



The European Rural Development Vision in Romanian Context

Raul-Cătălin OLTEAN, Felix H. ARION*

Faculty of Horticulture and Businesses in Rural Development, University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Cluj-Napoca, 3-5 Manastur Street, 400372 Cluj-Napoca, Romania

* Corresponding author: F.H. ARION e-mail: felixarion@usamvcluj.ro

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

Rural areas need our implication more than ever, in Romania, we identify a large percentage of people leaving behind their homes. Without a strategy to support and create opportunities, we will lose the heartbeat of our economy and an important part of our identity. This paper aims to study ways to develop self-sustained communities and achieve economic potential by investing in our rural areas' future through good policies. Based on debate between 25 participants from various professional backgrounds for 5 days, the focus group investigated the study cases of their nations to better grasp the future steps. The focus group is a dynamic mix of youth from European countries such as Greece, Ireland, Croatia, Ireland, and Romania with different educational backgrounds who took the opportunity to study the High value and rural areas in their countries. They identify the needs of different village stockholders and bring all the knowledge together. A great lack of trust in collaboration between farmers and the need for more practical policies was found, in addition to the need for education and a better understanding of how they can round their income. The objectives of this vision will be accomplished with the aid of a Rural Pact and an EU Rural Action Plan with concrete flagship projects and innovative tools.

Keywords: agritourism, bottom-up method, rural policies, rural tourism, stockholders keyword

INTRODUCTION

Received: 12 October 2022

Accepted: 10 May 2023

Published: 15 May 2023

DOI:

10.15835/buasvmcn-hort:2022.0034

In the countries of the European Union and in Romania, the development of agritourism began in the 1990s, although the first information about the use of rural areas for leisure purposes can be traced back to the 19th century (Valdivia and Barbieri, 2014; Wojcieszak and Bogusz, 2018). The 1990s witnessed a rapid development of agritourism around the world, especially in Europe. The five European countries with the largest number of agritourism facilities are Austria, Germany, Great Britain, France, and Ireland; all have a well-organized agritourism sector. Rural areas are vital for the European Union (EU), as they cover almost 88% of the territory and account for 59% of the population. In Ireland, Slovenia, and Romania, more than half of the people live in rural areas (EU, 2018). The European Charter of Rural Areas from April 1996 highlights the guiding principles of balanced rural development, also considering a sustainable development of the agricultural sector. The Charter has applicability at the level of the European continent and was based on a multifunctional development of the rural environment as well as the sustainable exploitation of the available natural resources, considering that most of the food of the European population, especially the raw materials, come from these areas (European Charter for Rural Areas). The liberalization of trade, the development of communication technologies, and the consolidation of rural development policies have determined major changes



© 2023 Authors. The papers published in this journal are licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

for rural areas from an economic and social point of view (Giannakis, 2014; Ivona et al. 2021). Agriculture no longer represents the main pillar of the rural economy, and this aspect is widely known, the contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) and employment in most rural areas is in relative decline (Future of the Common Agricultural Policy European Commission). There are major changes in the economy and social environment of rural areas in the European Union. The need for a change in rural areas by diversifying the basic economy seems to be the only answer to survive socio-economically (Giannakis, 2014).

Rural areas need the optimization of completeness which would translate into supporting the rural community and encouraging the diversification of economic activity in the rural environment (Ivona et al. 2021).

The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the EU for areas highlights the establishment of a more innovative and intuitive policy, ensuring that the CAP can further support European agriculture but also facilitating the creation of prosperous rural areas, and ensuring the production of high-quality food quality in the coming years (Future of the Common Agricultural Policy European Commission).

One of the most popular strategies for the development of the rural environment is closely related to the development of rural tourism and capitalizing on the entrepreneurial opportunities associated with this field, aiming to create jobs and generate income. The rural environment representing the main resource for a new beginning in economic thinking (Soare and Costachie, 2013).

Rural tourism is based on 3 coordinates: people, space, and products. The landscape and the wealth of local resources, which constitute recreational features and ensure cultural, spiritual, and ecological growth, attract many tourists (Baldacchino, 2015).

Like other regions of Europe, rural areas in Romania have experienced a decline in agricultural activities, the restructuring of rural society, and the increased abandonment of agricultural land due to the aging of the rural population and the migration of young people to the urban environment or abroad, to countries in the center or at the end of the west of the continent (Otiman, 2012). Among all these consequences, the aging of the rural population endangers the sustainability of rural areas.

Ursula von der Leyer, the President of the European Commission said "Rural areas are the fabric of our society and the heartbeat of our economy. They are a core part of our identity and our economic potential. We will cherish and preserve our rural areas and invest in their future."

The European Commission proposed an initiative to develop a common vision for rural areas. Through this collaborative process, they are trying to bring together the rural communities and the stakeholders to create a rural action plan to achieve the full potential for this area in the next decades.

For rural communities to become prosperous it needs to diversify their economic activities and improve farming and agricultural-related businesses (agri-tourism, agri-food, etc.). The local economic strategies should include a more attractive environment for companies. To achieve the goals, it should be maintaining and improving the public transportation infrastructure and incorporate digital tools to encourage strong social innovation and more resilient rural areas.

Rural areas have a key role in sustainable development, circular economy, and protecting ecosystems.

The framework for the Rural Pact is still in process of development, there are still details that need to be discussed during the autumn of 2022, where to clarify how this will translate into practical work.

The experts involved in creating a strategy for the rural area are from disciplines such as rural development, agricultural sciences, architecture/land planning/landscaping, social sciences, conservation biology, business and marketing, and ecology.

To test the hypothesis that the challenges are similar and that there could be an adaptable solution for all the rural areas' problems, a number 25 participants with different professional backgrounds come together in an intensive 5 days focus group to discuss and investigate the study cases of their countries for a better understanding of the next steps.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research consisted of understanding the areas of action proposed by the European Commission and how to improve the policies for achieving the long-term vision. This article analyzed the Romanian and EU policies connected to rural development to improve our country's situation. For doing that, case studies of good practices in rural areas and other articles related to the topic have been researched.

The second step was debating the concept in an international focus group through a summer school where discussed the Rural Pact, good practices in rural areas, and challenges. The creative RUR'UP Summer School is an experimental in-field course that combines group collaboration, field research, and results presenting. It falls under Agreement No. 2020-1-EL01-KA203-079121 and is a Strategic Partnership (Key Action 2) RUR'up Project called "Innovative Education for Sustainable Development in Peripheral Rural Areas RUR'UP." This event took place in the period 17-23 July 2022, in Pindos, Greece. The focus group was formed by professors, Ph.D., and M.Sc. students of different backgrounds in the economy, tourism, landscaping architecture, ecology, architecture, and public

administration. The group had been split into small groups to discuss their study case, to identify the common ground, the challenges, and the solutions which they implemented to solve the problems. Each group had a member from a partner country and presented the vision of the professional background and how this can be adapted to a large scale. There have been 5 days of meetings, documentation, and discussion. After each session of the discussion, the teams reunite and present the main ideas, and develop the second part of the discussion on a large scale. In the first 3 days, the participants focus on the theoretical information and prepared for the meeting with the local stakeholders (farmers, trainers, NGOs, and advisors) in the 4th day, they had the opportunity to understand better the challenges and the needs of the farmers, and the last day was for the results. The study cases are highly natural and territorial value areas selected during the learning training based on work performed under the previous project HNV-Link. The criteria of selection for those have been reaching professionals who already had this type of work on innovation but not necessarily developed for educational purposes. All the participants had access to the same study cases. The main goal of the Intensive Study Activity was to contribute to improving the fundamental skills and competencies of graduates in peripheral rural areas, with an overall aim of sustainable development of the areas. Participants would be able to put their knowledge from the e-course into practice by working cooperatively in transnational groups and with actors. The focus group discussed the following topics over the course of the week: identifying the gaps in sustainable rural development in EU countries; the bank of case studies created by project participants to enhance understanding and comprehension of rural areas; and, finally, a reflective activity to identify the next steps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Now, more than ever is important to act and develop a common policy related to the development of rural areas. For that reason, Rural Pact is the first step in acting, it is needed to understand what stakeholders and rural communities require and to create policies in that direction because the policies are supposed to be the framework within which to optimize the general well-being of human and natural areas.

One of the biggest problems identified was that the stakeholders have a great lack of trust in collaboration which can be related to unfortunate experiences, living in a restrictive period, or unclear sets of laws.

A direction for improving this is education, it is important to create informal education programs in which we educate the communities about their opportunities, and financial support about the importance of their rural areas and the ecosystems, and the way they can protect the environment and themselves. This focus group had the responsibility of evaluating the suitability and adaptability of the innovation that they learned about during summer school based on real study cases and stakeholders involved in the process of developing sustainable rural areas.

A good way of improving the policies and regulations is by defining the problems for the rural areas, discussing with the targeted population, studying the effects of policy, and improving or creating a better solution for the communities. Each area is unique and has special characteristics, but the root of the problem is a commune, and analysing and adapting evidence-based models are relevant activities that can be implemented. The impact expected of developing these types of meetings and programs is that the level of partnership between the stakeholders is improving and at the same time higher education institutions are more involved and anchored in finding a real solution for the challenges of the rural areas.

The challenges that must be overcome with the help of a better understanding of situations and complex policies anchored in the need of rural areas are land abandonment and the rural exodus, lack of trust between the actors (between each other and different categories), encouraging young people to start their own businesses and forming an association.

Due to the focal group meeting, there have been identified opportunities as well, not just challenges, for example, rural development policies from the EU, the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy and European Union funds, international cooperation, a good way for farmers to connect with other farmers around the world to find solutions for their common problems and for their communities, there are individuals businesses with the positive working relationship and strong partnerships between a range of stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS

There are small initiatives that thrive and succeed to make changes in the way they are doing business, involve the life of communities, and protect the environment, but there is a need for better laws and to promote good practice on a bigger scale.

Romania has the resources and the necessary story to be on the world tourist map, but for that, businesses must be developed that have a positive impact on the community and the landscape. That is important that the policies and regulations are protecting the entrepreneurs and the rural areas in equal parts. Without clear policies, structures are hard to protect the environment and at the same time develop businesses and rural areas.

The multidisciplinary nature of the focal group requires a critical approach to the process, and this will lead to a contribution of increasing the number of articles and literature on how to implement strategies and efficient solutions for rural areas.

The further implications of the research may transcend the development or evaluation of the method of launching tourism products/services or landscape integration, methods of evaluating a tourism product, estimating the degree of business integration in the community, and a comparative analysis of different countries in the world in terms of regarding rural tourism and agritourism accommodation structures. The following studies must be carried out according to the living labs concept, to develop a project as anchored as possible in the needs of the rural environment. Involving knowledge institutes, public actors, private actors, and users to create a real context.

Author Contributions: R.C.O., F.H.A conceived and designed the analysis; R.C.O collected the data; R.C.O. contributed data or analysis tools; R.C.O. performed the analysis; R.C.O. wrote the paper.

Funding Source: There was no funding source for this paper.

Acknowledgments

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

Conflicts of Interest

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

REFERENCES

1. Baldacchino, G. Feeding the Rural Tourism Strategy Food and Notions of Place and Identity. *Scand. J. Hosp. Tour.* 2015; 15: 223–238.
2. European Charter for Rural Areas. <http://www.europeancharter.eu/>
3. European Union. Rural Areas and the Primary Sector in the EU. 2018 https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/long-term-vision-rural-areas/eu-rural-areas-numbers_en
4. Future of the Common Agricultural Policy European Commission
5. Giannakis, E. The role of rural tourism on the development of rural areas: The case of Cyprus. *Rom J. Reg. Sci.* 2014; 8: 38–53. https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/new-cap-2023-27_en
6. Ivona, A.; Rinella, A.; Rinella, F.; Epifani, F.; Nocco, S. Resilient Rural Areas and Tourism Development Paths: A Comparison of Case Studies. *Sustainability* 2021; 13: 3022.
7. Otiman, P.I. Romania's current agrarian structure—a great (and unsolved) social and economic problem of the country. *Rom. J. Sociol.* 2012; 23: 339–360.
8. RuRuP summer school - <http://rurup.uth.gr/>
9. Soare, I.; Costachie, S. *Ecotourism and Rural Tourism*, 2nd ed.; Europlus Publishing House: Galati, Romania, 2013.
10. The Rural Pact conferences. https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/events/rural-pact-conference-2022-06-15_en
11. Valdivia C, Barbieri C., Agritourism as a sustainable adaptation strategy to climate change in the Andean Altiplano. *Tour. Manag. Perspect.* 2014; 11: 18–25.
12. Wojcieszak M, Bogusz M. Zagrody edukacyjne jako szydły markowego produktu turystyki wiejskiej (Educational farms as an example of a branded product of rural tourism). *Intercathedra.* 2018; 34,4.