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Short food supply chains as a mechanism for sustainable development

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SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS AS A MECHANISM FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT.

CASE STUDY - TÂRGU-NEAMȚ TOURISTIC AREA

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Abstract: *At present, gastronomy is becoming an increasingly stronger motivation and focus of interest in economics, especially in fields related to tourism. At the same time, gastronomic tourism represents one of the most important business opportunities, allowing direct contact between food sector producers and tourists. Moreover, food related tourism is a key factor of success for local food fests and food markets based in touristic destinations. Thus, food related tourism represents an important incentive for the development of short food supply chains, resulting in the cooperation between local producers and tourism operators. In satisfying the demand of tourists interested especially in gastronomical aspects, local economic operators, whether small food sector producers or accommodation unit owners, are compelled to cooperate and complement each other. The present study aims to discuss this particular economic mechanism specific to the Târgu Neamț touristic area, by taking into consideration both its strengths (especially regional cultural, historical heritage and natural habitat) as well as its weaknesses, represented by the local producers' lack of access to an adequate market, which is a key factor in ensuring long term regional proper development opportunities. Our conclusion is that, at least one potential solution to achieving sustainable development in the Târgu Neamț region, is to encourage the establishment of long lasting mutually beneficial partnerships between local food sector producers and tourism sector operators.*

Key words: *short food supply chains, gastronomic tourism, rural tourism, Târgu Neamț touristic area, local producers, local sustainable development*

JEL: Q13, Q11, O13, O16, O18, M31, L83

INTRODUCTION

Strategic instruments and local solutions to the problems of sustainability and durability

By both reviewing the currently available literature and on-field practices one can note that there is a tendency to make use of short term and long-term government level strategies, which require a great deal of effort from local or regional authorities and other socially involved bodies, such as economic units, NGOs . In this respect, one can take into account two eloquent examples such as the constant renewal of governing laws and the frequent adjustment of educational and regional development targets and objectives.

It can further be noted that solutions to many arising problems, particularly durability and sustainability, are generally characterized by a global perspective and approach, usually resulting in a low level of impact on the economy's real issues.

This state of affairs is to some extent the result of the neglecting of specific methods and instruments, which can accurately help to achieve a real sustainable development in rural areas. Such instruments often have immediate cost-effective results, implying the use of only a few available resources, and thus they can be described as economically and ecologically non-invasive. It can be noted moreover that they are better suited to specific local geographic characteristics and can, if implemented, lead to the enhancement of humans' relation to the natural environment, an interaction that is altered excessively by their anthropic environment. One such useful instrument in this respect is the short food supply chain (SFSC), which can address specific issues such as sustainability and durability, offering very much needed locally adapted solutions in an economy ever increasingly marked by globalization. The SFSC can prove to be very effective in tourist areas and regions especially as a result of the fact that tourism generates a large influx of visitors, a key aspect which ensures the possibility of expansion and development for both local agri-food sector

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producers as well as food products processors. Thus, SFSCs can contribute directly to the improvement of the local as well as the regional brand.

METHOD AND MATERIAL

The present study aims to approach the problem of sustainable development in rural areas by means of SFSCs, with an emphasis on the setting up of 'links' or 'connections' between small sized farmers/producers and or tourism operators, especially guesthouse owners.

With regard to the research approach, it can be noted that the main methods used are that of observation and the field literature review. The research endeavor has as a starting point the partial and selective analysis of the most relevant studies in the field on the aspects of brand and local culture, as well as their characteristics, types and impact level on the development of local communities. The research article furthermore presents a case study – the Târgu-Neamț tourist area – that stresses out the social, economic and environmental impact of SFSCs on local communities. It is noteworthy of mentioning that in the introductory part of the article the method of indirect research has been used- the consulting of various valuable articles and studies published in the field.

1. The Brand, tourist experience and the local culture

Over the course of time, tourism has been a human-driven activity confronting the humans' need for a personalized exploratory experience with a particular geographic area, which could be a loose description of the tourism phenomena. Tourists are itinerant individuals that acquire new knowledge and experiences from their physical and spiritual interaction with different cultures, in relatively short spans of time. From a cognitive perspective, tourists are nothing more than hedonistic beings in search of new experiences, intent on gaining gratification, relaxation, knowledge, etc., or simply the opportunity to improve one's health. Various, tourists observe, integrate and are sometimes encouraged or compelled to emulate, to a certain degree, a different way of living, one that is determined by the temporary place of residence and its environs. They get to this stage by experiencing and implicitly memorizing different geographic and cultural information, as well as by getting to understand other types of attitudes, ways of thinking, customs etc., more or less different from those practiced in their places of origin. In this respect, local cuisine too plays an important role, in the sense that tourists are often keen on tasting local dishes based as much as possible on local produce and recipes. In this way, tourists are able to experience to the full the local environment and thus add to their exploratory experience.

The quality of individual tourist experiences is influenced to a great extent by a series of factors such as geographic coordinates, culture, history, economy, social environment and ecology. What this study aims to emphasize is that, as a result of the influence of these specific, and sometimes unique factors, one can note the emergence of "regional brands" on the market. In this respect, *cuisine* plays a major part in the development of such "brands", due to several reasons:

- it is a basic characteristic of the anthropic environment;
- from an economic perspective, cuisine has the integrated feature of being able to influence both horizontally and vertically different areas of the cultural and social environment;
- cuisine varies sharply across the different geographic areas;
- it implies identifiable patterns of development, which involve effective communication between host and guest.

Thus cuisine emerges as one of the most important elements of tourist experiences. This may well be the reason why at a global level, a growing number of tourists are interested in personalized holiday packages where the quality of the cuisine is growing in importance.

Gastronomy is closely related to local customs and habits through the locally sourced produce and traditional recipes. The locally sourced ingredients are of particular importance for authentic local cuisine, as are the traditional methods and means of cooking. This is the only approach to gastronomy which combines traditional values with the emerging developments in tourism: appreciation of local culture and traditions, healthy lifestyles, authenticity, sustainability

and experience. Sustainability is traceable to the growing degree of awareness of environmental issues, and the need to adopt more eco-friendly ways and habits of living. SFSCs are absolutely essential to putting local gastronomy to good use.

2. Characteristics of Short Food Supply Chains

There is no unanimously accepted definition of short food supply chains, as a result of the fact that most of them come in various forms, depending on the local geographic and economic context and the particular types of producers and consumers. One of the most widely accepted definitions is that of the U.K. Soil Association (2001): “a system of producing, processing and trading, primarily of sustainable and organic forms of food production, where the physical and economic activity is largely contained and controlled within the locality or region where it was produced, which delivers health, economic, environmental and social benefits to the communities in those areas” (Tanasă, 2014). Generally speaking, a Short Food Supply Chain is an economic chain involving, ideally, no more than one, or as few as possible intermediaries between the producer and the end consumers.

There are nevertheless several distinct characteristics of SFSCs:

1. First, short supply chains operate solely with local produce, where the term “local” means “the smallest unit to describe the origin of food”, according to “*Defining local food systems and short supply chains in EU Rural Review*” (Publication from the European Network for Rural Development, Issue no. 12).
2. Second, “Short Supply Chains” are those with as few as possible intermediaries, the ideal being a *direct contact* between the producer and the consumer. Taking into consideration several definitions of the concept (Marsden et al., 2000, p. 425-426; Renting et al., 2003, p. 399-400, Kneafsy et al., 2013, p. 13), as well as others still proposed by French state authorities and the European Commission (“*Short Food Supply Chains and Local Food Systems in the EU. A State of Play of their Socio-Economic Characteristics*”) according to which “*the foods involved are identified by, and traceable to a farmer. The number of intermediaries between farmer and consumer should be ‘minimal’ or ideally nil.*” In ideal cases where there are no intermediaries, the contact between the agri-food sector producers and the end consumers involves additional relationships, besides the financial ones, namely direct communication and mutual trust. Even though the number of intermediaries can be reduced and further eliminated, their economic role can be fully suppressed. The activities previously performed by them must be taken over by the food sector producers: sorting, packaging and delivery, etc, while end consumers must be willing to lower their standards, given the fact that size sorting and washing, for example, cannot be in most cases be tackled by local small-scale producers.
3. Third, distance is another major factor with an impact on quality regulations and assurance schemes. Although regulations tend to differ across countries, they generally stipulate a 50, 80 or even 120 km radius within which the production, processing, sale and consumption of produce or food should e place. According to the National Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, p. 539), in Romania the local market is defined as a marketing radius of no more than 75 km from the original place of production.
4. Last but not least, from an economic perspective, SFSCs are not synonymous with direct sales, for instance, agri-food sector cooperatives can sell their entire harvest or low processed produce to supermarkets through their specialised employees (Marechal 2008; Aubry & Chiffolleau 2009).

3. Types of Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs)

Marsden et al. and later Renting et al., based on the principle of “connection” or “link” between the end-consumer and the agri-food sector producer, have identified three main types of SFSCs (Marsden et. al., 2000; Renting et. al. 2003):

1. Direct interaction (*face to face*): the consumer purchases a product directly from the producer/processor on a face-to-face basis. Thus, authenticity and trust are obtained through personal interaction. Authenticity (“designated origin and geographically protected origin”) as well

as mutual trust and respect are attained by means of personal interaction (e.g. farm shops, farm-gate sales, farmers' markets, as well as roadside sale along major transit ways).

2. Spatial proximity: agri-food sector products are obtained and later sold in their specific region of production; meanwhile consumers are regularly informed of the local nature of the product at the point of sale. Even though this category overlaps with the previously mentioned "face-to-face" category and includes the same retail spaces as noted above, in addition, this category may include specialist retailers (e.g. bakeries, mills, butchers', grocers', vegetable growers) which sell local produce. This category can also include public sector food provision – producers that either sell or provide locally sourced foods (e.g. hospitals, schools/universities, penitentiaries, orphanages, care homes).

3. Spatially extended: information about the place and processes of production is provided to consumers who are outside the region of production itself, and who may have no personal experience of that region. All types of retail space are potentially appropriate for this type of SFSC. In this way, customers are informed about product features through product packaging and marketing techniques (branding), and the use of certifications and regulations to protect trademarked products with distinct geographical origin. The main examples are P.D.O. (Protection of Designated Origin) or P.G.I. (Protected Geographical Indication).

4. The Impact of Short Food Supply Chains on the Socio-Economic Environment in Rural Areas. Case study: The Târgu Neamț Tourist Area

Taking into account the preceeding short description of the characteristics of SFSCs, one can note that SFSCs play an important part at all socio-economic levels in those areas where they function. The following graph represents the influence of SFSCs on communities residing in rural areas:

		Environmental protection	Economy		
		supporting wildlife conservation	supporting local economies		
		encouraging small farmers to adopt more eco-friendly production systems	increasing the incomes of local producers as well as increased retention of money within the local economy	Social environment	
		contributing to the conservation of air, soil and water resources including reduced pollution	stimulating E.U. funds absorption in local communities	maintaining local employment and generating greater employment opportunities	
		reducing fuel consumption and GHG emissions (carbon footprint)	developing entrepreneurial spirit	contributing to an increase in job satisfaction and organizational capacity within rural communities	
Health and well-being	encouraging the consumption of fresh, nutritious produce	food waste reduction	supporting local tourism-related activities	countering the migration of the active labour force	Culture
	improving diet and health through increased access to local nutritious food	promoting education on sustainability and environmental issues	supporting local shops and farmers' markets	supporting the direct interaction between end-consumer and producer	promoting and maintaining the local gastronomy
	promoting youth-targeted health food education	nature friendly attitude	encouraging the setup and development of local partnerships between different businesses	encouraging skills transfer and training	maintaining rural cultural heritage
THE EFFECTS OF SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAINS ON THE RURAL ENVIRONMENT					

Figure 1: The effects of Short Food Supply Chains on the rural environment

4.1. Tourist Features of the Târgu-Neamţ Area

In order to get a better understanding of the impact that SFSCs have in general, one must take into account the specific attributes of the area. The Târgu-Neamţ area comprises 16 administrative units (Târgu-Neamţ, Agapia, Bălăteşti, Brusturi, Crăcăoani, Ghindăoani, Grumăzeşti, Drăgăneşti, Păstrăveni, Petricani, Pipirig, Răuceşti, Timişeşti, Țibucani, Urecheni and Vânători-Neamţ). This microregion, including approximately 52,900 hectares of agricultural land, mainly arable (32,000 hectares) and pastures (20,000 hectares), can be said to have a dual structure – crop cultivation and animal husbandry (NIS Tempo online, 2016).

Most importantly, the Târgu-Neamţ microregion is also a self-sustaining tourist destination, due to its natural and cultural potential, its overall development owing a great deal to its extended existing tourist infrastructure.

The uniquely preserved natural environment is widely known and appreciated, due mainly to the Vânători Natural Park - a site of E.U. importance (S.C.I.), part of the ecological network (Nature 2000), and BirdLife International, which includes the 'Dragoș-Vodă' Wildlife Reservation, which focuses on preserving specific Carpathian fauna, in particular the European bison.

The cultural heritage of the region has a major religious component, as a result of several of the most famous monasteries in Moldavia (Agapia, Neamţ, Văratec, Secu, Sihla and Sihăstria) which attract every year a significant number of tourists. At the same time, the cultural heritage is complemented mainly by the medieval Neamţ Fortress, the 'Ion Creangă' Memorial House in Humulești, the 'Nicolae Popa' Ethnographic Museum in the village of Târpești, the Mihail Sadoveanu Memorial House and the Veronica Micle Memorial House.

The concentration of these natural and cultural tourist sites on a relatively small area has stimulated the expansion of distinct tourism forms such as (Tanasă, 2013):

- *religious or faith tourism* is widely practiced in the Neamţ County area, as a result of the presence of a large number of churches, monasteries and small convents, most of which are included in the important national religious tourist trails (for example 'Agapia', 'Văratec', 'Neamţ', 'Secu', 'Sihăstria', 'Sihla', 'Horaița' and others), attracting a significant number of both foreign and Romanian tourists every year;

- *cultural tourism* is probably one of the most important forms tourism practised in Neamţ County; Târgu-Neamţ's cultural heritage (customs and habits included) is of particular importance and can be described as generous to locals as well as potential visitors. well represented in the rural environment as well in urban areas its heritage includes numerous historical monuments which are granted recognition and protection from the Ministry of Culture, Religious Affairs and National Heritage, as well as memorial houses ('Ion Creangă' in Humulești village, 'Veronica Micle' in Văratec village, 'Mihail Sadoveanu' in Vânători village, 'Alexandru Vlahuță' located in Agapia commune), several museums (History, Ethnography and Archaeology – in Târgu Neamţ town; ethnographic – in Târpești commune; small-scale privately owned historical exhibitions run by the Orthodox Church are located in several monasteries such as 'Neamţ', 'Agapia', 'Văratec', 'Secu' and 'Sihăstria'); of similar significant importance to tourists and visitors by chance are the numerous cultural and artistic events taking place regularly in the area ('Neamţ Fortress' Days', the 'Artisans and Crafts' Fair', 'Silver Forest's' traditional fest, national literature author 'Ion Creangă' fest days and last but not least 'New Year's customs and traditions' parade';

- *gastronomic tourism* - is extensively practised thanks to the large number of operating restaurants and accommodation units in the region. Tourists can savour local traditional dishes of the Moldavian cuisine ('Humulești' broth, 'Secu Monastery' - abbey meat hodgepodge, traditional hodgepodge – 'Hanu Ancuței' Inn, wild mushroom soup/borsch, pickled orange agaric, 'shepherd's pie', Moldavian "Gugelhupf" - marble cake, stuffed zucchini, cottage cheese boiled dumplings, 'poale'n brâu' pies and so on. Traditional local delights can be served individually or in groups at the sheepfolds in the area.

- *forest tourism* (wild medicinal herbs harvesting, wild fruit and mushroom picking, etc.); the 'Vânători Natural Park' is again an important destination for tourists interested in such activities, given its sheer size and varieties of plants thriving in this protected wildlife area;

- *trekking* is practised on marked and unmarked trails in the ‘Neamţ Fortress`’ environs or nearby monasteries;

- *recreational tourism* (weekend trips included) is extensively practised especially during the summer and winter seasons;

- *cycling* is another well appreciated form of tourism, which is expanding as it benefits from a large number of unmarked off-road and charted tracks for bike enthusiasts in forested areas; riders can also benefit from the scenery by choosing to take advantage of the network of tarmac cycling paths linking the numerous religious sites in the region;

- *hunting tourism* – the Târgu Neamţ County is a potential destination due to its natural habitats and wild fauna areas encompassing approx. 47,600 hectares included in the BirdLife International network;

- *photography travel/tourism* – due to its highly appreciated landscapes that are home to several fauna and flora habitats of E.U. importance. Besides wildlife, scenic rural and urban architecture are also potential attractions for people enjoying or making a living out of photography;

- *bird-watching* (research eco-tourists) - due to the large numbers of bird species present in the ‘Vânători Natural Park’ (a habitat protected under the *Natura 2000* network), including several endangered species such as the C. crex, lesser spotted eagle, the European honey buzzard (pern or common pern), the hazel grouse, spotted flycatcher and the black woodpecker.

Most accomodation units in the Târgu Neamţ tourist area are mainly rural and urban guesthouses, located primarily in the town of Târgu-Neamţ and in nearby villages of ‘Vânători-Neamţ’ and ‘Humuleşti’ and around the ‘Agapia’, ‘Văratec’ and ‘Neamţ’ monasteries.

4.2. Economic Effects

SFSCs produce significant economic effects as a result of the fact that agriculture, husbandry and agritourism are the main occupations in rural areas. As long as rural guesthouses get their food supplies from traditional rural households, the businesses of farming, husbandry and agritourism can complement each other, ensuring economic growth. Tourism operators can take advantage of the growing consumer interest in locally sourced food products by establishing formal or informal partnerships with local farmers, thus ensuring a constant offer of food products in the tourism industry.

Equitable and economically viable producer-consumer partnerships can be set up, benefitting both sides. Agrifood sector suppliers of quality fresh vegetables, meat and dairy products are able to sell most of their products at fair prices. On the other hand, by including many diverse locally sourced food products in their offer of services, tourism business owners can improve their cost-effective branding strategies, thus attracting more and more tourists interested in healthy lifestyles, organic dishes and beverages. Even though the relative importance of SFSCs will vary depending on farm size and tourism business scale as well as geographical location, there is considerable evidence that SFSCs subsequently lead to increased local sales, employment growth (especially for women) and larger incomes for tourism businesses. Small-scale farmers may benefit from short or intermediate term credits, so that they will be able to provide steady buyers with a constant supply of produce. In such cases both sides involved in the business deal can agree on the terms of delivery, given the seasonal nature of the agrifood sector and tourism activities. Finally, SFSCs will ensure a sizeable constant flow of investments and revenues for local or regional economies. Even though the local culinary heritage is often associated with the context of healthy, sustainable diets, the importance of locally sourced based gastronomy resides in its ability to stimulate overall rural development.

4.3. Social Effects

SFSCs functioning in the tourism industry favour the interaction and ‘connection’ between local farmers and end-consumers, which promote the development of mutual trust. Social capital gained this way can also lead to the development of a local sense of community, providing tourists with a feeling of belonging, with positive social and economic effects in the long term, including

future visits, overall improvement in attitudes to the environment, new knowledge acquisition and sharing, as well as stronger consumer awareness.

In the last decades, like other regions of Romania, the Târgu-Neamț area has been severely impacted by a shortage of jobs and low incomes, which have resulted in an exodus of the local workforce – particularly the youth- to Western European countries. The current unstable global socio-economic and political context, characterized by a growing resentment of economic migrants, as well as widespread unemployment and lowered incomes may witness a potential reverse of migration of the Romanian nationals employed abroad. In this respect Neamț County's rural environment can to some extent provide the potential returnees with the opportunity to resettle and open new small-scale family businesses. One important argument supporting this plausible scenario is that many of the Romanian migrants currently living and working in Western Europe have largely preserved their properties - households and/or agricultural lands in Neamț County. If such a phenomenon will take place at significant level, SFSCs could prove to be a potential solution for individuals willing to make a fresh start or get involved in an established business operating in the agrifood sector or tourism and hospitality industry, taking advantage of the growing demand for locally sourced produce at a regional level. By resorting to SFSCs, younger individuals returning from abroad as well as youngsters moving in from urban areas can also help counter the severe phenomena of population ageing and economic decline of the rural space that emerged after 1989, creating instead a new stable social climate marked by a positive sense of community.

4.4. Environmental impacts and benefits

In the general context of numerous and lively debates aiming at assessing the environmental effects of SFSCs as economic mechanisms, some authors have argued that these can be seen as an overall driver of GHG emissions reduction. Even though studies emphasize that proper logistical arrangements are required and that there is an important potential for improvement in SFSCs, two main categories of benefits can arise from the use of short distribution networks. Firstly, using ecological methods of production and processing, which are mandatory to attaining a less negative global impact on the environment, fuel consumption levels can be greatly reduced, carbon footprints can be lowered accordingly and food product waste can be countered. Many researchers have pointed out yet another series of potential positive effects on the local environment arising from the use SFSCs. Using eco-friendly methods of production and processing, one can note a significant drop in the overuse or misuse of natural resources (land fund, forests, water resources etc.), thus attaining a much needed level of sustainability. Moreover, individuals too are beginning to reconsider their current relation to the natural environment, as part of the general tendency of growing awareness regarding climate change, natural resources scarcity, restraining geographical natural habitats, as well as ethical values on the whole.

The environmental benefits of rural tourism are clear due to the fact that viable SFSCs contribute to the improvement of the general image of landscapes, allowing tourists to better experience the authenticity of rural communities living in numerous picturesque villages and communes, by getting to know or better understand traditional agricultural practices employed in small scale farms, as well as by tasting local dishes, participating in culinary themed trades and fairs or by simply visiting temporary local traditional farmers' markets.

4.5. Impact on health, well-being and the environment

Local food systems provide the possibility of improving the overall diet and state of health of many individuals, through increased access to nutritious food, given the fact that produce sold by means of SFSCs undergo an extremely low degree, if any, of processing and are obtained by using traditional methods that involve a minimum of inputs, or no inputs at all of non-organic fertilizers and pesticides. Among Western tourists and especially the Scandinavians it can be noted that there is a strong tendency favorable to consuming an increasing amount of chemical-free and preferably seasonal produce, trend that is largely motivated by health consciousness. Consequently, big tour operators are starting to adapt their products and services by including in their portfolio stays and

holiday trips to various Mediterranean basin countries that are highly valued for their healthier diets, nutritious food products and sun exposure benefits.

4.6. Cultural impact assessment

In Târgu-Neamț touristic area one of the most relevant roles short food supply chains play is aiding to the conservation and branding of the local gastronomy and cultural heritage on the whole.

Small-sized farmers sell their locally sourced products, specific to the Neamț County region in markets open in the surrounding areas of monasteries and churches. Vendors supply the markets mainly with products such as syrups, jams, sorbets, dairy products and meat based products. Worth mentioning is also the range of ‘homemade’ products crafted by artisans - proprietors and managers of several workshops spread throughout the Neamț region.

Guesthouses serve visitors with traditional dishes based on their harvested crops from their own agricultural holdings, either on the procurement of locally sourced vegetables, dairy and meat products. In spite of the fact that a significant number of guesthouse owners still buy a wide range of supermarket sold food products, one can currently observe the tendency of the owners` reconsidering of their commercial relation, especially given their strong local sense of pride. The main reason for this state of facts are the strict regulations and norms that severely limit the use of homegrown produce in the tourism industry.

5. Recommendations on potential tools supporting the expansion of SFSCs

The expansion of SFSCs viewed as an efficient tool of distribution capable of generating a positive impact on the development of the level of sustainability reachable in the Târgu-Neamț area can be supported by:

- aiding the increase in cooperation and association between small size agricultural holdings, and tourism operators;
- stimulating the growth of farmers` markets (permanent and temporary) and fairs;
- enhancing the branding of agri-food sector products and local cuisine, criteria necessary in aiding also to the expansion of touristic services and offers;
- holding as many as possible gastronomic events (tasting events, cooking contests, fairs and exhibitions) with aim of increasing the attractiveness of touristical destinations;
- stimulating the growth of E.U. funding accessed by individuals and enterprises based on the legal basis provided by the 2014-2020 National Rural Development Programme framework, especially the sub-measures dedicated to encouraging the establishment and aiding of existing SFSCs, by providing incentives to stimulating association and cooperation between groups of farmers and also for the development of rural tourism; the issues are addressed by the N.R.D.P. thanks to Sub-measure 16.4 - *“Support for horizontal and vertical cooperation among actors in the supply chain for the establishment and development of short supply chains and local markets, and for related promotion activities in a local context”* and Sub-measure 9.1a – *“Establishment of producer groups in the fruit-growing sector”*;
- improving the credibility attributable to agri-food sector products provided by rural vendors by encouraging and even financially backing them to adopt labelling and quality-warranty schemes such as P.D.O. (Protection of Designated Origin), P.G.I. (Protected Geographical Indications) as well as T.S.G. (Traditional Specialities Guaranteed);
- implementing innovative forms of marketing and selling, as means of stimulating the expansion of SFSCs and rural tourism;
- resorting to strategic actions and perspectives when addressing rural communities with increased potential for development in tourism related activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst other Western European countries have only relatively recently discovered and taken advantage of the innovative benefits of SFSCs, historically speaking, Romania is quite familiar with this concept. During the long communist rule (1945-1989) the Romanian population residing in urban and rural areas were constrained to resort to the use of SFSCs as a solution to ensure its very survival in many cases, due to the severe shortages of produce supplies in the state owned shops and farmers' markets (especially in the '50s and '80s). That was mainly the result of the communist regime's nationalization of most of the existing agricultural land, between 1945 and 1962, policy which consequently deprived most rural inhabitants of their landed properties, leaving them with no more than a miniscule privately owned plot of cultivable land around their households to make a living out of.

Taking a leap forward to present times it can be noted that the Târgu-Neamț touristic area currently presents mainly all of the necessary elements for ensuring a proper socio-economic environment suitable for the development of local small-scale farming and tourism operators by means of economically viable partnerships. By harnessing and turning into good account the many geographical features of the Neamț region overall, SFSCs can prove to be an efficient economic mechanism if properly adjusted and implemented locally. Among many criteria needed to be met in order to implement such functional SFSCs, especially given the current fierce competition and pressure exerted by large supermarket chains and government regulations, small farmers are compelled to seek cooperative forms of association in order to stand a real chance in opposing many national, as well as other global interests and trends. To this respect, of crucial importance is the growing demand of fresh, chemical-free and seasonal produce strongly shown by tourists and end-consumers in general, which can be a considerable competitive advantage in favour of the expansion of local food systems and of SFSCs in particular. In Târgu-Neamț area many small scale farmers have already successfully managed to sell their produce to numerous guesthouses based on traditional gastronomy. Thus SFSCs have proved to be an efficient method of marketing and branding used by both producers and as well as tourism operators - a win-win situation.

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