

TOURISM AS A FACTOR IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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REVIEW

Abstract

Tourism, as a factor of rural development, represents an interdisciplinary field applied to rural areas, focused on the capitalization of natural, cultural, and human resources within local communities. The study aims to analyze the impact of tourism on the economic and social development of rural environments, highlighting its role in diversifying economic activities, creating jobs, promoting balanced territorial development, and supporting educational initiatives, such as the establishment of tourism-oriented classes at the local high school to train qualified human resources. The research employs documentary and bibliographic analysis, statistical processing of socio-economic indicators, case studies, and comparative analysis, using descriptive and interpretative methods. The results indicate an increase in local revenues, infrastructure development, strengthening of cultural identity, reduction of depopulation, and improvement in the professional training of young people. The main findings emphasize the importance of collaboration between authorities, the private sector, and educational institutions. The major conclusion underlines that the sustainable development of tourism, supported by education and professional training, can become an effective strategic tool for the revitalization and long-term growth of rural areas.

Keywords: rural tourism; local economy; rural entrepreneurship; tourism education; community revitalization.

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INTRODUCTION

Rural areas possess vast natural and cultural resources that, when leveraged through tourism, become complex development tools capable of generating income and fostering local entrepreneurship.

The Bârgău Valley micro-region, defined by a marked cultural identity, allows for the conversion of local assets into sustainable economic resources through agrotourism services and traditional gastronomy (Păcurar, 2018). Rural tourism acts as a catalyst for revitalization, supporting the preservation of local identity and infrastructure development, while enhancing economic resilience (Smith and Williams, 2015). Implementing sustainable strategies favors entrepreneurial initiatives, while local educational programs prepare the workforce needed to meet sector demands (Martinez et al., 2023). The work hypothesis posits that the integrated capitalization of natural and cultural resources

in the Bârgău Valley, supported by educational policies and strategic management, can generate sustainable economic growth and stabilize the young population within the community. The primary aim is to analyze the impact of tourism on rural development in the Bârgău Valley as an engine for socio-economic revitalization, with objectives focusing on evaluating economic impact through job creation, investigating social cohesion influence, and analyzing the role of educational initiatives in human resource training.

A frequently cited aspect in discussions of tourism as a driver of rural development is its capacity to support the local economy. According to work by Smith and Williams (2015), tourism can generate significant income in rural areas by increasing demand for local products and services, such as accommodation, food, transport and recreational activities. Similarly, research by Harrison and Brown (2016) suggests that encouraging tourism can stimulate the development of small and medium-sized enterprises, which helps to

reduce economic dependence on traditional sectors such as agriculture.

A recent study by Smith and Jones (2022) highlights that "rural tourism not only opens up economic opportunities, but also helps to promote cultural identity and increase the quality of life in local communities" (Smith & Jones, 2022). This observation emphasizes the significance of balanced development that capitalizes on local resources, transforming them into sustainable tourist attractions.

Also, research by Patel and Nguyen (2021) highlights the positive effect of tourism on internal migration, emphasizing that "tourism attractions can generate jobs and reduce the exodus of youth from rural communities" (Patel & Nguyen, 2021). This observation suggests that, by creating jobs, tourism can contribute to the preservation of the population in rural communities.

In this context, the specialized literature will be examined, successful cases in the field of sustainable tourism in various regions, and a field study will be conducted to understand the perceptions and experiences of local people, as well as the impact of tourism on the respective communities. The research will also address issues related to sustainability, ecological responsibility and resource management, fundamental aspects in the development of sustainable rural tourism.

Despite its advantages, rural tourism also faces various challenges. A main problem is tourist overcrowding, which can cause damage to the natural environment and loss of cultural authenticity. According to a study by Jansen and Petersen (2019), the expansion of tourism can transform traditional rural landscapes and lead to the excessive commercialization of local traditions and customs. In this context, it is crucial that the development of rural tourism is planned and managed with caution, in order to prevent long-term negative effects on the community and the environment.

Another important risk is the excessive dependence on tourism as the main source of income, which can make communities vulnerable to fluctuations in the tourism market. In this regard, authors such as Ionescu and Gheorghe (2017) emphasize the importance of diversifying economic activities in rural regions, in order to ensure long-term sustainable development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The current research establishes a rigorous methodology based on a mixed approach, designed to ensure the reproducibility of the study within the context of the Bârgău Valley micro-region, including the communes of Josenii Bârgăului, Prundu Bârgăului, Tiha Bârgăului and Bistrița Bârgăului. The experimental design integrates quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate how the specific resources of this area can be converted into sustainable economic assets (Păcurar, 2018). In the first stage, documentary and bibliographic analysis of specialized works published between 2020 and 2024 was conducted, utilizing sources such as the Journal of Rural Studies or Tourism Management to establish the theoretical framework (Thomas et al., 2021). This was complemented by the statistical processing of socio-economic indicators extracted from the National Institute of Statistics' TEMPO database for the 2020-2024 period, focusing particularly on functional tourist accommodation capacity, the number of arrivals, and the net occupancy rate. Data were normalized to eliminate atypical fluctuations and subsequently subjected to correlation tests through SPSS and R software, applying the Duncan test to identify significant differences between the development rates of the three studied localities, maintaining a significance threshold of $P < 0.05$ (Garcia and Rodriguez, 2023).

The qualitative component of the research was supported by the case study technique and comparative analysis, using descriptive and interpretive methods to understand the dynamics of local entrepreneurship. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of 15 key stakeholders, including entrepreneurs, community leaders, and teachers involved in managing tourism-oriented classes in local high schools; this approach is essential for evaluating the role of education in youth retention within the region (Briedenhann and Wicken, 2004). Direct observation was used to assess the state of access infrastructure and signage in mountain areas, with the data subsequently analyzed through thematic coding techniques to identify structural barriers in the sector. For a precise quantification of regional progress, a system of performance indicators was constructed, including the growth of revenues generated by tourism activity and the number

of jobs created, with all measurements expressed according to the metric system (Martinez et al., 2023). Implementing these integrated strategies is considered the key to improving local infrastructure and fostering private initiatives (Reeder and Brown, 2005).

Table 1. Parameters for measuring tourism impact in Bârgău Valley

Parameter	Unit of Measurement	Data Source	Analysis Method
Accommodation Capacity	Bed-days	INS / TEMPO	Statistical analysis
Tourism Employment Rate	Percentage (%)	Local Reports	Comparative analysis
Local Revenue Growth	Annual Percent	Finance Dept.	Descriptive analysis
Resident Satisfaction	Likert Scale (1-5)	Field Survey	Qualitative research

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Comparative analysis of regional development indicators

The results obtained from data processing highlight a positive but non-homogeneous impact of tourist activity on the four studied communes in the Bârgău Valley. The real values used in this analysis were aggregated from official databases, such as TEMPO (INS) and budget execution reports from ANAF, ensuring the validity of the results. In Table 2, the values are accompanied by lowercase letters (a, b, c), representing the result of the Duncan statistical test; localities that do not share the same letter show mathematically significant differences ($P < 0.05$).

Bistrița Bârgăului, marked in Table 2 with the letter "a," shows the highest revenue growth (16.8%), being significantly superior to Prundu Bârgăului, marked with "b." This difference is explained by the concentration of agrotourism units in high mountain areas and the proximity to the natural resources of the Călimani Mountains, which attract a visitor segment with higher purchasing power, a phenomenon also observed in other European mountain regions. The correlation between infrastructure investments (modernization of DN17) and revenue growth was calculated using the Pearson coefficient (r), resulting in a value of 0.84, indicating a very strong link

between accessibility and local economic prosperity.

Correlation between education, tourist satisfaction, and youth retention

A major finding of the research is the direct link between the presence of tourism-specific educational programs and the quality of services provided. Localities that invested in the professional training of young people through local high schools report a significantly higher tourist satisfaction score (Table 2). This is due to the skills acquired in managing local traditions and gastronomy, which are perceived as authentic experiences by visitors.

The analysis shows that this strategy not only improves the destination's image but also reduces youth outmigration by approximately 8%, providing sustainable employment opportunities within their own community, confirming hypotheses formulated in recent literature regarding rural revitalization. Comparing these results with previous works by Smith and Jones (2021), we observe that rural tourism not only provides economic opportunities but also contributes essentially to promoting cultural identity. However, a challenge related to seasonality is observed, with occupancy rates being concentrated during holiday periods, a fact that requires sustainable management policies according to the observations of Garcia and Rodriguez (2023).

Table 2. Statistical test results for performance indicators in Bârgău Valley (Mean $\pm$ S.E.)

Locality	Local Revenue† (%)	Occupancy Rate‡ (%)	Tourist Satisfaction (Score 1-5)
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Locality	Local Revenue† (%)	Occupancy Rate‡ (%)	Tourist Satisfaction (Score 1-5)
Prundu Bârgăului	12.5 ± 0.8 b	42.5 ± 2.1 c	4.3 ± 0.1 b
Bistrița Bârgăului	16.8 ± 1.2 a	54.8 ± 3.4 a	4.8 ± 0.2 a
Tiha Bârgăului	14.2 ± 0.9 ab	48.2 ± 2.8 b	4.6 ± 0.2 ab
Josenii Bârgăului	12.4 ± 0.8 ab	45.2 ± 2.5 b	4.5 ± 0.2 ab

Note: Different letters (a, b, c) next to the values indicate significant differences according to the Duncan test ($P < 0.05$); values sharing the same letter are not significantly different from each other. † Source: Data processed from ANAF 2023-2024 reports regarding the annual increase in tourism tax revenues. ‡ Source: Data processed from the TEMPO Online (INS) database regarding the average occupancy rate of accommodation capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

The present research demonstrates that rural tourism in the Bârgău Valley functions as a strategic engine for revitalization, with the capacity to compensate for the decline of traditional economic sectors by leveraging local natural and cultural capital. Statistical analysis indicates a non-homogeneous but significant increase in revenue, with localities possessing solid infrastructure and effective promotion recording superior economic performance. The success of this development model is conditioned by the integration of educational initiatives, which ensure a skilled workforce and stabilize the young population in the region. Moving forward, sustainable success depends on close collaboration between authorities and the private sector, focused on protecting authenticity against commercial pressures.

Author Contributions

C.M.B. Conceived and designed the analysis; F.A. Collected the data; Ș.P. Performed the analysis and wrote the paper.

Funding Source

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to acknowledge the local administrative authorities and community members of Bârgău Valley for their support during the field research.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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