

COOPERATION BETWEEN GUESTHOUSES, TRAVEL AGENCIES, AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES – A TOOL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS

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Abstract: *The paper analyzes the role of inter-institutional and economic collaboration in strengthening the competitiveness and sustainability of Romanian tourism. The study is based on the premise that modern tourism development cannot be achieved in isolation, but rather through strategic cooperation among public, private, and community actors. The main forms of cooperation in tourism — horizontal, vertical, public–private, inter-institutional, and international — are presented, along with well-established organizational models such as the tourism cluster, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), public–private partnerships (PPPs), and local cooperatives. The analysis highlights that these models foster the creation of economic, social, and ecological synergies, generating multiple advantages: cost reduction, diversification of the tourism offer, professionalization of human resources, attraction of European funds, revitalization of rural communities, and promotion of sustainable tourism.*

Key words: *tourism cooperation, public–private partnership, tourist destination, sustainability, tourism cluster.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary economy, the development of tourism no longer depends exclusively on the individual initiative of enterprises, but rather on their ability to cooperate. Partnership relations between guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities have become an essential form of economic and social cooperation, capable of generating synergies and stimulating the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

Tourism represents a sector of exclusive importance for the economic development of every region. It is one of the largest industries and a significant component of the global economy. Moreover, tourism is embedded within complex business structures and boundaries shaped by global transformations. Over the decades, tourism has experienced continuous growth. Worldwide, it has become one of the fastest-growing economic sectors. Today, tourism is closely connected to the process of socio-economic development and offers an increasing number of new destinations. This dynamic has transformed tourism into a key driver of socio-economic progress due to its capacity and potential to create new jobs, especially for young people [14].

Romanian rural tourism and ecotourism are based on the cooperation of local actors—a complex process involving the coordination of services, promotion, and investments. Without such collaboration, natural and cultural resources cannot be efficiently valorized [6].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main purpose of this research is to analyze how cooperation between guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities contributes to the sustainable and competitive development of regional tourist destinations in Romania. The study aims to identify effective models of collaboration, the resulting economic and institutional advantages, and the overall impact on local communities.

The research was conducted based on the documentary method, designed to provide an integrated perspective on the phenomenon of tourism cooperation. A bibliographic and documentary analysis was used, allowing the identification of theoretical models of cooperation such as Public–Private Partnerships (PPP), Destination Management Organizations (DMO), tourism clusters, networks, and local cooperatives.

RESEARCH RESULTS

A more comprehensive definition describes tourism collaboration as “support from public and private authorities, joint projects in the initiation or implementation phase, potential partnerships for project development, cooperation among local tourism operators, the elaboration of common strategies, and their representation before public decision-makers.” The terms *collaboration* and *cooperation in tourism* have been used since the late 1980s, and in 1995, the idea of inter-organizational tourism collaboration was proposed for destination planning and development. This approach aimed to create an interactive system in an otherwise fragmented tourism industry, through three stages: identifying local stakeholders and territorial issues, outlining potential collaborations by setting common goals, and institutionalizing those partnerships as the sector evolved [4].

Economic cooperation represents the process through which multiple actors—organizations, institutions, or individuals—coordinate their activities and resources to achieve common objectives. Cooperation is an advanced form of economic relationship, distinct from competition, as it is based on complementarity and mutual trust among partners. In an economic environment characterized by global competition, cooperation becomes a means of strengthening market position by reducing costs, encouraging innovation, and expanding distribution networks [5].

In the tourism sector, cooperation takes on multiple dimensions—economic, social, and institutional—since it involves various actors: private enterprises (guesthouses, travel agencies, restaurants), public organizations (local authorities, tourism information centers), and non-governmental organizations (associations, foundations, tourism cooperatives). Tourism functions as a complex system in which every component—transportation, accommodation, food services, leisure, and promotion—depends on the others. Therefore, without cooperation among all involved parties, a coherent, competitive, and sustainable tourism offer cannot be achieved [11].

Tourism is a complex economic sector with an interdependent structure, where success largely depends on the capacity of stakeholders to cooperate. Unlike other industries, tourism is not based on a single product, but rather on a set of complementary services—accommodation, food, transport, leisure, culture, events, and promotion [1]. Consequently, cooperation between economic agents, public authorities, and local organizations becomes an essential condition for creating an integrated tourism product and ensuring the competitiveness of a destination. Tourism is a *synthetic activity*, and its success depends on the collaboration of all components of the tourism system. This collaboration manifests in various forms, from voluntary alliances among private operators to institutionalized partnerships between the public and private sectors [11].

1. Horizontal Cooperation

Horizontal cooperation refers to collaboration among organizations operating within the same business segment (e.g., several guesthouses, restaurants, or travel agencies). The main goal is to increase bargaining power, reduce costs, and improve competitive positioning on the market. Horizontal cooperation in tourism can take various forms [7]: Professional associations (e.g., ANTREC – The National Association for Rural, Ecological

and Cultural Tourism); joint marketing organizations (e.g., The Association for Tourism Promotion in Timiș County).

Consortia or promotional networks that develop regional brands (e.g., “*Discover Maramureș*”, “*Țara Hațegului – Land of the Dinosaurs*”) are other key forms of horizontal cooperation. These associations allow for the creation of joint marketing campaigns, participation in tourism fairs, and the development of integrated packages that combine services from several local units.

For example, several guesthouses within the same area may collaborate to offer a 7-day package that includes accommodation, traditional meals, and local activities such as carriage rides, craft workshops, or visits to cultural sites. This form of cooperation is essential in rural areas, where enterprises are typically small and lack sufficient individual resources for promotion or innovation [6].

2. Vertical cooperation

Vertical cooperation involves collaboration among firms operating at different stages of the tourism value chain: service producers (guesthouses, hotels, restaurants); intermediaries (travel agencies, booking platforms); distributors (transport operators, tourist information centers). The goal of this cooperation is to integrate services into a unified offer and create competitive tourism packages.

For instance, a travel agency may collaborate with a guesthouse and a local transport company to offer tourists a complete package (transportation – accommodation – excursions). The advantage of this form of cooperation is that it “allows for the elimination of unnecessary intermediaries, reduces transaction costs, and increases customer satisfaction through coordinated services” [9].

At the same time, vertical cooperation contributes to service standardization, quality assurance, and the consistency of the destination’s image.

3. Public–private cooperation (PPP)

Another important form of cooperation in tourism is the public–private partnership (PPP), defined as an association between local public authorities and private entities, with the goal of developing infrastructure, promoting destinations, and capitalizing on local resources. PPPs represent “an efficient mechanism for implementing tourism projects of common interest by combining the financial and administrative resources of the public sector with the expertise and dynamism of the private sector” [8].

Examples of public–private partnerships in Romanian tourism include:

- the development of spa resorts (*Băile Herculane, Sovata, Covasna*) through collaboration among municipalities, private operators, and foreign investors;
- the creation of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) that unite county councils, city halls, and private operators;
- partnerships between local authorities and tourism associations for the promotion of cultural heritage.

This form of cooperation facilitates the attraction of European funds, integrated planning, and sustainable promotion of destinations.

4. Inter-institutional and community cooperation

In addition to economic and public actors, inter-institutional cooperation also plays a significant role in tourism—linking universities, NGOs, cultural associations, and heritage institutions. These forms of collaboration generate social innovation and sustainability through projects in education, research, and the preservation of local traditions [3].

Concrete examples include:

- cooperation between universities and tourism associations for the training of local guides;

- partnerships between ethnographic museums and traditional guesthouses for organizing themed events;
- community involvement in the creation of eco-tourism trails or cultural festivals.

5. International cooperation

In the context of globalization and European integration, tourism cooperation often transcends national borders. Romania participates in numerous cross-border projects under programs such as INTERREG, SEE (South-East Europe), or Danube 2030, which promote sustainable tourism development. International cooperation in tourism contributes to diversifying the tourism offer, transferring know-how, strengthening the national brand [5].

6. The role of cooperation in regional development

The various forms of cooperation in tourism—horizontal, vertical, public–private, inter-institutional, and international—represent essential mechanisms for ensuring the competitiveness and sustainability of a destination. They create synergies among economic actors, encourage innovation, and support the coherence of local development policies.

Without cooperation, tourism risks remaining a collection of isolated initiatives, unable to fully capitalize on the potential of a region [7].

Within the framework of regional development, tourism cooperation plays a dual role:

- economic, by creating jobs, stimulating local investment, and expanding the tax base;
- social, by revitalizing rural communities and preserving local traditions.

Economic cooperation generates “organizational synergies”, meaning positive effects that exceed the sum of the individual results of the partners. In tourism, this synergy manifests itself through attracting a greater number of tourists, diversifying the tourism offer, and extending the length of stay [3].

A concrete example is the creation of local tourism development associations, where guesthouses, travel agencies, and public authorities join forces to:

- carry out joint marketing campaigns;
- develop access and tourist signage infrastructure;
- organize thematic events (festivals, fairs, cultural routes);
- access European funds for rural development.

This type of cooperation strengthens regional identity and transforms tourism from an isolated economic activity into a catalyst for local development [6].

Over time, cooperation among actors involved in tourism activities has evolved from simple, occasional collaborations to structured and strategic partnership models, recognized in the literature and widely applied across Europe and Romania. These models aim to ensure efficient destination governance, economic synergies among partners, and the sustainable use of resources.

Tourism cooperation models represent the institutionalized expression of collaboration among the economic, public, and social actors of a destination, designed to foster competitiveness and developmental coherence [7].

Depending on their organizational structure, objectives, and level of integration, Romanian and European literature distinguishes several main models of tourism cooperation:

1. The tourism cluster model

The cluster model is based on Michael Porter’s theory of regional competitiveness, adapted to the tourism context by numerous Romanian authors. Clusters are groups of companies within a specific industry, characterized by common features and

complementarities, located in a defined geographical area. Their interdependent activity generates synergies and collective efficiency [10].

A tourism cluster represents a geographical concentration of interconnected companies and institutions active in tourism, including suppliers, service providers, governmental bodies, institutions, universities, competitors, and a set of differentiated attractions. These are concentrated within a defined area offering quality facilities and services, collective efficiency, social and political cohesion, and network management that creates competitive and comparative advantages [12].

Key characteristics of a tourism cluster:

- geographical concentration of actors (guesthouses, agencies, restaurants, authorities, NGOs);
- cooperation in areas such as marketing, professional training, quality, and innovation;
- development of a regional brand and a joint promotion strategy;
- involvement of educational and research institutions.

The tourism cluster is a higher form of cooperation, based on trust and innovation, which ensures the sustainable competitiveness of a destination [3].

2. The destination management organization model (DMO / OMD)

Another well-established model at the European level is the Destination Management Organization (DMO), introduced in Romania under the name OMD – Organizația de Management al Destinației. The Destination Management Organization is the organizational unit responsible for coordinating the management and development of a tourism destination, under which various authorities, stakeholders, and service providers collaborate to develop a common vision for destination growth.

This also requires a comprehensive development strategy, as the ultimate goal is the same: long-term socio-economic and environmental development and a high level of destination competitiveness. Destination management should be comprehensive, not limited to marketing. All tourism stakeholders should be involved in this process, balancing sometimes divergent interests and forming an inclusive partnership [15].

The role of DMOs: developing local tourism development strategies; managing the destination's brand; coordinating promotion campaigns; building partnerships and attracting European funding. In Romania, the first DMOs were created between 2021 and 2023, in areas such as Sibiu, Brașov, Oradea, and the Danube Delta.

The DMO model represents a form of participatory governance that ensures a balance between the economic, social, and cultural interests of a destination [9].

3. The public-private partnership model (PPP)

The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model is widely applied in tourism infrastructure and development projects.

A PPP represents, in principle, any form of cooperation between the public and private sectors; however, depending on each country's legal framework, the formation and structure of such partnerships may vary, taking the form of joint venture contracts, concession agreements, or service contracts.

The role of the government in tourism is to guide the industry as a national economic force, while also intervening when the private sector is unable to act effectively [13].

4. The model of tourism cooperatives and local associations

This model has a long-standing tradition in Romanian tourism, inspired by older forms of rural economic association. Tourism cooperatives are voluntary associations of small entrepreneurs in rural tourism, created to jointly capitalize on resources and promote local tourism offers [6].

Today, many Romanian regions—such as Maramureș, Țara Hațegului, and Bran–Moieciu–Fundata—have local tourism associations that operate on cooperative principles.

Their main roles include: joint promotion of the destination; participation in tourism fairs; certification of service quality; professional training of staff.

5. The network model

The network model of cooperation is a modern concept that emerged with digitalization and the rise of online platforms. Tourism cooperation networks function as flexible structures, based on information sharing, innovation, and adaptability [2].

This model involves connecting tourism actors through digital platforms, social networks, and integrated booking systems. Through such networks, guesthouses and travel agencies can collaborate regionally or nationally, exchanging information about demand, events, reviews, and promotion opportunities.

6. The cross-border cooperation model

In border regions, tourism cooperation transcends the administrative boundaries of a single state. Programs such as INTERREG, RO–HU, RO–BG, and RO–UA have promoted joint tourism projects based on shared cultural and natural heritage. Cross-border tourism cooperation represents an advanced form of economic integration, contributing to reducing regional disparities and strengthening European identity [5].

7. Strategic implications

Tourism cooperation models provide an organizational framework for strategic collaboration between public and private actors.

Regardless of the form adopted—cluster, DMO, PPP, cooperative, or network—their success depends on: the level of trust among partners; a shared vision of regional development; a coherent legal and institutional framework; the active involvement of local communities. Thus, cooperation is not merely an option but an essential condition for the sustainable development of Romanian tourism.

Cooperation among guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities represents one of the most important economic and institutional partnerships in modern tourism. It contributes not only to the economic development of tourist regions but also to the strengthening of local identity, the creation of jobs, and the sustainable valorization of natural and cultural resources. The development of a tourism destination cannot be conceived without continuous collaboration between the public and private sectors, within a unified system of planning and promotion [7].

Romanian rural tourism and ecotourism owe much of their success to the association of small entrepreneurs, local organizations, and public administration [6].

1. Economic advantages

Cooperation brings direct economic benefits to all parties involved. Through association, guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities can:

- reduce costs through joint promotion, marketing, and participation in tourism fairs;
- access European funds more easily (for example, through Local Action Groups – *GALs*, or programs such as the Regional Operational Programme *POR* and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan *PNRR*);
- increase revenues by attracting a higher number of tourists and extending their stays;
- diversify the tourism offer through integrated packages (accommodation + leisure + cultural experiences);
- strengthen the regional brand, as a uniformly promoted destination achieves a stronger image and better market recognition.

Economic partnerships based on cooperation generate synergies—that is, positive effects greater than the simple sum of individual results [3].

2. Organizational and managerial advantages

Cooperation also provides managerial benefits, by:

- increasing strategic planning capacity – local stakeholders can jointly formulate medium- and long-term tourism development strategies;
- improving communication and coordination between the private and public sectors;
- professionalizing human resources through training programs, experience exchanges, and joint education initiatives;
- promoting innovation, as small firms benefit from the know-how and expertise of public institutions and universities;
- improving service quality through standardization, certification, and best practice implementation.

Inter-organizational cooperation “creates a favorable framework for innovation and collective learning, essential for regional competitiveness” [9].

3. Social and community advantages

Tourism is not only an economic activity but also a vector of community development. Cooperation among local actors generates:

- job creation and the stimulation of rural entrepreneurship;
- improved living standards through additional income for the community;
- revitalization of traditions and local culture, by integrating them into the tourism offer (festivals, crafts, gastronomy);
- increased social cohesion, through community participation in joint projects;
- reduced migration, by providing viable economic alternatives in rural areas.

Tourism based on cooperation contributes to the rediscovery of rural identity and strengthens the sense of belonging within communities [6].

4. Ecological and sustainability advantages

Another major benefit is the orientation toward sustainable tourism, which respects the environment and natural resources. Cooperation facilitates:

- the implementation of common ecological standards (green energy, recycling, pollution reduction);
 - the promotion of ecotourism and responsible tourism;
 - sustainable management of natural and cultural resources;
 - the creation of green thematic routes and eco-friendly infrastructure (roads, visitor centers).
- through cooperation, companies can move beyond the logic of immediate profit and focus instead on sustainability and social responsibility goals [8].

5. Institutional and political advantages

At the institutional level, cooperation plays a crucial role in strengthening local governance.

Through continuous dialogue between public authorities and the private sector:

- administrative barriers are reduced;
- public policies are implemented in line with local realities;
- transparency and community participation in decision-making are increased;
- the public image of local authorities is enhanced, positioning them as reliable partners.

Efficient local administrations are those that become catalysts of economic cooperation, not merely passive managers of resources [5].

6. Image and promotion advantages

Finally, cooperation creates a strong image effect. A local tourism brand becomes credible only if it reflects the collective effort of the entire community. The image of a

destination is the product of collective strategic thinking, and cooperation is the main tool for building this image [2].

The advantages of cooperation among guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities are multiple and interdependent. This form of collaboration generates economic, social, and cultural value, contributing to the creation of a competitive, sustainable, and attractive tourism destination. By joining forces, local actors transform tourism from a fragmented activity into a collaborative ecosystem based on trust, innovation, and sustainable development.

CONCLUSIONS

Cooperation between guesthouses, travel agencies, and local authorities represents an essential condition for the sustainable, integrated, and competitive development of Romania's regional tourist destinations. In an economic context characterized by globalization and intense competition, the success of a tourist region no longer depends solely on the individual quality of services but rather on the ability of local actors to collaborate and generate synergies.

The analysis revealed that modern models of collaboration—such as tourism clusters, Destination Management Organizations (DMOs), public–private partnerships (PPPs), and local cooperatives—provide an effective framework for resource integration, joint promotion, and the professionalization of the tourism sector. Through these structures, multiple benefits are achieved: economic, through increased revenues and reduced costs; managerial, through service standardization and workforce development; social, through community involvement and job creation; ecological, through the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism.

However, the cooperation process also faces certain challenges: lack of trust among partners, administrative bureaucracy, absence of a shared vision, and insufficient public sector involvement in the strategic coordination of tourism. Overcoming these obstacles requires strengthening the legal framework for partnerships, enhancing transparency, and encouraging professional training in destination management.

In the long term, tourism cooperation must be regarded as a strategic investment, not merely as an occasional initiative. Only through a joint, coordinated, and sustainable effort among the public, private, and community sectors can balanced tourism development be achieved—one that contributes to the economic and social well-being of Romania's regions.

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