

## **RURAL TOURISM POTENTIAL AS PART OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA**

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*Abstract. One of the social-economic phenomena of our century is represented by the remarkably fast development of tourism, through the diversification of tourism products and the “refining” of hospitality industry. More and more tourists want to spend their leisure time and holidays in the countryside, being largely influenced by environmental ideas, by the desire to escape from conventional tourism structures, by the search for the best quality/price ratio.*

*In this context, rural tourism and agro-tourism are a real opportunity to revive the local economy and traditional Romanian rural communities. Tourism practiced under various forms in rural Romania offers people who want to relax, who love nature, culture and folk art, a treasure chest of ancient rural civilization values and the possibility to save time and money by spending their vacation on peasant family farms, private farms, boarding houses and guesthouses.*

*The objective of this paper is to provide a summary on tourism sustainable development in Romania’s rural areas. This research paper is based on a complex processing and analysis of statistical data, of information from official sources, from central and local institutions, as well as numerous data and information obtained in the field.*

*Starting from the data presented above we can affirm that tourism is one of the most important sectors of national economy. Its development can be influenced by the development of other fields of activity like business, culture, religion, environment protection etc. In the last years, investments were made aiming at attracting new tourists, yet serious investments in infrastructure are still necessary in order to be able to compete with the tourism destinations from abroad.*

*Keywords: rural tourism, sustainable development, natural and anthropic potential.*

### **Introduction**

Tourism can create jobs in the less-favoured areas through the improvement of infrastructure and tourism services, protection of the environment and heritage, rehabilitation of traditional resorts of special importance, diversification of tourism offers, eco-tourism, spas, winter sports, cultural and historical tourism development. Family businesses and micro-enterprises are worth mentioning, as they can increase the occupational opportunities at local level.

The successful and sustainable tourism development depends not only on the attractive scenery and facilities but also on competitive quality services. Hospitality and tourism represent a people industry: people providing services to people. As one of the most competitive economic activities in the world, tourism requires understanding, professionalism, commitment, organization and an effective human resource development strategy.

The investments in tourism infrastructure, in agricultural and rural tourism are identified as a modality to contribute to supporting the balanced development of all regions of Romania, raising living standards in rural areas and reducing the development disparities across the country's regions.

The "Master Plan for National Tourism Development in Romania 2007-2026" was initiated by Romania's Government in order to lay the basis of implementing a permanent approach to the development of tourism and rural tourism in Romania. This covers a wide range of interests, from the eco-tourist specifically interested in environment protection and conservation, the agri-tourist interested in experiencing the farmer's lifestyle; the activity tourist enjoying the great outdoors; to the more generalised interests of the geo-tourist appreciating the scenery beauties, the culture and traditions of the countryside. One can include here the national parks and natural reserves, open rural regions, villages and farmland areas.

Rural tourism development is identified as one of the five sub-priorities in the strategy to bring about a balanced development between the country's regions. The development of the natural and cultural heritage and activities focusing on the natural and cultural landscape are seen, in the plan, as means of developing and promoting tourism.

Furthermore, a number of other elements contributed to defining the concept of rural tourism, namely: psychological dimension, social dimension, geographical size, urban dimension. Rural tourism is one of the most efficient solutions for the harmonization of tourism demands and environment preservation rules. (Bran et al., 2010)

### **Material and method**

The economic impact of tourism can be measured in several ways utilizing a range of key indicators, which demonstrate the contribution of the sector to the wider economy. These indicators include the foreign exchange earnings and their contribution to the travel account on the Balance of Payments, tourism expenditures and incomes, tourism sector contribution to GDP (both in terms of the foreign exchange earnings and the wider tourism sector earnings), contribution to Government earnings (mainly taxation), the multiplier effect and employment creation. A comprehensive

identification of such impacts is a complex undertaking and it fully depends on the availability of comprehensive, reliable and accurate data.

Unfortunately the rural tourism statistics database in Romania is inadequate for a comprehensive economic analysis. Therefore, the methodology used is based on the inventory of the main modalities to promote and stimulate the Romanian rural tourism using information from articles and studies published in specialty journals, as well as from reports and governmental and non-governmental documents.

The information and findings of this article were obtained through selective research-specific methods. The research followed the following process and stages: identification of the researched issue, research framework delimitation, information collection, data processing, analysis and interpretation, drawing up the conclusions.

### **Results and discussions**

Based on the existing topographic, weather and historical conditions, there is the possibility to extend tourism to the level of an important economic sector in Romania. In this respect, considerable effects regarding incomes and labour market are foreseen. Looking ahead, Romania is in a prime position to develop a sustainable and successful tourism model (WTTC, 2006).

Rural tourism has been considered a means of achieving such economic and social development due to its capacity to generate local jobs and stimulate external investments in the communities. Sustainable tourism systems are related to raising the more general interest in sustainable development and the pioneering work of the Brundtland Commission in 1987. The growth of rural tourism activities can be traced back to the late 1960s and the early 1970s and is the product of economic and technical changes, which threatened the status quo of society, life styles and long-existing economies. Agricultural change threatened traditional farming patterns and techniques in a large part of the developed world. In 1968, Sicco Mansholt, European Commissioner for Agriculture, suggested that small farms had no agricultural future. The Mansholt Plan envisaged five million farmers giving up farming (European Commission, 1968). Mansholt also noted that the heavy industries – coal, iron and steel, textiles, and shipbuilding - were shedding enterprises and labour rapidly. These development trends helped create both industrial heritage tourism and rural tourism. Farms diversified to maintain their income: tourism was a way out of dependence on agriculture. (Lane et al., 2013)

For Romania, rural tourism is a priority area in the revival of the economic life, especially considering that rural tourism has continuously developed in our country, mainly after 2004, with

the development of associative support forms and building the legal framework that regulates the activities of the sector.

Currently, rural tourism is an important part of the Romanian tourism sector. Yet we must draw particular attention on the fact that the tourism potential of rural areas in Romania is far from effective realization, showing poor use of natural, historical and cultural tourism resources, as well as a low utilization of the existing material base. As regards the tourism potential, we note that our country has diverse attractions, distributed in a balanced way, from the Carpathians to the Black Sea, or areas with old cultural traditions.

Paradoxically, however, is that many areas that are economically undeveloped, practically focus the most important tourist attractions, and rural tourism here can have a revitalizing role by capitalizing their natural and anthropogenic tourism potential.

To ensure a good recovery of the tourism potential it is necessary to develop products/programs in addition to tourist accommodation, including a wider range of attractions and activities, accompanied by appropriate integration and promotion of events and traditional customs. The products need to be tailored to the type of practiced rural tourism (cultural, curative, religious, adventure, rest and recreation, for winter sports, hunting and fishing, transit, etc.) and influenced by a number of factors such as season, religious holidays, holidays/vacations, and last not least by infrastructure and weather conditions.

In recent years, rural tourism and agro-tourism are economic activities that have significantly developed with the tourists' growing desire to get away from the crowded and polluted cities and to spend their holidays in the rural areas with numerous natural and anthropic resources. For these tourists, rural tourism represents a good alternative to holidays spent on the seashore or in cultural cities and a great opportunity to better know the culture of rural areas and to get closer to the traditional way of life.

The main destinations of the rural tourism and agro-tourism in Romania are the following:

- Maramureș (Sălișteea de Sus, Bogdan Vodă, Săpânța, etc.),
- Transylvania (Arieșeni, Gârda de Sus, Bistrița Bârgăului, Băișoara, etc.),
- central part of Romania (counties Brașov – Bran, Moeciu, Râșnov; Covasna; Harghita – Tușnad, Praid, Sub-Cetate; Sibiu – Sadu, Tâlmăcel, etc.),
- the Carpathians and the Curvature Sub-Carpathians (counties Prahova – Poiana Țapulului, Cheia; Argeș - Brăduleț, Rucăr; Buzău; Dâmbovița; Vrancea),
- Moldova (county Neamț - Agapia, Văratec; Suceava – Vatra Moldoviței),
- Oltenia (counties Dolj; Gorj – Tismana; Vâlcea – Vaideeni;
- Mehedinți – Ponoarele;

- Hunedoara – Hațeg, Bucium, etc.

Probably the most tangible indicator of the growing interest in rural tourism is the expansion of guesthouse accommodation in recent years stimulated by the availability of SAPARD funds and National Rural Development Program 2007-2013. Entrepreneurship stimulation in the Romanian rural tourism sector has continued under the National Rural Development Program 2014-2020. Thus, since July 15, 2015, the Funding Agency for Agricultural Investments has provided funding opportunities through:

- Sub-measure 6.2. Support for the creation of non-agricultural activities in the rural areas; the total available funds in the year 2015 were 44 164 707 euros;

- Sub-measure 6.4 Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities; the total available funds in the year 2015 were 57 214 935 euro.

These aim at:

stimulating the business environment in the rural areas through the increase of the number of micro- and small enterprises in the non-agricultural sector and in the sector of services;

increasing the number of non-agricultural activities in the rural areas by encouraging the maintenance and development of traditional crafts;

developing the present non-agricultural activities;

creating jobs in the rural area;

reducing the differences between the rural and urban areas by non-agricultural practices in order to increase the incomes and occupational alternatives.

As regards the *sustainable development of the Romanian agro-tourism*, the following main aspects must be taken into consideration: environment degradation diminution, conservation of the natural and anthropic resources, ensuring additional incomes for the people from the rural communities with tourism potential, creation of global alliances between several rural localities for the development of a single development policy, the improvement of the general infrastructure, equipment of certain model/pilot farms, boarding houses, tourism households, development of the national reservations system, establishment of local public administrations as promoters of profitable management of the tourism patrimony through the initiation of programs providing support to rural tourism.

## **Conclusions**

The rural tourism activities can contribute to the economic recovery of villages, to infrastructure modernization, can attract different investors, if the inhabitants of the rural areas adopt a favorable attitude, which should be received correctly by the tourists who prefer this type of tourism, and if

the local authorities are sufficiently involved in the development of this profitable economic activity.

In order to obtain good results in the Romanian rural tourism activity, the following are necessary:

Improvement of infrastructure to support the agro-tourism business;

Continuing to reduce bureaucracy with regard to the establishment and operation of agro-tourist boarding houses;

A better information of the population with regard to the governmental programs for private initiative stimulation;

Popularization of the successful business examples of the Romanian entrepreneurs.

In the future, in order to improve the living standards in the rural areas, it is of utmost importance to create and maintain sustainable jobs, to initiate and consolidate businesses, to develop products, services and activities on the basis of the existing potential.

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