

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN MOUNTAIN AREAS THROUGH SPECIFIC ACTIVITIES – CASE STUDY PEȘTERA LOCALITY, BRAȘOV COUNTY

Bianca NISTOR¹, Iulia SZABO¹, Alina Emilia Maria GHERDAN¹, Monica BERCE², Tibor Zsolt CZIRJAK¹

¹ University of Oradea, Faculty of Environmental Protection, 26 General Magheru St. 410048, Oradea, Romania

² Scoala Gimnaziala Dacia Oradea, bulevardul Dacia nr 25, 410464, Oradea, Romania

REVIEW

Abstract

Mountain areas have unique economic development challenges and opportunities due to their specific geographic, climatic, and social conditions. This paper examines the economic development of Peștera locality in Brașov County, Romania, focusing on specific activities that contribute to local growth and sustainability. The study explores how tourism, agriculture, and small-scale local enterprises serve as pillars of the economy in this mountainous region. Peștera, situated in a scenic part of the Carpathians, offers diverse tourism products such as rural tourism, agro-tourism, and nature-based activities, attracting visitors both nationally and internationally. The locality benefits from existing accommodation facilities, including guesthouses, small hotels, and camping areas, which form a crucial part of the tourism infrastructure. Using qualitative research methods, including interviews with local stakeholders and business owners, as well as observational data, this study identifies the key economic activities and assesses their impact on the community's development. The results reveal that tourism is the primary driver of economic activity, supported by traditional agriculture and artisanal crafts, which preserve local heritage and contribute to income diversification. However, challenges such as limited infrastructure, seasonal fluctuations, and insufficient promotion hinder full economic potential. The discussion emphasizes the need for integrated development strategies that foster sustainable tourism, enhance local capacities, and leverage funding opportunities. Ultimately, Peștera demonstrates the importance of adapting economic activities to mountain environments to ensure balanced regional development and improve residents' quality of life.

Keywords: Local authenticity, mountainous region, sustainability

#Corresponding author:alina.gherdan@uradea.ro

INTRODUCTION

Peștera locality is situated in the mountainous region of Brașov County, Romania, known for its rich natural landscape and cultural heritage. Positioned in the southern Carpathians, Peștera is characterized by forests, rivers, and traditional rural settlements, offering an appealing destination for tourists seeking tranquility and nature experiences. The area has developed a diversified tourism offer, including rural tourism accommodations such as guesthouses and small hotels, hiking trails, and cultural events that celebrate local traditions. The accommodation capacity in Peștera comprises around 200 beds distributed among family-run guesthouses and small hotels, with seasonal camping facilities enhancing visitor options during the warmer months. This infrastructure supports a steady influx of tourists, particularly during summer and winter seasons. Beyond tourism, the local economy relies on agriculture, focusing on livestock and crop production adapted to mountain conditions. The combination of these activities forms a

complex economic framework that sustains the community and shapes its development trajectory.

From a demographic perspective, the village of Peștera reflects the general trends of rural areas in Romania, characterized by a relatively small population and an aging demographic, caused by the migration of young people to urban centers or abroad (Stoica, 2018). However, in recent years, a positive dynamic has been observed due to the development of rural tourism, which has led to the creation of new jobs and the stimulation of local economic activities (Marinescu, 2020).

Thus, Peștera provides a representative framework for case studies on sustainable rural development, where complex strategies can be implemented, including investments in tourism infrastructure, training programs for the local community, tourism promotion, and environmental protection. These measures are essential for maximizing the area's economic and social potential, ensuring a higher quality of life for

residents and an authentic experience for tourists (Popa, 2021).

The local economy remains predominantly agricultural, with a significant share of small farms and traditional activities. However, a clear trend toward diversification is emerging through the development of tourism infrastructure and related services. Rural guesthouses, agrotourism offers, and recreational activities for visitors have begun to play a key role in generating additional income and promoting the area's image (Rusu, 2022). These developments support a gradual transition toward a more diversified and resilient local economy.

From the perspective of sustainable development, Peștera aligns with national and European policies and strategies that support ecological tourism and agrotourism as effective ways to capitalize on natural and cultural resources without compromising environmental integrity (Dragomir, 2020). The preservation of natural heritage, as well as authentic cultural traditions, represents major priorities for local development planning, thus ensuring a balance between economic progress and sustainability (Nistor, 2017).

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach to investigate the specific economic activities in Peștera locality and their role in regional development. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with key local actors, including tourism operators, farmers, local authorities, and artisans. Additionally, field observations were conducted to document infrastructure and economic practices. Secondary sources include statistical data, regional development plans, and existing literature on mountain economy and rural development. The qualitative method allows a comprehensive understanding of the economic dynamics from the perspective of those directly involved and affected by local development policies. Data were analyzed thematically to identify patterns, challenges, and opportunities within Peștera's economy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings highlight tourism as the cornerstone of Peștera's economic development. The locality's natural

environment, combined with its cultural authenticity, attracts tourists interested in rural and eco-tourism experiences. Guesthouses provide personalized services, often integrating local gastronomy and traditions, which enhance the attractiveness of the offer. Seasonal events, such as folk festivals and agricultural fairs, not only entertain visitors but also stimulate local commerce. However, tourism in Peștera faces challenges such as limited transport infrastructure, lack of marketing expertise, and dependency on peak seasons, which causes fluctuations in income and employment.

Agriculture remains a vital complementary activity. Mountain agriculture in Peștera is mainly characterized by small-scale livestock farming (sheep, cattle) and cultivation of hardy crops adapted to the climate. These activities ensure food security for local residents and supply agri-food products used in tourism services. Traditional farming methods contribute to preserving biodiversity and maintaining the landscape, which are important for eco-tourism development. Yet, aging farmer populations and limited access to modern technologies restrict productivity and innovation.

Artisanal crafts, including woodworking and textile production, represent a cultural asset and economic opportunity. These crafts, often practiced by local families, provide supplementary income and help preserve intangible cultural heritage. Efforts to promote these products through local markets and tourism channels have been partially successful but require stronger organizational support and quality standards.

The study also identifies institutional and financial constraints. Local authorities recognize the potential for development but face budget limitations and fragmented policies. Access to European Union funds, such as those dedicated to rural development and mountain area support, is underutilized due to lack of expertise and administrative capacity. Strengthening cooperatives and producer associations could enhance bargaining power and resource management.

Integrated strategies are needed to improve infrastructure, diversify economic activities, and promote sustainable tourism models that respect environmental and cultural values. Training programs for local entrepreneurs, better marketing campaigns, and infrastructure

investments are crucial. These measures would improve employment stability, increase income levels, and foster community resilience against economic and climatic shocks.

The main economic sector that still predominates today is agriculture and animal husbandry—a traditional activity that has been in decline over the past 20 years.

During the communist period and immediately after 1990, the local economy of the Moieciu commune was dominated by agriculture, especially livestock farming, which represented the main source of income for most households. Agricultural activities were traditional, based on family labor and the use of mountain pastures and hayfields. In all six component villages—particularly Moieciu de Jos, Cheia, and Drumul Carului—households raised cattle, sheep, and horses, and agricultural production was primarily intended for personal consumption and local exchange.

After the year 2000, there was a significant decline in the importance of agriculture in the local economy due to several factors: the aging of the rural population, the migration of young labor to cities or abroad, the lack of profitability in traditional farming, and the difficult access to land in mountainous areas. Moreover, the absence of modern infrastructure such as irrigation systems, mechanization, and producer associations further contributed to the sector's loss of competitiveness.

Today, agriculture is still practiced on a limited scale as a complementary activity by part of the elderly population or by those who integrate food production into agrotourism activities. There is a notable trend of revaluing traditional local products (such as brânză de burduf, caș, urdă, and honey), which are offered to tourists in guesthouses or at local culinary events.

The second most important economic sector is tourism and agrotourism, which has become the driving force behind economic development post-2000.

The most spectacular economic transformation of Moieciu commune was driven by the development of the tourism sector. Since the 2000s, due to its strategic location between the Bucegi and Piatra Craiului Mountains and its proximity to Bran

Castle, Moieciu has become an attractive destination for both domestic and international tourism. The villages of Moieciu de Sus, Măgura, and Peștera, thanks to their exceptional natural landscapes and easy access to hiking trails, have become points of interest for tourists seeking outdoor activities, tranquility, fresh air, and rural authenticity.

A large part of the commune's active population has turned to opening guesthouses, vacation homes, rental rooms, or traditional restaurants. In Moieciu de Sus, tourism development has been particularly intense, leading to a high density of accommodations and a profound transformation of the local economic and architectural landscape. The villages of Măgura and Peștera have adopted a more ecological and sustainable tourism model, focused on hiking, agrotourism, and the preservation of traditional architecture.

This tourism boom has led to increased demand for local labor and contributed to rising household incomes, but it has also brought challenges: pressure on infrastructure, chaotic expansion of construction, loss of cultural identity elements, and overuse of natural resources. Additionally, many tourism activities are concentrated on weekends or during the summer season, which gives this sector a highly seasonal character.

In terms of local economy, services and commerce are complementary sectors currently expanding.

As tourism has grown, the commune has seen diversification in services, especially in public food services, retail, and tourism-related offerings. Small general stores, cafés, souvenir workshops, local food stands, and businesses specializing in transport, mountain guiding, or leisure activities have appeared.

In parallel, public service infrastructure—such as education, healthcare, and local administration—has remained relatively underdeveloped. Many residents rely on nearby towns, especially Zărnești and Brașov, for more complex medical and educational services. However, after 2020, the pandemic context encouraged "work from nature" initiatives, in which tourists temporarily settle in

Moieciu to work remotely in calm rural settings with internet access. This phenomenon has created new demand for digital services and coworking facilities, still in early stages of development.

A fourth sector currently expanding is construction and real estate development.

Another important pillar of the local economy is the construction sector, which has been steadily growing since 2010. The increased demand for guesthouses, vacation villas, and tourism infrastructure has led to numerous private investments in real estate. The villages of Moieciu de Sus and Moieciu de Jos have been most affected by this wave of construction, which has led both to architectural modernization and to the loss of traditional features.

Economically, this growth has generated jobs in the construction sector, but the local labor force has proven insufficient, often being supplemented by workers from other regions. In the absence of a well-regulated urban planning framework, real estate development has sometimes occurred chaotically, with negative impacts on the environment, local infrastructure (water, sewage, traffic), and architectural coherence.

Meanwhile, forestry has become a limited and strictly regulated activity, decreasing in importance for local development.

Timber exploitation and forestry once played a notable economic role in Moieciu, particularly through the use of forests for heating, construction, and temporary grazing. Today, this sector is marginal, being strictly regulated by forest legislation, especially due to the fact that a significant part of the commune's territory lies near the Piatra Craiului National Park and within Natura 2000 sites. Illegal logging, which was a problem in the past, has been significantly reduced through monitoring and control measures.

The economic development of Moieciu commune reflects a profound transition

from a subsistence agrarian economy to one based on services, tourism, and construction. The tourism sector has emerged as the central element, attracting investment, modernization, and a certain degree of local economic revitalization. However, this development comes with risks and challenges that require careful planning focused on sustainability, the protection of natural and cultural heritage, and the preservation of the commune's identity. Agriculture and forestry continue to exist in an adapted form, particularly in connection with rural tourism and complementary activities.

Peștera locality exemplifies how mountain areas can leverage specific economic activities to achieve balanced development. The interplay between tourism, agriculture, and crafts creates a multifaceted economy that, if properly supported, can ensure sustainable growth and enhance the quality of life for residents.

CONCLUSIONS

The case study of Peștera locality in Brașov County reveals the significant role of specific economic activities in mountain area development. Tourism stands out as the main driver, complemented by agriculture and artisanal crafts, which together support the local economy and cultural preservation. Despite existing challenges such as infrastructure deficits, seasonal dependence, and limited institutional capacity, the potential for growth is substantial. Sustainable development strategies emphasizing diversification, capacity building, and effective use of funding are essential to unlock this potential. The experience of Peștera provides valuable insights for other mountain communities aiming to balance economic progress with environmental and cultural sustainability.

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