

## ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM: STATUS AND PROSPECTS BY INNOVATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACHES

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### **Abstract**

*Romania's tourism potential is becoming visible by various investment projects that allow its valuation by domestic and foreign tourists. Rural areas are major contributors to the overall tourism potential and their supply is addressing fast growing trends in tourist's preferences. The analysis aims to highlight the main strengths and weaknesses of Romania's rural areas in the perspective of tourism development, as being the basis for optimistic and pessimistic scenarios. A number of innovative tourism products are proposed in order to overcome the lack of financial resources and low interest of local authorities. It results that by supply chain management for local resources and association for increasing the local value added the contribution of rural tourism to sustainable development could be significantly increased.*

**Key words:** *rural tourism, traditions, nature, Romania, innovative products*

**JEL Classification:** *L83, O18*

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The process of globalization expanded over tourism too, since tourist flows cover the entire surface of the Earth and the phenomenon is continuing to develop due to the higher life expectancy of developed countries' inhabitants, their raised incomes and appetite for knowledge and entertainment, but also because of the existence of a standardized infrastructure and tourism products that are also very diversified, addressing a wide range of needs expressed by tourists and host communities.

Out of the hundred types of tourism that are practiced today, the rural tourism has an important market share determined by its diverse attractions such as: discovery of nature, people, and rural culture, praising of environmental factors' quality, culinary inedited, historical forays, natural reserves or manmade elements (Authors, 2004). Rural tourism should be recognized as one of the most important means that allows modern people, inhabitants of cities to meet the environment in that their ancestors lived for thousands of years (Authors, 2009; Authors, 2008).

### **II. CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS AND**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

Tourism is defined as a recreational or sport activity that consists in crossing by foot or by different transportation means a region that is beautiful or interesting from a certain point of view (Bran, Manea et al., 2011).

We suggest widening this definition by adding as components of tourism activity new areas of interest stemming in the human knowledge need, voluntary activities for environmental protection, practicing hobbies using tourism means, health care by various therapies, proximity tourism, spiritual interests, shopping etc. Author (1979) discovers the engine of human existence as being the pleasure of living. Completing this with the desire to know – the engine of human progress – we suggest as content for the modern notion of tourism activities that allow the satisfaction of these two needs of humans. This interpretation of tourism definition allowed as identifying the tourism attractions of the Romanian village that could be emphasized and promoted.

The paper follows the logic of a SWOT analysis that result in a plausible offer of Romanian rural tourism services.

### III. PREMISES OF ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

The Romanian rural area covers most of the 237500 square kilometers of the country. More than 40% of the population lives in 2688 villages placed in a very varied relief from plains to hills and mountains that allow a great diversification of the tourism offer (Authors, 2011). Unfortunately, not all the facts are in favor of rural areas. There are also contexts or historical evolutions that are not advantageous. The most important characteristics that should be considered for tourism planning are:

- Depopulation of villages due to the migration of youth is a real phenomenon that appeared after 1990 and had disastrous effects on rural demography, economy, and culture. Many rural settlements are so depopulated that they cannot be considered in the assessment of tourism potential. It is possible that around two million people emigrated for finding jobs and means of economic survival;
- Hoping to return many rural inhabitants restored their homes or built new ones providing them with all modern facilities that are usual in urban areas, creating an important real estate heritage for the rural areas. In addition, the ones who are returning are speakers of one or two foreign languages and adopted modern behavior;
- The minimal infrastructure needed for tourism (transportation networks, accommodation, comfort, access to services like post, health assistance, police, trade of artifacts and traditional food products etc.) does not comply always with the needs of competitive European tourism (Authors, 2013). Unfortunately there is no national program for a coordinated approach of improvement of rural infrastructure on short and medium term. There are a number of initiatives for building accommodation structures, although they are concentrated in the mountain area (Prahova Valley, Moeciu etc.). These succeed quite well in providing tourism services;
- The rural area is still not ready to deliver and manage tourism services at a level that is in accordance with the high value of the tourism potential and is able to face the competition with other European countries. Therefore it is advisable to address initially the domestic market in order to allow hosts to adjust their behavior and attitude for the new type of relation with tourists;
- Training of tourism personnel is almost as important as tourism infrastructure. The experience of neighborhood countries could be very helpful in this respect. The training should include also local public authorities (mayors,

counselors) that should collaborate with entrepreneurs, ex-emigrants who have capital, but also with the population to improve its motivation.

Since not all the premises of Romanian rural tourism are favorable, it could be concluded that an intensive organizational, investment, and training effort should be assigned in order to transform tourism in a meaningful economic engine for rural sustainable development.

### IV. RATIONAL FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism is first of all a form of expression of ancient human spirit with different nomination: traveling for widening knowledge horizon, living area, establishing and strengthening relations with new communities for mutual economic and cultural advantages. Step by step this lead to hundreds of tourism forms that mirror the diversity and complexity of the contemporary world.

For many countries, tourism is an important source of income, generator of jobs and supporter of entire settlements and geographic areas by the valuation of renewable resources (Authors, 2013).

Romania's interest for rural tourism could be an important goal of the country's development strategy (that does not exist as thought or legal document), since it could have the following impacts (Authors, 2012):

- Survival of villages by the revival of economic activity and stabilization of the population;
- Attractive perspective for young people to return from abroad;
- Safeguarding of crafts and culture that in other way will be irreversibly lost;
- Providing an alternative to the current continuous growth of modern cities that is in opposition with the concept of sustainable development. Only villages are sustainable on the long run, since they rely almost entirely on local renewable resources;
- Transforming the rich and diversified tourism potential in a significant income source for the local and national budgets;
- Creating a source of income for population that is based on a high value added activity which is contrast with agriculture;
- Modernization of village by developing the basic infrastructure needed to improve rural people's life quality (comfort, quality public services) and by valuing innovation, talent and traditional knowledge;
- Increasing the educational level of rural inhabitants by facing them with the need to communicate with tourists.

These favorable impacts could be canceled by negative ones such as overwhelming of local culture by tourism industry, pollution and degradation of natural assets (Authors, 2011). Most of negative impacts could be prevented by a proper organization and well-targeted protection measures.

#### V. ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

The rural areas of Romania are very rich in tourism attractions, although most of them are offset by poor infrastructure and low interest for tourism activities. A short-list of the most important assets that could be supportive for the development of Romania rural tourism is presented in box 1.

##### Box 1 – Strengths of Romanian rural tourism

Natural ecosystems of tourism interest.  
 High quality of environmental factors that are not affected by human activities.  
 Flora and fauna rich in rare species.  
 Traditional or organic agri-food products (fruits, wines, vegetables, meat, dairy, sweets etc.).  
 Hospitality of inhabitants.  
 Local culinary novelties.  
 Mineral and thermal springs officially recognized for their therapeutic effect.  
 Modern houses built in the last ten years that could be used well in tourism activities.  
 Plenty of historic, natural, and spiritual attractions (fortresses, museums, reserves and Natura 2000 sites, churches, monasteries etc.).  
 Traditional crafts, events, collections.  
 Favorable climate in all seasons.  
 Relief for the pursuit of sport performance: mountain trails and waters, fishing and hunting, biking, hiking, trekking etc.  
 Rich local culture expressed in fiestas, fairs, clothing, songs and dances, customs, legendary places etc.  
 Well organized households, modern farms that could support local tourism.  
 Human resource readily available for investments and projects.

These strengths should be interpreted considering the following aspects:

- There is a real potential of investment for the modernization of the village and for creating the conditions of competitive tourism. These funds are provided by the European Union, returning local people who are willing to invest in profitable businesses in the rural area, and private funds. Nevertheless, the absorption of European funds is hindered by low institutional capacity, bureaucracy, and corruption. Emigrants sent in Romania between 2 and 8 billion euro in

the last ten years. Restoring the agricultural banks that existed until the middle of the XX<sup>th</sup> century in almost all Romania's villages (4) would facilitate investments in the rural area and, thus, the local economy;

- There are examples of foreign citizens who decided to establish their residence in the Romanian countryside by managing a household that has tourism functions too. Their example should be carefully considered by local authorities in order to be transformed in a powerful incentive for rural youth;
- The example of Prince Charles of Great Britain in prizing the Romanian village in Viscri, Transylvania is not popularized enough and not well understood by the rural population of Romania being undervalued in economically and demographically viable settlements;
- There are many examples of good practices for rural tourism (for instance Moeciu village) and these should be popularized and pursued in other villages too.

It should be recognized the existence of major gaps between the Romanian rural and the one of the neighborhood or other European countries where modern tourism was developed gradually in accordance with its contribution to the national GDP or the number of foreign tourists that visited the country and that often exceeds the number of domestic tourists.

The barriers and difficulties that hinder the development of Romanian rural areas with impact on rural tourism too are numerous, but most of them could be managed if certain conditions are met. In box 2 there are presented a number of weaknesses of Romanian rural tourism.

##### Box 1 – Weaknesses of Romanian rural tourism

Rural tourism is not a priority goal of local public authorities.  
 The adaptation of the activities deployed in villages to the promotion and providing of tourism services is a slow process, unevenly distributed and lacking strategic guidelines.  
 There is no national strategy that is viable on long run for the development of rural areas and rural tourism. Nevertheless, the National Rural Development Program and certain tourism strategies (The National Strategy for the Development of the Ecotourism) by providing highlights and support on priorities could serve as meaningful guidance in this respect.  
 The Romanian village continues to devolve, especially in mountain and hill areas.  
 Incomplete general and tourism infrastructure: transportation, public services, training of the personnel.  
 The aspect of settlements and safety conditions (stray

dogs, thieves) could be significantly improved.

The tourism offer of most settlements is to be created and the support for the development of competitive tourism products is to be obtained.

Low interest and effort invested in valuing the rich tourism potential, at least compared with neighborhood countries.

Lack of additional tourism services for entertainment, outdoor and indoor recreation, including trading local handcraft and other souvenirs.

## VI. OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMANIAN RURAL TOURISM

Romania is in an initial stage in the organization of rural tourism. The interest for the development of rural tourism should increase especially for villages located in hill and mountain regions where small households are prevalent and the alternative income from tourism is making the greatest difference since the current status of these households is quite poor.

The Romanian rural is severely devolving due to a number of factors such as: migration, depopulation, ageing labor, fallow of agricultural land, atomization of property over land, loss food independence, major difficulties in the commercialization of agricultural products, and severe aversion against association among rural producers toward a better adaptation to the requirements of modern markets.

The devolvement process is not so severe in several areas. In these villages the inhabitants, entrepreneurs, initiators and returned emigrants started the modernization of household and their opening toward tourism activities. There were examples of good practices before 1990 too, especially where the potential for therapeutic and spa tourism was high.

Considering this configuration of the main drivers and barriers for tourism development it is possible to sketch a number of tourism products that could be provided in rural areas on short term. For their organization and promotion there are needed less financial resources, being more important the effort of organization and motivation of local people (Authors, 2013). There are envisaged especially domestic tourists, although foreign tourists could be also considered, especially by following the model of Viscari. These products might be: holiday grandparents, convalescence stages, practice and demonstrative workshops for amateurs and/or tourists, interactive tourism forms, valuing mineral and therapeutic springs, holiday houses, renting of small plots of arable land, annual encounters with the sons of the village, interest areas for religious tourism, rural tourism for shopping, and cattle keeping in the

mountain areas.

*Holiday grandparents.* This is an old practice that was verified in time. It consists in sending children during their holiday in rural areas to their grandparents or if they had not to other persons who may host them. Children are faced with the rural world, nature in all its diversity, while they consume healthy local food. Then the hosts are the grandparents of the children such activity would represent a source of supplementary incomes. The organization of this activity depends on the possibility to obtain an official recognition for the status of adoptive grandparents. It could be offered by the local public administration. Further, the activity should be deployed based on a contract that establishes the responsibilities of adoptive grandparents and o parents. If it is organized properly the program of holiday grandparents could have a real success by bringing benefits for both parts: parents of the children and host grandparents.

*Convalescence stages* consists hosting a person from urban environment who should recover from various illnesses by staying in clean rural environment that is quite and provide healthy food and a warm familiar context.

*Practice and demonstrative workshops for amateurs and/or tourists.* These could be organized along the craftsmen of villages. Greater interest is for pottery, wood sculpture, craft products, fabrics, glaze painting etc. The products could be sold directly in the workshop.

*Interactive tourism forms.* These include helping out in various activities of a rural household (hoeing, harvesting etc.) in various seasons. The volunteer receives food and shelter. In Apuseni Mountains, a Belgian a mind woman who defended the integrity and quality of the natural environment by fighting against the exploitation of golden ores by using cyanides opened a tourism hostel that could be rented entirely by a family of tourists for the duration of a holiday. The business is viable and could be extended for the households of local inhabitants.

*Valuing mineral springs with therapeutic effects.* Romania is very rich in such resources. For instance, only in Bacau county, 40-50 years ago were tested and recognized for therapeutic effects around 80 springs by the Institute of Balneology and Physiotherapy from Bucharest (Cinca, 2010). Most of these springs are spread all over the area of the county and there is no coordinated action or planning for their valuation. Yet such a valuable resource, that is free, could be used by local people and by tourists who could treat various health issues while being hosted in rural households.

*Holiday houses* that could have a positive effect on rural economy: create jobs, represent a market for agricultural and food products, generate revenue by taxes and fees collected by the city hall, develop personal relations etc. City hall could be

involved in the facilitation of such a project by establishing the location and the houses that could be sold in order to be transformed in holiday houses, securing the basic infrastructure and access by public roads (Author, 2013). The exodus of Saxons from Romania was an important loss for the rural economy, culture and society. Interest of some of them for their country of origin is a reality that shows then they participate in local events like religious processes, various anniversaries, cultural and artistic fairs etc. Their interest in having a holiday house is also real. There could be initiated and arrangement by public institutions for facilitating the satisfaction of this desire.

*Renting of small plots of arable land* for the practice of agriculture as a hobby by urban people. This project could be applied in villages situated in the proximity of cities. The international experience in rich such initiatives that proved to be in the favor of the village: revenue for local budgets, selling of seeds and other agricultural inputs, selling of agricultural products, hosting some of the amateurs etc.

*Periodical encounters (preferably annual) with the sons of the village.* These encounters allow interesting contacts between authorities and people originating from those villages in terms of exchange of ideas for local development, better knowledge of economic potential and on how it could be valued more efficiently, tourism services for guests etc. A mayor from Switzerland publishes for the sons of the village a trimestral newsletter that comprises the novelties occurring in the rural area. He was surprised by the fact that the number of subscriptions was larger than the number of inhabitants. The section of announcements became of mutual interest (Authors, 2007).

*Interest areas for religious tourism.* The religious tourism is well organized all over the country being favored by the large number of religious objectives with high attractiveness and a good management back-upped by endowment with modern transportation means. The large tourist flows, especially pilgrims, in their way to and from monasteries, goes through many villages with no stop due to the lack basic and specific tourism services: selling of crafts, food products, snacks, and even hosting. Short cultural moments could be considered along with the show up of a local public figure – mayor, priest etc.

*Rural tourism for shopping.* This type of activity is very poorly represented, although the potential exists consisting in: agricultural and food products, alcoholic beverages, sweets, forest fruits, honey, rustic furniture, crafts etc. There are no or very few selling points for such products. Swiss tourists who passed through Romania by bike several years in a row complained that they did not find in our villages a restaurant where to take the daily three meals and

any indication that they could be hosted for 1-2 days. Stray dogs were their fiercest enemy in their rural routes.

*Cattle keeping in mountain areas.* In countries like Switzerland or Austria there are two types of relation between urban people and nature that are difficult to be included in the definition of rural tourism. The first case is about volunteers, usually students, who help out shepherds and cattle keepers during holiday. The second case there are used the buildings from mountains like sheepfolds, houses from Apuseni Mountains etc. that are not used due to the decrease in number sheep or cattle. These buildings could become tourism shelters, temporary refugees, or holiday houses.

The above mentioned options for rural tourism on short term suggests the idea that this type of tourism is addressed mainly to the domestic market, leaving room for authorities and local people to get prepared for receiving foreign tourists too. This does not mean that currently there are no villages prepared to host tourists from abroad. Their example could catalyze the transformations that should occur in villages envisaging this path for their development.

Learning from the experience of the last fifty years could and should be a preoccupation for the authorities since there are eloquent examples of good and very good organization of rural tourism for Romanian and from foreign tourists especially in regions with therapeutic resources (for instance, Geoagiu village in Hunedoara county).

For the regions of villages from plain, dominated by industrialized agriculture employed for large areas with minimum involvement of labor could be considered several of the above mentioned propositions.

The tourism in the Danube Delta was not mentioned in this paper because we consider that this region should not be exposed for mass tourism. In addition, we stress the need to ban hunting in this area, which should be considered and ecological crime since it impacts on passing bird populations, a treasure of humankind not living target for domestic or foreign amateurs. Similar but more protective tourism products could be developed by flooding of previously drained Danube Pools and gradual transfer of fishing from the Danube Delta in these pools.

The lack of public intervention for the development of Romanian rural tourism leaves little optimistic previsions. The rural environment will continue to devolve, while modern agriculture will fail to create as many jobs as there are needed. Small households focusing on agriculture are, on the other hand, unable to compete with larger producer and have little or no access on market.

The latest policies of the European Union encourage young people to establish their residence in rural areas by a number of financial support measures

(Authors, 2009). The concept of sustainability, already accepted as basis for the policy making in agriculture, finds its best illustration in case of small rural households that are able to value especially local and renewable resources. Thus there are created the premises to reconsider the place and role of small scale agriculture within the economic system and this hopefully will push toward national policies that are able to stop the devolvement of the agriculture and of the rural life.

By continuing the current trends most of the weaknesses identified in box 2 for rural tourism will deepen, while the expectation is to have policies able to value the competitive advantages mentioned in box 1 for the same activity with major impact on rural economy especially in mountain areas (Authors, 2009).

Out of the solutions proposed by specialists we consider important the project for the development of rural areas based on supply chains that value the natural and human resources owned by each settlement. By this local households provide processed food products instead of raw agricultural products. Such scheme will be possible by the association of small farmers at the level of a village envisaging to process the agricultural products by using industrial machinery established on specially designed industrial platform. These units could be supported financially by public funds, but also by the participants to the association, given that they are engaged in other income generating activities that high value added (4).

Rural tourism is occurring in a similar scenario,

since it should be supported by a level of organization and performance that on a long term transforms it in a competitive economic activity, comparable with modern tourism.

Transforming the realistic scenario in an economic reality supposes major efforts on the behalf of local and central public authorities, but also for households. The challenges are important and they cannot be addressed properly if the quality of decision making is not improved and the aversion against association among rural active people is not reduced.

## VII.CONCLUSIONS

The village is devolving and this process is occurring not only in Romania. It goes on with serious consequences for the rural inhabitants and for the national economies. The rural tourism has a meaningful role to play especially in villages where devolution stagnated or does not have been produced.

Romania has important economic potential for the development of villages, regarded as association of small households. This could imply the development of tourism too, but depends on a prospective thinking and strategic guidelines to be established by decision makers. We recommend revisiting Seneca's statement that *Gods do not send favorable winds in the sail of ships that have no clue about where to go*.

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