

## SYNERGY – RURAL TOURISM AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL AREAS IN BULGARIA

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### **Abstract**

*Rural tourism in Bulgaria - a relatively fast growing and assertive field - is an alternative form of tourism. In the recent years, there is a positive trend and an increasing interest in this type of leisure by the tourists and tourism professionals too. Nearly all resources are available in Bulgaria for the sustainable development of rural tourism. Local economy and population in lagging and rural areas can to be helped with development and promotion of rural hiking. Bulgaria has with all necessary conditions and prerequisites for sustainable his development. The development and promotion of rural tourism in Bulgaria leads to a number of consequent positive and is particularly important for lagging and underdeveloped regions. In Bulgaria for the future sustainable development of rural tourism is related to: conservation and promotion of ecological resources and cultural heritage; plan and implement ad-hoc national and regional strategies for rural tourism development, improvement of existing infrastructure and activation of activities to promote its dissemination In the present study, we used a methodological approach that is implemented through specific methods: inquiry method and interviews, quantitative methods, etc.*

**Key words:** rural tourism, rural area, sustainable development

### **INTRODUCTION**

Rural areas occupy a substantial part of the territory of Bulgaria. They are characterized by considerable negative tendencies, which must be overcome in order to achieve the sustainable development of these regions.

There is still a negative trend in the differences between the living standards of people of working age living in the city – and of those in rural areas. These negative social trends could be mitigated and stopped with the establishment of working places in rural areas, i. e. the development of entrepreneurship. [1] Having the essential elements, entrepreneurial activity in these areas may focus in rural tourism, since it brings revenue and directly contributes to the increase of the capital of the entrepreneurs in the business. It creates and maintains jobs, directly or indirectly, and in addition, we have to bear in mind that every workstation facilitates the detection of three to five jobs in other sectors related to it. That's why researchers believe that multiplicative effect on tourism in general and, in particular, in

rural tourism, is much more strongly bound than in other sectors of the economy. The development of the rural and agrarian tourism attribute to better valorisation and use of a number of resources; affects to the reduce of the emigration from rural areas through the creation of working places in tourism and its related activities; directly reduces unemployment, facilitates the development of new activities and the diversification of production and the new skills and knowledge of those working in agriculture; leads to the creation of such a structure of agriculture to contribute to the development of the production of new, typical local products; helps to improve the quality of life in rural areas and reduce disparities between rural areas and industrialized and highly developed areas; helps to reduce budgetary imbalances between different types of tourism in the country; strengthens the economic activity in the area and thus improves the quality of life of the inhabitants In Bulgaria the niche of rural tourism is still insufficient, although there is significant potential for its development [5].

This article has for purpose to be clarify essence of rural hiking, to trace its state, main problems associated with its development and positive his influence for sustainable development of rural and trailing areas.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present paper is examining the following basic scientific methods and approaches: ***dialectical approach*** which examines all processes and phenomena and their actual relationship, mutual and continuous movement modality, modification; ***the system approach*** – through its application any phenomenon and process is taken as a system whose state depends on the structure, level and amendments of its constituent parts; ***abstract-logical approach*** which allows abstracting from particular characteristics and manifestations of the processes and phenomena and searches their deep innate characteristics. Specific manifestations of abstract approach are the analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction; ***situation approach***, which is taking into account the situation, the set of specific circumstances that have a strong influence on the behaviour of the individual and on the course of the phenomenon. This complex methodological approach is realized through the use of specific methods: ***inquiry method and interviews, quantitative methods***, etc. The precise use of the above-mentioned methods provides to author the opportunity to fully achieve the objective of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### *Situation of rural tourism*

The roots of the Bulgarian spirit and character can be found in a Bulgarian village, preserving the utmost extravagance of the Bulgarian traditions. There are often mountainous and remote regions with significant background in rural economy and promising potential too, since they have succeeded to become a visible landmark of the European or even global map of the rural tourism. Of course, in Bulgaria these are just exceptions, while on the contrary, in other

countries as for instance is France, Ireland, Netherlands, Ireland, Germany, Spain, the practice of rural tourism is stimulated in national level and there is also widespread culture of rural tourism amongst not only the tourism professionals but amongst inhabitants too. A tourist may travel to villages and rural areas after his seaside holidays. This trend could easily find a solid ground in Bulgaria too, since the relief of the country combines attractive beaches and mountainous areas of unique beauty. According to the Bulgarian Association for alternative tourism (BAAT) the interest in rural areas has increased. The increase in demand for the products of rural tourism is about 6% in last years. The majority of the visitors in the Bulgarian mountains and villages are Germans, French, Spanish, British and US citizens. Although The niche of the rural tourism is still insufficient, there are indeed significant preconditions for its development. In the recent years, the reorientation of the tourists for alternative tourism products is more and more visible in global level. Bulgaria has not yet reached the levels of other EU countries (Spain, France, Italy, etc) where the guest-houses are rented in a higher price than the hotels and offer the same conditions providing to the guests pure authenticity and customised services.

Guesthouses and family hotels located in rural areas are becoming more and more popular, being already a favourite place for relaxation and escape from the crowded urban centres. These types are predominantly micro-and small enterprises. [2] Bulgaria offers more than 1,200 sites for rural tourism, providing a total capacity of 209,000 beds for accommodation. The interest in building similar properties is growing steadily. During the previous programming period under the Rural Development Programme 2007-2013, (measure 311 and 312) it was implemented a significant number of projects for the construction or reconstruction of guest houses, family hotels, villas, motels and campgrounds. In the current programming period, these projects are implemented under the measure 6.4 "Investment support for non-agricultural activities in RURAL

DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME [8]. This financing tool allows the funding of projects for the construction of new properties and for renovation of existing ones. The requirement is that they are up to 20 units. A prerequisite is the project to be implemented within a rural territory. It is not foreseen financing for investment within urban centres or developed resorts with mass tourism. Beneficiaries of the Measure 6.4. "Investment support for non-agricultural activities" could be newly created or existing micro firms (employing up to 9 persons including), based in a rural municipality. In case the applicant is a registered farmer, it is required that his farm should have a standard production volume (CSP) over 8,000 Euros. Grants will be up to 75% of the total eligible costs and up to 200,000 Euros [8] (Rural development programme 2014-2020). Not good interaction between local power and other important participants in tourism industry not waters to creating of more competitive tourist product and a fuller absorption of potential of rural hiking, despite that has positive trends in its development. Another factor which definitely affects the situation is the fact that the pace of development in rural tourism has not yet reached its full potential due to the lack of infrastructure (making mountain areas not easy accessible at all) and of efficient public services in remote tourist areas. The positive trends in the development of rural tourism are mainly the result of private initiative as well as of the constantly rising demand for high-quality tourist services. Along with agriculture, rural tourism is the other, with great importance sector which can provide sustainable, long-term employment and income for the rural population. This is primarily a family-type business, unlike the major hotels and resorts, which corporate investments. Here the question touches to the role of national policy in the area led to the absorption of EU funds in the direction of non-agricultural activities for rural tourism. The investments should be in family farms, small and medium-sized firms, rather than large structures in tourism. For the sustainable development of this type of tourism, we must develop a regulation for rural tourism,

covering all the activities within it - that is, certification criteria, categorization of stars for sites, because the purpose of these regulations is to have one correct definition, which the subject develops and what services it provides to users. And at major hotels, places and small objects, there are abuses. These regulations must not be unregulated, or they are reduced to an absolute minimum in the interest of consumers and holidaymakers. Rural tourism seems to be a promising chance for the development of many areas in the Bulgarian territory. The most prominent destinations in Bulgaria today are located in the northern part of the Central Balkan Mountains, more specifically the areas within and around the municipalities of 'Elena' and 'Apriltsi'. Significant employment rates in rural tourism are met within the regions of Smolyan, and Blagoevgrad. There is also a remarkable employment rate during the summertime in 'Strandzha' villages and as well as in the villages of the Southern Black Sea coast. It should be outlined that, that the investments in rural tourism are returning and are also resistant when they are made after a serious business planning, and taking in consideration specific conditions, capacity and potential of each area. There are plenty of 'worst practices' to be mentioned from the previous programming periods as countless hotels and guesthouses are now standing almost abandoned. Measure 6.4 From "Programme for Development of Rural Areas" has key matter for effective score of projects from Ministry of „Agriculture and Forests“, what assisted development of rural hiking and area through effective investment.

#### *Essence of rural tourism and elements of its product*

Rural tourism and its mode of organization does not imply a scale and pace that can bring great profit. After all, it is all about a small, family-run businesses, with relatively limited development opportunities. A guesthouse may not happen with 40 beds, because there is no already, guest house or hotel. However, it seems that it is a great opportunity when a variety of services and activities is offered to the visitor along with the accommodation. Through this policy, attractive services (e.g.

trekking, biking, climbing, etc) are offered by the guesthouse owners or in collaboration with specialized instructors, achieving to return an added value to the business and even to the wider area. Tourism professionals are still not aware about the exploitation possibilities to be offered in rural areas. There is a lack of knowledge and expertise especially in the basic elements of rural tourism product and the manner of their offering on the part of practitioners of rural tourism [3] In Bulgaria the lack of knowledge and experience in the opportunities for development in rural tourism, the poor knowledge of its nature by the seeker to practise this type of tourism, as well as the way of proposing to the proposer, to clarify his nature and items.

Rural tourism represents the tourism in a rural area, having as a primary objective the active or passive recreation at the tourist site with typical rural setting, making direct contact with farmers; and exploring the authentic and typical landscape of as well as the exploration of the regional cultural, natural, archaeological and historical capital. Rural tourism provides complex product and according to a broader definition "rural tourism includes a range of activities, services and amenities that are submitted by farmers and peasants in order to attract tourists in a given area and thus to gain extra income " [7] (Clarke, 1986). If that perception is more widely adopted, rural tourism will cover not only farmer's agricultural and tourism (this is the common understanding of the term), but also breaks in nature and non-urban areas, in addition to accommodation, services may include a variety of festivities, events, shopping of local handicraft. As a specialized form of tourism it contains three components: **overnight, food and extra activities.**

In rural tourism, it is necessary, on the one hand, to maintain the originality and authenticity of the sites for accommodation; and on the other hand, to create contemporary comfort with the use of rural tourism product since the tourist has it in their daily lives in the contemporary urban environment.

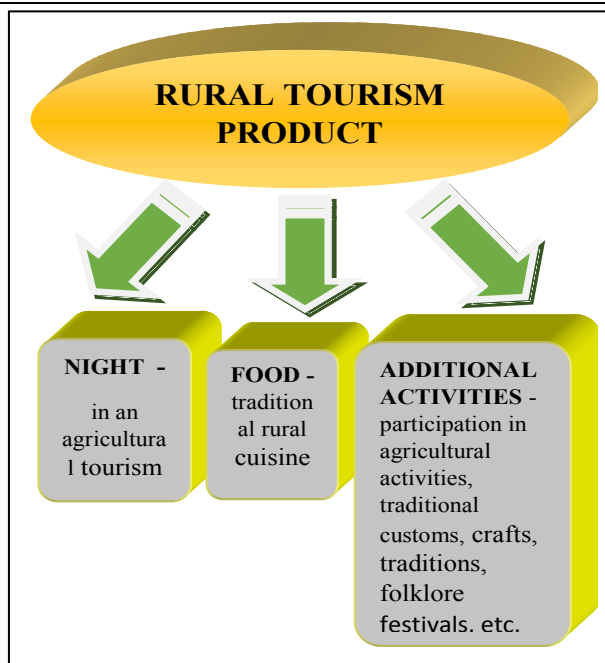


Fig. 1. Content of the rural tourism product  
Source: author's development

Objects, on the one hand, the need to preserve its authentic, natural and distinctive looks and simplicity, and, on the other, to offer modern conditions for residence, for example: hygienic modern bathroom in the farmhouse with beamed ceilings and a thatched or by stone roof tiles, house to meet modern safety requirements, etc. Rural tourism is usually associated with a specific shape of the interior of the house – the wood-carved furniture, ceilings, natural fabric, decoration of old agricultural tools, authentic old household items, hand-embroidered tablecloths, dried flowers, etc., the coppersmith's products, pottery and other crafts.

The second element of the content of rural tourism product i.e. nutrition, should include traditional local dishes preferably made of local agricultural products. A traditional local dish can reflect the culture of the area and the nutrition habits of the inhabitants giving the opportunity to the tourist to become more familiar with the everyday life and activities of the locals. To that end we should not underestimate the value of the local cuisine as a basic element of the overall tourism product of a specific area. The primary purpose of the 'culinary geography' is to allow local producers to create a local 'brand' as a vehicle to promote the area and its special

characteristics, to support this effort by producing products locally cultivated and preserved, retaining their authenticity. A local network or a cluster may also apply in this case as a tool—towards enhancing the final tourism product. This could also be combined with the concept of organic farming, fresh and healthy agrifood which preserves the local biodiversity.

The third element of the content of the rural tourism product concerns the additional activities which might include the following ones: diverse-trips, tours, picnics, trekking, climbing, canoeing, folklore festivities, etc. The competitiveness of rural tourism is determined by the content and the combination of its elements. In order to achieve a complex tourism product, it is very important to develop all three elements the content of these elements depends on the specific features and characteristics of the region, the possibilities for combination with other types of alternative tourism: e.g. ecological, culinary, wine, sports, and so forth.

#### *Sustainable development of rural tourism and rural areas*

The problems of developing and promoting rural tourism in Bulgaria, is formulated in the following way:

- Missing booking system for accommodation in rural tourism sites, and of tour operators offering rural tourism.
- Weak advertising—because of the lack of a good advertisement of the country's attractions abroad, yet tourists who choose this type of holiday, are mainly Bulgarians. They are about 85-90% of the tourists who choose rural tourism in and still is obviously a very small percentage of foreigners who prefer to relax in the countryside, mostly because of the weak marketing and advertising abroad in this direction.
- Thematic tourism product, connecting accommodation with a certain activity is now starting to be implemented.
- Rural tourism is seasonal, which reduces the annual implementation and profit and its product has a low added value.

- Lacking adequate infrastructure; bad road infrastructure; lack of directional signs, information, etc.

- Lack of experience and knowledge in the vast majority of practitioners or wishing to practice rural tourism.

Intellectual currents originated on tourism in rural areas has for objective the improvement of the social and economic way of life of the population in these disadvantaged regions through:

- The creation of new jobs;
- Infrastructure development in an environmentally-friendly way, uniting the efforts of the private and public sector;
- Creation of infrastructure, which would affect favourably the economic growth of the region, such as not exceeding the permissible load of the natural environment and has a positive impact on the quality of life in the area concerned;
- Stimulating exchanges between rural areas, and develop a positive attitude and knowledge of the rural community;
- The reduction in the number of young people leaving the countryside and moved into large cities, as well as the emigration out of Bulgaria, which will help to stabilize the population in the less developed regions still;
- Creating opportunities for the preservation of traditional agricultural activities and practices, "village" atmosphere and life;
- Contribution to the conservation of the historical, architectural, cultural and ethnographic identity of the region;
- Rural tourism complies with environmental requirements and avoids the negative impact of major tourist sites on the environment;
- Encouraging the preservation of the environment and contribute to the conservation of rare and endangered plants and animals;
- Emphasis is placed not only on the environment but also on the cultural sustainability. Rural tourism does not violate the cultural traditions of the community – the host;
- Rural tourism is a form that is based on natural, social and societal values that allow

the guest and the host to share experiences and positive experiences.

- Preserve family relationships with rural communities;
- Stimulate the development of local small businesses and thus encouraging the diversity of economic activities in rural areas;
- Development of tourism and organic farming, which is a prerequisite for the establishment of a means of livelihood of the people, to create jobs and revive the economy in the area.
- The restructuring of the agriculture and agri-food industry, development of authentic Bulgarian crop varieties and breeds of livestock, wine growing and winemaking, fruit-growing and canning industries, the cultivation of essential crops, etc.

creating jobs and reducing unemployment, reduced direct emigration from rural areas, contributes to the development of new activities and the diversification of the economy [4]. Therefore, tourism services in the rural areas are able to support local population and communities in developing economic diversity. [6]

The potential of rural tourism must be recognized and thus used by these regions; a comprehensive analysis of the current situation should be made (along with a SWOT analysis) and a strategic plan to support rural tourism, should be developed with recommendations on specific measures for the promotion of the rural tourism of the region. This is partly due to the lack of an established institutional and legislative framework and official data on the economic outcomes of this type of tourism. There is no proper reflection of the share of taxes collected from rural tourism to other types of taxes in municipalities, which does not show its real impact on the local economy. There is also a lack of accurate data on the amount of rural tourism revenue. All this has an impact on our real assessment of the economic impact of rural tourism in the rural area concerned. However, without these official data, we can say that in poorly developed and lagging areas, rural tourism is an economic activity that has an economic and social impact on their development. The sustainable development of rural tourism leads to an improvement in the quality of life of the population in the region. It has a positive impact on local communities, it enables local citizens to participate in the social and political life of the region and the country, which encourages their participation in the development, supply and management of local tourist product. So they can judge the benefits it brings to them and its impact on the preservation of ecological and cultural values, preservation of traditions, landscape and biodiversity. The development of rural tourism leads to preservation, restoration, maintenance of the material and non-material cultural heritage.

The contribution of the rural tourism to the local economy is relatively small for most

Table1. Comparison between mass and rural tourism

Subjects	Mass tourism	Rural tourism
<b>Tourist</b>	passive recreation	physical activity
	encapsulation of personality	complicity in activities
	subject to the lowest price	an authentic rural environment
		exploratory activities
<b>Industry</b>	standardization	product diversification
	clothing	flexible specialization
	mergers	ecological orientation
	Search for economies of scale	increasing profits by increasing consumer experiences
<b>Local community</b>	more tourists at any price	links between economic activities
	export of income	cluster networks
	ecological crisis	community revival
	without a direct connection with cultural-historical, architectural landmarks	

Source: adapted by the authors

Entrepreneurs in mountain and rural territories of Bulgaria be appear important segment for achieve of better rural holding and economic tool for development in region. Rural tourism generates additional income for rural families,

rural destinations or at least it is the officially registered income. This partially happening due to the presence of the so called “gray” economy, which is facilitated by the lack of a well-established institutional and legislative framework and the lack of formal data for this type of business. In fact, there is no accurate data on the real income from rural tourism, and the ratio of taxes collected from tourism to all other taxes does not properly reflect the share of industry. This fact influences our awareness of the economic impact of a given area, but even with no formal data, it can easily be assumed that in underdeveloped areas rural tourism is the only economic activity with growth potential. In addition to financial outcomes, rural tourism development generally improves the quality of life (providing more personal contact, motivating people to better care for the environment, making these areas preferable in national development plans).

Rural tourism is not only an economic opportunity to develop rural and mountain lagging areas, but it has a positive environmental and social impact, a means of improving the quality of life; Representation of local citizens in government. All this leads to encouraging the development of meat communities, active local residents and tour operators. In this way local communities participate in the development and management of the tourist product and the benefits it will bring to them. The ecological aspect that this type of tourism has is expressed in the conservation of the landscape and biodiversity in the region concerned. Secondly, tourism can also serve as an element of conservation, for example, in the restoration, maintenance and protection of tangible or intangible cultural heritage. Creative potential stands out especially when the revival of certain cultural traditions for the purposes of tourism encourages individual creativity, artistic creativity and the fullness of familiarizing people with their environment and history.

In recent years, widespread popularity in literature and a number of attempts at practical realization has gained the cluster approach. It is based on partnership and co-

operation of various direct and indirect participants in the execution of a particular activity or production of a particular product.

The cluster in tourism combines mostly representatives of small and medium-sized tourism businesses, for the exchange of experience and knowledge, for the development and the implementation of innovations, the inclusion in national and international networks, joint marketing activity. However, the utmost motivation for joining a cluster is not other than the economy of scales.

All these activities aim to provide more complete and quality service to tourists. For example, a single cluster can combine various sectors of tourism, culture, local industry, agriculture (agribusiness), and local government and municipal administration.

This kind of groupings formed on the basis of the so-called "Diagonal integration", providing complementarity to organizations and institutions in order to ensure a—'full pack' of the tourists' stay. Thus, the cross-sectoral cluster approach provides a better quality of tourism product and adds competitiveness to the rural tourism enterprise.

The cluster approach also provides an integrated development of the economy and economic life of the region - economic, social, environmental and institutional; regulated environmental impact; balancing the interests of business, the population's municipal power. Through the integrated development of the economy in a certain region, it is achieved the so-called "Synergy effect" – a multidimensional effect and result. In economically underdeveloped or underdeveloped regions, the need for cluster, integrated approach is higher.

Economic life in underdeveloped areas requires diversification of the economy due to the impossibility of strong, forward-looking development of an individual business sector.

Apply the cluster approach by merging certain activities that are either organizationally and technologically related or not, for example:

-rural tourism and wine production and specific local food products;

-production of clothes - local costumes, souvenirs and pavilions for their sale;  
-leisure and sports instructors and mountain guides;  
-producing high-quality food made of products coming from local farmers and offering it in catering and family hotels;  
In this way, the implementation of a diversification strategy in a particular rural area, the cluster approach, helps to create added value for the produced rural tourism product and makes it more attractive, more demanding and more sophisticated. The application of this approach is in line with the European Union Regulation No. 1698/2005 on the promotion of the diversification of the rural economy.

## CONCLUSIONS

Rural tourism is one of the major tourism subcategories, being in the first line of the leisure market in many European countries. Changes in agriculture policy have made the future of many rural and mountainous regions in the country uncertain, and it is precisely the revival of these lagging areas that would be possible through the development of rural tourism, which has evolved significantly rapidly.

In a number of European countries, it is a core activity in the development of the local economy and a form not diversifying agriculture in an outside urban undeveloped rural environment.

This is due to the growing attractiveness of this type of tourism. As well as its rapid spread over time as a result of the uncertainty in rural development caused by changes in agricultural policy, rural tourism is the most appropriate tool for economic and social development of underdeveloped rural areas. This is done by keeping or even increasing employment, maintaining and creating local income, jobs and population growth, diversifying the professions offered, preserving services, supporting farms, increasing the number of cultural events, preserving nature or revitalizing rural crafts and arts to attract tourists, enables the

acquisition of agricultural and culinary skills, enriches the knowledge of the countryside and culture of the region. Rural tourism often provides incentives for infrastructure development, helps raise funds for economic and social infrastructure, which in turn contributes to the growth of other economic sub-sectors in rural areas.

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