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AGROTOURISM POTENTIAL AS PART OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ROMANIA

ELENA SIMA¹

Abstract: *The rural economy is more developed and more dynamic if it has a more diverse structure, and if the share of non-agricultural economy is higher. In this context, the agrotourism is a field that is growing in popularity as producers try to diversify their activities and increase profits that can support economic development in the countryside through sustainable use of tourism resources and maintaining the rural community cultural and social diversity. Our paper focuses on specific opportunities and constraints that influence the progress of agrotourism activities as viable entrepreneurial solutions for self-sustainable rural communities in Romania from the perspective of European integration. The results have shown that agrotourism activity in the areas where it was implemented and developed, had a very strong and favourable impact not only on the economic and touristic framework of localities, but also on their social, cultural, spiritual and even ecological framework.*

Keywords: *sustainable development, non-agricultural activities, agro-tourism, Romania.*

JEL Classification: *Q01, R33.*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability leaves from the idea that human activities are depending on the environment and resources. Health, social security and economic stability of society are essential in defining life's quality. As result, a sustainable society is a society which is modelling its economic and social system such that the global natural resources and the support systems of life be maintained for the next generations.

In Romania, as a Member State of the European Union, ever since the year 1997 steps have been made towards the identification of the priorities for a sustainable development at national and local level, as well as for the incorporation of the sustainable development principles and practices in the ensemble of the Romanian public programs and policies. The national rural development program identifies as priorities the improvement of the rural infrastructure, the increase of life and working standards and the maintaining of population in the rural zones through the development and diversification of economic activities generating incomes and multiple activities (<https://pndr.ro>). This applies to the sustainability principles as the rural zones remain attractive for the next generations.

In the context in which agriculture is still considered "a strategic sector of Romania due to the country's natural advantages and due to the economic and social environment" agro-tourism (an activity as many others, organized and developed in the rural environment by the members of a farm/agricultural household, which means the combination of the agricultural and tourism activities) becomes an alternative source of incomes and labour employment supported financially by European funds, and the Romanian agro-touristic potential represents a component of the sustainable rural development (<http://www.madr.ro>).

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Having in view the positive role which is played by the promotion and development of agro-tourism activity as activity complementary to the agricultural one, organically integrated in the farms' economy, as well as benefiting by a non-polluted picturesque environment, and by the touristic natural attractions and the traditions and habits present in the village environment, the paper proposes itself an inventory of the opportunities and constraints at the basis of this activity development in our country. The methodology used is based on the analysis and synthesis of

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information regarding the evolution of the Romanian agro-tourism activity, supported through the agricultural and rural development policy. The statistical data was completed with information comprised in articles, studies, reports and governmental and nongovernmental documents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In Romania, agrotourism is a form of tourism emerged from the need to find some solutions for increasing the rural farms incomes by putting into value their economic potential. This potential refers both to the existent accommodation potential, prepared and arranged mainly for the guests' receiving, and to the goods and services supplied for consumption to persons coming into the rural environment for relaxing, rest, leisure. In function to the natural, cultural, folklore environment of the region, agro-touristic services offered can vary from meals' serving, accompanying and touristic guide on certain tracks or initiation in certain traditional crafts, to the practicing of some sports or assistance to a series of traditional habits in the locality or zone (poems sessions, village dances, carols, church holidays, traditional fairs, folklore shows, etc).

According to the legal regulations, the rural households/farms' orienting to the completion of their incomes from the agricultural activities with incomes from touristic activities should be rearranged keeping the rural and archaic specific. The specific manifested through the construction materials, working technics, architecture, decorations, furniture must be re-discovered and kept as such, being protected from the urban civilization's contaminations.

The main condition for a farm/household to receive the name of agrotouristic boarding house is to have sufficient rooms for its own family and supplementary capacities to accommodate and feed, proper hygiene and sanitary conditions, means of information and other comfortable adjacent elements in order to constitute an attraction for the tourists.

The licence for the accommodation and feeding of tourists, as well as the certificate for the classification of the comfort degree are granted by the central public institution responsible in the tourism field together with the respecting of the following criteria:

- spaces and access destined to tourists must be separated from those of the host;
- the accommodation rooms must be detached with direct access from the hall or from the stairs' house, must be spacious, sunny, shiny, with the heating possibility, furnished strictly corresponding to the norms, preferably with simple, traditional rustic furniture, eliminating the objects lacking utility for the tourists;
- to exist balconies and terraces at the rooms or halls destined to the tourists endowed with lounges, osier armchairs, tables and electric light;
- to have a day room destined to the tourists for serving the meals, leisure, lecture, games, watching tv and others;
- to have sanitary groups endowed with cold and warm water, which must be well kept and perfectly clean;
- to exist the possibility to prepare the meal by the tourists in a separate space or in the kitchen of the host with the possibility of separating the compartments and equipments for tourists;
- to exist places and objects for children to play.

Rearranging of a farm/household with agrotouristic boarding house needs a quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the touristic potential and supply at micro-territorial level, as well consulting, assistance and funds on whole period of its formation as entity in tourism. In Romania, there are a multitude of actors involved in the development of agro-tourism in Romania. Some of them play a role more important than others, but each brings a contribution in the development of agro-tourism. Main actors can be classified in governmental institutions, local public administrations, members of the private touristic sector, nongovernmental organizations, local communities, financiers, university environment, tourists. Among non-governmental organizations involved in the development of agro-tourism activities, we enumerate:

- The Romanian Federation for Mountain Development (1990), promoting support under any form to the mountain dwellers, including the organization and development of agro-tourism;

- The Romanian Agro-tourism Agency (1995), aiming at agro-tourism connection to the international tourism system;

- The National Association for Rural, Ecological and Cultural Tourism in Romania ANTREC (1994), member of the European Federation of Rural Tourism (EUROGÎTES), well known on international and national plan as a leader in the development of the rural Romanian tourism, as well as the keeping of the Romanian traditional culture (<http://www.antrec.ro>).

Sustainable development of agro-tourism activities in the boarding houses requires among others:

- improvement of infrastructure to support the agro-tourism businesses;

- continuing to reduce bureaucracy with regard to the establishment and operation of agro-tourist boarding houses;

- a better information of the population with regard to the governmental programs for private initiative stimulation;

- popularization of the successful business examples of the Romanian entrepreneurs;

- establishment of local public administrations as promoters of profitable management of the tourism patrimony through the initiation of programs providing support to rural tourism.

According to specialized research, the promotion and development of agro-tourism activities in the rural areas are generating multiple positive effects at economic, social and cultural level through:

- putting into value the local natural and cultural potential;

- increasing the number of jobs, both in the tourism sector and in other auxiliary sectors, of services and management of local resources;

- increasing the living standard and education of the involved population ;

- maintaining the local population in the zone;

- preserving and promoting traditional occupations;

- stimulating certain profitable tourism activities (hotels, restaurants, transport, handicrafts, guide services, etc.);

- diversification of the local economy, mainly in the adjacent rural areas, where agriculture has no development possibilities;

- fostering rural economy development through an additional demand for agricultural products and financial capital;

- improvement and modernization of the local transport, communication and technical infrastructure, with advantages for the local population;

- increased interest in environmental protection inside the protected natural areas;

- fostering inter-cultural communication between local people and tourists.

In the absence of a proper management of the agro-tourism activities in the boarding houses there appear the following negative effects:

- change of land destination, often with good farm yields and well positioned, which is attracted into the tourism business;

- favouring the speculative attitude in the land sale-purchase process, without a well-defined juridical status;

- destruction of soil, flora, fauna and the change of the ecological equilibrium by tracing paths and roads for tourist circulation in the sensitive areas in terms of biodiversity;

- “urbanization” of rural areas and development of “mass tourism” in many natural reserves or natural parks near the tourist villages, etc.

The most substantial financial support required to promote and develop agro-tourism activities in the Romanian countryside has been ensured:

- in the period 2000-2006, through the European Pre-Accession Program SAPARD (Special pre-Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development), Measure 3.4 “Development and diversification of economic activities generating multiple activities and alternative incomes”;

- in the period 2007-2013, through the National Rural Development Programs, Measure 313 “Encouragement of tourism activities”, Axis 3: “The improvement of life quality in the rural areas and rural economy diversification”;

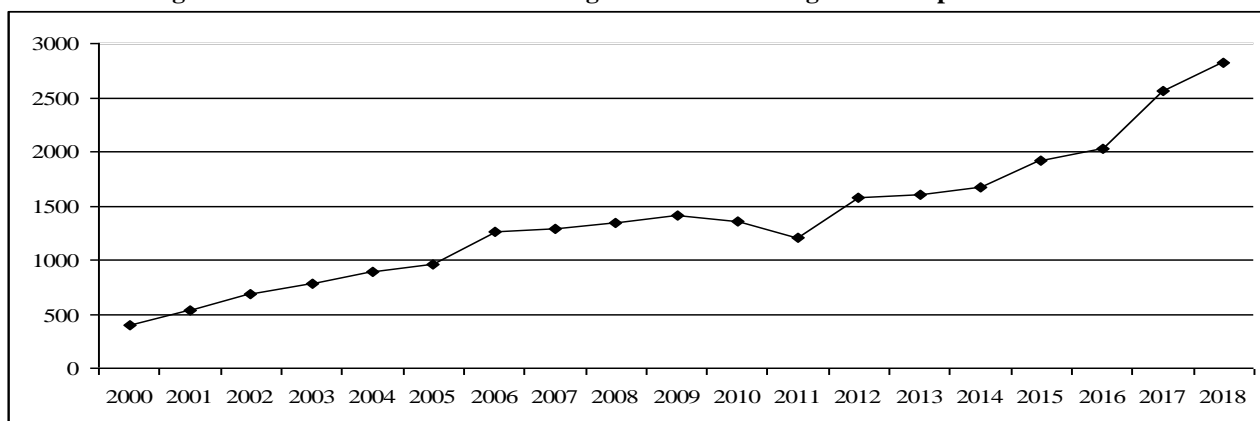
- in the period 2014-2020, through the National Rural Development Programs, Measure 06 “Development of agricultural holdings and enterprises”, Priority P6 “Private investment in non-agricultural sector”. (<http://www.afir.info/>)

The eligible investments supported by the European funds targeted:

- to increase, improve and diversify the small-scale tourism accommodation facilities - agro-tourism boarding houses and private investments in the leisure tourism infrastructure;
- to develop the information and promotion the agro-tourism services;
- orientation, counselling and training in the agro-tourism services domain granted to the inhabitants in the rural environment;
- to develop the local on-line biking systems for the rural tourism accommodation facilities within the rural area connected at regional and national systems.

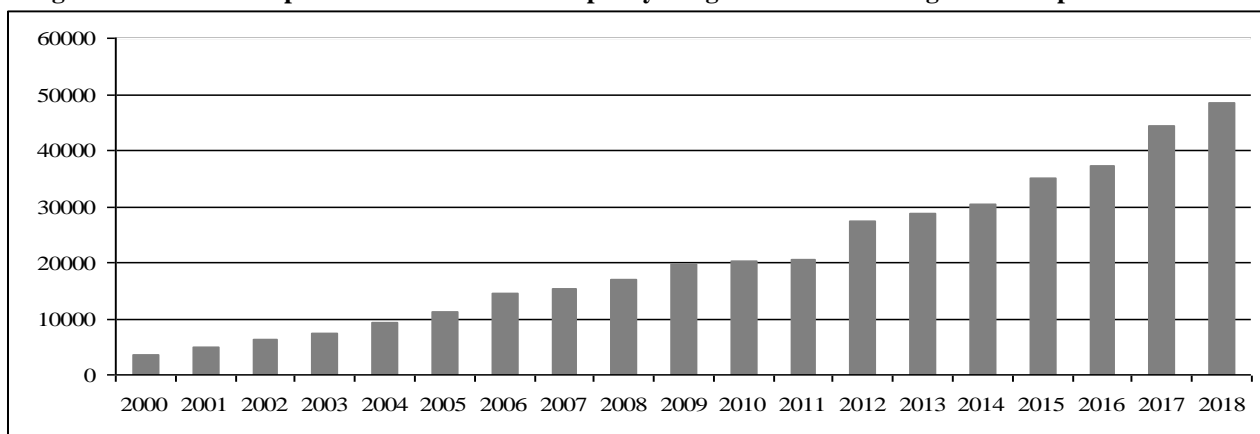
As result of these investments, in the analysed period it was registered a certain increase of the number of agro-touristic boarding houses, registered statistically from 400 in the year 2000 to 2,821 in the year 2018 (Fig.1) and of the accommodaton capacity from 3,544 places in the year 2000 to 48,574 in the year 2018 (Fig.2).

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of agro-turism boarding houses in period 2000-2018



Source: Tempo-online database, 2019

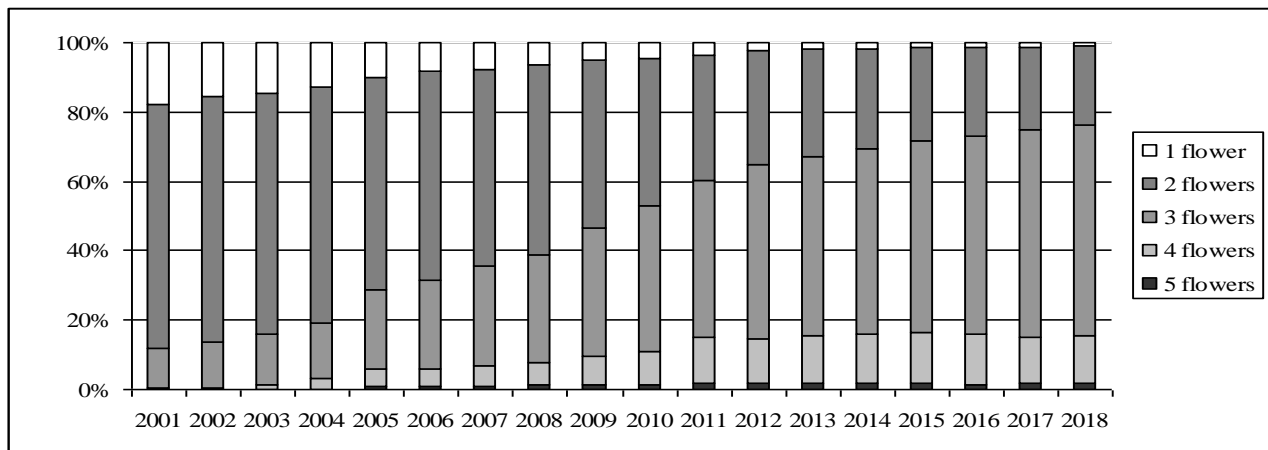
Figure 2. Evolution of present accommodation capacity in agro-turism boarding houses in period 2000-2018



Source: Tempo-online database, 2019

The quality of the services supplied and the level of endowment of the agro-touristic boarding houses, evaluated fom 1 to 5 flowers /daisies, evolved in favour of the category: 3 flowers /daisies (Fig.3).

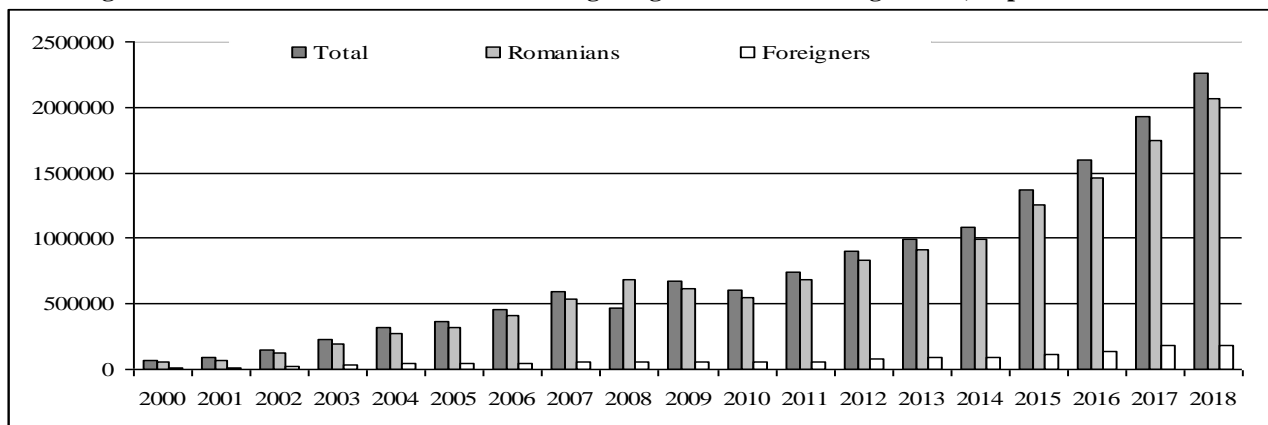
Figure 3. Evolution of function accommodation capacity in agro-turism boarding houses, by comfort categories, in period 2000-2018



Source: Tempo-online database, 2019

The number of Romanian tourists who chose to bed in the agro-touristic boarding houses increased from 53,804 persons in the year 2000 to 2,068,888 persons in the year 2018 (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Evolution of tourists number bedding in agro-turism boarding houses, in period 2000-2018



Source: Tempo-online database, 2019

The Romanian agro-touristic potential is also supported by the variety of natural and anthropic resources determined by the proportionality, concentric disposal and the exposure in amphitheatre form of the three major relief forms (mountains, hills, plains), as well as the maintaining of cultural traditions (literary, musical, popular art, folk art, gastronomy, religious habits, etc.).

The main Romanian agro-touristic destinations are mainly situated in the mountain and hilly zones in the counties: Braşov (Bran, Moeciu), Harghita (Tuşnad, Praid), Cluj, Sibiu (Sadu, Tălmăcel), Maramureş (Săpânţa), Suceava, Neamţ etc.

The present development of the agro-touristic activities is the result of an insufficient exploitation of the material resources, of the deficitary education, the low level of the utilities, as well as of the phenomenon of massive migration to the urban or to other states of the world.

Also, from the annual reports about progresses regarding the implementation of the National Rural Development Programs in Romania made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development it results an average level of financial absorption of measures encouraging rural tourism and implicitly agro-tourism because of lack of own resources of the stakeholders and the difficulties with which they are confronting to obtain the loans ensuring the co-financing necessary to projects' implementation, as well as because of the long period of financing and implementing the integrated infrastructure projects. The reasons for the slow development of the Romanian agrotourism are also holding to the up to bottom approach of the different strategies, to the non-

implication of authorities and rural communities, to the systematic non-allocation of funds initially foreseen and to the lack of any priorities to be maintained on a sufficiently long term.

CONCLUSIONS

In the last decades, the world of the Romanian village was in a continuous transformation process leading to the modification both of the rural localities specific, and of the demographic, occupational, values coordinates of the population.

In this context, agro-tourism proved to be an antidote of the subsistence agricultural production structures, a privilege of the economic phenomenon of pluriactivity and a promotor of founding of a rural society the socio-economic basis of which is represented by the middle class.

For the analysed period, the European programs for the financing the investments in the Romanian agro-tourism represent an opportunity insufficiently put into value, although in the zones in which agro-touristic activity developed, this had a strong favourable impact not only upon the economic and touristic framework of the localities, but also upon their social, cultural, spiritual and ecologic framework.

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