

ECOTOURISM AND ORGANIC FARMING

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Abstract

Organic farming plays a vital role in supporting rural areas, improving quality of life and contributing to the development of ecotourism. Offering new products with higher quality also has the potential to attract tourists and enhance regional attractiveness. This study aims to explore the relationship between organic farming and ecotourism, focusing on how their interaction can benefit the sustainable development of rural areas. The study focuses on the economic, social and environmental benefits of linking these two sectors, while addressing key challenges such as market access and the need for training in sustainable practices. Analysis in the study allows us to give certain recommendations to strengthen cooperation between farmers and tourism stakeholders, ultimately promoting sustainable growth and expanding economic opportunities for local communities.

Key words: bio-agriculture, ecotourism, sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Modern global trends in the development of sustainable economies place increasing emphasis on environmentally friendly practices in agriculture and tourism. Organic production and ecotourism represent two key directions that contribute to the ecological, social and economic sustainability of the regions.

This article examines the interrelationship between these two sectors and their potential for synergistic development.

Ecotourism and organic farming are interconnected fields that promote sustainability and local economies. Ecotourism focuses on responsible travel to natural areas with the goal of protecting the environment and improving the well-being of local communities [39]. The World Ecotourism Conference in Quebec in 2002 accepted that "ecotourism encompasses all forms of tourism focused on nature where the principal motivation is to observe and appreciate nature and traditional cultures living in natural areas" [41].

The International Ecotourism Society [35] defines ecotourism as "ethical travel to natural areas that help the well-being of local people and conserves the environment". Global

Biodiversity Protection [34] said that "ecotourism (also known as ecological tourism) is responsible travel to fragile, pristine, and usually protected areas that strive to below impact and (often) small scale".

In Bulgaria, many organizations, such as the Bulgarian Association for Rural and Ecological Tourism [32] and the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism [33], offer their own definitions of ecotourism. Ecotourism encourages local economic development through small-scale entrepreneurial ventures which is helping to boost the socio-economic vitality of local communities and ensures a fair sharing of responsibilities and benefits.

Another important part is the environmental education that is directly related to the sustainable tourism and social responsibility [29].

Ecotourism helps to minimize the environmental impact and contributes to the conservation of natural resources. From the other hand the organic farming is very important for the healthier lifestyle and that includes the next benefits: soil health and biodiversity, lower emissions and pollution, boosts product value by label it as organic [19].

In addition to these benefits, organic agriculture promotes the sustainability of agroecosystems by integrating agronomic, biological and physical-mechanical management methods [5]. It also takes into account local natural conditions, aiming to maintain soil fertility and optimize biological cycles. The regulatory framework in Bulgaria follows EU guidelines and includes specific requirements for organic products controlled by certification bodies.

Impact of organic production on sustainable development

Organic production has a significant impact on the economic, environmental and social aspects of sustainable development. The application of environmentally sound agricultural practices not only improves soil and water quality, but also creates new economic opportunities for small and medium farms [13].

Socially, organic farming promotes the development of local communities by stimulating job creation and supporting traditional agrarian practices. Incorporating ecotourism into organic production also has a positive effect, contributing to the promotion of local crops and ways of life [14].

Both sectors – ecotourism and organic farming – share a common commitment to sustainable practices that contribute to environmental protection. Ecotourism has the potential to increase demand for organic products, thereby stimulating farmers to adopt environmentally friendly production methods [39], [21].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A number of methods are used in this study such as: statistical analysis, induction, deduction and systematization/classification of data.

A SWOT analysis of bio-production has been made, which provides clarity on the strengths and weaknesses in this field, along with the possible opportunities and risks facing the sector.

In order to support the analysis, data from Eurostat have been utilised to illustrate and highlight the main trends in the organic farming land usage for some countries in EU.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Benefits and challenges

Organic farming practices are vital for the environment and give economic stimulation to the local communities. Ecotourism plays an important role in the implementation of organic farming practices by promoting economic leverage, increasing environmental awareness and stimulating the commitment of local communities. The relationship between ecotourism and organic farming manifests itself through various dimensions, but economic motives are among the leading factors. Ecotourism provides farmers with additional sources of income by encouraging them to implement organic practices that are in sync with the principles of sustainable tourism. The integration of ecotourism with agritourism provides farmers with the opportunity to sell organic products directly to consumers, which increases their profitability and strengthens the motivation to switch to organic production methods. Additional income from rural tourism allows farmers to diversify their income, thus reducing their dependence on traditional agriculture and providing greater financial stability. In addition, ecotourism creates new job opportunities in rural areas, which not only strengthens local economies, but also encourages farmers to adopt sustainable organic practices. These practices are key factors because they match the expectations of modern tourists, who often prefer environmentally friendly manufactured products. Organic products often command higher market prices, and ecotourism opens up direct sales opportunities that further increase farmers' economic viability. Thus, ecotourism not only provides financial support for local communities, but also promotes sustainable development by promoting environmentally responsible agricultural practices [29].

Engagement with organic farming within ecotourism plays an important role in preserving local cultures and landscapes by promoting a sense of community and preservation of cultural heritage [29], [21]. The link between ecotourism and organic farming supports environmental care, as tourists often

look for sustainable practices and products that meet their environmental expectations [29].

On the other hand, the application of biological farming techniques, such as those in conservation agriculture, reduces costs and improves soil health, making these methods particularly attractive to farmers seeking to benefit from ecotourism [20]. Promoting ecotourism can also increase farmers' understanding of ecological practices, thereby making them appreciate more the benefits of organic farming and its contribution to the conservation of natural resources [1]. Farmers involved in ecotourism initiatives are often driven by a desire to protect the environment, which is fully consistent with the principles of organic farming [6]. Voluntourism initiatives create additional opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and experience by stimulating a community-oriented approach within organic agriculture [22]. Social pressure and community support play a key role in encouraging farmers to adopt organic farming practices, as highlighted by the Theory of Planned Behavior [17]. In addition, organic farms have the potential to become educational centers, providing visitors with hands-on experience in sustainable farming practices and highlighting the importance of organic farming [21]. Tourists can deepen their understanding of food production processes and environmental protection, making this educational value an essential part of their experience. However, some critics argue that the commercialization of agritourism can lead to a loss of authenticity in the experience, with an over-focus on profit compromising the sustainability of the practices. It is therefore crucial to maintain a balance between economic and environmental objectives to ensure that agritourism initiatives remain true to their ecological roots.

Among the main obstacles are resource management, impact on local ecosystems, limited access to markets and the need for training in sustainable practices. These barriers make it very difficult for rural communities to fully benefit from the synergies between ecotourism and organic farming. Among the main challenges is the uneven distribution of benefits, which may discourage some farmers

from adopting organic practices. This inequality of benefits is particularly critical for sustainable rural development and requires careful management to be overcome.

Good practices and innovations in bioproduction

In Europe and many other places around the world, there are a number of successful examples of organic farming that is linked to ecotourism practices that focus on sustainable partnerships and the active participation of local communities. The key aspects include three main elements: sustainable partnerships, community engagement and environmental protection.

Among the successful examples of organic agriculture and ecotourism can be mentioned:

- **Organic farms with their own tourist infrastructure** – Farms in France and Italy offer accommodation, tastings and hands-on workshops for visitors. For example, in the Tuscany region of Italy, farms such as Podereil Casale combine organic production with agritourism, offering opportunities to participate in farming activities and tastings of local organic products [27].

- **Certified bioregions** – Some regions of Austria and Germany are being designated as bioregions, attracting tourists and investors. An example is the Wertheim bioregion in Germany, where local farmers are working together for the sustainable development of the region through organic farming and ecotourism [11], [37].

- **Agrotourism with participation in agricultural activities** – In Bulgaria, some farms provide different organic activities, like participating in animal husbandry, dairy production, and nature walks [36].

- **High-tech organic farms** – The introduction of automated crop monitoring and management systems increases the productivity and quality of organic products [16], [7]. In the Netherlands, for example, some organic farms use robots for weeding, which reduces reliance on manual labour and increases production efficiency [15].

- **Educational and demonstration centres** – In some European countries there are farms that are specifically set up as educational centres. For example, in Sweden, organic

farms such as Skärvångensbymejeri offer training in organic farming, including courses in traditional cheese and animal husbandry [30].

●**Collaborate with restaurants and hotels** – Many organic producers are creating partnerships with local restaurants and hotels that offer only certified organic products. In Spain, for example, some hotels in Andalusia use only organically produced food on their menus, thus promoting organic production and increasing interest in local products [12].

In regions such as Nepal, organic farming strengthens ecotourism by promoting sustainable practices, improving local produce, and attracting visitors who value a healthy lifestyle [2].

Eco-agritourism combines the principles of organic farming and ecotourism, promoting sustainability, biodiversity and the preservation of local culture, significantly improving the economic opportunities of local communities, especially in less developed areas such as the island of Korčula [38]. The Center for Environmental Education in Indonesia demonstrates how ecotourism can increase the economic and social empowerment of local farmers through organic rice farming [40]. The Subak Uma Lambing project in Bali also highlights the synergy between organic farming and ecotourism, highlighting the need for legal frameworks to support these initiatives [4].

In order to have the benefits from the ecotourism in Romania there is need of implementation of coherent policies and active involvement of local communities [9]. According to different research the funds from the European Union are vital in the support of agritourism especially due to the period of COVID-19 period [31].

In Bulgaria we can see that there is ecotourism and organic farming, but a lot of improvements can be done in these sectors, like enlarging the markets which will affect the revenue for the

farmers [28]. Efficiency and environmental waste can be optimized [8]. New skills and networks can be also helpful in this process [3][18].

Government support is also key to promoting initiatives related to organic farming and ecotourism, and providing funding and resources can accelerate the development of the sector [26]. Certainly, there are difficulties for the producers to have equal access to the market and fulfil all requirements of the authorities. However, with innovative approaches, flexible policies and promoting the sustainable growth of organic farming, there could be an improvement in this sector. [3].

Institutional support for bioproduction

Organic production in Bulgaria is supported through various programs and regulations targeting the rural areas and their sustainable development. We can list a number of mechanisms related to rural development:

●**Rural Development Programme (RDP)** – This program is allowing to the beneficiaries to receive funding for their production transformation and invest to the modernisation and sustainable technologies [23];

●**European Union funding** – The EU supports organic production through policies such as the European Green Pact and the Farm to Table Strategy, which aim to reduce chemical pesticides and boost organic farming [10];

●**Certification schemes and control bodies** – organic producers in Bulgaria have to go through strict controls in order to obtain the relevant organic certificates that increase their competitiveness on the international market;

●**National and local initiatives** – various organisations and associations work to promote organic farming, provide training and support farmers through advisory services;

●**Tax breaks and grants** – some organic producers can benefit from tax breaks and grants for investing in sustainable practices.



Fig. 1. SWOT analysis of biomanufacturing
Source: Authors' vision.

The SWOT analysis of organic production in the context of ecotourism reveals deep structural prerequisites for sustainable growth, but also highlights key constraints that require a strategic approach. The combination of high ecological value, growing demand for organic products and opportunities for integration into ecotourism models creates a foundation for the development of innovative and diversified business models in rural areas. Such models can unite production, tourism and education in sustainable local economies.

Strengths, such as the high quality of production and its ecological value, can be a catalyst for building premium market segments oriented towards healthy eating and sustainable consumption. This opens up opportunities not only for direct sales, but also for the creation of territorial brands that would unite producers, tourism services and institutions.

At the same time, however, weaknesses in the sector – most notably high production and certification costs, as well as the lack of market culture and access to distribution networks – hinder the large-scale expansion of organic agriculture. Of particular concern is the dependence of many producers on subsidies without a sustainable business logic, which

makes the sector vulnerable to political and market shocks.

Threats related to the regulatory environment and the lack of young and trained farmers can lead to stagnation and the withdrawal of potential participants in the sector, especially in remote and demographically aging areas. Without active state participation in simplifying procedures, reducing the administrative burden and stimulating young agricultural entrepreneurs, the potential of the biosector will remain untapped.

Therefore, the key lever for overcoming weaknesses and neutralizing threats lies in the opportunities for integration - both horizontal (between farmers and tourism operators) and vertical (inclusion in value chains, from production to the end consumer). Examples from France, Italy and Germany show that by creating bioregions, combined with training centers, tourism infrastructure and digital logistics, real sustainability can be achieved.

In conclusion, the synergy between organic production and ecotourism should be perceived not simply as a niche opportunity, but as a strategic tool for the social and economic revitalization of rural areas in Bulgaria. This requires a coordinated national policy based on territorial planning, investments in human

capital, public-private partnerships and digital transformation.

In 2022, the share of agricultural land used for organic production in Bulgaria amounted to only 2.2%, according to Eurostat data, which places it among the last in the EU in this indicator. In comparison, Sweden (23.42%), Austria (26%) and Estonia (22%) demonstrate a significantly higher commitment to organic farming. This clear discrepancy is not due to natural constraints – on the contrary, Bulgaria has a variety of climatic zones, little polluted land and a tradition of natural production. The main differences stem from systemic and structural factors – primarily the lack of a long-term strategy, unstable institutional support, as well as low motivation of farmers, who often perceive organic certification as expensive, bureaucratic and opaque.

The reports of the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) show that since 2019, the area under organic production has been decreasing, and in 2021 they are 86,310 hectares, compared to over 100,000 hectares two years earlier [24]. This is a clear indicator of the difficulties in retaining already certified farms, especially due to the unpredictability of subsidies and the insufficient realization of production. An additional factor is the limited domestic market - studies show that only about 8–10% of Bulgarian consumers regularly buy

organic products, with the main reasons for refusal being the price and doubts about the authenticity of the certification. Against this background, ecotourism is an alternative channel for market integration of organic producers. In regions with well-developed agrotourism practices - such as Smolyan, Stara Zagora, Gabrovo and parts of Northwestern Bulgaria, producers manage to sell their production directly, with higher added value. According to the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism [32], over 60% of tourists in rural areas actively seek out organically certified products, being willing to pay up to 20% higher prices, especially when the product is combined with local history, tasting or participation in agricultural activities. This highlights the need for closer integration between agricultural producers and tourism operators, as well as the creation of regional quality and origin labels. In addition to the economic value, this relationship has the potential to stimulate local employment, social entrepreneurship and cultural identity, especially in vulnerable and depopulated areas. This outlines not only a market but also a social logic of the synergy between organic agriculture and ecotourism, which can be capitalized on through targeted policies and regional initiatives.

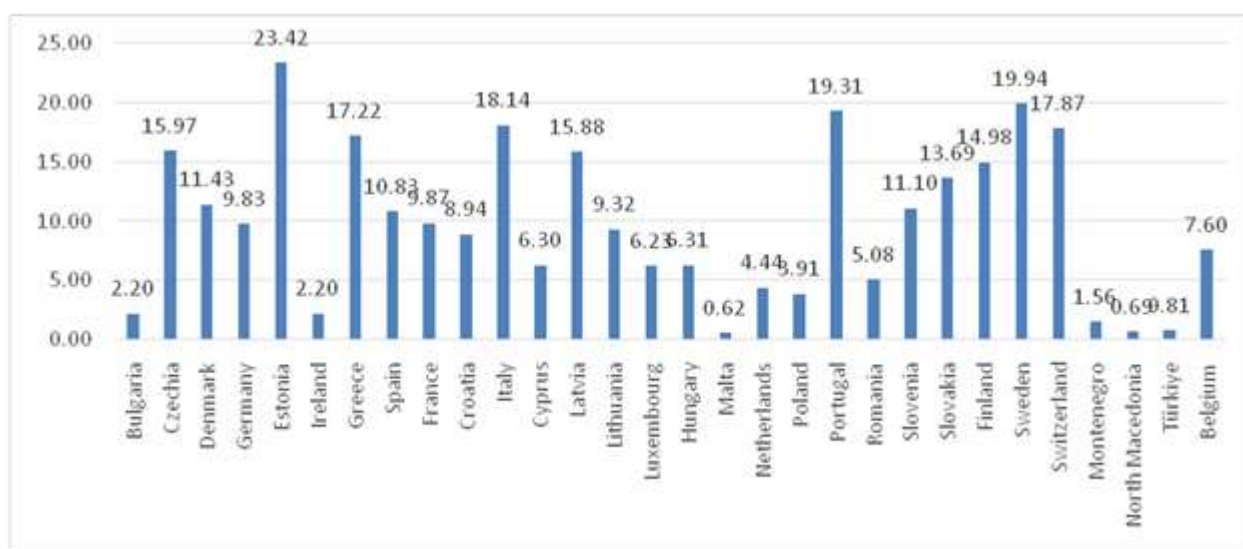


Fig. 2. Area under organic farming, 2022, %
Source: Eurostat, [42].

In animal husbandry, the number of biologically raised cattle reached 10,408, and

sheep – 19,873. Biological beekeeping is also actively developing, and in 2021. 218,949

certified bee colonies were registered. Despite the favorable natural conditions for the development of the sector, a number of challenges such as regulatory complications, high production costs and low consumer awareness hinder the progress of organic producers [24].

Link between organic production and ecotourism

Ecotourism promotes responsible travel to natural areas to protect the environment and improve the well-being of local communities [25]. Organic farms offering tourism services such as agritourism, tastings and educational programs can create additional revenue opportunities and promote sustainable agricultural practices. Interactions between ecotourism and organic production include:

- Development of farmers' markets and direct sales;
- Organisation of tourist routes including visits to organic farms;
- Conducting courses and seminars on sustainable agriculture and ecological nutrition;
- Introducing sustainable practices in tourist sites through the use of organic products.

CONCLUSIONS

The synergy between bioproduction and ecotourism opens up new perspectives for sustainable development, balancing economic benefits with nature conservation and cultural heritage preservation. Innovative business models are outlined when there is combination between organic production and tourism. The synergy can improve the quality of life in these areas and also support the sustainability.

We can conclude that both sectors – organic farming and ecotourism are connected and they contribute to the sustainable growth in rural areas. They not only help protect the environment, but also stimulate economic growth, create jobs and strengthen the social well-being of local communities. Through their synergistic development, sustainable models can be built that bring benefits to both nature and people, affirming an ecologically and socially responsible way of life.

Despite these mechanisms, a number of

challenges such as bureaucratic procedures, a complex certification system and insufficient awareness of farmers hinder the wider spread of organic farming.

Based on these aspects, the following SWOT analysis presents the main strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats for biomanufacturing. Despite government support and various types of funding to improve and accelerate the development of this sector, challenges such as limited access to markets and regulatory barriers still exist. The resolution is in the innovative approaches, new policies, and continued support for the sustainable development of ecotourism and organic agriculture in Bulgaria.

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