

Economia Aziendale online²⁰⁰⁰ Web[©]
International Business and Management Review

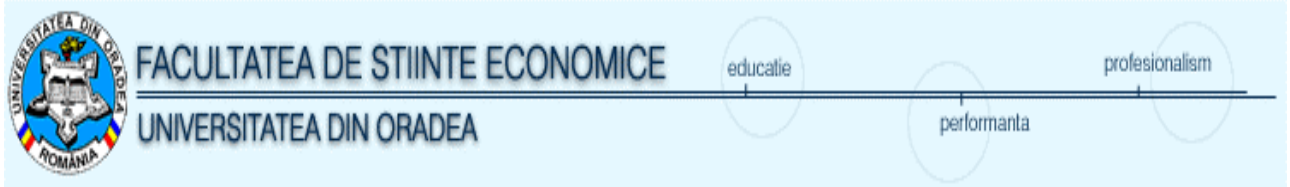
N. 1/2008
Special Issue

**3rd International Economic Scientific Session
International Scientific Conference**
**“European Integration
New Challenges for the Romanian Economy”**
**University of Oradea, Romania
May 25th – 26th, 2007**

Economia Aziendale online²⁰⁰⁰ Web[©]
International Business and Management Review
Editor in Chief: Piero Mella
ISSN 1826-4719
Reg. Trib. Pavia - n. 685/2007 R.S.P.

**Pavia, January, 2008
No. 1/2008 – Special Issue**

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Rural Tourism and Project Management

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Abstract

The many-sided character of tourism, in general, and of agro-tourism, in particular, does not allow us to describe it as an industry in the technical sense because this sector does not imply a single specific production or very well defined operational parameters. We will always start from the idea that tourism must be an element of maintaining and developing of agricultural activities and not a distinct element (in the sense of an urbanization of the environment of the country side). The tourism system implies decision-making and the placing of responsibility as close as possible to the place of the production activity (that means the household, farm), which means increasing authority for the rural family which provides the tourist services. The success of agro-tourism depends mostly on the capacity of the region to apply the development projects, with all the changes which are brought by this type of tourism to the region, in general, and the households, in particular.

Key words: Rural tourism, development project, human resources

The development projects for agro-tourism must start from their fundamental aim, that is the obtaining of some elements and information that on the one hand will enrich the experience of the project team and on the other hand will allow the local groups acting on its behalf to carry out the tourist activities taking into consideration the resources, the competition and the market. The main steps to be taken are: the correct evaluation of the agro-touristic potential (the analysis of the current situation and the diagnosis-analysis); the elaboration of some efficient organization patterns for the agro-tourism within the specified are; the establishing of the socio-economic impact; the presenting of solutions for the local community inhabiting the area. Other solutions can be accompanied by a series of connected activities, which the members of the project team are prepared to offer to the local community/local authorities.

Those who are responsible for the organizing of rural tourism in a certain area must establish the objectives and the guiding lines of the activities in such a way that the interests of the two parties, the local population and the project managers, should not find themselves in opposing positions. Thus, any development project must be conceived and sustained in three directions: economically – the obtaining of economic results which are positive for the local population and project managers by identifying, developing and increasing the degree of resource exploitation; socially – by settling the population within the villages, increasing the employment rate and returning to several old traditional crafts; ecologically – by avoiding the degradation of the environment, the ensuring of a balanced long term exploitation of resources.¹

The many-sided character of tourism, in general, and of agro-tourism, in particular, does not allow us to describe it as an industry in the technical sense because this sector does not imply a single specific production or very well defined operational parameters. Its economic dimension cannot be estimated without the intervention of external and internal factors of economic, social, cultural and environmental nature. Thus, we are dealing with a wide, varied and complex character of the touristic phenomenon which requires a careful analysis. Among the problems concerning rural tourism, which are well known for their negative impact are: the threat to the surrounding environment, the socio-cultural threat, the disturbance of the natural world affecting the balance of the small socio-cultural universe of the rural community; problems related to the planning, local control, public environment and possible partnerships.

We will always start from the idea that tourism must be an element of maintaining and developing of agricultural activities and not a distinct element (in the sense of an urbanization of the environment of the country side). A very important element of agro tourism is the better capitalization of the local resources, which can occur as follows: by selling the local products at an as good price as possible, using shorter distribution channels, by selling the products obtained within the household (food, folk art items, clothing) directly to the tourists; by initiating tourists in different agricultural activities (hand crafts, animal raising, hay collecting, fruit picking, etc.); the direct participation of the tourists in the process of production of goods.

Another major advantage is that the performing of some tourist services implies the building of infrastructure (communication network, water supply, sewage, electric energy and heating), equipment which can be used in other economic activities also.

The issue of tourism management in the rural area must be connected with the principles of approaching this field, principles which can be seen as the objectives of agro-touristic development: obtaining positive economic effects for the householders (landowners, farmers) and

¹ Bran F., Simon T. and Nistoreanu P. (2000), *Ecotourism*, Ed. Economică, București [44]

the local community; satisfying the customers by providing quality, flexibility and a good price for the products and services offered; creating and diversifying the employment range; this is more important than the areas where the degree of unemployment is high; preserving the traditional houses and customs; tourism contributes to the acknowledgement of the importance of these activities, especially as many communities use these as means of encouraging the tourist circulation; supporting the local community; the emergence of new initiatives; agro-tourism can serve as an incentive for attracting new investments to the rural areas; the modernization of the network of transport and communication; supporting the agriculture and logging industry; the improvement of living standards of the local population; the creation of new functions for the underprivileged groups; this form of tourism can help the small establishments to survive by performing some complementary activities; the improvement of the living standards for the tourists that come from urban areas.

Even though, in our opinion, we must not forget that agro-tourism is foremost, as any other tourist service, an economic activity which has as fundamental motivation the attaining of profit. The strategic objectives must start from the attaining of an income complementary to the agricultural activity by offering some new and unexpected tourist products for the tourism market, and so to achieve an increase of the living standard in the rural areas, stimulating the settling of the active population in the rural areas (the occupational diversification of the active population, especially the younger one) and the hindering of the rural-urban migration.

As opposing other economic activities, in the case of agro-tourism, the economic and social objectives are more inter-conditioned. Even though the economic objectives have a determining percentage within the firm management, as they directly express the interests of those who are involved in the organization process, in this case, they cannot be summed up without taking into consideration the social objectives also. This step by step extension towards unquantifiable objects reflects an increasing preoccupation for the social responsibilities of the firm/agro-tourism association. Due to the peculiarities of agro-tourism, the social responsibility is a condition for the existence of this phenomenon; if the development of agro-tourism is not controlled, there is the risk that the elements that define agro-tourism may disappear – the rural area, traditional life, traditional occupations, etc.

The local, individual answers offered in order to solve the agro-touristic issues do not represent a policy for this field; such answers can only provide short-term solutions for long-term problems. The providing of a general policy of agro-touristic development must begin with the analysis of the alternative strategic options. Unfortunately many rural communities got stuck in their own efforts to implement their objectives due to the lack of human, financial and technological resources, which are necessary for the initiation of an touristic industry accepted by not only both tourists and tourist agent, but at the same extent by their hosts.

In order to promote the development of agro-tourism according to the notion of social responsibility, long-term development, the involvement of the local community etc, the analyzed project is focused on the following imperative objectives: to elaborate a strategy with a wide perspective in agro-tourism and specific actions in association with the firms and organizations in the field; to support the regional and national development of agro-tourism by preparing a statistics material regarding the sector, potential clients and competitors as well as the already existing project of touristic development at a regional and national level, which should facilitate the obtaining of information that can be applied to the particular area; to come up with a plan to organize and integrate the tourist product in the national agro-tourist offer; his way the stress in the development of the client-based services is, from all points of view, placed on the exploitation of natural and human resources from the country-side.

This exploitation must be carried out according to the principles of long term tourism; to help with the drawing up of a national rural program and to help with the joining in the different sections of the programs of the European Union; to promote the cooperation on the national as well as on the international market for agro-tourism; to set in motion the national development projects for agro-tourism; to come up with proposals and initiatives for the solving of the problems which concern agro-tourism.

In the field of rural tourism, the human activity will rely more on competence, increased individual responsibility and high efficiency. The tourism system implies decision-making and the placing of responsibility as close as possible to the place of the production activity (that means the household, farm), which means increasing authority for the rural family which provides the tourist services. The opinion according to which, in what regards agro-tourism, the handling of human resources should be one of mere consultancy, has been surpassed because “the players” on the field begin to have a certain responsibility towards the local community, the environment in which the firm is active, the requirements of the activities.

The diversity of the problems and activities which those, who work in agro-tourism have to tackle, has as a consequence the fact that these people are qualified in a large range of interdisciplinary fields. Together with the growing complexity of the agro-tourism carried out in the country-side, with the more and more complicated problems generated by this activity, there appears to be a an acute need to grant the rightful importance to the human resources issue.

The concept of tourist product has as most important component the human element, which is the one who organizes and carries out the tourist programs. Experience has shown that the growth of competition in the field of tourism, linked to the almost identical characteristics of some tourist destinations, the commercial success cannot be insured only by the attractiveness of the components.

This component is becoming increasingly influenced by the professional qualification of the staff hired for the tourist activity, by the promptitude with which the needs of the tourists are satisfied. Traditionally speaking, tourism is considered to be one of the fields of activity which are highly labour consuming.

Human resources represent an essential factor in the conceiving and development of any agro-tourist activity taking into consideration the central position which it occupies in the rural area, not only as a factor of goods and service production but also as a consumer of goods and services. Due to the fact that at the organizational and institutional level, as well as at the level of agro-tourist farm, the human factor occupies the same privileged positions, a careful eye must be kept on the process of insuring and training the staff by seeking to apply the ‘right man at the right place’ principle. In the field of agro-tourism, human resources management must not have as final aim the recruiting of staff members (their presence as household owners represents the core of the agro-tourism), but their instruction and integration in an organization.

A large number of action-groups and governmental and non-governmental associations have tried to use their experience in what regards the improvement of the skills of the population and the local communities in order to determine them to play a bigger part in the agro-tourist development of the area. In the majority of the cases, those who have led the initiatives in this field can adopt a strategy that requires the implementation of several stages:

a. An analysis of the needs, based on the general development strategy makes possible the control of:

- an evaluation of the already existing local organizations within the area, their level of knowledge and the techniques they use;
- an assessment, with the help of the local managers, of the groups which are not yet involved or not sufficiently involved, but which can be encouraged to play an active part. As a result of the coordination measures pursued by the action-group, the defining of the development needs and of the local priorities can trigger a local dynamics and a growth of the awareness of the benefits of agro-tourism.

c. The objectives defined in the elaboration of the implementation of the project must have as aim the following:

- the acquirement of a general awareness of the changes that are desirable in the area;
- the increase of the number of locals capable to assume responsibility;
- the promoting of a large information campaign in the area;
- the setting in motion or substitution of the organizations or institutions which are inactive or frail;

c. The implementation of some organizational strategies and measures.

This analysis of the needs makes possible the development of a strategy for the training of the local population, groups and companies at a local level, so that the already limited resources not to be wasted.

The organizing and delivery of training courses in the agro-touristic field or the organization of a training course for the local representatives are seen as lines of developing the interest of the locals for agro-tourism.

Thus this strategy is defined as aiming at the consulting of the representatives of the targeted groups, the establishing of certain priorities and the establishing of the interest to play a constructive part in the development of the area. The application of these theoretical courses requires the consulting of at least two types of partners: organizations with experience regarding the local dynamics and organizations which specialize in the training for local development. Based on the information given by external managers, these can suggest the most adequate training options and, where they are compatible, they will be able to carry out this training.

In the majority of cases the training courses combine the theoretical training with the analyzing of some real agro-touristic areas (methods, instruments, advantages, disadvantages, etc) A part of the training process is carried out in work groups (work shops), which allows the students to handle a real situation to learn from the experience of others and the benefit from the experience of those who work in this field.

So, in many cases, the training is integrated in the strategy for general development of the area by joining theoretical discussions with practical research on the field. In the case of training courses which are concerned with the training for special projects, these distinctively regard small groups and “specialized training”, as to make possible the satisfying of the individual specific needs, based on the their previous experience and the need for further training, the capacity to meet the requirements of their future positions within the project.

These courses can be organized on training sequences, shaped after the development program: in the beginning, the training provides the information and increases the awareness of those liable to be involved in the project – this is the initiation phase of the development process; the training may continue so as to clarify the expectations of the individual, to define the objectives and the methods to achieve them and to try the organizing at the level of the community.

The success of agro-tourism depends mostly on the capacity of the region to apply the development projects, with all the changes which are brought by this type of tourism to the region, in general, and the households, in particular.

In the works of reference regarding this subject, when the economic implications of agro-tourism are discussed, the authors rely on a simple enumeration of economic effects (many of them rely on the general consequences of each and every tourism related phenomenon), without trying to evaluate these effects as defining elements of the development policy of a rural area, *or only from a tourist-based perspective*.

Among these effects we must mention the settling of the population by setting the labour force, generating employment, diversifying the way in which the labour force is used, creating a variety of activities, promoting and development of services, the economic support for the farmers, and through the rehabilitation of municipal patrimony and attracting new investments.

The preserving of a rural world, with all that is economically significant, implies the initiation and development of this type of tourism. Also, tourism can help maintain the viability and stability of rural settlements especially as the depopulation phenomenon manifests itself through the decision of the young people to leave the villages in the favour of the urban areas and through the tendency to leave behind the old households and the land. The meeting between the country-side, an increasingly fragile environment, and the dynamism imposed by the touristic phenomenon causes the emergence of some general risks generated by the process of reorganizing.

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