

PEER-TO-PEER ECONOMY, A WAY OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract

The paper presents some elements of a research on the analysis of how "peer to peer economy" platforms can support sustainable tourism development in Romania's rural areas. The aim of the paper is to analyze the way the features of sustainable development overlap (conservation of the natural environment, protection of biodiversity and human heritage, economic development and regeneration) within a "peer-to-peer economy" platform or C2C economy (consumer to consumer/ customer to customer/ citizen to citizen).

The object of the research was to analyze the features of C2C e-commerce platforms such as Airbnb, Loft, Booking.com in the context of sustainable development. The results obtained lead to the viable conclusion that the involvement of rural households in tourism activity by registering their services or goods on a sharing economy e-commerce platform represents an efficient way of associating the small entrepreneur with the big corporations. The most important result is the increase in the limits in which tourism, respectively its support capacity, can be developed.

Keywords: rural tourism, sustainable development, economy

JEL classification: L83, Q01

1. Introduction

A complex and always typical problem concerns the development of rural areas in general and rural tourism in particular.

This paper discusses the way in which collaborative economy platforms can boost sustainable rural tourism development. The first part of the research will operationalize concepts such as rural tourism, sustainable

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development and collaborative economy. The findings are supported by a survey conducted on over 2,000 people who have stated their intention for a stay in the countryside.

2. What do we mean by sustainable rural tourism?

In order to address this issue, a series of policies and strategies have been issued at European Union level. The European Union requests the active involvement of rural communities in the process of development, adoption and implementation of the best solutions, with the purpose of mobilizing all initiatives for superior valorisation of all resources and attaining social and economic benefits for the community. The European Charter of Rural Area stated that in drafting development policies, it is necessary that to consider specific conditions of rural regions, while also taking into account principles such as subsidiarity and solidarity.

We live in an era that requires communities to respect principles and practices of sustainability in order to foster a healthy development. The idea of sustainable development in the field of tourism emerged in the beginning of '90s. It is important to differentiate between sustainable and mass tourism, as the former represents a type of alternative tourism based on the following principles:

- Reducing the impact of tourism on the natural environment in order to achieve ecological sustainability;
- Reducing the impact of tourism on local communities in order to achieve so-called social sustainability – more exactly the minimization of hostile situations in the relationship with local populations; a hostile situation is considered to occur when tourism disturbs and interrupts the daily life of local populations;
- Reducing the impact of tourism on culture and the customs of a local community in order to achieve cultural sustainability.

According to what was stated above, the definition of sustainable tourism appeared as follows: “sustainable tourism is the type of tourism which shows a positive approach with the intention to reduce tensions and frictions created by the complexity of interactions between tourist industry, tourists, natural environment and local communities as hosts of tourists” (Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 1993).

Hence, we can undoubtedly assert that, out of all types of tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism are the most sustainable.

Also, as this paper operates with the concept of rural tourism, we need to mention that in literature it is defined as the capitalization of agricultural spaces, natural and empirical resources of rural areas (Nicula V., 2012). Rural tourism capitalizes on cultural heritage, rural local architecture, as well as local traditional products.

3. An overview of the concept of sustainable development

It can be clearly seen that the environment suffers more and more conspicuous changes. These changes happened unexpectedly and mostly they were foreseen by specialists. Both authorities and population became aware of a risk factor that threatens the proper existence of mankind itself.

Faced with this threat, global organizations from the field of environment protection have concluded that the lifestyle of people needs to undergo fundamental changes. Hence, a new concept was created, that of sustainable development or sustainability.

In 1987, with the publication of the Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development "Our Common Future", also known as the Brundtland Report, the concept of sustainable development started to be treated in its broader sense. There are over 100 definitions of sustainable development, but for this research we will work with the following definition: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Commission, 1987). As reference for the term of sustainable development we must mention two documents: Agenda 21 and the Declaration of Rio. The core message of these documents state that only "by changing the attitude and behaviour of the whole world can we bring about the desired changes in the profound crisis between nature and man"

We must point out that sustainable development does not solely concern environmental issues. When we speak of sustainable development there are three dimensions (pillars of sustainable development) to consider: economic, ecological and social.

4. Sharing economy or peer to peer economy

The term “collaborative economy” recently appeared in specialized literature. It is also known as sharing economy or peer to peer economy. When we speak of sharing economy we refer to the common use of resources such as work, houses, cars, bicycles, etc., by agreement between demand and supply. The central point of this type of economy is the replacement or avoidance of institutions which traditionally mediate the exchange. It is very important in this new ecosystem that the resources available are not held only by companies, but also individuals. The common use of these resources – equipment, services, skills and competences – translates into significantly lower costs than in traditional transactions. This shared consumption leads to increased efficiency because it gives the opportunity to those who do not hold the objects to use them for a short period of time in exchange of a cost fraction of the purchase of that object. This is not just about objects; we can speak of services, work spaces or accommodation services.

Hence, on one hand we have users who increase the efficiency of costs and on the other hand, we have the owners who obtain supplementary rental incomes. This new form of economy became possible thanks to the development of new technologies and the exponential increase of Internet access, thus creating the proper premises for setting up platforms that easily connect suppliers and consumers. The most important sharing economy platforms are Uber, Airbnb, Loft, and Lift.

After having analysed the concepts of rural tourism, sustainable development and sharing economy, we can now approach the manner in which all these elements converge to a possible solution of sustainable tourism development in the Romanian village.

The hypothesis we started from in this paper is that sharing economy represents a possible solution for the Romanian village. We have shown that sustainable development refers to an economic activity which has to observe three basic elements: a low ecological impact, a lower pressure on the local population, but also respect for traditions and local culture.

The research activity was carried out in the village of Sibieli, Sibiu County, and as sharing economy platform we used Airbnb.

At first, we need to find out the reasons that make the Romanian village attractive to. After having processed all 2000 questionnaires, filled in

by Romanian subjects, who expressed their intention to spend time in rural areas, the findings point out the following:

- Over 60 percent of respondents declared that serenity and landscape offered would be the main reasons for spending time in rural areas. Local traditions and products (28.2%) check third on the preferences list.
- 68% of respondents declared that if they were to choose between authenticity, tradition and comfort, authenticity and tradition make the top;
- Over 50,5 % of potential tourists would choose a three to seven days stay, while only 6,8% expressed the preference for an over seven days stay in a rural area;
- 68% of tourists prefer to be accommodated in an agro-tourist boarding house, while 25.2% consider renting a room or chalet;
- When it comes to expenditures, 60% of respondents said they were willing to spend between 17 to 30 Euro /day / person for accommodation and meals;
- Only 30 percent of respondents declared they wanted to use the services of a traditional travel agency.

Apart from the surveys completed by tourists, we interviewed 12 owners of boarding houses from Sibiel and 30 individuals who offer rooms for rent. Following the interviews, we learned that all guest houses use at least one online form of attracting tourists, but only two individuals have accounts on sharing economy platforms. It is important to note that over 60 percent of online bookings are made by foreign tourists.

The average price of a double room in Sibiel ranges up to 120 Lei for boarding houses and up to 90 Lei for private lodging. For full boarding in a guest house, the average price a tourist would pay is 80 lei/day.

5. Conclusions

The conclusions of the study show that rural tourism offers respect and are in trend with the domestic demand, but worth to be noted and further developed is the huge development potential with regard to attracting foreign tourists.

Moreover, the survey shows a contradiction between the declared preference of a stay, i.e. authenticity and tradition (68%), but only 28.2 % of all respondents designated traditions as a reason to stay in rural areas. The conclusion that arises after this survey shows that Romanian tourists' main reason for spending a vacation in rural areas are serenity and landscape, while local traditions only fit the declarative level. This conclusion is very important, as it proves that any alteration of the idyllic atmosphere of the Romanian village would lead to a drastic decrease in the number of tourists. At this point, sharing economy becomes vital. For Example, building a hotel in a rural area would undoubtedly boost the economy of that certain village. On the other hand, a hotel building would alter and be in major contradiction with the image a tourist got about Romanian villages in general. If we take a closer look at the tourist village of Sibiel, we notice accommodation facilities would suffice if a larger number of individuals would display renting space/rooms on an online platform, Airbnb for instance.

Such an approach is advisable, as would we can correlate it to another finding of the present research: 60 % of total online bookings are made by foreign tourists. In view of this potential, only 2 persons out of 30 private persons have an account on a sharing economy platform.

Hence, if a larger number of persons would use a sharing economy platform, the principles of sustainable development would be met, as this would lead to economic growth without showing negative impact on the area's ecology.

The second element of sustainable development represents the reduction of tourists' pressure on local traditions.

What impact would a hotel, situated in a rural area, have on local culture and traditions? That means that a large number of tourists are concentrated in a single place, barely interacting with the local population and its culture. On the contrary, if the same tourists were accommodated in private homes, the same tourists would be in permanent contact with the lifestyle and activities carried out in a rural household. As a very important note, we mention that the "scattering" of tourists throughout several households would lead to a division of resources attracted from tourism directly into and for the community.

Thus, a larger penetration of the sharing economy in rural areas would bring factual benefits to the local community. But why does it barely happen? The main obstacles we identified range from lack of information to that of

legal procedures regarding this type of economy. There are three main reasons for which sharing economy is still an obstacle in Romania:

- lack of information – very few persons from the rural area heard about sharing economy platforms; also, most of village inhabitants have minimum or no skills in using a computer, the internet or a mobile application;
- linguistic barrier – the use of an Airbnb platform requires at least basic foreign language skills;
- the legal framework and the papers to be handed in to the Romanian tax authorities for supplementary incomes obtained from the rental of a room for a short period of time is ambiguous and complicated.

We have seen that rural tourism combined with a collaborative economy platform meets all criteria required for sustainable development. Still, there are several obstacles to be overcome at present, before this strategy could work properly. In order for these issues to be addressed, it is necessary to involve all decision makers, public institutions, tourism organizations and members of the local community. On the one hand, legal procedures for individual offering tourist services need to be both clarified and simplified and, on the other hand, it is of the essence to raise awareness of the extraordinary potential collaborative economy platforms represent to sustainable rural tourism development.

It is high time for the Romanian village to value its past and its traditions, as a starting point, and confidently embark on a journey towards meeting its future potential.

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