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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT OF ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

ABSTRACT

The chances to revitalize the rural area are assessed not only in relation to the agricultural/forestry development potential, but also to the potential of diversification of the non-agricultural activities, through the development and strengthening of the industry and services sectors. Without minimizing agriculture importance, one of the premises of the economic development of rural areas is to promote the tourism activities. The impact of tourism activities upon the rural communities and environment has become a subject of interest lately. The research findings show that if it is well managed, rural tourism can significantly contribute to the rural community development; if not, it could have negative results upon nature and society.

Key words: rural development, rural tourism, agro-tourism.

JEL Classification: Q01, L26.

1. INTRODUCTION

As an economic sector with real development valences on medium and long term, tourism involves many economic, social and cultural activities. Tourism contribution to the economic and social life of rural communities, but also the intensity of its actions are different across regions, from one country to another, depending on the policy in relation to this activity (Gannon, 1994).

In Romania, tourism development in the rural area is inscribed to the European process of fostering the competitiveness of sustainable, responsible and quality tourism, capitalizing on the policies and financial tools involved directly and indirectly in the economic growth of localities, zones and regions and in the increase of population's incomes from those areas respectively (Iorio & Corsale, 2010).

From this perspective, the promotion and development of tourism activities inside rural communities can have both positive and negative effects, in terms of natural environment, way of life and social evolution or resource exploitation (Calina *et al.*, 2017).

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

According to the World Tourism Organization and to many European associations, *rural tourism is a form of tourism including any tourism activity organized and managed in the rural areas by the local population, which puts into value the local natural, human, cultural and historical resources, the tourism endowments and services*. This activity either replaces unprofitable agricultural activities or it is a complementary activity, which means maintaining the agricultural activities at all costs.

At European level, tourism has become an essential component of the regional and local development policies in the rural area. There are a number of studies revealing that rural tourism provided economic and social benefits in various rural areas in Europe and elsewhere. In order to avoid the mistakes of the past that they made, with more or less awareness, the countries with tradition in this form of tourism, based on new sustainable development principles, focus on maintaining the functionality of rural localities, on the preservation of rural infrastructure and of the traditional way of life, as well as on the preservation of the cultural identity specific to each rural community (Drăgoi *et al.*, 2017).

According to specialized research, the promotion and development of tourism activities in the rural areas are generating multiple positive and negative effects at economic, social and cultural level (Nistoreanu, 2003).

The advantages and positive effects of the rural tourism reside in:

- Putting into value the local natural and cultural potential;
- Increasing the number of jobs, both in the tourism sector and in other auxiliary sectors, of services and management of local resources;
- Increasing the living standard and education of the involved population;
- Maintaining the local population in the zone;
- Preserving and promoting traditional occupations;
- Stimulating certain profitable tourism activities (hotels, restaurants, transport, handicrafts, guide services, etc.);
- Diversification of the local economy, mainly in the adjacent rural areas, where agriculture has no development possibilities;
- Fostering rural economy development through an additional demand for agricultural products and financial capital;
- Improvement and modernization of the local transport, communication and technical infrastructure, with advantages for the local population;
- Increased interest in environmental protection inside the protected natural areas;
- Fostering inter-cultural communication between local people and tourists.

The negative effects and the disadvantages of the rural tourism appear and become manifest in the absence of a proper management of the tourism activities. These are: disturbing the rural life, change of local people's way of life and disappearance of certain traditions;

- Change of land destination, often with good farm yields and well positioned, which is attracted into the tourism business;
- Favouring the speculative attitude in the land sale-purchase process, without a well-defined juridical status;
- Destruction of soil, flora, fauna and the change of the ecological equilibrium by tracing paths and roads for tourist circulation in the sensitive areas in terms of biodiversity;
- “Urbanization” of rural areas and development of “mass tourism” in many natural reserves or natural parks near the tourist villages, etc.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The objective of the present paper is to analyze the positive or negative impact of tourism activity promotion and development in the Romanian countryside. The information support is ensured by data supplied by the National Institute of Statistics (NIS), through the Tempo-Online database, as well as by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), through ex-post evaluation reports of the national rural development programs SAPARD 2000–2006, NRDP 2007–2013 and NRDP 2014–2020.

In the paper we present the results of the statistical data series for the agro-tourism boarding houses, as statistics redefined the urban boarding houses into tourism boarding houses, and the rural and agro-tourism boarding houses into agro-tourism boarding houses.

The agro-tourism boarding house is a tourist reception structure with an accommodation capacity of 8–15 rooms, evaluated at 1 to 5 flowers/daisies (equivalent to the star rating system for hotels), operating in people’s dwellings or in independent buildings; these structures ensure, in specially designed spaces, the accommodation of tourists, the preparation and serving of meals, as well the possibility of tourist participation in household or craft activities.

The utilized research method is the diagnosis analysis of governmental information and of statistical data on the evolution of the agro-tourism boarding houses number, of the accommodation capacity in operation, the number of beds in the agro-tourism boarding houses and the utilization index of agro-tourism accommodation capacity, over a period of 18 years period, with the year 2000 as reference year.

On the basis of these synthetic indicators, the net utilization index of the tourist accommodation capacity in operation was calculated, according to the following formula:

$$I_n = (N / C_f) \times 100,$$

where: I_n is the net utilization index of the agro-tourism accommodation capacity in operation; N is the number of beds in a certain period; C_f is the tourist accommodation capacity in operation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Romania, in the governmental reports and in the specialty literature, the tourism activity represents an occupational alternative for the rural area, a modality to diversify the economic activities and a stabilization factor for the rural population. An important segment of the Romanian rural tourism is agro-tourism, which has been differently approached since the official opening of the accession to the EU negotiations and the EU financial support for agriculture and rural development. Thus, through SAPARD 2000–2006, NRDP 2003–2017 and NRDP 2014–2020 programs, the necessary investments have been established to support and boost agro-tourism activities (Table 1).

The context data and information included in the evaluation reports of the three national rural development programs reveal a positive impact of the Romanian agro-tourism promotion and development.

Table 1

The financial support to the development and promotion
of the Romanian rural tourism and agro-tourism, in 2000–2018

1	SAPARD 2000–2006	
	Measure 3.4 “Development and diversification of economic activities generating multiple activities and alternative incomes”	Eligible investments in: – Rural tourism – Other types of tourism activities in the rural area
2	National Rural Development Program (NRDP) 2007–2013	
	Measure 313. “Encouragement of tourism activities”	Eligible investments in: – Tourism accommodation infrastructure and recreational activities – Small-scale infrastructure (tourist information centers, marking/tourist routes, etc. – Development and/or marketing of tourism services related to rural tourism
3	National Rural Development Program (NRDP) 2014–2020	
	Measure 06 – Development of agricultural holdings and enterprises – sub-measure 6.2. “Support to the creation and development of non-agricultural activities in rural area” – sub-measure 6.4 “Investments in the creation and development of non-agricultural activities” – sub-measure 7.2 “Investments in creation and modernization of small-scale basic infrastructure”	Eligible investments in: – Tourism activities, eg. (agro-tourism accommodation services, leisure services, catering services, tourist guide services)

Source: <http://www.madr.ro/>

Through SAPARD program, the number of jobs created due to the initiatives of Measure 3.4 was estimated at around 8,108 newly created jobs and at around 2,838 maintained jobs.

Through NRDP 2007–2013, the eligible investments made under Measure 313 led to the creation of 779 jobs, the total number of direct beneficiaries of this measure being estimated at 1,289 (micro-enterprises/authorized physical persons with a APP status/communes and associations of communes/NGOs), and the number of indirect beneficiaries at 50,421 tourists, out of which 30,564 were accommodated overnight and 19,857 have benefited from the financed recreational facilities.

Through NRDP 2014–2020, until the beginning of 2018, a total number of eligible applicants (farmers and/or micro-enterprises) finalized development/promotion projects for rural tourism services, submitted under sM 6.2 and/or sM 6.4, and 169 applicants finalized projects transferred through the transition procedure from the previous program under sM 6.4.

The greatest share of investments made through all the three programs belongs to the category “accommodation and leisure infrastructure”, followed by the category “infrastructure for tourist information, development of tourist trails/routes” while the category “development/promotion of rural tourism services” is on the last place.

The diversification of tourist services supplied by the agro-tourism boarding houses has mainly consisted of the development of multifunctional sports grounds/spaces for sports activities/winter, summer sports, swimming pools, sunbathing spaces/food-restaurants/organization of events, conferences, internet access/diversified leisure activities – transport of tourists by sledge and horse-drawn cart, etc.

According to statistical data, the number of agro-tourist reception structures with accommodation functions and public food services, licensed and patented by the National Tourism Agency increased in the period 2000–2009, then slightly decreased in 2010 and 2011, and then resumed the increasing trend (Table 2). The tourism accommodation capacity of agro-tourism boarding houses followed an upward trend throughout the investigated period (Table 2). The evolution trend of the number of tourists who asked for agro-tourism accommodation and leisure services slightly decreased in 2009 and 2010 as a result of the economic-financial crisis that began in 2008, which affected almost the entire world (Table 2).

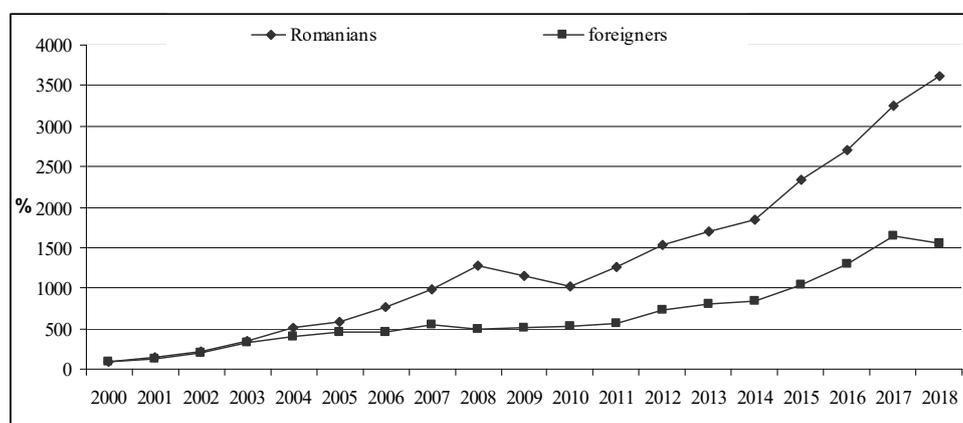
From the data presented in Figure 1, it results a modest evolution of the number of foreign tourists, who stayed overnight in the Romanian agro-tourism boarding houses, which shows that the promotion and quality of the rural tourism product has not received sufficient attention.

Table 2

The tourist accommodation capacity and the tourist accommodation activity of agro-tourism boarding houses

Years	Structures	Tourist accommodation capacity		Tourist accommodation activity		
	number	existing no. places	in use no. places-days	arrivals no.	beds no.	utilization indices
2000	400	3544	805618	28152	64588	8.0
2001	536	4843	1105724	41658	88349	8.0
2002	682	6219	1270505	64811	144135	11.3
2003	781	7510	1614497	89446	225388	14.0
2004	892	9405	2132008	149104	321168	15.1
2005	956	11151	2528316	170164	365967	14.5
2006	1259	14551	3188350	217020	459344	14.4
2007	1292	15448	3625647	288508	592327	16.3
2008	1348	16906	4038887	357617	743444	18.4
2009	1412	19783	4735468	325686	673188	14.2
2010	1354	20208	4891862	289923	604606	12.4
2011	1210	20683	5378364	360696	741350	13.8
2012	1569	27453	6864934	447113	906504	13.2
2013	1598	28775	7932634	501746	996475	12.6
2014	1665	30480	8219979	549302	1081521	13.2
2015	1918	35188	9079901	672756	1368992	15.1
2016	2028	37394	10336702	813454	1597939	15.5
2017	2556	44499	11787897	1004400	1928485	16.4
2018	2821	48574	11896348	1123353	2148377	18.1

Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>



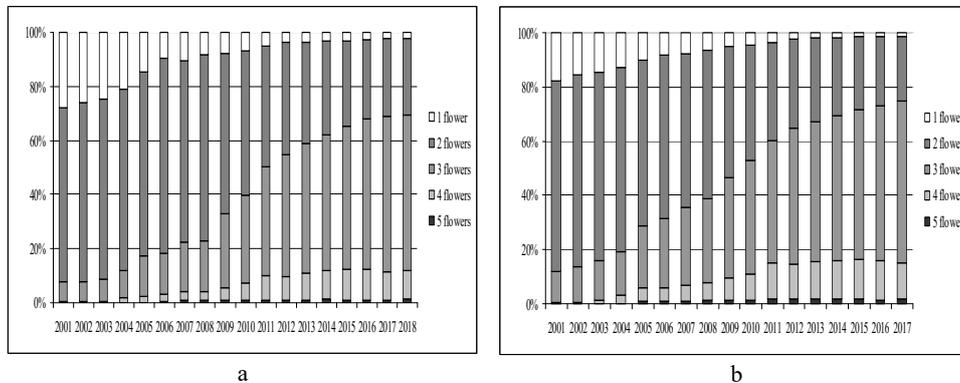
Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>

Figure 1. The evolution of the number of the Romanian and foreign tourist beds in agro-boarding houses, considering the year 2000 as a reference year.

In conformity with the provisions of the current national legislation, i.e. Order no.65/2013, in our country, the quality of services supplied and the endowment level

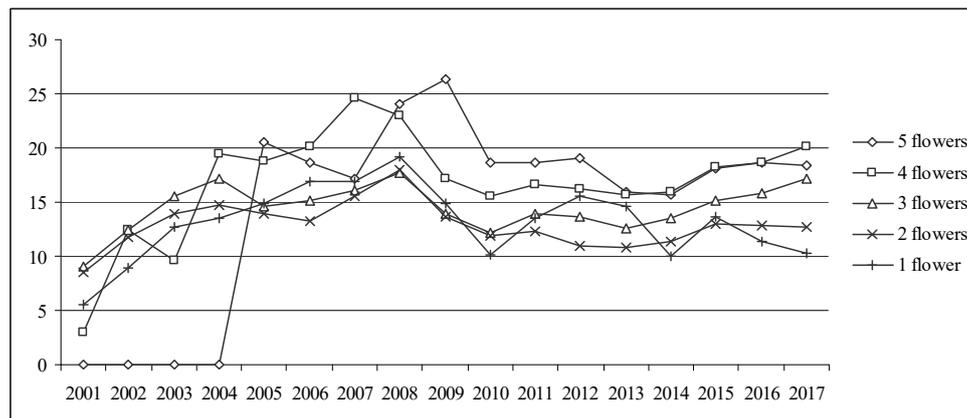
of the agro-tourism boarding houses are evaluated at 1 to 5 flowers/daisies (equivalent to the star rating system for hotels). With an accommodation capacity of up to 8 rooms functioning on the people's dwellings or in separate buildings, providing for tourists' accommodation and conditions for meals preparation and serving in special equipped places, as well as the possibility of getting involved in the households activities or in handicraft activities, the agro-tourism boarding houses must have a certain level of comfort and quality of services and to reach a certain quality standard according to the boarding house rating (minimum one daisy).

At the beginning of the period under investigation, most agro-tourism boarding houses were rated at 2 daisies, but beginning with the year 2012, the balance tilted in favour of the 3 daisy category (Fig. 2a and b), while tourists' preference was for the 4 and 5 daisy category (Fig. 3).



Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>

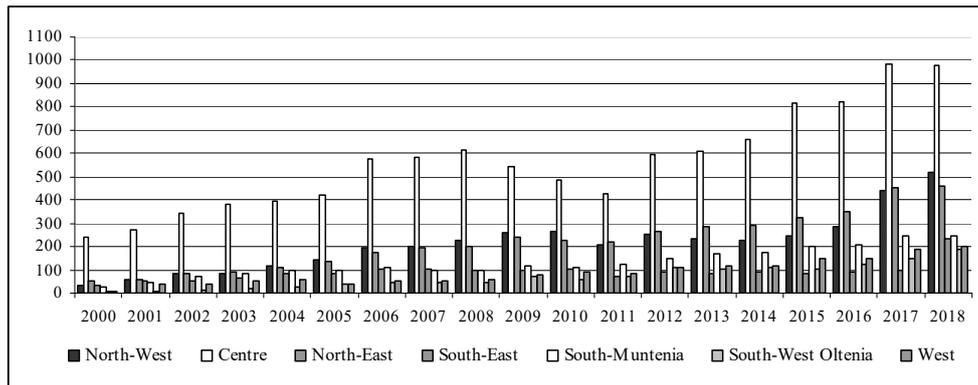
Figure 2. The evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses (a) and of their accommodation capacity by comfort categories (b), in the period 2001–2018.



Source: Tempo-online database, 2018, <http://www.insse.ro/>

Figure 3. The evolution of the utilization index for agro-tourist reception structures with accommodation function and public food services, by comfort categories.

As it needs smaller investments and can bring additional incomes to its owners, the agro-tourism business has developed mainly in the mountain areas from the North-West development region, in the counties Cluj and Maramureş, from the development region Center, in the counties Braşov and Harghita and from the North-East development region in the counties Suceava and Neamţ (Fig. 4).



Source: Tempo-online database, 2017, <http://www.insse.ro/>

Figure 4. Evolution of the number of agro-tourism boarding houses by development regions, in the period 2000–2018.

The rural and agro-tourism activity is being promoted through the National Association of Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism (ANTREC) Bucharest, which is publishing catalogues and brochures, booklets for international and national use. The edited catalogues comply with the coding by the European Federation of Rural Tourism (EUROGÎTES) regarding the pictograms for each tourism boarding house. The rural tourism supply is promoted through the Romanian National Tourism Fair, but also through exhibitions, fairs and international tourism stock exchanges, in which ANTREC participates with handicraft and crafts exhibits specific for the following rural areas:

- Maramureş (Sălişte de Sus, Bogdan Vodă, Săpânţa, etc.),
- Transylvania (Arieşeni, Gârda de Sus, Bistriţa Bârgăului, Băişoara, etc.),
- Central part of Romania (counties Braşov – Bran, Moeciu, Râşnov; Covasna; Harghita – Tuşnad, Praid, Sub-Cetate; Sibiu – Sadu, Tălmăcel, etc.),
- The Carpathians and the Curvature Sub-Carpathians (counties Prahova – Poiana Țapului, Cheia; Argeş – Brăduleţ, Rucăr; Buzău; Dâmboviţa; Vrancea),
- Moldova (Neamţ – Agapia, Văratec; Suceava – Vatra Moldoviţei),
- Oltenia (counties Dolj; Gorj – Tismana; Vâlcea – Vaideeni;
- Mehedinţi – Ponoarele;
- Hunedoara – Haţeg, Bucium, etc.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism is a complex phenomenon, with various psychological, geographical and urbanistic implications. The main tourism role in the local economies is given by the influence of these activities for the increase of rural population's incomes, for the creation of new jobs, for the development of related services, etc.

In the period 2000–2018, the development of the entrepreneurial initiatives in agro-tourism takes place in the context marked by the significant increase, both in qualitative and quantitative terms, of the accommodation units in the Romanian rural area.

The first investments appeared with the implementation of the SAPARD Program 2000–2006 and have continued with NRDP 2007–2013 and 2014–2020. At the same time, the ANTREC network development came to support the promotion and valorization of the activities of many owners of tourism and agro-tourism boarding houses, located both in well-known areas frequented by tourists and in less known areas.

Rural tourism and agro-tourism proved to be a solution for supplementing the incomes from farming, with positive effects, both of economic and social nature. This form of tourism has been under continuous development in our country, mainly after the creation of the necessary legal framework.

The agro-tourism structure with accommodation function and public food services account for over 30% of the total Romanian accommodation structures in 2018, and the increase of their quality resulted in a number of tourists accommodated in agro-tourist boarding houses that exceeded one million persons, out of which 8% are foreign tourists. The lack of tourism services, of integrated tourism products and the infrastructure problems resulted in tourist arrivals and overnight stays ensuring an occupation degree of these structures of only 18% in 2018.

Every year, programs were designed for tourism marketing-promotion-development, whose general provisions include the most important destinations and forms of tourism in Romania, which are promoted on the domestic and main foreign tourism markets. Nevertheless, in the investigated period, the tourism in the rural areas had a slow development rate, under its potential level. In order to boost investments in this field of activity, other coherent programs are also needed for the diversification of non-agricultural activities in rural areas and preserving the cultural identity specific to each rural community.

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