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Abstract: Rural tourism is often promoted as a driver of development in peripheral rural regions, but its effects depend on local territorial conditions. This paper examines how territorial governance and local value chains shape the development effects of rural tourism in Fishtë, Albania. The study is based on 60 semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observations. The findings show that development in Fishtë does not result solely from tourism, but from its links with local agriculture and gastronomy, mainly through informal governance arrangements. These local value chains help retain value within the territory, but their benefits remain uneven. Rural tourism can support territorial development only when embedded in locally governed and more inclusive value chains.

Keywords: rural tourism; territorial governance; local value chains; peripheral rural regions; rural development; Albania

Highlights

- Rural tourism alone does not ensure territorial development.
- Governance shapes who benefits from rural tourism.
- Local value chains retain income within the territory.
- Informal cooperation supports flexibility but limits inclusion.
- Long-term development needs more inclusive coordination.

1. Introduction

Across Europe, rural tourism is often presented as a promising strategy for revitalising peripheral rural regions. In areas affected by economic decline, outmigration, and the restructuring of agricultural economies, tourism has frequently been promoted as a means of diversifying local livelihoods and generating new economic opportunities based on local resources, landscapes, and territorial identities (Pigram, 1993; Lane, 1994; Verbole, 1997; Butler, 1998; Long & Lane, 2000; Shaw & Williams, 2002; Živković et al., 2025; Pato & Duque, 2025). However, the developmental effects of rural tourism are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. While tourism can contribute to income generation, diversification, and job creation, empirical research increasingly shows that its outcomes vary significantly across territories and may remain limited, uneven, or fragile, particularly in highly peripheral rural contexts (Hall, 2011; Bianchi, 2004; Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014; Žafran & Radeljak Kaufmann, 2022).

These uneven outcomes are especially visible in peripheral rural areas characterised by structural constraints such as limited infrastructure, weak institutional capacity, fragmented local coordination, and insufficient policy support. In such contexts, governance plays a crucial role in shaping how tourism initiatives emerge, are coordinated, and connect with broader processes of territorial development (Pato, 2020; Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2020; Figueiredo et al., 2021; da Mota et al., 2024). Recent contributions in European rural studies similarly emphasise that rural development outcomes depend not only on sectoral initiatives themselves, but also on the territorial governance arrangements through which they are organised, implemented, and socially embedded (Thuesen & Nielsen, 2014; Kniec & Goszczyński, 2022; Lopes & Mota, 2021). More recent work also points to the importance of community participation and local government capacity in shaping whether tourism development becomes locally empowering or remains weakly institutionalised (Živković et al., 2025; Turčinović et al., 2025).

A closely related dimension concerns the role of local value chains linking tourism with other productive activities within rural territories. Research on rural development, agri-food systems, and rural tourism has highlighted how stronger linkages between tourism, agriculture, and gastronomy can help retain economic value locally, strengthen territorial identity, and support more diversified rural economies (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Figueiredo, Forte & Eusébio, 2021; da Mota et al.,

2024). However, such linkages do not emerge automatically. They depend on locally embedded forms of cooperation, trust, coordination, and institutional support that shape how value is created, circulated, and retained within rural territories (Lopes & Mota, 2021; Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2020). This is also consistent with research showing that embeddedness in local and extra-local networks is crucial for the growth of rural businesses and for overcoming the constraints associated with peripheral location (Greenberg et al., 2018). Despite growing interest in these processes, the concrete ways in which local value chains are constructed and governed in peripheral rural regions remain underexplored, particularly in contexts characterised by institutional fragility and uneven development opportunities.

This article examines how territorial governance and locally embedded value chains shape the developmental effects of rural tourism in a peripheral rural context. Empirically, the study is grounded in original qualitative research conducted in the Fishtë area of northern Albania, based on semi-structured interviews with tourism entrepreneurs, farmers, local government representatives, and other local actors, complemented by document analysis and field observation. This empirical material makes it possible to analyse how rural tourism is organised, coordinated, and embedded in local productive systems in practice, rather than treating tourism development only as a policy objective or conceptual model.

The empirical analysis focuses on the village of Fishtë, located in the Zadrima plain in northern Albania. Although situated relatively close to regional urban centres, the area has long been characterised by a predominantly agricultural economy, limited local employment opportunities, and processes of rural outmigration typical of many peripheral rural regions in the Western Balkans. In recent years, Fishtë has gained national and international visibility through the development of gastronomy-based rural tourism closely linked to local agricultural production and food culture. This combination of tourism activity, agricultural production, and local entrepreneurship makes the area a particularly relevant case for examining how rural tourism becomes embedded within local economies and governance arrangements in peripheral rural territories (Greenberg et al., 2018; Nilsen et al., 2023; Turčinović et al., 2025).

Against this backdrop, this article examines how territorial governance and local value chains shape the developmental effects of rural tourism in a peripheral rural context in Albania. Drawing on the case of Fishtë, the study explores how territorial governance mediates the integration of tourism with local productive activities, particularly agriculture and gastronomy, and how this shapes development outcomes at the territorial level (Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2020; Lopes & Mota, 2021).

Rather than treating rural tourism as a universal solution to the challenges facing rural areas, the article asks whether and how its developmental effects depend on its integration with other sectors of the local economy and on governance arrangements that support that integration. More specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- In what ways does local territorial governance mediate the developmental effects of rural tourism in peripheral rural regions?
- What role do local value chains play in linking rural tourism to the territorial development of rural settlements?

This article advances debates on rural tourism and territorial development by examining the governance conditions under which tourism can generate locally embedded economic linkages in peripheral rural contexts. The findings show that the developmental effects of rural tourism depend not only on tourism growth itself, but on the extent to which tourism becomes embedded within local value chains and supported through locally coordinated governance arrangements. At the same time, the study highlights the dual role of informal coordination and locally embedded networks: while they can enable economic opportunities and strengthen local linkages, they may also produce uneven development outcomes through selective inclusion of actors already embedded in local networks (Greenberg et al., 2018; Nilsen et al., 2023; Turčinović et al., 2025).

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis. It is followed by the methodology section, which explains the research design, case selection, and data collection and analysis methods. The subsequent sections present and discuss

the empirical findings in relation to the existing literature. The paper concludes by summarising the main findings and reflecting on their broader implications for rural development in peripheral rural regions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Rural Tourism and Territorial Development

Within the international literature on rural development, rural tourism has been widely regarded as a tool for economic diversification and the revitalisation of rural regions facing demographic decline, lack of investment, and structural weaknesses (Lane, 2009; Sharpley & Roberts, 2004). In this sense, rural tourism has often been promoted as a sustainable alternative to traditional development models, drawing on local resources, cultural heritage, and the rural environment (OECD, 2016).

At the same time, a substantial body of literature has criticised approaches that conceptualise rural tourism primarily as an economic sector and assess its contribution mainly through indicators such as visitor numbers, income generation, or employment creation. Such perspectives tend to understate the broader territorial processes through which development is organised, mediated, and distributed, as well as the role of institutions in shaping who benefits from tourism-led change (Hall & Jenkins, 1998; Hall, 2011). As a result, rural tourism may generate economic activity without necessarily producing sustainable, territorially embedded, or socially inclusive development outcomes.

In response to these limitations, more recent scholarship has increasingly conceptualised rural development as a territorially embedded process shaped by the interaction between local actors, place-specific resources, and institutional structures operating across different scales (Ray, 2001; Shucksmith, 2010). From this perspective, rural tourism is not understood as an autonomous engine of development, but as an activity whose developmental effects depend on the extent to which it becomes embedded in wider territorial structures and relations.

This perspective is especially relevant in peripheral and sparsely populated rural areas, where structural disadvantages and weak institutional capacity often constrain the developmental potential of sector-based strategies (Vaishar et al., 2021). Recent studies show that tourism can support local development, but its contribution is strongly conditioned by the territorial environments in which it unfolds, particularly in peripheral and sparsely populated rural areas (Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014; Vaishar et al., 2021; Žafran & Radeljak Kaufmann, 2022; da Mota et al., 2024).

2.2 Local Territorial Governance as a Mechanism Structuring Actor Interaction

The concept of territorial governance has gained increasing importance in contemporary analyses of rural and regional development. Unlike traditional hierarchical models of governance, territorial governance refers to the ways in which diverse public, private, and community actors coordinate their actions and interact in shaping the development of a given territory (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Gualini, 2006). In rural settings, such governance depends not only on formal institutions, but also on the relationships, forms of collaboration, and negotiation processes established among local actors (Healey, 2006; Jessop, 2016).

From this perspective, territorial governance should not be understood merely as an institutional structure or a set of formal rules. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic and political process in which actors interact under unequal conditions and with unequal resources, thereby influencing how development priorities are defined, how coordination takes place, and how development outcomes are distributed (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). This is particularly relevant in rural areas, where governance often operates through hybrid arrangements combining formal institutions with informal relations, personal ties, and locally embedded practices of coordination, including network-based forms of territorial organisation (Yubero & Chevalier, 2018).

In peripheral rural regions, weaker institutions and fragmented cooperation can limit territories' ability to transform local potential into broader development outcomes (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Pike et al., 2017). Recent studies on rural governance have therefore stressed the importance of multilevel coordination,

local policy innovation, and the active role of local authorities in shaping development trajectories in low-density and peripheral areas (Pollermann et al., 2020; Lopes & Mota, 2021).

For the purposes of this article, territorial governance is approached as an analytical lens for examining how actor interaction is structured in practice: who coordinates, who participates, how cooperation is organised, and under what conditions development opportunities are enabled or constrained. This makes it possible to analyse the institutional and relational mechanisms through which rural tourism becomes connected to broader territorial development processes.

2.3 Local Value Chains and Territorial Development

An increasingly prominent approach in contemporary analyses of rural development is the local value chain approach. These chains are considered essential for territorial development, as they enable the retention and circulation of economic value within rural territories, thereby limiting the leakage of benefits outside the local economy (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008). Recent studies have further highlighted the importance of food- and gastronomy-based linkages in rural tourism, showing that integrating tourism with local production systems can enhance value retention within the territory and strengthen local development dynamics (Figueiredo, Forte & Eusébio, 2021; da Mota et al., 2024).

In this sense, local value chains constitute an important component of a territory’s territorial capital, relying not only on tangible resources such as land, agricultural production, or infrastructure, but also on intangible assets, including local knowledge, social relations, and territorial identity (Hoxha & Bombaj, 2021). Unlike global value chains, which are characterised by the geographical dispersion of production stages and an orientation towards international markets, local value chains emphasise close linkages between production, processing, distribution, and consumption within a limited territorial context (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008).

These two ideal types reflect different development logics. Global value chains are primarily oriented towards efficiency, scaling, and competitiveness, whereas local value chains place greater emphasis on retaining value within rural territories, strengthening local economic linkages, and fostering cooperation among local actors. At the same time, local value chains should not be idealised. Their developmental significance depends on how they are organised, which actors are able to participate in them, and how cooperation is coordinated and governed in practice.

This point is particularly important in relation to rural tourism. As shown in recent contributions in European Countryside, food tourism and gastronomy can generate stronger territorial linkages when tourism is connected to local production, local identity, and place-based development strategies (Figueiredo, Forte & Eusébio, 2021; da Mota et al., 2024). Yet these linkages do not emerge automatically. They depend on local forms of cooperation, trust, coordination, and policy support, all of which shape how value is created, circulated, and retained locally (Lopes & Mota, 2021; Cárdenas Alonso & Nieto Masot, 2020). Table 1 summarises the main differences between local and global value chains as ideal types.

Tab 1. Key differences between local value chains and global value chains. Source: authors’ elaboration based on Marsden and Sonnino (2008)

Dimension	Local value chains	Global value chains
Geographical scope	More territorially embedded	More externally oriented
Coordination among actors	More often based on trust, proximity, and informal cooperation	More often based on formal contracts and hierarchical coordination
Primary objective	Greater retention of value within the territory	Greater efficiency, scaling, and market expansion
Distribution of benefits	More likely to circulate value among local actors	More likely to concentrate value outside the territory or among dominant actors
Territorial impact	Stronger links to the local economy and territorial identity	Weaker territorial embeddedness

2.4 Analytical Framework of the Study

Building on the preceding discussion of rural tourism, territorial governance, and local value chains, this study develops an analytical framework that integrates these dimensions in order to examine how tourism-related development processes unfold in peripheral rural contexts. Rather than treating rural tourism as an isolated economic sector, the framework conceptualises tourism-led development as a territorially embedded process shaped by the interaction between governance arrangements, local economic linkages, and the structural characteristics of the rural context (Ray, 2001; Shucksmith, 2010; Pike et al., 2017).

Figure 1 illustrates the analytical model guiding this study. The framework proposes that the developmental effects of rural tourism emerge through the interaction between three key elements: territorial governance, local value chains, and the peripheral rural context. Territorial governance operates as a mediating mechanism that structures how local actors cooperate, how resources are mobilised, and how coordination takes place within the territory (Pierre & Peters, 2000; Healey, 2006; Jessop, 2016). At the same time, local value chains capture the extent to which tourism becomes linked to local production systems and embedded in the territorial economy (Marsden & Sonnino, 2008; Figueiredo et al., 2021; da Mota et al., 2024). The peripheral rural context conditions both processes by shaping institutional capacity, historical legacies, and the practical possibilities for local coordination and development (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Pike et al., 2017; Nilsen et al., 2023).

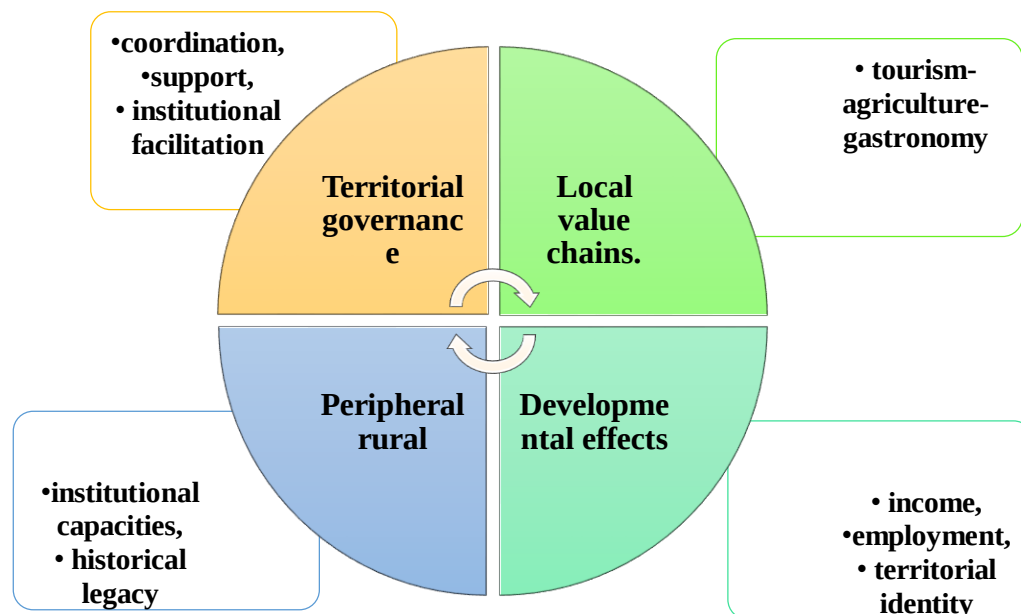


Fig 1. An analytical framework linking territorial governance, local value chains, peripheral rural context, and developmental effects. Source: authors' elaboration

Taken together, these interactions produce differentiated developmental outcomes at the local level. In this study, such outcomes are understood in terms of income generation, employment opportunities, and the strengthening of territorial identity associated with tourism-related activities. At the same time, they may remain uneven where access to participation depends on pre-existing social relations, trust-based cooperation, or unequal access to productive resources and market opportunities (Greenberg et al., 2018; Turčinović et al., 2025).

This analytical framework provides the conceptual basis for examining the case of the village of Fishtë. More specifically, it guides the empirical analysis by focusing on how local authorities facilitate coordination and institutional support, how tourism–agriculture–gastronomy linkages are constructed through local value chains, and how the characteristics of the peripheral rural context influence the distribution, sustainability, and territorial embeddedness of development outcomes. In this way,

the framework supports the empirical investigation of how rural tourism is coordinated, embedded, and experienced in practice, and how these processes shape uneven territorial development outcomes in Fishtë.

3. Methodology

3.1 Selection and Profile of Interview Participants

The selection of interview participants followed a purposive sampling strategy to include the main actor groups directly involved in rural tourism development in the village of Fishtë. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). The objective of the sampling strategy was therefore not statistical representativeness, but rather the inclusion of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into the processes shaping rural tourism development and local economic interactions within the study area.

Three main categories of participants were considered particularly relevant for addressing the research questions of this study: rural tourism entrepreneurs, local farmers and producers, and representatives of local government. These groups represent the principal actors shaping the interaction between tourism development, local agricultural production, and territorial governance in the village. Tourism entrepreneurs play a central role in organising tourism activities and linking visitors with local territorial resources; farmers and producers are directly involved in supplying agricultural and food products to tourism establishments; while representatives of local government participate in local development initiatives, tourism promotion, and governance processes affecting rural development.

An effort was made to include participants with diverse roles and levels of involvement in local tourism activities to capture a broad range of perspectives. Most of the interviewed actors were local residents directly engaged in economic activities within the village, while representatives of local government were included as institutional actors involved in territorial governance processes. Table 2 presents an overview of the interview participants by category, number of interviews, gender composition, age range, position relative to the study area, and interview coding.

Tab 2. Profile of interview participants. Source: authors' elaboration

Category of interviewees	Number of interviews	Gender	Age range	Position in relation to the study area	Interview coding
Rural tourism entrepreneurs (agritourism operators)	22	M/F	30–60	Internal actors	S1–S22
Local farmers/producers	28	M/F	35–70	Internal actors	F1–F28
Local government representatives	8	M/F	30–55	Institutional actors operating at the municipal level	P1–P8
Other local actors/community members	2	M/F	35–65	Local community actors	A1–A2
Total	60				

To ensure confidentiality while maintaining analytical clarity, interviews were coded according to participant category. Rural tourism entrepreneurs were coded S1–S22, farmers and producers F1–F28, local government representatives P1–P8, and other local actors involved in tourism-related activities A1–A2. These codes are used throughout the results section when referring to interview excerpts.

3.2 Case Study Selection

The selection of Fishtë as the case study is justified by several territorial characteristics that make the village representative of many peripheral rural regions in Albania. Fishtë is part of the Administrative Unit of Blinisht, within the Municipality of Lezhë, and this administrative positioning is important for understanding the territorial and institutional context within which local development processes unfold. From a demographic perspective, the area reflects patterns commonly associated with rural peripherality in the country. Official census data indicate that the Administrative Unit of Blinisht had 4,238 inhabitants in 2001, 3,361 inhabitants in 2011, and 1,873 inhabitants in 2023, indicating a marked population decline between 2001 and 2023 (Lezhë Municipality, 2026; INSTAT, 2014; INSTAT, 2024). This demographic trend reflects broader processes observed in many Albanian rural areas, including population ageing, outward migration, and limited employment opportunities outside agriculture. Table 3 summarises the demographic evolution of the study area and highlights the scale of rural depopulation affecting the local territory.

Tab 3. Population change in the Administrative Unit of Blinisht (2001–2023). Source: authors' elaboration based on Lezhë Municipality (2026), INSTAT (2014), and INSTAT (2024)

Year	Population	Change from previous census	Overall change from 2001
2001	4,238	—	—
2011	3,361	-20.7%	-20.7%
2023	1,873	-44.3%	-55.8%

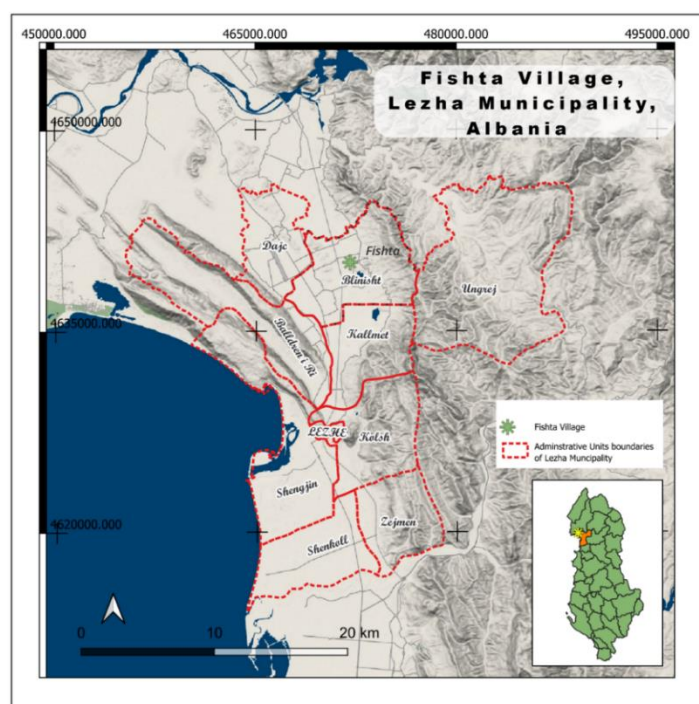


Fig 2. Location of the village of Fishtë within Lezhë Municipality, northern Albania. Figure 2 illustrates the geographical location of the village of Fishtë within Lezhë Municipality and within the national territory of Albania. Source: authors' elaboration based on administrative boundaries and GIS data

From a territorial perspective, Fishtë is located in the Zadrime plain, a predominantly rural agricultural landscape characterised by fertile land and dispersed rural settlements. Historically, agriculture and small-scale livestock production have represented the main economic activities of the area, supported by favourable natural conditions for farming. Despite its proximity to regional routes connecting northern Albania with the Adriatic coast and neighbouring territories, the area retains several characteristics of rural peripherality, including demographic dynamics, economic diversification, and institutional capacity.

The local economy remains strongly rooted in agriculture and small-scale livestock production, while opportunities for non-agricultural employment remain limited. These structural conditions contribute to processes of rural outmigration and demographic ageing, which are widely observed across Albania's rural territories. At the same time, the village is associated with a distinctive cultural and gastronomic identity, which is an important component of its territorial character. Traditional agricultural practices, locally produced food products, and culinary traditions constitute key elements of the local heritage. In recent years, these resources have increasingly been incorporated into rural tourism activities, particularly through agritourism initiatives that combine hospitality services with the promotion of local gastronomy and farm-based products.

These developments illustrate how tourism activities can become linked to local production systems and territorial identity. In this sense, Fishtë provides an illustrative example of the interaction between agriculture, gastronomy, and tourism within a rural territorial context.

To further contextualise the case, Table 4 summarises selected territorial characteristics of the study area. These indicators do not constitute the article's primary empirical basis, which is grounded in qualitative research, but they provide relevant contextual information for understanding the broader development dynamics within which rural tourism operates.

Tab 4. Selected territorial characteristics of the study area. Source: authors' elaboration based on Lezhë Municipality (2026), INSTAT (2014; 2024), field observations and document analysis

Dimension	Characteristics of the study area	Relevance for the study
Demographic profile	Strong population decline between 2001 and 2023	Indicates rural depopulation and demographic ageing
Settlement pattern	Dispersed rural settlements in an agricultural plain	Reflects a fragmented rural territorial structure
Main economic base	Agriculture and small-scale livestock production	Shows continued dependence on primary-sector activities
Economic diversification	Limited non-agricultural employment opportunities	Explains the relevance of tourism as a complementary activity
Territorial identity	Strong local food and gastronomic traditions	Supports the development of tourism–agriculture linkages
Rural tourism development	Emergence of agritourism initiatives connected with local production	Illustrates the integration of tourism and local value chains
Governance context	Interaction between local producers, tourism actors, and municipal institutions	Allows examination of territorial governance dynamics

As part of the Administrative Unit of Blinisht, under the Municipality of Lezhë, Fishtë is embedded in a broader local governance framework through which development planning, institutional coordination, and support for economic initiatives are organised (Lezhë Municipality, 2026). Consequently, the village provides a particularly suitable setting for examining how territorial governance and locally embedded value chains shape rural tourism development in a peripheral rural context.

Together, these demographic, territorial, economic, cultural, and institutional characteristics make Fishtë a relevant case for examining how rural tourism is embedded in local value chains and shaped by territorial governance in a peripheral rural context.

3.3 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through a combination of qualitative research methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of rural tourism development processes in the study area. The primary source of empirical data consisted of 60 semi-structured interviews conducted between May and September 2025 with the participant groups presented in Table 2. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research because they allow a flexible exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining a shared thematic structure across interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Yin, 2018).

Interviews lasted on average 40–60 minutes and were conducted primarily at tourism facilities or interviewees' workplaces. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and complemented with detailed field notes, which helped capture contextual observations and non-verbal aspects of the interaction during the interviews.

The interview guide was organised around several thematic areas linked to the research questions of the study. These included: the role of interviewees in the local rural tourism economy; forms of cooperation between tourism businesses and local farmers; the integration of local agricultural products into tourism activities; the role of local authorities and governance arrangements in tourism development; and the perceived benefits and challenges of rural tourism for the local community. Examples of guiding questions included: *How do tourism businesses cooperate with local farmers? What role do local authorities play in supporting tourism development? How are local products integrated into the tourism offer?*

In addition to interviews, the study also relied on document analysis and field observation. Documents included municipal planning strategies, development plans, and materials related to rural tourism promotion. Document analysis helped contextualise the institutional framework and policy discourse surrounding tourism development in the area (Bowen, 2009). Field observation provided additional insight into everyday tourism practices, the use of territorial resources, and concrete forms of interaction among local actors within the rural tourism economy.

3.4 Data Analysis

The empirical material was analysed using a thematic analysis approach in order to identify the main themes and recurring patterns emerging from the interviews, field notes, and documentary sources (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interview transcripts, field notes, and documentary material were read several times to allow a close familiarity with the dataset and to trace the meanings and relationships that appeared across different sources.

The analysis was carried out iteratively, moving back and forth among the empirical material, the research questions, and the study's theoretical framework (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). After transcription, the interviews were coded according to the main issues that emerged from participants' accounts and from the thematic areas covered in the interview guide. At this initial stage, attention focused on themes such as cooperation among local actors, relationships between tourism businesses and farmers, the use of local products in tourism activities, the role of local authorities, and the benefits and challenges associated with rural tourism development.

In a second stage, these initial codes were grouped into broader analytical categories that reflected the study's central concerns. Codes related to institutional support, coordination, and public involvement were grouped under territorial governance. Codes related to production, supply, gastronomy, and the links between tourism and agriculture were brought together under the umbrella of local value chains. Finally, codes addressing opportunities, constraints, uneven inclusion, and broader local effects were grouped under developmental outcomes at the local level.

Attention was also paid to the differences and similarities across participant groups. In particular, the analysis compared how tourism entrepreneurs, local farmers and producers, and representatives of local government understood and described the same local processes from their different positions. This enabled identification not only of shared views but also of tensions, uneven experiences, and differing perceptions regarding cooperation, inclusion, and the distribution of tourism-related benefits.

Overall, this analytical approach enabled moving beyond a simple description of rural tourism in Fishtë and focusing more closely on the mechanisms by which tourism, governance arrangements, and local value chains interact in practice. In this way, rural tourism development was understood as a relational, territorially embedded process rather than an isolated economic activity (Yin, 2018).

3.5 Trustworthiness of the Study

To strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings, this study relied on data triangulation across sources and research methods, combining semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and field observation. Bringing these sources together enabled a more balanced, in-depth understanding of rural tourism development in Fishtë and facilitated comparisons of perspectives across different groups of local actors. Such an approach is widely recognised as an important strategy for increasing credibility and interpretive robustness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Recent studies on rural development have also emphasised the importance of combining multiple empirical sources in order to capture the complexity of local social relations, governance dynamics, and development processes in rural territories (Farkas, 2021; Lindberg et al., 2024).

Beyond triangulation, an important part of ensuring trustworthiness in this study was the gradual building of trust with local participants. In rural contexts, local development processes are often closely shaped by personal relationships, informal cooperation, and social capital. Continuous presence in the field and repeated interactions therefore helped create a more open and trusting atmosphere, encouraging participants to share not only positive experiences but also difficulties, tensions, and uncertainties related to local development. This is consistent with research highlighting the role of social capital and local cooperation in shaping rural development processes (Farkas, 2021).

Attention was also paid to reflexivity throughout the research process. The researcher remained aware of their position as an external observer interacting with local actors and reflected critically on how this position could influence both the research encounter and the interpretation of the material (Creswell, 2013). Maintaining this reflexive stance was important for balancing sensitivity to the local context with analytical distance in interpreting the findings.

4. Results

4.1 Dynamics of Territorial Governance in the Development of Rural Tourism in Fishtë

The findings show that the development of rural tourism in Fishtë has been shaped by a specific form of local territorial governance based on private initiative and predominantly informal interaction with public actors. In this context, rural tourism entrepreneurs are central actors in initiating and coordinating local development processes, often serving as intermediaries between local producers, the community, and local institutions. As one tourism entrepreneur explained, *“we do not have any official cooperation structure, but in practice it is we who connect farmers with tourism and keep these relationships functioning”* (Interview S1).

Most interviewees described the role of local government as supportive rather than leading, suggesting that local development in Fishtë is driven primarily by entrepreneurial initiative rather than by formal institutional coordination. According to their accounts, municipal involvement is mainly expressed through facilitating administrative procedures and promoting the area, while formal mechanisms for coordinating local actors remain limited. As one representative of local government noted, *“we try to help where we can, especially by easing procedures and promoting these enterprises, but the main initiative comes from the local actors themselves”* (Interview P1).

A central feature of this governance setting is the informal nature of cooperation among local actors. Relationships are largely based on trust and personal familiarity rather than on formal agreements. Local actors described this mode of cooperation as practical in everyday terms, but also as dependent on personal commitment and long-standing familiarity. As one farmer stated, *“everything is based on trust and one’s word; if that breaks down, cooperation breaks down too”* (Interview F3).

In the absence of formal coordination mechanisms, decision-making often takes place through direct communication and individual initiative. Interviewees frequently referred to this as a normal way of organising local activities. One local actor described it as follows: *“There is no official table where we all meet, but everyone knows whom they need to talk to in order to get things done”* (Interview A2).

According to several participants, this mode of cooperation allowed for quick responses to tourist demand and flexible organisation of local supply. As one tourism entrepreneur put it, *“we did not need contracts; a phone call was enough for the products to arrive on time”* (Interview S2).

At the same time, the interview material points to the fragility of this governance arrangement. Because cooperation depends heavily on personal relationships, it remains vulnerable when conditions change, when demand increases, or when existing actors are unable to maintain these informal commitments. As another tourism entrepreneur observed, *“everything works here because we have known each other for years; there are no papers, but there is moral responsibility”* (Interview S4).

Overall, the findings indicate that rural tourism development in Fishtë has been supported by a form of territorial governance led primarily by local private actors, while the role of local government has remained secondary and largely facilitative. Informal coordination has enabled cooperation between tourism and local production, but it has also limited the institutionalisation of local collaboration. To summarise these findings, Table 5 presents the main dimensions of territorial governance in Fishtë.

Tab 5. Territorial governance configuration in rural tourism development in Fishtë. Source: authors' elaboration

Dimension	Description
Key actors	Local tourism entrepreneurs
Role of local government	Supportive and facilitative
Forms of coordination	Predominantly informal
Basis of cooperation	Trust and personal relationships
Advantages	Flexibility and rapid responsiveness
Limitations	Fragility and lack of institutionalisation

These findings illustrate how territorial governance in Fishtë operates primarily through informal coordination among local actors, providing an empirical answer to the research question concerning the role of governance in mediating rural tourism development.

4.2 The Construction and Functioning of Local Value Chains Linked to Rural Tourism

The empirical evidence suggests that local value chains in Fishtë have developed primarily around the relationship between rural tourism, agricultural production, and gastronomy. Tourism activities in the village rely heavily on local food products, illustrating how rural tourism is embedded in local agricultural production and how value is retained within locally organised food-tourism networks. As one tourism entrepreneur noted, *“almost everything we serve comes from local farmers; this is what visitors are looking for and what distinguishes us from other places”* (Interview S2).

These linkages operate mainly through direct relationships between tourism entrepreneurs and local producers, without formal intermediaries. Farmers are involved through the regular supply of agricultural and food products that support tourism-related activities. According to one local producer, *“we do not have written contracts, but we know how much and when to supply; this works because we have known each other for years”* (Interview F2). This organisation allows a greater share of tourism-related demand to be channelled through locally based production rather than through external suppliers.

Interviewees described these local value chains as strongly dependent on trust-based cooperation. In the early stages of tourism development, this form of organisation was presented as functional and adaptable to everyday needs. However, as tourism activity has grown, some limitations have become more visible. Several farmers explained that during periods of high tourist demand, the quantities required are not always easy to meet. As one farmer stated, *“when visitor numbers increase, our workload increases too, and verbal agreements are not always sufficient; we cannot always take responsibility”* (Interview F5).

Participants also pointed out that, in the absence of formal agreements, supply problems are managed informally and on a case-by-case basis. This reveals both the flexibility and the structural fragility of these

locally embedded value chains. Cooperation works as long as conditions remain manageable, but becomes more difficult when demand rises or when producers face labour and seasonal constraints. As another farmer explained, *“when demand is high, it is not always easy to meet the quantities required, because everything depends on the season and on our labour”* (Interview F4).

Overall, the findings indicate that local value chains in Fishtë are organised through direct and mostly informal relationships linking tourism businesses, farmers, and local food production. These relations support the integration of local products into the tourism offer, but they remain sensitive to fluctuations in demand and to the limited production capacity of local actors. Although local government is not directly involved in production and supply relations, it contributes indirectly by facilitating procedures, promoting the area, and shaping the institutional environment within which local value chains operate. Table 6 summarises the main actors and forms of cooperation involved in the functioning of local value chains in Fishtë.

Tab 6. Actors and functioning of local value chains in Fishtë. Source: authors' elaboration based on interview data

Actor	Main function in the value chain	Link to rural tourism	Coordination mechanism
Tourism entrepreneurs	Organisation of tourism services and integration of local food products	Central actors connecting tourism demand with local production	Direct and largely informal relationships with local producers
Local farmers	Production and supply of agricultural and livestock products	Provide fresh food products used in tourism facilities	Trust-based cooperation and regular informal supply arrangements
Artisanal producers	Production of traditional and specialty products	Contribute to the differentiation and authenticity of the tourism offer	Selective cooperation with tourism businesses
Local government	Institutional support and territorial promotion	Indirect support through promotion and administrative facilitation	Not directly involved in the value chain but shapes the enabling institutional environment

These findings indicate that locally embedded value chains constitute a key mechanism through which rural tourism becomes integrated into the territorial economy.

4.3 Interaction between Territorial Governance and Local Value Chains

The findings indicate that territorial governance and local value chains are closely connected in practice in the case of Fishtë. Interviewees described tourism development as depending not only on the availability of local products, but also on the ways local actors communicate, coordinate supply, and maintain ongoing cooperation. In this respect, governance is expressed less through formal institutional structures than through everyday interactions among actors involved in tourism and production.

According to participants, tourism entrepreneurs play an important role in linking local producers with tourism demand. They communicate directly with farmers, negotiate supply informally, and coordinate activities without formal procedures. As one tourism entrepreneur explained, *“when we need something, we speak directly with farmers or with people from the municipality; there is no formal mechanism, but things get resolved because we know each other”* (Interview S3). In practice, this means that the functioning of local value chains depends on the same informal relations through which local coordination takes place.

Interviewees also indicated that this form of coordination works unevenly across the local community. Actors who are already integrated into existing local networks tend to benefit more easily from cooperation in tourism-related activities, while others encounter greater difficulty entering into these

relationships. This was particularly evident in the accounts of smaller producers, who reported that access to established cooperation networks is not always straightforward. As one local producer stated, *“those who have been connected for a long time benefit more; for the rest of us, it is harder to enter the network”* (Interview F5).

From the perspective of local government representatives, one of the main limitations concerns the lack of specific resources and instruments to organise local supply relations more actively. Municipal actors described their role as mainly supportive and facilitative rather than coordinative. As one representative explained, *“we do not have specific resources or programmes to organise supply chains; our role remains mainly facilitative”* (Interview P2).

Taken together, these findings show that the interaction between territorial governance and local value chains in Fishtë is structured through informal cooperation, direct communication, and selective patterns of participation. This interaction enables local economic activities to function, but it also creates unequal opportunities for inclusion. In this sense, governance shapes value chains less through formal planning instruments than through how local relationships are activated, maintained, and accessed by different actors.

4.4 Developmental Effects at the Local Level (The Case of Fishtë)

Interview evidence indicates that the interaction between rural tourism, territorial governance, and local value chains has generated visible effects at the local level. One of the most frequently mentioned effects concerns the increased demand for local products, especially agricultural and food products used in the gastronomic offer of tourism businesses. Interviewees explained that this has created new opportunities for local producers and has altered the way some of them organise their work. As one farmer stated, *“before, we produced only for the family or the local market; now we have regular demand from tourism, and this has changed the way we work”* (Interview F6).

Another effect identified by participants relates to employment opportunities linked to services, gastronomy, and small-scale food processing. Although these opportunities were often described as seasonal and concentrated in families already involved in tourism, they were nevertheless seen as an important source of supplementary income. As one tourism entrepreneur noted, *“without tourism, many of these jobs would not exist; especially for young people, this has been a reason to stay”* (Interview S4).

Interviewees also emphasised the role of tourism in strengthening the local image of the village. In particular, local gastronomy and traditional practices were often mentioned as factors that have increased Fishtë's visibility and reinforced local pride. As one local actor explained, *“visitors come here precisely for the food and the way we live our traditions; this has made us value more what we have”* (Interview A2). In this sense, the effects observed at the local level are not limited to income generation alone, but also include symbolic and territorial dimensions related to identity, recognition, and the valorisation of local resources.

At the same time, the findings show that these effects are not experienced equally by all local actors. Participants noted that those already connected to local networks benefit more readily from tourism-related opportunities, while smaller or less connected producers often remain outside these relations. As one farmer stated, *“if you are not part of the circle, it is difficult to enter, even if you have something to offer”* (Interview F1).

Several participants also noted that limited production capacity, lack of information, and insufficient institutional support reduce the ability of some local actors to participate more actively in tourism-related activities. As one producer explained, *“not everyone has the possibility to enter this system; those without connections or sufficient quantities remain outside”* (Interview F7). These findings indicate that the local effects of rural tourism are shaped not only by market demand, but also by the governance arrangements and local networks through which access to opportunities is mediated.

Overall, the findings indicate that rural tourism in Fishtë has generated new opportunities for local income, employment, and territorial visibility, while also reinforcing linkages between tourism, gastronomy, and local production. However, these effects remain unevenly distributed across the community. The case of Fishtë therefore suggests that the developmental effects of rural tourism are territorially embedded but socially selective: tourism strengthens local income opportunities, employment, and territorial visibility, yet access to these benefits remains mediated by existing governance arrangements and actors' position within local networks.

5. Discussion

The case of Fishtë shows that rural tourism alone cannot explain local development in peripheral rural areas. More important is the extent to which tourism becomes embedded in local production systems, actor networks, and forms of cooperation within the territory. In Fishtë, tourism has developed not as an isolated sector, but through its links with agriculture, gastronomy, and everyday collaboration among local actors. This supports a territorial reading of rural tourism, according to which its developmental effects depend less on tourism activity itself than on the local institutional and economic relations through which it is organised.

A central finding of the study concerns the role of territorial governance. The results indicate that tourism development in Fishtë has relied mainly on informal and practice-based forms of coordination. Tourism entrepreneurs often play a key role in linking local farmers, tourism activities, and the wider community, while local government remains more supportive than directive. This pattern is consistent with research showing that, in many peripheral rural areas, development depends on locally driven initiatives, particularly where formal coordination structures are weak or limited (Hall, 2011; Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Gualini, 2006; Lopes & Mota, 2021). At the same time, the case of Fishtë refines this literature by showing that informal governance is not only a pragmatic substitute for weak institutional coordination, but also a mechanism that shapes access to participation and the distribution of local opportunities.

The case also reveals the limits of such arrangements. Informal cooperation can be effective because it is flexible, quick, and grounded in trust. Yet it depends heavily on personal relationships and long-established networks, making it more fragile when demand grows, when new actors seek to enter the system, or when cooperation requires more stable forms of organisation. In this respect, Fishtë illustrates both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of informal governance in a peripheral rural setting. Similar observations have been made in studies that emphasise the importance of social capital and local cooperation in rural development processes (Farkas, 2021). The present study, however, goes further by showing that trust-based arrangements may also reproduce selective inclusion and uneven access to local opportunities, even where social networks play an important role in supporting tourism development and territorial construction (Yubero & Chevalier, 2018).

The findings further highlight the importance of local value chains. In Fishtë, tourism is closely linked to local agricultural production and gastronomy, and this connection is one of the main ways economic value is retained within the territory. Local food is not simply an added element of the tourism experience; it constitutes one of its central foundations. This supports wider arguments that the links between tourism, agriculture, and food can strengthen local economies and reinforce territorial identity in rural areas (Sims, 2009; Mitchell & Ashley, 2010; Marsden & Sonnino, 2008; Figueiredo et al., 2021; da Mota et al., 2024). At the same time, the case of Fishtë suggests that these value chains are not only economic arrangements, but also social and territorial relations shaped by everyday cooperation and local embeddedness.

However, the study also shows that embeddedness does not automatically produce inclusive development. Participation in local value chains is not equally open to all local actors. Those already integrated into existing networks are generally in a stronger position to benefit, while smaller producers and actors with weaker connections often find it more difficult to participate, even when they have relevant products or capacities. This uneven access helps explain why the benefits of tourism are not distributed equally within the community. Similar concerns have been raised in the wider literature on rural and territorial development, where access to networks, institutional support, and local resources

often determines who benefits from development processes and who remains excluded (Shucksmith, 2010; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013; Pike et al., 2017; Farkas, 2021; Lindberg et al., 2024). In this sense, the findings suggest that locally embedded value chains may retain value within the territory while still reproducing selective participation and uneven benefit distribution.

This reading is also consistent with more recent studies on tourism in peripheral, low-density rural areas, which show that tourism does not automatically lead to inclusive development. Its effects depend to a large extent on governance capacity, territorial embeddedness, and the strength of links between tourism and other sectors of the local economy (Carson, 2018; Nieto Masot & Ríos Rodríguez, 2020; Bahamonde-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Žafran & Radeljak Kaufmann, 2022). In Fishtë, tourism has clearly created new opportunities, but these remain shaped by informal cooperation, unequal participation, and limited institutional coordination.

Overall, the discussion suggests that rural tourism should not be treated as a stand-alone solution to rural development challenges. Its contribution depends on how it is embedded in local economic and social relations, how cooperation is organised, and how governance shapes access to opportunities. From this perspective, tourism can contribute to local development, but the process remains uneven, relational, and strongly conditioned by territorial context. The study therefore supports an understanding of rural tourism as a territorially embedded process shaped by governance arrangements, actor networks, and locally organised value chains, while also showing that such embeddedness does not in itself guarantee inclusive territorial development.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the relationship between rural tourism, territorial governance, and local value chains through the case of Fishtë, a peripheral rural village in northern Albania. The analysis shows that development in this context does not result solely from tourism, but from the ways in which tourism is connected to local agricultural production, gastronomy, and everyday forms of cooperation within the territory. In this sense, the case of Fishtë suggests that the developmental effects of rural tourism are territorially embedded and mediated by local governance arrangements rather than generated solely by tourism activity.

The findings highlight the importance of local private actors, especially tourism entrepreneurs, in organising and sustaining these connections. At the same time, local government has acted mainly in a supportive and facilitative capacity rather than as a central driver of development. Much of the local system continues to rely on informal cooperation, trust, and direct personal communication. These features have helped make the system flexible and functional in practice, but they have also limited its institutionalisation and made it more vulnerable as demand grows and participation expands.

The study also shows that local value chains are a key mechanism through which tourism contributes to village development. The links between tourism, food, and local production help retain value within the territory and strengthen Fishtë's visibility and identity. Yet these benefits are not shared equally. Access to local networks, production capacity, and established relationships strongly influences who can benefit from tourism-related opportunities and who remains at the margins. The case, therefore, shows that locally embedded tourism can support territorial development while still reproducing selective inclusion and uneven distribution of benefits.

Taken together, the findings suggest that rural tourism in peripheral areas should not be understood as an automatic or universal answer to local development challenges. Its effects depend on the quality of local governance, the strength of local economic linkages, and the extent to which participation can be broadened over time. From this perspective, the study supports a territorially grounded understanding of tourism, treating it as part of a wider local development process rather than an isolated economic activity.

This study also has limitations. As a qualitative case study based on a single rural context, its findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Rather, the aim is to provide an analytically grounded understanding of how tourism, governance, and local value chains interact in one specific peripheral rural

setting. Future research could extend this analysis to other rural areas in Albania or to comparable peripheral contexts in order to explore how similar or different these dynamics may be across places.

From a practical point of view, the case of Fishtë suggests that tourism can contribute more effectively to local development when stronger and more inclusive forms of coordination are in place. Supporting local producers, widening access to local value chains, and strengthening local institutional capacity may help make tourism-related development more stable, inclusive, and sustainable over the longer term. Where appropriate, more structured forms of coordination could also reduce dependence on highly personalised relations and make participation in local development processes more accessible to a wider range of local actors.

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