

AGROTOURISM BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION: EXPLORING ITS ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT IN ROMANIAN RURAL AREA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

Agritourism in Romania has developed in a complex context, marked by the post-socialist transition, massive migration and profound transformations of agriculture and the rural economy. Recent studies show that rural tourism and agritourism can contribute significantly to diversifying incomes, reducing depopulation, protecting natural and cultural heritage and strengthening social cohesion in rural communities, when managed sustainably.

The article explores, from a dual perspective – tradition and innovation –, the economic and social impact of agritourism in the Romanian rural environment. Based on a narrative review of scientific literature and public policy documents, the role of traditional heritage (agricultural landscapes, peasant households, gastronomy, crafts) and the introduction of innovations (digitalization, new business models, use of CAP funds, cooperation in networks and clusters) are analyzed.

The results show that agritourism can function as a true engine of economic and social development in rural areas with high landscape and agricultural potential, but also that there are risks related to excessive commercialization, pressure on the environment, inequalities between households and vulnerability to external shocks (economic or health crises). The article concludes with recommendations regarding public policies and future research directions.

Keywords: agritourism, rural development, innovation, economic impact, social sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

After 1990, the Romanian rural space went through a series of profound transformations: the fragmentation of agricultural holdings, the decrease in employment in agriculture, the aging of the population and the significant migration of young people to cities or abroad. In this context, rural tourism and agrotourism were promoted as alternatives for economic diversification and the valorization of local resources (Sima, 2019).

Agritourism is generally defined as a form of tourism carried out in direct connection with a farm or agricultural household, in which agricultural activities and local products represent the core of the tourist experience (visiting the farm, participating in agricultural activities, consuming own products, accommodation in the household). In Romania, legislation and practice have established the terms agrotourism guesthouse and rural tourism, often used complementary, but with different emphasis: agrotourism implies a direct connection with agricultural activity, while rural tourism can also include other services in

the rural environment (accommodation, gastronomy, leisure) without a clear agricultural component (Buda, 2021).

The tradition of the Romanian village – the mixed household, the vernacular architecture, the local gastronomy, the customs and crafts – represents a fundamental resource for the development of agritourism. Studies on rural tourism and agritourism in Romania highlight the fact that authenticity and the connection with local traditions are the main differentiating factors for tourists, in relation to other forms of tourism (Ana, 2017).

At the same time, recent literature highlights that agritourism is increasingly becoming a space for innovation: farms integrate online booking platforms, use social networks for promotion, develop thematic packages (gastro-tourism, educational experiences, tasting tours), invest in renewable energy and more efficient management solutions (Stanciu et al, 2024).

Global bibliometric studies show an explosive growth in scientific interest in agritourism, especially in relation to rural development and sustainability (Yasin, 2025). Analyses dedicated to Romania confirm that

agritourism and rural tourism are increasingly treated as policy instruments for the development of rural territories, not just as niche activities (Stanciu et al, 2023).

The objective of this article is to explore, in an integrated manner, the economic and social impact of agritourism in the Romanian rural environment, placed "between tradition and innovation", through:

- synthesizing the main contributions of agritourism to the economic development of rural communities;
- highlighting social and cultural effects (social capital, identity, equity);
- capturing the role of innovation (digitalization, European funds, new business models);
- discussing risks and challenges for the future.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The paper is based on a narrative review of scientific literature and public policy documents, focusing on the case of Romania and the period 2010–2025, complemented by relevant international references for conceptual framing.

The following types of sources were consulted:

- ❖ Scientific articles indexed in international databases (Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, MDPI) regarding agritourism in Romania and Central and Eastern Europe; Bibliometric studies global and regional issues on agritourism, sustainability and rural development;

- ❖ Official reports and documents of national (Ministry of Agriculture, doctoral theses) and international (FAO, thematic platforms on agritourism) institutions;

- ❖ Case studies and quantitative analyses on the impact of CAP subsidies and the development of agritourism in Romania.

The inclusion criteria were:

- ❖ direct relevance for agritourism in Romania or the Romanian countryside;

- ❖ analysis of economic and/or social dimensions (income, employment, migration, social capital);

- ❖ recent approach (preferably after 2010), with the inclusion of classic works for definitions and context.

Based on the selected sources, four axes of analysis were identified and organized:

1. Agrotourism between tradition and innovation– definitions, the role of heritage, modernization trends;

2. Economic impact – income, employment, investment, the role of the CAP;

3. Social and cultural impact– cohesion, identity, gender and generational equity;

4. Challenges and risks– environment, governance, inequalities, resilience.

The analysis is of a qualitative-interpretative type, following the convergences and divergences in the specialized literature and their translation into a synthetic framework applicable to the Romanian rural context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Agritourism between tradition and innovation in Romania

Studies on rural tourism and agritourism in Romania highlight the fact that the success of these forms of tourism is based on traditional resources: agricultural landscapes, rustic households, authentic gastronomy, local customs and crafts (Ana, 2017). Tourists – especially urban ones – are looking for a "return to the village", tranquility, natural products and "simple" experiences, anchored in tradition.

At the same time, research shows that, to be economically viable, Romanian agritourism must be open to innovation:

- ❖ promotion and sales through online platforms and social networks;

- ❖ development of thematic packages (weekend at the farm, culinary experiences, participation in agricultural work, cheese, wine or canning workshops);

- ❖ integration with other forms of tourism (ecotourism, cultural tourism, adventure tourism) (Stanciu et al, 2024).

Analyses of seasonality and pricing in rural tourism and agritourism in Romania show that agritourism guesthouses tend to charge slightly higher rates, focusing on quality, facilities and personalized experiences, but also that there is still pronounced seasonality, with peaks in demand during holiday and weekend periods (Gordan et al, 2023).

Thus, Romanian agritourism is literally "between tradition and innovation": tradition is the core of authenticity, and innovation - the condition of competitiveness in an increasingly digitalized and demanding tourism market.

The economic impact of agritourism in the Romanian rural environment

Specialized literature indicates several directions through which agritourism contributes to the economic development of rural communities:

Diversifying farm and household incomes

Studies on rural tourism and agritourism in Romania show that tourism income can represent an important share in the household budget, reducing dependence on agricultural production and the volatility of agricultural product prices (Marin, 2017). Economic analyses reveal that, for some areas - especially mountainous and hilly areas with attractive landscapes - agritourism has become the main vector of local development (Nimara, 2022).

Reducing migration and creating jobs

Research on the impact of CAP subsidies and the development of agritourism highlights that financial support for the diversification of non-agricultural activities, including agritourism, has contributed to increasing local employment opportunities and reducing permanent emigration in certain rural areas (Galluzzo, 2021; Ndhlovu et al, 2024). Stanciu (2024) notes that agritourism encourages the development of rural micro-enterprises, creating jobs for family members and the community (Stanciu et al, 2024).

Local economic multiplier effects

By selling local products (milk, cheese, meat, vegetables, jams, traditional drinks) to tourists, agritourism stimulates short supply chains and increases the added value that remains in the community (Turtureanu et al, 2025). Bogan (2013) highlights the role of rural tourism and agritourism in diversifying and stabilizing the local economy, especially in disadvantaged areas. (Bogdan, 2024).

The role of CAP funds and public policies

Galluzzo's studies show that CAP subsidies for farms and agritourism investments have significantly influenced the increase in the number of agritourism guesthouses in Romania, although the impact varies depending on the region, agricultural structure and local entrepreneurial capacity (Galluzzo, 2021). Documents from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development indicate that agritourism was explicitly supported through rural development measures (PNDR),

with grants for the establishment and modernization of agritourism guesthouses and related infrastructure (MADR, 2024).

Overall, the literature suggests that agritourism has a positive economic impact on the Romanian rural environment, but the degree and quality of this impact depend on the local context (resources, infrastructure, human capital, access to financing).

Social and cultural impact

The social and cultural impact of agritourism is as important as the economic one, although more difficult to quantify.

Strengthening social capital and community cohesion

Studies on rural tourism in Romania show that community involvement in agritourism projects leads to the creation of collaboration networks (associations, cooperatives, public-private partnerships) and to increased trust between actors (Marian, 2017; Hosseini et al, 2025). Collective initiatives (agrotourism routes, local festivals, territorial brands) strengthen the sense of belonging and local pride.

Valorization and protection of traditions

Agrotourism contributes to the preservation and reinterpretation of culinary traditions, crafts and local customs, transforming them into economic resources, but also into educational tools for tourists and younger generations (Ana, 2017). However, literature warns of the risk of "folklorization" or the overly commercial transformation of traditions, if there is no genuine community involvement (Partalidou, 2024)

Role in gender and generational equity

❖ Numerous researches emphasize that agritourism opens entrepreneurial opportunities for women and young people, through hospitality, gastronomy, guiding and marketing activities, thus reducing the risk of social exclusion (Stanciu et al, 2021). In the Romanian context, Gordan's (2024) thesis shows that the development of rural tourism and agritourism can contribute to the professionalization of human capital in rural areas and the creation of prospects for young people, by diversifying non-agricultural activities (Gordan et al, 2023).

Effects on migration and quality of life

❖ Analyses on migration and the rural economy indicate that agritourism,

through the additional income and jobs generated, can reduce emigration pressure, especially in areas with high tourism potential, even if it cannot reverse demographic trends alone (Gordan et al, 2023). In addition, investments in infrastructure (roads, utilities, internet) motivated by the development of agritourism improve the quality of life for the entire community.

Challenges and risks for the future

Although the overall picture is positive, the literature and documents analyzed highlight a few challenges and risks:

Regional disparities and inequalities between households

❖ The development of agritourism is strongly concentrated in certain counties (Braşov, Harghita, Maramureş, mountainous and hilly areas), while other regions with potential remain poorly represented (Gordan et al, 2023). Households with financial resources, human capital, and access to information benefit the most, risking widening disparities within rural communities (Buda, 2021).

Limited institutional capacity and governance

Buda emphasizes the undervalued role of national and local authorities in coordinating and monitoring agritourism, as well as the lack of clear and coherent statistics at the country level (Sima, 2019). In the absence of adapted governance, there is a risk of chaotic developments, without minimum standards of quality and sustainability.

Pressure on the environment and rural landscapes

Uncontrolled growth in accommodation capacity, expansion of construction without adequate regulations, and poor waste management can generate significant pressure on the environment, undermining the very resource on which agritourism is based. (Sima, 2019).

Vulnerability to external shocks

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the sensitivity of the tourism sector, including agritourism, mobility restrictions and changes in tourist behavior. However, recent studies suggest that, in the post-pandemic period, interest in rural destinations and nature experiences has increased, which may represent an opportunity for agritourism, provided that the offer is adapted (Turtureanu et al, 2025).

These challenges indicate the need for a consolidated strategic framework, in which

agritourism is explicitly integrated into rural development, tourism, environment and digitalization policies.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the literature and public policy documents allows the formulation of several major conclusions regarding agritourism in Romania, located at the intersection of tradition and innovation:

- Agritourism is a significant vector of economic development in rural areas, by diversifying incomes, creating jobs, stimulating short supply chains and leveraging CAP funds for investment. (Marian, 2017).

- The social and cultural impact is profound, agritourism contributing to the consolidation of social capital, the preservation and reinterpretation of traditions, the creation of opportunities for women and youth, and the improvement of the quality of life in rural communities. (Marian, 2017).

- The tension between tradition and innovation is productive, if innovations (digitalization, new business models, energy and management solutions) are anchored in local values and resources, avoiding the uniformization and excessive commercialization of rural culture (Stanciu et al, 2024).

- The challenges – regional disparities, limited institutional capacity, environmental risks and vulnerability to shocks – show that agritourism is not a miracle solution, but a piece in a complex policy puzzle for sustainable rural development. Integrated planning, clear sustainability standards, monitoring mechanisms and real community involvement in governance are needed (Buda, 2021).

For the future, several directions of action are outlined:

- ❖ developing integrated indicators for evaluating the economic, social and environmental impact of agritourism in Romania;

- ❖ supporting inclusive digitalization (digital skills training, collective promotion platforms);

- ❖ strengthening agrotourism networks and clusters at regional level, with an emphasis on cooperation and social innovation;

- ❖ explicit integration of agritourism into agrifood systems transformation strategies, in line with FAO recommendations on agrifood systems and agritourism (FAO, 2024).

Therefore, Romanian agritourism has the potential to become a driving force for the transformation of the rural environment, if it is supported by coherent policies and built together with local communities, respecting both traditional heritage and the need for innovation

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