ASPECTS OF DRONE USAGE BY ROMANIAN FARMERS FOR ENHANCING AGRICULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract
The increasing demand for sustainable agricultural practices has accelerated the adoption of advanced technologies, with drones emerging as a transformative ability in precision farming. This study explores the impact of agricultural drones on productivity, environmental sustainability, and economic feasibility in Romania. By leveraging advanced imaging technologies such as multispectral and thermal sensors, drones facilitate real-time monitoring of crop health, early detection of diseases, and targeted input application, leading to significant yield improvements. Romanian case studies report a 20% increase in wheat and maize yields due to drone-assisted interventions. The interventions also contribute to environmental sustainability by reducing resource wastage. Studies show a 40% reduction in nitrogen runoff and an 18% decrease in water usage in Romanian farms, highlighting their role in mitigating soil degradation and water pollution. Furthermore, drones help lower greenhouse gas emissions by replacing fuel-intensive machinery in specific agricultural operations.
Despite these benefits, challenges such as high initial costs, regulatory constraints, and technical skill requirements hinder widespread adoption, particularly among smallholder farmers.
This research underscores the transformative potential of drones in Romanian agriculture by enhancing productivity and sustainability and highlights the importance of addressing challenges through government support, cooperative frameworks, and public-private partnerships to enhance technology accessibility and adoption. By fostering innovation and collaboration, drones can play a pivotal role in shaping a more sustainable and efficient agricultural system in Romania.

Keywords: remote sensing, precision agriculture, crop management, sustainable farming, agronomic innovation.
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INTRODUCTION

Agriculture plays a crucial role in Romania's economy, yet it faces persistent challenges such as climate change, soil degradation, and inefficient resource utilization. In recent years, technological advancements have provided innovative solutions to enhance agricultural sustainability with drones (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, UAVs) emerging as pivotal tools in precision agriculture. These devices enable real-time monitoring, efficient resource management, and data-driven decision-making.

Several studies have demonstrated the benefits of drone usage in agriculture. For instance, Zhang and Kovacs (2012) highlighted improvements in crop health monitoring and input optimization using UAVs, while Torres-Sánchez et al. (2018) showed that drones can effectively detect plant diseases early, thereby reducing the need for excessive pesticide use. In Romania, Popescu et al. (2021) noted that although large farms benefit significantly from drone technology, smallholder farmers often encounter financial and regulatory barriers. Despite these insights, research specifically focusing on the sustainability impacts of drone adoption in Romanian agriculture remains limited. As shown in Figure 1, Romania is one of the top users of harmful substances in Europe, with steady use over the years, as shown in Figure 2 and therefore the adoption of precision farming would benefit greatly the local agriculture sector.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the role of drone technology in enhancing agricultural sustainability in Romania by assessing its contributions to resource efficiency, environmental protection, and economic viability. The central hypothesis is that drone adoption by Romanian farmers significantly enhances sustainability by optimizing input usage, improving crop yields, and reducing environmental impacts. This hypothesis is examined through empirical data collection and comparative analysis.

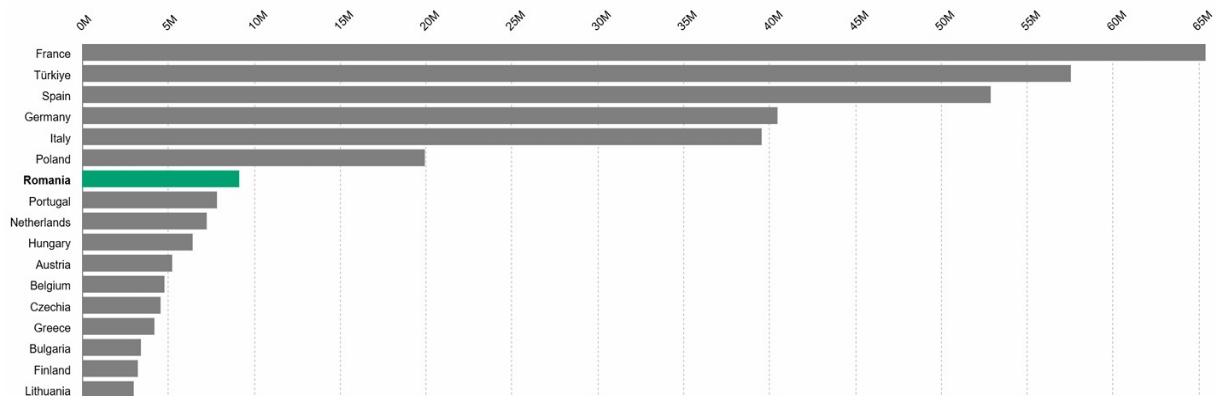

Figure 1. **Top pesticide sales in Europe in 2023** (Source: Eurostat)

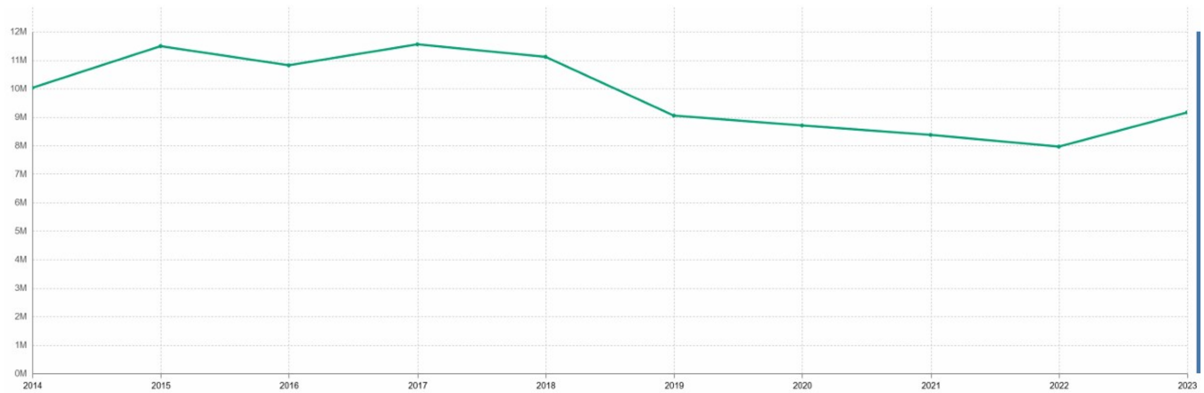

Figure 2. **Pesticide sales in Romania, from 2014 to 2023 (Source: Eurostat)**

The primary aim of this research is to explore the impact of drone usage on sustainable agriculture in Romania. Specific objectives include:

- Investigating the current adoption rates and usage patterns of drones in Romanian agriculture.
- Evaluating the impact of drones on resource efficiency, crop monitoring, water management, and biodiversity preservation.
- Identifying key barriers and challenges to drone adoption among Romanian farmers.
- Providing policy recommendations for enhancing the accessibility and effectiveness of drone technology in Romanian agriculture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, to ensure comprehensive analysis and evaluate the role of agricultural drones in enhancing productivity, environmental sustainability, and economic feasibility, with a focus on Romania. Data was collected from peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and agricultural research institutions, including the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR).

Romania, with its 13.9 million hectares of agricultural land, provides a diverse agricultural landscape, ranging from the plains of the south to the hilly regions of Transylvania and the vineyards of Dobrogea. These regions were selected to capture the varied farming practices and challenges across the country, offering a comprehensive understanding of drone usage in Romanian agriculture.

The study focuses on the use of two primary types of drones in Romanian agriculture: rotary-wing and fixed-wing drones. Rotary-wing drones, such as the DJI Agras T30, shown in Figure 3, are widely used for tasks like pesticide spraying, irrigation management, and close-up crop inspections. These drones are versatile and capable of hovering, making them suitable for small to medium-sized farms. Fixed-wing drones, such as the SenseFly eBee X, shown in Figure 4, are used for large-scale field mapping and surveying. These drones have longer flight times and can cover extensive areas, making them ideal for large farms and cooperative projects. Hybrid drones, which combine the features of fixed-wing and rotary-wing designs, are also gaining popularity for their versatility in diverse agricultural landscapes.

The study incorporates data from Romanian distributors such as DroneHub Romania, Top Geocart, and Romanian Precision Agriculture Solutions (RPAS), which provide access to these technologies, as well as training and technical support for farmers.

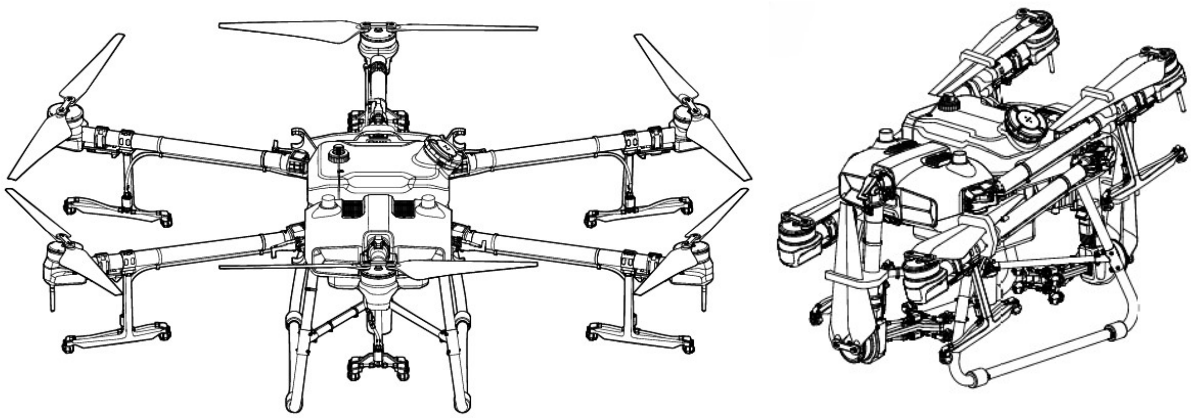

Figure 3. **Rotary-wing DJI Agras T30** (Source: T30 User Manual)

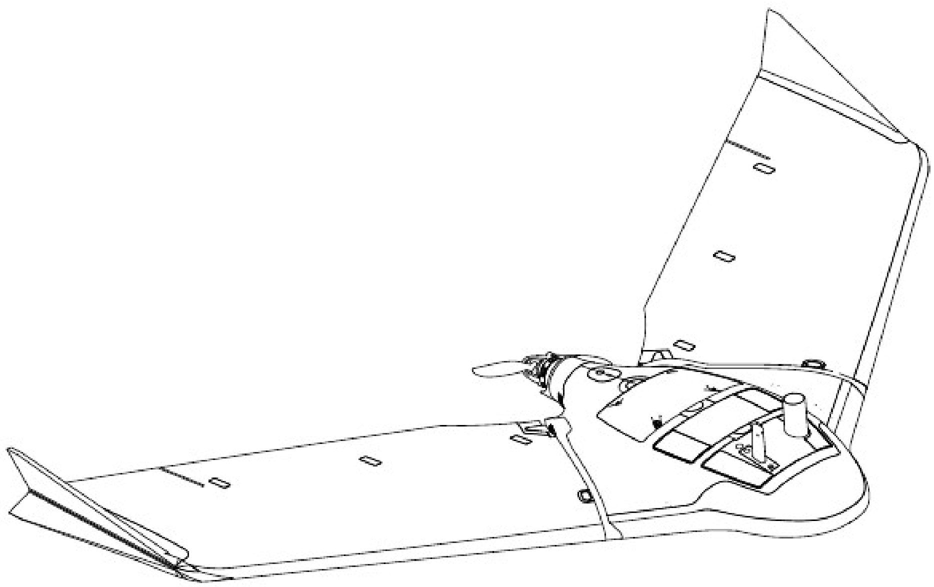

Figure 4. **SenseFly eBee X** (Source: eBee X User Manual)

Evaluating Romanian drone usage against global trends in agricultural technology, we can see that while Romania has made significant strides in adopting drone technology for precision agriculture, its integration remains uneven compared to leading agricultural nations such as the United States, China, and Germany. In highly developed agricultural systems, drones are extensively utilized not only for crop monitoring but also for automated seeding, pesticide spraying, and soil analysis. For instance, the United States leads in drone adoption due to advanced regulatory frameworks, government incentives, and widespread digital infrastructure, enabling seamless data collection and integration with AI-driven analytics. In contrast, Romanian farmers face challenges such as high equipment costs, limited technical expertise, and regulatory constraints, which slow the pace of adoption. Additionally, while countries like China have developed low-cost drone models tailored for smallholder farms, Romanian farmers often rely on expensive imports, increasing financial barriers. Despite these challenges, Romania has seen promising growth in drone-assisted farming, particularly in large-scale agribusinesses. However, to match global advancements, strategic initiatives such as subsidies, education programs, and regulatory reforms must be implemented to enhance accessibility and efficiency of drone technology in Romanian agriculture.

The analysis also considers the role of Romanian drone distributors and service providers in facilitating the adoption of this technology. Companies like DroneHub Romania and Top Geocart play a crucial role in providing farmers with access to advanced drone technologies, training programs, and technical support. These companies collaborate with research institutions and government agencies to promote the adoption of precision agriculture technologies in Romania. Training programs offered by these distributors are essential in addressing the technical expertise gap, enabling farmers to effectively operate and maintain drones.

The study also examines the regulatory framework for drone usage in Romania, which includes airspace restrictions and licensing requirements. These regulations can pose barriers to adoption, particularly for smallholder farmers. The availability of training programs and government support is critical to overcoming these challenges and ensuring the widespread adoption of drone technology. By focusing on these aspects, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the materials and methods involved in evaluating the role of drones in Romanian agriculture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The Strategic Advisory Group, in their 2023 Smart Farming Final Report, defined smart farming as "data-driven, principled decision making in agricultural and food value chains occurring as multi-objective optimization in the context of global volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity" and placed very small producers (i.e., smallholders) "apart from the system to highlight the challenges associated with making the promise of smart farming and data driven agrifood systems in general apply to them too", Figure 5.

The future of agricultural drones in Romania lies in the integration of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), and the Internet of Things (IoT). These abilities can enhance the analytical capabilities of drones, enabling predictive modeling and automated decision-making. AI-powered drones could analyze historical data to predict pest outbreaks, allowing farmers to take preventive measures, and IoT-enabled drones could communicate with other smart farming devices, creating a fully integrated precision agriculture ecosystem. Recent advancements in drone technology are revolutionizing agricultural practices by increasing efficiency, accuracy, and automation.

AI-Integrated Drones: Drones equipped with artificial intelligence can analyze real-time data, providing farmers with actionable insights into precision agriculture. AI-powered drones enhance crop health monitoring, pest detection, and automated decision-making, while assisting with yield prediction and harvest planning. On January 8, 2025, DJI, a global leader in civil drones and creative camera technology, unveiled the DJI Matrice 4 Series as its latest compact flagship enterprise drone lineup. The series includes the Matrice 4T and Matrice 4E, both featuring cutting-edge capabilities such as smart detection and laser marking measurement. Equipped with an AI computing platform and enhanced sensing technologies, these drones offer greater safety and reliability in flight operations than ever before, enabling

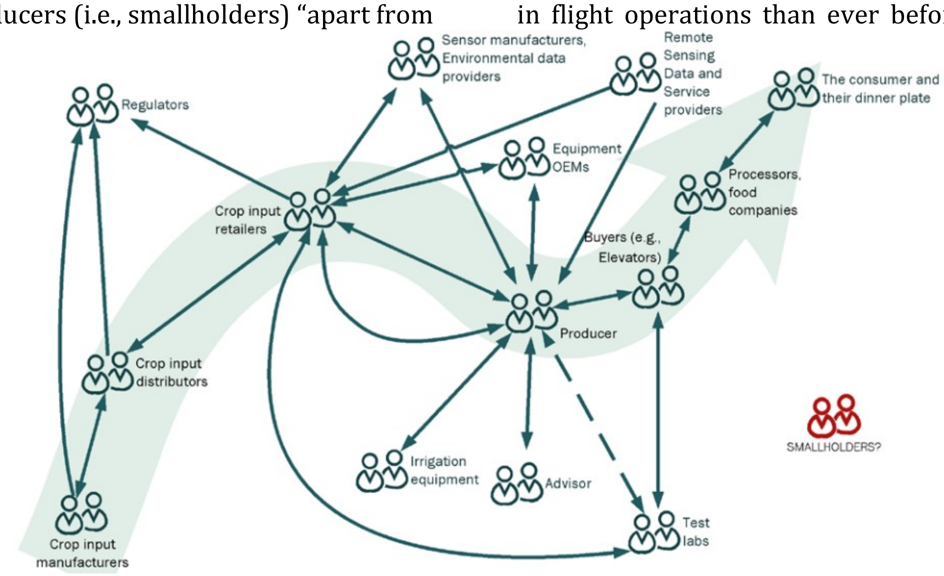

Figure 5. **Stakeholders and data flow in an agrifood system** (Source: ISO Strategic Advisory Group)

surveying, mapping, and inspection work to be done with higher precision for higher efficiency.

Multispectral and Hyperspectral Imaging: Advanced imaging technologies enable drones to capture detailed data on plant health, soil conditions, and water stress. These imaging techniques help farmers optimize input use and improve crop yields. When selecting a drone for multispectral or hyperspectral imaging, we must consider factors such as sensor quality, spectral coverage, ease of integration, and overall cost to ensure it aligns with specific application requirements. While not a drone itself, the MicaSense RedEdge-P is a premier multispectral camera compatible with various UAV platforms. It captures high-resolution, calibrated multispectral imagery, making it indispensable for advanced agricultural analysis and research. DJI Mavic 3 Multispectral Drone integrates an RGB camera with a multispectral camera array, allowing comprehensive crop analysis. It features a built-in RTK (real time kinematics) module for precise geolocation, enhancing data accuracy. Its compact design and user-friendly interface make it a top choice for farms seeking an affordable and efficient solution. For example, in the southern plains of Romania, drones equipped with thermal imaging technology helped identify areas of water stress in sunflower fields, resulting in an 18% reduction in water usage.

Autonomous and Swarm Drones: A drone swarm is a large group of multiple unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), flying together as a unified and coordinated entity, communicating with each other to accomplish a task as a unit. Fully autonomous drones can execute agricultural tasks without human intervention, reducing labor costs and enhancing efficiency, revolutionizing farming practices. This technology allows multiple drones to work together for large-scale operations, such as pesticide spraying or crop monitoring, pollinating, targeting disease outbreaks, or planting tree seeds.

Extended Flight Time and Solar-Powered Drones: New battery technologies and solar-powered drones have the potential to extend flight times, enabling prolonged monitoring and data collection over larger agricultural areas, with a lower carbon footprint.

Drones with Precision Spraying Systems: Modern drones are equipped with advanced spraying systems that allow targeted application of fertilizers and pesticides, reducing chemical wastage and minimizing environmental impact. Precision application of agrochemicals minimizes harm to beneficial insects and surrounding ecosystems, thus helping in the preservation of biodiversity. One of the most significant contributions of drones to Romanian agriculture is their ability to reduce the environmental impact of farming practices. Traditional methods often involve the excessive use of water, fertilizers, and pesticides, leading to resource wastage, soil degradation, and water pollution. Drones enable site-specific management (SSM), delivering inputs only where they are needed and in precise quantities. This targeted approach minimizes environmental externalities and promotes sustainable farming practices. In the Dobrogea region, the use of drones in vineyards reduced pesticide application by 30%, significantly lowering the risk of chemical runoff into nearby water bodies.

Due to the increased interest in the use of UAVs in a variety of domains, we need a regulatory system to ensure safety usage and reach full technology potential. Farmers must comply with airspace regulations and obtain permits for drone operation, which can be a complex and time-consuming process. Simplifying the regulatory framework and providing clear guidelines for agricultural drone usage could encourage more farmers to adopt the technology. Harmonizing drone regulations across the European Union would further facilitate broader adoption and create a more supportive environment for innovation.

Also, concerns about data privacy and the potential impact of drones on wildlife must be carefully managed. Farmers need assurance that their data will be securely stored and used responsibly. Additionally, measures should be taken to minimize the disturbance caused by drones to local wildlife, particularly in ecologically sensitive areas.

Drone regulations vary significantly worldwide, with international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) providing guidelines to ensure safe and responsible drone usage. The European Union has implemented a unified drone regulation framework under EASA, Regulation (EU) 2019/947**,** that specify the rules and procedures for drone operations, and organizing drones into Open, Specific, and Certified categories to ensure compliance based on risk levels. Most people fly drones in the low-risk open category, with A1, A2, and A3 subtypes, that require a visual line of sight between the pilot and the vehicle. The specific category is considered medium risk, includes BVLOS operation and requires obtaining an operational authorization from the national competent authority before starting the operation. For the third category, the safety risk is high, and the certification of the drone operator and its drone are needed. Romania follows European drone regulations while also implementing national laws to regulate drone operations (Table 1). The National Authority for Civil Aviation (AACR) enforces drone operation rules in Romania, requiring the registration of drones over 250 grams, remote pilot competency certificates for certain categories of drone use and operational authorizations for specific category drones, especially in agricultural applications. Also, drones cannot operate near airports, military zones, or densely populated areas without special approval, and BVLOS operations require special authorization. Drones equipped with cameras must comply with GDPR regulations to protect individual privacy. Unauthorized surveillance and data collection are prohibited under Romanian law.

Table 1

European Union (EU) and Romanian UAV (drone) regulations

Regulation Aspect	European Union	Romania
Regulatory Authority	EASA - European Union Aviation Safety Agency	AACR - Autoritatea Aeronautică Civilă Română)
Applicable Laws	EU Regulation 2019/947 & EU Regulation 2019/945	National Law following EU regulations and AACR directives
Drone Categories	Open, Specific, Certified	Follows EASA categorization
Drone Registration	Required for drones over 250g or with a camera	Required for drones over 250g or with a camera
Pilot certification	Required for Specific and Certified categories	Required for commercial and agricultural use
Operational Restrictions	No-fly zones near airports, military areas, crowded places	Same restrictions as EU plus additional national security zones
BVLOS	Allowed with special authorization	Allowed with AACR approval
Insurance Requirement	Mandatory for Specific and Certified category operations	Required for professional and commercial use
Privacy Regulations	Must comply with GDPR	Must comply with GDPR and additional national privacy laws
Commercial Use	Allowed with appropriate category authorization	Allowed with AACR registration and authorization
Agricultural Use	Allowed with permits for pesticide spraying or high-risk operations	Allowed, but requires specific authorization from AACR
Type of Permits Required	**Open Category:** No permit needed (but pilot training required for subcategories A2 & A3) **Specific Category:** Operational Authorization based on risk assessment (SORA) **Certified Category:** Special certification for high-risk operations (e.g., drone delivery)	**Open Category:** No permit needed for A1-A3, but online training required for A2 **Specific Category:** Authorization required for riskier flights (e.g., BVLOS, flying near people) **Commercial Use:** AACR-issued Remote Pilot License **Pesticide Spraying:** Special permit from Ministry of Agriculture **Photography/Surveillance:** Authorization required if images are used commercially or for mapping

Drones facilitate targeted application of inputs, reducing waste and environmental impact. Data analysis shows a 20% reduction in pesticide use among drone-equipped farms compared to traditional methods. They also enhance operational efficiency by covering large areas quickly and accessing remote or difficult-to-reach locations. In the southern plains of Romania, drones were used to manage irrigation in sunflower fields, significantly reducing the time and labor required for field monitoring. This capability is particularly valuable for large-scale farming operations, where traditional methods are less efficient. The ability of drones to provide precise and actionable data has proven to be a game-changer for Romanian farmers, enabling them to optimize resource use and prevent yield losses. Drones equipped with multispectral cameras assist in irrigation planning, optimizing water use. Statistical analysis indicates a 15% improvement in water conservation on drone-equipped farms.

The integration of drones into Romanian agriculture has demonstrated significant potential to enhance productivity, improve environmental sustainability, and increase economic efficiency. This section synthesizes the findings from case studies, distributor reports, and existing literature to provide a detailed analysis of the impact of drones on Romanian farming practices. The results highlight the transformative role of drones in addressing key challenges faced by farmers, while also identifying barriers to their widespread adoption.

Several studies provide insight into how drones contribute to precision farming and sustainability. For instance, Mihailescu et al. (2020) explored the use of UAVs for crop health monitoring in Romania, demonstrating a 25% reduction in chemical input usage through precision application. Another study by Radu and Pop (2019) highlighted the economic impact of drones in small and medium-sized farms, reporting a 17% increase in cost efficiency. Additionally, international research, such as that by Torres-Sánchez et al. (2018), has reinforced the role of drones in early disease detection and biomass estimation, both of which are critical for optimizing yield. While these studies emphasize the benefits, there remains a gap in research focusing on the specific sustainability outcomes of drone adoption in Romanian agriculture, necessitating further empirical analysis.

The study found that drone adoption among Romanian farmers is steadily increasing, especially in large-scale farming operations, and precision agriculture techniques such as variable rate application (VRA) of fertilizers and pesticides are gaining popularity.

These findings highlight the role of drones in addressing water scarcity, a critical issue in the context of climate change. Additionally, drones contribute to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by replacing fuel-intensive machinery in certain agricultural operations. By reducing the reliance on heavy equipment for tasks such as spraying and monitoring, drones help lower the carbon footprint of farming activities.

The environmental benefits of drones extend beyond resource conservation. In hilly regions like Transylvania, drones have been used to minimize soil erosion and chemical leaching, protecting local biodiversity. These applications demonstrate the versatility of drones in addressing diverse environmental challenges across Romania's varied agricultural landscapes.

While the environmental and productivity benefits of drones are well-documented, their economic feasibility remains a critical consideration for Romanian farmers. The high initial investment required for drone acquisition, coupled with the costs of maintenance and software integration, poses a significant barrier, particularly for smallholder farmers. For example, the DJI Agras T30, a popular rotary-wing drone used in Romanian agriculture, costs approximately €15,000, excluding additional expenses for software and training (Table 2). For smallholder farmers, who make up a large portion of Romania's agricultural sector, these costs are prohibitive.

Additionally, ongoing expenses for maintenance, software licenses, and training further increase the financial burden. To address this challenge, government subsidies and financial support programs could play a crucial role. For example, offering grants or low-interest loans to farmers for purchasing drones could make technology more accessible. Cooperative models, where multiple farmers share the costs and benefits of drone usage, could also help reduce the financial burden on individual farmers.

Another significant challenge is the lack of technical expertise required to operate and maintain drones. Many farmers in rural areas lack the necessary training to use drones effectively, which limits their ability to fully leverage the technology. Training programs offered by distributors like DroneHub Romania and Top Geocart are essential in addressing this gap, but their availability is still limited. Expanding these programs and integrating drone training into agricultural education curricula could help build the technical capacity needed for widespread adoption.

However, studies indicate that the long-term economic benefits outweigh these initial costs. Medium to large-scale farms in Romania have reported a return on investment (ROI) within three years, primarily due to increased yields and reduced resource usage. Cost-benefit analyses from Romanian case studies further support the economic viability of drones. In vineyards, the reduction in pesticide usage not only lowered input costs but also improved grape quality, resulting in higher market prices. Similarly, in sunflower fields, the savings from reduced water usage and irrigation costs offset the initial investment in drone technology. These findings highlight the potential of drones to improve the profitability of farming operations, particularly for larger farms with the financial capacity to invest in advanced technologies.

Table 2

Comparative overview of different drone models

Feature	DJI Agras T30	XAG P100	TTA M6E-X
Price Range	\$15,000 – \$18,000	\$15,000 – \$19,000	\$6,500 – \$7,500
Spray Tank Capacity	30 liters	40 liters	10 liters
Spray Width	9 meters	10–12 meters	Not specified
Flight Time	20–25 minutes	25 minutes	Not specified
Max Range	7 kilometers	8 kilometers	Not specified
Wind Resistance	12 m/s	10 m/s	Not specified
Pros	High efficiency Advanced obstacle avoidance Intelligent flight modes	AI-driven smart spraying Larger payload capacity Durable design	Affordable entry-level option Fully autonomous capabilities Obstacle avoidance and terrain following
Cons	Higher initial investment Requires training for optimal use	High power consumption Less user-friendly interface	Smaller tank limits coverage Less suited for large-scale operations

When choosing between drones, it is advisable to consider factors such as farm size, budget, and the specific agricultural applications intended.

Government initiatives and collaborations with research institutions will be critical in accelerating the adoption of these technologies. Pilot projects and demonstration farms could serve as models for scaling up drone usage, particularly in regions with high agricultural potential. Additionally, partnerships between public and private entities could facilitate the development of affordable drone solutions tailored to the needs of small hold farmers. By addressing the barriers to adoption and leveraging the potential of advanced technologies, drones can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of Romanian agriculture.

The adoption of drones in Romanian agriculture has broader implications for global food security and environmental conservation. By increasing productivity and reducing resource usage, drones can help meet the growing demand for food while minimizing the environmental impact of agriculture practices.

This is particularly important in the context of climate change, where sustainable farming practices are essential to ensure the long-term viability of agricultural systems. Moreover, the widespread adoption of drones could drive innovation in other sectors, such as forestry, water management, and environmental monitoring.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of drones in Romanian agriculture has led to measurable improvements in productivity. By leveraging advanced imaging technologies such as multispectral and thermal sensors, drones enable farmers to monitor crop health, detect diseases, and implement targeted interventions. For example, in the Transylvanian region, drones equipped with multispectral cameras were used to monitor wheat and maize crops, resulting in a 20% increase in yields. This improvement is attributed to the ability of drones to provide real-time data, allowing farmers to address nutrient deficiencies and pest infestations promptly. Similar results were observed in Dobrogea, where drones were deployed in vineyards to monitor vine health and detect early signs of disease. The use of NDVI sensors reduced crop losses and improved grape quality, leading to higher market value. Crop Monitoring and high-resolution imagery allows early detection of plant stress, improving yield predictions and reducing losses.

The integration of drone technology into Romanian agriculture presents significant opportunities for enhancing sustainability through improved resource efficiency, environmental protection, and increased productivity. However, challenges such as high costs, regulatory hurdles, and technical barriers must be addressed to maximize the benefits. Future policies should focus on subsidies, training programs, and infrastructure development to promote wider adoption of drones in agriculture. With strategic investments and supportive frameworks, drones have the potential to revolutionize Romanian farming, ensuring a more sustainable and resilient agricultural sector. In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate the transformative potential of drones in Romanian agriculture. Their ability to enhance productivity, reduce environmental impact, and improve economic feasibility makes them an invaluable ability for sustainable farming. However, realizing their full potential requires addressing the barriers to adoption, including regulatory restrictions, high costs, and the need for technical expertise. By fostering innovation, collaboration, and supportive policies, agricultural drones can play a pivotal role in shaping a more sustainable and efficient agricultural system in Romania.

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