

Training 1

Rural Tourism: A Path to Socio - Economic Growth

LOGBOOK



- Introduction (5 mints)
- Definition and Scope of Rural Tourism (20 mints)
- Socio - Economic Impact of Rural Tourism (20 mints)
- Challenges and Innovations in Rural Tourism (20 mints)
- Community Involvement and Participation in Rural Tourism Initiatives (20 mints)
- Final Quiz (20 mints)

SAILMAP



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OBJECTIVES

This module aims to educate population about the concept of rural tourism , pointing to the social economic importance of tourism development in rural areas .

- Learning objectives :

- *grasp the definition , scope , and characteristics of rural tourism and how it differs from other forms of tourism ;*
- *analyse how rural tourism can stimulate economic growth , create jobs , and lead to social change in rural areas ;*
- *explore the main challenges facing rural tourism development , such as infrastructure , governance , and environmental sustainability , and discuss potential solutions ;*
- *analyse the importance of community involvement and participation in rural tourism initiatives .*



INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism is an extremely important segment of Romanian tourism. Romania is a country favourable to rural tourism, given the fact that the rural areas extend over 87% of its national territory. The Romanian rural area consists of the administrative area of 2,862 communes, composed of 12,958 villages, while the number of larger units (towns, cities and municipalities) is 319 (of which 103 are municipalities). At the same time, at the national level, in 2023, there were 3,498 guesthouses operating in rural areas (representing 27.5% of the total reception structures nationwide) and offering 58,086 accommodation vacancies, of different comfort categories. The increasing number of guesthouses, along with the special natural and anthropic setting, traditions and customs constitute the basis on which rural tourism in Romania has developed over the years. The growth of rural tourism is also due to the fact that more and more people want to spend their holiday as far as possible from the congestion, noise, and pollution in urban spaces.



DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism was ***defined***, in a broad and unanimous sense in the Romanian literature, as the action of people consisting in spending their holidays in rural areas, where the necessary facilities (accommodation, catering, leisure, spa treatment) to welcome tourists, throughout the entire year, were created.

In order to elaborate on this concept, most authors defined rural tourism as the activity that involves the movement of people in rural areas, with a view to spending their free time in close accordance with nature, culture and traditional art, provided that they have the possibility to eat fresh natural food. Therefore, this form of tourism implies that tourists want to experience aspects of traditional rural life, while indulging in high comfort and services. Overall, this type of tourism allows capitalizing on the rural area and its specific resources, but without losing or endangering the authenticity, the cultural identity, and the traditional architecture there.



DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

The development of rural tourism in Romania was motivated by the intensification of the need for recreation of the active population in the urban area or of the people who work and live in stressful conditions, by the desire to get rid of the accentuated pollution of the urban environment, by the impulse to return to nature and traditional customs, the picturesque landscapes of rural settlements, the worsening of the health problems faced by the population, the authenticity of the rural tourism offer (the general rustic atmosphere created by the service providers, the quality of the dishes), and the increase in the number of tourist reception structures in the rural area.

Over the years, rural tourism has developed in Romania with the following **goals:**

- to ensure the enhancement of the tourist resources available to rural localities, through appropriate arrangements, based on a specific infrastructure, for the benefit of rural communities and potential tourists;
- to improve the living conditions of local producers, by capitalizing on the traditional gastronomy and the products obtained in the agricultural activity;
- to capitalize on, and to preserve the rural traditions and customs;
- to preserve the environment, but also the historical and the cultural assets;
- to create new forms of tourism services and products.

DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

The scope of rural tourism can be seen from three essential perspectives, namely:

- **from the perspective of potential tourists**, since the services that tourists benefit from – during their stay in the rural area – generate costs, translated as an expense for the tourists and as an income for the providers;
- **from the perspective of the providers of tourism services and products** – since the purposes of the providers of rural tourism services are numerous (making use of the workforce, capitalizing on their own living spaces for tourism purposes and selling products from their own households, cumulating experiences over time). Therefore, all these activities are performed out of the desire to obtain income, so the interest behind running them is mainly an economic one;
- **from the perspective of the tourism market**, which has its own requirements and demands (both the rights and obligations of tourists and those of service providers are taken into account, and, within the market, they are harmonized and regulated according to the need to balance supply and demand).

In general, tourists who look for and choose rural tourism products, participate in these activities for fun, to gain knowledge, and to improve or to maintain their health, based on a multitude of social and family motivations, etc.

The Romanian rural tourism product includes:

- basic components (accommodation, public catering, transport);
- auxiliary components (leisure, spa facilities, sports activities, etc.).

DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

Legal regulations related to the field of rural tourism include:

- **Government Ordinance no. 63/1997** regarding the establishment of facilities for the development of rural tourism – sets up a series of measures to support a restricted category of economic operators in the field of tourism (individuals, family associations, and commercial companies whose sole object of activity is the provision of tourist services in tourist guesthouses and in classified agro-tourist guesthouses);
- **Order no. 65/2013** for the approval of the Methodological Norms regarding the issuance of classification certificates of tourist accommodation and catering structures, tourism licenses and patents, with its subsequent amendments - establishes the mandatory minimum criteria for the classification of tourist accommodation facilities, including guesthouses and agrotourism hostels, which it **defines** as follows:
 - **Guesthouses** are the tourist reception structures that have an accommodation capacity of up to 15 rooms, totaling a maximum of 40 vacancies, operating in a person's home or in an independent building, and that provide accommodation for tourists and offer facilities for preparing and serving meals in specially arranged spaces;
 - **Agrotourism guesthouses** are the tourist reception structures that have an accommodation capacity of up to 8 rooms, operating in a person's home or in an independent building, and that provide accommodation for tourists and offer facilities for preparing and serving meals in specially, as well as the possibility for tourists to participate in household keeping or in craft activities.

DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

Regarding *the delimitation of the rural space*, this was achieved at national level through Law no. 351/2001 regarding the approval of the National Spatial Planning Plan - Section IV - Network of localities, according to which the national network of localities is composed of **urban localities and rural localities**, ranked according to the specificity and the weight of the dominant economic activity within each, the number of inhabitants, the character of the built fund, the density of the population and its housing, and the level of social-cultural endowment and technical equipment. According to this law, the *rural locality* is a locality in which:

- the majority of the workforce is involved in agriculture, forestry, fishing, offering a specific and viable way of life to its inhabitants and which – through proper modernization policies – will also preserve its rural specificity in the future;
- the majority of the workforce is not involved in agriculture, forestry, fishing, but that currently offers an insufficient endowment necessary for its declaration as a town or a city and which – through proper endowing and modernization policies – will be able to evolve towards an urban locality.

DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF RURAL TOURISM

The Government Emergency Ordinance no. 142/2008 regarding the approval of the National Territorial Planning Plan, Section VIII – Areas with tourist resources, highlighted the following aspects related to **the rural area**:

- the total number of territorial and administrative divisions included in the rural area and that feature a **very high tourist potential** is of 98;
- the total number of territorial and administrative divisions included in the rural area and that feature a **high tourist potential** is of 853.

The Romanian rural area is rich in tourist attractions, which emerged and developed in the most varied types of landscapes. From a tourist point of view, the Romanian rural area has a varied and highly original potential, made up of natural and cultural-historical components (numerous tourist and heritage attractions are located in rural areas : painted monasteries, wooden churches, fortified Saxon churches, Dacian fortresses, etc.). The elements of originality of the Romanian rural space lie in the preservation – in both time and space – of a less altered nature, by the existence of a traditional architecture, the ethnic, cultural and religious continuity. Romanian villages are the basic components of the rural area, their attested tourist value transforming them – over the years – into authentic tourist products.

SOCIO- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

In the literature dedicated to rural tourism, there are various ways of approaching the consequences related to the development of the rural area, but **the socio-economic approach** was the object of much debate, given the fact that rural tourism represents one of the major components of economic and social life at national level, being a means of diversifying the economy, but also an element of education and training. The local economy and culture are, in fact, the key components of the tourism products offered in rural areas. The socio-economic approach takes into account not only the organisations involved in tourist activities, but also the social groups and the people who live, carry out their activity, produce income, and use the services available in rural areas.

The positive economic impact of rural tourism

Rural tourism involves the consumption of goods and services, and the development of tourism in rural areas influences their growth, which has the effect of increasing the prosperity of the rural area. In other words, tourism develops in rural areas in a close correlation with **the local economy**. Most tourism specialists have indicated that tourism development is beneficial to rural areas, as tourism exerts positive influences on them, even if this development can also be associated with certain negative consequences (which leads to the need for the impact of tourism on rural areas to be continuously monitored).



SOCIO- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

As *an economic activity*, rural tourism represents *an additional source of income* for the rural population, because with its help the local, human, and tourist resources in the rural area can be capitalized, considering that:

- rural tourism uses rural guesthouses and agro-tourist guesthouses as accommodation spaces, which involve, in their organization and development, the inhabitants of villages and the local authorities, which, in turn, leads to rural employment in the field of tourist services (in fact, in the specialized literature rural tourism is described as an economic and practical alternative to the professional activity of the workforce belonging to the Romanian rural area). A good example supporting this is the recent growth in the number of guesthouses and agro-tourist guesthouses in the urban area, which has helped to strengthen the local economies in the areas where they are located;
- in addition to a certain standard of guesthouses, in the practice of rural tourism there is also a need for infrastructure, technical-urban facilities, provision of related services, commercial facilities, leisure, etc., which also contribute to the development of rural localities. Thus, the valence of rural tourism consists in the use of rural space as a resource for the development of tourist activity bringing alternative income initially, and followed by the creation of a network of tourist services, productive and competitive on the medium and long run;
- the development of rural tourism also has certain indirect positive effects, such as boosting other branches and sectors of the economy (transport, communications, agriculture, services, trade – for example through the production of consumer goods used during and after holidays);
- the revitalization of economic activities in rural areas can result in an increase in the average length of stay and an increase in the average expenditure of both Romanian and foreign tourists, for the benefit of the local communities;
- through rural tourism activities, opportunities are created for selling the products of the local agriculture and handicrafts (the volume of raw materials resulting from the own production of the locals has increased in the total services offered in guesthouses or at various local events). The crafts, the natural and anthropic heritage, gastronomy, folklore, folk costumes are elements that contribute to the development of the local communities, mainly through the traditional festivals organized in rural areas. During these traditional festivals, locals can capitalize on the products obtained in their own households, can present them and sell them;
- the increase in the incomes of the resident population leads to the improvement of their living standards;
- rural tourism helps to diversify the local economy (especially in rural areas where agriculture has no possibilities for development), to create new business opportunities and to attract new investments, by creating an environment conducive to attracting funds from various sources (direct investments, public-private partnerships, national and international projects).



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SOCIO- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

Regarding **the positive social impact on tourists**, the main social efficiency of rural tourism lies in the contribution of this type of tourism to the useful spending of free time, the recreation of tourists and the restoration of their working capacity, to raising their general level of knowledge, and in the possibility to satisfy their spiritual or psychic motivations. At the same time, tourist trips made in rural areas offer people the opportunity to get in touch with each other, to involve in networking activities, and act as an educational element, as the rural tourism encourages and favors cultural exchanges between hosts and guests.

In terms of **the social impact on local communities**, the practice of rural tourism has beneficial effects, since:

- members of local communities are involved in rural tourism activities, which also contributes to reducing the process of depopulation, fighting back unemployment, stopping the migration of the population from rural to urban areas (as long as there are local opportunities for the development of tourist activities, bringing income), but also to ensure good and modern living conditions in rural areas (by supporting local services). The local staff engaged in rural tourism activities will be able to acquire new knowledge, skills and motivations, which leads to the development of local human resources and the emergence of possibilities/opportunities for employment in tourism and in other areas as well;
- folk practices and traditions are revived and traditional crafts are perpetuated/preserved by carrying out activities specific to rural tourism, which also leads to the diversification of the range of cultural and educational activities;
- there is a constant state of concern for the management of local rural tourism businesses and for the provision of quality tourism services;
- rural tourism contributes to an increase in the level of professional training of the staff involved in rural tourism activities, so that its performance does not decrease and does not affect the quality of the services provided;
- opportunities arise for exchanges of experience between various rural communities both in the country and abroad;
- the sense of belonging of the rural communities is strengthened;
- offers in the range of Romanian rural tourism are diversified and promoted, thus creating a favorable image of the Romanian rural space.

SOCIO- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism generates all the aforementioned positive aspects in terms of socio-economic environment (and, besides, it increases revenues and contributes to the development of the local communities), but it can also generate less positive influences. Rural tourism can have a positive impact and can represent a starting point for ***making income-generating investments for local communities*** only when imbalances such as those described below are not allowed to occur.

There are certain ***negative social effects*** caused by the development of rural tourism, which occur and are exhibited in the absence of an adequate management of tourism activities, and they consist in:

- disruptions of the rural life of the locals (inappropriate behavior of tourists towards the locals, high noises causing discomfort among residents, vandalism acts, criminal activities, drug use, etc.);
- causing changes in the way of life of the rural communities (negative influence and exaggerated modernization of the Romanian villages caused by the penetration of the urban culture into the traditional rural way of life);
- the disappearance of certain traditions.

In the Romanian countryside there is a conflict between tradition and modernity, between the desire for conservation and evolution, the so-called phenomenon of "urbanization of villages" (which refers to copying the urban way of life). That is why it is necessary for the development of tourism businesses in rural areas to be carried out in such a way as to ensure a balance between the tourism industry and the customs/traditions specific to rural communities, while maintaining the natural environment unpolluted, by respecting the principles of sustainable development. In other words, when decision makers begin a development process of a rural area, a priority condition that needs to be considered is maintaining an optimal balance between the socio-economic and cultural system of the area, and between development (through modernization) and the preservation of specific traditional elements.

SOCIO- ECONOMIC IMPACT OF RURAL TOURISM

Other types of impact that arise from practicing rural tourism activities occur when the environmental support capacity is exceeded and when the tourist activity becomes intensive. The continuous increase in the number of tourists in rural areas is a challenge that can lead to pollution and environmental degradation, through the uncontrolled running of large flows of tourists. Mainly, the most important polluting actors are tourists, while those who amplify it are local providers of rural tourism services. Therefore, the development of tourism in rural areas can have a negative impact on the environment, by increasing the consumption of local resources (water, fuel, energy, wood, cereals, agri-food products, etc.), air, soil and water pollution, the use of polluting means of transport, etc. Environmental conservation should be a primary condition for the smooth running and development of rural tourism.

That is why the development of rural tourism activities must be carried out according to standards that guarantee the maintenance of an ecological balance and that prevent the overuse of resources, pollution, and other negative consequences on the environment, through activities such as:

- collection of household waste resulting from offering tourist services of accommodation, public catering and leisure activities and their transport to specially arranged landfills;
- reducing polluting emissions resulting from the processes of sanitation and heating of accommodation units and during the preparation of food for tourists;
- choosing non-polluting systems for the production of the necessary electricity (alternative energies, such as wind or hydroelectric power).

Local rural communities must take a firm stance against unethical tourist behaviour and support local initiatives focused on protecting the environment. At the same time, local authorities can ensure a balanced access of tourists in accordance with the capacity of the respective rural area, monitor the state of the environment, and attract European funds for the conservation and development of the area and promote only authentic local cultural values, through the implementation of appropriate management policies.

A rural tourism project can only be deemed as an effective one only when the entire local community benefits from its positive aspects, and the negative influences are limited or reduced as much as possible. The development of rural tourism can only become a constant source of income for the rural communities involved provided that the available resources should be exploited responsibly and correctly.

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

The challenges and the evolution and/or the involution of rural tourism are best reflected by the statistical data available at national level. Therefore, we will analyze the socio-economic, demographic, and cultural characteristics of the rural population, as well as the digital challenges people in rural areas face, based on the official information made available by the National Institute of Statistics.

Demographic challenges:

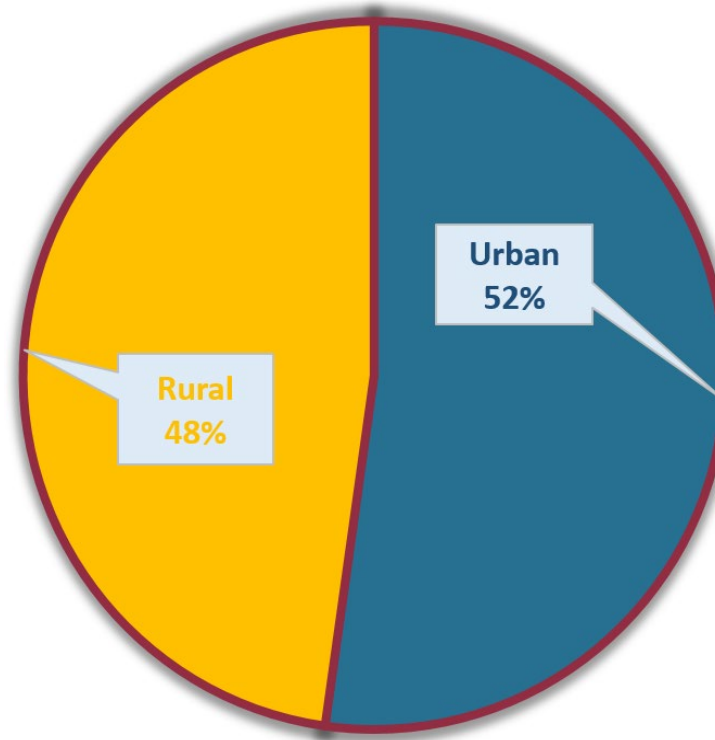
- rural tourism is related to the ***evolution of the rural population***. One of the main problems encountered in the existence of the rural area is the preservation of the demographic size. According to the information found in the population and housing censuses, in 2021, 47.8% of the total population lived in Romania's rural area, while urban dwellers accounted for more than half of the country's population (52.2%). Since 2002, the rural population has registered a demographic decline (in 2021, there were 25% fewer people in rural areas than in 2002). But, 73 years ago (1948), the situation was the opposite – because 76.6% of Romania's inhabitants lived in rural areas, and cities were populated by only 23.4% of the population. It was only in 1992 that the ratio was reversed, with the urban population becoming more numerous than the rural one, a situation that has not changed up to the present.



CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Demographic challenges:

- The most recent data that allow us to present demographic characteristics of rural and urban areas can be found in the records of the National Institute of Statistics, for January 2023, when we noticed that 52% of Romania's resident population lived in urban areas, and 48% **in rural areas**. The analysis of the structure by age groups also confirmed the continuation of the demographic aging phenomenon in rural areas, at least in the last 5 years analyzed (2019 - 2023), as the share of the senior population (inhabitants aged over 64) increased. As for the **increase of the natural growth** in rural areas, it had a negative value in all the years between 2019 and 2022, as there were more deaths than births. This phenomenon was accentuated in the pandemic years (2020 - 2022), and it was more acute in rural areas than in urban areas.



CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

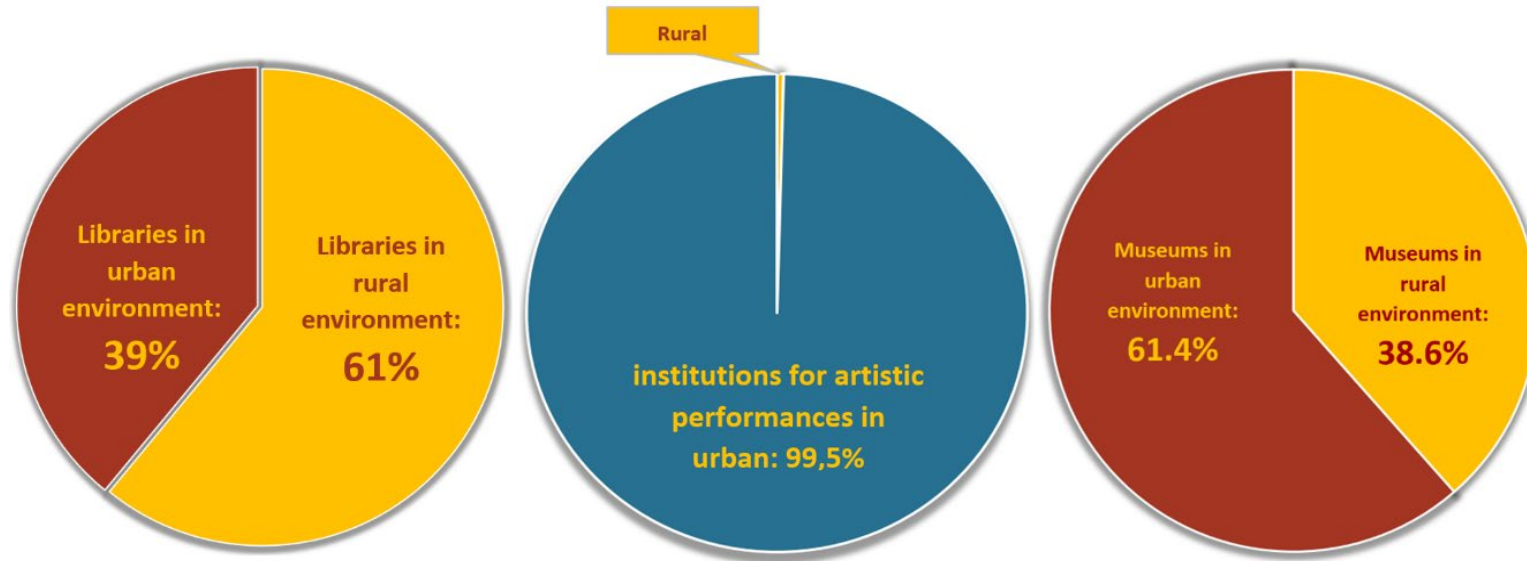
Socio-economic challenges:

- analyzing the number of **active/working persons**, we could observe a downward trend during the pandemic period (as expected), in both residential environments, but this proved to be **more acute in rural areas**. In 2022, the active population totaled 4,777 thousand people in urban areas (a decrease of 3.5% compared to 2019), and 3,493 thousand people in rural areas (a decrease of 14.4% compared to 2019);
- In 2022, most of the employed population resided in urban areas (59.2%), compared to only 40.8% **in rural areas**, a ratio that was maintained (with small percentage variations) between 2019 and 2021. The gap in the share of the employed population between urban and rural areas has widened during the pandemic period. Thus, in 2019 and 2020, the gap was of 11 percentage points in favor of the urban environment, compared to a 19 percentage points gap in 2021 and 2022, in favor of the urban environment;
- **the unemployment** rate in urban areas was of 3.2% in 2022 (compared to 3.4% in 2019): thus, its value did not decrease much during the pandemic, but **in rural areas** it was of 8.9% in 2022 (compared to 4.5% in 2019), which means that it almost doubled in size;
- In terms of **total income**, even if its value increased between 2019 and 2022 for the residents of both areas, the persons in urban areas had higher average total incomes than those in rural areas;
- In terms of **available income and the possibilities of meeting the population's consumption needs**, according to the National Institute of Statistics, in urban areas, the share of households that could meet their needs with their income was of 79.6% in 2022, with 0.2 percentage points lower than in 2021 (which denotes a certain stability of the quality of life in urban areas). However, in terms of **rural areas**, the share of households that could meet the needs with their income decreased by 1.5 percentage points in 2022, compared to 2021 (the quality of life in rural areas being slightly affected). According to the same source, in 2022, the share of households in rural areas that could meet their needs with their incomes was of 69.4% – 10.2 percentage points lower than the share recorded in urban areas.

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Cultural challenges:

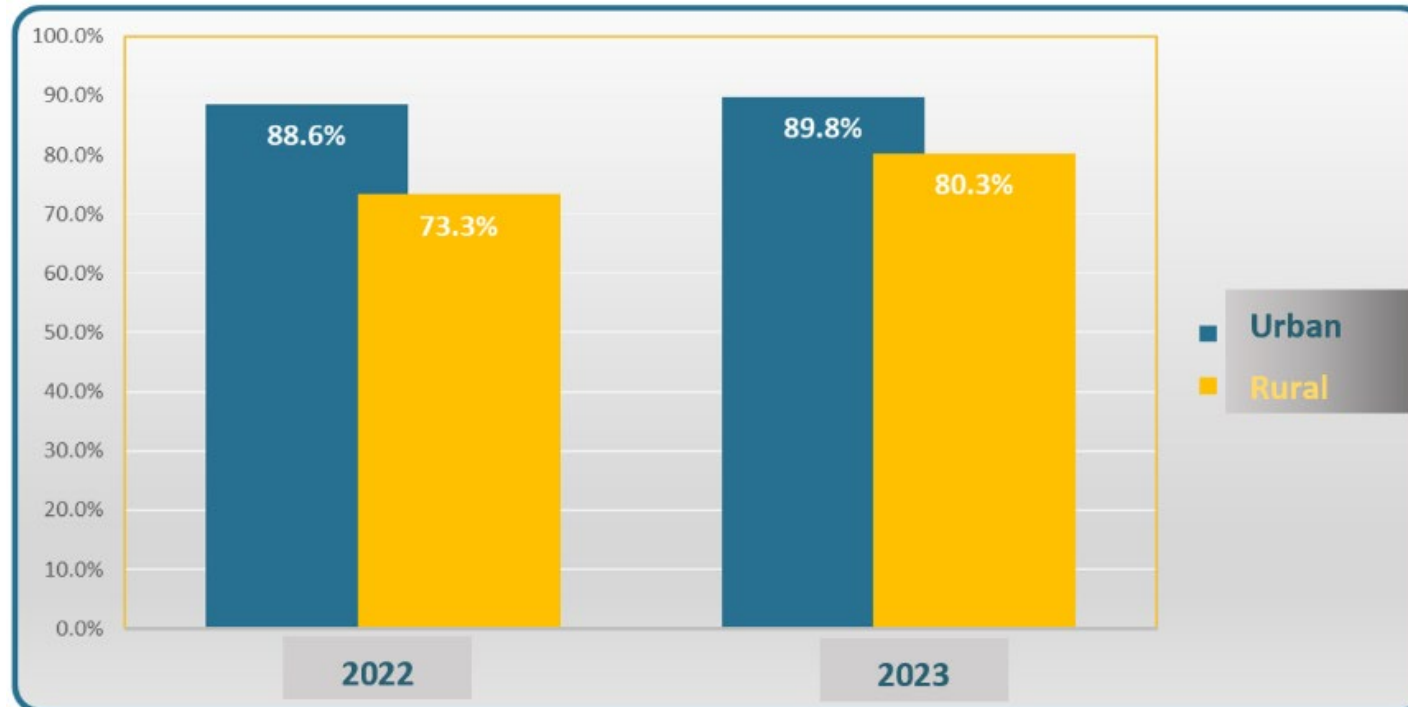
- Rural areas also have a diverse and rich cultural heritage. Consequently, cultural values are an important resource for rural tourism. Regarding **the cultural consumption at national level**, significant differences occurred in relation to the participants' residency environment. Significant differences between urban and rural areas were found in the participation rate in all three types of activities analyzed (number of readers enlisted at libraries, visitors to museums and spectators attending artistic performances). At the same time, from the calculations we made based on the information made available by the National Institute of Statistics, we noticed that there are several museum and performance institutions in the urban environment, the availability of the cultural infrastructure being obviously higher in this environment. However, in the case of libraries in rural areas, which are more numerous (61%) than those in urban areas, there was a lower involvement of readers, as they attracted only about 28% of the total number of readers. Thus, the area of residence is a factor that influences the cultural consumption practices, as people living in the Romanian urban area engage more in activities related to enlisting in libraries, visiting museums, and attending performances than those in rural areas (who have other practices and embrace a different lifestyles).



CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Challenges related to digitalization:

- **New trends** in tourism, including rural tourism, include the **widespread use of digital services and new technologies**. Increasing Internet access and Internet use are directly related to improving local identity (which can be achieved through activities related to crafts, history, traditions, historical monuments, various tourist and cultural attractions);
- In 2023, 80.3% of all households in **rural areas** were connected to the Internet – **an increase** of almost 9% compared to 2022. However, it is obvious that Internet access is higher in households in urban areas (89.8%). In the same year (2023), in urban areas, 89.8% of households were connected to the Internet, which represents a gap of 9.5% compared to rural areas (a gap that was reduced compared to 2022, when it was almost 15%). Therefore, we can say that rural areas still face lower Internet connectivity than urban areas and even though the share of households with Internet access in rural areas has increased in recent years, the adaptation of the rural area to the digital technologies has been lower;
- The vulnerability of the Romanian rural environment to digital transformations is not only related to access to the Internet, but it rather also resides in **the insufficient degree of development of digital skills**. According to the European Commission's data published in the Report for Romania on the Digital Economy and Society Index, our country faces a lack of basic digital skills among the population.



CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Other **challenges** manifested in the Romanian rural area:

- Despite the fact that Romanian rural areas have a very high tourism potential, it is not sufficiently exploited (mainly because of the **insufficient investments in infrastructure and in related services** – transport, services, staff training). At the same time, according to the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism, there are is a **small number of tailored programmes and funding opportunities for the promotion of traditional crafts, folklore and business opportunities in rural areas**;
- The authenticity and originality of the Romanian rural area is one of the advantages of this tourist environment. However, the emergence of the "**kitsch**" phenomenon in rural areas consisting in the perpetuation of products lacking authenticity, pattern-based and large-scale generated objects (objects made of glass, ceramics, or wood, pieces of clothing, jewelry, etc.) contributes to endangering this authenticity. This happens because the kitsch phenomenon is not only expressed in the widespread of marketable products / "souvenir" objects characteristic of rural spaces, to the detriment of authentic unique ones, but it has also penetrated the architectural field, destroying the harmony between the elements of the traditional Romanian rural architecture. For example, in some villages in Maramureş, architectural constructions were erected with stainless steel accessories and prefabricated concrete painted in golden mother-of-pearl-like shades, resulting in a visible and severe alteration of the architecture of the traditional village. The penetration of kitsch in the Romanian countryside is a current challenge, as it leads to the degradation of classical values, and it is a phenomenon of alteration of the authentic rural spirit, through artificial objects, which imitate rural symbols and values, to the detriment of the local specificity. That is why it seeking both the preservation of the traditional character of the buildings in the rural areas (a feature that can coexist with a minimum of modern comfort), but also preserving the consecrated architectural style of the respective rural region (which can be ensured by minimal interventions on the external appearance of the buildings, thus preserving their original harmony) are paramount.

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Innovation has also left its mark on the rural tourism, as a consequence of the need for adapting the rural tourist offer to the current demands of the tourists, innovation itself being pivotal to the success of any activity.

In this regard, one of the most recent initiatives at European level is that of creating **smart villages**, a concept in relation to which, in 2018, the "Declaration for Smart Future of Rural Areas in the European Union" (in Bled, Slovenia). The signatories of this declaration have acknowledged that the rural digital economy – if developed in an innovative and inclusive way – has the potential to improve the quality of life of the rural citizens.

At the same time, they considered that digital technologies are a very important tool for smart villages (but they are not the only one available). Under the declaration, a **definition of smart villages** was also formulated; according to this, smart villages are rural areas and communities that consolidate their strengths and resources, as well as their opportunities, for the development of added value, where traditional and new networks develop digital communication technologies, innovation, and efficient use of knowledge, for the benefit of inhabitants.

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

The development of **smart villages** refers to the identification of practical **initiatives and solutions** to counterbalance the challenges faced by rural inhabitants, through:

- ***the development of digital skills*** – a solution was considered to be “smart” thanks to its degree of innovation (e.g. providing training and development on digital skills opportunities for rural dwellers, innovative tourism packages, use of the Internet for the integration of tourist and cultural objectives to lay the foundations for an intelligent system of tourism services, digital rural guides, the creation of smart applications that offer the possibility of making online reservations, providing video and audio information, as well as various other services to help tourists enjoy a new digital experience). The use of the term “**smart**” refers to the use of digital technologies, but they should only be employed when it is the case and not just because they relate to a modern concept. In other words, smart villages are those that rely on communities that are involved in the future of their rural area, with the help of digital technologies, but do not rely exclusively on them. If smart villages focused only on the digital technology, this could further widen the gap between more advanced (urban) and lagging (rural) areas. Digital technologies have been assessed as the most important in the process of developing effective and long-term collaboration with stakeholders in rural areas, provided that they also involve the local community. Therefore, the term “**smart**” also refers to the actions of rural locals, who, based on their own initiatives and by using the knowledge they have, resort to local goods and resources to improve their living conditions. Thus, the digital technology is a key aspect in the development of smart villages, but using it it is not the only way to build a smart community;
- ***the development of the local, human, environmental, and economic potential*** – emphasis is placed on the development of the local communities, by carrying out small-scale actions, at the local level and, subsequently, on supporting these communities so that they can find their own way of facing the challenges they are confronted with;
- ***the revitalization and improvement of basic public services.***



CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

In **Romania**, the **definition** of the concept of "smart village" was made in the **Emergency Ordinance no. 156/2020**, in Article 3, paragraph 2: *the set of activities and projects implemented at the level of municipalities that comply with the cumulative requirements of smart specialization, transition to a low-carbon economy, and digitalization, and that aim to ensure smart public services for the population, as well as to increase the living standards of the population.*

In order to present a recent situation of "**smart village**" **projects in Romania**, we analyzed a study developed in 2022 by S.C. Vegacomp Consulting S.R.L. According to the authors of this study, the objective of "smart village" projects is to provide rural residents with the benefits of a higher and more modern lifestyle, while preserving the values, traditions, and customs of rural communities, at the same time understanding the advantages of a sustainable and healthy lifestyle. In this study, 224 projects were identified in 2022, which were carried out in 147 communes, a figure that represented an increase of about 300% compared to the previous year (2021). Most "smart village" projects were implemented in the counties of Alba (40), Sibiu (36), Mureș (33), and Hunedoara (9). The top of the communes that implemented "smart village" projects was led by Ciugud (Alba County – 8 projects), followed by the communes of: Aluniș (Mureș County – 7 projects), Boghiș (Sălaj County – 5 projects), Saschiz (Mureș County – 5 projects), Bălășești (Galați County – 4 projects), Corunca (Mureș County – 4 projects), Mănăștiur (Timiș County – 4 projects), Șelimbăr (Sibiu County – 4 projects), and Snagov (Ilfov County – 4 projects).

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Smart village initiatives in Romania (good practices):

- at the national level, **Ciugud commune in Alba County** is considered to be the promoter of the "smart village" concept, given the fact that the local administration successfully developed and consolidated such a project (digitization of public services, easy and fast interaction with citizens, digitization of education, smart environmental protection, use of "smart" solutions to support the local economy). In this commune, even during the Covid-19 pandemic, development plans were carried out continuously, with a focus on digitalization and innovation. As a result, in 2020, the Romanian Government decided to develop the concept of "smart village" using the commune of Ciugud as a case study. Ciugud commune also developed the first mentoring program carried out in the public area in Romania to support the digitization of the local administration, a program joined by more than 300 rural communities both in Romania and abroad. The locality implemented projects with European funding worth approximately 35 million Euros (in areas such as: infrastructure, tourism, green energy, cultural projects). In the field of cultural tourism, a project is currently being carried out for the creation of information centers, based on the concept of virtual reality and focusing on local traditions and customs (this project also involves the rural communities in the surroundings of Ciugud commune). The Ciugud community is currently used as an example of good practice by local administrations in the Republic of Moldova, Germany, France, or Poland. In addition, since 2021, the projects in Ciugud have been used as examples of good practice by the Prignitz District in Germany.

Smart village initiatives in Romania (good practices):

- another example that can be classified in the category of smart villages in Romania is the **WeWilder project**, which was implemented by WWF Romania, together with the "Valea Zimbrilor" Association, the "Rewilding Europe" Organization, and the "European Safari" Company. The project was implemented in the vicinity of Armeniș commune in Caraș-Severin County, in the form of a rural campus/hub, which was built with the help of the latest technologies, based on an "invisible" architecture (with glass facades, that provide visibility over the panorama of the Țarcu Mountains). The campus (which was opened to the public in 2022) included wooden houses (called "cells"), a central space (called "The Fairy" – where there is a co-working area (with shared workspaces), and a community kitchen, where products will be created from local organic ingredients – and a library. The campus is also complemented by a network of traditional stone houses, located in the village of Armeniș, which were renovated by locals and already offer accommodation and culinary experiences to tourists.

CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIONS IN RURAL TOURISM

Regarding the **funding of smart villages** at national level, in **the Emergency Ordinance no. 156/2020** it is stipulated that, starting with the 2021-2027 programming period, the urban administrative-territorial units, respectively the county seat municipalities, the municipalities, the sectors of the municipality of Bucharest, and the cities that include villages in their administrative and territorial structure, are allowed to include their territorial area when applying for funding from non-reimbursable external funds and in the categories of interventions that concern smart village solutions. Also, in the event in which the local development strategy contains elements related to the implementation of Smart Village solutions, the communes within the Functional Urban Areas, defined according to the spatial planning documentation or according to urban development strategies, can submit projects aimed at attracting financing from non-reimbursable external funds under the framework of the regional operational programs created for the implementation of such solutions. Smart Village projects that are financed from non-reimbursable external funds under the regional operational programmes must cumulatively meet the following conditions:

- to be consistent with the provisions of the European regulations, the operational program and the Applicant's Guide approved according to the law;
- to include elements of information and communication technology;
- to include elements of transition to a low-carbon economy, in line with national and European provisions in the field;
- to include solutions for the digitization of public services.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN RURAL TOURISM INITIATIVES

Rural tourism is centered around the way of life of the respective communities, their culture and traditions (which are, in fact, the elements that attract tourists). **The involvement of local communities** is an approach that is based on the principles that respect the right of all of their members to be informed, involved and empowered, as direct stakeholders (since understanding the residents' perspective leads to the implementation of policies to minimize the negative effects arising from the development of rural tourism). At the same time, we also advert that a basic principle of sustainable development states that the local community participates and is consulted in all aspects of sustainable tourism development (as a factor of control and balance for local communities, which allows them to adapt to the new social and economic conditions and to prevent the negative consequences of a rapid and uncontrolled development). Therefore, local communities play the role of an active decision-maker, their involvement in strategic processes and in their own projects being vital in the development of rural tourism. Moreover, the community must be involved in the decision-making process, from the beginning of the planning process of rural tourism development, and up to the promotion activities and the activities of gathering feedback from tourists.

Local authorities and communities, various associations and individuals interested in this phenomenon are involved in rural tourism activities, which contribute (together, ideally) to the development and promotion of this type of tourism. The development of rural communities can be achieved by carrying out tourism projects through which the community is actively involved in capitalizing on its own resources, in order to obtain social and economic benefits. A development of rural communities initially involves the creation and then the maintenance of connections and/or partnerships with the local, regional, and central authorities, the civil society, various public institutions, tourism agencies and organizations, etc.

The positive attitude and participation of the rural population in rural tourism activities and projects is one of the necessary components for achieving success and generating revenues. Some authors have considered that community support is a necessary condition for the sustainable development of tourism, because the local community is the one that is most familiar with the problems and needs of the locals in the area and, at the same time, it owns many types of resources (land, buildings, local products, etc.). However, since rural tourism can be a new activity for residents, local communities need training to be able to take part in tourism activities. Through education, it is possible for the local population to become aware of the tourism potential of their community. The most appropriate approach is not to act suddenly or hastily, giving enough time to community members to convince themselves that rural tourism will be complementary to their daily activities and not a substitute for them. By paying proper attention to tourism planning and education, but also as a consequence of the first successful activities, it is possible that the members of the rural community be convinced to join tourist activities. Rural communities must also be aware that sometimes these can be extended over long periods and must be willing to commit to long term activities, as successful tourism projects gradually grow over time.



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION IN RURAL TOURISM INITIATIVES

At the national level, since 2022, the Ministry of Economy, Entrepreneurship and Tourism has concluded a collaboration protocol with the Romanian Order of Architects (O.A.R.), in order to improve the image and quality of tourist reception structures and tourist resorts in rural areas. According to the guidelines developed by O.A.R., the following sets of actions should be considered to increase the quality of life of rural communities, while preserving the traditions and the existing cultural landscape:

Actions aimed at involving the rural communities in the responsible management of the built environment:

- respect for cultural heritage (preservation of the identity of the rural settlement, of the built and of the natural landscape);
- responsibility towards future generations (improving the current living conditions by capitalizing on local resources in the long term, in order for them to be preserved for future generations);
- use of renewable energy sources;
- use of recyclable materials and reuse of wastewater and stormwater;
- capitalizing on the sites so that the shape and appearance of the buildings reflect the local climate;
- use of traditional materials and building techniques.

Actions aimed at offering professional qualifications to the members of the rural communities, that contribute to the encouragement of the local economy:

- the qualification of the locals is necessary so that they can have access to informative resources for them to latter unfold socio-economical activities, which, in turn, can subsequently bring a constant income to the respective rural community. In this way, the local workforce can become operational, and the community can benefit from qualified personnel;
- identifying and involving the unemployed adult locals (only as an unskilled labor force, in the first phase);
- identifying and involving the companies/persons who can carry out training actions and who can ensure the qualification of unskilled workers;
- organising training and professional qualification courses for locals (including practical sessions).

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Q. 

A. 

Is everything understood?
Proceed to take the Final Quiz!



Inovații în Ecoturism
pentru Dezvoltare Rurală

FINAL QUIZ

- Define rural tourism and name its scopes.
- What are the types of impact of tourism development in rural areas?
- List the positive and the negative socio-economic effects of rural tourism.
- Name the negative effects of rural tourism on the environment and on the rural communities.
- What are the socio-economic, the demographic, the cultural, and the digital challenges manifested in the Romanian rural area?
- What does the "smart village" concept mean?
- What are the types of actions via which local communities can be involved in the development of rural tourism?

Thank you for participation!