

**AGRITOURISM-SUPPLEMENTARY INCOME SOURCE
FOR THE RURAL POPULATION**

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***Abstract:** Currently, the economic coordinates of the rural environment are strictly dependent on the predominance of agricultural activities and the still high degree of employment in this sector. Thus, in the Romanian rural area, agriculture remains the main economic activity, although there are areas where activities such as forest industries, rural tourism and agrotourism, fishing, etc. dominate. Rural development in Romania must take into account all agricultural and non-agricultural activities that are and can be carried out in rural areas, given the potential of existing resources. [1,5,8] In the context of the multifunctionality of rural areas, complementary activities related to agriculture and the provision of services, must become the priorities of sustainable development programs. For rural communities, agritourism plays an important role in their development, but especially in increasing and diversifying the income of the population. The study undertaken is based on the analysis of existing statistical data at national level, which allowed the substantiation of some ideas regarding the implications that the rural tourism activity has on the entire local economy.*

Key words: rural area, non-agricultural activities, agrotourism, rural tourism

INTRODUCTION

The Romanian rural area has a significant potential, regarding economic growth also having an important social role. It occupies 89% from the total area and concentrates 9.07 million people, representing 46.2% of the total population of the country.

The diversification of the Romanian rural economy towards the non-agricultural sectors is still poorly developed, although, in the last period, progress has been made in this respect. Insufficient statistics from rural areas show that 20.2% of farmers are involved in non-agricultural income-generating activities in rural areas, while 35.8% of the employed rural population works in non-agricultural sectors (secondary and tertiary sectors). [1,8]

Economic development, as well as increasing living standards, increases the role of the entrepreneurial sector, because more people can access funds to start their own business, in an economic environment capable of facilitating the development of opportunities. In addition, there are other factors that influence the rate of entrepreneurial activity, such as demographic, cultural and institutional characteristics, existing at national level.

The diversification of activities in rural areas determines the identification of some alternative or additional sources of income for the rural population and is an important way to create jobs for the available labor force in rural areas. [5,7,12] By diversifying the farm's activity, a balance could be struck between agricultural activity and the conservation of natural resources, while the multifunctional role of farmers could take on other dimensions - producers and suppliers of food or non-food services, in other words, entrepreneurs in rural environment. [3,8,10]

The aim of the paper is to indicate the development of the agritourism activity, from the last period, action that determined a major impact on rural areas economic development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper has as purpose to highlight the role that tourism activity has in the economic development of rural areas. Being an activity that combines very well the capitalization of agricultural production with the enhancement of the natural and anthropic tourist heritage of the Romanian state, agrotourism is a real alternative source of income for the inhabitants of these areas. The documentation for conducting this study is based on important bibliographic sources in the field and the existing statistical information on this activity. In conducting this study we took into account some of the analysis indicators of tourism activity (tourist arrivals, number of overnight stays, the evolution of the number of agritourism units and the average length of stay).

RESEARCH RESULTS

The development of the entrepreneurial environment in the rural area contributes to the conservation and development of traditional activities and also leads to the reduction of rural-urban disparities.

In rural areas, anthropogenic resources (especially ethnographic ones) are associated and harmoniously combined with natural resources. The rural area has an impressive variety of cultural and historical values (ethnography and folklore, folk art, traditions, customs, historical vestiges), and has many natural resources, which define a picturesque natural setting, with wonderful and varied landscapes, all these representing special valences, in the introduction and development of the tourist activities, in this area.

Analyzing the Romanian rural area, we can say that here, has been preserved very well, a real treasure of historical monuments, architecture or art, historical remains, and an invaluable ethno folkloric heritage, with a pronounced cultural value.

Rural tourism is one of the non-agricultural activities that show an increasingly strong evolution. The geographical position and the potential of natural and anthropic resources, as well as the richness of the cultural and historical heritage, make Romania a special tourist destination, offering the possibility to practice a wide range of tourist activities, starting from classic tourism to those involving rural and its defining elements, meaning rural tourism, agrotourism and ecotourism.

Rural tourism represents that form of tourism organized within rural communities, aimed at promoting the specificity of the area (local history, traditions and customs, daily life, elements of folk art, ethnography and folklore, etc.), combined with activities specific to the primary sector and comes, as an alternative to support and diversify the activities carried out within households.

Regarding the appearance of rural tourism, as a specific tourism activity, on the Romanian territory, we can appreciate that this form is always practiced, however, in a spontaneous, sporadic, accidental form, in principle unorganized, but, starting with the years 1920-1930, it materialized in the accommodation of visitors to rural settlements, in the homes of residents. [2,6,11] The practice of rural tourism, in an organized form and with a more pronounced intensity, resumes during the '90s. During this period, with the increasing demand for this form, there were some associations and bodies aimed at developing and promoting tourism in rural areas. [1,4]

Agrotourism, as a form of rural tourism, combines agricultural activities with the capitalization of the popular heritage, very well preserved, in many rural areas. Thus, agrotourism can be defined as "a form of tourism practiced in rural areas, based on providing accommodation, meals, leisure and others, within the household, thus capitalizing on the superior natural and human resources of the area and contributing to raising the living standards of the rural population"[12,14]

Agrotourism unites the specific activities of two complex sectors, agriculture and tourism, opening new possibilities for capitalizing on the farm's products and services and offering, at the same time, new tourist experiences to consumers of cultural and traditional values.

Agrotourism imprints on the recreational activity a strong authentic local identity, thus becoming a real possibility to consolidate and support the local economy, given the positive effects it generates both at the level of members of the rural community (income growth, job creation, capitalization of own agricultural production) as well as at the locality level (infrastructure development, highlighting the traditions and customs specific to the area), determining a wide dynamic, upstream and downstream activities.

Agrotourism is promoted as a real possibility to support the rural economy and the creation of new jobs for the local population. Given the poor representation of the two economic sectors, industry and services, in the rural economy, agrotourism is seen by both farmers and local government as a good opportunity to diversify and support the viability of agricultural business, its benefits being far more extensive.

The practice of agrotourism, as an alternative activity, generating income for agricultural producers, indicates a series of advantages, both at national and local level, and especially at the level of farmers: capitalizing on the rich rural potential, saving investments to create accommodation capacities, public catering and leisure, minimizing serving staff, improving living standards in areas used as a material base of tourism, additional sources of income for the rural population, reviving popular traditions and the desire to perpetuate traditional crafts. [4,13]

The advantages generated by agrotourism target both the primary sector and the agricultural farmer and the rural community as a whole, as well as the tourism industry, viewed on a national and even international scale.

Regarding the benefits that agrotourism generates on the agricultural producer, its role can be reduced to the following actions: [2,11]

- ❖ the development of new possibilities for capitalization on the market, of the production;

- ❖ promotion and capitalization of local agricultural products;
- ❖ the possibility of supporting agricultural development and land use;
- ❖ generating new jobs, in general for family members;
- ❖ increasing the long-term viability of its tourism business and supporting the agricultural business;
- ❖ identifying an additional source of income and raising living standards.

Through the advantages it produces among the rural and regional communities, agrotourism appears as a factor of diversification and stabilization of the rural economy, by:

- ❖ generating jobs at the community level and increasing the income of its members;
- ❖ identifying new niches of the local business market;
- ❖ attracting investors and developing new businesses in the field of industry and services;
- ❖ local infrastructure development;
- ❖ increasing the budget of local communities, as a result of the emergence of new businesses.

For the tourism industry the advantages of agrotourism, consist in the diversification of tourist products and services available to consumers, and the unique positioning, as a rarity, of local and rural communities.

In conclusion, the agrotourism activity can be defined as an economic activity, carried out in the rural area, complementary to agriculture. Thus, it becomes a way of full capitalization of the rural environment, with its agricultural, tourist, human and technical-economic potential.

Although the specialists were correct pronounced in terms of listing the assets "well-established picturesque rural settlements, located in an unpolluted environment, preserving traditions and a rich historical past, which apart from political-administrative, social, economic and cultural activities fulfill seasonally or throughout the year and the function of receiving and hosting tourists for a stay of indefinite duration", we must follow only the idea of practicing tourism in rural areas, villages and in no case, the idea of transforming rural localities into "tourist villages" with a museum flavor and artificial atmosphere.

The analysis of the current situation of tourism in the Romanian rural area, reflects an insufficient financing of tourism promotion and, consequently, a lack of an adequate infrastructure for tourism promotion and information, at present, there are only promotion points of local interest. There are no specialized centers for tourism promotion and information, which provide up-to-date, complete and well-structured data on the country's attractions. The information is also very poorly promoted on the internet, and because of this, the tour operators from abroad, encounter difficulties in creating their own tourist programs for Romania.

To these is added the anthropic tourist potential, which includes historical, religious, cultural, economic objectives, monuments, ethnographic heritage. The entire national territory is of interest in terms of folklore and ethnographic heritage, each area having its own specificity, which encourages the practice of cultural tourism.

In the conditions of existence, of such a diversified and high quality natural, cultural and spiritual tourist potential, at national level, a real progress was registered, in this sense, in many areas, the rural localities being introduced in the internal and external tourist circuit.

Even if there have been significant increases in rural tourism, however, the rural area has a special potential, insufficiently exploited. The tourism sector currently has registered significant increases in terms of the number of accommodation structures, and the level of accommodation capacity.

Regarding the offer of tourist accommodation in rural areas, it is represented by accommodation in households and agrotourism guesthouses. From data presented in Table 1, regarding the number of agrotourism guesthouses registered at national level, for the period 2000-2018, an ascending evolution can be observed.

Table 1

Tourist reception structures with tourist accommodation functions

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total - number	3121	4226	5222	6821	6946	7905	8453
Number of agritourism guesthouses	201	597	949	1527	1530	1666	1709
% of total	6.44	14.13	18.17	22.39	22.03	21.07	20.22

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>, [15]

The number of accommodation units in rural areas increased during the analyzed period, 8.5 times, which indicates both an intensification of rural tourism activity and a support of rural residents, regarding the development of tourism activities in the Romanian villages.

At the level of 2000, the agrotourism pensions represented 6.44% from the total number of reception structures, with accommodation function, existing at national level, while in 2018, they represent 20.22%.

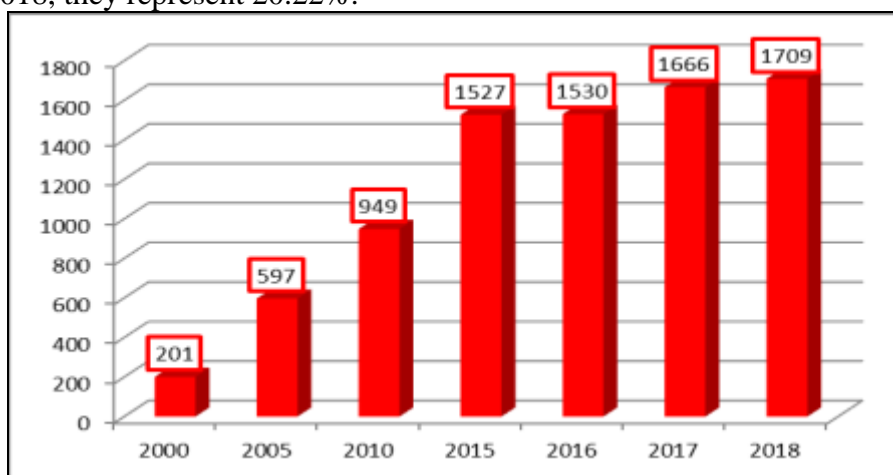


Figure 1. Evolution of the number of agrotourism pensions, [15]

At regional level, the development of agrotourism is influenced by the presence of the technical-material base with accommodation function (farmers' households or agrotourism guesthouses) and by the existence of activities specific to popular culture, ethnographic regions with ethno folkloric and culinary specificity but also to the practice of agriculture and viticulture.

The main agrotourism areas, outlined at national level, are noted for their specificity, especially in terms of preserving traditions and customs, rural authenticity and values of popular culture, history or religion, each area having a certain specificity imprinted. Thus, the area of Bucovina (North-East) is known for religious tourism, the area of Maramures (North-West) for architectural and ethnographic tourism, and Transylvania (Center) for recreational and cultural tourism, culinary art, winemaking and fishing. Mountain and forest areas offer opportunities for ecotourism.

The Danube Delta, due to its high natural heritage, varied biodiversity and the specificity of rural life, stands out as an agrotourism destination, with a high tourist value, offering the possibility to practice various forms of tourism (rest, fishing, and culinary art).

Regarding agrotourism, Romania does not yet have a very well-defined image at global level, internal promotion is insufficient, being undersized in demand.

Tourism promotion centers, specialized centers and information centers are poorly represented, both nationally and externally. Thus, tourists do not have the necessary information regarding the attractions from agrotourism areas (cultural events specific to each destination, archeological sites, elements of folk and culinary art, etc.) as well as those regarding accommodation, places to eat, existing leisure places, etc.

The realization of this major field of intervention requires the intensification of actions targeting Romania, as an attractive destination for tourism and business, along with the sustainable development of tourism products, increasing the use of the Internet in promoting and booking tourist services.

The main indicative operations are:

- ❖ creating and promoting the positive image of Romania as a rural tourist destination by defining and promoting the national tourist brand, the capacity to attract investors in order to develop the tourism industry and increase the degree of attractiveness;
- ❖ development and consolidation of domestic tourism by supporting the promotion of tourism-specific products and specific marketing activities. The purpose of this operation is

to develop the concept of tourist recreation inside the country, to increase the number of holidays spent in Romania, by promoting specific tourist products.

Rural tourism and agrotourism (specifically related to farm activities) thus appear as activities related to the agricultural branch, generating alternative and additional income to agricultural producers and also offering the possibility of developing rural areas. The preservation, conservation and promotion of the specific elements of the agrotourism areas that aim at the traditions, culture, culinary specialties as well as the variety of rural tourist resources, are elements that print an increased potential in the development of this sector.

Agrotourism is a form of rural tourism, with positive values in terms of development, at the national level. This is supported by the growing demand for tourism in rural areas, both in terms of Romanian and foreign tourists. For the analyzed period, the arrivals of tourists, in the agrotourism pensions, register, significant increases, over 40 times (41.68 times), from 28,152, in 2000 to 1,173,455, in 2018.

Increases were registered for both Romanian and foreign tourists. In the case of Romanian tourists, the increase is 43.41 times, while among foreign tourists it is lower, only 28.15 times.

Table 2

Arrivals of tourists in agrotourism guesthouses

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total	28152	170164	289923	672756	813454	1004400	1173455
Romanian	24962	152521	270246	622187	748320	917213	1083662
Foreigners	3190	17643	19677	50569	65134	87187	89793

Source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/shop/>

Particular importance must be given, in the economic analysis of the tourist activity, to the average length of stay. Overall, there is a longer stay for foreign tourists compared to Romanian tourists.

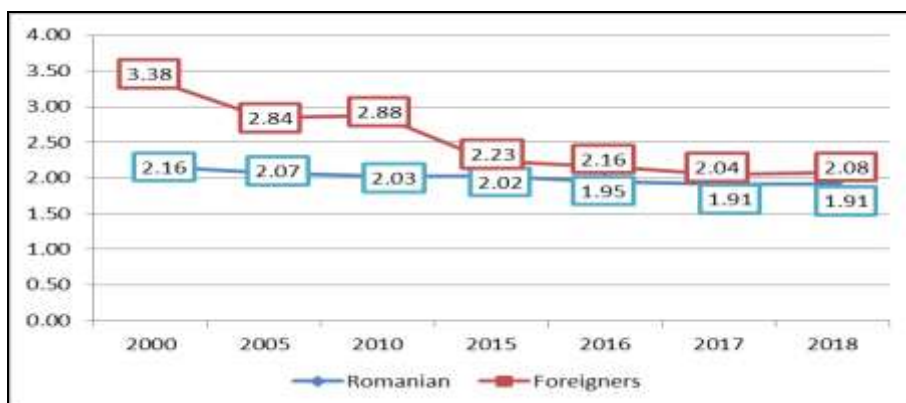


Figure 2. Average duration of stay in agrotourism guesthouses, days/tourist, [15]

In the period 2000-2018, at the level of agrotourism guesthouses, there is a reduction in the average length of stay. In the case of Romanian tourists, the average length of stay decreased from 2.16 days, in 2000, to 1.91 days in 2018, and in the case of foreign tourists, from 3.38 days, in 2000, to 2.08 days in 2018.

The statement that the tourist activity from rural areas has experienced a rapid development in recent years is supported by the large number of accommodation units registered in rural areas. The development and promotion of agritourism has determined the growth and intensification of tourism in rural areas, which results in increasing the living standards of the population, as a result of the overall development of rural areas and

diversification of economic activities. The diversification of the rural tourist offer has allowed the intensification of the demand for this type of tourism but, considering the fact that, most leisure stay is still quite short.

CONCLUSIONS

The development and intensification of the tourist activity requires investments in the modernization and development of the technical-material base of accommodation, food and leisure of agritourism guesthouses, as well as improving the quality of services provided to customers, increasing the qualification of the workforce, thus increasing the number of tourists and the average length of stay.

For the Romanian rural area, rural tourism and agrotourism represent a reconsideration of traditional relations, of the relations between material production and services in the rural environment, thus constituting a real chance for the local economy.

The main obstacles, in the establishment and development of business, in non-agricultural fields, and especially in the area of rural tourism, are represented by the lack of a specific entrepreneurial culture but, especially by the lack of capital, necessary to set up a business.

Future rural development programs in Romania will have to target, among others:

sustainable development of the rural environment by strengthening the economic and social role of agriculture;

encouraging non-agricultural practices;

improving the quality of life in rural areas, in order to maintain the population in this area;

conservation of natural resources, agricultural and forestry and cultural heritage;

the use of all rural resources through an efficient system and the practice of non-agricultural activities in most agricultural holdings.

The conservation of a rural community, with a set of significant elements from an economic, social and cultural point of view, is the key element in the initiation and development of rural tourism. Thus, the practice of tourist activities has the effect of maintaining the viability and stability of rural localities and reducing rural-urban migration. The practice of agrotourism can cause significant changes in the organization and functioning of activities in rural areas. We must keep in mind that the practice of agrotourism is an alternative to the problems faced by agriculture and farmers and not to those in the area.

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