

# The Role of Agritourism in Sustainable Rural Development of Georgia

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The notion of rural development has become an issue of current discussions that contains agriculture and countryside agritourism. It has an important role in the sustainable rural development of the country. Evidence from the experience of European Rural Development Programs confirms the role that rural development can play in terms of increasing the welfare of rural populations and reducing the economic imbalance between rural and urban areas. Rural and agricultural policies should build on the identity and tendencies of rural areas through the implementation of integrated strategies and multi-sector approaches. They should promote diversification and foster entrepreneurship, investment, innovation, and employment. These policies should also add value to rural identity and enhance sustainability, social inclusion and local development, as well as increase the resilience of farms and rural communities. In the article, rural development practice in Georgia is represented where agrotourism can be considered as one of the promising directions that contributes not only to the development of tourism, but also is a kind of multiplier for the economy for both the region and the country.

*Keywords:* rural tourism, agritourism, rural areas, urban areas, sustainable development

Before 2017, Georgia had no integrated rural development policy. However, rural development policies and programs had been successfully implemented among EU member states, as well as in many other countries throughout the world.

According to Chapter 10 (Agriculture and Rural Development) of the *Association Agreement* between Georgia and the EU signed on June 27, 2014, Georgia has an obligation to adopt an agriculture and rural development policy that is compliant with EU policy and European best practices. Georgia also has an obligation to harmonize the country's legislation with European legislation and expand the power of the central and local governments in order to comply with the policy planning and evaluation frameworks that meet European standards.

Urban and rural settlements in the regions of Georgia differ in their population density, size, and type. The lowlands and the Black Sea coastline have settlements with a higher population density compared to those of the highlands. The highlands of Georgia are characterized by significant structural weaknesses. The main problems include weak economic diversification, migration, extreme poverty, poor infrastructure and poor access to healthcare and education, and lack of employment opportunities (Enpard, 2015).

During the period of 2018, the total number of overnight stays amounted 30,183,344 with the most used form of accommodation—hotels (39.6%). Slightly more than a quarter of tourists stayed in private home of

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friend/relative (26.5%), and 12.7% stayed in guesthouses and hostels.

According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the most Popular Tourism Activity was Tasting Georgian Cuisine and Wine—68.9% (at <https://gnta.ge/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2018-ENG.pdf>).

Customer satisfaction is a psychological concept that involves the feeling of well-being and pleasure that results from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product and/or service (WTO, 1985). (Pizam & Tailor, 1999.p. 327).

### **The Relationship Between Tourism and Agriculture**

There are conflicting opinions in the literature on the linkages between tourism and agriculture about the complexity of the relationship between them. There is a general recognition that there should be an increased reliance on local resources (Telfer & Wall, 1996).

Over the centuries, strong trends in industrialization and urbanization have gradually changed the economic and political situation of the agricultural community. These trends have intensified in the last 40 years, with farmers' incomes falling sharply. Technological changes, along with declining incomes, have reduced the number of people employed in the agricultural sector. Therefore, the provision of agricultural services has decreased. Many small towns and villages are struggling to survive. Local, regional, and central government agencies around the world are trying to solve this problem with varying degrees of success.

The relationship between food production and tourism conflict or compete for land, labor and capital to symbiosis where both sectors mutually benefit from each other (Telfer & Wall, 1996).

Unlike agriculture, tourism is a means of growth and development. Tourism has long been concentrated on famous beaches, lakes, and mountain resorts, as well as major cultural centers. It has proven to be a powerful mechanism for economic growth, as well as for capital, income and job creation in less developed regions.

Zunic (2020) suggested that the emphasis should be made on organic agriculture and production. Organic agriculture involves food production as a result of specific production in which the system of ensuring quality is the base of all activities, and leads to the harmonization of the whole environment.

Rural tourism is not a new trend. The new vision of rural tourism is completely different compared to the early years. Nowadays much larger number of visitors is involved. Rural tourism management strategies should aim at conserving rural areas as an important resource, but, in some cases, making any changes or even encouraging the changes may become worthwhile. Agriculture plays an important role in rural tourism, but it may be more or less regional depending on national circumstances.

### **Agritourism and Rural Development**

Europe is moving from agricultural modernization towards rural development as the main paradigm and as the guiding principle for policy formulation, enterprise development, and new institutional arrangements (Mannion, 1996). Rural development is reconstructing the eroded economic base of both the rural economy and the farm enterprise (Mannion, 1996). Rural development is multifaceted in nature. It unfolds into a wide array of different but sometimes, interconnected practices. Among them are landscape management, the conservation of new nature values, agrotourism, organic farming, and the production of high quality and region-specific products (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000).

According to Vafadari (2013), agriculture and tourism are both important sectors of the world economy and contribute to the livelihood of many people by providing food and jobs. In comparison with the agricultural

sector, tourism is a new and rapidly growing industry, and creating synergies between the two can be a challenging process. The tourism industry has turned into one of the most important and fastest-growing economic sectors worldwide.

The main aspects in rural tourism are concentrated to the relationship between tourism and rural development attracting new enterprises, conservation, giving a wider role to women and attracting investments. The development of agritourism has given the following benefits to the countries:

- Existence of tourist infrastructure in rural areas;
- Cancellation of tourist seasonality, as agritourism operates all year round;
- Attracting tourists to the villages;
- Creating new jobs in the villages, etc.

Maximizing the number of tourists or tourism revenue does not necessarily enhance people's livelihood in rural areas unless there is a proper consideration of the sustainability aspects in tourism development as well as of local priorities (Vafadari, 2013).

### **Favorable Conditions for the Development of Agritourism in Georgia**

Elementary variables and factors of attractiveness of any destination and the main elements of the tourist product and its further development as an agritourist destination are: elements of accommodation; attractiveness of tourist destination; environmental elements; socio-cultural; elements of the offer; infrastructure facilities; political stability; the local involvement in tourism; elements of promotion; marketing; and information system (Zunic, 2020).

The country is characterized by very diverse natural and economic conditions, which have a special impact on the development of agriculture. The importance, aggravating circumstances, necessity and preconditions for the development of agritourism are confirmed by the fact that the signs of Georgian agricultural traditions are reflected in mythological and ethnographic monuments, which are revealed in the customs/traditions related to this field in religious rituals.

The development of agritourism is characterized by the diverse contrasting nature of Georgia: rich flora and fauna, large hunting/ fishing area, the size and uniqueness of the forest fund, ski slopes, rich historical and ecclesiastical architectural monuments, winemaking and gastronomy traditions.

### **Wine Route of Georgia—An Authentic Agritourism Product**

Agritourism is one of the best ways of affirmation, improvisation, and existence of the village, and sustainable development in the country (Zunic, 2020).

Culinary tourism is a subset of agritourism that focuses specifically on the search for, and enjoyment of, prepared food and drink (dinner and theatre package; culinary schools and workshops; food festivals; tasting/buying packaged local products; farmer's markets; tour a food/wine/beer factory) (Zunic, 2020).

Agritourism is often practiced in wine growing regions, as in Italy and Spain. In America, agritourism is wide-spread and includes any farm open to the public at least part of the year (Zunic, 2020).

Wine route of Georgia includes visit to family winery, tasting delicious local wine at artisanal winery. The tour includes tasting local cheese and the lunch at the farmhouse or/and accommodation at family guesthouse.

Any tour in Georgia involves traditional wine degustation in Marani (wine cellar), accompanied by Georgian traditional supra with Tamada (a toast master). Therefore, supra (feasting) in Georgia is a traditional

community based event attracting visitors as spectators and also as participants (Vasadze & Baqanidze, 2020).

Supra can be defined as a local community based event which consists of four authentic cultural elements: gastronomy (food & wine), folklore and appointed toast master (conductor of the event), specially designed for visitors who can be not only spectators but also participants of the event (Vasadze & Baqanidze, 2020).

According to Van Der Ploeg et al. (2000), farming, combined with other activities, has become broadly accepted livelihood strategy for rural families that enables them to make the best use of the multiple set of opportunities offered by agricultural and labor market.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis**

According to Lane (1994), rural tourism as a discrete activity with distinct characteristics may vary in intensity, and by area. UNTWO defines sustainable tourism as “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability (at <http://sdt.unwto.org/en/content/about-us-5>, p. 1).

Tourism activity like a business works for its ultimate objective-sustainability. It gives special priority to community participation and poverty alleviation.

Rural development can be recognized as a multi-level process rooted in historical traditions (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000). Agricultural institutes, education and training opportunities, and developing to keep in touch with the labor markets are essential for sustainable agricultural development (Banks & Marsden, 2000).

Each European country offers a different institutional setting for the production, transformation and marketing of agricultural goods and services. Some of these settings may be favorable to rural development while others may be irrelevant or even have a negative effect (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000).

According to Banks and Marsden (2000), conservation policies can, if appropriately designed and regionally embedded, go some way to mitigating both the “farm problem” and the “rural problem”, and are therefore capable of a sustainable and desirable rural development.

The counties with high household income levels are more capable of incorporating agriculture in economic growth while the counties with significant agricultural activities are more competent of improving income levels. Overall, results conclude the importance of secured satisfactory level of income through agriculture to enhance economic growth. (Banks & Marsden, 2000, p. 142)

According to Ciolac et al. (2019), agritourism is an activity that links the economic, social, and environmental components of sustainability, strongly related to local communities and their attitudes towards tourism, so one of the solutions for rural areas can undoubtedly be agritourism.

Ciolac et al. (2019) concluded that agritourism is an innovative strategy for farms, including recreational and leisure activities for tourists, having economic and non-economic benefits for farmers, visitors and communities, with the emphasis on natural, organic, bio aspects, in any part of human activities, health and the environment, in a word on sustainability.

...the counties with significant agricultural activities are more competent of improving income levels. This implies the importance of secured satisfactory level of income through agriculture. This can be achieved in many ways. One way is to improve agricultural channels of production, processing, and marketing. Another way is to identify niche markets such as agro-tourism, organic farming, farmers’ market, and improving information technology. For instance, agritourism brings

significant revenues to the rural farmers while creating job opportunities to farm family members. (Herath & Hil, 2013, p. 147)

Community tourism is one or a combination of tourist products offered at a community to domestic or international visitors. It usually refers to visitor interaction with local people in the rural areas outside of the traditional tourist areas but can also be linked to urban neighborhoods (village rum shops; parish/district parks; community festivals; special events; stay with a host family in a local village) (Zunic, 2020).

Tourism is an important economic base for many of the world's poorest nations, generating foreign exchange earnings, employment and funds for development. Many developed and less developed countries have a comparative advantage in tourism resources, considering their rich natural and cultural heritage that provides a good potential for tourism development and operations (WTO, 2004).

### **Methodology**

The current study is based on a research project which refers to a specific study of agritourism entrepreneurs (basically wineries, farms, and guesthouses) in rural areas (Kakheti, Imereti, and Racha) of Georgia.

The methodological approach of this paper involves a combination of collecting information from secondary sources and collection of primary information through quantitative studies and interviews/questionnaires.

Personal interviews have been conducted with 180 foreign and local visitors alongside with short questionnaires distributed to 40 small and medium guesthouses/farmhouses/wineries in three different regions of Georgia.

The purpose of the research was to accumulate a concrete data on rural development by using a questionnaire, so it can highlight the information about the characteristics of respondents; the type of the farm, the existence of specialized training; the development of households involved in the rural area in agritourism; the motivation of tourists to practice agritourism; and the desire of the farm/guesthouse owners to expand the agritourism product.

### **Results**

The study reveals that there are good prospects for the development of agritourism in Georgia reflected in the following issues:

1. The natural conditions of Georgia are extremely favorable for the development of agritourism;
2. The nature, the structure of plants and livestock, the use of backward technologies, the tradition of processing products produced in the farm houses, winemaking traditions, the ability to prepare delicious dishes with local products are a serious motivation for urban residents to make a decision in favor of agrarian tourism;
3. The total area of rural houses, the number and location of rooms, the provision of the necessary household appliances make it possible to arrange recreational conditions for tourists at a relatively low cost;
4. Analysis of rural household income and expenditure pushes residents to find an additional source of income, which is possible through the development of agrarian tourism.

Rural development is not just about "new things" being added to established living style. It is about newly emerging and historically rooted realities (Van Der Ploeg et al., 2000, p. 400).

The research shows that the owners of agritourism farms/guesthouses are ready to increase agritourism product quality/branding and create tourism programs that focus on the life of the rural areas.

## Conclusions

Under ENPARD, Local Action Groups, which bring together local government, private sector and civil society representatives to create local development strategies and provide strategic policy guidance from a local perspective, have been established in 12 municipalities in Georgia. They join a network of hundreds of Local Action Groups across Europe. The Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture plans to release the official ARDS Beyond 2020 in the coming months. (<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/15255/Conference-on-Rural-Development-in-Georgia>)

Agritourism entrepreneurs with business plans have approximately twice as much income compared to those with no business plans for their enterprises (Banks & Marsden, 2000).

For the rapid development of agritourism, it is necessary not only create rural development strategies but also take it into action by bringing together local government, entrepreneurs, representatives of local communities for creating the regional policy guidance.

It is obvious that the development of agritourism in the rural areas of Georgia is necessary primarily at the local level, but it can not be considered as a separate aspect from local, regional, or international connections or development of marketing strategies.

Rural tourism can support sustainable socio-economic development. Besides, proper planning and management may contribute to environmental conservation.

However, when tourism development is not integrated into the overall development plan of local areas, it may result in negative percussions on the natural environment and associated cultural aspects, including agricultural systems and landscapes.

Agrotourism, as one of the promising directions, contributes not only to the development of tourism, but also is a kind of multiplier for the economy of both the region and the country. It can be considered as one of the main factors of sustainable rural development of Georgia—the continuous process that needs strong leadership and constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive or corrective measures where necessary maintaining the high level of tourist satisfaction.

“achieving sustainable tourism will require a variety of individuals, agencies, and programs, each using different forms of knowledge and each involving those effected by decisions” (McCool & Moisey, 2008, p. 3).

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