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The role of public-private partnership in the sustainable development of the rural tourist destinations

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The perspectives of the international tourism development justify the interest about the touristic specialization of many rural regions. Such an orientation may however generate high opportunity costs, if it's not founded on an analysis of the competitive advantages, of the demand and supply and the market tendencies. The results also depend on the founding of a sustainable touristic development strategy, considering not only the economic aspects, but also environment, social and ethic aspects. This implies, first of all, a general strategy for development and a perfect correlation between all its components. Thus, an essential role is given to the partnership between the firms of the tourist channel, between these firms and firms of complementary fields and between public and private partners.

The present study includes an analysis of the necessity and of the roles of the public-private partnership in the sustainable development of the rural tourist destinations and it is organized in four parts.

In the first part, I presented the particular aspects of the relationship tourism – development in the rural environment; the second part includes a proposition for a system of coordinates in order to create a development strategy for the rural areas. From the first two parts it results the necessity and the role of the public-private partnership in assuring the sustainability of the rural tourist destinations.

The third part suggests some forms and objectives of the public-private partnership, with reference to the sustainable development principles. The last part describes a model for the marketing of rural destinations based on natural and cultural resources, applied in the North-East Region of Romania, a mainly rural region.

Key words: sustainable tourism, rural tourist destinations, cultural tourism, eco-tourism, regional tourist product, public – private partnership, Romania's North-East region

The dynamics of tourism industry, considering the fact that the economic reality proved an important stimulating impact on receiving economies, made certain communities under crisis and lacking resources, but enjoying natural, landscape and cultural attractions, choose **tourism as economic development and social progress factor**. Tourism can contribute, by the specificity of its activities (trans-sectoriality, use of local resources, mainly artisan offer, capacity to create new jobs by imposing limits on productivity, short time trainings at the working place, increased dynamics, more ample multiplying effects than the traditional activities with which they are competing in relation to alternative resources), to *general economic development* and to *support the areas in difficulty*. Moreover, the high degree of production and consumption internalization stimulates *international cooperation*, provides *the integration of receiving regions in the international circuit of values*, contributes to *communication and mutual respect of values*

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between populations belonging to different social-cultural systems and can be real support for world sustainable development.

The development of a region tourist function is accompanied by **negative effects** as well: *natural landscape resources are an essential component of offer, without being considered in the calculation of the production cost; many areas register a tourist load over the absorption and regeneration capacity of the receiving area, affecting the environment and biodiversity (the natural heritage is damaging); the architecture of tourist infrastructure has often little to do with the local architecture; the used labour force is seasonal, under qualified, without allowing for long term employment or opportunities concerning the professional career; the foreign capital (especially the one in the accommodation industry) calls on little to local resources and generates reduced multiplying effects; the cultural, religious and traditional values enter a system of excessive trade risking to devaluate and lose identity.*

Within the rural area, the relation gets a series of peculiarities which, on the one hand, make more attractive the appeal to tourism as a stimulating factor of local economy and, on the other hand, make more relative the role of tourism in ensuring sustainable development.

1. Specific aspects of the relation between tourism and development in the rural environment

The World Tourism Organization estimates that the following ten years will register an increase over the average number in the alternative tourist flows (other than the classical holidays of mass tourism in resorts), which will be about 20% of the market. An important place will be held by rural tourism. Nowadays, 70% of Americans take part in different activities specific for the rural tourism and 23% (average) of Europeans cite the village as their favourite destination for the holidays.

The increased interest for the rural tourism is due, on the one hand, to the attraction of the rural civilization as an alternative to standardize the daily events and to the moral crisis of post-industrial society and, on the other hand, to tourism development public policies in the rural area as a sector able to improve the quality of life and to contribute to the equilibrium of rural life. *The use of tourism as a factor of the rural area sustainable development is conditioned by taking into account the specificity elements of the relation between tourism and rural development.*

A. The stimulating effects and structural frailty

Tourism is a complex set of specific goods and services (hotels and similarly, restoration, brokerage, promotion, transport and entertainment activities), but also of infrastructure products and general equipment: different distribution networks, mail and telecommunications services, commercial services, equipment and public services, local transport and communication. Thus, it has a *high potential to generate multiplying effects for transactions, production, income and jobs*, can contribute to the dynamics of agriculture and forestry, to stimulate services, the craftsmanship industry, building and transports. Yet, reality proves that *the stimulation of local economy is strictly related to the degree of diversification and the level of development of the local economy*. The rural areas are characterized by high structural frailty, sometimes even by mono-production, low quality of services and labour force, low supply elasticity by structural non-correlation between the supply and the local production, rigidity to changes and rejection of the new things within the more traditional communities. Hence difficulties in developing viable tourist business and the creation of necessary tourist structures, on the one hand, and reduced chances of stimulating the receptive economy, on the other hand. In some

situations, (depending on the type of market and level of development of the local economy), expenses for the supply from sources outside the region can go up to 80-85% from cashes. Least but not last, the structural frailty of the rural regions emphasizes the vulnerability of local economy by the degree of “external” dependency specific for tourism.

B. The entrepreneur spirit and entrepreneurship quality

It has been noticed that, under a favourable context for tourist development, a small part of the population and local entrepreneurs integrate in the tourist market. This is due to, partly, reduced efficiency provided by business in tourism (mainly small and medium), but especially to the lack of entrepreneurship spirit necessary to start new business, together with the low investment resources. Least but not last, the tourist market is concurrent, dynamic, vulnerable and supposes a relatively high quality of entrepreneurship, in comparison to other activities. Hence the prevalence of “external” entrepreneurs, who understand less the receptor environment and are less interested in the negative impact of their business on the natural, ecological, cultural or economic environment. Moreover, they appeal less to the local economy, have a high level of income “repatriation” and generate lower stimulating effects.

Yet, they compensate for the lack of local initiative, bring about capital and qualified labour force and stimulate the local business, contributing to launch again the competition spirit.

C. The role of tourism in employing the labour force

Tourism is an intensive labour activity and can thus contribute not only to the preservation of jobs, but also to the creation of new direct and indirect jobs. The balancing function, very important for the rural areas, is not only stimulated by the capacity to generate job stimulating and multiplying effects, but also by the type of direct jobs: low level of qualification, leading to professional mobility; seasonality; atypical program (different schedules in comparison to other activities, especially in the agricultural and week-end activities), providing the possibility of occupying partial time; prevalence of specializations which are traditionally only for women and young people, considering the fact that unemployment occurs especially at the level of these categories; average income exceeding other traditional activities (agriculture, extractive industry, agro-alimentary industry), able to ensure the improvement of life conditions.

At the same time, we have to consider the fact that competitive tourism, especially on the alternative tourism markets, supposes high competences, while the level of education and professional training in the rural areas are, most of the time, relatively low. That is why tourism business have a high level of bankruptcy (increase in unemployment), and where it succeeds, it usually appeals to local labour force for the so-called inferior low paid jobs, while the managing and conception jobs come from the immediate or import urban environment in the case of huge projects.

Consequently, the multiplication of income risks to be low. Moreover, tourism occupations suppose seasonal activities, atypical schedule, low career possibilities, direct contact with the clients, high level of vulnerability towards the tourist flows with high risks of losing the job, all these increasing the opportunity cost for placing the labour force on this market.

D. Social-cultural heritage

Tourism provides the necessary frame for a better mutual understanding of history, culture, traditions, by promoting harmonious relations through mutual respect for

values; it generates effects of reviving the receptor environment and stimulating the social progress; it ensures cultural “supra-valorisation” by extending and diversifying the target markets; it contributes to increasing the level of culture or, at least, to acquiring new information and knowledge which are otherwise non-accessible; it promotes modernity by making more the flexible the traditional social structures which are strictly hierarchic. If tourism is organized within totally integrated group packages (for example, circuits or sojourns in holiday villages) and if it means the contact between different social-cultural systems – the specific case of rural receiving areas, the established relationships are short, superficial, stimulate humble behaviour, moral and cultural perverting, lead to social effects that can alter the cultural values, social structure and identity of the receiving environment.

E. Natural heritage

Rural tourism takes place in frail and sensitive natural areas. We may even say that the attractiveness of destinations increases with the ecologic frailty. It results in the increase in the possibilities to benefit from the competitive advantages and incomes that contribute to the preservation and improvement in the environment quality can be generated. Unfortunately, the aggressive consumption and production behaviours, frequent on the tourist market, are greatly detrimental for environment and biodiversity. Without efficient policies for environment protection and social company awareness, which may ensure the balance between tourist flows and the capacity of region tourist loading, to change the production and consumption behaviours towards raising the ecological consciousness, tourism development will end by destroying the key attractiveness elements that have generated it.

On the whole, we may infer that **rural regions raise many constraints upon tourism development**. Although tourism may constitute an important factor of economic development and valorisation of local resources for certain regions, the production and supply peculiarities involve economic, social-cultural and ecological risks, having a negative impact on sustainable development.

Consequently, the improvement of the relation tourism – development cannot take place without a **regional strategy subordinate to the principles and requirements of sustainable development**, based on the diagnosis analysis of the region tourist profile.

2. The coordinates of a strategy for tourism development in the rural area

A strategy to develop the tourist function of a rural region is based on **evaluating the potential and establishing the tourist profile of the concerned region** by: *inventorying the tourist resources* (attractive and functional), *analyzing the demand* (including the potential markets) and *competition* (present and future). The main aim of the analysis is to decide whether a region can be oriented towards tourism as a sustainable development factor or not. It is essential that, in making this decision, the analysis suppose **an integrated view on the tourist resources of a region and take into account not only the existing potential, but also the development potential in relation to the tourist market evolutions**.

An important part in this respect is played by the functional restructuring of the tourist resources, the specialized literature providing many patterns for the marketing of the tourist product. A functional pattern for the rural areas and from the point of view of sustainable development must include, for the analysis of the existing and the definition of the tourist profile, the following types of resources:

- *attractive resources*, with emphasis on those providing a comparative advantage, structured on attractiveness categories, competitive potential and target markets;
- *specific infrastructure*(transport, accommodation, restoration, loisir equipment);
- *general infrastructure* (commercial, medical, communication, public services, banking system, etc);
- *general atmosphere and environment* (landscapes, weather, attitudes, behaviours);
- *legal and political context* (national tourist strategies and existing regional strategies, policies in complementary fields such as SME, transport, environment);
- *public and private actors who are involved or possibly involved*;
- *the existing market* (identification of interest resources for the existing target segments and resources providing competitive advantages);
- *vulnerable resources*.

Once the region tourist profile has been identified and the position on the market has been set, the following stage may be to establish the strong points and the weak points of tourist function development, in relation to the peculiarities of target markets and the supply of competitive regions. If the final evaluation is favourable, the next step is **to set up the strategy**. It cannot be conceived outside the following *minimum coordinates*:

A. Integration of tourism into a unitary conception of regional development (territorial planning).

One of the main causes of the failure of a tourist development project in an area is the lack of a general strategy for the concerned region development or, where it exists, the weak correlation between its elements. Experience shows that the tourism role of stimulating the receiving communities depends on their development level. If the region is already economically integrated and is situated near the issuing centres, tourism can develop and can generate increased multiplying effects. Yet, in many cases, the rural areas are under periphericity (declining little competitive activities, generating relatively low incomes, unprofitable business environment, reduced equipment in the transport infrastructure, weak quality of entrepreneurship and labour force, reduced population density). Under these circumstances, it must show interest from the point of view of the natural and cultural heritage to attract tourist investment. Yet, their impact is not able to generate sustainable effects to stimulate and benefit from the receiving environment unless there is a unitary strategy of territorial planning and regional development.

B. Orientation towards sustainability within the tourist supply and production. The decision of a region to choose tourist development must be conditioned by the adoption of a sustainability strategy, by reaching a balance between the economic, social and environment objectives. According to Agenda 21 for travel and tourism adopted by The World Tourism Organization in 1996, “sustainable tourism meets the necessities of tourists and receiving regions, by protecting and improving the future possibilities (of the future generations to satisfy their needs of tourist consumption – n.n.). This means resource management which should allow for both economic, esthetical and social need satisfaction and the preservation of cultural integrality, ecosystems, biodiversity and life supporting systems.”

A sustainable tourist development means to apply the **sustainability “magic triangle”** (sustainable development, social progress, protection and improvement of environment quality) to the specific nature of the tourist supply and production. The

importance paid to sustainability in developing the tourist function of rural areas is also proved by the fact that, by its definition, rural tourism includes only those activities which, beside taking place in the rural environment, meet the following requirements: they suppose the use of functional elements adapted to life in the countryside, are based on material and spiritual values of the rural world and support long term conservation of “rurality”.

From the economic point of view, sustainability can be ensured by: the use of endogenous development factor, considering the improvement in their quality (especially of functional resources); predominant involvement of local actors; creation of a stimulating business environment for the small and medium companies; increase of competitiveness in the tourist industry and network development. **Ecologic sustainability** suppose the stimulation of consumption and production ecologic practice, means to preserve and improve natural resources, introduce the environment criteria in projects and investment projects, ensure the balance between the dimension of flaws and loading tourist capacity of the receiving area. **Social sustainability** results from: widening access to tourism; improving the labour force quality in tourism, simultaneously with improving the work conditions and access to professional jobs, ensuring chance fairness, increasing the real incomes; fair distribution of benefits between the local actors and the external actors; observing the social and cultural values of the receiving environment; increasing tourism contribution to achieve social cohesion.

An essential role in this perspective could be played by social responsibility of companies, by integrating the social and environment preoccupations into their commercial activities and in the relations between partners.

C. Promotion of responsible tourist consumption (the specialized literature uses the concepts of “sweet” – meaning soft, “alternative” “integrated”, “green”), as a factor of social and cultural development of the receiving communities. One of the defining elements of tourist activities is coincidence of production and consumption. As a consequence, approaching sustainability only from the offer and production point of view is not enough. Sustainable tourism supposes sustainable and clear consumption, tourists assuming attitudes and behaviour depending on the sustainability criteria. 80% of tourist consumption belongs to mass tourism which often leads to the degradation of the receiving natural, cultural and social environment. The target tourist wants to have at the destination the way of living he has been used to so far, he wants to have fun, he is expansive, noisy, and little interested in what the life of the receiving communities is like.

Sustainable tourism should allow for the valorisation of cultural heritage, but to preserve the traditional system of values, together with improving the life conditions of the receiving population. The solution is **to attract those market segments which have already integrated into their consumption patterns the values of sustainable development.** It is appreciated that, nowadays, two third of the market are influenced by new social-cultural behaviour which, at the level of tourist consumption, mean holidays which meet the needs of communication, knowledge, intellectual development and balance. They suppose *a real interest for the values of the receiving area and behaviour which do not alter the social-cultural heritage* as main attraction of rural tourism. Tourists who choose to spend their holidays in rural areas come from higher social-professional categories, with high income and education, who lay emphasis especially on the quality of services, are attracted by nature, culture, traditional life style and spend on holidays more money than the media. It would be an illusion for us to believe that the actual tourist patterns from the rural areas promote such consumption on a large scale. Only when the

consumption behaviour includes the needs for culture, communication and development as essential needs for large segments of tourist demand, may we hope that the rural tourism will valorize the cultural and traditional heritage under a sustainable conception.

D. Ensure coherence of the economic policies. The trans-sectoriality of tourist production conditions the success of a development strategy for the tourist function of a region by the *implementation of structural policies in all the fields involved, as well as horizontal policies to support the effort made by the private actors*. A sectorial approach of the tourist development strategy risks to fail, considering the fact that the tourist market is influenced by several policies: the transport policy, the agricultural policy, the environment policy, the social policy, the budgetary policy, the monetary policy, the education policy, the regional policy and the policy for the consumer protection. Only if these policies succeed in integrating the objectives of the tourist policies as well, is it possible to ensure a social, economic, legislative and institutional environment, favourable for sustainability in the tourist development of a region. Moreover, it is necessary to achieve *the coherence of measures taken at different decision levels* (local, regional, national).

E. Cooperation and partnership. Tourism involves many public and private agents, who are involved, on the one hand, at the level of all the components of the tourist chain and, on the other hand, in different complementary fields: companies of the tourist industry, companies from the agriculture, transport, communication and trade fields; local, regional, national and community public administrations; professional associations, trade union associations, consumer associations; schools and professional training centres, etc. The development of the tourist function of a rural region can be reached under a sustainable conception, by creating the following types of partnerships: *between the companies of the tourist channel, between them and companies from complementary fields, between the public and private partners*.

It is necessary to **create networks by promoting the urban-rural partnership**. The pilot centres can provide examples of good practice, generate demonstration effects, can support by their know-how the rural communities and small entrepreneurs. As for the urban centres, they are development points for the industrial activities, service, education and professional training activities, research, playing an essential part in tourism development. They are also able to increase the tourist flows and reduce seasonality, improving the efficiency of tourist activities, considering the fact that rural tourism is proximity tourism.

In order to hold a position on the external markets, it is efficient to **create inter-regional and international networks** (for example, the chains of agencies, hotels or networks between the Regional Management Organizations). The risk of dependency is thus reduced, the sector attractiveness increases by improving profitability, the multiplying effects are increasing.

F. Quality integrated management. Rural tourism is interested especially for the segments of alternative tourism. This is maturity tourism, with a strongly elastic demand for the relation quality-price. Consequently, the supply answer to quality requirements conditions essentially the region attractiveness and the permanent customers. The result depends on ensuring the quality of all the components of the tourist “chain”, under a unitary conception. Any break in the chain, either attractive or functional resources (both specific and general), can compromise the region products and image on the market. *A coherent strategy must aim at all the supply and production components in order to ensure a quality integrated management.*

G. **Adoption of specific policies for regional marketing, complementary to the company policies.** The creation of a tourist identity and image to promote the region on different markets cannot be only the result of individual and punctual actions of the private actors. 90% of the tourism agencies are small and medium companies, most of them having few human and financial resources to draw and implement efficient marketing strategies.

The adoption of a regional marketing mixture, complementary to the company mixture is absolutely necessary for the efficient shaping and promoting of a regional tourist identity. **By the product policy**, a product portfolio may develop, based on the comparative advantages, which generate complementarities able to diversify the target markets, to increase flows and diminish the degree of concentration (in time and space), closely correlated with the capacity of the region tourist loading, to stimulate the processes of integration into the tourist offer and to increase the multiplying static and dynamic tourism role. For example, the open products can generate and maintain networks, while the integrated products can amplify the stimulating effects and contribute to the region balanced development. **In the price policy**, emphasis would be laid on ensuring a best relation between price and quality, on using the price to create regional comparative advantages and on creating a tariff modulating system to stimulate consumption and ensure a better distribution of tourist flows in time and space. The creation of a **distribution policy** at the regional level allows for trade through the great tour-operators and booking centres, supports the creation of integrated service packages and can even stimulate the horizontal and vertical integration of local actors. As for the **communication regional policy**, it has a decisive role on more remote issuing markets, especially on the external ones. The creation and implementation of the marketing regional mixture can be the result of a private partnership (professional associations) and / or of partnerships between public institutions and tourist companies.

H. **The strategy post management, by evaluating and adapting it to the general evolution of receiving areas, on the one hand, and on the other hand, of tourist supply and consumption.** Achieving the objectives of a strategy is conditioned by its elaboration under a more flexible and dynamic conception. It should be adapted to the different market segments, especially because the rural tourism market is strongly heterogeneous. Rural tourism is just a relatively new niche within the mass tourism, aiming at achieving a superior dynamics, both at the level of flow dimensions and of the structural evolution of demand and supply. An efficient tourist development strategy must involve quantifiable goals, to allow for evaluation during its implementation and adaptation to the evolution of the tourist market and regional economy on its whole.

In conclusion, tourism can be, under certain circumstances, a factor of sustainable development in the rural regions. The result depends on the adoption of a strategy under a dynamic and integrated conception, able to ensure a dynamic balance between the economic, social and environment objectives.

Incontestably, the essential role within such a strategy should be played by the private initiative. Yet, the specificity of the tourist production in general and the tourism development in the rural area, in particular, involves the public intervention within a **wide public-private partnership**.

3. The necessity and role of public-private partnership in the tourist development of rural regions

The public-private partnership is the most suitable system for the tourist development of a region and especially of the rural region. By synthesising the above mentioned things, the **main arguments** to support this option are:

- *The tourist product is a complex set of goods and public and private services, under strong inter-conditionality relations. The satisfaction of tourists depends not only on the specific services (accommodation, meals, entertainment, transport) provided by the tourist industry, but also on the infrastructure and the health, education, security public services, etc. The success of a destination is in correlation with all these elements, the private sector depending totally on the public administration which takes on responsibilities and specific objectives concerning tourism development;*

- *Tourism is an activity playing an important part in sustainable development and integration of rural areas into the national and international economy, but it cannot develop only based on the action of the private economic agents. Tourism in general, but rural tourism in particular, is characterized by mostly artisan family-like small and average production. The companies don't have the necessary financial and human resources to hold a position on the international markets and to ensure the integrated management of the destination quality;*

- *The multitude and diversity of actors requires the creation of efficient cooperation structures to provide the necessary frame in order to ensure the cohesion and coherence of different actions of the public and private tourist actors;*

- *The sustainable position on the tourist markets depends on the way in which the integrated management of the tourist quality destination is achieved, in relation to the three main components: the tourist and his interests, local people and environment. The rural tourism takes place in frail natural environments and socially vulnerable communities that impose strict management and control of industry development and of tourist behaviours. The private sector and civil society are not strong enough to replace public intervention in the destination sustainable management;*

- *Local public administrations, in their turn, are small and don't have the necessary resources and possibilities of unilateral and individual responsibility of the region tourist development. The implementation of a tourist development strategy cannot take place without a partnership and cooperation framework to include not only the tourist companies, but also the population and other local administration;*

- *The necessity to shape and promote regional tourist identity. Irrespective of how much imagination, originality and professionalism the tourist companies might have, the portfolios of their products can be traded only under the circumstances of a regional tourist identity, of an image that cannot be created and supported without a partnership.*

Consequently, in the field of tourism, the production and commercialization of goods and services involves both the public and the private sector. The orientation towards a pattern of free market led to the minimization of the state role as economic actor throughout the whole world. The public activities are externalized through different types of granting, contracts of cooperation or services, while in tourism, *the state remains co-producer* due to the production specificity. Moreover, under the circumstances of a relatively low developed economic environment, such as that of rural communities, the state must take on the leadership role by *stimulating and facilitating investments, improving the business environment, developing the infrastructure and human capital*". The result can consist in scale economies and synergies at the level of tourist destinations which can improve the competitive advantages of the private actors.

The partnership development fields could be:

- *Strategic planning and territorial planning;*
- *Outline and communicate the importance of tourism to the whole society (it has been stated several times that people don't know and are not aware of the tourism potential role in a region / economy);*
- *Ensure a system and methodology to gather and process the statistical information (although hazardous, the Satellite Account System should be used at the regional level as well);*
- *Create a competitive business environment to encourage investments;*
- *Promote the integration of social and environment aspects in the consumption and production behaviours;*
- *Develop the human capital through education and professional training;*
- *Attract new funds for investments, promotion and marketing;*
- *Promote the sustainable tourist products and markets;*
- *Promote examples of good practice at the international level;*
- *Support the process of information / communication of the destination on the international level;*
- *Stimulate technological development and the introduction of new technologies in the production, promotion and commercialization of tourist products;*
- *Promotion, distribution and commercialization of the destination.*

Irrespective of the adopted pattern and the proposed objectives, **the key success factors of the partnership are:**

- *Adopt a strategic framework for the region tourist development.* The setting up of a strategy allows us to set objectives, priority axes, actions, ensures the premises for the evaluation of the destination evolution and reduces the opportunity costs;
- *Limitation of a regional partnership entity which allows for natural coherence, complementarity of interests and shaping of an identity.* There is the risk of conflicts of interests, incoherence and administrative blocks especially in the case of regional entities of the partnership exceeding the administrative entities. The existence of a regional existence already recognized by tourists and the local people or the possibility of developing a tourist identity is a compulsory starting point in establishing the partnership;
- *Adopt a partnership plan with clear objectives which should be the result of wide cooperation on the regional level.* Thus, the partnership could benefit from the agreement of several partners and from public support;
- *Involve a great number of actors,* to take on the objectives and responsibilities they have within the partnership. The setting up of responsibilities, of conditions to take part in the partnership, of giving up, of inclusion of new partners must ensure a system of cooperation flexible enough, but at the same time a frame of responsible commitment to ensure coherence and efficiency of partnership;
- *Involve in the partnership the actors from fields which are complementary to tourism.* Partnerships are most often created between tourist companies, with or without the public administration. They could have increased efficiency if transport, agriculture or trade companies participated too, because these fields are not only co-producing, but also potential beneficiaries of tourist development in the area;
- *Identify the financing sources.* For the rural communities, the financing of partnerships is a very difficult task. Without clear options from the very beginning, a partnership risks to fail even before its beginning;
- *Involve the population.* In the rural area, population is an important tourist resource. It is more than a component of the tourist product; its interests are as important as those of the tourists and the tourist industry;

- Establish an evaluation system of the partnership both during and after the partnership. The system would allow for the adaptation of partnership (if necessary) and evaluation of the impact related both to the specific proposed activities and to the general objectives of the region development.

It is also compulsory to observe the **following principles**:

- *implement a system of integrated management of the destination quality;*
- *preserve authenticity and originality of destination;*
- *ensure balance between the economic, social and environment objectives;*
- *precaution and prevention in making decisions;*
- *relation to the tendencies in the evolution of behaviours and markets;*
- *permanent relation to the tourist interests and implementation of a strategy for target market balance;*
- *strategic approach;*
- *information, cooperation and transparency;*
- *efficient implementation of subsidiarity, by promoting the involvement of local private actors;*
- *improvement of the free market mechanisms, by „stimulating and facilitating investments, creating a system of clear and stable laws, through the development of infrastructure and human capital”.*

The principles and system of public-private partnership are totally applicable within the **DESTINATION MANAGEMENT OR PROMOTION ORGANIZATIONS (ODG)**. The concept is little known in Romania, especially because the approach of development from the regional perspective is only at the beginning. Moreover, there is little information and knowledge about the essential contribution which tourism can have to the economic development on the one hand and, on the other hand, about the necessity of partnership in commercializing the tourist destinations.

ODGs can be the result of a private partnership (professional associations) and / or partnerships between public institutions and tourist agencies. But for the rural regions, it is necessary for the public sector to get involved to facilitate and support a process of quality integrated management, to ensure the coherence of private actions and to promote the destination image on the international markets through regional marketing strategies, complementary with the company policies.

One of the most common forms of implementing the public-private partnership in the tourist field is represented by ODGs which communicate and promote the destination. The key element of the partnership is the development of a regional product and the shaping of an international identity of the product in question, to hold a position on the different target markets.

We are going to exemplify a pattern of regional tourist product in the North-East Region of Romania. From the whole region, the product concept is developed only in two counties (Neamț and Suceava), as a consequence of the similarity between the supply and the complementarities that can be generated within the proposed thematic portfolio.

Situated in the North-East Region of Romania, the two counties have in common the prevalence of the rural area, the mountainous landscape, the “non-altered” nature, which is wild here and there, the small density of monasteries and churches, life in the rural area that keeps the traditional values, the high conservation degree of the tradition authenticities, diversity and unique character of craftsmen; all these elements can generate products with a high degree of originality and authenticity to provide identity to the region.

4. Case study. The product concept „The Places of the Spirit” for the North / East Region of Romania

The starting point in choosing and developing the concept of product was *to identify the tourist profile* of the selected region *and to select the types of tourism* where *cultural and natural motivations dominate*. The main idea is that the main resources that can generate similar advantages and can afford a high position on the international markets are the natural and cultural resources. Moreover, the markets which these types of resources address are alternative tourist markets able to support a process of region sustainable development.

After setting the strategic option, the next step was *to choose the product concept and develop the thematic portfolio*. In this respect, we have used the following **principles and objectives**:

A. *the necessity to implement an integrating conception concerning the regional product*. “Tourism based on culture and nature” is made up of a set of manifestations which meet the communication, knowledge and development needs and create the favourable context for a better relation between man and himself, man and his neighbours, man and environment. It can address different markets and thus can ensure the rural integration within a strategy that can generate long term dynamic and stimulating effects.

B. *take into account the tendencies in the evolution of needs, motivations and preferences of the target groups*, especially: the tendency to divide the holidays, by reducing the average number of days per sojourn / package, the need for autonomy, vitality and meaning in spending holidays, the tendency towards individuality, the need for a minimum comfort even for the target markets mainly looking for the local specificity, increase the environment importance in evaluating and spending one’s holiday, the need for communication / development as a prevalent feature of the potential target markets; in conclusion, the defining common element would be “to travel somewhere else, differently; to differentiate ourselves”.

C. *start from the regional tourist features* (the attractive and functional component), taking into account the strong points, the weak points and the degree of polarizing the attractions (relatively high), correlated with the mainly rural nature (the relatively low degree of urbanization);

D. *ensure a wide geographic coverage*, to reduce the degree of concentration in space and generate greater multiplying effects;

E. *reduce the degree of seasonality*, especially by contributing to the development of a tourist pattern, based on the winter-summer complementarity; mainly based on the monastery attractions, the tourism in the area takes place in summer, leading to a reduction conception having a negative impact upon the region image and valorisation of its tourist heritage. We have tried to suggest voyages that would lead to the reduction of seasonality when choosing the product concept and building the thematic portfolio;

F. *the integrated use of attractive resources*, by placing them on different target markets; an essential advantage of this criterion is the reduction of dependency risks;

G. *the shaping of an identity / image as a regional product*; a special purpose in this respect was to avoid identifying the region with the image of a single product (for example: Bucovina = religious tourism, situation of the region nowadays) and to select a unitary regional area from the point of view of tourist attractions;

H. *create packages which are in different life stages*, in order to minimize the market risks and to ensure continuity and sustainability to the concept of regional product;

I. *consider the evolutions and exigencies related to packages, as well as their adaptability to the specificity of the offer and demand*. In this respect, our research

supposes *partially integrated “moyenne” and “haut de gamme” sojourns, “a la carte” products and open products*. The study also takes into account the possibility of commercializing products through circuits, but it is necessary to mention that this type of product is not recommended, except perhaps for the thematic circuits. In order to discover, feel, understand, live, one needs time which is not provided by the circuit, except perhaps for the combinations with punctual sojourns (1 or 2 stops of two or three days); from this point of view, the travel would last too much, considering the fact that the tendency is to reduce the average number of days per holiday, people preferring to leave several times a year. In fact, the circuit proposes rigid structures, the groups make up with difficulty, and when they are made up, they are heterogeneous, allow for a partial product image and do not allow for real communication with the receptor environment.

J. *the region sustainable development* (implement the concept of integrated tourism, also called “sweet”, or “green”, or “responsible”), especially through: selling on emergent markets, diversification of target markets (in order to eliminate the risk of dependency), creation of products in relation to the local specificity, ensure a relatively high level of communication with the receptive population (in order to promote intercultural dialogue and create a favourable context for real knowledge of the local social-cultural environment), integration of the sustainable dimension.

Taking into account the mentioned objectives and principles, one of the possible options to place the North-East region on the tourist markets based on cultural and natural attractions, is the development and promotion of a thematic product portfolio subordinate to **„The Places of the Spirit³” concept**. This conception is based on the idea that all manifestations contributing to the psychical and physical individual balance, leading to harmony with himself and the environment (social and natural) have a dominant / relevant spiritual component; either we talk about culture in its general meaning (both “high culture” and traditional culture), religion in its narrow meaning or nature and sport, the specific manifestations are complementary, widen the knowledge horizon and make the individual get closer to the act of creation and to understanding the spiritual world we are living in. Taking into account the specificity of the attractive resource supply in the North-east Region, the common identity element on the culture and nature based markets is the spiritual one.

4.1. Markets and target groups. The position of the product

The product “Places of the Spirit” is aimed at the markets which might be called “maturity tourism” or “alternative tourism”.

Common elements of this type of markets:

- *high cultural and educational level;*
- *professionals with a high standard of education;*
- *high incomes which allow for average expenses (price of accommodation per night, price of the whole stay) bigger than the average;*
- *people from urban areas*
- *people aged between 30 and 59*

³ The concept has been developed through the project **Marketing Analysis for Neamț and Suceava Counties area in the framework of Est-European Places of the Spirit**, created within the European project INTERREG III B CADSES, in cooperation with Valentin Niță University Ph.D. Professor and Corneliu Iașu University Ph.D. Associate.

- *people with tourist experience and high expectations regarding the quality and the competitive advantage of the product; always on the look for new destinations and experiences, these people require detailed information about the destinations on offer and make preliminary research about the place;*
- *people who are interested in the cultural, ecological and social aspects;*
- *people who take frequent holidays, usually shorter ones (4 - 6 days), and not only during the peak season;*
- *people who prefer personalized journeys, with a high degree of flexibility and adaptability;*
- *those who prefer three to four-star guest houses to large hotels,; those who want to enjoy the hospitality of the locals;*
- *people who are willing to try traditional dishes, local ones, prepared with ingredients specific to a certain area;*
- *those motivated by the wish to discover new places, to get in touch with and understand new cultures, to live new experiences when coming into contact with other systems of value and other communities, those who are willing to return to nature and to rediscover its beauty and uniqueness; those who are looking for the balance between the psychical and the physical side so much needed in order to overcome the routine and stress of everyday life;*
- *those who are flexible enough to the rate price / quality;*
- *people who prefer to use their own means of transport.*

The main markets to which the product can be addressed are: *cultural tourism; religious tourism; ecological tourism; rural or eco-tourism.*

The market of cultural tourism

It is a dynamic market, the average development rhythm surpassing the world average. Culture has been more and more associated with tourism lately; the WTO appreciates that over 35% of the tourist consumption can be included in the category of cultural tourism. Consequently, it is a perspective market and has the advantage of creating gaps in the process of tourist mass extension which occupies nowadays 80% of the market. Culture harmoniously associates rest with differentiation, communication, emotion, pleasure, meets the need for balance and happiness of the modern man, allows for an offer adapted to a punctual demand, by valorising individualized themes and meeting the new social-cultural trend (the need for individuality, autonomy, meaning), reaches wide segments of demand (certain studies state that 70% of the tourist demand also has cultural motivations), allows for the development of elitist markets, meeting the needs for differentiation, distinction and social status. People in need for demand are middle aged and more, come from superior social-professional categories, have a high level of education and high incomes, come from the urban areas, have cultural preoccupations throughout their daily life, have high exigencies concerning the quality of tourist resources (both the attractive and the valorising ones).

As it is a strongly divided market, it is necessary in our case to develop and promote certain previous preferences (which are modest at the international level for both departments) and adopt some differentiated marketing strategies.

The market of religious tourism

Religious tourism is often associated with cultural tourism. Many among those who travel out of religious purposes are interested in culture in the broad meaning. Yet, there are differentiated segments made up of “the tourists” who do not take religion

only for a means of education, communication or knowledge, but mainly as a way of getting closer to God and to conversion. In this respect, the religious tourism identifies itself with the religious practice, even if it combines with religion as a show. In fact, the social and cultural dimensions of religious tourism in both analyzed departments are accepted and even promoted.

The approach towards this market (content and way of organizing the different travels) must be differentiated depending on the type of experience that tourists are looking for: purely religious, the practice of rituals or the cultural / ethnological practice, a case which comes closer to the cultural tourism market.

The market of ecological tourism

The low development level of the two departments, the low density of population and urbanization, the particular respect of the local population towards environment allowed for the conservation of the fauna and flora biodiversity, of a clean natural environment, with wide spaces lacking civil planning and even with “wildlife”. The many natural parks and reservations, the attraction exercised by the mountain scenery, the richness and diversity of flora and fauna are important key elements to place “The Places of the Spirit” product on the ecotourism market. It is the market with the highest increase level in the world, tourism and nature already becoming associated concepts in the developed countries. Tourists come from the segments of alternative tourism, are well educated, show respect towards nature and its manifestations, are middle aged and more and their number of nights per sojourn is over the average.

The market approach must lay emphasis upon authenticity, innovation, single experience, wildlife, peace and non-consumerism.

The market of rural tourism

As an area with a relatively low degree of urbanization, the North-East region provides great opportunities for the rural tourism. All the thematic areas of “The Places of the Spirit” product can be based on the specific elements of rural tourism, suggesting even the association in promotion between the product identity and rural tourism. People in need for demand have the following motivations: differentiation, communication/development and knowledge, come from superior social-professional categories, have a high level of education and are familial-like, while the average expenses per tourist are superior to other markets.

It is a market that deserves to be gained, but it is necessary to make efforts towards improving accessibility, accommodation and entertainment, infrastructure, as well as reception quality.

Apart from the specificity elements, the four markets need to be approached, however, within an integrated marketing concept. As shown in the table below, there is a high degree of interaction between the target markets with the exception of the thematic area “ High culture”. The high interaction eliminates the risk of dependence and allows for diversity of practices within the same market as well as for a more flexible offer, it increases the role played by tourism in the industrial development of the respective area and it gives special, superior value to the cultural, ecological, and traditional patrimony. At the same time it asks for a big effort to coordinate production, to provide the necessary facilities and to carry out the promotion campaign, all these being possible only as a partnership between the private and the public sector within the context of the development of networks at regional level.

Table 1 Chart illustrating the correlation between topic – market of product “ Places of the Spirit”

	Themes of the range of products “ Places of the Spirit”				
	Nature and landscapes	High Culture	Traditional culture	Religion and family rituals	Country life
Basic markets					
Cultural tourism	x	x	x	x	
Religious tourism	x	x	x	x	x
Ecological tourism	x		x	x	x
Rural tourism	x		x	x	x
Additional markets					
Mountaineering tourism	x		x	x	x
Sporting tourism	x				x
Venue tourism	x	x	x	x	
Health tourism	x		x	x	

Also, the product interacts at least with the following **additional markets**: *Mountain tourism, Sporting tourism, Venue tourism and Health tourism*.

Mountain tourism has reached, in almost all European countries, its mature phase and it is hard to presume that the departments in both Suceava and Neamt will win in perspective important segments of the tourism demand; a fortiori, competition both on the internal market as well as on the international one is very strong and the region has significant competitive gaps especially in the field of accessibility and valorising elements. However, the marketing strategy can address market segments specific to the Austrian model for mountain tourism, characterized by the choice for small resorts where the quality of skiing is less important than the natural environment, the scenery, local culture and contacts with natives. The model is being transmitted to Central Europe and is specific to the segments with high income, high level of education and training, of average age and above it. The common identity elements with the basic markets which “Place of the spirit” is aimed at, can be easily identified. The result of positioning the product on this market will depend, however, on the one hand on advertising and, on the other hand, on the evolution of the offer. The accent must fall on authenticity, low level of tourist burden, the novelty of the offer.

Sporting tourism can be approached, for the time being, on the component of sports and winter festivals at a medium level and on hunting and fishing. Several sporting practices must be associated with environmental tourism, the venue and the rural ones. Besides, in both Neamt and Suceava departments, attempts to overcome the limitative concept of the offer, lodging and meals only (predominant until recently), have been made on the one hand by developing not only traditional recreations, specific to the region, but also sportive recreations (horse riding, camping, trips, walks, cycling sky-diving, fishing, hunting), and on the other hand the incorporation of sportive practices in all forms of tourism. One of the requisites of establishing it on the market will be the subordination of principles and sporting practices to a long-lasting development, especially with regards to protecting the natural environment.

Business tourism

Both departments provide opportunities for venue tourism (conferences, seminars), although they are not exploited enough, in relation to, on the one hand, the improvement in accommodation structures in the main urban centres and the variety of attractive aspects which can represent a considerable advantage (knowing that venue tourism practices are usually associated with cultural and religious reunions but also

ecological and sportive ones. When situating the product “Places of the Spirit”, the accent must fall on the idea to live differently and to discover.

Health tourism

Benefiting from spa resorts with accommodation structures and some of the latest equipment, important mineral water sources and fresh air, both departments can place their product on this market as well, especially regarding the “remise en forme” component, consisting of combined practices of regaining psychological and physical balance. The health practices can be harmoniously combined with nature, traditional culture and religion. The market, just like in the case of venue tourism, offers the advantage of diminishing season tourism by organizing holidays any time of the year.

As a conclusion, “Places of the Spirit” has the advantage of integrated capitalization of the tourist resources of both departments; the various themes can be positioned on 8 markets, 4 of which are basic ones (table 2).

Table 2 Placement chart for the product “ Places of the Spirit”

	Themes of the range of products “ Places of the Spirit”				
	Nature and landscapes	High Culture	Traditional culture	Religion and family rituals	Country life
Basic markets					
Cultural tourism	Contact with nature	Spiritual heritage	Tradition and modernity	Spiritual values	-
Religious tourism	Contact with nature	Tradition and modernity	Tradition and modernity	Tradition and modernity	Spirit in life
Environmental tourism	Natural preserved variety	-	People and nature in harmony	Creation in nature	Living time differently
Rural tourism	Natural preserved variety	-	Spirit in action	Spirit in action	Living time differently
Additional markets					
Mountain tourism	Natural preserved variety	-	Spirit in action	Spirituality and nature	Living time differently
Sporting tourism	Contact with nature	-	-	-	Living time differently
Business tourism	Contact with nature	Spiritual heritage	Tradition and modernity	Tradition and modernity	-
Health tourism	Contact with nature	-	Tradition and health	Health in Spirituality	-

We can notice common criteria and the high level of complementarities between various positions, which justifies and confirms the possibility of developing an integrated product such as “Places of the Spirit” for both departments. The main advantage of the product concept for the rural areas of the two departments depends on the high complementarity between rural tourism and the other markets, through four thematic areas: nature, traditional culture, religion and family rites and life in the countryside. Hence the result is a process of stimulation and interdependencies between the different markets, to integrate the rural space within a sustainable process of economic dynamics and social progress.

4.2. The thematic areas of the product concept “The Places of the Spirit”

This being an approach at regional level, which does not come from a tourist operator, the product portfolio can only be delineated in general terms, as a sum total of tourist services and not as contractual offers proper.

Our study suggests **an approach of the following type**: *theme of the product, values promoted versus motivations for each theme, basic attractions, content (activities / actions), accommodation, meals, the type of contractual trips promoted, organization of the offer, slogan.*

A. Theme: Nature and landscapes

Values promoted / motivations: contemplation, meditation, aesthetics, the spirit in relation with the nature, remise en forme, getting closer to and integrated in nature.

Basic attractive aspects:

- In the Neamt county: The Bicaz Gorge, the lake Izvorul Muntelui, the Ceahlau Mountains – the highest in Moldavia with 1911 m altitude, the Duruitoarea waterfall, the natural reserves Codrii de Arama (The Bronze Forest) and Codrii de Argint (The Silver Forest) in the vicinity of the Agapia monastery; the Plateau with Lilies (limestone tier on which *Larix decidua* can be found); forestry reserves (Codrii de Arama , Codrii de Argint, The Forest Gosman Tarcau : two century – old forest, Vanatorii Neamtului: forests with 170 year-old oak trees); the palaeontological reserves near Piatra Neamt (at Cernegura, Cozia and Pietricica), the dendrological park at Grumazesti; the caves Tosorog and Munticelu; the Dragos Voda Buffalo Reserve (oak trees more than five centuries old, spontaneous fauna and four buffalos after a period of a century when buffalos had been extinct)

- In the Suceava county : the Caliman Mountains – spectacular range of volcanic nature (Pietrosul – 2100 m high); the Natural Park Calimani (more than 15 hectares), the 12 Apostles (grouping of stones with strange shapes); the Rarau Mountains (spectacular cliffs - Pietrele Doamnei/ the Lady’s Stones, Pietrele Albe/ the White Stones, Cheile Moara Dracului / the Devil’s Mill Gorge, Pestera Lilieilor / the Bats’ Cave); The Bistrita Gorge and the Golden Bistrita Canyon; the Bistrita and Moldova Valley; the century -old forest in Slatioara with (pine trees more than 400 years old; areas where man has not left his print yet); the century-old forest Giupalau; the widest reserve of peat in Romania, also known for its therapeutic value), Poiana Stampei, Saru Dornei; the nature reserves at Lucina and Radauti; the paleontological reserve and century-old forest at Pojorata, century-old hay fields.

Content (activities / actions): trips, outings, walking, cycling, mountain climbing, study trips, light sports, taking part in country-life activities; a combination of different attractions; taking part in traditional events, visiting museums and monasteries, traditions, arts and crafts, horse riding, fishing and hunting, health cures at the local spas.

Accommodation: 2 – 4 star hosting places (2 – 4 daisies for agro-tourism) in rural areas, surrounded by natural landscapes; also urban hosting places in small towns, preferably not hotels.

Meals: all these are Bed & Breakfast places; they can also offer full board, serving breakfast and dinner on the premises, with lunch in the open (picnics) to allow for more time in nature.

Type of contractual trips promoted and the organization of the offer: the attractions being concentrated within limited geographical areas, they can be easily enjoyed during the stay there; some of them can be also included in round – trips, but the impact on the spirit and the soul will be less strong. These places are highly recommended to young people for their educational role, the stress being in such cases on learning,

discovering, experiencing nature, but they can also be enjoyed by other categories of people who are also interested in discovering, experiencing, enriching their spiritual life.

Slogan: Yes, this is Earth!

B. Theme: High Culture. Medieval Art and History

Promoted values/ motivations: communication, development, knowledge, differentiating, emotion, pleasure, discovering the local culture, architecture and history, relaxing, being entertained, finding a unique experience, learning new things about history and human civilisation.

Basic attractive aspects:

- *in the Neamt county:* Cetatea Neamtului (The Neamt Fortress), Tg. Neamt – end of XIV th cent.; The History and Ethnography Museum (Tg Neamt), The Natural History Museum, (Piatra Neamt); the monasteries Neamt, Agapia, Varatec, Secu, other monasteries and churches, historical buildings from 14-18 century; the memorial houses Ion Creanga, Mihail Sadoveanu, Calistrat Hogas.

- *in the Suceava county:* architectural civil and religious vestiges from the 14th and 16th century (the Suceava Fortress, the Suceava Princes Inn, the Museum of Folk Art of Bucovina); the Bucovina monasteries Voronet, Moldovita, Sucevita, Putna, Arbore being the most famous, but to them a number of other churches and cult places could be added ; museums like the Museum of the Bucovinean Village, the National Bucovina Museum (archeology, ethnography, natural sciences), the Solca Ethnographic Museum, the Museum of Waters in Falticeni, the Ciprian Porumbescu group of museums, the memorial house Nicolae Labis, the Wood Museum, and Ioan Tugui’s Ethnographic and Numismatic Museum - Campulung Moldovenesc, as well as the Cynegetics Museum Vatra Dornei.

Content (activities / actions): visits to museums and monasteries, taking part in festivals, performances (see list of events), language and study trips.

Accommodation: 3 – 4 star hosting places (3 – 4 daisies for agro-tourism) both urban and rural, according to the defining elements for each contractual offer.

Meals: full board or only bed & breakfast

Type of contractual trips promoted and the organization of the offer: the theme can be promoted either by spending a few days there or during round-trips, either thematically or general; it is recommendable, however, to ensure more active involvement of the tourist in the spiritual/cultural life of the people from the visited places. In the case of these “high culture” trips, there is also the risk of turning the trip into an act of knowledge, without allowing for direct contact with the cultural life. The holiday will be a passive one, the tourists being always shown around by guides and accumulating information about the places visited. A contractual trip like “Places of the Spirit” should avoid this risk, emphasizing the relation with the cultural medium of the area and thus being an „experiential product”.

The organization and promotion must differ on the national market from the international market. The lack of an international cultural identity evident abroad, will not allow, on a short to medium term, the commercialization of culture through contractual voyages on cultural themes, while at a national level, the combination culture-tourism has not gained a lot on the market. As a consequence, according to the specific characteristics of the target group, we recommend a combination between the attractions of “high culture” and the traditional or natural ones.

Regarding the functional aspects (transport, accommodation, meals, specialized guiding, etc), as we are dealing with elitist targets, quality and comfort should be given special attention.

Slogan: Footsteps of glory

C. Theme: Traditional culture, Arts and Crafts and Gastronomy

Values promoted / motivations: authenticity, traditional clothing, traditional pottery, traditional meals (gastronomy), ethnography and Folk Art, traditional architecture, discovering, communicating, understanding, experiencing.

Basic attractive aspects: traditional local architecture (house styles, interiors, decorations), traditional clothes, traditional pottery, traditional meals, traditional music and dances, ethnography and folk museums, traditional events (festivals, holidays).

Content (activities / actions) : visits to arts and crafts museums, visits to local houses, visits to monasteries, visits to local workshops for pottery and ceramics, traditional clothes, fabric, painted Easter eggs; attending courses on crafts specific to the area, like pottery, embroidery, music and dancing; participating at religious holidays and traditional feasts.

Accommodation: 2-4 star housing units, preferably agro-tourism so that to offer a sample of traditional architecture and style and local hospitality as well as the possibility of getting in touch with the locals and experiencing their way of life.

Meals: bed & breakfast or full board, mainly local dishes.

Type of contractual trips promoted and the organization of the offer: trips “moyenne and haut de gamme”, in groups or individual, combining attractions of the theme with other attractions (nature and scenery, museums, sports, agro-tourism).

Slogan: Wonders of Creation

D. Theme: Religion and family rituals (customs).

Values promoted / motivations: getting closer to God, making peace with yourself and with life, understanding history, culture and spiritual values, acquiring knowledge, communicating, evolving spiritually, mutual respect for religions and reciprocal transfer of values, tolerance.

Basic attractive aspects: monasteries, churches, the Christmas and Easter holidays, religious ceremonies like baptism, wedding, death rituals.

Content (activities / actions): pilgrimages, visits to monasteries, being present at religious services and rites of passage.

Accommodation: 2-4 star housing units (according to the market segment – religion as spiritual, cultural and social manifestation) preferably situated in rural areas.

Meals: bed & breakfast or full board, local dishes.

Type of contractual trips promoted and the organization of the offer: trips “bas, moyenne and haut de gamme”, with an emphasis on active participation in the life and religious services, family rituals; these can be combined with elements of traditional culture, nature and landscape.

Slogan: Eyes of soul

E. Theme: Country life

Values promoted/ motivation: local cultural identity, traditions, spirituality, nature, conviviality, communication, integration in country life; farm life, local architecture.

Basic attractive aspects: natural surroundings, rural architecture and social structure, agriculture and forestry.

Content (activities/ actions): the study and contemplation of nature, sports, trips, outings, taking part in agricultural activities, a combination of activities with thematic areas 1, 3 and 4 on condition that the location should be rural and tourist practices should

be consistent and long-lasting (oriented towards protecting the natural, cultural and social receptor)

Accommodation: 2-4 star housing units, preferably agro-tourism so that to offer a sample of traditional architecture and style and local hospitality as well as the possibility of getting integrated into the local way of life and communicating with people.

Meals: bed & breakfast or full board, mainly local dishes.

Type of contractual trips promoted and the organization of the offer: trips “moyenne and haut de gamme” short to medium in length, personalized, with an emphasis on authenticity and quality of attractions, which will ensure the possibility of integrating into the way of life of the locals.

Slogan: *Treasures of identity*

The thematic areas were developed following the integrated usage of tourist resources and they allow for combinations and positioning on different markets. The contractual packages as a function can be usually developed by tourist operators in both departments and on each of the above themes.

4.3. Specific conditionalities

The product concept “The Places of the Spirit” can be used by any region using cultural and natural resources, if it manages to find elements of uniqueness, authenticity and to relate to the specific region conditionalities. In the case of the North-East region, people should pay special care to the following aspects:

A. Create the product image; the product exists but, in order to be obtained, it is necessary to find some representations in the individual’s mind, both at the rational and subconscious level, which approach the product to the needs and motivations of the target markets; for example, on a certain market segment, “The Places of the Spirit” can be associated with religion as an act of culture, on another market with religion as practice, meditation and prayer to get closer to God, on another market with the religious and cultural militancy (the desire to know and understand), on another market with religion as culture manifestation; the imaginary can be also made up of a single component (pole) or of two or several components, by associating culture with religion, history, tradition, architecture, nature, rural area or mountainous area.

Consequently, *information and promotion must be differentiated on target market segments, considering its imaginary or the “Imagined picture” of “Spirit” in the mental representations of individuals*; it may be different not only from the point of view of the target group peculiarities, but also from the point of view of the origin geographic area and the cultural space to which they belong.

Apart from the specificity elements, each region of “The Places of the Spirit” product must find its potential personality within the product and develop the means to manage the created image. Besides the specificity elements, a unitary product image can be shaped at the regional level. As for the two departments of the North-East Region, the main defining elements of this image should be the combination of features ensuring the position of the product on the four main markets (cultural tourism, religious tourism, eco-tourism, rural tourism), namely: *tradition and modernity; spiritual heritage; Spirit in life; living time differently; Creation in nature; Natural preserved variety; Spirit in action.*

Emphasis must be laid on the following **values:** *authenticity; unique character; tradition; nature and unity between man and nature; integration of spiritual values into the everyday life; autonomy, individuality, vitality and sense; communication.*

B. Image communication and promotion at the level of the provider, of the local and regional involved actors. In order that the image of a regional product is outlined and finds its representation at the level of target groups, the actions of the involved agents in the offer management must be coherent and relate to the suggested potential personality; if it is incoherent, it may generate an ambiguous image, without competitive capacity, lacking force and able to confuse the target markets. In this respect, *the regional actors must know and especially understand the product, the image and the way it is managed.* Obviously, this supposes some effort towards information, but especially towards educating the tourist actors in the “spirit” of the company social responsibility, namely in the general meaning, in the spirit of the area sustainable development;

C. Ensure coherence of actions of the administrative entities. One of the major difficulties in “The Places of the Spirit” product management in general, but especially concerning its identity promotion and outlining, will come out of the lack of correspondence between the “tourist entity” and the administrative entity, considering the fact that the tourist entity is more important / greater. In this respect, following the product common line, *the emphasis towards promotion must be placed on brand, identity and not on the product (authenticity, specificity and personality of the region), by associating the brand with “The Places of the Spirit” product.* The promoting strategy will be oriented on the following concepts: discover and understand, live differently, communicate, get closer to God, discover and relate oneself to the other people, within the cultural, religious and naturally receptor environment, in other words, the prevalent appeal to the imaginative, symbolic and affective side of the individual. In order to benefit from the offer contribution, the regional actors must find themselves within the image of the promoted brand. An essential part in this respect could be played by “The Places of the Spirit” festive day, organized in turns in the regions in question, to reunite the public and private actors taking care of the product management.

D. The necessity to shape the feeling of belonging to an objective / common interest and solidarity on the one hand, between the involved actors from the same departments and, on the other hand, between those from different departments. The festive day could be one of the instruments. We could take into account twin programmes between the public administrations of the involved departments, partnership participation to programmes of tourist development financed from communitary funds, creation of networks of the tourist agents, mutual promotion of offers, etc.

E. The specific supposed by the tourist marketing in general, but especially the forms of tourism which “The Places of the Spirit” product addresses mean that the strategy cannot relate to the consumer needs; **the tourist marketing, especially if it is related to the sustainable tourism principles, doesn’t have the consumer nature (meaning that it doesn’t adapt the offer to the demand),** but supposes the identification of those target markets which can relate to the product; *it is a relation like product – offer – local / regional actors – consumer,* even if, when creating products, we obviously aim at correlating the offer with the demand (in this case, the attractive component is essential). The rigidity of the tourist production compels, as a consequence, to an effort of identifying the interested markets and to promote, under the circumstances of high competition, not only the similar products, but also the substitution products. The risk of substitution (high substitution on the tourist markets, on the average) will be very high as a consequence of

the general and tourist infrastructure elements in the area and weakly competitive on the markets of maturity tourism. The chance of success will be thus determined by how the promotion will succeed in addressing the potential markets that could become efficient and loyal. It will have to emphasize the elements of specificity, of product differentiation and to count on the principle of alternative tourism markets – “to travel differently, to feel differently, to live differently”. *To attract, to get, to retain, and to determine recurrence* can be the strategic key elements for promotion. Yet, it has to be integrated within a general strategy of sustainable tourist development of the region.

Conclusions

On the whole, we may appreciate that, if the specific tourist nature of Neamt and Suceava counties is favourable for the development and support of a regional concept of a product having real potential to benefit from competitive advantages, the concept management cannot take place outside a regional strategy of sustainable tourist development and a wide public-private partnership. It is also very important to promote the most realistic possible image, to avoid too great discrepancies between expectations and realities, in the case of valuable resources (accessibility, transport infrastructure, accommodation, etc). In promotion, emphasis should be laid on attractive resources.

The presentation of the case study allows us to get **general conclusions** concerning the criteria and principles which have to be met in drawing and implementing the concept of regional tourism which should be an efficient instrument for the region sustainable management, integrating the rural spaces into a process of economic dynamics and social progress. Briefly, it is necessary, first of all, that the product strategy start from the offer and address the markets of alternative tourism, to be subordinate to sustainable development, to rely on the support and involvement of local actors, on the development of a wide public-private partnership at the regional level and on the creation of international networks of tourist actors from similar regions (to get the range effect). Secondly, it is necessary to create a brand image; we must lay emphasis on the promotion of brand, identity and not on the promotion of product (authenticity, specificity, personality of the region), by associating the brand with the chosen product concept. Least but not last, it is necessary to implement the concept of integrated management of the product within the wide frame of regional tourist development and planning, as well as the continuous evaluation and adaptation of the product both to the evolutions of target markets and the economic, social and ecologic receiving environment.