

The Role of Public Authorities in the Agro-Tourism Sector

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Abstract. *In the countries of the European Union, agritourism is not a new phenomenon. Over time, for most EU countries: time meaning several decades, tourist accommodation has been practiced in a more or less spontaneous or organized manner. The new in this field is manifested by the expansion of the tourist phenomenon in the rural area. This expansion is explained, on the one hand, by relaunching the development of rural regions and, on the other hand, by diversifying the forms of mass tourism practice. The activity has proven to be profitable, especially as a result of changes in the preferences and habits of tourists towards individual tourism, to the detriment of mass tourism. On the other hand, the migration to the city, the modernization of work in the agricultural sector, the changes caused by the increase in competition in the rural world through the expansion of the free community market, have a counterweight in agritourism. Activities in the sphere of tourism can economically revive the villages, if the benevolent attitude of their inhabitants, to receive and accept in their midst wasteful and demanding guests, is favorably received. The objective of this article is to interconnect the concept of agritourism analyzed at the European level with the main strategies and stability policies of public authorities in the large-scale development of this type of non-invasive tourism*

.Keywords: *agro-tourism, environment, Europe Union, sustainable development.*

Introduction

Since ancient times, for the rural environment, the fundamental field of activity was represented by agriculture, which equated, on the one hand (Bodislav et al., 2019; Bodislav et al., 2020), to the main source of obtaining constant income at the level of the rural economy and, on the other hand, to the primary employer of labor for the inhabitants of rural areas (Bran et al., 2020; Ladaru et al., 2022).

Throughout history, the incomes obtained directly from agriculture have been characterized by flexibility, and their level began to experience a gradual decrease, with the manifestation of the phenomena of urbanization (Profiroiou et al., 2020a), industrialization and globalization (Profiroiou et al., 2020b) and, more recently, due to the appearance of economic difficulties in which the agricultural sector is in, determined by crises such as the drop in prices for some agricultural products, the high volatility of the global agricultural commodity markets, the economic slowdown on the European and global level, the imminent risks generated by diseases, natural disasters,

unfavorable weather conditions, the enumeration not being exhaustive (European Parliament, 2016, p.2).

Considering this context, farmers and members of agricultural households had to identify other additional sources of income, with a special focus on the diversification of agricultural incomes (Alpopi et al., 2018; Burlacu, Stoica et al., 2022). This phenomenon refers to the realization of any profitable activities within the farm, other than agriculture itself, such as, for example, handicrafts, processing of wood and agricultural products, agro-tourism, energy production from renewable sources, aquaculture (Adamov et al., 2020).

In parallel with farmers' concerns regarding diversification, studies on the matter indicate that governments around the world, along with competent national authorities in the field of economic development, are constantly looking for ways to ensure sustainable rural development, consolidation and promotion wealth and resources in the rural environment, as well as supporting the diversification of businesses at the local level, so that they become profitable and less affected by the cyclical nature of the economy (Stanciu, Popescu & Răsvan, 2022). In this context, a response to the searches of national administrations can be represented by supporting the agro-tourism sector, which, in addition to the fact that it uses already existing resources, presents a series of advantages, which we will analyze during this paper.

According to the available data, in the last decades, the local and national administrations of the member states of the European Union have begun to focus on the significant importance that the tourism and agro-tourism sectors have for the development of rural areas, especially those with attractive landscapes (Zoto, Qirici & Polena, 2013). Moreover, it is well known that, globally, more and more national policies embrace the idea that agro-tourism should be encouraged not only from the perspective of the positive impact it has on the development of the farm, but also from the perspective of the favorable effects on the level of employment and the development of rural areas, investments in the promotion and development of agro-tourism being equivalent, in some regions, to a real diversification strategy regarding the combination of agriculture and tourism. The objective of this article is to interconnect the concept of agritourism analyzed at the European level with the main strategies and stability policies of public authorities in the large-scale development of this type of non-invasive tourism. The analysis on the general topic was carried out based on the period 2015-2022.

Literature review

In an attempt to define agro-tourism, we can highlight the fact that it represents a species of rural tourism, closely related to agricultural activities, in which the farm is used as the main destination for spending free time, tourists choosing to spend the night in peasant households and not in specially arranged locations, such as hotels (Cărătuș et al., 2015).

In addition to accommodation on the farm, agro-tourism includes, as appropriate, a series of activities, such as visits to the farm or to neighboring farms, exploring agricultural work and farm activities, consuming and buying local food products, the purchase of handicraft items, but also some leisure activities, such as horse riding or fishing in the farm premises (European Parliament, 2016, p.3).

Some authors have even developed a typology for the identification of agro-tourism, based on three key segments: the farm visited carries out an agricultural activity, there is a contact between the touristic and agricultural activity, the touristic experience meets a high degree of authenticity (Lupi et al., 2017).

From a historical perspective, it is interesting to note that, traditionally, rural regions experienced the development of so-called routes that crossed them, among which we can emphasize the route of silk, wine, amber or the journeys to Jerusalem, Mecca or Mont Saint Michel (Gaikwad et al., 2017) practiced even today by tourists- which per se involved accommodation in farms, all of which demonstrate the remote origin of this form of farm tourism, as well as its viability as an alternative to classic tourism (Negescu Oancea, et al., 2019).

Although agro-tourism became the subject of specialized literature relatively late, more precisely, towards the end of the 20th century, it developed significantly during the 60s-70s, when the diversification of farm activity in the direction of tourism began to be officially encouraged by the authorities (European Parliament, 2013, p.29), thus giving rise to the concept of "agro-tourism". However, despite the importance that farm tourism has gained in recent years, in the specialized literature it is still considered to be a secondary activity, agriculture remaining the main source of income and occupation of farmers (Darău et al., 2010).

Currently, the meaning of agro-tourism, similar to that of rural tourism, varies depending on the different geographical regions, but at the level of the European Union, the two notions basically refer to the "multidimensional economic development of agricultural farms" and, respectively, to the "multidimensional development of rural areas" (Bodislav et al., 2020), involving the policies of the Union in the agricultural, social and economic fields (Jagtap, Nichit & Benke, 2010). Although, at first sight, agro-tourism seems to be well defined from a conceptual perspective, over time, the phrase "rural tourism" began to be more and more practiced, agro-tourism becoming only a sub-sector of a rural tourism understood in a holistic sense (European Parliament, 2013, p.29), the two notions often being confused at the level of current speech.

In the specialized literature it is clearly indicated that, despite the existence and operation at the EU level of some common policies in the fields of agriculture and transport, each country and region has its own category of definitions and applicable rules in the field of agro-tourism and other forms of rural tourism. Until now, there are no clearly defined guidelines in the agro-tourism sector, neither internationally nor within the EU, the terms and phrases used different: on the one hand, they talk about the necessary development of agro-tourism and, on the other hand, it is desired to combine agriculture with rural tourism through the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism in rural areas.

In order to outline a clear image regarding the understanding of the meaning of farm tourism and the conceptual distinction between it and rural tourism, a series of clarifications are required. Since the beginning of the 90s, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), through its rural development program, addressed the problematic issue of the definition of rural tourism, which, in its view, should include at least the following aspects : to be a tourist activity located in the rural area, the activity to be functional from a rural perspective, in the sense of rendering the specific characteristics of the traditional world (an open environment or space, permanent contact with nature and the rural world, the involvement of traditional practices and, where it is the case, the reflection of rural heritage), settlements and buildings to express rurality, the activities carried out to ensure the traditional character and the connection with the native population and local families, and the actual development of tourism to aim at the long-term sustainability of the area, by promoting the complex model of the rural environment, with emphasis on the traditional economy, history and characteristics of the place.

Recent studies in the matter indicate the scope of the concept of "rural tourism", which consists, de facto, in any tourism activity that is carried out in the rural environment, including, as species, ecotourism, agro-tourism, adventure tourism, food tourism, etc. (Pawar, 2021). Therefore,

rural tourism is not limited to its form of farm tourism, but includes, in addition to farm holidays, special interest nature holidays, ecotourism, walking, mountaineering and horse riding, the desire for adventure activities, sports and health tourism, hunting and fishing, educational tourism, heritage tourism, even arts-oriented and, in some areas, ethnic tourism.

In addition to these forms of rural tourism, there is another form considered to be of general interest, particularly highlighted in studies of German tourism, generated by the high demand for peace and relaxation in the countryside (Dubois& Schmitz, 2013).

Currently, rural tourism is considered sophisticated and modern, addressing people belonging to groups considered superior from a socio-economic perspective, who seek experience in travel. Having a variable meaning from one country to another, the phrase "rural tourism" currently does not know a universal definition, due to its complex nature.

Methodology

Secondary data, such as journal articles, proceedings, reports and statistical data were analyzed to obtain a picture of the current state of research on rural tourism, agritourism and ecotourism in Romania. The quantitative structure of the bibliometric analysis makes it ideal for this study because it keeps the authors' bias under control. It is the ability to manage massive databases that allows it to extract information from a large corpus. In the current study, a review and a bibliometric analysis was performed to identify, organize, and analyze trends in the proposed research area. Selecting the right database is critical to a well-performed evaluation. We used the Web of Science Core Collection which is a comprehensive bibliographic data source.

The methodology was applied to generate a full search of the WOS database using the syntax: "rural tourism" OR "agritourism" OR "agritourism" OR "ecotourism" AND "Romania" in the title, abstract and keywords of the papers. To refine the search, two filters were applied to the dataset: "language" (English) and "year of publication". The application of these filters resulted in 440 documents that constitute the data set to be analyzed. SPSS software was used for data extraction from the Web of Science Core Collection and Vosviewer software for bibliometric analysis of the results.

Results and discussions

In order to identify the set of characteristics that attribute significant importance to agritourism for the sustainability of the rural environment within the European Union, it would be very useful to highlight, among other things, the implications of this field from a statistical point of view.

The importance of agro-tourism for the sustainability of the rural environment within the European Union

The effort to collect and codify the data from the subcategories included in rural tourism is, most of the time, unsuccessful, an aspect generated especially by the non-existence of a clear and unanimously accepted distinction at the conceptual level, as we highlighted in the previous section. Secondly, the insufficient collection of statistical data within the EU regarding agritourism has its origin including in the interference of some parts of this sector with other sectors. Thus, it is considered that numerous activities specific to farm tourism overlap, from a financial perspective, with agricultural activities, on the one hand, because the profit obtained from accommodation activities can be compensated, from an accounting point of view, with the losses at the farm level and, on the other hand, since there is no clear evidence on the sale of traditional products from the

perspective of evaluating the type of customer (if they are mainly purchased by tourists or by the local population), the cases being exemplary (Pawar, 2021).

Moreover, in addition to the collection of data based on the income index of non-agricultural activities carried out at farm level, in the European Union there are attempts to create databases depending on the size of rural tourism within the tourism sector as a whole or.

Referring to this last aspect, the available data indicate that, in 2015, approximately 15% of the total accommodation capacity in Europe was represented by rural tourism units (Bran et al., 2020). However, the data are not directly relevant in terms of agritourism, as a type of rural tourism. However, we have a number of good practices in some Member States.

In Slovenia, given the fact that, from a legislative perspective, agricultural tourism must be registered as an additional activity within the farm there are few statistical data on it. For example, the research carried out in 2022 indicated the existence of approximately 950 units specialized in agritourism that provided accommodation to a total number of approximately 5.000 tourists. Also, in Austria, approximately 36.000 agritourism accommodation units were operating (which could accommodate almost 450.000 tourists), equivalent to 28% of Austria's total tourist offer.

At the same time, Hungary also had a wide range of accommodation places within the framework of farm tourism, providing 16. 000 places for interested tourists, equivalent to 5% of the total accommodation places available in (Ioan, Bran& Radulescu, 2014). Unlike the mentioned states, in Croatia, the number of accommodations offers on the farm was not very high, in 2015 only 372 existing accommodation units were estimated (which could be used by a number of 950 tourists). Statistics show that, in 2022, there were approximately 2.900 accommodation units registered in Romania in the agritourism sector, the net utilization index being 24.3%. Also referring to Romania, according to the data taken from the research carried out by the National Institute of Statistics based on the index of net use of accommodation places, we can observe the fact that, in the first 9 months of 2022, 25.2% of all tourists have preferred accommodation in tourist guesthouses, and 27.5%, in specially arranged campsites.

The importance of agritourism for the sustainability of the rural environment within the European Union

Although there are no complete and coherent statistics at the level of the European Union regarding the number of farms that regularly practice agritourism or regarding the extent of income obtained from agritourism activities or their weight in the overall agricultural and touristic activities, it is essential to emphasize the fact that, within the Union space, there is a rich specialized literature, which focuses on research and case studies carried out at the individual, national or regional level and which, even if they cannot provide an exhaustive statistical picture at the EU level, reflects the importance especially the benefits that agritourism has for the development potential of farms, in particular, and rural areas, in general.

First of all, agritourism activities offer farmers the opportunity to diversify their activity, the immediate result being the generation of additional income (Buzoianu, Balu& Teodor, 2016). In the medium term, increasing incomes at the farm level most often leads to the expansion of non-agricultural economic activities within the household, ensuring the maintenance of an active workforce and, at the same time, the creation of new jobs, and in the long term , these aspects can even lead to the renewal of generations and to slowing down or combating depopulation in rural areas.

Moreover, in the research carried out on agritourism activities in the regions of Wales, the category of "proactive farmers" was identified, who, practicing agritourism, benefited from a multitude of advantages, such as the generation of multiple income streams, the development of skills entrepreneurship, the creation of new enterprises and the assumption of environmental responsibility.

In this context, it was found that community-oriented agro-tourism businesses (creating economic links and offering community facilities) can have a positive impact on rural communities from an economic, social, cultural and environmental point of view (Talbot, 2012).

Of course, the importance of agritourism can be viewed from several perspectives. Agrotourism can be considered a fundamental element for strengthening the development of biosphere reserves, as a link between the functions of use and protection. Also, by taking care of the proper arrangement of accommodation units, by thematic development at farm level and ensuring an effective relationship with clients, agritourism provides, in this case, an opportunity for undisturbed recreation and authentic experiences.

Beyond the direct consequences of agritourism on the sustainability of rural areas, it is also interesting to highlight its indirect impact, analyzed in relation to the perception of tourists. Thus, some authors appreciate that a high quality of the natural resources and cultural heritage specific to the place reflects, most of the time, the idea of specific uniqueness, this becoming a fundamental element within the agritourism initiatives, in terms of attractiveness. Also, agro-tourism is sometimes considered an authentic response to tourists' desire to experience an "idyllic countryside", a current social phenomenon, characterized by a socially constructed rurality.

In our interpretation, this form of tourism allows satisfying the needs of tourists to return to authentic lifestyles, an aspect that, over time, can lead to a double result: on the one hand, it can prevent and even combat the current gap between populations urban and rural and, on the other hand, can lead to the appropriate conservation of the environment, in order to ensure the sustainability of tourism from the perspective of satisfying consumer preferences.

The development of agritourism activities, supported by the European Union

Taking into account the significant importance that the development of agritourism can have on the sustainability of the rural environment and pursuing the fulfillment of the three main objectives of rural development in the EU- balanced territorial development, sustainable management of natural resources and climate actions and competitiveness agricultural sector (Poruțiu et al., 2021). in the period 2014-2020, the European Union offered its support to farmers who opted for the diversification of their activity, as part of the sixth priority in rural development: "promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas.

Concretely, from the total budget of 99 billion Euros allocated to the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), during the mentioned period, farmers had the opportunity to access financial resources for the development of exploitations and their enterprises, among others, in for the establishment of non-agricultural activities or for the realization of investments with the aim of creating and developing non-agricultural activities, including those in the field of agro-tourism.

In accordance with the EU funding Guide for the tourism sector (2014-2020), the list of Rural Development Programs at national and regional level prepared by the member states included the actions eligible to be financed through the EAFRD, which could include: activities of professional development or training (courses, such as learning agritourism development methods), information actions; consultancy in order to improve the income level within the farm; investments

in accommodation spaces, shops, aid for newly established businesses; creation and harmonization of development plans for localities in rural areas; investments in leisure infrastructure, in small-scale tourist infrastructure, investments in tourist information procedures; investments in maintaining, restoring and modernizing the natural and cultural heritage of villages/rural landscapes; cooperative activities between at least two entities (farms, for example) in order to organize common action processes, for example, to pool the resources and facilities they own to promote agritourism services.

In addition, in order to be able to fully capitalize on existing synergies between rural development instruments, it is important to mention that the support provided by the general measure "development of exploitations and enterprises" could be combined with other types of financing, such as advisory services or investments in physical assets, the enumeration not being exhaustive. Also, agritourism activities could be supported within the LEADER initiative, by addressing the need for local development from an agritourism perspective.

According to the Parliament's briefing, the data available in 2016 indicated the fact that, at the level of the European Union, approximately 10.8 billion Euros were allocated for the development measure of exploitations and enterprises, and for the support for investments in activities non-agricultural should have benefited a number of approximately 55.000 beneficiaries. In this context, we can say that the importance of encouraging and supporting agritourism activities is starting to become an increasingly important topic for European decision-makers, with the European Commission itself stating that it will support "agritourism as a sustainable model of tourism in rural areas", as part of the initiative to relaunch tourism, in general, and local tourism, in particular.

However, although essential, EU support is not sufficient for the large-scale development of farm tourism in all EU regions, primarily because a significant budget cannot be made available to cover the entire investment - the costs in such activities for all the farms that need it and, secondly, because of the dysfunctionalities that still emerge in the process of absorption and implementation at national level, different from one member state to another. Therefore, we appreciate that it is fundamental that local and regional authorities are actively involved in identifying the most effective ways to promote and develop agritourism.

Conclusion

Among the conclusions of the study, the following stand out as essential: encouraging collaboration partnerships with producers in the region to ensure the sale of healthy, local food products; creation of the possibility, by the local authorities, for the owners of agro-tourism structures to participate in some training courses; conducting information campaigns regarding the possibility of practicing agro-tourism and the advantages that agro-tourism offers; creation of a form of association between local administrations and owners of agro-tourism structures and local farmers/producers; technical assistance for the creation of the agro-tourism structure from an administrative point of view; the development of some forms of consultancy for tourism initiatives

The need for the existence of a correct record of farm tourism is also fundamental for the identification of areas where agro-tourism is not practiced yet, but which have considerable potential in this regard. For example, if there is an absence of agro-tourism activities in a mountainous or peripheral area and, following the analysis of the national authorities, it is appreciated that investments in farm tourism can contribute to increasing incomes in the area and, implicitly, to the development the respective communities, the regional or national administrations

can initiate support strategies that lead, over time, to the development of the respective areas through agro-tourism.

Beyond the importance of compiling statistics at the local, regional or national level, we appreciate that one of the essential aspects that must be implemented by the administration is the promotion of the advantages that the diversification of non-agricultural activities, especially farm tourism, can have both at farm level as well as community level.

Therefore, the member states that have the potential to strengthen agro-tourism should carry out wide campaigns to inform and promote the importance of agro-tourism, which will have an impact, on the one hand, on the mentality of farmers (in the sense of moving them away from the vision of exclusive earnings from the classic farm activity), as well as on the behavior of tourists (in order to orient them towards returning to traditions, customs, culture). For example, in the direction of promotion, national or regional authorities can invest in the creation of online platforms that host farm tourism offers and attract visitors.

Of course, at the level of each member state, there are already private companies that provide web portals and central registration systems, bringing agro-tourism closer to visitors, but their services may be considered expensive by small farmers, thus promoting only those farms that invest considerable sums in their central market position, discouraging small local businesses.

Like a magnet that has two poles, and this research has both "pluses" and "cons". In addition to the positive aspects of this work, during the research I also identified a series of assumed "shortcomings", even if some of them do not belong entirely to the authors of this work. First of all, we mention the lack of qualitative research, through interviews or focus groups, which would have helped us to know much more deeply the perception of society on the role that public authorities can lead to the development of agro-tourism.

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