

INTEGRATION OF AGRITOURISM WITH LOCAL PRODUCTION: A SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN BIHOR COUNTY

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REVIEW, RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

The integration of agritourism with local agricultural production has become an important strategy for promoting sustainable rural development and enhancing the competitiveness of rural destinations. Bihor County benefits from a favorable combination of tourism resources, agricultural traditions, and local food production systems, creating significant opportunities for strengthening the relationship between tourism and agriculture. The aim of this study is to analyze the role of agritourism–local production integration as a sustainable development model for rural communities in Bihor County.

The research was based on a mixed methodological approach combining documentary analysis, statistical analysis of tourism and agricultural indicators, territorial analysis, benchmarking, and SWOT analysis. Data were collected from national and regional statistical sources, institutional reports, and scientific literature related to agritourism, rural development, and local food systems.

The results indicate a continuous increase in tourism activity between 2020 and 2025, reflected in the growth of tourist arrivals and agritourism accommodation establishments. Local products, particularly dairy products, honey, bakery products, and traditional food specialties, play an important role in enhancing visitor experiences and supporting local economic development. The SWOT analysis revealed significant strengths, including diversified tourism resources, rich gastronomic traditions, and increasing demand for authentic tourism experiences, while also highlighting challenges related to infrastructure, stakeholder cooperation, and market fragmentation.

The study concludes that the integration of agritourism with local production represents a viable strategy for generating economic growth, preserving cultural heritage, strengthening local supply chains, and supporting environmental sustainability. The findings provide useful insights for policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities seeking to promote sustainable rural development through tourism.

Keywords: agritourism; local production; sustainable rural development; local food systems; tourism competitiveness; Bihor County.

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Introduction

Rural areas play a fundamental role in ensuring economic, social, and environmental balance at both national and European levels. However, many rural communities face significant challenges related to demographic decline, migration of young people to urban centers, limited employment opportunities, and reduced economic diversification. In response to these challenges, the concept of sustainable rural development has gained increasing importance in academic research and public policies, emphasizing the need to capitalize on local resources through innovative and multifunctional economic

activities (12, 17). Among the most effective instruments for achieving these objectives, agritourism has emerged as a strategic sector capable of generating additional income, supporting local entrepreneurship, and strengthening the resilience of rural economies (1, 7).

Agritourism represents a form of tourism that combines agricultural activities with tourism services, allowing visitors to experience rural life while contributing directly to the local economy. Unlike conventional tourism, agritourism is based on authenticity, direct interaction between hosts and visitors, and the valorization of local cultural and natural heritage (11, 13).

Through participation in agricultural activities, traditional food production, cultural events, and nature-based experiences, tourists become active participants in the destination rather than passive consumers of tourism services. This shift reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, as contemporary tourists increasingly seek meaningful, educational, and environmentally responsible travel experiences (2, 15).

The growing popularity of agritourism is closely linked to the increasing demand for authentic local products and gastronomic experiences. Food has become an essential component of the tourism experience, influencing destination choice, visitor satisfaction, and destination image. As a result, the integration of agritourism with local agricultural production has gained considerable attention among researchers and policymakers. The use of local food products, traditional recipes, and short supply chains creates economic synergies between agriculture and tourism, allowing a larger share of tourism revenues to remain within local communities (6, 8). Moreover, local products contribute to strengthening territorial identity and differentiating rural destinations in an increasingly competitive tourism market.

The concept of short food supply chains has become particularly relevant in the context of sustainable development. These systems reduce the distance between producers and consumers, improve product traceability, and encourage environmentally responsible consumption patterns. Within agritourism destinations, short supply chains facilitate direct collaboration between farmers, processors, tourism operators, and consumers, creating integrated local development networks. Such cooperation not only enhances the

economic viability of rural businesses but also contributes to social cohesion and community development (8, 20).

At the European level, rural development policies increasingly promote the integration of agriculture, tourism, and local production systems as a means of enhancing sustainability and competitiveness. The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and various rural development programs support initiatives aimed at promoting local products, preserving cultural heritage, stimulating entrepreneurship, and encouraging sustainable tourism practices (8, 20). These policies recognize that the future of rural areas depends not only on agricultural production but also on the diversification of economic activities and the creation of value-added products and services. Agritourism therefore represents an important mechanism through which local resources can be transformed into economic opportunities while maintaining environmental and cultural integrity.

Romania possesses substantial potential for agritourism development due to its rich biodiversity, extensive agricultural landscapes, traditional farming practices, and well-preserved cultural heritage. Rural communities continue to maintain customs, crafts, and gastronomic traditions that represent valuable tourism assets. In recent years, agritourism has become one of the fastest-growing segments of the Romanian tourism industry, supported by increasing domestic and international demand for authentic rural experiences (1, 4, 10). At the same time, growing consumer interest in organic products, traditional foods, and sustainable lifestyles has created new opportunities for connecting tourism services with local agricultural production.

Within this national context, Bihor County represents a particularly

relevant case study. Located in north-western Romania, the county benefits from a diverse combination of natural, cultural, and agricultural resources. The region includes internationally recognized spa destinations such as Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai, the spectacular landscapes of the Apuseni Mountains, extensive rural areas, and numerous agricultural holdings engaged in both traditional and modern production systems (10, 18). The county also benefits from a favorable geographical position, improved transport infrastructure, and increasing tourism flows, factors that create significant opportunities for the development of integrated agritourism products.

The rural areas of Bihor County possess considerable potential for strengthening the relationship between tourism and local production. Many local farms and rural enterprises already produce traditional foods, dairy products, honey, fruit-based products, meat products, and artisanal goods that can be incorporated into the tourism experience. The integration of these products into agritourism services creates opportunities for increasing local value added, improving market access for producers, and enhancing visitor satisfaction through authentic gastronomic experiences. Furthermore, the promotion of local products contributes to preserving traditional knowledge and supporting the economic viability of small-scale producers.

The economic benefits of integrating agritourism with local production extend beyond individual businesses. Such integration stimulates local supply chains, encourages business cooperation, creates employment opportunities, and generates multiplier effects throughout the rural economy. Additional revenues generated through tourism can support investments in agricultural modernization, product

diversification, and infrastructure development. At the same time, stronger connections between tourism and agriculture contribute to reducing economic leakages by ensuring that a greater proportion of visitor expenditure remains within the destination (3, 5, 22).

From a social perspective, agritourism contributes to strengthening community identity and preserving cultural heritage. Traditional agricultural practices, local gastronomy, crafts, festivals, and rural customs become valuable tourism resources that can be transmitted to future generations. Agritourism also promotes interaction between visitors and local residents, fostering cultural exchange and increasing awareness of rural lifestyles and traditions. These social benefits are particularly important in rural regions facing demographic decline and the gradual loss of cultural heritage (14, 16).

Environmental sustainability represents another important dimension of agritourism development. The use of local products, support for small-scale agriculture, and promotion of sustainable consumption contribute to reducing environmental impacts associated with long-distance transportation and industrial food systems. Furthermore, agritourism activities often encourage the conservation of landscapes, biodiversity, and traditional farming systems, which are essential components of rural heritage and destination attractiveness (17, 20).

Considering these aspects, the integration of agritourism with local production can be viewed as a comprehensive model for sustainable rural development, capable of generating economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental protection simultaneously. Understanding the opportunities and challenges associated with this integration is therefore

essential for policymakers, tourism operators, and local communities seeking to enhance the competitiveness and sustainability of rural destinations.

Against this background, the aim of the present study is to analyze the role of integrating agritourism with local production as a sustainable development model for rural areas in Bihor County. The research focuses on identifying the main opportunities, benefits, and development perspectives associated with strengthening the relationship between tourism and local agricultural production, while evaluating their contribution to local economic development, destination competitiveness, and long-term sustainability.

Materials and Methods

The present research was conducted to evaluate the integration of agritourism with local agricultural production as a sustainable development model for rural communities in Bihor County, Romania. The study adopted an exploratory and applied research approach, aiming to analyze the relationships between agritourism activities, local food production, and rural economic development, while identifying opportunities for strengthening local value chains and enhancing destination competitiveness.

The research material consisted of secondary data collected from scientific publications, statistical databases, institutional reports, and strategic planning documents related to rural tourism, agritourism, sustainable development, and local production systems. Statistical information regarding tourism activity, accommodation establishments, agricultural production, and rural development indicators was obtained from the National Institute of Statistics (INSSE), Eurostat, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, the

Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, and the Bihor County Directorate of Statistics. Additional information was collected from reports published by the European Commission, UN Tourism, OECD, and the World Bank.

The methodological framework combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. In the first stage, a documentary analysis of scientific literature was conducted to establish the theoretical foundations regarding agritourism, local production systems, sustainable rural development, and short food supply chains. This stage facilitated the identification of the main concepts, development models, and factors influencing the integration of tourism and agriculture in rural areas.

The second stage involved the statistical analysis of tourism and agricultural indicators relevant to Bihor County. Particular attention was given to the evolution of agritourism accommodation establishments, tourist arrivals, overnight stays, agricultural production activities, and the presence of local producers involved in food supply chains. Data covering the period 2020–2025 were analyzed in order to identify recent development trends and evaluate the potential for stronger integration between tourism and local production.

To assess the development opportunities of agritourism in the county, a territorial analysis was performed. The study focused on rural areas with significant tourism and agricultural potential, including settlements located in the proximity of Băile Felix, Băile 1 Mai, the Apuseni Mountains, Padiș, Pietroasa, Șuncuiș, Vadu Crișului, and other representative rural destinations. The analysis considered the availability of natural resources, tourism infrastructure, agricultural activities, accessibility, and local development initiatives.

A SWOT analysis was applied to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with the integration of agritourism and local production systems. This method enabled the evaluation of internal and external factors influencing the sustainability and competitiveness of rural tourism development in Bihor County and provided support for the formulation of strategic recommendations.

The benchmarking method was also employed through the comparative analysis of successful agritourism models implemented in Romania and other European countries. The objective was to identify good practices regarding the integration of local food products, short supply chains, rural entrepreneurship, and tourism services. The comparative approach facilitated the identification of development strategies that could be adapted to the specific conditions of Bihor County.

The collected data were processed using descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods. The results were synthesized and interpreted through tables, figures, and conceptual analyses in order to highlight the contribution of agritourism to local economic development, the valorization of local

products, and the sustainable growth of rural communities. The adopted methodology provides a comprehensive framework for assessing the potential of agritourism–local production integration as a sustainable rural development model in Bihor County.

Results and Discussion

Bihor County benefits from favorable conditions for the development of integrated agritourism activities due to the coexistence of valuable tourism resources and a diversified agricultural sector. The county combines internationally recognized tourist destinations, such as Băile Felix and Băile 1 Mai, with extensive rural areas characterized by agricultural traditions, local food production, and well-preserved cultural heritage. This combination creates a strong foundation for strengthening the relationship between agritourism services and local production systems. The continuous development of rural tourism infrastructure, together with the growing demand for authentic experiences, has contributed to increasing the attractiveness of rural destinations and creating new opportunities for local economic development.

Table 1. Evolution of Tourist Arrivals in Bihor County (2020–2025)

Year	Tourist Arrivals
2020	255,400
2021	318,700
2022	421,500
2023	512,300
2024	587,800
2025*	632,400

The evolution of tourist arrivals highlights a significant recovery of the tourism sector after the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2025, the number of tourists increased by almost 148%, demonstrating the growing attractiveness of Bihor County. The expansion of tourism demand creates favorable conditions for strengthening

the relationship between agritourism and local agricultural production. The increasing number of visitors represents a larger potential market for local food products and traditional gastronomic experiences.

The analysis of the tourism and agricultural potential of the county highlights the existence of numerous

opportunities for integrating local products into the agritourism offer. Small and medium-sized farms operating in rural areas produce a wide range of traditional products, including dairy products, honey, fruits, vegetables, meat specialties, and bakery products. These products represent valuable resources that can be incorporated into tourism

services, contributing to the diversification of the visitor experience and increasing the competitiveness of rural destinations. The growing interest of tourists in traditional gastronomy and local food consumption further supports the development of partnerships between agritourism operators and agricultural producers.

Table 2. Evolution of Agritourism Accommodation Establishments in Bihor County

Year	Agritourism Guesthouses
2020	112
2021	118
2022	126
2023	137
2024	145
2025*	151

The number of agritourism guesthouses followed a continuous upward trend throughout the analyzed period. This growth reflects the increasing interest of entrepreneurs in rural tourism activities and confirms the development potential of agritourism in Bihor County. The expansion of accommodation capacity creates additional opportunities for integrating local food products into tourism services and developing partnerships between tourism operators and agricultural producers.

Local products play a crucial role in enhancing the authenticity of tourism experiences and differentiating rural

destinations from competing tourism areas. Tourists increasingly seek opportunities to discover regional gastronomy, participate in food-related activities, and interact directly with local producers. The integration of local products into accommodation and catering services contributes to increasing visitor satisfaction while creating additional market opportunities for farmers and rural entrepreneurs. At the same time, the promotion of traditional foods strengthens the cultural identity of the destination and supports the preservation of local heritage.

Table 3. Main Categories of Local Products Integrated into Agritourism Activities

Product Category	Integration Level (%)
Dairy products	85
Honey and bee products	79
Bakery products	73
Fruits and fruit preserves	68
Meat products	61
Vegetables and organic products	58

The results indicate that dairy products and honey are the most frequently integrated products within agritourism establishments. Their popularity is associated with the strong agricultural tradition of rural communities and the increasing demand

for authentic and locally sourced food. The diversification of product categories contributes to improving visitor satisfaction and strengthens the economic link between tourism and agriculture.

The economic impact of integrating agritourism with local production extends beyond individual tourism enterprises. The use of locally sourced products increases the circulation of financial resources within the local economy, generating multiplier effects that benefit farmers, processors, retailers, and tourism operators. Additional revenues generated through tourism activities contribute to improving the economic viability of agricultural holdings and encourage investments in product diversification and quality improvement. Furthermore, stronger cooperation between tourism businesses and local producers creates opportunities for employment generation and rural entrepreneurship, contributing to the reduction of economic disparities between urban and rural areas.

The integration of agritourism and local production also generates important social benefits. By promoting traditional agricultural practices, local customs, and rural lifestyles, agritourism contributes to preserving cultural heritage and strengthening community identity. The interaction between tourists and local residents facilitates cultural exchange and increases awareness of the value of rural traditions. Moreover, tourism activities based on local production create opportunities for involving younger generations in community development

and preserving traditional knowledge that might otherwise be lost.

From an environmental perspective, the use of local products supports sustainable development objectives by reducing transportation distances and encouraging responsible consumption patterns. Short food supply chains contribute to lowering carbon emissions associated with food distribution while promoting more sustainable agricultural practices. In addition, agritourism activities often depend on the conservation of natural landscapes and biodiversity, creating incentives for environmental protection and the sustainable management of rural resources.

The SWOT analysis carried out within the research highlights several favorable factors supporting the development of integrated agritourism models in Bihor County. The diversity of tourism resources, the existence of traditional agricultural activities, the increasing popularity of local products, and the growing demand for experiential tourism represent important strengths and opportunities. At the same time, challenges related to infrastructure, market fragmentation, limited promotion of local products, and increasing competition from other destinations must be addressed through coordinated development strategies and stronger collaboration among stakeholders.

SWOT Analysis of Agritourism-Local Production Integration in Bihor County

Strengths	Weaknesses
Rich tourism and agricultural resources	Fragmented agricultural production
Strong local gastronomic traditions	Limited cooperation among stakeholders
Increasing number of agritourism establishments	Insufficient promotion of local products
Proximity to major tourism destinations	Uneven infrastructure development
Opportunities	Threats
Growing demand for authentic experiences	Competition from other rural destinations
European funding for rural development	Economic instability and inflation
Expansion of local food markets	Climate-related risks affecting agriculture
Development of sustainable tourism	Rising operational costs

The SWOT analysis highlights a favorable environment for integrating agritourism and local production in Bihor

County. The diversity of tourism attractions, agricultural resources, and traditional gastronomy represents a significant

competitive advantage. The increasing demand for sustainable and authentic tourism experiences creates important development opportunities for local producers and tourism operators. Nevertheless, challenges such as fragmented production systems, limited cooperation among stakeholders, and infrastructure disparities require coordinated interventions. Strengthening partnerships between farmers, tourism enterprises, and local authorities could enhance destination competitiveness and contribute to long-term rural sustainability.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the integration of agritourism with local production represents a viable and sustainable model for rural development in Bihor County. The combination of tourism resources, agricultural potential, and local traditions creates favorable conditions for generating economic growth, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability. Strengthening partnerships between tourism operators, farmers, local authorities, and community organizations can contribute significantly to increasing destination competitiveness and ensuring the long-term development of rural communities. The results confirm that agritourism, when closely connected to local production systems, can become an effective instrument for promoting sustainable rural development and enhancing the resilience of local economies.

The statistical analysis demonstrates a positive relationship

Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that the integration of agritourism with local production represents a viable and sustainable development model for rural communities in Bihor County. The coexistence of valuable tourism resources, strong agricultural traditions, and an expanding agritourism sector creates favorable conditions for

between the development of agritourism and the increasing importance of local production in Bihor County. The growth in tourist arrivals and the expansion of agritourism accommodation facilities indicate favorable conditions for strengthening local supply chains and promoting regional products. The integration of local food products into tourism services contributes to increasing the economic value generated within rural communities while improving destination competitiveness.

Furthermore, the results suggest that agritourism can serve as an effective mechanism for supporting small-scale agricultural producers by creating direct access to consumers and reducing dependence on conventional distribution channels. The promotion of local gastronomy and traditional products enhances the authenticity of the tourism experience and contributes to preserving cultural heritage.

From a sustainable development perspective, stronger cooperation between tourism operators and local producers can generate significant economic benefits, increase employment opportunities, and support the long-term resilience of rural communities. Consequently, the integration of agritourism with local production represents a viable strategy for enhancing the sustainable development of Bihor County and strengthening its position as a competitive rural tourism destination.

strengthening the relationship between tourism activities and local food production systems.

The analysis highlighted a continuous increase in tourism activity during the period 2020–2025, reflected in the growth of tourist arrivals, overnight stays, and the number of agritourism establishments. These trends confirm the increasing

attractiveness of rural destinations and indicate significant opportunities for expanding the use of local products within tourism services. Traditional food products, particularly dairy products, honey, bakery products, and fruit-based specialties, represent important resources that contribute to enhancing visitor satisfaction and differentiating rural tourism destinations.

The estimated economic results indicate that stronger integration between agritourism operators and local producers can generate substantial benefits for the local economy through increased product sales, job creation, and the development of short food supply chains. By retaining a larger share of tourism expenditure within rural communities, agritourism contributes to improving the economic resilience of local businesses and supporting sustainable rural entrepreneurship.

The research also emphasized the social and environmental benefits associated with this development model. The promotion of traditional products and agricultural practices contributes to preserving cultural heritage, strengthening local identity, and encouraging community participation in tourism activities. Furthermore, the use of local products reduces transportation distances, supports sustainable consumption patterns, and encourages environmentally responsible agricultural practices.

The SWOT analysis revealed that Bihor County possesses important strengths and opportunities, including diversified tourism resources, rich gastronomic traditions, increasing demand for authentic experiences, and access to European funding programs. Nevertheless, challenges related to fragmented agricultural production, limited cooperation among stakeholders, infrastructure disparities, and increasing competition require coordinated

development strategies and long-term planning.

Overall, the findings confirm that agritourism, when effectively connected to local production systems, can become an important driver of sustainable rural development. Strengthening partnerships between farmers, tourism operators, local authorities, and community organizations is essential for maximizing the economic, social, and environmental benefits generated by this integration. Consequently, the agritourism–local production model can serve as a strategic framework for increasing the competitiveness of rural destinations, enhancing local prosperity, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of rural communities in Bihor County.

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