

Chapter 18

Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: Can Tourism-Related Activities Contribute?

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the concept of resilient societies that are emerging recently by opening the question of social empowerment and willingness to cope with uncertainties. It presents a comprehensive review on the issue of real contribution of tourism based economies within rural communities. The study evaluates the basic preconditions for tourism related activities in sampled rural areas in North Macedonia and Southern and Eastern Serbia, being particularly vulnerable in terms of social and economic issues (aging, poverty, migration and depopulation). The concept of 'sustainable rural livelihoods' is further enlightened, and many recommendations are noted. Generally, rural tourism should be focused on providing additional financial input, but also seek a way to attract tourists in periods with low agricultural activity. The vitality and prosperity of the village itself does not rely on tourism activity only, but rather on the natural resources and human capital, thus providing sustainable livelihood for the residents.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern world, within the era of globalization, contemporary rural societies are faced with many challenges, with an increasing need to cope with interlinked uncertainties. Economic changes happening within global scopes influenced that many rural areas in Europe are facing dilemmas about their future existence. They are usually considered to be less-favored and least-developed regions which are largely dependent on natural resources and agriculture. As small-scale agriculture is dominant, rural economy is facing the need for alternatives in overcoming low production, poor agricultural incomes, rural abandonment and environmental pollution. Such extreme changes in agricultural practices have also led to rural

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unemployment and increase in poverty levels within rural areas. Furthermore, large number of villages have suffered from extreme levels of emigration, often of the youngest and most active and reproductive groups, as well as females, which has eroded the vitality of villages and rural communities. This is particularly the case with the underdeveloped countries, whereas poverty and abandonment is considered predominantly a rural phenomenon. Therefore more sustainable approaches are needed and sought for. The number of family farms is constantly reducing due to the aging process, migration, globalization, strengthening of concentration of capital in agriculture and many other factors, which meets its extremes within the Southeastern Europe. Rural areas are reflected in a wide variety of regional differences and socio-economic profiles that further indicates that their survival strategies must be created.

Tourism is generally regarded as specific economic activity that has the potential to use and enhance the existing resources, providing some economic effects and injecting capital and the motivation to local communities, indicating more prosperous future developments, providing productive alternative and ensuring certain levels of livelihood sustainability (short or long term). However, such activities must be taken seriously and consciously, and only there where they have realistic potential to contribute to the general communal goals. Such a global trend, where tourism is regarded as “grasping at straws” for local communities, is evident almost everywhere. Even though, rural areas featured prominently to the development of sustainable tourism, with concern focused on the maintenance of environmental and cultural quality and diversity.

Particular attention has been focused on rural development issues, encouraging diversification of rural economic activities, while tourism is seen as the most prospective one. The decline of the agriculture income has made rural tourism a viable and justifying economic activity in rural areas. The viability of rural tourism lies on the fact of being compatible and complementary to traditional activities, not being a substitute to previous incomes. From the economic perspective, it is considered additional income for the household, a source of incomes to complement traditional ways of agriculture and livestock.

As tourism is highly seasonal activity, this chapter puts an accent that rural tourism should be focused on providing additional financial input for rural households, but should seek the way to promote and attract tourists within time of year when normal main agricultural occupancy is low demanding (with a focus on early summer and wintertime). In this manner, the main perspective is to present a comprehensive review on the issue of real contribution of tourism based economies within rural communities, along with examining the emerged concept of resilient destinations by opening the question of social empowerment and preparedness to cope with uncertainties (natural disasters, climate change, migrations, global demographic and cultural changes, technological innovation, etc.). Furthermore, the chapter introduces a strongly debated concept of ‘sustainable rural livelihoods’ in addition to sustainable development, rural development, social resilience, poverty reduction etc.

Selected rural areas from North Macedonia and Southern and Eastern Serbia (one of the five regional units of Serbia, NUTS 2) are considered particularly vulnerable in terms of social and economic issues, and therefore are subject to an in-depth assessment and analysis. The study aims to discuss possibilities for introducing tourism as an alternative for sustainable rural economies for both countries, having in mind that their rural livelihoods possess capabilities, assets (both, material and social resources) as well as activities required for providing basic means of living in rural communities. Hence, it highlights that both countries may serve as good practices to show that they have rural areas that provide valuation of preserved natural environment, traditional ambience, local organic food and gastronomic dishes, tranquility and stress free experiences. So, rural tourism may be encouraged in both cases as a low demanding service sector in terms of input, while providing the possibility to place domestic (local) products and

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