

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM THROUGH THE SAPARD PROGRAMME. A THEORETICAL VIEW

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ABSTRACT. – **The Development of Rural Tourism through the SAPARD Programme. A Theoretical View.** The process of studying the applicability of the policy of rural tourism development through the European funds allocated for rural development programmes functions on the basis of an entirely different mechanism than the one that guides the approach of financing from the standpoint of rural tourism development as known so far. Up to now, this has been the trend used in qualifying the main policy of development of rural communities that stand at the extreme opposite margins of economic progress. In the newly above mentioned approach, the rural communities, subjects of the analysis, are selected either in accordance with their low level of development, thus being included in the category of less favoured areas, or in accordance with their higher level of economic development, that allows the focusing on the role tourism practices have in their local socio-economic evolution, more or less becoming their main economic activity. Therefore, by the end of such a financing programme, tourism development should become a priority policy, not only a priority axis, element of a national rural development policy, considering the population's attitude towards the evolution of this economic sector in certain areas of the national territory. This becomes an issue of maximum importance, having in view that the decision-making factor is represented by the rural community itself, the individuals or family associations, which indirectly depends on the financing opportunities it has been offered. Consequently, the community was more or less guided towards specific directions, either by the extent of information promoted and given by the official authorities at a national, regional and county level and absorbed by the communities at a local level about the priorities set by the national and regional plans and strategies of development, or by the financial facilities offered through the European Programmes for Rural Development in the pre-accession period. Presently, rural tourism may not be considered a phenomenon similar to the classical form of tourism anymore, as appreciated by most of the specialists in the field. Nevertheless, it can be considered a sum of all other existing and practicable types and forms of tourism. The only delimitation we can perceive is that established between rural and urban, in which case, any other type and form of tourism is being transferred to the field of alternative economic activities within the rural space. Assessing the impact of the SAPARD financing Programme, at a national level, supposes a cumulative analysis resulting in quite positive effects. The verified differences of scale stress upon punctual growths, which cannot set forth the process of economic development, at a locality and at a communal level, but rather cause the appearance of income stimuli that grow weaker within a general underdeveloped economic background, counterbalance the classical perspective, since the gradual growth of the analysed territorial level determines concentrations of financial input, which provide economic growth, new jobs, and other premises of economic development.

Keywords: *rural development policy, the SAPARD Programme, rural tourism, agritourism.*

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1. RURAL TOURISM – PART OF AN INTEGRATED RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY

As an immediate consequence of the elaboration of tourism promoting policies at a European level, the Romanian national policy of rural development and that of rural tourism development set and define the opportunities given by the natural and anthropic potential and by the specific investment directions. The top priorities focused by these policies, symmetrically reflect the same necessities, independently of the scale level they refer to, which emphasize the compulsoriness of identifying new job opportunities of employment for untrained young active workforce, especially female workforce living in the rural space (*A Renewed EU Tourism Policy: Towards a stronger partnership for European Tourism*, Communication from the Commission, Commission of the European Communities, Brussels), by diversifying economic activities, and also by reactivating the less favoured areas from the economic and demographic standpoint. The obvious interest and involvement of the EU institutions, in which regards the tourism issue, reveal the importance it gained, currently being necessary to acknowledge it as having a major impact upon the European economy. (*Tourism and Industry in the European Union*). Beginning with the 1980s, all the institutions, together with the European Parliament, the Socio-Economic Community and the Regional Committee, have decided to annually allocate an important share of the budget for investments in tourism development.

The concept or the process of rural tourism development, or even of rural development through tourism practices and services, requires a complex model of implementation and functioning within the territory. The current policies for rural development have not yet created such a particular policy specific to rural tourism. The development of rural tourism and agritourism is obviously included in the axis of rural development as a strong priority in terms of a new approach of the Romanian rural space evolving towards an alternative economic development. Yet, it becomes compulsory when approaching this subject in a most coherent manner and directly addressed to the socio-economic specificity of the national rural area. If, up until the present, the main national priority during the implementation of the SAPARD Programme has been the financial absorption within specific time coordinates, the main purpose being to make a start to the rural development process, the next stage of the application in course, which will happen over a new specified period of time, and implementing a different type of European funding for the rural space, will focus mainly and especially on the issue of in course development, which will surely require a certain amount of financial allocations. Important to be highlighted here is the dependency relationship created when Romania, trying to to play its part in and, at the same time, actively participate to the entire process of integration, firstly focused on how to spend the money as fast as possible in order to respect the imposed deadlines and avoid to be penalised by the withdrawal of funds. This resulted in a superficial and unorganized planning of a proper strategy in the benefit of an integrated and coherent rural development, and consequently we might say, the same European budget, initially considered necessary for implementation, was improperly spent.

Assessing the economic impact of rural tourism in the Romanian rural space represents a very difficult objective to be illustrated and, at the same time, a very difficult subject to be explained and defined, on medium and long term. As for the policy for promoting and supporting rural tourism and agritourism, as an alternative economic activity for the socio-economic development of the rural communities, and of rural space, still lacks

in a diagnostic analysis, particularized and rightfully integrated in the regional and national policies and strategies of development. So as to initiate, develop and stabilize tourism activities and channel major investments towards the construction of new buildings with tourism function in certain areas within the national territory, it is necessary to take into consideration a number of factors that would positively or negatively affect the material results of such a planning, such as: the local community involved in the development process; the financial resources the inhabitants of a rural administrative unit dispose of; the physico-geographical conditions; the natural and anthropic tourism potential of the region purposed for investments; the level of tourism development in the area.

2. ADVANTAGES AND IMPACT OF LOCATING TOURISM IN RURAL AREAS – FACTORS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR THE RURAL LIFE

The issues taken in discussion within the present article should also deal with the relativity of accommodation and integration of the newly built units with tourism function within the areas and in the economic context of the considered settlements. This relativity is basically the big “if” of the possibility for such units to accede to the network of national or regional rural boarding houses and, by this, if they really contribute to the on going process of rural development.

These being considered, we cannot pretend to prescribe here an exhaustive analysis of the impact of the SAPARD Programme and of the axis of development in which rural tourism and agritourism are concerned. The results, or, better said, the interpretation of a quantitative research results, may show real facts, however, their overall relevance is somehow questioned by the relativity aspects highlighted by the qualitative interpretation of territorial distribution, this mainly being due to some previously established analysis directions, such as:

a) the presence of some new tourism households, which presupposes an evaluation, in matters of number and location, at a regional and county level;

b) the modernization of already existent accommodation places, which presupposes an evaluation, in matters of number and location, at a regional and county level. Out of the total investments registered in the Romanian rural territory, we notice the low ratio of projects for modernization, which can only mean that the existing units already function at high standards, being ready to successfully comply with all the compulsory classifications of tourism services quality. However, we can also interpret this as a mutation in the local economy, by the assumption of new practices and new tourism services, facts that could have determined a new functionality for those settlements;

c) the effects of imitation or multiplication in some areas of interest, phenomena explained by the high number of projects of investment;

d) the scattered distribution, at random, of new touristic households in the territory of the country, and their presence in areas that do not present a high touristic functionality, can be evaluated as the product of a missed administrative and institutional organization, or as the effects produced by the confusion state of the inhabitants of certain communities. This represents the conflict between the principle of individual economic development versus the principle of coagulated group development. The substantial contribution of the investments within the local economy cannot be accomplished by the involvement of only one actor, or of an insignificant number of actors within a community. The infusion of capital within a rural community does not necessarily bring forth its economic development, this being possible only through a coherent progressive and uninterrupted evolution of the practiced economic activities;

e) the improper administrative and institutional organization of local councils and county and regional agencies for the benefit of the community, the insufficient information of the population, of which tourism investors could efficiently use in a more organized formula. Again there arises the need for the application of a program that would serve an integrated tourism infrastructure development.

**The ratio between new investments and modernization projects in Romania,
at a county level**

Table 1

County	Rural boarding houses		Agritourism boarding houses		County	Rural boarding houses		Agritourism boarding houses	
	M	NI	M	NI		M	NI	M	NI
Alba	2	20		5	Harghita	1	46	0	1
Arad	0	4	1	1	Hunedoara	0	7	0	1
Argeş	2	18	0	3	Iaşi	0	6	0	1
Bacău	1	9		1	Ilfov	0	1	0	1
Bihor	1	34	1	1	Maramureş	2	8	0	2
Bistriţa Năsăud	0	4	0	1	Mehedinţi	1	3	0	3
Botoşani	0	2	0	0	Mureş	0	20	0	1
Braşov	2	120	0	11	Neamţ	7	23	0	4
Brăila	0	0	0	0	Olt	0	1	0	0
Buzău	1	4	0	4	Prahova	0	12	0	0
Caraş-Severin	1	14	0	5	Satu Mare	0	1	0	1
Călăraşi	0	1	0	0	Sălaj	0	3	0	13
Cluj	0	15	0	2	Sibiu	0	21	0	4
Constanţa	0	5	0	1	Suceava	6	46	0	6
Covasna	1	7	0	2	Teleorman	1	2	0	0
Dâmboviţa	1	6	0	1	Timiş	0	15	0	1
Dolj	2	5	0	1	Tulcea	2	5	0	7
Galaţi	0	0	0	0	Vâlcea	3	12	2	4
Giurgiu	0	1	0	0	Vaslui	1	2	0	1
Gorj	0	26	0	3	Vrancea	1	5	0	0

Judging by the number of projects of investment for the development of rural tourism and tourism infrastructure, mainly accommodation establishments, it is necessary to assess:

a) the level of favourability for practicing tourism activities in the area, all in accordance with the available natural and anthropic resources that could be exploited, and also taking into account the traditional tourism areas, internationally recognized and registered as potential tourism services providers, both for autochthonous and for foreign visitors;

b) the level of tourism development in the area, in terms of tourism infrastructure, accommodation base, available number of beds, communication network;

c) the tendency of the inhabitants to practice rural tourism, aspect derived from the number of the SAPARD co-funded projects of investment registered in that rural area.

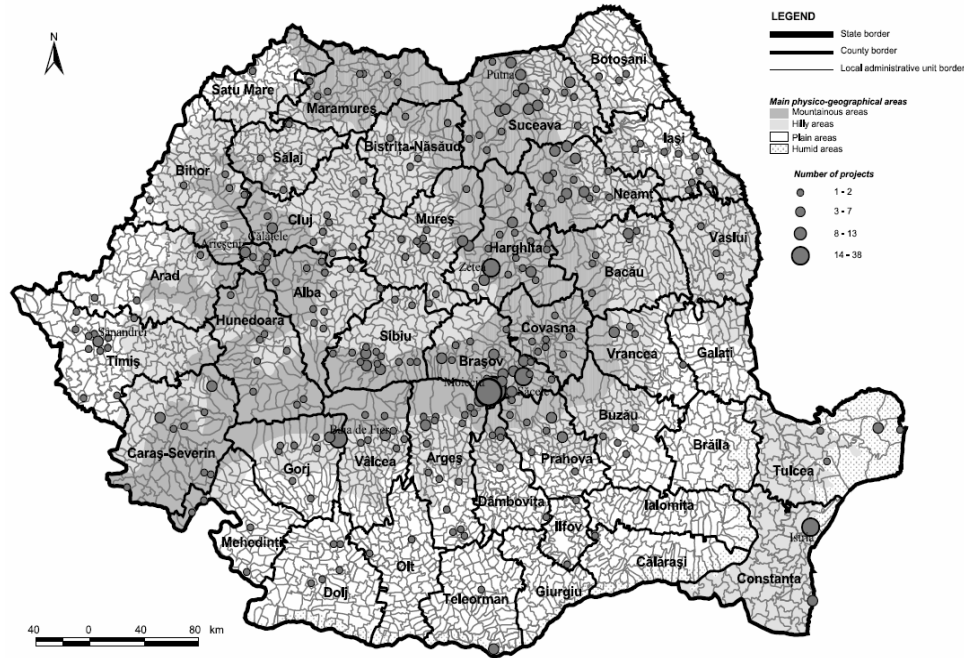


Fig. 1. Territorial distribution of new establishments for practicing rural tourism.

3. RURAL TOURISM = RURAL INDUSTRY

Once rural tourism becomes the issue of national and European policies of development, it turns to gain an increased importance as the newest non-polluting rural industry; hence, the approach is quite different insisting not on the seasonality it involved until recent years, but on the necessity to transform this economic activity into a specific rural industry with a character of permanence. Seen as a new financial provider opportunity rural tourism and its diverse offer of services at relatively low costs both for the investors and for the tourists as beneficiaries, brings up front the need to analyse it as a phenomenon that develops in a dependency relation with the human element, and its main features regarding activeness, quality (level of education), availability, professional orientation, and last, but not least, the quality of natural resources to be exploited.

From a qualitative point of view, we can highlight two directions of promotion: that of rural tourism and that of agritourism, both of them being relatively new in the literature of specialty, or at least in our autochthonous economic practices. From this perspective, rural tourism can signify rather a detachment from the classical function of the rural settlement, which used to be that of agricultural exploitation of land, while agritourism can be perceived as a framework of tourism in the agricultural tradition, a combination between two economic branches, agriculture and services.

Rural tourism emerges as a practical alternative to the primary economic function of the Romanian rural space, which is agriculture, pointing to efficiently exploiting, professionally speaking, the active human component from the countryside. At first, it is seen as an already available constant and viable resource in developing alternative income bringing tourism activities, so that, eventually, to create a veritable medium and long term productive and competitive network of services.

Agritourism introduces a new concept in terms of production and services within the national rural space. The rather low number of the potential functional units represents a premise for the future countryside household capable to support the small business of a family or of a family association involved in activities of tourism services. Currently, we consider that, although existent, agritourism boarding houses are not sufficiently equipped or do not produce sufficiently, so that we could presume the existence of a functional agritourism activity, in which the actual individual household of the physical bodies or family association could manage to sustain quantitatively and qualitatively approximately 50% of the consumption required by a permanently functioning tourism establishment.

4. FINANCIAL TERRITORIAL ABSORPTION AND ITS IMPACT UPON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM

So as to identify the peaks of financial absorption and, undoubtedly, those that determined the rural tourism phenomenon, we should spot the types of predominant factors that can (or could) trigger a chain emergence of the initiatives for constructing rural boarding houses or practicing tourism activities. We usually find investments concentrated in the traditional tourism areas, with a high degree of development of technical and accommodation infrastructure. The territorial analysis will focus on the administrative units, which are correlated to the already established tourism areas included in county and regional administrative units.

The National Plan for Territorial Arrangement, Tourism Section, elaborated by the Ministry of Development, Public Works and Housing established a hierarchy of tourism areas according to several criteria, of which we can mention: resources, tourism equipment and communication network. By this we can determine the most solicited areas in which the local communities manifested great interest for developing tourism practices, thus registering the most numerous investments in building and modernizing establishments with tourism function. The area registering the highest number of investments through the SAPARD Programme, the two most active localities being Bran and Moieciu, is Braşov County that scored a number of 135 projects of investments. It can be included in the first rank area, that of Braşov-Bucegi-Valea Prahovei. Other areas that registered a certain level of concentration are Bucovina, Călimani - Dornelor Depression, Mărginimea Sibiului, Sibiu, Oltului Land, Vâlcea-Câmpulung Muscel, Bihor-Moţilor Land, and Gorj. We consider necessary to also mention a few of the areas that registered the lowest level of tourism investments, which was determined by subjective and objective factors.

The objective factors are represented by the same patterns considered for the emergence, development or inhibition of such economic activities. On the other hand, we have to bear in mind the subjective factors: the extent of information given to the population, the level of initiative, the financial availability, the priorities established for the economic rural development of the area, the financial input, keeping the terms of deadlines (time framing), the level of competitiveness of the projects proposed for financing.

Types of investments in rural tourism in Romania, at a county level**Table 2**

County	Rural boarding houses	Agritourism boarding houses	Other tourism activities	County	Rural boarding houses	Agritourism boarding houses	Other tourism activities
Alba	22	5	1	Harghita	47	1	8
Arad	4	2	2	Hunedoara	7	1	1
Argeş	20	3	2	Iaşi	6	1	-
Bacău	10	1	-	Ilfov	1	1	-
Bihor	35	2	2	Maramureş	10	2	1
B.-Năsăud	4	1	-	Mehedinţi	4	3	2
Botoşani	2	-	-	Mureş	20	1	1
Braşov	122	11	2	Neamţ	30	4	1
Brăila	-	-	1	Olt	1	-	-
Buzău	5	4	-	Prahova	12	-	-
C.-Severin	15	5	5	Satu Mare	1	1	-
Călăraşi	1	-	-	Sălaj	3	13	-
Cluj	15	2	1	Sibiu	21	4	1
Constanţa	5	1	1	Suceava	52	6	4
Covasna	8	2	1	Teleorman	3	-	-
Dâmboviţa	7	1	2	Timiş	15	1	1
Dolj	7	1	1	Tulcea	7	7	9
Galaţi	-	-	-	Vâlcea	15	6	2
Giurgiu	1	-	-	Vaslui	3	1	1
Gorj	26	3	-	Vrancea	6	-	-

Even though the quality of services, set by the conditions imposed for validating the projects as eligible, is relevant for the integration of these boarding houses with tourism function into the national and international tourism networks, still, some of them prove to be functional only temporarily or at a local level. The reason for this still remains uncertain, the only thing we could presume is that they either do not benefit of sufficient promotion, or they do not represent the main economic activity. Another possibility would be that they either are not part of an area or administrative unit, with a high tourism potential, or that they are located at the periphery of an area with tourism function.

The risk of promoting tourism activities without any material basis or of insisting on accepting or “embracing” the tourism phenomenon, as a unique, available practice, able to improve the economic state of the rural space, still persists. The viability of such an economic process at a national level is proved at least on medium term, conditions in which Romania is still a beginner on the international tourism market, though traditionally advanced from the point of view of resources, the services offered being at an initial stage

of development, diversification and quality. Our county is in its first steps in the issue of schools with tradition in tourism specialisations as well, thus being unable to provide trained and qualified persons, adequate to this sector of services to the work market.

The increasing number of firms dealing with tourism promotion and services, and of units with tourism function and services, indeed prove to need support verified only by the functionality of the products they sell. Much more, among the factors that influenced the phenomenon of engaging rural local actors in activities of rural tourism we can also count the status of the areas in which they live. Based on the classifications in the literature of specialty, localities with tourism function were classified in a hierarchy, according to the status obtained from the point of view of their tourism addressability, as it follows: 1. of first importance; 2. of secondary or transit importance; or on another level 1. of international interest; 2. of national interest; 3. of regional interest; 4. of local interest (Iancu, M., Sultana, Viorica, p. 17). We overlapped the relevant areas, which reflect a high concentration of projects of investments, over the ones classified as having a traditional tourism potential. The new tourism areas with potential of development can be identified, only if we eliminate the previous traditional ones, where high concentrations of investments were registered. Hence, the graphics will reflect new nuclei of future potential tourism areas, or scattered establishments, not yet able to support tourism fluxes. Having in mind that up to now we have as a reference the latest known dividing into tourism zones, which for Romania has taken place in 1972, our analysis portrays a possible prior phase of a new dividing into zones of tourism areas, although *tourism dividing into zones does not have a static character, it still needs constant actualisation*, (Iancu, M., Sultana, Viorica, p. 17), this being in fact the scope of our analysis.

5. THE TERRITORIAL IMPACT OF INVESTMENTS IN RURAL TOURISM

The analysis of the territorial absorption of the funds that aim at developing and initiating new activities of “rural tourism” can relatively rely on the first Romanian tourism territorial dividing into zones, or at least on the “fundamental coordinates” considered as illustrative by researchers. The significance of the fundamental coordinates, lies both in their value of natural entities that generate attraction and potential for development, and in the “functional structures” they provide, as subordinate spaces (of influence), which consequently will determine the most competitive and viable types of tourism activities.. These functional structures can determine another type of territorial dividing into zones of establishments that provide tourism services, meaning functional dividing into zones, directly correlated with the types of all possible tourism activities that can be performed. Altogether, we must also consider the factors that can determine the apparition of new specific forms of tourism, and these can be grouped into three main categories: natural, cultural-historical and socio-economic. The territorial dividing into zones of new and modernized tourism establishments co-financed through the SAPARD funds, in our case rural boarding houses, can be classified or discussed in analogy with the classical tourism areas, which are already established in accordance with terms and regulations equivalent to the principles of classification of tourism dividing into zones of a territory that disposes of short, medium and long term exploitable objectives, such as natural and anthropic resources. Concurrently, the spatial frequency of these establishments is determined or greatly influenced by the status of “tourism area”. If the tourism establishment and the services it

provides does not represent the main activity, which brings in income to the beneficiary, and, consequently, offers services for transitory tourism, week-end tourism or occasional tourism, then, there is a probability, or we can presume, that the zone factor did not play a leading role in initiating such an activity. On the other hand, the factor that could have, to a greater extent, determined the choice to invest in building a boarding house, resulted to be the character of its perpetual functioning, which resides in the familial trait of this economic activity. This choice finds its motivation in the fact that the beneficiary of such an economic activity is, usually, an authorized person or a family association, in which at least one member of the family is directly involved in the activity of the boarding house.

6. POSSIBLE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The most proper manner of stressing the positive effects that rural tourism development registered during the period of implementation of the SAPARD Programme would be to highlight the increase in the number of accommodation beds created through the construction of new rural boarding houses, 573 establishments and 97 agritourism boarding houses at a national level.

Another important aspect of rural tourism development is represented by the quality of services provided, since these tourism establishments must fulfil all the eligibility criteria required by the contract of non-refundable financing, of being classified with at least 3 flowers in the hierarchy of quality.

So as to attract all categories of potential tourists in the phenomenon of recreational tourism and agritourism, we can notice, in the applicant's guide, the attempt of creating diversity through a rich offer. Hence, all types of potential recreational activities that could be practiced during a *séjour*, activities offered by the programme of the rural boarding house, those available to be practiced on the territory owned by the proprietors (tourism services providers), or those provided by the natural and anthropic conditions specific to the region or the area in which the accommodation and tourism services unit is located, are financed from the budgets established by the programme. Among such activities we can mention bike-tourism, hunting-tourism, riding-tourism, fishing-tourism, and wine-tourism.

The newly employed workforce in the sector of tourism services, respectively, hotel services, restaurant and bars attending, first hand medical practices, therapy services, benefits of specialized trainings. The most convenient option here would be to select the new employees from the students that have recently graduated from schools oriented to tourism specialization and immediately engage them in these practices. Another aspect to be considered would be the period of employment, and we must admit the fact that most of the new investors generally prefer to employ the new applicants seasonally but there are already many cases in which the applicants are hired over an unspecified period of time, signifying permanence. The most important criteria in the selection of the personnel are the graduated school, age, preferably young persons who could be professionally trained at the workplace. The explanation in the preference of investors to hire personnel seasonally can be explained by the need of evaluating the junior employees' abilities and qualities to adapt to and mould into this work profile, their communication skills, and the level of adaptability in this sector of services.

The rural tourism development may be set as a medium and long term target, due to the fact that it seems quite impossible to create a sustainable network of functional rural boarding houses in such a short period of time, three years, knowing the fact that *measure*

3.4 The development of rural tourism, was declared eligible only in 2003, and the first sessions of contracts financed under it started with 2004. The first areas that registered the first attempts to modernize or to newly build accommodation units with tourism function could represent the premises for a future tourism development, or be taken as examples for strengthening some of the current tourism functional areas in the country. Moreover, the first attempts of the small entrepreneurs within the Romanian rural space can be assimilated as the first models of development in this economic sector.

Having the fact that the SAPARD Programme offered financial help especially to the small entrepreneurs, favouring or at least trying to promote the proper economic activities for the private investors, we cannot imply that this programme did not have the desired impact and effects. On the other hand, a group activity or an organized local community, standing for the concept of unitary and concentrated sustainable development, could have had a lot more advantages, mainly through the financial absorption concentrated in a rural local community, a real development of a much larger local community, and implicitly more visible socio-economic effects within a region.

Yet, we cannot discuss here about the regions that effectively and entirely function based on tourism practices, the tourism economic sector prevailing as the main activity that facilitates inward financial income by exploiting the available natural and anthropic resources.

Romania finds itself at the beginning of a period of attempts to use tourism activities and to shape rural tourism in a well individualized economic sector that would produce financial capital, professional human capital, and specialized services, since, for a long period of time, its rural economy had stagnated, or even regressed to a period of transition and transformation. Therefore, developing a new functional economic sector that would be permanently functional can be considered a realistic attempt for the social and economic refreshment of the Romanian rural areas.

7. CONCLUSIONS

Common policies of rural development promote a strong implementation of the rural tourism especially as a strategic economic alternative for thoroughly analysed large areas but not yet taking into account the risk that a single main activity can determine in the future economic course and development of a local community. The impact rural tourism has, initially seen as a seasonal economic activity with no certain supporting pillars generating flowing financial income, appears differently perceived according to the noticeable reaction local communities have, as active economic agents and beneficiaries. The positive attitude rural inhabitants have towards developing activities in services sector constitute advantages of locating rural tourism in rural areas, especially where the natural potential prevails highlights the major role of the community in developing tourism practices and services in the benefit of people, hence the dependency on human resource and its quality and its ability to properly manage land and the natural resource.

The novelty issue that becomes visible after the implementation of the SAPARD Programme, planned on a 6 year period, is the non-involvement of the local administrations in the locals' decision of developing tourism activities, the level and sense of entrepreneurship being the only factor that determined the absorption of non-refundable funds.

A few blanks, which derived from the previous pre-accession rural development policy and programme, having rural tourism as one of the main priorities, may be considered as important to be filled in for a future rural tourism development strategy and programme so that it

should a more significant impact and cohesion on the rural areas, such as: to organize local action groups for developing tourism investments and assess the land, the natural, and the human resources that could be exploited in tourism, to prepare technical assistance personnel in delimited areas proposed for financing and organized programmes of rural tourism development, to establish tourism as a priority in strictly delimited regional, zonal or local areas or specific localities based on the resources previously mentioned, to create connections between other types of resources economically exploited and practicing rural tourism in localities that show potential of development for various alternative economic activities, to try to apply various models of local tourism development subsequently enlarging the pattern over other neighboured localities so as to create regions (depending mostly on tourism activities), creating borders of tourism development in the benefit of certain areas and their inhabitants – thus correlating rural tourism strategy of development with other directions of rural development, to change typical local life from agricultural production practices to tourism services practices. What becomes a priority is the need for a different approach of the rural development policy, especially rural tourism development, yet not insisting on a single functionality of the rural areas, but preferring the collaboration and mixture of other economic activities, thus eliminating the eventual risk to create single functional areas.

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