

THE IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

At present, the development of rural tourism has the role of creating a balance between the traditions specific to the local community and the tourism industry, the socio-economic benefits on the community being influenced by the way of organization, arrangement of tourist villages, as well as by the variety and quality of tourist services. Romania has a valuable rural tourism potential, which properly capitalized can positively influence the development of local communities, ensuring the creation of new jobs, additional income for the population, while stimulating external investments in rural areas. In this context, sustainable rural development as a factor of active economic growth becomes necessary, in order to gradually move to an acceptable economic and social standard in rural areas. Because the Romanian tourist village does not present itself as a standard tourist product and carries the imprint of the original, the unpublished and the surprise, it is attracting an increasing number of tourists, both Romanian and foreign. In this sense, the scientific research methods used include bibliographic synthesis for the theoretical basis of the paper, data processing, comparative analysis and description of data from the studies identified and collected from specialized institutions, from official reports and statistics. The preliminary results include analytical investigation of the impact of rural tourism on the socio-economic development of local communities, analysis of the evolution of the accommodation base in rural areas, as well as the evolution of the tourist circulation.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between rural tourism and socio-economic development of local communities should be seen in terms of identifying not

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only the development stages of the phenomenon, but also how tourism should be viewed today, as one of the priority branches of the national economy.

Income, jobs, and resident population satisfaction presents the main benefits of rural tourism, which applies to any local community. Compared to other forms of economic development, improved living standards can be obtained from the tourist flow and its rapid expansion. No sophisticated technology is needed to establish the basic facilities. Rural tourism can absorb the unemployed labour force, which is very important in areas with a surplus of unskilled labour.

In some areas, rural tourism can provide the necessary infrastructure to stimulate the local economy and develop new economic activities indirectly related. In this regard, tourism can be expected to create a demand for goods and services necessary for the development of local industries, to maintain facilities, to support resource demands and to meet visitor requirements.

Looking at this context, it should be mentioned that along with the offer of gastronomic products and diversified services, rural tourism also has a large dispersion in space – at agro-tourist boarding houses – and is not assimilated with mass tourism, so the impact on the natural and humanized environment is minimized.

An alternative to Romania's sustainable development, rural tourism is considered an aggregate of the product-price-consumption type, which gives the country multiple chances after the accession process through which it benefits from all the functioning mechanisms of the European Union. Therefore, tourism can solve some of the economic problems of the rural population. The advantages obtained from the practice of rural tourism can be of an economic and socio-cultural nature.

Although compared to other Member States of the European Union, Romanian rural tourism still has much to recover, from the proper use of insufficiently exploited rural potential to the provision of quality tourism products to meet the requirements of all categories of tourists, the role of this form of tourism in the socio-economic development of local communities must be emphasized. Thus, for the future, a positive and dynamic evolution of the Romanian rural tourism can be anticipated.

2. General considerations regarding rural tourism in Romania

Rural tourism, generally considered to be any form of “tourism that takes place in rural areas” (Pop et.al., 2017) is an area that properly exploited

can significantly contribute to the socio-economic development of local communities.

Therefore, rural tourism is a form of tourism that takes place in rural areas, capitalizing local resources (natural, cultural and human) as well as tourist facilities, uses various accommodation and covers a wide range of motivations: rest and recreation, transit, culture, knowledge, sports, adventure, etc.

The Romanian village is an atypical tourist product in terms of the national market, but also internationally. In our country, rural tourism is practiced in an organized way, since 1967–1968 when the first actions were carried out in rural areas for groups of tourists on the Romanian Black Sea coast.

The tourist village was launched in Romania in 1973, when the following rural localities were declared, experimentally, as tourist villages: Lerești, Rucăr, Tismana, Fundata, Șirnea, Vaideeni, Rășinari, Sibiel Hălmagiu, Bogdan Vodă, Vatra Moldoviței, Murighiol and Sfântu Gheorghe.

The criteria for identifying and classifying tourist villages are as follows (Glăvan, 2003):

- the existence of households that provide accommodation and food according to certain standards, which were developed by the relevant Ministry.
- picturesque and unpolluted natural setting, which offers possibilities for recreation.
- ethnographic and folk traditions.
- traditional occupations specific to the place and unchanged over time.
- various tourist resources - local and in the surroundings - (natural, cultural-historical, etc.) that allow the realization of a diversified offer of tourist programs (rest, recreation, spa treatment, culture-knowledge, sports etc.)
- easy accessibility and adequate infrastructure (proximity to railways and national roads, modernized roads or paved with river stone, water supply and electricity, sewerage, etc.).
- appropriate technical-municipal, commercial, communications, cultural and sanitary facilities.

Therefore, on ethno-folkloric areas and relief units, the rural tourist offer is concentrated in the following areas (Nicula et.al., 2012):

- Oaş (Oaş Depression and Oaş Mountains): Bixad, Călineşti villages, etc.
- Maramureş (Maramureş Depression and neighboring mountains: Rodna, Maramureş, Țibleş, Gutâi): Botiza, Vadu Izei, Săpânța, Rozavlea, Ocna Șugatag, Săliște de Sus etc.
- Bucovina (Dorna – Câmpulung Moldovenesc depressions): Ciocănești, Dărmănești, Dorna Arini, Iacobeni, Poiana Stampei, Panaci, Neagra Șarului, Vama, Vatra Moldoviței, Putna etc.
- Neamț (sub-Carpathian hills, Bistrița valley): Ceahlău, Durău, Oglinzi, Agapia etc.
- Bârgău –Bistrița (Bârgăului Mountains, Bistrița –Năsăud hills): Bistrița Bârgăului, Colibița, Lunca Ilvei, Prundu Bârgăului, Susenii Bârgăului, Șanț, Telciu, Tiha Bârgăului etc.
- Harghita (Gurghiu – Harghita Mountains, Giurgeu – Hășmașu Mare, Gheorgheni – Ciuc depressions, Praid – Corund, Sovata –Odorhei hilly area): Praid, Corund, Harghita Băi, Dănești, Cârța, Sântimbru Băi, etc.
- Bârsei Country (Brașov – Covasna depression and neighboring mountains: Bodoc, Baraolt and Perșani, Ciucului, Întorsurii, Piatra Mare, Postăvaru): Arcuș, Băile Balványos, Ilieni, Sânzieni, Zăbala, Șugaș Băi, Turia, Malnaș Băi , Cristian, Ghimbav etc.
- Bran – Fundata (Bran corridor, Bucegi Mountains and Piatra Craiului): Bran, Bran – Predeluț, Bran – Șimon, Moeciu, Fundata, Peștera, etc.
- Făgăraș Country (Făgăraș Depression, Făgăraș Mountains): Bucium, Sâmbăta de Jos, Avrig, Cârțișoara, Șercaia, etc.
- Mărginimea Sibiului (Sibiu Depression and Cindrel Mountains): Sibiel, Rășinari, Gura Râului, Orlat, Poplaca, Jina, Săliște, Cîsnădioara, Cristian etc.
- Arieș Valley (Bihor –Trascău –Metaliferi Mountains): Albac, Arișeni, Rimetea, Scărișoara etc.
- The hills of Cluj – Vlădeasa Mountains: Băișoara, Beliș, Bologa, Ciucea, Margău, Gilău, Poieni, Sâncraiu, etc.
- Vrancea (Vrancea Depression, Vrancea Mountains): Câmpeni, Greșu, Vidra, Soveja, Lepșa, Mera, Vulcăneasa, Negrileşti, Vizantea;

- Teleajen –Prahova (Ciucaș –Baiului Mountains, Prahova hills): Slon, Drajna, Cerașu, Măneciu, Cheia, Doftanei Valley, Trăisteni etc.
- Rucăr –Muscelele Argeșului (Rucăr –Dragoslavele Corridor, Piatra Craiului –Iezer –Leaota Mountains, Argeșului Hills): Brădet, Lerești, Rucăr, Dragoslavele, Bughea de Sus, Bughea de Jos, Corbeni etc.
- Olt Valley - Vâlcii Hills (Olt Gorge, Lotrului Valley, Coziei Mountains, Jiblea –Loviștei Depressions, Vâlcii Hills): Mălaia, Costești, Vaideeni, Voineasa, Vlădești, Băile Govora, Olănești etc.
- Tismana - Polovragi (Gorj Hills, Parâng – Vâlcan Mountains): Polovragi, Baia de Fier, Stănești, Săcelu, Tismana, Runcu, Topești etc.
- Mehedinți (Mehedinți Plateau): Balta, Cîreșu, Nadanova, Cloșani;
- Vlășia (Vlășiei Plain): Snagov, Gruiu, Grădiștea, Siliștea Snagovului etc .;
- Danube Delta: Crișan, Sfântu Gheorghe, Uzlina, Murighiol, Mila 23, C. A. Rosetti, Periprava;
- Black Sea coast: Agigea, May 2, Limanu, Vama Veche.

In a country marked by the transition from one political system to another, by the decline in natural growth, living standards, and the approximately 5 years of economic crisis that have resulted in job losses and changes in the economic and social system, rural tourism can represent a reference point in the development of Romanian villages (Avram and Bălan, 2015).

The development of rural tourism ensures the increase of interest towards Romania, as a tourist destination that can offer a wide range of experiences, quality holidays and even business opportunities. In terms of characteristics, the traditional village includes (Nistoreanu et.al., 2010): both natural and cultural resources; various tourist experiences; favorable price / quality ratio; the specificity and uniqueness of our country; local communities (the social groups to which they belong); history (constructions, events, legends); people's culture (customs and traditions, crafts, Romanian folklore, gastronomy, art, music); geographical elements (mountain area, delta area, area of hills and plateaus, Black Sea coast, etc.) located within the Romanian village but also in the country's heritage.

The Romanian village represents a united community in terms of authentic values and way of life, the social organization of work influencing

the specifics of the villages and their development. Thus, the local economy is the basis of a common goal of each household, namely, to develop.

The main activity in rural areas is agriculture, forestry, fish farming, representing a small share in GDP. In other words, tourism is an element with a large share in the country's GDP which means that rural tourism is an important vector in the economic development of local communities.

Rural tourism is a real opportunity for the economy being created on the basis of the main motivations brought in the development of a traditional activity, crafts, knowledge initiatives and last but not least the satisfaction of the needs of tourists, activities that contribute to the local socio-economic development.

The tourist demand for visiting rural areas increases regularly for villages with a rich heritage of resources and traditions, which leads to the development of local trade and services (Niță and Niță, 2008).

The rural tourism industry in Romania is considered a less innovative industry, being dominated by small and medium-sized companies. Not having special financial possibilities, the economic agents must adopt distinctive managerial solutions, based on the current stage of the Romanian village's development (Rădulescu et.al, 2014). Although tourism is a key tool for rural development, decision-makers must remember the major complexity of local development issues and actions, which will go beyond the limits of the economic or technological framework to ensure adaptation to an ever-changing society (Naghiu et.al, 2005). In this sense, a wide range of historical, cultural, educational, organizational, and structural factors will determine the real capacity to generate and adopt an innovation by economic agents operating in a rural area. There is a growing awareness of the need to accompany change in rural areas by diversifying their economic base. Rural tourism has been seen as a means of achieving economic and social development, due to its ability to generate jobs and stimulate foreign investment in communities.

Like any other sector of the economy, rural tourism is profit oriented. However, as it is based on the principles of responsibility, rural tourism should be based not only on the basic characteristics of rural tourism (local biodiversity and ecosystem support, sustainable development), but also on understanding the motivations of tourists who choose rural areas as their holiday destination.

In this context, in order to maximize the socio-economic benefits of rural tourism, it is necessary to elaborate an authentic tourism program, taking into account the following stages: presentation of the accommodation offer, inventory of the area's strengths, possibility for tourist to practice some activities specific to the area or the season, the presentation of recreational activities, establishing the elements of attraction, inclusion in the program a crafts and small industry workshops in the area.

Therefore, the development in the rural space of some tourist activities has the role to create a balance between the traditions and customs specific to the local community and the tourist industry; the impact on the socio-economic development of the local community can be influenced by the way of organizing and arranging the tourist villages, as well as by the variety and quality of the tourist services.

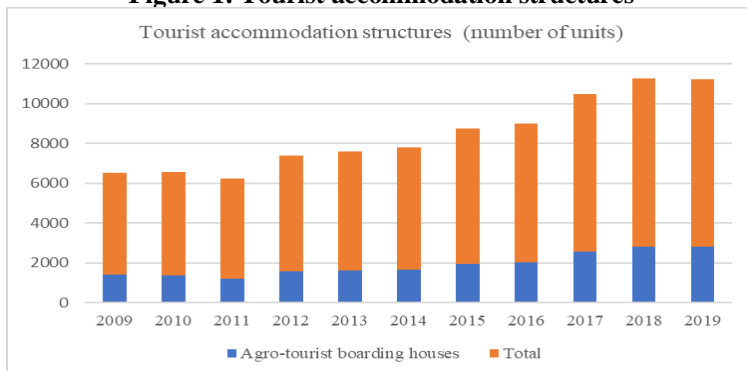
3. The role of rural tourism in the socio-economic development of local communities

Rural tourism determines at the local level a good capitalization of the natural and cultural potential and contributes to the increase of jobs, directly in the tourism sector and in other auxiliary sectors of services. Thus, the development of rural tourism ensures the diversification of the local economy, especially where agriculture does not have development possibilities, contributes to the improvement of local infrastructure in terms of transport, communications with advantages for local communities.

Rural tourism is a dynamic segment of socio-economic development of local communities due to the evolution of the main indicators of tourism activity obtained in recent years.

Regarding the accommodation base specific to rural tourism, in 2019 the number of agro-tourist boarding houses in Romania was 2800, representing 33.3% of the total number of tourist units and approximately 14% of the total number of accommodation places available in tourist units (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Tourist accommodation structures

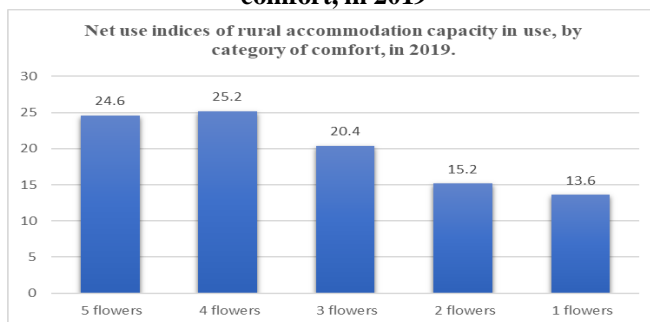


Source: INSSE, 2020

The analysis of the data contained in the above figure reveals a significant improvement of the accommodation base in rural areas, compared to 2009, when there were 1412 agro-tourist boarding houses, representing 27.7% of the total accommodation units in Romania, respectively less than 7% of the total number of accommodation places available in tourist units.

The index of agro-tourist boarding houses capacity in use registers an upward trend of 20% in 2019, increasing by approximately 6 percent compared to 2009. In this context, the figure below presents the Net use indices of rural accommodation capacity in use, by category of comfort, in 2019.

Figure 2: Net use indices of rural accommodation capacity in use, by category of comfort, in 2019

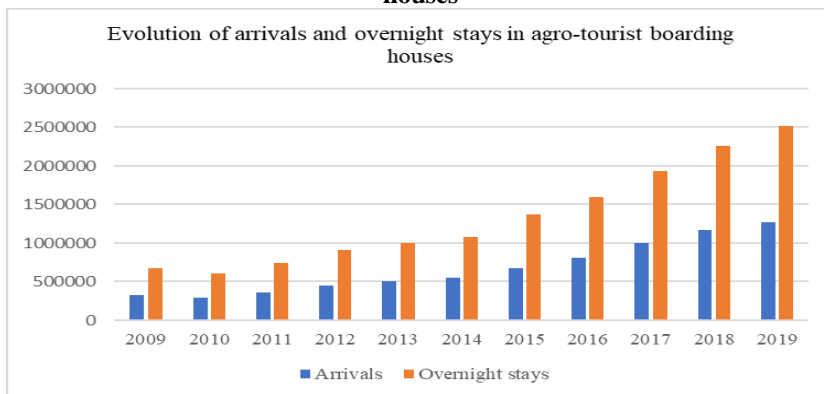


Source: INSSE, 2020

Thus, analysing the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics the highest percentage in terms of the index of use of rural accommodation capacity is registered in the case of units classified at 4 and 5 flowers.

Along with the accommodation capacity, the analysis of the tourist circulation in the rural areas highlights the development of the rural tourism and implicitly its impact on the local communities (see figure 3)

Figure 3: Evolution of arrivals and overnight stays in agro-tourist boarding houses



Source: INSSE, 2020

Analysing the data contained in the figure above, we notice that except for 2010, there is a progressive increase in both the number of arrivals and overnight stays.

The growing interest of tourists in rural areas in the last ten years reveals the extent of this form of tourism. Moreover, if in 2009, rural tourism registered 5.3% of the total arrivals, ten years later this percentage reached 9.5%, similarly in the case of overnight stays there is an increase from 3.88% of the total overnight stays, in 2009 to 9.37% in 2019.

Under these conditions, rural tourism contributes to the socio-economic development of local communities by: job creation in rural areas, reducing the exodus which is one of the major issues of our days; offers the opportunity for small entrepreneurs at the local level to expand on the market of products and services; contribution to the payment of expenses for the provision of economic and social infrastructure (directly and indirectly related

to rural tourism activities and facilities); improving the standard of living of the local community; increasing the quality of the environment; preservation of the cultural heritage so that tourists can discover the authentic way of living of the local community.

However, even when rural tourism can provide many opportunities for local communities, decision-makers need to remember the major complexity of local development actions.

To ensure the economic and social development of the local communities, it is necessary to develop the transport infrastructure. Its degraded state thus prevents the development of rural areas due to the difficulty of access. It is desirable, in a first phase, to rehabilitate the access to the national roads, the railway transport networks but also to the medical, cultural, and educational units. The provision of transport and other services should meet the needs of visitors and local communities and take into account environmental policies. The aim is to increase the share of visitors using public transport to visit tourist attractions in rural areas, by establishing new routes and attractive timetables and by promoting quality. Thus, the direct beneficiaries following the rehabilitation works of the transport infrastructure are mainly the local communities, the tourists but also the potential investors or entrepreneurs, who want to start a business in the rural area.

Developing and maintaining an adequate level of infrastructure is essential for the economic and social development of the rural environment and for balanced regional development, with modern infrastructure being important for rural areas to be able to compete effectively for domestic investment and remain competitive for existing businesses.

Along with the development of rural tourism and implicitly of the activities related to this sector, it will be possible to create new jobs, thus trying to stop the exodus. Starting new businesses comes in support of local communities, so locals have various options in terms of choosing a job. In this sense, a collaboration between the public and private environment becomes opportune in order to achieve some objectives, such as: consultancy provided for starting European projects, professional training on business management, respectively encouraging the local community in the development of entrepreneurship. Therefore, to absorb the high number of unemployed young people, micro-enterprises should be encouraged to start economic activities in rural areas and to diversify service-oriented offers for local communities.

Finally, business development in rural areas must take into account the following aspects: the need for sustainable use of local resources; responsible and ethical approach to the artificial and natural environment; local socio-economic benefits should be planned in advance while respecting long-term sustainability; establishing and respecting limits on the optimal reception capacity (number of tourists, impact of visitors on the environment and on the lifestyle of the local community).

4. Conclusions

Rural tourism contributes significantly to the socio-economic development of local communities through the efficient use of natural, cultural, physical, and human resources, resulting in increasing the standard of living of the population and harmonizing economic and social cohesion.

Therefore, the impact of rural tourism on local communities lies in obtaining social and economic effects without the need for special efforts, many of the effects having superior values difficult to obtain in other ways. Rural tourism contributes to the increase of the incomes of the local population by carrying out the transport, the presence of the accommodation units and the treatment bases but also by the activities of the public alimentation.

Starting new businesses in the field of rural tourism or developing existing ones will have as immediate effects the creation of new jobs and implicitly the increase of incomes for the locals, ensuring an overall socio-economic development of the local communities.

Tourism is an activity that fits perfectly with the Romanian rural area. Hospitality, openness, natural potential, and cultural heritage are several factors that facilitate success in the development of rural tourism.

The development of rural tourism must be achieved in a way capable of ensuring a balance between the need to preserve the natural, ecological and cultural rural environment, on the one hand, and the tendency to "modernize" rural economic activity, on the other. Promoting the development of rural tourism also has an important educational component that refers to the knowledge of cultural traditions, landscape or historical values of the rural space.

In order to multiply the economic and social effects of rural tourism on local communities, the following are necessary: analyzes and proposals regarding the development of tourist activities and equipment; organization of

tourism activity in forms compatible with the status of rural areas; balanced planning according to loading capacities, ensuring monitoring.

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