

HOUSEHOLD ECONOMIES UNDER THE EFFECT OF AGRITOURISM

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, agritourism has spread rapidly worldwide with the growing interest of tourists in learning about rural life and the farmers' need to increase their income with various economic activities. Diversifying business activities on the farm, primarily through agritourism, increases the farm's income and helps reduce the financial problems. Yet, the economic importance and consequently the cultural and social consequences of agritourism in rural areas have not been well studied, particularly in the developing countries. The concept of agritourism is considered in various forms in the literature related to tourism and rural development, without a consensus on its different activities. Agritourism is often known as tourist farm, holiday farm, farm-based tourism, and rural tourism. Depending on the epistemological framework, different authors have defined agricultural tourism from different perspectives, yet the lack of a common definition has limited the development of effective policies to support agricultural tourism. However, the meaning of agritourism in this study is related to farming activities performed on the farm or in other agricultural environments for entertainment or education. This study explores agritourism's cultural and economic consequences in unspoiled rural regions of north Albania that have not yet experienced tourism as a sustainable economic activity. The findings indicate that economic consequences arising from agritourism include improvement of economic development, increasing financial challenges, monetary recognition of new economic patterns, and requirement of economic and administrative measures. Cultural consequences include the emergence of cultural challenges, cultural promotion tools, culture-instilling strategies, pre-implementation management measures, post-implementation management measures, and cultural capacity development. The results could help local authorities to develop sustainable tourism plans in the rural areas with traditional agricultural livelihoods Albania.

Keywords: Agroturism, Albania, economic development, rural areas.

INTRODUCTION

Albania is an agriculture-based country with exceptional geographic location, outstanding landscapes, rich in culinary and gastronomy offerings. Combined with a great tradition for hospitality, Albania has great potential for agritourism development. Whilst the sector has only emerged over the last few years, fast growth is expected in the near to medium future. Untapped potential for agritourism development exists almost countrywide. The regions that offer the most promise in combining agriculture with touristic attractions are Korça, Berat, Gjirokastër, Vlora, Shkodër, Kukës and Dibër. The most common agritourism models are farm to table restaurants with some limited accommodation capacities. Agritourism is defined as a high priority sector on the government agenda. Most central and local level strategies have considered agritourism important for agriculture and rural diversification. Regarding public sector efforts to support

agritourism, there seems to be no conflict in roles only in coordination. Establishing better information sharing among public institutions would bring about vital benefits and more cohesive development results. Synergies between public institutions and donor projects with a focus in agritourism are also important in generating greater combined effects. A better formal definition of agritourism - as per best international practices – would speed up policy reforms and better integrate grant financing with sustainable development. Agriculture and Tourism are amongst the most rapidly expanding industries in Albania (INSTAT). The potential for Agritourism to create synergistic relationships between these two important sectors has been widely recognized by planners and policymakers. Agritourism is a hybrid type of agricultural system that merges elements of farming and tourism to create markets for farm products and services and provide travel experiences for tourists. The accelerating pace of life in cities and increasing pollution of the environment are pushing urban residents into rural areas. Residents of big cities are looking for environments where they can spend precious time in the presence of family and friends and enjoy the uniqueness of nature. Tourists are getting bored by standardized experiences and tour programs, standardized environments in hotels and the same old attractions and excursions. This trend represents a great opportunity for the emerging agritourism sector in Albania. GDP Growth Rate in Albania averaged 0.90 percent from 2005 until 2019 and both the agriculture and tourism sector are enjoying a steady growth above the economy. Based on INSTAT data for annual real growth of GDP by sectors, Agriculture has been growing at an average annual rate of 2 percent since 2012, while for the same period the tourism sector has been growing at an average annual rate of 4.4 percent (14.23 percent in 2017). However, there is significant space for the acceleration of growth and job creation at the intersection of these two sectors: agritourism. Agritourism in Albania is an emerging sector with great potential. Geographic location, outstanding landscapes, the long-standing tradition of hospitality, rich cuisine with many traditional cooking techniques and traditional products make Albania the perfect place for an agritourism experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International experts have confirmed that Albania fulfills the necessary criteria to become a center of European ecological tourism (Qirici and Theodhori, 213). So far, the agritourism sector in Albania has primarily taken place outside of farms. New farm-to-table enterprises are currently more common than on-farm businesses. Agritourism was initially concentrated in a limited number of regions, mainly in the (i) Southern part of the country (Vlora, Saranda and Gjirokastra); (ii) Northern Alps (Vermosh, Theth and Valbona in Shkodra and Kukes regions); and (iii) Korca region (Dardhe, Voskopoje and Vithkuq). However, in the last few years, agritourism businesses have emerged all over Albania with some of the largest agritourism hotspots located around Tirana, Durrës, and Lezha. There is an overall lack of official data when it comes to Albania, and no public institution including INSTAT, nor the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MoTE) is producing agritourism-related data. However, based on practical experience and consultations with stakeholders, there is an estimated number of more than 300 guesthouses and 100 agritourism units in Albania. Currently, based on information from the MoTE there are about 14 certified agritourism units, and all of them got the certification in the last two years. Most of the guesthouses are located in the North of the country (Theth, Valbonë); as well as Korça region (Dardhë, Voskopoje, and Vithkuq); Berat and Gjirokastrë. While the agritourism units have a more even distribution, some of the largest agritourism businesses are located in Tiranë, Durrës, and Lezhë. Most agritourism units are farm-to-table restaurants with limited accommodation capacities

available on site. The Government of Albania, led by Prime Minister Edi Rama, has identified Agritourism as a particularly inclusive and sustainable tourism opportunity and prioritized its development as a rural economic diversification tool within the country's new "100+ villages Programme". Consistent with this program, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (MoTE) has started certifying Agritourism businesses, while Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MoARD) through the Albanian Rural Development Agency (ARDA) is in the process of funding Agritourism projects. It is essential to understand the emerging patterns within the sector to strategize appropriately supportive policies. The Movements of citizens in Albania (INSTAT) report for June 2018 indicates a decrease by 13.3%² in the number of foreign citizens' arrivals as compared to June 2017. There is (month-by-month) erratic traffic of tourists and hence undefined tourism season for the country. The Government of Albania faces a dearth of tourism specific information, like in attractions visited most by tourists, or mapping of identified agritourism farms to make better policy judgements required for seasonal tourism preparedness.[5] Agritourism is defined as the act of visiting a farm or operating an agribusiness for the purpose of enjoyment, education or active involvement in farm activities (Kelly 2006). The ultimate goal of an agritourism activity is often to increase farm income by supplementing visitors' needs for education and recreation (Grgić et al. 2017). As a type of rural tourism, it is sustainable activity that takes place in rural areas that offer specific activities such as tourism services which allow tourists to have a lively experience on rural culture and traditions (Chen et al. 2019); Parish, 2020; Aikaterini et al. 2001). In addition to direct agricultural activities and daily rural work, agritourism offers space for leisure and the pleasure of being in contact with nature (Apaza-Panca et al. 2020). Agritourism is used as an instrument to develop local economies, to preserve rural culture and communities (Barbieri et al. 2015). Recently, agritourism initiatives have been on the rise in developing countries due to the need to renovate local economies, food production, agro-processing, arts, and cultural heritage (Breiby, et al. 2020). These initiatives aim to affect the attraction of tourists in the villages and to create a bridge for the movement of urban tourists towards rural tourism and vice versa (Sadowski & Wojcieszak 2019). Cultural consumption initiatives and the assessment of cultural heritage in rural areas have brought a great impact on increasing the tourist flow to agritourism and strengthening the rural economy (Billore 2018)..

RESULTS

Agritourism in Albania is an emerging sector with great potential. Geographic location, outstanding landscapes, the long-standing tradition of hospitality, rich cuisine with many traditional cooking techniques and traditional products make Albania the perfect place for an agritourism experience. International experts have confirmed that Albania fulfills the necessary criteria to become a center of European ecological tourism (Qirici and Theodhori, 213). So far, the agritourism sector in Albania has primarily taken place outside of farms. New farm-to-table enterprises are currently more common than on-farm businesses. These enterprises are in most cases not owned by traditional agricultural producers, however, they have substantial positive effects on farm incomes.

The accelerating pace of life in cities and increasing pollution of the environment are pushing urban residents into rural areas. Residents of big cities are looking for environments where they can spend precious time in the presence of family and friends and enjoy the uniqueness of nature. Tourists are getting bored by standardized experiences and tour programs, standardized

environments in hotels and the same old attractions and excursions. This trend represents a great opportunity for the emerging agritourism sector in Albania. GDP Growth Rate in Albania averaged 0.90 percent from 2005 until 2019 and both the agriculture and tourism sector are enjoying a steady growth above the economy. Based on INSTAT data for annual real growth of GDP by sectors, Agriculture has been growing at an average annual rate of 2 percent since 2012, while for the same period the tourism sector has been growing at an average annual rate of 4.4 percent (14.23 percent in 2017).

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Agroturism in North Albania

In the Northern region of Albania, there are some benchmarks for rural and agritourism development potentially scalable in other regions of Albania. The villages of Theth in Shkodra region, Valbone in Kukes region and Lura in Dibra region are among the most renowned rural and agritourism attractions in Albania. Farms in these villages are set in outstanding landscapes and located close to natural heritage sites (Theth National Park, Shala River, Valbona Valley, Lura National Park and seven lakes, etc.). There are 690 accommodation units (hotels, guesthouses, farm-stays etc.), most of which are located in the regions of Shkodra and Lezha. Based on MoARD data there are more than 40 agritourism units in the northern region. In the last 10 years, these touristic attractions experienced a rise in guesthouses. The region has benefited from donor-funded projects to develop its rural and agritourism offer. An estimated 1.2 million tourists visited museums, castles and national parks in protected areas of north Albania in 2018 where the main destination, with 70 percent of total visits, was Shkodra.

There are more than 35 families in Theth which have transformed their old dwellings into guesthouses with a total accommodation capacity of around 400 beds. Valbona has followed the same development path, while Lura offers a much lower accommodation capacity. In these areas (as well as in other villages included in the 100 villages program), there exists a great potential to combine agritourism with farm-stays that will further enrich the touristic experience. The biggest potential for these villages is the high flow of international tourists (around 16,000 in 2015), and rapidly growing demand for agritourism services.

CONCLUSIONS

Albania is set for a two-fold model of agritourism development. First, culinary tourism led by chefs with strong connections to farmers, is already emerging but can be supported on the demand side. There may also be need for government support toward targeted programs in education, in close collaboration with the private sector, to strengthen the pipeline of skilled food service professionals. Second, farm stay accommodations led by farmers are yet to fully emerge but represent an enormous opportunity for inclusive development of Albania. The first steps in jumpstarting this opportunity must involve the identification of themes and geographical clusters, the active promotion of existing and new farm stays through modern tools, the creation of publicly-sponsored events consistent with the themes, and the use of digital platforms to make farm stays easy to find and book by international tourists.

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