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## BENEFITS OF SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN ROMANIA AS EMERGENT COUNTRY DURING CRISIS

### ABSTRACT

The current paper analyses the way the short food supply chain can positively influence the development of the rural tourism, with economic, social and environment benefits, as well as the harmonious and sustainable development of the rural communities.

Numerous examples offered by the developed countries prove that, for the well-known rural tourism destinations, the key of success can be ensured by the natural and cultural landscape of the area, by the existence of a local gastronomic identity, by the collective involvement of rural communities and of local authorities. Another important success factor is the development of local short supply chains. The innovating character of these chains, as it is proved by numerous researchers in the field, can bring a new flavor to the gastronomic activities within consecrated tourism areas.

The presented case study (Viscri village) is an example of sustainable development of rural tourism and of local patrimony preservation, and at the same time a lesson to be learned by all the dwellers of traditional Romanian houses.

**Key words:** rural tourism, short food supply chain, gastronomy, agri-food sector.

**JEL classification:** L83, L66, O13, D71.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of short food supply chains (SFSC) in the field of rural tourism has an interdisciplinary character, due to the fact that it approaches fields of interest, such as agriculture, tourism, culture, gastronomy, ecology, environment protection, which are interdependent and under a continuous change and innovation process. Such a mobilization of competences and methodologies offers the opportunity to approach the inter-relationship between these fields from a new perspective. *Food, agriculture and tourism* are three variables that are subject to fast and simultaneous changes, which generate connections and combinations into innovative forms, mainly at rural area level (Visentin, 2011).

The new tendencies in rural tourism target independent trips, accessible holiday destinations (not far from home), in a relaxed manner, with the opportunity of experiencing local traditions, emphasizing its unicity and environment sustainability. Nowadays, such a way of living is no longer a common one, but it can be

rediscovered during holidays, when tourists have the opportunity to escape and get detached from the everyday life. Recently, an increase of the tourism demand for such vacations throughout Europe has been identified. Furthermore, such getaways benefit from the advantage provided by the natural environment in those specific areas, and also from the specific cultural heritage. These types of holidays represent a genuine advantage for the promotion of the local agri-food products and for the development of small farmers in the rural area implicitly.

The cultural heritage represents an important source for the regional and local enhancement, the symbolic capital being essential for identifying the cultural identity represented by values, customs and occupations, beliefs and symbols shared by the local community. The expression of the cultural identity, of traditions and customs is influenced by the region, which represents more than a geographical location. Rural heritage protection is extremely important from the perspective of rural tourism development, as modality to promote the traditional village, with a positive effect on attracting tourists and with economic benefits for the local population.

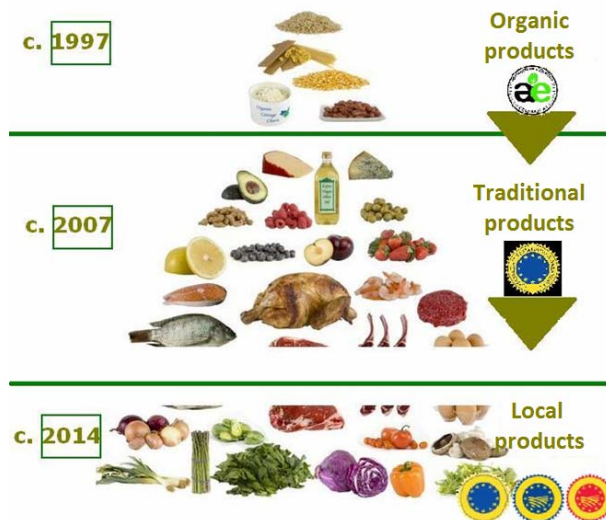
## 2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

At global level, the consecrated tourism regions started to increasingly focus on the development of tourism promotional strategies based on local gastronomy. The extension of networks based on local agri-food products and cuisine, the development of new gastronomy routes, as well as on the revitalization of the peasant markets are obvious elements that prove the importance of local systems in the context of globalization.

In Romania, the agri-food sector has had a relatively similar evolution to that in the other emergent countries of the European Union, in the sense that the certified organic products became present on the agri-food market, with quite a timid start (in the 1990s). After about 10 years of explorations, the certified traditional products appeared on the Romanian agri-food market. In a first stage, these products were manufactured by the small producers and they were well received by the final consumers; then the large agri-food producers (mainly those from the livestock sector) began to produce them. In Romania, it was noticed that the traditional products have been better received by the consumers compared to the ecological products, as the former have a better quality/price ratio, and also because there is a more permissive legislation as regards certification. Thus, by the year 2012, over 3,000 Romanian traditional products had been certified (the second place in the European Union, after Spain). Starting with the year 2014, the products certified PDO, PGI, TSG, according to the European norms and standards, began to appear on the market, and the local producers, mainly from the oenology sector, made important steps in this respect.

At the same time, the rural tourism started to take shape in the emergent countries of the European Union after the fall of the communist regime. In Romania,

an important role was played by the creation of the National Association for Rural, Ecologic and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) in 1994, which brought together over 3,000 members by the year 2014. The most well-known Romanian tourism destinations are those in Braşov, Bucovina, Maramureş and Sibiu areas, which have the advantage of being also promoted on the international market.



Source: own data processing.

Figure 1. The certification of ecological, traditional and local products in Romania.

The local agri-food products and brands, distributed through SFSCs, have an important role in developing the local rural tourism, their promotion implicitly contributing to the improvement of the local image among tourists. Practically, nowadays it is difficult to talk about sustainable rural tourism without enhancing local agri-food products and brands, an interdependency relation existing between them.

In the economic crisis context, at the level of the European Union, each member state tries to emphasize its national specificity. Thus, there is a tendency among many EU member states (mainly in France, Germany, Italy, Spain or Poland) to promote the consumption of products manufactured in their own countries and thus to stimulate the national economy. In the agri-food sector, this approach is even stronger, going deeper into the local specificity of products. In the tourism sector, for instance, the local gastronomy can make the difference between the tourism packages within the same destination.

### 3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The current paper highlights the interdisciplinary character of the approached theme (short food supply chains and rural tourism), emphasizing the interdepen-

dence between three fields of interest (agriculture, local gastronomy and rural tourism) that are under a continuous process of change and innovation. The rationale of the study starts with the analysis of the specialty literature on the origins and definition of short food supply chains, it continues with the presentation of the economic, social and environmental benefits for the rural communities, ending up with a case study – Viscri village, a Romanian example of sustainable rural tourism. This presents the modality in which the members of the local community, assisted by “*Mihai Eminescu*” Foundation, succeeded in reviving the local economy by: the restoration and promotion of the main cultural objectives in the area, the entrepreneurship development (by training the community members), the setting up of an accommodation infrastructure in traditional restored Transylvanian Saxon houses, the enhancing of small agricultural farms and the creation of short food supply chains.

The methodology used in the first part of the paper (the theoretical groundwork) is based on the study of the articles and papers published in specialized journals, as well as on the analysis of the intermediary/final results within the FP5 (“*SUS-CHAIN*”) or FP7 (“*FOODLINKS*”) research projects. The case study is the result of a field research in Viscri village, being supplemented with the study of several documentary materials concerning the tourism promotion of the area.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 4.1. Short food supply chains and rural tourism

Worldwide, it is estimated that about 80% of the total amount of agri-food products available on the market are produced and commercialized at local level especially by means of short food supply chains. In the European Union, this percentage amounts to only 15% (Committee of the Regions, 2011). The local agri-food system represents a key issue, to which no sufficient attention has been paid so far. Therefore, a better approach from the socio-economic and juridical standpoint is needed, in order to improve the profile of the local agri-food system at professional and structural level and also from the perspective of its innovating character (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013).

In the opinion of the French authors Fleury and Moustier, the short food supply chains represent an important component of the peri-urban agriculture, which appeared long before the setting up of the globalized agricultural systems, specific to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, SFSCs represent a distribution form mentioned since old times, although the presence of intermediaries between agricultural producers and final consumers was noticed even before the intensification of trade flows (Aubry and Chiffolleau, 2009).

In the strongly-industrialized countries from Western and Central Europe, the function of supply with agri-food products to towns has been assured by the local agricultural producers, largely coming from the peri-urban areas, throughout the years, mainly by means of direct sales on peasant agri-food markets. Nevertheless,

this direct form of supply to the urban area experienced a considerable decline in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, due to the development of the railway and maritime transports and later on of the road transport systems. Another factor was represented by the development of the international agri-food markets and the expansion of industrial supply structures, of super/hypermarkets respectively, as representatives of the globalized agri-food systems.

The tourism products, which should be mostly attractive and amusing for tourists, represent an important element in the competition for new clients, the local culture playing a central role next to gastronomy, mainly the traditional gastronomy, not only because food and beverages are vital in the tourism experience but also because *gastronomy became a primordial source of local identity*. The distinctiveness of a destination mainly comes from food, which became increasingly important in making decisions when choosing a destination. The Romanians also translated it in the local reality, and the expression “*we are what we eat*” is considered that we are, both physically and culturally, the result of what we eat, in the sense that the gastronomic tradition represents a basic aspect of our culture (Dobay *et al.*, 2009). This is the reason for which food and beverages became extremely important elements in promoting the rural tourism, as a result of the strong connection between food and identity.

#### 4.2. SFSC benefits for rural tourism

The analysis and the implications of SFSCs in the rural tourism present an innovative character. In the last 20 years, the SFSC thematic has been approached by numerous European and American researchers, being considered a viable, long and short term solution for enhancing the local rural communities, with a significant economic, social and environmental impact.



Source: Galli and Brunori, 2013.

Figure 2. The benefits of short food supply chains.

According to UK's Soil Association (2001), SFSC is defined as “a production, processing and trading system, primarily based on organic and sustainable methods of agri-food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which provides health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas”.

The quantitative and qualitative assessment of SFSCs, carried out by the researchers from Joint Research Center, emphasized numerous economic, social and environmental benefits, as mentioned below (Kneafsey et al., 2013):

– *Human capital*: Increased local employment opportunities providing for a higher employment rate in rural areas; fostering the knowledge/information transfer;

– *Financial capital*: Support to the local services and suppliers (small agricultural producers, beneficiaries of accommodation units), as well as the increase of the local money absorption;

– *Physical capital*: Support to the local stores and markets, as well as the promotion of the local rural tourism;

– *Social capital*: Improving population's wellness by assuring access to healthier food, increase of social interaction and belonging spirit, a better understanding of the connection between food, environment and health, increased utilization of the cooperation opportunities between different types of businesses (small local farmers and entrepreneurs in the tourism sector);

– *Natural capital*: Encouraging the small farmers to adopt more environment-friendly production systems, improving traditional agricultural and food systems with positive environmental impact;

***Economic benefits.*** The idea that SFSCs can generate economic gains for the producers, consumers/tourists, as well as for the members of the local communities is sustained. For example, FP5 “*SUS-CHAINS*” project drew the conclusion that the regional and direct initiatives of commercializing local agro-food generate extra incomes and provide for a certain employment rate in the rural regions, which fluctuate from one area to another. Furthermore, these elements determine certain synergies with other regional economic activities (including the rural tourism) and most often increase the employees' satisfaction and the community capacity of internal management. It must also be mentioned that in this way the final consumers' confidence is increased and the logistic chains and resulting wastes are reduced (Roep and Wiskerke, 2006). In certain contexts, in specific areas respectively, these advantages can represent elements to be used in the fight against the phenomena of agricultural activity abandon, external migration and gentrification (Roep, Wiskerke, 2006).

SFSCs create “*new economic spaces*” (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000; Marsden et al., 2002; Renting et al., 2003) and can reverse the decline of rural communities and the depletion of agri-food sources/stocks, as well as of the farm-specific

physical infrastructure (Pearson *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, Du Puis and Goodman (2005) state that SFSCs can be “seen as new sources of value added which that be retained locally and can act as a catalyst for rural economic regeneration and dynamism”. They also stated that short chains present the advantage of putting into value the local attributes and the socio-ecological individualities – territory, traditional knowledge/ information, different species, which can be sold at higher prices (Du Puis and Goodman, 2005).

One of the most frequently invoked economic advantages, related to the area of local agro-systems/SFSCs, is that of consistent incomes obtained by the agri-food producers. It was emphasized that small producers have the possibility to increase the selling prices for their products by using SFSCs (Pearson *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, the fact that the intermediaries are eliminated from the selling circuit generates bigger profits for the producers (Sage, 2003). SFSCs offer them the opportunity to diversify their activities and to add value to their products. Numerous cases have been identified, in Romania inclusively, when the agricultural producers extend their businesses horizontally, even in the tourism sector.

The local gastronomy, seen as a tourism resource, is appreciated not only as a healthy resource, but also for its ability of generate rural development. The agri-food tourism has the role to facilitate the sale of traditional products and to hire labour force, women in particular.

**Social benefits.** In the scientific research, the suppositions regarding the social impact of short food supply chains are often repetitive, apparently a lack of consensus being noticed with regard to the identification of viable indicators, capable to reflect the social benefits of SFSCs.

Numerous authors of literature relevant to this sector use a series of notions and concepts (reputation and social belonging/social) instead, trying to illustrate the importance of social interaction generated around these short chains. On the basis of the consulted studies, the following types of social impact were identified, which are mainly based on qualitative arguments:

- Interaction between producer and consumer/tourist
- Trust and social involvement;
- The tourists’ feeling of belonging to the community;
- Increased amount of knowledge/information or data, as determinant factor for behavioral modifications in the consumers/tourists.

Moreover, SFSCs have the great quality of contributing to the *health of final consumers*, as the products commercialized by means of short chains are considered to be fresh and healthy (“*good food*”). The *Slow Food* Movement, set up by Carlo Petrini even since 1986, as a direct reaction against fast-food and from the desire to give access to a healthier food, brings together more and more followers in the cities. Lately, mainly among the Western European and Scandinavian tourists, the tendency to eat healthier in the holiday can be noticed. The important tour

operators offer a large variety of active vacations and healthy diets in the natural environment (for example, the Mediterranean summer destinations based on sun bathing and Mediterranean diet).

***Environmental benefits.*** The reasons and scientific opinions that sustain the existence of environmental benefits, as identified in the specific literature, include: *the diminution of the distance within the supply chain, as well as of the pollution volume in the process of obtaining the local foodstuffs; the positive impact upon biodiversity, especially by diminishing the amount of pesticides and fertilizers used in the traditional agriculture.* Most scientific papers only briefly notice that SFSCs represent genuine benefits for the environment, but no pertinent quantitative and qualitative data and proofs are given to support the arguments and suppositions (Kneafsey *et al.*, 2013). Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the advantages offered to nature by SFSCs are not concretely justified, but rather the benefits specific to different categories of SFSCs.

Even though a big number of short supply chains target the commercialization of ecological products, this distinct feature is not implicitly an intrinsic characteristic of SFSCs. Moreover, the existence of a large amount of scientific research focused on the environmental impact can be identified, generated by the traditional/ecological means of agricultural production, compared to the conventional production practices.

For the rural tourism, the environmental benefits are obvious, as *the operation of the short food supply chains contributes to the improvement of the cultural landscape*, creating the image of the authentic traditional village for tourists through: the traditional agricultural methods used on the small farms, the tasting of local products, the organization of gastronomic markets/events and of traditional peasant markets.

#### 4.3. Case study

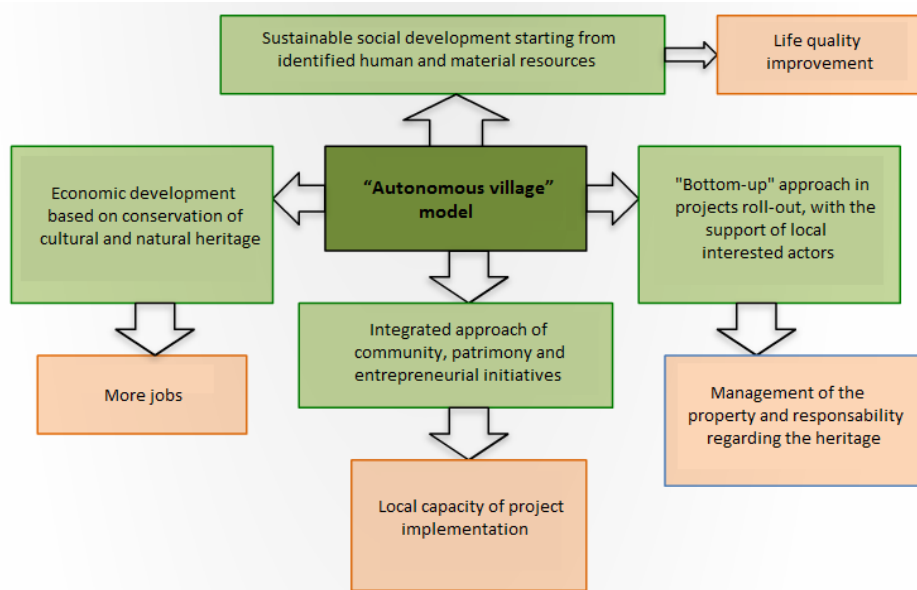
*Viscri village* represents an example of sustainable tourism development and of the local heritage preservation and at the same time a lesson to be learned by all the dwellers of traditional Romanian houses. Viscri was registered on the world map of traditional villages, with a Transylvanian Saxon fortified church dating back from the 13<sup>th</sup> century that is included on the UNESCO Heritage list. The Transylvanian Saxon house dating back from 1875 and recently renovated (that belongs to His Royal Highness Prince Charles) represents a good example of sustainable tourism to be promoted by the Romanian communities. “The Key of success for good living in a village and not to have to leave abroad for work is the community spirit and the respect for what we already have”, considers Caroline Fernolend (“*Mihai Eminescu*” Foundation). For almost each and every person a job was found in the community. Numerous craftsmen were trained by the foundation. Out of the total number of 300 gypsies in the village, only three receive social aid. Thanks to a European Project, 1,200 people from the Transylvanian villages visited



Viscri to “steal” its story of success. The largest part of Viscri community understood that getting involved in promoting and developing a sustainable tourism form can build up their future and their children’s future (ProTV Channel News, 2014).

The members of the local community understood that it is their responsibility to try to preserve the heritage of their predecessors for the future generations. Due to the fact that the traditional Transylvanian Saxon community from the village (that preserved this heritage through its community spirit) still existed in a low number, there was an immediate need for intervention. The “new” communities needed support and empowerment so that the cultural heritage from the Transylvanian Saxons should not be lost. Viscri village being accepted on the list of the UNESCO world heritage was an additional reason to support its cause, thus confirming the value of the existing heritage.

Since His Royal Highness Prince of Wales accepted the patronage of MET Foundation in the year 2000, the lobby that HRH has made throughout the years for the foundation activity, for the special cultural and natural heritage in Transylvania, contributed to the positive image of Romania worldwide (CSR Romania, 2011).



Source: Tuerk, 2014.

Figure 3. “Autonomous village” model for the revitalization of Transylvanian traditional villages and the sustainable protection of the material and non-material heritage.

The main strengths of the local community, which made a success model out of Viscri village (Braşov county) worth to be followed by other Romanian communities are the following:

- Empowerment of the local community with regard to the preservation of the cultural heritage (local architecture, gastronomy, local traditions and customs etc.);
- Awareness at local community level that the sustainable tourism development in the area can contribute to local economy revitalization;
- Introduction of Viscri village on the list of UNESCO World Heritage, which confirms the value of the existing heritage;
- Involvement of “*Mihai Eminescu*” Foundation in preserving the cultural and natural heritage in the area. By the year 2014, over 1,200 projects had been implemented in 49 Transylvanian villages, with a total amount of approx. 7.4 million euro. Only Viscri village benefited from the implementation of 337 projects worth over 900,000 euro (Tuerk, 2014);
- Involvement of ADEPT Foundation in promoting small local farmers, preservation of local foodstuffs, including traditional seeds, as well as of the traditional agricultural practices;
- “Collective” projects with Norwegian/European funding for local small farmers, which have the role of working together (for example, milk collection and canned fruit production);
- The lobby that His Royal Highness Prince Charles has made along the years (since 2000) for the Transylvanian cultural and natural heritage has contributed to the positive image of Romania at international level;
- Development of the local tourism infrastructure (new accommodation structures in reconditioned Transylvanian Saxon houses, biking infrastructure and so on);
- Getting the small local producers involved in providing local products to tourists (food products and handicraft products).

Thanks to the sustained efforts made both by “*Mihai Eminescu*” Foundation and the local community, the results started to appear. Over 15,000 tourists, out of which the most part are coming from foreign countries (especially from Great Britain and France), visit this village each year. Some Transylvanian Saxon Families returned home, more buildings have been restored and transformed into accommodation units, the entrepreneurial spirit flourished in the area (several businesses in stock raising, tourism, gastronomic and handicraft sectors have appeared), and the local product brands are increasingly present at regional gastronomy events (for example, the Viscri jam and confiture or “*Casa de pe deal*” spicy pickles).

Sustainable rural tourism has been practiced in Transylvanian Saxon houses, which were restored with “*Mihai Eminescu*” Foundation support. Some of these houses date even from the 18th century: Viscri no. 22, Viscri no. 44, Viscri no. 125, Viscri no. 38, Viscri no. 63, Viscri no. 63b, Viscri no. 77, Viscri no. 129 or Viscri no. 195. Besides the quality tourism services, the hosts try to offer the tourists traditional local food, prepared on their own household or by the small producers in the area (dairy products, meat products, canned fruit and vegetables and so on).

At the same time, it is also worth mentioning “*Casa de pe deal*” (the House on the Hill) in Saschiz (located at 8 km far from Viscri), where the administrators of the boarding house, the members of Dalmasso family, succeeded in combining the tourism and restaurant activity with the commercialization of local traditional products (they have their own online store). Practically, it is a good example of traditional household, where the rural tourism is also practiced and, lately, a short food supply chain has been operating. The range of products are different depending on the season and they are commercialized both online and on the occasion of gastronomic and tourism events. The main products are: nut confiture, rhubarb jam, cranberry jam/jelly, dogberry jam, apple jam with cinnamon, traditional vegetable stew and spicy pickles.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Thinking globally and acting locally is the principle that should be considered as often as possible, in the context of the world economic crisis. As consumers, we should act patriotically consuming products obtained at local/regional/national level, thus putting into practice the “*food patriotism*” concept. Product differentiation according to the unicity of its origin or of its production process represents, on the long term, a competitive advantage to be used for the integrated promotion of local agri-food products and rural tourism.

The short food supply chains generate economic, social, environment and health benefits not only for the rural communities but also for tourists. As regards the human capital, we can identify: new local job opportunities in the agricultural/farming sector, fostering the knowledge/information transfer, a higher employment rate in rural areas, increase of employees’ satisfaction and of the organizational capacity at rural community level, counteracting the external migration and gentrification phenomena. As for the financial benefits, SFSCs contribute to sustaining the local services and suppliers, increase the local money absorption, enhance the consumers’ confidence in LFS (local food system) and implicitly increase the local incomes. SFSCs also contribute to the diminution in size of the logistic chains and of the resulted waste, counteracting the abandon of farming activities, and provide support to the small producers’ stores and to peasant agri-food markets and last but not least to the promotion of local rural tourism.

The main social benefits of short circuits refer to: improvement of population’s wellness by assuring access to healthier food, increase of social interaction between small producers and final consumers/tourists, stimulation of tourists’ feeling of belonging to the community, better understanding of the connection between food, environment and health, increase of cooperation between different types of businesses (such as those in the agricultural and tourism fields).

The environmental benefits are the following: encouraging farmers to adopt more environment-friendly production systems, improving traditional agricultural

and food systems with positive environmental impact, reducing the distance within the supply chains which implies less pollution when producing local products, positive impact on biodiversity, mainly by reducing the quantities of pesticides and fertilizers used on the traditional agricultural holdings. From the tourism perspective, the operation of short circuits in the rural space contributes to the improvement of the local cultural landscape, creating the image of the authentic traditional village for tourists.

Viscri village (presented in the case study) succeeded in becoming an example of sustainable rural tourism for other Romanian rural communities, having several main ingredients that favored the community development in the area: the recognized value of the natural and cultural heritage, support of non-governmental organizations in the field, the promotion offered by world-wide recognized personalities, the development of the entrepreneurial spirit in the non-agricultural sector in particular, the training of community members, development of the accommodation infrastructure. After several years of collective involvement, the positive results started to appear. In this village, we can find an authentic rural Romania, old, clean, with its own functioning rules and full of life. We should all become aware of the great opportunity to have all these places in our country and we should fully enjoy them.

## 6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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