due to COVID. For example, during Ramadan in 2021, JREDS launched a successful photo competition, and 15 short videos on selected sites in Aqaba were produced (30 sec).

Still to do before the end of the project

- Events with women groups working with tourism and tradition/heritage/culture products and services.
- Events with different visitor's target to test the experiences and promote them. A focus is to find women-friendly diving experiences.
- Update experiences and tours options for tourists.
- Update information on outcomes for subgrants.
- Develop the brochure about new products and experiences to promote them.
- Review the LAP to be able to send them to authorities for approval and adoption.

Our future needs towards the sustainability of the LAP

- Need that ASEZA and other authorities update tourism strategies to value cultural and sustainable tourism, and keeping the collaboration with ASEZA for the promotion of the sustainable tourism products developed with CROSSDEV.
- Need to connect Aqaba's less-known destinations with other destinations in the country and to enhance the promotion of the products and services offered by the subgrantees.

The resources needed in order to make this project sustainable in the long-term. i.e. Type of resources (finance, human capital, infrastructure, organizational, marketing,...)

- Need for a consultant/expert to fine-tune and finalize project outputs, such as promotional materials, and LAP to present it to the authorities.
- Need for knowledge exchange with project partners around the cultural products to do benchmark and learn from best practices.

From whom we expect to derive additional resources (e.g.local, visitor tax, project funds etc).

- Logistical support will come from local authorities such as ASEZA and the Ministry of Tourism.
- Some operational support will continue to come from volunteers' association and groups.

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