

STRATEGIC ALTERNATIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM AND AGRO TOURISM IN MĂRGINIMEA SIBIULUI AREA

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Abstract: Rural tourism and agro tourism had an ascending evolution in the rural economy of Romania in the last 20 years due to progressive involvement of specialists, entrepreneurs and local accountability factors. However, if we lap this development over the tourism potential characteristic for the rural Romanian space, we find out that we are far from an adequate capitalization of it. This paper addresses the development of rural tourism and agro tourism in the micro-region of Mărginimea Sibiului because it represents an important source of income and a sure way of development of this areal. Although natural resources of the researched areal create favorable conditions for sustainable rural tourism and agro tourism, the development level achieved is below expectations. For this, at the level of Mărginimea Sibiului countryside a field research was conducted, using the case study methodology. This helped to highlight the specificity of the researched area compared to the requirements of sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism and lead to the formulation, preparation and adoption regarding implementation of the relevant strategic options for sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism in the studied area of Mărginimea Sibiului.

Keywords: agro tourism, development, resources, rural, sustainability, tourism.

1. Introduction

The beginning of the third millennium, illustrates the current economy as a destroyer of his support systems, consuming natural capital assets (Brown, 2001, p 159). This signals the need to produce a change leading to the integration of environmental and economic assessment activities (Brown, 2001, p 86) as "any of the trends of environmental degradation can undermine civilization as we know it" (Rojanschi et al., , 1997, page 109). Rural areas benefit from a natural, cultural and human potential, in part affected by the current economic situation due to the fact that rural development was based a long period of time only on the abundance of natural resources.

This resulted in major changes in rural areas with negative implications that led to the changing of lifestyle of the rural communities and the relations between the rural and urban areas, respectively drastic reduction of natural resources, putting the area in danger, and not least the impoverishment of the rural population. It follows the need to improve the quality of life for all members of the rural community, but with the condition of using natural resource within the earth's endurance, which means ensuring economic growth, social equity, environmental protection and conservation of natural resources (Mateoc-Sîrb and Ungureanu, 2010 p.46).

The analysis of the land's structure illustrates a share of 61.2% (2011) in favor of the way it is used, where arable agriculture holds 64.3% (2010) which shows a predominance of

agricultural activities (National Strategic Framework). The 28.5% related to how we use forest areas and other woodlands provides economic diversity, generating a real potential waiting to be harnessed. In many rural areas the economic diversity is ensured through the development of rural tourism and agro-tourism activities. Sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism holds a special place in the economic, social or geographic practice, as it ensures the perpetuation of specific values along rural area, satisfying the interests of those who provide travel services and the requirements of those who are beneficiaries from tourism (Mac et al., 1999).

Rural tourism is an effective solution to harmonize tourism requirements with the requirements of environmental protection and sustainable development (Minciu, 2004). Rural tourism, as first manifestation of tourism, has registered in its development, periods of ascension and decay, but has never disappeared (Scioşteanu and Barbu, 2006). The debut of rural tourism activities in Romania takes place around the 30s as a form of exploitation of mountain resources and balnear resources. The first attempts of organized rural tourism happened in the years 1967-1968 for groups of tourists situated on the Romanian Black seaside and were a real success and have determined the Ministry of Tourism to develop the Order of Ministry no. 297/1972, requesting the Research Centre for international tourism promotion the identification and representative selection of villages to launch them in touristic programs which resulted in the nomination of about 118 villages. In 1973-1974 there are identified for approval another 33 tourist villages from all ethnographic areas from which 13 are certified, but came to function only two of them (Lereşti, Arges county and Sibiel, Sibiu county). Engaging in an organized practice takes place after 1990, with increasing interest in rural tourism which requires the adoption of measures regarding the establishment and strengthening of the organization on stimulating rural tourism materialized in 1994 with the establishment of the National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism of Romania (NARECTR), with the support of the Ministry of Tourism, association that managed to gather a large number of members (2500) and county branches (30) (Dobrea-Luke and Nistoreanu).

How can we achieve a sustainable development of tourism and agrotourism, becomes an increasing problem today, to which we will try to provide an answer. For this, a decisive role plays the strategic evaluation of the countryside to capture its specificity, in order to develop strategic options from which the most relevant will be selected for the sustainable development of rural tourism and agrotourism. To achieve this, a field research was organized on the strategic development of rural tourism and agro tourism in Sibiu microregion, Mărginimea Sibiului.

The microregion of Mărginimea Sibiului is a group of Romanian settlements, villages and towns at the foot of Căndrel Mountains (Cindrel), formed in an organic unity based on common features (Anthropogeographical, historical, social, economical, political, etc.). from the time of crystallization and formation of the principalities and Romanian voivodeships. (Ursan, 2010). If the initial micro-region was formed only from five villages - Cacova (Fântânele), Sibiel, Vale, Sălişte and Gales - Romanian Lands that belonged to Romanian voievods - as author of the book "Marginenii Sibiului" affirm. Romanian culture and civilization estimates that the number of settlements that form the Mărginimea Sibiului (Hermannstadler Randgebiet in German and in Hungarian, Szeben - Hegyalja) is of eighteen:

Boița, Sadu, Sadu River, Talmaciu (that became a city in 1989), Tălmăcel, Rășinari, Poplaca, Gura Rîului, Orlat, Fântânele, Sibiel, Vale, Săliște (declared city in 2004), Gales, Tilișca, Rod, Poiana Sibiului and Jina. The above mentioned localities spread over three large depressions which are clearly outlined (Sibiu Depression, Săliște Depression and Apold Depression) starting from the meeting place of the Transylvanian Plateau with crystalline massifs of the Carpathians, from the south to the river Sebes, bordered by mountains ranging between Olt River and the river Sebes. The novelty of this work consists in addressing the strategic management of rural tourism and agro-tourism development in terms of sustainability in the development, adoption and implementation of relevant policy options.

The means by which you can adopt the most relevant strategies for sustainable development of rural tourism and agritourism in rural researched area are the adoption by local factors of a single model of effective thinking – the strategic model. The foundation of this model of thinking is the smart, innovative mentality, able to lead to strategic decisions designed to connect the development of a certain area to present and future requirements in the context of achieving sustainable development (Brătianu, 2000). Through this work, we recommend using the strategic management by the modern society stakeholders in order to to answer "strategic" questions as: Where are we?, Which way shall we go?, What changes and rhythms exist in the environment?, What course of action contributes to the objectives and goals set?. All of this because strategic management helps to diagnose the external environment and hence the knowledge of the factors influencing activities in the area studied. Essentially, strategic management defines the set of decisions and actions necessary for the implementation of plans and programs (Nicolescu, 2001) designed to achieve sustainable development of the rural researched area.

For the success of this approach in the present research, based on the study of literature in the field of sustainable development of rural tourism, i.e. tourism and strategic management, the following research axes are addressed: the impact of the current situation on the development of rural tourism and agro tourism in rural areas; assessment of methods and tools for strategic analysis of rural tourism development and the characteristics of rural agro tourism investigated; strategic assessment of the development of rural tourism and agro tourism area from Mărginimea Sibiului; policy options on sustainable development and diversification of economic activities in rural areas from Mărginimea Sibiului through rural tourism and agro tourism. Addressing this research axis represents a way to: identify alternatives for sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism; development regarding the implementation of policy options consistent with rural reality able to promote a unitary and coherent criteria and principles of sustainable development, innovation and ICT; making recommendations for better targeting strategies in order to increase efficiency of human, natural, energetic, material and informational resources.

2. Methodology

The research method regarding sustainable development of tourism and rural tourism in Mărginimea Sibiului must be consistent with the objectives and purposes of the investigation. The major objective of the research is the development of strategic options for the sustainable development of tourism and agro tourism related to the rural reality of the researched space. The research purpose is to increase economic diversification and quality of

life in Mărginimea Sibiului, to improve the quality of life for all members of the rural community, but with the condition that natural resources are used within the earth's endurance.

2.1. Research hypotheses development

To study the socio-economic reality of the rural researched space, most methodology schools insist on using "in parallel and complementary quantitative and qualitative methods to gain extra knowledge" (Kerekes et al., 2010, p 33). They contribute to forming an overall picture and to identify critical factors with impact on the rural areas (David, 2009).

Given the myriad issues presented, necessary to approach, when questioning the rural research, in this paper there was adopted a research methodology able to capture the regional specificities. It refers to the methodology of the case study (Yin, 2003 Hammersley, 2003, EC, 2009), recommended by the results in several studies and research projects conducted at nationally and internationally level- Ruraljobs, Ruremplo, Himilce, Top Mard - (Kerekes et al., 2010).

The case study of this paper addresses the socio-economic reality of the countryside in Sibiu Depression in terms of sustainable development, of rural tourism and agrotourism. This was evidenced by the use of multiple methods, both quantitative and qualitative, such as statistical research and of literature in the field (reports, strategies, studies, monographs), semi-structured interviews with key local stakeholders and of course PESTEL analysis and SWOT analysis, completed by focus group meetings.

PESTEL analysis is a process of analyzing the components of direct influence, and indirectly the development of the rural area investigated (general external environment) and works by analyzing the following factors: political, economic, social, technological, environmental (environment), and legislative factors (Garrett et al., 2009). The method allows the identification and understanding of macroeconomic forces impacting on development and is an important step in creating a new strategy since it fixes a frame in which to operate and make decisions. Such an analysis is very useful, especially in the context of globalization, because it allows the highlighting of particular aspects of the studied community and mediates adaptation to more frequent changes occurring in the environment.

S.W.O.T. analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) is a diagnostic analysis that highlights strengths and weaknesses - the internal environment, opportunities and threats in the external environment (Ilies, 2008). It is the premise of preparing development strategies that actually support the future development of rural development policies. The usefulness of SWOT analysis lies in the possibility of identifying such opportunities for potential development that can be exploited by decision makers in rural areas and potential threats that might inhibit the development as an adverse effect on persons or institutions in the rural areas. Combining these elements, four quadrants which correspond to four strategic groups are outlined (Nistorescu Sitnikov, 2009). The first group is an active strategic alternative oriented towards the capitalization of the opportunities identified. The second group is also an active strategic alternative oriented towards exploiting opportunities, by reducing or eliminating weaknesses. The third group is a passive strategic alternative focused on countering threats in the external environment by harnessing its forces, and the fourth group also faces a passive strategic alternative to counter threats and minimize weaknesses. The purpose of strategic alternatives generated by the SWOT analysis is to

strengthen good points, to exploit opportunities, to counter threats and improve weaknesses (Ritson, 2008).

The approach to the data collected during the field research is complex and includes a variety of tools. It began with a questionnaire - very important tool for quantitative research, which is based on quantitative data complement existing at LAU2 level (common) taken from various sources (official statistics at LAU2 level, statistics on local businesses, territorial development plans, monographs, research studies, projects, data on population, way of land using). This information was supplemented with primary data following the deployment of a process of collecting them for items not covered by information in official documents. We obtained information leading to the highlight of a realistic picture, but embracing the issues and opportunities of sustainable development and economic diversification in rural areas investigated. This prompted the organization of a semi-structured interview with key local stakeholders. At the core of the interview lies the idea that through the open questions formulated, local factors can identify opportunities, or constraints on sustainable development and diversification of the rural economy. The interview was held in the form of focus group meetings to highlight new problems from a small number of subjects (Kruger, 2003).

3. Results and Discussion

Adopting as the methodology of research – the case study, allowed us to obtain relevant information in accordance with the objectives of the research and led to the identification of options for sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism. The adopted methodology made it possible for us to highlight specific elements of rural space from Mărginimea Sibiului in order to achieve better targeting of policy measures for sustainable development of tourism and agro tourism, as shown in the results obtained using PESTEL and SWOT methods, supplemented by focus group meetings, all of which is highlighted by the following socio-economic characteristics:

Rural tourism and agro tourism are the major activities in rural development, recognized by the European Parliament by the 16th Amendment, Paragraph 2b in which " Member States together with the Commission should promote new forms of tourism that can balance seasonal effects, as the example of tourism countryside, ... " (European Parliament, 2004-2009). The European Economic Community is concerned with activities that may take place in rural areas such as: Verdict on the future of the rural world (89/c298/10), Community measures for the development of rural tourism , the Commission of 29 October 1990 (COM 90/438), the Community action Plan for tourism (COM 90-97, late April), etc.. (Henche, 2004). National tourism development is orientated towards a series of documents such as the National Tourism Development Master Plan 2007-2026, and at local level, towards development strategies. Also the sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism is part of rural development, politically coordinated through CAP (Common Agricultural Policies).

Economic analysis shows that the rural tourism and agrotourism in Mărginimea Sibiului had an upward trend in the last two decades, due to the involvement of both progressive group of professionals and entrepreneurs, but if you superimpose this development with that of tourism potential that characterizes the rest of the rural territory investigated, we find that we are far from its proper capitalization. The tourism sector in the

micro-region of Mărginimea Sibiului recorded in 2013, compared with 2012, an increase both in the number of units specialized in such activities 15.7% (from 121 to 140 turistic structures) and in the accommodation capacity with 23,58% (from 1930 places to 2385). The upward trend of tourist structures in the period after adhesion is attributed to EDFs (European Development Funds). It can be said that in many rural areas, tourism has become an essential part of the economy even though many times this is not clearly observed (Pender and Sharpley, 2005).

Analysis of the social environment in the towns of Sibiu Borders shows demographic growth and positive demographic balance of 0.7 ‰.

Analysis of the technology in the rural area of Sibiu Depression shows a relatively high level of expenditure on innovation and also in number of enterprises.

Environmental analysis of the micro-region Mărginimea Sibiului shows that sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism should be performed taking into account the characteristics of the environment without violating safety and health. This approach is supported by the existence of a legal and institutional framework that allows both sustainable development and diversification of economic activities and support of a state of unspoiled natural environment. Forum regulating health insurance and continuity of the natural environment, we have the Regional Environmental Protection Agency of Sibiu, whose status is "decentralized public service with responsibilities in environmental protection in Central Development Region no. 7.

Legislative environment analysis reveals regulation by a variety of environmental laws, human health and quality of life. Through these, Romania puts EU directives into practice, as rural enterprises from the investigated space are required to develop and implement environmental policy and environmental management methods.

The information gathered led to the SWOT analysis to identify strengths and weaknesses, external opportunities and threats that an organization or territorial units have (Vincze et al., 2009). The first variation of SWOT analysis was so obtained, that included a significant number of strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats which led to the organization of focus group meetings with local responsibility makers and professionals in which to discuss relevant opportunities and threats; each of the strengths and weaknesses found then analyzed in terms of sustainable development and economic diversification of agricultural and non agricultural activities. The results have enabled a brief SWOT analysis (found in Table 1) whose interpretation shows that improving physical infrastructure to harness hydro, forestry and tourism potential appropriately, created by mountainous terrain is considered an important factor for sustainable development of tourism and agro tourism to which we add improving the organization of agro tourism activities, medical and social infrastructure improvements, i.e. improving the perpetuation of traditions and customs. In the same time are also identified a number of success factors (strengths) for development of rural tourism and agro tourism, such as the existence of natural resources with an excellent hydro, forestry and tourism potential; geographical position of Mărginimea Sibiului, close to Sibiu facilitates, with connections with other regions and concentrated flows of goods and information; knowledge at home and abroad due to famous local personalities (Emil Cioran, Octavian Goga); traditional lifestyle and the existence of brands recognized on a national and international level that recognize it as an ethno-cultural area with well kept local traditions.

Tabelul 2. **Brief SWOT Analysis**

	Strengths		Weaknesses
T 1	Existence of excellent natural resources of hydraulic, forestry and tourism type.	S 1	Lack of knowledge on European funds by a high percentage of entrepreneurs and farmers.
T 2	Mărginimea Sibiului area is known at home and abroad due to famous local personalities (Emil Cioran, Octavian Goga, ...)	S 2	Low capitalization sightseeing in the area and knowledge of the possibilities of spending free time in the mountains situated in the micro region.
T 3	Geographical location in the vicinity of Sibiu facilitates connections with other regions and concentration of flows of goods and information.	S 3	Poor educational infrastructure, transport and communication
T 4	Traditional lifestyle and brands recognized nationally and internationally.	S 4	Lack of clear guidelines of networking initiatives with other neighbouring regions
T 5	Ethno-cultural region known for local traditions well preserved.	S 5	Lack of jobs for young people with higher education.
	Opportunities		Threats
1	Advantageous position of the area in relation to European projects.	1	Impaired degradation of the touristic heritage or uninspired development and lack of direction in systematization.
2.	Possibility of accessing national and European funding for tourism development	2.	Inability of key local stakeholders to create partnerships for European funds and implementing projects
3	The area is part of the network "European Destination of Excellence in Tourism	3	Poor development of recreational areas and activities outside the hostels.
4	Working closely with the local population of migrants abroad and the establishment of joint ventures.	4	Law of sponsorship and public-private partnership that are ineffective
5	The possibility of higher capitalization of some elements of intangible and tangible cultural heritage well preserved	5	Lipsa unor politici și strategii de promovare și susținere a produselor obținute în spațiul rural

The analysis undertaken highlights the problems of sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism as a result of the existence at the level of the micro-region of Mărginimea Sibiului of weaknesses related to the lack of necessary knowledge on attracting

European funds for most entrepreneurs, lack of experience in harnessing the sights of modern marketing principles; lack of knowledge of possibilities for leisure in the mountains micro region; lack of clear guidance in systematizing rural and urban areas; bad educational infrastructure of transport and poor communication; lack of networking initiatives with other regions; lack of jobs for young people with higher education.

Sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism is under the influence of threats such as: touristic patrimonial affected by degradation or uninspired development; inability of local stakeholders to create partnerships for fundraising, weak development of rural areas and recreational activities outside hostels and hotels, namely the lack of policies and strategies to promote and support their products in rural areas, for which this threats are considered to be the most powerful ones directed against the development of rural tourism and agro tourism. What could bring more sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism is a good use of the opportunities manifested in the micro-region of Mărginimea Sibiului. Among those on which we have focused all our attention are the advantageous position in relation to the European project area, the possibility of accessing national and European funds; connection to the "Destination of Excellence in Tourism"; working closely with the local population of Emigrants; existence of elements of tangible and intangible cultural heritage well preserved that are waiting to be capitalized.

The results are relevant for development in the implementation of policy options that lead to sustainable development and diversification of the rural economy. These are grouped as follows:

A. Policy options that create favorable framework for sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism:

Promoting the development of rural tourism and agro tourism by attracting investment in physical infrastructure and communication to increase the use of existing resources and attract additional resources. This contributes to better use of existing natural resources in an increase in the quality and quantity of speciality infrastructure of touristic attractions and facilities.

Improving educational infrastructure for knowledge, and development of entrepreneurial skills. Education is one of the cornerstones of development, able to lead to a better understanding of how to attract development funds for the smooth and efficient drawings of landmarks in the area and knowledge and promoting leisure opportunities in Mărginimea Sibiului.

B. Policy options specific to the development of rural tourism and agro tourism:

Support for implementation and sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism. Represents policy options which mediates the creation of a network to promote sustainable tourism and all forms of collaboration that can lead to sustainable development, namely vertical integration of tourism and agro tourism, namely the emergence of related activities.

Promote the implementation and development of traditions, traditional farming and marketing of specific products in the area; is strategic option based on specificity of villages and their traditional folk art, folklore, crop production, livestock gastronomy, hospitality etc. .. This requires specific measures leading to better use of natural resources favorable to sustainable development of rural tourism and agro tourism by creating partnerships,

cooperations between touristic structures, cultural and food structures in order to achieve a superior capitalization of traditions by assembling these elements which give identity and specificity to the area in a "brand image" in order to determine tourists to stay more in the area and to return.

Support the development, promotion and better use of specific products for traditions in Mărginimea Sibiului. Represents a specific strategic option through which local and accountability factors and specialists put aside political and administrative barriers and proceed to adopting policies and strategies geared towards the development of projects that group specific activities from the area and lead to better use of specific products and traditions.

Support the development of information and consultancy services for rural residents and staff of local government in order to access funds to develop rural tourism and agro products, conservation and promotion of cultural heritage.

Conclusions:

The current economic conditions of the Mărginimea Sibiului area with diverse natural and cultural heritage largely in good state of preservation, sustain rural tourism and agro tourism where it is a real opportunity for development, yet sufficiently exploited through diversification of activities in order to obtain an additional income for the population in the area.

Rural tourism and agro tourism activities provide an opportunity to obtain additional income, recovery of their household products, the resources of the area, the use of excess space, goods and labor, banishing boredom and monotony which leads to the revigoration of economic activities in the rural areas of Mărginimea Sibiului.

The research conducted upon the existing reality of the social and economic life in Mărginimea Sibiului lead to identifying success factors, and shortcomings manifested in organizing tourism and agro tourism, namely the effective promotion of tourism potential and traditions. There were also identified some external factors that favor the development of these activities as well as those that hinder the development of rural tourism and agro tourism.

The micro region of Mărginimea Sibiului is a tourist-oriented area offering quality holidays and business opportunities and contributes to increased consumer interest in tourism services so that it inclines to become a senior touristic destination.

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