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Izvoru Crişului - a Handicraft Based Tourist Village

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ABSTRACT

In a period of time when in Romania the concept of rural tourism was related to negative stereotypes, which failed to bring the image capital required for a harmonious development, the village Izvoru Crişului proved itself as a model of special strategy. The village is one of the richest in Cluj County and has a continuous potential of economic development. Moreover, being a village of ethnic diversity, it received a stable starting point by default. Tourism has occurred here instantaneously as a result of economic activity, especially handicraft. As a matter of fact the key to this village's success lies in the proper exploitation of its cultural resources (handicrafts, architectural heritage, folklore), exploitation of the advantages provided by the natural environment (location at the boundary between the Huedin Depression and the Păniceni Plateau; in the proximity of the Apuseni Mountains), as well as the transport network (the village is crossed by DN1 - E60). Taking some of the existent classifications into account Izvoru Crişului meets at least two of the proposed tourism forms. Consequently, the best shaped types are geotourism and alternative tourism forms, like transit, business and academic tourism, of course under the roof of rural tourism. Precisely, due to the complementary character between art and tourism-based economy, the village managed to build an effective economic model, which perfectly complies with the requirements of globalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Emphasising different issues concerning rural areas in Romania has been a growing trend lately. Usually, we deal with research on poor rural areas with flaws in good governance and financing, respectively investment.

Additionally, young inhabitants abandoned their native places. As a consequence, most of the results of existing analysis lead to the fact that villages are about to die. Actually this is a general concern including all modern societies and economic systems nowadays.

Traditional activities, like agriculture, seem to have lost their efficiency. Dumping prices practiced by some highly-industrialised companies in the food industry make farmers become bankrupt. For example, local products are often more expensive than those imported from the EU or other developed economies, like the US or Japan.

The gloomy view on this topic is turning dangerous, because, on the other side, there are well-developed villages with huge social-cultural, economic and environmental potential. They frequently endure image problems, first of all because of negative stereotypes, but also because they do not get the necessary attention, being over-shadowed by the general perception towards rural, peripheral areas. However, some actors, confident of the conservation and equilibrate development of villages, still confer a more optimistic perspective. In fact, they interfere in one way or another with local communities helping them to go on. These village-supporters are "Land-Pioneers" and are perceived as pathfinders to the "New Village". Therefore, their main responsibility is to put the village and its local community into a good light by offering thrust and adding image capital.

The problem statement of this study proposes to assess the extent of sustainable tourism according to specific criteria in the village Izvoru Crişului, Cluj

County. The study aims at demonstrating whether rural tourism can contribute with proportionate advantages so as to be considered efficient by the local community.

The research questions gravitate towards topics like auto-financing possibilities and spatial selection regarding tourist villages.

Salánki Zoltán [1] quotes the sociologist Dumitru Sandu (2005) and lists a group of social variables that influence the development of rural space: ethnical and religious variety, education stock, isolation degree and migration experience. Hence, D. Sandu establishes a classification of the Romanian villages as traditional, isolated, with religious diversity, with ethnical diversity, modern, based on immigration. Consequently, he states that only the last three types are adequate for rural development.

Some of the Transylvanian villages are extremely suitable to be taken into consideration regarding successful strategies in rural areas. For instance, we mention Rimetea (Hungarian Torockó, German Eisenmarkt), Izvoru Crișului (Hungarian Körösfő), Sâncraiu (Hungarian Kalotaszentkirály). These villages are not the only remarkable examples in Transylvania, but they share a similar destiny related to the achievement of sustainability. Their prosperity is the result of assiduous work and constant adjustment to the existing conditions.

Salánki Z. indicates in his article that the village Rimetea, Alba County fulfils concomitantly cultural and natural criteria, necessary to integrate it in one of the classes mentioned above. Rimetea is characterized by ethnical variety, preponderantly Hungarians. Besides, the architecture of the houses represents a reminiscence of the Saxon culture. Furthermore, today inhabitants devote themselves to art handicraft, like wood processing, furniture painting and decorating, stone cutting. Additionally, the nature endowed this village with beautiful landscapes and a scenic, lunar view granted by a calcareous formation, such as Piatra Secuiului.

József Benedek [2] performed a field inquiry concerning rural tourist regions, like Huedin Microregion.

He used Sâncraiu as a case study, a village situated in the Western part of Cluj County. Actually, Sâncraiu exhibits almost the same conditions like Rimetea: inhabitants are mostly Hungarians; plenty of cultural resources (Old Protestant Church, Ethnographical Center) and some natural resources (proximity to the Apuseni Mountains).

Izvoru Crișului, the village representing the case study of this paper, has been invested with an average tourist potential over the past years. The cause is the absence of natural resources, but it transcends through rich cultural heritage (Old Protestant church, art handicraft, traditional Hungarian costumes, etc.).

The village is residence of the commune bearing the same name and was attested for the first

time in 1276. The commune is situated on a 41-square kilometre area and consists of three other villages (Șaula, Nearșova and Nadășu).

Agriculture is not a plus of the area, though locals practice it to a small extent and cultivate vegetables for the daily use of their families. Nevertheless, evidence of extensive wine and fruit growing was found in the past. In spite of the natural potential of the hilly region with altitudes between approx. 500 and 750 m, these cultures completely disappeared nowadays. An important characteristic of the present relief is the high erosion degree, which involves significant costs for agriculture.

Since the late 19th century wood processing has gradually turned into handicraft. According to the rural municipality, in 1880 some inhabitants became apprentices of a German master craftsman, who taught them to process wood into furniture. Furthermore, around 1900 these products got on the market and then evolved gradually to art handicraft. In 2009 the village had about 200 family businesses organized in around 30 street boutiques.

The manufacture and commercialization of wooden handicrafts and ornamental seams on linen represent about 85% of the total income earned currently by the population.

2. MATERIAL AND METHOD

In order to determine the tourist potential of Izvoru Crișului, we tried to find effective, suitable tourism forms. For this purpose we took into consideration comprising criteria such as: natural environment; cultural-ethnographical aspects, socio-economic background, but also infrastructure. Taking the criteria one by one, we pursue the following aspects:

- natural environment: types of landscape, characterized by relief, climate, water resources and vegetation, but also by the interaction between man and nature, respectively agricultural land use;
- socio-economic background: economic and social structure and the present development;
- cultural-ethnographical aspects: settlement types and architecture, occupation, folklore (traditional costumes, cultural manifestations, customs);
- infrastructure: accommodation and accessibility.

In parallel, we followed and applied eight elements found to be significant according to the American Traveler Survey when choosing a rural tourist destination, namely: scenic attractions, undamaged environment, cleanness, friendly people, auspicious relationship price/value, a place without crime, the ability of inhabitants to speak the language of the tourists, quality accommodation and tasty food. For each of these elements the village has the possibility to achieve between zero and 1 point, with 0.5 by partial performance.

The goal is to use verified methodology in order to review and summarize the situation of rural tourism in Izvoru Crişului. The first aspects we persuaded were meant to offer the perspective of the supply (the favourable frame and the way the local community takes advantage of it). The last group of aspects arises from the subjectivity of tourists and informs consequently about personal requirements, which characterize the tourism demand in the village. Through the selected approach we intend to give a critical overall view, where demand and supply meet and create or destroy the touristic potential.

3. RESULTS AND DISSCUSION

3.1. Tourism forms

A synthesis of the results shows the extent to which Izvoru Crişului fulfils the requirements for potential, sustainable tourism.

The existing tourism forms in Izvoru Crişului are geo-tourism and transit tourism. Potential forms could be business and academic tourism.

Geotourism enhances the geographical character of a place – its environment, culture, aesthetics, heritage, and the well-being of its residents, according to National Geographic - Centre for Sustainable Destinations [3]. Tourists, who prefer not only Izvoru Crişului in particular and Huedin Microregion in general combine default forms of tourism and their pregnant feature is the wish to accumulate knowledge during the holidays. Activities that involve plenty of traditions, like festivals, costumes, dance and songs, the handicraft “industry” and sights, like the Protestant Church (built in 1764 on the same place of the old one; possesses a Turkish carpet since 1660) are of main interest. On the other hand, the proximity to the Apuseni Mountains generates outdoor actions, which geo-tourist also takes into great consideration. The inhabitants have to build the supply in a unique manner based on the local specificity, because the tourist particularities of a place attract one special category of holidaymakers.

The key to this alternative tourism forms, like transition, business and academic tourism is the E60. The community is aware of this advantage and the administration of the commune seeks investors to exploit these benefits, for example through truck parking and other transit facilities. In the near future, business and academic tourism are about to grow in the village as a consequence of the closeness to Cluj-Napoca (~43 km) and to the international airport (~50 km). After the relief of the traffic across Cluj-Napoca, businessmen, but mostly academicians shall not hesitate to book lodging in the proximity of the large city. In villages like Izvoru Crişului, they can relax closer to nature and be served by hospitable people for less money. Even though someone gets in contact with the

area as a businessman or an academician, if the community succeeds to attract (even visually) this person, they can expect to gain a new tourist and his family or friends for the future.

3.2. Demand perspective

The scenic attractions are characterized by a hilly background, the spring of Crişul Repede River and the “Roses hill”, where the species *Daphne Eneorum* blooms.

The natural resources by themselves are not sufficient in this village in order to attract tourists. Instead, the vicinity to the Apuseni Mountains offers a great opportunity, because some tours can have this village as a start, sometimes even as return point. The reliable infrastructure might influence the decision towards accommodation in favour of Izvoru Crişului, although the other tourism related activities take place in the surroundings. In this respect, the village gets 0,5 points for this element.

An undamaged environment biases the balance in favour of a place, but in Izvoru Crişului it is not the case. Its position on E60 becomes the greatest disadvantage when following this criterion, thus getting zero points.

The same way as in many other places in Romania, cleanness in Izvoru Crişului raises some problems. Although accommodation requirements have accomplished the international tidiness rules lately, the aspect of the village and of the close sights triggers frustration among tourists. Therefore this element is graded with 0.5 points.

The community acts friendly offering help and information with pleasure. Locals tell cheerful stories about their lives and their work, about the experiences of other tourists. Telling local stories they make tourists cease the day, but also relive the past atmosphere of their village. As a typical Hungarian attribute, they splash it with the right portion of humour. Consequently, one point is granted.

At present the tourism conditions ascended to a new level and on the whole, the village has attained an increased value, while prices remained lower according to the general economic frame. As a result we can talk about an auspicious relationship price/value and the village gains one more full point.

Crime is not such a stringent issue like in cities, even though it is taken into account by tourists. In Izvoru Crişului we have a low rate of criminality and it does not usually interfere with tourism related activities. That is why the village scores one further point.

Most tourists are controlled by the tendency to choose vacation destinations where inhabitants speak their language. Certainly the majority of population in Izvoru Crişului has the advantage of mastering at least two languages: Hungarian and Romanian and this leads

to the high percentage of tourists from Hungary. However, as a consequence of demographic change, young people, who may master further foreign languages, leave the village. Elder population usually does not speak other languages except for the two mentioned above, so the village is evaluated with just 0.5 points.

Although of less significance for other forms of tourism, food & beverages stand for major expectancy in the area of rural tourism. The choice of a vacation in a village is often taken on behalf of tasty, healthy food. Transylvanian traditional recipes are famous, especially because they contain ingredients from at least three cuisines, the Romanian, Hungarian and German. In Izvoru Crişului, like in many other places with Hungarian population, the specialty of the area is the "Gulyas" and other home-made recipes prepared in a traditional pot called "Ceaun". Tourists, as well as passengers stop by in the village to enjoy a tasty meal. Even inhabitants from Cluj-Napoca visit the village sometimes with the goal of a rich meal. Handicraftsmen come up with these special pots and tourists have the possibility to purchase one for their own use. Unfortunately, Izvoru Crişului does not have the similar recognition in this industry like other localities in Cluj County, for instance Săvădisla (Hungarian Tordaszentlászlo), where the community is much more involved in this industry. Finally, the community achieves 0.5 points.

On the whole, there is a sum of 5 points out of 8, which represents more than the average. In other words this means that the tourism demand has a positive background to increase. Criteria, like natural conditions cannot be improved, but the amelioration of all the other aspects is possible in time, first of all through a good management strategy. In order to require renown, provided services need some adequate adaptation. In the end we categorize the potential segments of rural tourism demand.

First the village has to diversify its offer and make it appealing for weekend and short-term tourism and of course for backpackers. The suitable category of holidaymakers is the population of Cluj-Napoca and the other nearby localities. For example, this category of tourists would utterly enjoy a tour in Izvoru Crişului and in the Huedin Microregion at weekends.

This kind of tourism will be taken into consideration by those who want to relax in a natural setting, to practice outdoor sports and activities, and especially in Izvoru Crişului, to find out the secrets of handicrafts, by practicing wooden objects painting, carving or learning other processes concerning this art.

A demand segment that could bring great profits particularly through long stays and consumption of local goods are high-income families with children. Unfortunately, this group has more than average expectations, which lodging and restaurants in the village do not completely fulfil.

A developing trend coming from modern countries is given by the increased interest of children and teenagers towards animals. Although not very popular yet, it will gain weight along with the process of urbanization.

This involves the fact that only few grandparents will still live in the countryside. Those who remain in villages will not be in possession of domestic animals anymore.

The last segment causes controversy. There is talk of the people who used to live in Izvoru Crişului and still have their families and close relatives there. Certainly not all their actions are tourism related, but they can become part of the tourism demand, if they bring friends and if they make use of handicraft products, take excursions, etc. It is a very important group to launch the tourism related activities in the village. Firstly, because it does not involve costs to attract them in the home-village and their word has great weight to potential tourists.

3.3. Relationship tourism-handicraft

Since rural development has become a necessity for all local communities, the notion of "tourist village" gains considerably interest. G. Erdeli and I. Istrate [4] give us a useful classification of Romanian "tourist villages", namely folkloric-ethnographic; arts and handicrafts based; climate and landscape architecture based; fishing and hunting based; wine and fruit growing based; pastoral; for sports practice.

According to this classification, Izvoru Crişului can be included adamantly in the first two classes, since the village has already proved the existence of consistent tourism characteristics. Specific, current activities, like decorating the rooms with traditional objects made by the community and informing the tourists where they can buy such art objects are features of an art and handicrafts based village. On the other hand, traditional festivals, costumes, folk dances and diverse customs offer the folkloric-ethnographic essence. Some of these activities have been practiced successfully for years by the local community. The people in Izvoru Crişului are famous for their colourful popular costumes and traditional dancing habits. On white linen women used to sew red and green tiny decoration. The furniture, mainly created by the handicraftsmen or representing antique inherited furniture, is usually placed in rooms respecting the rural style or, to be precise, the traditional design of the area. Actions meant to increase the cultural value of the village should comprise: popular art demonstrations (invite craftsmen at specific time for different performances); guided tours, where tourists would see how craftsmen live and work; workshops, handicraft exhibitions; as well as some pragmatic facilities, like

realistic prices and possibility to transport voluminous objects.

The tourism theory recognizes souvenir shops within a hotel, motel or any other kind of accommodation as a great method for the win-win effect. Accordingly tourists get the possibility to buy presents, decorative objects meant to remind them of their vacation, while the tourism service contractor increases his gains from the business. However, it is often the case of misunderstandings between tourism provider and artisans. Hence, this collaboration might cause tension in the entire local community. On the contrary through establishment of a natural, pre-existing relationship between the two members of the tourism value chain, the atmosphere in Izvoru Crişului is advantageous by default. Basically, because of the presence of artisans and their boutiques, which are often one and the same with the accommodation providers, there is no need for complicated, formal relations.

Despite constant efforts of self-education with regard to aesthetics, the souvenir shops often overstep the bounds of good taste. However, it seems to be a subjective issue. While domestic sophisticated tourists (customers) complain about the design of the boutiques and the disposal of products, extern tourists (customers) perceive the whole organization of the shops combined with the specific tourism related activities as part of the tradition and customs of the community. Moreover, internationals appreciate a lot this type of hospitality. As a general rule it would be noted positively, if inhabitants were able to raise the curiosity of most customers through attractive patterns.

Both domestic and international demand influences the handicraft merchandise. While travelling to diverse destinations crossing the E 60, domestic tourists afford the pleasure to buy souvenirs and gifts for their own use or for relatives and friends living abroad.

On the other hand, there are passers-by, who prefer buying directly from manufacturers, due to lower prices and unmediated interaction with the producer. The international demand belongs to incoming tourists on their visit through Transylvania. Several international customers have been attracted over the recent years. Consequently, some of them showed interest on the tourism services of the community and therefore, conducted to the improvement of the tourist system of Izvoru Crişului.

Besides, the handicraft entrepreneurs started new businesses abroad. The shops in Hungary and Austria have a win-win effect, providing the consumer with goods, as well as with tourist information. Similarly, the producer collects income from sales, but he is also given a unique opportunity to advertise explicitly tourism services in the region of Izvoru Crişului, without spending tremendous amounts of money.

The colour of the village is given by the Hungarians that have lived here during the centuries. In this context plenty of advantages regarding tourism in international context have arisen, exactly like in other Transylvanian settlements inhabited by a Hungarian majority. Therefore, this village satisfies the demand of tourists arriving mainly from Hungary, but to some extent also of some other European countries tourists, who are interested in history, customs and authentic rural life.

In order to illustrate the nationality of foreign tourists, J. Benedek and Şt. Dezsi [5] in their article "The Role of Rural Tourism in the Economic Diversification of Rural Space in Romania" listed the countries which give the majority of tourists to those Transylvanian rural areas mainly inhabited by Hungarians. Moreover, according to them, the Hungarian population from Transylvania is specialized in international tourism. As a result, France (38%), Hungary (35.5%), Benelux – (especially Belgium, 23%) and Germany (23%) are the states with the highest percentage of tourism visits to these villages. Other countries mentioned by them are Italy, the USA, Canada, Austria, Scandinavian Countries (especially Finland), Great Britain, Switzerland, Japan and Spain.

3.4. The tourism value chain

A convincing proof for effective rural development relies on stable business connection. Thus all the available economic sectors, like farmers, local food & beverages industry, artisans, etc. have to participate actively to the value chain they make part of. Satisfied tourists are considered to be the best advertisement. However they mainly comprehend the tourism act as a whole, precisely as the quality of all products and services they are provided with.

Inhabitants of Izvoru Crişului have already become aware of the potential of cooperation. In contempt of the social and psychological phenomenon of envy, which has deep roots in human behaviour within communities, the village illustrates a model of economic success. In short, the positive effects incline the balance towards cooperative work and fair competition.

In the theory of regional clustering H. Bathelt and Jh. Glückler [6] cited Malmberg and Maskell (2001), who had given a classification of four cluster dimensions. These dimensions can be transferred to the value chain theory as well. Further we will exemplify the horizontal and the vertical dimension of the economic cycle in Izvoru Crişului, in order to show the relationships between economic actors.

The horizontal level contains those actors who commercialize similar products and services. By extension, competition-relevant actions influence their behaviour. For this reason subjects of the community in Izvoru Crişului do not have close relationship to each

other, but they gain from the situation of co-presence. The nearness creates a fabric, so that everyone is directly informed about the handicraft products and tourism services in the village. Observing the neighbours is actually a continuous learning and perfecting process, which leads automatically to innovation and eventually to variety. The inhabitants are characterized by this economic attitude ever since they noticed its benefits to the whole community.

The manifestation of the vertical dimension is less evolved in Izvoru Crişului, especially because of the lack of pluralism concerning the fields of economic activity. Accordingly the value chain it is not properly built up. Except for the artisans and some guesthouses, there are just a few actors in the food sector (restaurants, village shops). The improvements in this respect would be of great impact, mainly because a wealthy economic background with an adequate number of participants confers an impulse and the highest incentive for other actors to spread out their activity in the region. Consequently, this contributes to agglomeration effects usually with positive results in the social division of labour.

Nevertheless, the proportion between the horizontal and vertical dimension of the followed region represents a turning point. In order to find the optimal balance both dimensions should forward subsequently. At the moment Izvoru Crişului requires a rapid increase of the vertical dimension and for this reason it is necessary to attract new businesses in the village.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on a non-artificially constructed model, we recognize Izvoru Crişului as a bottom up structure. The local community is directly involved, using its ordinary means in the everyday activity. The governance formula relies on strategies based on what the locality has already accomplished, respectively on factors of production, cultural heritage and learning capability within the Learning by Doing–Process. Governance has just the simple, natural role to keep a stable frame in order to let the individual, respectively communitarian initiatives the right of free movement.

Rural tourism attracts people who prefer the traditional life in a village and the cultural-historical aspects of the community, but look also for undamaged nature with peaceful landscapes. Inhabitants of Izvoru Crişului should particularly emphasize on the traditional decorations of the guesthouses, especially of the rooms, with furniture and objects shaped and painted by the artisans living in the community. This would create the linkage between tourism and handicraft, and through their complementariness both sides win.

Likewise, tourists feel the cooperation among community members working for the sake of their satisfaction and translate this into hospitality.

Traditional food and lodging play a huge role. However, locals still have to learn to evaluate the prices they ask for the provided services realistically according to the market. “Rural tourists” are looking for neat design with folk flair and delicious recipes, but they do not plan to spend a lot of money on basic services, like accommodation and food. On the other hand, they are ready to spend more on culture (cultural events), souvenirs and household articles. With this in mind, locals have to better structure their choice of products and services.

By approaching the relationship between tourism and handicraft the present study has brought into light an important aspect regarding tourism in rural areas, namely that there is great potential beside agro-tourism. Rural tourism denotes a wider domain, which incorporates many sides, numerous activities and a variety of tourist profiles. The World Tourism Organization emphasizes that rural tourism is a form that includes all tourism related activities run in rural areas by local population, enhancing the value of local natural, historic-cultural and human resources, as well as endowments, tourist structures containing farms and guesthouses. This accurately shows that it is not all about the restrictive area of the farm when it comes to rural tourism.

The right proportion of tourism, as well as non-tourism activities in local context compiles the ideal, personalized strategy of development for the community.

Izvoru Crişului holds an advantageous position on the international road E60, 7 km away from Huedin, 42 km away from Cluj-Napoca and 122 km away from the border with Hungary.

This fact implies new forms of tourism with important benefits for the local community. In context of achieving a high modernization level, this location represents another value, but it is also the greatest challenge to the address of sustainability in the region.

Considering these aspects it becomes clear that sustainable development of villages, especially concerning rural tourism, is a matter of socio-cultural, economic and environmental selection. According to this, not only the existing natural and cultural potential, but also the general attitude of the community plays a decisive role.

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