

THE ROLE OF AGROTOURISM IN REVITALIZING RURAL ECONOMIES: A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *Agrotourism is an alternative form of rural tourism that integrates traditional agricultural activities with tourism services, significantly contributing to the diversification of the rural economy. This article examines the implications of agrotourism for the sustainable development of rural areas in Romania, focusing on the three fundamental pillars of sustainability: economic, social, and environmental. The study highlights the multiple benefits of agrotourism: additional income for rural households, preservation of cultural and natural heritage, and the reduction of rural depopulation. At the same time, the paper addresses key challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, seasonality of activities, and the need for coherent public policies. The results suggest that agrotourism holds strong potential for revitalizing rural areas, provided it is integrated into a long-term sustainable development strategy.*

In conclusion, agrotourism has a vital role in revitalizing the rural economy by offering households the opportunity to diversify their sources of income and to sustainably capitalize on local resources—natural, cultural, and gastronomic. By promoting an authentic, responsible form of tourism that is integrated into rural life, agrotourism contributes not only to reducing migration and preserving local identity, but also to strengthening social cohesion and protecting the environment.

Key words: *agrotourism, sustainable development, rural areas, local economy, responsible tourism, Romania*

INTRODUCTION

The historical evolution of rural communities has been closely linked to the existence and abundance of natural resources. These resources have formed the basis of economic, cultural and social activity in these areas, making it possible to maintain a traditional way of life. However, the profound transformations of the 20th century – technological, political and economic – have fundamentally altered the structure of agriculture and the rural economy, while also affecting the relations between the rural and urban areas. [1,5]

In order to consolidate the ethnographic specificity of the rural community, and at the same time perpetuate it, a certain degree of receptivity and interest on the part of local administrative entities is necessary, so that the ethnographic specificity of the village can be capitalized on through tourist activities. This aim must be implemented in localities with tourist potential, but at the same time the emphasis must be placed on maintaining the traditional lifestyle, these localities having the chance to become particularly profitable tourist localities. [7,12]

Therefore, the problem of implementing forms of sustainable rural tourism arises, transforming them into sustainable ones presupposing compliance with certain aspects and principles:

- ❖ initiating tourism activity based on the local community's own resources, the latter being the one that will maintain control of tourism development;
- ❖ creating a balance between newly emerging tourist activities and other economic activities specific to the rural environment, with forms of rural tourism coming as a complement to them, not as a substitute;

- ❖ guidelines regarding the development of tourism activities and the identification of the impact of their development on the entire community;
- ❖ preparing training programs to support the sustainable development of tourism activity in rural areas. [1,9]

Preserving an authentic rural world can also take into account the development of rural tourism activities and especially agrotourism, which participate in preserving the viability and stability of localities. Rural tourism and agrotourism, as activities specific to the rural environment and at the same time complementary to agriculture, can be considered allies of agriculture, if we talk about the conservation and protection of the rural landscape, as well as cultural elements, the integration of tourism businesses within the community. [1,11] By offering accommodation services and at the same time the valorization of products obtained from their own and local production, the two forms of tourism come with a viable solution from an economic and social point of view for rural households, valorizing the surplus accommodation from their own household, and offering a multitude of specific activities.

The rural tourism product brings a series of specific benefits to tourists:

- ❖ they can benefit from the advantages and secrets of farm life, crafts and specific food;
- ❖ can explore the diverse architectural heritage, secular and religious buildings, as well as the area's folklore richness. All of this has its roots in several cultures and civilizations, due to the fact that in addition to Romanians, other ethnic groups (Hungarians, Swabians, Serbs, Czechs, Slovaks, Bulgarians) have lived here over the centuries. [14]

Considering the future of rural communities from a tourist point of view and analyzing them for this purpose, we believe that their rustic and ethnographic specificity could and should be preserved and supported (adequately), otherwise, the current interest from tourists for the tourist village, for the rural environment, will gradually decrease. [2,10] The development of villages and ecotourism areas must bring direct income to farmers and all citizens of the locality, and the local public administration must directly use the local budget to protect ecotourism resources.

Forms of rural tourism can constitute viable alternatives for revitalizing the rural economy, contributing to the valorization of local natural and cultural resources in a sustainable manner. [6,13] They can strengthen local identity, provide employment opportunities, and stimulate the significant investments needed to modernize local infrastructure and services.

To achieve this objective, it is essential that local public administrations demonstrate receptivity and active involvement in promoting rural tourism, emphasizing the valorization of ethnographic heritage through cultural and educational activities. [3,8]

Agrotourism, an integrative model that links agriculture and tourism, represents a powerful mechanism for revitalizing rural economies, especially in post-industrial and transition regions such as Romania. This form of tourism capitalizes on existing agricultural resources to create diversified sources of income for rural households, stimulate job creation and encourage local development, while preserving cultural and environmental integrity. [4,11]

The main limitations of the study on the role of agrotourism in revitalizing rural economies in Romania may be related to limited access to official and informal data, the difficulty of establishing causal relationships, and the challenge of distinguishing its effects from other public policies.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research uses qualitative methods to analyze in depth the contribution of agritourism to the sustainable development of rural areas in Romania. The methodological structure was based on three main directions: documentary analysis, statistical data analysis and their interpretation. In the first stage, a systematic review of the specialized literature was carried out, using academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar. Articles published between 2010–2024 were selected that address relevant topics such as agritourism, rural development, tourism sustainability and European policies in the field. Strategic documents issued by institutions such as FAO, Eurostat, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), and the National Authority for Tourism were also consulted. In the next phase, the existing statistical data were interpreted and conclusions were drawn.

RESEARCH RESULTS

In the context of the global transition towards sustainable and inclusive economic models, agritourism is emerging as a form of alternative tourism capable of significantly contributing to the revitalization of the rural environment and the achievement of sustainable development objectives. Agritourism involves the valorization of agricultural resources and local traditions by integrating them into an authentic tourist offer, aimed at generating additional income for the rural population, conserving natural and cultural heritage and reducing territorial disparities.

By its multifunctional nature, agritourism responds to the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social and ecological. On the one hand, it offers a viable economic alternative for agricultural households affected by the decline in the competitiveness of the traditional agricultural sector; on the other hand, it contributes to preserving local identity and strengthening community cohesion, while promoting environmentally friendly practices such as organic farming, sustainable resource management or vernacular architecture.

Agritourism in Romania is closely linked to the principles of sustainable development. Operators frequently adopt organic farming practices, the use of renewable energy and waste management, in line with multifunctional rural development strategies. This integration supports ecological restoration, landscape conservation and the maintenance of agricultural biodiversity.

Agrotourism appears as a necessity for rural areas, with a multitude of benefits, which ultimately translate into increased incomes and improved quality of life. Rural residents have identified these opportunities and gradually developed tourism as a complementary activity to agricultural production, thus managing to better capitalize on production, to highlight the culture, authenticity of the area and the products specific to each area, as well as to develop local infrastructure.

Figure 1 shows the evolution of the number of agrotourism guesthouses, at national level, during the period 2005-2024.

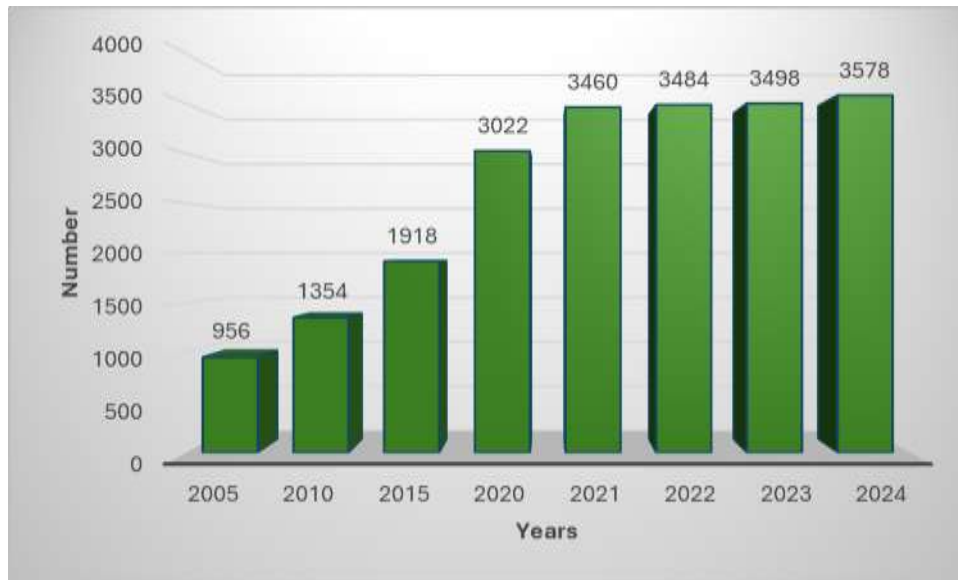


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of agrotourism guesthouses

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online>, [15]

During the analyzed period, the number of agrotourism guesthouses increased at an average rate of 274.68%. The development of agrotourism, as an activity complementary to agricultural activity, is not uniform at the national level. Regarding the structure of agrotourism guesthouses, in 2024, by development regions, figure 2 is presented.

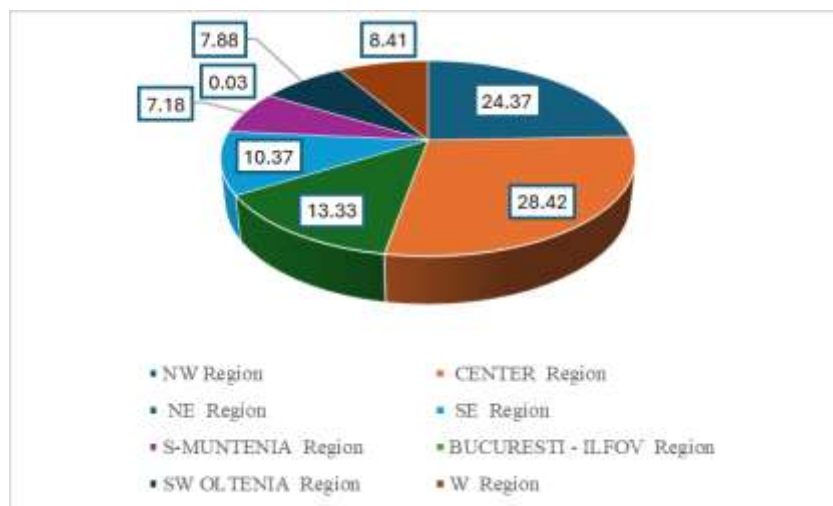


Figure 2. Distribution of agrotourism guesthouses, by development regions, 2024

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online>, [15]

Most agrotourism guesthouses are concentrated in the Centru region, 28.42%, which is recognized as a region with high agrotourism potential, notable here being the counties of Braşov, Sibiu and Alba, as well as Harghita and Covasna. In second place is the North-West Region, notable here are the counties of Maramureş, Cluj and Bistriţa, areas with numerous resources that can be exploited through tourism. In the North-East Region, the best known is the Bucuvonia area, an area with numerous resources that can be exploited through rural tourism (traditions, customs, natural and anthropogenic resources, numerous traditional products, etc.).

Agrotourism has a multidimensional effect on rural communities, structuring the influences into three broad categories:

- ❖ **Economy:** Diversification, job creation, additional income and market for local products.
- ❖ **Society:** Community cohesion and cultural heritage preservation.
- ❖ **Environment:** Sustainable land use and increasing ecological awareness.

Agritourism and economic development

Agritourism functions as a source of non-agricultural income, allowing farming families to mitigate income volatility and structural socio-economic vulnerabilities, such as emigration and population aging. Empirical evidence suggests a strong correlation between regions with high emigration rates and the growth of agritourism enterprises, indicating that agritourism acts as a countermeasure in managing rural depopulation.

Socio-cultural impact

Beyond the economic dimension, agritourism fosters community cohesion and cultural revitalization. In Bucovina, authentic agricultural and folkloric practices have been harnessed to develop the tourism offer, strengthening local identity while generating significant income without compromising authenticity. The Romanian agritourism landscape - reflected in activities such as farm stays, rural crafts and gastronomic experiences - also encourages the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage.

CONCLUSIONS

In the Romanian context, agritourism is emerging as a multidimensional force in rural revitalization. It diversifies farmers' incomes, stimulates entrepreneurship, preserves cultural landscapes and aligns with the imperatives of sustainable development. However, its future success depends on the consolidation of public policies, adequate institutional support, professional training and effective coordination between the parties involved. The agritourism sector in Romania thus represents not only an economic opportunity, but also a strategic investment in the conservation and regeneration of rural heritage.

In the case of Romania, the development of agritourism takes on strategic relevance, given the predominantly rural structure of the national territory and the existence of a remarkable potential of natural, cultural and gastronomic resources [10]. However, obstacles such as poor infrastructure, limited access to financing or the migration of young people from rural areas require the implementation of integrated policies adapted to the local context, in order to transform agritourism into a real instrument of sustainable development.

Thus, the analysis of the relationship between agritourism and sustainable development becomes essential in formulating coherent public policies, capable of responsibly utilizing local resources, supporting rural entrepreneurship and contributing to long-term territorial cohesion.

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