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Heritage as an Alternative Driver for Sustainable Development and Economic Recovery in South East Europe

Tourism opportunities for valorising the authentic traditional rural space-study case: Ampoi and Mures Valleys microregion, Alba County, Romania

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Abstract

Click here and insert your abstract text. This article is presenting a local initiative in Romania, Alba County, representing an association consisting of one town and ten villages, which tries to valorise the microregion potential in the framework of Leader approach. Analyze conducted in this article is focused on the touristic activity seen as an opportunity of stimulating economic development that offers an alternative to the agricultural dependence of the community. Rural tourism is an opportunity for valorising the natural framework, cosy accommodation and personalized touristic experiences. Leader approach is offering limited support for rural area in order to encourage cultural activities, architecture rehabilitation, valorising natural landscape and rural tourism. Rural tourism is an opportunity for valorising the natural landscape, history and culture of the Ampoi and Mureş Valleys Microregion, generating working places especially for women and making rural area more attractive for young people.

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1. Introduction

Rural areas in Europe are not in their original natural situation, these areas have been modified during centuries of agriculture practice. Agriculture has created the diversified environment in which communities are living. So, agricultures are administrating the rural areas in the benefit of entire community. Through their activity, agricultures

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are contributing to preservation of the soil, landscape and biodiversity of these areas. Unfortunately the economies are not offering rewards for these activities. So, their challenge is to produce food protecting the environment and biodiversity. Sustainable agriculture supposes to use carefully the natural resources in order to produce food and to assure the increase of the quality of life for the present and future generations. Thus, the agriculture is a seasonal activity that has to be completed with other economic activities that are generating incomes for rural areas inhabitants during the entire year. Such an opportunity is to combine the touristic activity with the agriculture specific of the rural areas and to offer a diversity of activities that tourists can do in these areas.

Thirty years ago, rural tourism was a new tendency with small impact in the entire touristic activity. However, nowadays this kind of tourism has a more significant role in its development. The rate of growth of tourist demand in rural areas, in the last 20 years, is deployed by region as follows: Europe 52%, Africa 8.1%, 4.1% Middle East, South Asia 9.4%, South East Asia and Pacific 10.8%, 5.4% North America and other parts of the world 4.3%. Everything points to the exceptional direction of European population towards these destinations (Stefanović, 2010, p.48). The market trends worldwide are in favor of rural tourism, which is also affirmed by the World Tourist Organization. Findings in the last 20 years show clear growth, and the biggest growth rate was registered in some Southern and Eastern countries, almost 25%. In Europe there are over 200.000 registered service providers and about 2.000.000 beds available. Number of people who are directly or indirectly employed in rural tourism is approximately 500.000. The annual tourist consumption in rural tourism is about 65 billion Euros. Almost 98% of all registered accommodation is in European Union countries (Radmilo Nikolić, Vidoje Stefanović, Nedžad Azemović, 2012).

2. Presenting a local initiative in Alba County, Romania: the Association representing the community of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys

In the last years, increased the efforts in valorizing the rural areas, expressed in a modification of relationship between country side and city, which can be appreciated in substitution of concepts as: old for antique, primitive for traditional. To have an interest for cultural heritage must be based on the three determinants: the conservation of authenticity, the defense of public goods and the value of patrimony as a factor of cultural rural development (Gabriela Antoşová, 2013). Romania is considered by both, Romanian and foreign specialists a country with tourist potential, which could compete with any other country in the world in what concerns the wealth of tourist resources (Nedelea, 2007; Gina-Ionela Butnaru, Florina-Iuliana Timu, 2011). According to the tourism development strategy, a quarter of Romania's surface is considered a true touristic heaven. A study realized by the Tourism Research Institute shows that more than half of Romania's surface has touristic potential. Romania is divided into three areas: the area of great value, with touristic potential; the area with high touristic potential, and the area with low touristic attractiveness. Consequently, 24% of the surface of the country is of high and great value of touristic potential. This category includes: the mountain and sub-mountain area from Carpathians and Apuseni Mountains, Maramureş, the Danube Delta and the coastal area. Thus, 34% of Romania's surface has an average touristic potential, including spa resources, museums, memorial houses and other historical areas, Someş Plateau, Târnavă, Central Moldavia Plateau, or Dobrogea Plateau (Bedrule – Grigoruţă and Corodeanu, 2007). The area of Ampoi and Mureş Valleys represents a physical-geographical sub-unit of the Alba County, which overlaps two Romanian development regions (Center and West Regions). The area is a traditional rural space which includes Zlatna City, but its economic influence is reduced and surpassed by the influence of Alba Iulia and Sebeş Municipalities. The area benefits of natural touristic heritage (natural reservations, beautiful rural landscape) and anthropogenic touristic heritage (ecclesiastic architecture monuments such as monasteries and wooden churches, museums and memorial houses, various periodic events, festivals, local fairs). The association created as a partnership between public and private agents from the eleven localities which tries to valorize the area potential in the framework of Leader approach. This partnership aims to stimulate the entire community to cooperate and to valorize the local potential of the area (economic, social and touristic). The Leader approach is based on the involvement of the community in the development territory activities. Thus, the partners, that were not used to cooperate before, have to collaborate and to develop common projects and to support these projects in the future.

Leader approach offers a new opportunity for the development of rural communities through the organization of the Local Action Groups, which must consider the problems the territory faces, to define strategy, prioritize

objectives and implement its development program rural. Leader methodology involves the cooperation of members of rural communities, entrepreneurs and public authorities in a public-private partnership to help revive rural communities by creating jobs, diversifying the rural economy and the value of cultural heritage. Because rural areas are very different and specific, the fundamental concept underlying the Leader approach assumes that development strategies are more effective and efficient if are decided and implemented at local level by local actors using clear and transparent procedures and benefiting of the support of relevant public administrations (Gavrila-Paven Ionela, 2013).

2.1. Rural and cultural identity of the Ampoi and Mureș Valleys

Rural tourism is one of the motivational forms of tourist circulation and represents a form of tourism in rural areas. The village is an anthropogenic tourist base, usually located within the emphasized recreational and serene environment. Recreational potentials are primarily expressed by the very atmosphere, because the village is characterized by preserved nature, the absence of pollution and large green areas. Besides recreational potentials tourists are attracted to villages by the opportunity of including tourists in some rural activities such as: livestock pasture management, fruit harvesting, forestation etc. Tourist attraction of the village to a large extent depends on the attractiveness of accompanying facilities and attractions (Radmilo Nikolić, Vidoje Stefanović, Nedžad Azemović, 2012).

2.2. Analysis of the touristic potential of the Ampoi and Mureș Valleys

The area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys has a high touristic potential that could be used in order to activate and develop the tourism activity. The most important are as follows: (2) the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys is located at the crossroads linking two Romanian development; the immediate vicinity of the international European roads and the future functioning of three highways make the area extremely convenient because passengers in transit are regarded as potential tourists; certainly the vicinity of the cities of Alba Iulia, Sebeș, Sibiu, Cluj-Napoca, Deva and Târgu Mureș, makes the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys available and easily accessible; (2) the existence of utilities and other infrastructure in most villages is an important prerequisite for developing tourism potentials; (3) value, beauty and diversity of the natural and built heritage offers outstanding scenery and memorable information about historical periods Romanian nation; the relief allows diversified leisure tourism development; (4) the rich cultural heritage represented by numerous monuments, monasteries, churches, and customs, traditions, crafts, architecture, also represent important potentials; existing cultural objectives allow the development of cultural tourism; diverse local cuisine; (5) environmental organizations that are involved in education on the protection of the natural environment. The touristic products that will promote the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys should include local lifestyles presented through various events and activities. Thus, for example, various agricultural activities could be organized involving the participation of tourists (picking fruit, cultivating the land etc.). Through various events tourists can be introduced to local customs, traditions, local costumes etc. Regarding the demand, the most promising segment would be the urban population, mainly from the cities nearby. Considering the high population concentration in cities, and therefore stressful lifestyle, more and more people are expected to go for the week-ends in the rural areas. Tourists will appreciate the landscape and the different traditional activities that will be able to do in this area.

Tourism and its associated entrepreneurship opportunities as a development strategy for the rural areas can generate jobs and support retail growth. The results obtained in other studies clearly demonstrate the importance of the community approach to tourism development and that rural tourism development and entrepreneurship cannot work without the participation and collaboration of businesspersons directly and indirectly involved in tourism (Wilson Suzanne, Fesenmaier Daniel R., Fesenmaier Julie, John C. Van Es, 2001). Analyzing the touristic activity, it can be observed that it is only an additional activity and only for half of the localities in the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys. Considering the perspective of tourism activity development in the area, it has to be considered also a series of obstacles and constraints: (1) lack of adequate tourism infrastructure starting from the level of accommodation capacities, touristic services, auxiliary services for spending free time; (2) insufficient time allocated

to cultural activities in relation to investments in cultural infrastructure; (3) poor promotion of tourist attractions in the area; insufficient financial resources to support local development of this activity; (4) the local cuisine is diverse but not manifested; (5) lack of interest for the development of handicrafts; (6) poor training in the field of tourism; (7) tourism is not organized as an economic activity that can be planned to determine the investment required and income potential; (8) controlling deforestation is still weak and affects the natural landscape with inadequate facilities and vacation houses without a plan based on basic landscaping; (9) lack of facilities for control and monitoring of tourism activity; (10) reduce awareness of the natural values of the local community and visitors; lack of touristic signs and tourist information points regarding the valuable areas, natural monuments and anthropogenic events calendar and their correlation with those at the regional level.

Considering the existing touristic heritage of the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys, it can be considered a suitable area for rural tourism valorizing the authentic rural space (especially traditions, various periodic events, festivals, local fairs, local cuisine, natural landscape), for leisure tourism (combining with cultural tourism and valorizing the presence of local and regional important monuments) and active tourism (giving the tourists the opportunity of sports – golf playing, trip making, mountain bike and other activities). In this area can be valorize the duality of the rural/ethnographic tourism and active tourism which is not singular. In Europe it can be mentioned the development programs of Limousin France or Extremadura in Spain, less polarized areas where the dominant of most localities is still an agricultural or an agro-industrial one (Ateljevic J., 2009). Given the infrastructure present development in last period (area is situated nearby three highways) this area is likely to stake also on transit tourism. Tourism represents a viable alternative to the area development. The area is suitable for transit tourism, rural tourism and industrial tourism. Rural tourism is an alternative that can lead to personal or the community prosperity in which it is carried, the economic crisis, impoverishment and especially the depopulation of villages. Romanian villages – rich in tradition, history and nature – offers varied experiences of those trying to regain roots, those looking for relaxation or recreation, or experiencing local culture and rural lifestyle. Under these conditions, conservation and ethnographic identity are essential for rural tourism.

3. Conclusion

The area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys benefits of favorable factors to develop the touristic activity: (1) increased tourist interest for the area and high demand for quality tourism services; (2) by enhancing activities of the rich cultural and historical heritage of villages components will attract an increased number of tourists; (3) the possibility of using of European Union funding programs for the development of rural tourism; (4) the existence of spaces available for tourism; (5) there is potential for the development of cultural, ecumenical, adventure, science, rural and agro-tourism activities; (6) developing tourism structures and access roads will contribute to the inclusion of the main touristic attractions of the area in the county and regional tourist circuits; (7) spatial planning of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys as recreation areas, recreation and sport; (8) drawing tourism routes that combine elements of valuable natural heritage objectives ultimately contributing to the development of quality tourism activities.

In order to provide better results and to develop rural tourism in appropriate ways, it has to be plan a strategy for tourism development. The strategy has to follow three major aspects: (1) social aspects, referring especially to the increase of the cooperation between rural and urban areas; (2) environmental aspects – referring to the awareness about natural and anthropogenic values and the necessity of preserving the environment; (3) economic aspects referring to the possibilities to support the local and regional economic development and reversing the process of depopulation of the rural areas. This is the main objective of the local action groups, like the association described above.

Given the existing touristic heritage, the area of Ampoi and Mureș Valleys can be considered a suitable area for rural tourism valorizing the authentic rural space (especially traditions, various periodic events, festivals, local fairs, local cuisine, natural landscape), for leisure tourism (combining with cultural tourism and valorizing the presence of local and regional important monuments) and active tourism (giving the tourists the opportunity of sports – golf playing, trip making, mountain bike and other activities).

Through their diversity and pure beauty of the landscape, the rural area can become a favorite destination for leisure and free time spending. The holidays in the rural areas allow for the cities inhabitants to be reconnected to the rural traditions, including a clean environment and fresh and high quality food directly from the farms from these

areas. A viable rural tourism can help socio-economic development of localities, but only if other conditions are fulfilled: a modern infrastructure for communications and transport, sewerage people open minded but conservative in places that give charm to a local without kitsch, providing at least modest accommodation conditions, keeping the local architecture of the buildings, the principles travel arrangement; existence of authentic traditions, craftsmen, handicraft workshops, animation tourist; existence of marketing strategies, social media and public relations campaigns

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