



Rural tourism and livelihood strategies in Romania

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A B S T R A C T

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Substantial changes in the Romanian countryside accompanied by the need for more robust economic activities have caused some families to turn to tourism as an economic diversification strategy. A qualitative study of selected rural tourism entrepreneurs indicates positive experiences, both economically and in other aspects of their lives. However, the development of rural tourism is highly uneven spatially and the Romanian Government should act more incisively to support families establishing guesthouses.

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1. Introduction

Romania is still a largely rural country. In 2007 the percentage of rural population still reached 45% of the total (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2008), a strikingly high level that clearly differentiates Romania from the rest of the European Union (24%) and suggests the survival of a lively system of villages and small towns that continues to play a major role in the socio-economic and cultural life of the country.

Romania's rural characteristics consolidated after the end of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime, in 1989. The difficult transition from a planned to a market economy caused the decline of the formerly dominant industrial sector, whose labour force was only partially absorbed by the services sector. As a result, many unemployed workers had to return to an agricultural life (Biertel and Turnock, 2007). This phenomenon, in combination with the deep social changes caused by the ongoing land restitution process, produced a new "agrarianisation" of society (Benedek, 2000: 42). Hence, agriculture is a key sector in Romania, accounting for about 32% of employment (approximately 70% in rural areas), 12% of GDP and 9% of exports (Institutul Național de Statistică – INS, 2006). However, in spite of the central role played by this sector in the economic life of the country, productivity is generally very low, as indicated by the "labour to land" ratio of 63 Annual Work Units/100 ha (UE average 5 AWU/100 ha), and the negative trade balance in agro-food products that continues to widen (€1.3 billion in 2005).

According to Gertrud et al. (1999), the key characteristic of Romanian farming is its dual structure, with the coexistence of a small number of large entities, mostly commercial farms (18,263

averaging 269 ha, accounting for 34.5% of total utilized agricultural area – UAA) and a considerable number of individual farms, mostly subsistence and semi-subsistence holdings (4,121,247, average size 2.15 ha, accounting for 65.5% of UAA). Less than 0.5% of holdings account for more than one third of UAA, with the remaining 99.5% accounting for two thirds of UAA. Around 3 million holdings, covering approximately 30% of total agricultural land, have clear subsistence features. In some types of farming, such as vegetable production, the contribution of subsistence agriculture reaches 90%.

The rural areas of the country are characterized by a highly dispersed population. Romania has about 13,000 separate villages, a number that increases when considering smaller hamlets, which developed over the centuries in relation to local agricultural potential (Biertel and Turnock, 2007). A traditional socio-economic structure largely survived through the communist time, when the government strengthened and emphasised "top-down" central planning and introduced a new farming system through large co-operatives and state farms. During the 1980s, Ceaușescu's "sistemizare" plan turned into a highly controversial project aiming at radically eliminating up to 8000 villages in order to create stronger district units based on coordinating "rural towns", but the fall of the regime stopped the project at its very early stages.

The quality of life in rural areas is generally poor. Currently, only 33% of rural residents are connected to a water supply network, only 10% to a sewerage system and only 10% of rural roads are of adequate standard (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2008). Basic social infrastructure (health and education systems, finance and credit provision, etc.) is also much less developed than in urban areas. These factors hamper economic development, increase out-migration and exacerbate sanitary and environmental problems.

A quickly improving economic situation, with GDP growing at the yearly average rate of 8%, and predominantly optimistic views on the foreseeable future of the country, are currently not able to

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constrain mass emigration, although the consequences of the current financial crisis are difficult to estimate, and Romania is still struggling to recover from the severe economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. During the late years of Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule, declining standards of living, in a context of dramatic recession and rampant nationalism, caused an emigration phenomenon that heavily hit the historically largest ethnic minorities located in Transylvania (Hungarians and Germans) and further shrank the rapidly dwindling Jewish communities concentrated in the main urban areas.

After the re-establishment of democracy and a market economy in the early 1990s, the loss of population accelerated and is still going on, currently involving all of the country's ethnic groups, notably the Romanian majority, the strong Hungarian minority, the partially nomadic Roma community and the declining German population (Axmann, 1998; Bauer and Zimmermann, 1997; Postma, 1995; Sandu, 2005).

The 2002 census showed the extent of the emigration process that is touching the Romanian people during the current transition period, causing, for the first time in the country's modern history, a significant population decrease mainly determined by spontaneous labour migration towards Italy, Spain and other Western countries. Low fertility rates, caused by the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, have been further reduced by emigration of young families resulting in a serious demographic unbalance.

Emigration and urbanization, both temporary and permanent, have become widespread survival strategies for a population that is only starting to savour the long-awaited welfare commonly associated with the Western World, and the entrance in the European Union, in 2007, has created an unprecedented opportunity to move freely to the other member states. Italy, in particular, has been chosen as a destination by over 1 million Romanians, according to the Italian Government's official estimations as of January 2009 (Ministero dell'Interno – Italia, 2009).

Considering the remarkably high share of subsistence agriculture, rural diversification in Romania has become a political priority at all administrative levels (Biertel and Turnock, 2007). This aim has been pursued through farmland redistribution and creation of larger, more viable holdings, and also through the European Union's SAPARD programme (Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development), focusing on rural infrastructure, farm modernisation, increase in food processing capacity and development of rural tourism (Biertel and Turnock, 2007; Ministerul pentru Întreprinderi Mici și Mijlocii, Comerț, Turism și Profesii Liberale, 2006; Turnock, 2002). The development of rural tourism, in particular, is expected to play an important role in the revitalization of rural areas, in line with common beliefs and practices in several other European countries (Hall, 2004). High expectations related to the creation of new local development opportunities, offering an alternative to emigration and urbanization, embrace job creation, income growth, productive specialization, infrastructure development and cultural heritage protection.

In spite of the importance generally accorded to rural tourism as a major agent of local development, there is still widespread uncertainty about the economic impacts on rural communities in terms of livelihood enhancement. From an academic perspective, while a large number of general studies on Romanian rural tourism have appeared both in national and international literature (Benedek and Dezi, 2004; Dezi, 1999; Cipollari, 2005; Hall, 2004; Mitrache and Manole, 1996; Turnock, 1990, 1999, 2002; Vaetisi, 2006), the links between tourism and livelihood strategies in local communities have yet to be investigated thoroughly. Accordingly, this study explores how rural communities can enhance their livelihoods by becoming involved in tourism through documentation of the experiences of some families that host tourists in their

homes. The strategies that they have adopted to achieve a better standard of living will be highlighted.

2. Rural tourism as a tool for family enterprises and development of rural areas

Tourism has long been considered as a potential means for socio-economic development and regeneration of rural areas, in particular those affected by the decline of traditional agrarian activities. Peripheral rural areas are also considered to be repositories of older ways of life and cultures that respond to the post-modern tourists' quest for authenticity (Urry, 2002). Thus, the encouragement for rural tourism has become a common policy both in developed countries (Cănoves et al., 2004; Hall and Jenkins, 1998; Long and Lane, 2000; MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003; OECD, 1994) and in developing ones (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Hall, 2004; Kinsley, 2000).

This increasing support for rural tourism is based upon a number of perceived benefits it potentially provides to rural areas. According to Roberts and Hall (2001) and Hall et al. (2004), benefits can be summarized as follows:

- the economic growth, diversification and stabilisation through employment creation in tourism business;
- the provision of supplementary income in farming, craft and service sector;
- the opportunity to realize the economic value of specific, quality-based production of food products, as well as of unused and abandoned buildings;
- the increment in social contacts, especially in breaking down the isolation of the most remote areas and social groups;
- the opportunity to re-evaluate the heritage and its symbols, the environment and the identity.

It has been observed that rural tourism offers many opportunities to family enterprises. Due to the difficulties that the agricultural sector is currently undergoing, many family farms have to look for new ways to survive and one solution is to host tourists in the family property. According to Barbieri and Mshenga (2008), Nilson (2002), Ventura and Milone (2000), this kind of enterprises can bring several economic benefits, including increased farm gross income (when the family owns the farm), the generation of cash flow and the creation of employment opportunities for family members.

However, there are a number of widespread weaknesses which can affect the business and reduce the stimulus for rural development. Lack of professionalism is a frequent complaint addressed at family businesses. Low entry barriers in rural tourism might attract people with no relevant training or education, which can seriously limit their potential to grow or prosper (Getz et al., 2004). Furthermore, many family do not want to increase their business beyond the subsistence level and therefore will not create significant job opportunities. Another concern is the relatively widespread lack of innovation spirit.

Following this approach, a number of studies have highlighted that various factors may hamper the achievement of rural economic diversification and growth through tourism (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000; Gannon, 1994; Lachov et al., 2006; Roberts and Hall, 2001; Sharpley and Sharpley, 2002). In particular, it has been found that:

- inward investment, new firm creation and employment generation may be limited, owing to the small scale and dispersed nature of the sector which supplies, moreover, a highly seasonal market. As a result, returns on investments tend to be low;

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