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Advantages and Limits for Tourism Development in Rural Area (Case Study Ampoi and Mureş Valleys)

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Abstract

Rural areas have been modified during centuries of agriculture practice and, in the last decades, of other economic activities like mineral extractions and processing industry, including also touristic activity. A challenge for ensuring sustainable development in rural areas is to cover the development needs of the community. Tourism has been indicated as a good development strategy for Romanian rural areas. The article is presenting the advantages and limits in supporting touristic activity in the framework of Leader approach at the level of a Local Group of Action in Romania, Alba and Hunedoara Counties. Leader approach is offering limited support for rural area in order to encourage cultural activities, architecture rehabilitation, valorizing natural landscape and rural tourism. Through its direct and indirect impacts, tourism attracts significant foreign exchange, investment and know-how and stimulates the local economy, with a significant multiplier effect on many other areas of the economy. In the same time, it has to be paid a great attention to the effects generated upon the rural communities by the tourists' activities. Certainly, tourism development should be considered with all financial, material and human efforts that have to be done in order to support it. Tourism development in rural area should be strategically planned and its negative effects on nature and social-cultural environment of tourism areas should be limited.

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1. Introduction and conceptual framework

Tourism has an important role modifying rural communities in their environmental, economic, social and cultural structures, processes and dynamics. In this context rural tourism plays a primary role because the tourist has to move towards tourist destination in order to enjoy the product (F. Sgroi, A. M. Di Trapani, R. Testa, S. Tudisca; 2014). Tourism development depends on commercial, economic, and logistical issues, such as the quality of the product, accessibility and infrastructure of the destination, availability of skills, and interest of investors. In most of these aspects, rural areas may well be at a disadvantage compared to urbanised and more developed areas. Thus, tourism can play a significant role in rural economy growth and in developing rural standards (Holland J., Burian M., Dixey L.; 2003). Tourists are attracted to rural areas by their distinctive social and cultural heritage landscape qualities. So, the rural space can be threatened by the tourism impact and the recreational activity developed for tourists (Hall D.; 2004). Rural tourism is largely a domestic phenomenon with a disparate nature across countries and continents (Gao S.; 2009). The rural landscapes have always been influenced by the agricultural activity. The human permanence in rural areas exposed to risk factors (degradation, depopulation, poverty) can contribute to preservation of social values, to valorize the human, economic and environmental resources of the various rural communities, to qualify and to promote the image of these areas, increasing their attractive capacities and contributing to their development (Lanfranchi M., Giannetto C.; 2014).

Tourism, especially rural tourism, is an important resource that has to be taken into consideration for developing rural areas. Rural tourism represents an opportunity for small farms that cannot compete with the conditions imposed by the globalization of markets (Goebel *et al.*, 2012). Rural tourism has spread in many countries of central and northern Europe since the sixties of last century; instead in southern Europe it has developed in the following decade according to the European economic policies adopted to encourage the reduction of rural exodus and to promote the economic development of disadvantaged areas (F. Sgroi, A. M. Di Trapani, R. Testa, S. Tudisca; 2014).

Rural tourism allows the rural areas to satisfy their growing interest in the context of preserving the natural heritage and rural culture. This can contribute to reduce the exodus of population from rural areas and to create job opportunities, promoting the socio-economic development of disadvantaged areas (Bulin, 2011). Rural tourism is referring to all types of activities carried out by tourists in rural areas (agritourism, direct sales in farm, educational farms) including the elements related to traditions, culture and hospitality of the people from rural villages. So, rural tourism is expressed through visits to the farms, explanation on the crop cultivation methods, tasting of agrifood products and all those forms directly related to the resources of rural areas (Brunori *et al.*, 2009).

In Europe, farm tourism plays an important role in rural tourism. In some rural areas in East Germany (Wittow, Island of Rügen), 80% of accommodation is provided by working farms or farms that have been converted to accommodation facilities. In African rural areas there are some commercial guest farms and the emerging equivalent of home stays in traditional huts. There is evidence that farm tourism generates proportionately higher benefits than other tourism using purpose-built accommodation in a similar area (Holland J., Burian M., Dixey L.; 2003). Poland's experience since the early 1990s provides a case in point: rural farm-based tourism was seen as a cheap form of tourism that would utilise existing spare capacities in farm houses and small, unsophisticated catering facilities (McMahon F.; 1996). This was a high investment burden for generally small-scale farmers. Furthermore, marketing costs and the set-up of marketing networks coordinating a large number of small-scale entrepreneurs were added expenditures that were initially not foreseen. As a consequence farm tourism was far from a cheap option as was initially thought (Holland J., Burian M., Dixey L.; 2003).

Tourism has an important role in modifying rural communities in their environmental, economic, social and cultural structures, processes and dynamics (Theodoropoulou H., Kaldis P., 2008; Andereck K. *et al.*, 2005).

Tourism largely contributes to the formation of places, fostering reconfiguration and restructuring processes that tend to create new rural opportunities in function of services it provides to the society as a whole satisfying demands, needs and desires of tourists (Figueiredo E., 2011; Crouch D., 2006).

“Rural tourism is a factor for rural areas development” – stated Suzanne Thibal, EUROTER general secretary: “Rural tourism is a social development factor, it improves the living standards, it maintains crafts, it sustains the agricultural production, it opens spirits and makes mentalities evolve”. European Union has identified rural tourism as a priority for the rural space development. In the new financial framework for 2014-2020, family farms and small farms are being the solution for rural space revival. In this conditions, supporting rural tourism as an alternative activity represents an opportunity for development of rural areas and preserving the traditions, culture and activities practiced in these areas.

Specialized studies, realized by Tourism World Organization, had identified the key megatrends in tourism for 2020: (1) increasing the number of tourists concerned about environmental issues; (2) increasing demand for new destinations; (3) increasing the number of shorter vacations; (4) increasing number of older people that are more active and willing to travel; (5) becoming more experienced and sophisticated travelers, that are expecting high quality attractions, facilities and services as appropriate tariffs and quality in their travels. In this framework rural space is the perfect destination for developing rural tourism, cultural tourism and tourism in protected areas (ecotourism, adventure tourism, tourism in wild areas and camping). This trend indicates an increase in demand for rural tourism, especially for ecotourism, and its transformation from a niche market into a main segment.

2. Authentic Romanian Rural Space

The rural space in Romania represents 89% from the entire national territory and shelters 45.6% of the population that have their home situated in rural area (European Commission, 2014). Romanian rural economy is dominated by agriculture. The predominant feature is the high share of subsistence farms, mainly producing for their own consumption and only marginally for the market. Because of the domination of this form of agriculture the rural economy remains poorly integrated into the market economy. According to a study conducted by the Institute of Social Economy and Institute for Quality of Life, three-quarters of the rural population lives in poor conditions, and 37%, which means over a million people are unpaid family workers, without any form of salary or payment for their agricultural activity. Thus, over 36% of the population from rural areas has the status of worker's employment on their own. People living in rural areas depend on agriculture activity, which cannot provide a decent living standard due to the low productivity and the limited market access of Romanian farmers. Considering Romanian agricultural structures of the holdings, depending on utilized agricultural area (UAA), in 2010 there are recorded 74.3% of the farms with less than 2 hectares and 18.8% between 2 and 5 hectares. The country average is 3.4 hectares per farm, while in European Union with 28 member states the average is 14.4 hectares. Considering the second criteria used by the European Commission, the economic size, calculated for each farm*, in Romania, 70.4% of the farms are under 2,000 €, 15.6% are between 2,000-4,000 €, 8.1% are between 4,000-8,000 € and a small percentage of the farms have an economic size considerable (European Commission, 2014).

So, the rural economy presents big differences between Romania and European Union. Romanian rural economy is largely agricultural (about two thirds) or agro-food (more than three quarters). In the European Union dominates the services in economy of the rural areas, with a share of 42.2%, up 2% from the agricultural

* for each activity is considered a standard gross margin (SGM) that is estimated, based on the area or the number of heads and a regional coefficient; the sum of all margins, for all activities of a given farm, is its economic size, expressed in €

economy. So, Romanian rural space is characterized by low level of per capita agricultural production, rural economy and agricultural structures far from a competitive rural economy. Underdeveloped rural economy of Romania results in immediate and permanent, visible, negative effects on Romanian Village: aging accentuated by young people leaving rural areas with urban exodus or external, low productivity level, small cultivated surfaces, reticence to association systems, losing the village identity – traditions, culture and local values (Kruszlicika, M., Chiriteanu, V., Gavrilăescu, C., Gavrilă, V., Andrei, D.R., 2014).

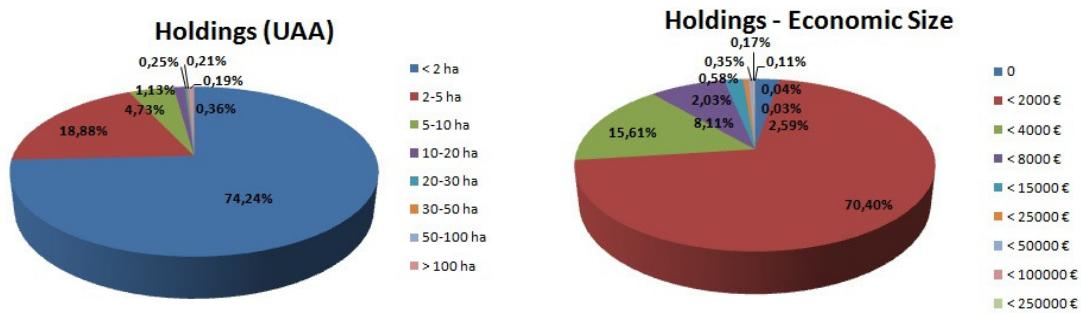


Fig. 1. (a) Structure of Romanian Holdings (UAA); (b) Structure of Romanian Holdings (Economic Size)

Source: Authors processing based on data available from European Commission, DG Agriculture and Rural Development, Agricultural Policy Analysis and Perspectives Unit, June 2014.

Rural tourism represents a development opportunity that can valorize the authentic rural space. Tourism development will contribute to the diminishing of discrepancies between various areas, representing an incomes' increase source for the rural population. The natural landscape, typical for Romania offers excellent possibilities for practicing rural tourism: relaxing in the rural space, trying certain original activities, getting involved into various activities and events for the village life or visiting some attractions that are not available in urban areas (Baltes N, Ciuhureanu A.T., 2009). Thus, rural tourism is becoming increasingly attractive as tourists become more mobile and seek a change from city life. The development of rural tourism is strongly related and conditioned by preserving popular traditions and customs, which represents the heart of rural space. The future trends in the rural hospitality industry include more green and eco-loggings: development of tourist and agrotourist boarding houses, more personalized boutiques, and intelligent tourist boarding houses with advanced technology, more emphasis on the rural activities, more pedestrian journeys (Dorobanțu, M.R., Nistoreanu, P., 2012).

3. The Authentic Traditional Rural Space of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys

Sustainable development of rural areas is one of the strategic priorities for 2014 – 2020 financial programming period, both at county and regional level. One of these strategic priorities is rural tourism. Tourism is the activity that allows rural areas to diversify and move from traditional sectors such as agriculture to a service economy, without having to develop less environmentally-friendly industries (as has been the traditional path to modernization in much of the developed world) (Rural 21; 2012). Tourism development as the objective of sustainable rural development planning for the Ampoi and Mureș Valleys area is referring to the quality of life in this territory, both for locals and tourists. This area has be able to provide quality

experiences for visitors and to preserve the quality of the environment. The area of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys represents a physical-geographical sub-unit of the Alba and Hunedoara Counties, which overlaps two Romanian development regions (Center and West Regions). The area is a traditional rural space which includes Zlatna City and ten communities (Almaşu Mare, Blandiana, Ceru-Băcăinți, Meteş, Pianu, Romos, Săliștea, Săsciori, Șibot and Viță de Jos). The area benefits of natural touristic heritage (natural reservations, beautiful rural landscape) and anthropogenic touristic heritage (ecclesiastic architecture monuments such as monasteries and wooden churches, museums and memorial houses, various periodic events, festivals, local fairs).

The tourism potential of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys area is a particularly rich and diverse that can be valorized in different forms of tourism. Testimonies of ancient civilization in these lands can be restored and placed in the context of thematic tours at county, regional, national and even international level. This includes cities such Dacian fortresses, Tăuți Fortress, Zebernic Fortress, Martinuzzi Castle and similar objectives. Some archaeological sites from this area have been left unprotected, which led to uncontrolled exploitation and disappearance of valuable artifacts (ruins of Dacian fortresses in particular). The Ampoi and Mureş Valleys area includes entirely or partially 14 natural reservations offering to the specialists and researchers in Biology, Entomology and Zoology the natural laboratories for studying different species of plants or animals. Together with the caves present in this territory, the area represents a great potential for developing scientific tourism. Archaeological sites and historical relics discovered can also offer specialized and scientific documentation in various specialized fields: archeology, history, anthropology etc. In terms of tourism potential of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys area, the territory is favored by the density of monuments and national and international programs that have been conducted or are being developed in the territory. According to the list of historical monuments of national importance, published by the Ministry of Culture – National Institute of Historical Monuments (2010), in the analyzed territory there can be met three archaeological sites, three cemeteries, twelve settlements, twenty six churches, two cemeteries, three obelisks and monuments from the same category, four fortresses with towers and enclosure walls, one castle, one mansion, one cloister and one rural ensemble.

Rural space development in Romania was conducted in 2007-2013 period through an instrument for sectorial development planning, respectively the National Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, elaborated by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, in which are analysed the resources and the development perspectives of rural tourism in Romania. The document shows that in 2005 the number of accommodation places in tourism pensions has reached 22,061, among which 50.5% in rural space and the rural tourism development depends on the existence and quality of tourist guesthouses, the presence of some various types of activities, the elements of folklore, the ethnographic regions and the practicing of agriculture and viticulture favorable to agritourism. Even the agro-tourism and rural tourism, forms of tourism related to the farm activities, generate alternative revenues and provide opportunities for rural development, in Romania is necessary a process of modernization, development and innovation of this form of tourism, the creation of modern and competitive services. The tourism in rural spaces is affected by the lack of organization, the insufficient promotion and limited dissemination of information in tourist centers, but also the limited number of these centers which activate at national and international level, the existence of an infrastructure that does not satisfy the tourism requirements in terms of accommodation and recreational structures as well as the general access infrastructure (Zaman Gh., Vasile V., Goschin Z., Rosca R., 2012; Zaman Gh., Goschin Z., 2005; Zaman Gh., Goschin Z., 2006). Sustainable development of rural areas represents the purpose of rural development policy that focuses on three commonly objectives: (1) improving the competitiveness of agriculture and forestry, (2) supporting land management and improving the environment and (3) improving the quality of life and encouraging diversification of economic activities. A thematic axis corresponds to each core objective in the rural development programs: Leader axis dedicated to the Leader approach.

Leader approach offers a new opportunity for the development of rural communities through the organization of the Local Action Groups, which must consider the problems the territory faces, to define

strategy, prioritize objectives and implement its development program rural. Leader methodology involves the cooperation of members of rural communities, entrepreneurs and public authorities in a public-private partnership to help revive rural communities by creating jobs, diversifying the rural economy and the value of cultural heritage. Because rural areas are very different and specific, the fundamental concept underlying the Leader approach assumes that development strategies are more effective and efficient if are decided and implemented at local level by local actors using clear and transparent procedures and benefiting of the support of relevant public administrations (Gavrilă-Paven I., 2013). Leader is an important instrument for Romania in reducing economic and social disparities and disparities between urban and rural areas. In Romania, the implementation of Leader through the Local Action Groups (LAGs) began in 2007-2013 through regional development policy. In the period 2011-2012, national territory was covered by 163 LAGs on a surface of approximate 142,000 km², representing about 63% of the eligible surface and about 58% of the eligible population. In the short period of implementation of local development strategies and operation of the LAGs, it was shown that on the basis of its specificity, the Leader approach can contribute to a balanced development of the Leader and can accelerate their structural evolution. Leader represents a key tool for rural development, given the fact that current services do not meet the basic needs of the population in Leader areas or social conditions.

4. Advantages and Limits for Tourism Development in Area of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys

4.1. Tourism Development Advantages for Ampoi and Mureş Valleys

In recent decades tourism activity had an upward trend, multiplying forms of tourism and thus ensuring better use of tourism resources. But taking into account that the development of tourism activity was made possible through the development of the society, which is based on technical progress and economic development, it should be analyzed also the effects on the environment. Between tourism and environment there is a complex relationship: developing tourism activity involves paying attention to the environment through conservation and development of its quality in the touristic areas or to go ahead and control the consequences of tourism activity, in order to assure the sustainable use of tourism resources.

Analyzing the experience of different European countries in tourism in recent years, it appears that attention is given to the management of natural and human resources. In many cases the damage that occurred on the environment or tourism resources are caused by free access of visitors to the touristic sights. Since 1968, Italian economist Garret Mardi underlined that, in the event that a natural or cultural resource is available to all users, will be exploited and could reach up to destruction.

Sustainable tourism requires the development of all forms of tourism that respect the integrity of natural, social and economic environment by rational exploitation of natural and cultural resources, offering to the future generations equal opportunities to benefit of the same conditions. Tourism development in the area of Ampoi and Mures Valleys is an opportunity for the development of this community, under certain conditions, which can determine: (1) population growth in destination areas; (2) stimulation and increasing interest in environmental conservation and cultural heritage, and (3) a strong dependence of tourism demand for this area and the local environment, especially how the quality will be maintained as the number of tourists in the area will increase.

Tourism evolution in Alba and Hunedoara Counties recorded in the last years ascendant trends, together with the tendency of increasing the period of staying (the average in the last years is 1.7 days/tourist). Still, the accommodation capacity remains polarized around the cities, recording a low level of occupation level (the average is up to 20%). Analyzing the types of tourist accommodation units in the territory of the Local Action Group Ampoi and Mures Valleys, it can be seen that prevails tourist boarding houses, representing 69% of all registered accommodation units in the territory. The presence of these types of units is evident for rural tourism

development in the planning, development of indicators related to the number of tourists, highlighting the preference for weekend tourism, especially from urban areas that are starting to prefer oasis of tranquility and beauty they discovered nearby. Add to this the emergence of rural tourism, 13%, tourist cabins, 12%, and 6% tourist stops. These forms recorded officially, are being completed by agro-hostels that offer tourists their own agricultural products, prepared according to regional culinary traditions and bring tourists in activities of daily life of the locals of rural communities and unregistered units but receiving tourists, especially weekends, giving possibility of experiencing life in a rural households.

Among the investments made in the territory to support the development of tourism activity, through Leader initiative, it should be mentioned the projects financed from the Local Action Group of Ampoi and Mures Valleys Area. During the period 2011 – 2014 there were financed three projects, one for the construction of rural locations, one for building a mini-football field covered and the third project aiming to build a tourist information center.

Sustainable tourism is the activity that protects the countryside more than intensive industries that are using resource (mining, construction etc.), but it is influenced by the impact of these industries on the environment. Rural tourism does not require large investments for infrastructure and supra-structure facilities or other facilities and does not produce urban agglomeration such as tourist resorts. Thus, rural tourism can be the key factor in rural development and in winning the *loisir* basic function, with multiple development possibilities. It also offers for the low-income households the opportunity for rest and recreation, leisure vacation or weekends in the authentic rural space. Rural tourism should be developed so that agriculture and forestry, activities identified in the Local Action Group as priorities, should not be overlooked. Thus, tourism will be developed as a complementary activity without transforming artisanal workshops into boutiques or souvenir shops.

4.2. Tourism Development Limits for Ampoi and Mureş Valleys

Like other sectors, tourism can have both positive and negative effects on the environment. Tourism is the activity that stimulates action to protect the environment, monuments and sites, flora and fauna. But, still the touristic activity is the reason for which were established the national parks and protected areas. These natural areas are particularly attractive to tourists and are the basis, the foundation, for ecotourism. In addition, the economic effects of this activity are felt by increasing development of the area by generating jobs and reducing unemployment.

Natural or anthropogenic environment is the base resource for tourism industry. If this resource is not used rationally, it can lead eventually to damage and even destruction of that resource. Tourism is often viewed as a harmless form of industrial development compared to other industries. However, the destructive actions of tourism activities may occur through misconception and equipment recovery of tourist areas or tourist intervention on the landscape and natural resources. These harmful actions are found in areas of high attractiveness, in polluted areas or near large urban areas and in view of the fact that tourism is continuously developing, they are more intense and varied from year to year. These are multiply by the absence of regulations referring to tourist behavior and insufficient monitoring of touristic areas and touristic sights (Bran, F., Simon, T., Nistoreanu, P., 2000). The main factors leading to this situation are: (1) the uncontrolled movement of tourists outside marked trails, especially in natural and protected areas, which attract tourist flows mainly during weekend and lead to destruction of vegetation, flora, rocks peeling, breaking trees, improper collection of flora that can cause extinction of species of plants; (2) intense visitation of historic monuments, architecture and art in poor lighting using candles, which together with the lack of ventilation of the facilities are leading to degradation of monasteries frescoes, paintings of historical monuments and art objects; (3) lack of demarcation for resting places and camping areas, which is allowing the installation in areas of high attractiveness affecting the landscape and the natural environment; (4) developing systemized tourist settlements, which are leading to overload of the territory with construction of tourist resorts and urbanization

that is affecting the ecological balance; (5) poor facilities for visiting the caves which may lead to partial or total loss of their natural elements, together with the establishment of a dense network of paths, roads and transport cable in the mountains that can affect the landscape; (6) misconception to exploit tourism resources resulting mainly from oversized resorts in terms of reception capacity and treatment compared with the resources designated for a rational exploitation.

Considering the action of these factors, tourism activity can generate a series of negative effects on the natural environment, which may include: changes in ecosystems, intensive urbanization of the area and its degradation, speculative pressures exerted on arable land (determining optimal use in agriculture or construction), air pollution due to road congestion, excessive consumption of the local water reserves, local groundwater pollution.

Tourism development can have negative effects upon social and cultural environment, such as: loss of identity and cultural traditions of the local community, loss of traditional occupations, limiting career opportunities due to economic domination of tourism, poor professional motivation (in many cases staff consists of young working only season in that location), competition between residents and tourists regarding the purchase or rental of a building, any social security issues etc. In this context, developing a unified strategy in tourism, in the analyzed territory, which is meeting the objectives set at the county, regional and national levels, is necessary for a coherent development of the area.

Negative effects increase with the level of tourism development. Socio-economic changes take place much faster if they are due to the intervention of external factors. In these circumstances, it is difficult for traditional professions to find a space of their own, although there are exceptions in this regard. At the same time, development of tourism in less developed areas of economic, determines the dependence of these areas on tourism, discouraging other productive activities and thus preventing a possible diversification of the local economy.

5. Conclusions

Economic well-being and social progress depend on exploiting natural resources and activities that have a particularly large impact on the environment. Thus, tourism development should be assessed in each community, its resources and how they can be operated without risk of damage or degrade them. Rural tourism, in recent years, recorded an upward trend in terms of tourism demand. This has led tourism and services operators for the rural communities to have a new economic and social perspective. Rural tourism offers different alternative consequences of massive urbanization, represented by keeping the particularities of the local community with everything that involves life in rural areas. The countryside is a special destination recommended by the diversity of local and/or regional specificities, traditions preservation, quality of movement and communication networks in developed Western countries, natural landscape protection and enhancement, historical and cultural heritage and hospitality of its people.

Development of rural tourism in the territory of Ampoi and Mures Valleys, can play an important role in rural development at local, county and regional level. The specific of the analyzed territory is the rural character, even Zlatna Town showing a high degree of rural character, and it offers a complex and varied tourism potential. The settlements from different historical time, with buildings in various architectural styles specific to the local community, developed over time, with customs, traditions and specific lifestyles, are attracting tourists which desire to know and live these experiences. The territory is endowed with a generous nature and numerous archaeological remains, and should be turned so that the investments are not transforming villages into towns, the authenticity of houses is not destroyed, and traditions and customs are not lost. Rural tourism is not a mass tourism. Each rural tourism offer or tourism homestead is unique in its own way, through the features and characteristics of the components. A special place is given to agritourism, which is offering to tourists the opportunity to become directly involved in the activities of the peasant household.

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