STUDY ON THE PERFORMANCE OF AGRITOURISM SECTOR IN ROMANIA

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Abstract
The paper presents the results of a survey conducted by the authors in agritourism sector in Romania in November 2011 – January 2012. The research was conducted by questionnaire method. The aim of the research team, composed by the three authors and coordinated by Prof. Maurizio Lanfranchi University of Messina, is to highlight the performance of agritourism pensions in Romania.

Key words: performance, agritourism, quality, competitiveness

JEL Classification: L1, L15

1. Introduction
Agritourism is seen as a regenerate factor of rural economies and, at the same time, as an element for preserving the rural environment. This form of tourism used only for the accommodation and dining in tourist pensions and agro-tourist farms, is benefiting of a not polluted and pictorial environment, of natural attractions and cultural historical values, and also of traditions.

In Romania, rural space is very important element, especially if considering that more than 90% of country surface has a rural character. About 47.3% of the country population (about 10 million people) is living in rural environment, and their quality of life is directly related and determined by economical potential and results from agriculture and other primary activities [3].

The population migration from urban to rural areas (since 1997) become a back to the old house movement in the surviving hope, but has increased social and economical pressure on some regions. Agritourism is a form of tourism, relatively new in Romania, which emerged from the need to find solutions for unlocking the potential of economic growth rural households. Also, rural tourism offers the possibility of diversifying the rural economies, creating new jobs and favoring the protection and enhancement of local culture and traditions.

Combined with the offer of rural activities, like climbing, riding, fishing, cycling, these are the main ingredients for a successful rural tourism [1].

Agritourism provides a wide range of valuable social and cultural benefits to the population. World trends show the great increase of the agritourism form of tourism although the organizational differences is stronger and more systematic growth to a certain extent. Based on the above considerations, we present next the main results of the study conducted by the authors in Romania.

2. The agritourism in Europe
In Europe this particular form of tourism is embedded in the concept more generic of rural tourism.

Regarding this, European policy has been active for years towards the development of the rural economy, promoting the integration between farming and tourism and thus supporting rural tourism. This form of tourism is characterized both the environment and for the close alliance between tourism, resources and culture of the territory. Rural tourism has long been a European phenomenon and demonstrates the level of dialogue that, at community, have achieved the professional organizations, and the rapid extension of the application of rural tourism.

The panorama of the European farm is therefore quite varied: while some countries where this form of business integration is a long history and reveals, therefore, established by the professionalism of the operators (Italy, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark). There are others where rural tourism is just beginning even now and suffer the consequences of their deficiencies and / or weak laws (Ireland, Spain, Greece, Netherlands, Portugal, Luxembourg and Central and Eastern Europe) [2].
3. Research methodology

The research was conducted between November 2011 – January 2012, using the questionnaire method. The questionnaire was applied in 49 farmholidays. Questionnaire primarily aimed to identify the main forms of tourism and to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of this pensions.

Figure no 1. Pensions-surveyed profile

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<th>Total number of respondents</th>
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Research has shown that all 49 pensions have the main form of tourism, the agritourism; of all these, about 50% (24) pensions carries out agricultural activities.

4. Analysis and interpretation of research results

According to the Romanian country potential, agritourism considered as a key-tool in a more complex and ambitious rural development system (Figure 2) would be able to contribute substantially to life quality improvement [3].

Figure no 2. Design of a rural development integrated system for Romania

Rural activities have a significant impact that goes beyond rural areas. The rural economy is interdependent with the national economy and it is beginning to interact in order to conform an economical relationship system between cities, suburbs, surrounding countryside, small towns and villages.

Agriculture and food production is currently undergoing thanks to a highly stressful precess of economic reform and admission in the European market competition.

People from rural areas in Romania, as elsewhere in Europe, begin to realize that rural tourism is not simply a concern for tourist operators.

For example, people on a short break in the countryside are not simply buying services from the accommodation suppliers, but from a huge number of assortment sources (leisure services, clothing, handicrafts and souvenirs, meals and drinks, etc.).

All these might not show up in a rural tourism statistic report, but they are there nonetheless.

Starting from this consideration, the questionnaire applied in the 49 rural pensions showed the following characteristics:
- 36 pensions have food and beverage arrangements for customers who purchase accommodation service;
- 13 pensions offers table service nd drinks to customers outside the system of accommodation;
- 24 pensions are selling traditional products from there own production.
Rural tourism offers a wide range of social and cultural benefits valuable for people such as the joy of comfort and relaxation, scenery, fresh air. The principle to be applied is the rediscovery and preservation of local specificity.

Defining elements for characterization agrituristic offer are:
- accommodation;
- food service;
- entertainment.

Research conducted by the authors pointed out that the offer of accommodation in the 49 agritouristic pensions has the following structure (Figure 4):

In agritouristic pensions, tourists can opt for meals or not. However, the table is a basic motivation in choosing this form of tourism. Food service can be achieved by:
- all inclusive pension;
- HB (half board);
- Breakfast in the room rental rate;
- All inclusive or HB offered to the family group of tourists who live in different pensions;
- Preparing meals for tourists with their products or with products from own production and its equipment;

The essential characteristic of the agro food service is the fact that food service is mainly based on natural preparations, fresh, coming from own production. This result also from the questionnaire applied on the agritouristic pensions contained in the sample (Figure 5).
Outside the conditions given in the pension which provides to the tourist basic services, quality of stay is influenced to a large extent by the opportunities and programs to spend time around. Taking place in rural areas, leisure tourism is different from classic tourism. Special landscape in which are arranged the pensions, is a relaxing way for tourists because they can enjoy nature and beauty.

Visiting cultural and historical monuments, folklore shows, all this are other recreational options for the tourists. Besides traditional songs and games that can be enjoyed by participating in folklore shows, is noted also the traditional costume in the specific area, which is the tourist’s delight.

In the next figure we tried to emphasize the weight of tourists who stay in the questioned agritouristic pensions, given the possibilities of entertainment and recreation for the tourists choose.

Figure no 6. Reasons for the tourists to stay in agritouristic pensions

Other additional features entertainment and recreation are the walks with a cart, sled, ski, fishing trips, horseback riding, hunting, ATV tours and so on.

Figure no 7. Agritouristic structure in Romania according to sports and recreational activities offered to tourists

When we talk about rural tourism activities, we consider two different groups of people: local people and visitors.

Visitors are themselves classified into two categories: domestic or national visitors and international visitors (foreigners). A three-side scheme of interpersonal relationships because rural tourism can be settled, as shown in Figure 8 [3].
Research conducted by the authors showed that 90% of tourists that are accommodated in agritouristic pensions are Romanian and only 10% of tourists are foreign (English, Germans, French, Italian and so on). Regarding the type of tourists, most of them are aged under 30 years, like 80% (Figure 9).

In attracting potential tourists, regardless of origin or tipology (age), a very important role it’s promoting products and services in these agritouristic pensions.

Promotion is a key factor in the development of rural tourism. Investigated pensions are using different forms of promotion of agro business. These are presented in the following figure.

- Including in itineraries
- Tour operators catalogs
- Foreign operators travel catalogs
- TV / Radio
- Yellow Pages
- Internet
- Touristic guide
- Travel agencies

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Figure no 10. Number of agritouristic pensions that are using different forms of promotion
Research conducted by authors highlights besides the above mentioned issues also self-analysis of agritouristic pensions regarding strengths and weaknesses of the latter.

The main strengths of investigated agritouristic pensions are:
- location of agritouristic pensions in a quiet area – 45 pensions;
- welcoming atmosphere and family – 38 pensions;
- quality of offered products – 49 pensions;
- equipment in the European Community – 39 pensions;
- marketing strategies and tactics defined – 16 pensions;
- competitive pricing – 9 pensions.

Also, pensions have recognized the existence of weaknesses in terms of tourism activity undertaken, including:
- small capacity of accommodations in pensions – 19 pensions;
- lack of meeting rooms – 6 pensions.

Figure no 11. **Difficulties in terms of market penetration**

The question „From your own experience, what are the main difficulties in terms of market penetration?” the answers are quite interesting (Figure 11).

In terms of financial performance, the research has highlighted the following:

a. **Regarding the sources of funding to start a business:**
   - 29 pensions have opted for obtaining European funds;
   - 14 pensions through cash flow;
   - 6 pensions have opted for loans.

b. **Regarding the payback period for initial investment:**
   - 29 pensions said they were able to recover the initial investment in a period between 3 and 5 years;
   - 12 pensions have recovered the initial investment in a period included between 5 and 7 years;
   - 8 pensions were needed only for 1 to 3 years for proper recovery of initial investment

c. **Regarding the annual turnover:**
   - 5 pensions have annual turnovers less than 10,000 Euro;
   - 20 pensions have annual turnover between 10,000 and 20,000 Euro;
   - 24 pensions have annual turnover between 20,000 and 40,000 Euro.

Figure no 11. **Quality certification in agritouristic pensions**
To obtain performance in agritouristic pensions, a very important role it has the quality certifications. This one of the questions included in the questionnaire aim to identify quality certified of agritouristic pensions. The results are presented in Figure 12.

5. Conclusions

Agritourism in Romania may be a good opportunity to make a deal for those tired of stressful city life rhythms and sleep for a change, may be interested in the idea of moving to rural areas with family to work the land and to offer hospitality to tourists.

In conclusion, we list some reasons that may cause a decision in this regard, given the research conducted:

- *The market is booming.* The number of tourists visiting the agritouristic pensions, even after a short time there, they wish to return or to visit other rural locations.
- *Investments are relatively low.* We refer here to the investment for organize the existing house, investments that are required to arrange adequate facilities and equipment for receipt the tourists.
- *No special skills required.* For business success it is recommended that the pension to have a good location and the hosts have a strong sense of hospitality and know how to cook.
- *You can capitalize on products obtained from your own production.* The law expressly provides the possibility to sell products from own production leading to significant gains.
- *Can be a family business.* Activity can be managed by family members without recruiting and hiring foreigners.

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