

KEY FACTORS IN DEVELOPING SUSTAINABLE AGRITOURISM

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Abstract

The objective of this paper was to identify the main factors that contribute to the development of agritourism in terms of sustainability. For this purpose, the method of systematic review of specialized literature was applied, which addressed the linkage between sustainability and agritourism activities. The findings indicate that agritourism can offer sustainability advantages under all three basic aspects of sustainable development (economic, ecological, social). The current state of literature shows that among the most important factors that positively affect agritourism sustainability are: good skills and competences, high level of hygiene of facilities, green technology innovations, good infrastructure and accessibility, landscape design, reducing water and energy consumption, family involvement, women empowerment, quality products and services at affordable prices, education and training, collaboration and partnerships.

Keywords: agritourism, sustainability, key factors, development

Agritourism farms carry out various recreational, educational and commercial activities in order to attract tourists and ensure their economic profitability. The need to meet the requirements of an ever-increasing number of visitors to rural regions determines the establishment of new tourist accommodation places, facilities and small tourism-related businesses (Cortez N.J. *et al*, 2024). The excessive expansion of tourism in the rural areas has the potential to disarrange local social structures, increase the stress on daily rural life and threaten the natural environment and local resources due to overcrowding and overconsumption (Roman M. *et al*, 2020).

In order to protect the rural area from tourist activities and the risks associated with them, agritourism must be based on sustainable practices that preserve natural resources and local cultures and traditions. Through responsible agritourism, a balance can be achieved between the needs of tourists and those of the host communities (Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020). Identifying the key factors that contribute to the agritourism sustainability and understanding how they operate, helps to plan appropriate agritourism development, taking into account economic, social and ecological realities specific to the countryside.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the elements that have the potential to contribute

to a sustainable development of agritourism. In order to achieve the objective, a review of the specialized literature was carried out, and the articles published online in the field of agritourism were analyzed. The main search keywords were "agritourism development", "sustainable agritourism development", "agritourism sustainability". The databases used are diverse, but Francis and Tylor, Elsevier, Scopus were preferred due to their prestige among researchers. The analysis of the digital library allowed the identification of a number of 13 main factors which, according to the studies various researchers and scholars, could influence the sustainability of agritourism. Some of them are composed of several sub-factors. After a brief general description of the determinants in question, several aspects related to their action were presented, classified according to the three dimensions of sustainability: social, economic and environmental.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For any tourist destination, sustainability is the main success factor, regardless of the nature of the tourist activities carried out (Cortez N.J. *et al*, 2024). Sustainability is a way of maintaining the existence of tourism by minimizing the negative effects on the natural environment and society, while providing opportunities for the local economy and benefits for all stakeholders (Baipai R. *et al*, 2021).

In the last decade, agritourism has been promoted as a model of sustainable tourism (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023). There are many reasons to

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be considered more sustainable than other types of tourism, its potential impact being more favorable along all dimensions of sustainability: farm profitability, social responsibility and environmental protection (Santucci F.M., 2017).

The current state of specialized literature on the factors that ensure the sustainable development

of agritourism shows that the most important are those presented in *figure 1*. Some of them have been grouped into a single composite factor by combining individual determinants that are linked by related aspects.

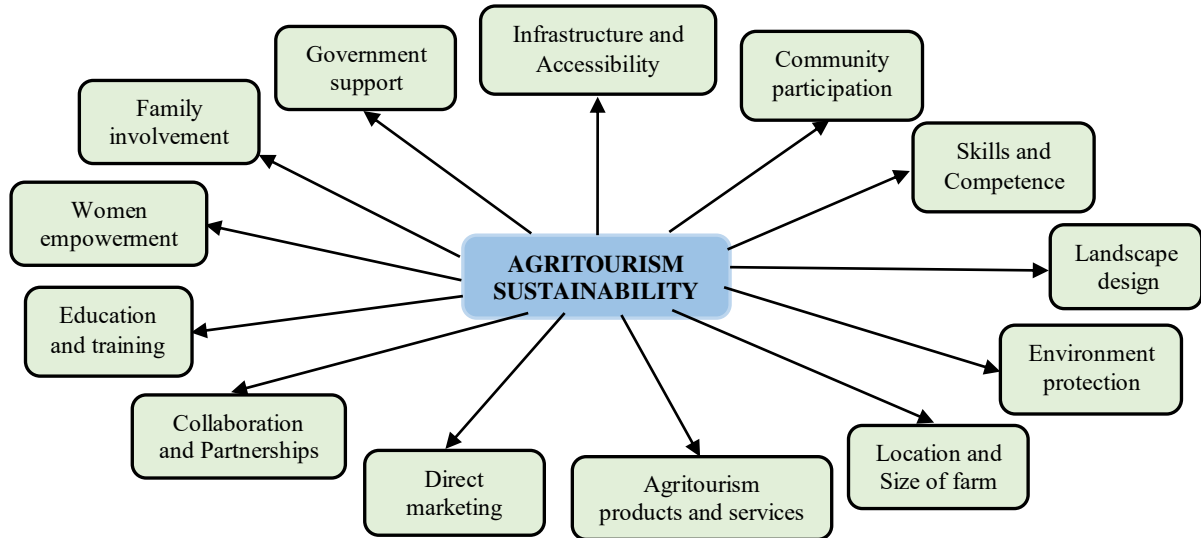


Figure 1: The main sustainability factors of agritourism

The most frequently factor mentioned in the literature is the “*agritourism products and services*” (Baipai R. *et al*, 2021), which refers to the range, quality and authenticity of the agritourism offer (tourist attractions, amenities, activities etc.). Together with a good “*infrastructure and accessibility*”, constitute the basis of the tourist motivation to visit a certain agritourism farm and a certain rural region (Bagi F.S., Reeder R.J., 2012). Another essential factor to attract visitors and gain their loyalty is “*landscape design*”, tourists being very interested in the beauty of the natural and cultural landscape, that decisively contribute to the success of a tourist destination (Barbieri C., 2013). “*Location and farm size*” are factors that could also influence the tourist flow and, thereby, the success and sustainability of the agritourism guesthouse (Schilling B.J., Sullivan K.P., 2014). In addition, the “*collaboration and partnerships*” factor could contribute to increase the number of tourists even more. This involves collaboration with other agritourism guesthouses as well as the establishment of partnerships with other players in the tourism industry (hotels, restaurants, tour-operators), in order to facilitate the marketing of agritourism products (Sumardi R.S. *et al*, 2023). A higher tourist flow means more opportunities to sell the agro-food production of the agritourism farms directly to consumers (“*direct marketing*” factor) (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023).

The ecological component is very important for sustainability, with agritourism having great potential to help “*environment protection*”. This factor encompassed the activities that ensure the conservation of the environment both by farmers (minimizing the production of waste and the consumption of water and energy, environmentally friendly farming methods, the use of renewable energy (Tew C., Barbieri C., 2012), the promotion of recycling and reuse, etc.) and by tourists (their behavior during the stay, regarding the conservation of natural resources and biodiversity) (Ingrassia M. *et al*, 2023).

“*Skills and competence*” factor refers to the fact that farmers must have knowledge that will help them in running their business (management, marketing, planning, accounting etc.) as well as skills regarding the relationship with tourists (communication, hospitality, etc.) (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023). To this fact may also contribute the “*education and training*” factor, which involves the efforts of the government or the private sector to transfer to farmers information and knowledge regarding the responsible management of agritourism businesses.

The main aid provided by the state is represented by “*government support*” factor and includes start-up financing, the creation of the legal environment and the promotion of policies necessary to adopt appropriate strategies for the development of agritourism activities (Baipai R. *et*

al, 2021). Also, the long-term viability of agritourism farms is supported by the local “community participation”, by facilitating farmers' access to resources and market opportunities (Cortez N.J. *et al*, 2024) and providing labor and various tourist attractions (art, culture, folklore, traditions and customs, etc.) (Baipai R. *et al*, 2021). But more important is the. “family involvement” factor, which entails the participation of the farmer's family members in the activities of welcoming guests, preparing and serving meals, promoting the business, cleaning and other hospitality services. Especially the female labor force is involved in these activities (Stotten R. *et al*, 2019). Agritourism is considered a suitable means to ensure their independence and jobs correlated with their skills and abilities. Most often, the touristic activity within the farms remains under the care of women, as they fulfill to the best extent all the competence requirements for interacting with tourists (Brandth B., Haugen M.S., 2011). The role and contribution of women from the rural community to coordinate the tourism initiatives is included in the “women empowerment” factor.

Between these relevant determinants for sustainability, interdependence relationships are established, their degree of importance depending on the characteristics of the agritourism household and the specific conditions of the rural area where it is located (Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020). According to the opinions of some researchers, the most suitable farms for involvement in tourist activities are horticultural and livestock farms (Brown D.M., Reeder R.J., 2007), small lifestyle farms (Schilling B.J. *et al*, 2014), farms with increased labor resources (Barbieri C. *et al*, 2008) and farms using conservation practices (Schilling B.J., Sullivan K.P., 2014).

Economic sustainability of agritourism.

As stated in the extant body of literature, there are many economic motivations for agritourism. For the local rural community, the economic benefits of the development of agritourism are empowerment of rural areas, creation of jobs, preventing the decline of the rural population due to urban migration, development of infrastructure and tourism-related businesses (Mahmoodi M. *et al*, 2022). The main reasons for the adoption of tourism by farmers consists of improving of the farm's economic conditions, solving problems with employment, improving farm productivity and sustainability of agricultural businesses (Halim M.F. *et al*, 2020; Srisomyong N., Meyer D., 2015). Agritourism farms benefit from opportunities for economic diversification, generating cash flows and increasing gross income

(Hochuli A. *et al*, 2021), which allows to mitigate seasonal fluctuations in farm income (Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020). This could reduce the excessive dependence of farms on agricultural production, offering, at the same time, more opportunities for marketing (Nematpour M., Khodadadi M., 2021).

The association of tourism-related activities with agriculture could contribute to increase the volume of sales of agricultural goods, to facilitate farm adjust to market requirements, to gain new market segments (Nickerson N. *et al*, 2001), as well as to promote and increase the farm visibility (Tew C., Barbieri C., 2012). Agritourism is also seen as a way to reduce the influence of some factors that are independent of the farmer (such as the weather, for example) (Veeck G. *et al*, 2006), the income from tourism having the role of supporting agricultural production and mitigating the risk factor in agriculture (Bagi F.S., Reeder R.J., 2012).

A comparison of the financial results obtained by the farms shows that the incomes of the agro-tourism ones grew faster than the non-agro-tourism ones, but the agricultural production decreased (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023). Agritourism can be a significant source of additional income for farming families (Schmitt M., 2014), there being a positive correlation between the development of various leisure and entertainment activities at the farm and its income (Giaccio V. *et al*, 2018).

As a rule, the incomes from agriculture are higher than those from tourism (Koutsouris A. *et al*, 2014), but there are also situations when the agricultural activity generates only up to 20% of the total income of the farm, as it appears from the study by Stotten R. *et al* (2019). However, as shown by the study carried out by Arru B. *et al* (2021), it is difficult to maintain a balance between agricultural and tourist activity. Some farms involved in tourism give priority to agricultural production (Schermer M. *et al*, 2007), but others wish to expand their tourist activities. (Ammirato S., Felicetti A.M., 2014). Many times, agricultural and tourist activities end up competing with each other for some limited farm resources, such as available space and time (Fischer G., 2019). The efforts to respond to the special requests of the visitors, make the daily operations of the farm to be, sometimes, disturbed. In addition, agritourism farms tend to expand their tourist facilities by restricting the surface of agricultural areas, a fact that disadvantages agrifood production (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023).

Ecological sustainability of agritourism.

The critical drivers of environmental sustainability are rural economic conditions and sustainable business performance (Cortez N.J. *et*

al, 2024). Of essential importance, this component of sustainability includes multiple aspects. Agritourism contributes to the promotion of sustainable practices and environmentally friendly production, in line with tourists' expectations (Mastronardi L. *et al*, 2015; Abadi A., Khakzand M., 2022; Grillini G. *et al*, 2023; Ingrassia M. *et al*, 2023). The success of these sustainable practices depends on the cooperation between farmers and the rural community (Cortez N.J. *et al*, 2024). In order to meet tourists' demand for a diversified range of products, the farmers use sustainable production techniques that have beneficial effects on the landscape and natural resources (Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020). Increasing interest in quality and healthy food has stimulated agritourism farms to be more involved in organic production (Mastronardi L. *et al*, 2015; Shen C.C. *et al*, 2020) and environmental and biodiversity conservation (Kuo N.W. *et al*, 2006; Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020) than those not engaged in tourism.

Agritourism guesthouses tend to implement programs to reduce the consumption of energy, water (Ispas A. *et al*, 2019) and raw materials (Shen F. *et al*, 2009), landscape preservation (Ammirato S. *et al*, 2020), revalorizing some agricultural products that cannot be used in classic ways (Brandth B., Haugen M.S., 2011), minimizing the generation of waste by promoting recovery, reuse and recovery activities (Choo H, Jamal T., 2009), as well as the use of renewable energy sources (especially solar energy) (Paniccia P.M.A., Baiocco S., 2020). Some studies have signaled contribution regarding soil protection and the reduction of the use of chemicals in agriculture practiced by farmers involved in tourist activities (Ollenburg C., Buckley R., 2007).

In some cases, the farmers have turned to green technological innovations (Pimonenko T. *et al*, 2021), were oriented towards the application of integrated pest management or have taken measures to improve wildlife habitats (Barbieri C., 2013). Also, agritourism could have a positive impact on the farm animals. Because it exerts a strong attraction on tourists, farmers would be tempted to provide them increased attention and better care conditions than in non-agritourism farms (Hansen B.G., Østerås O., 2019). That will be reflected in the improvement of animal welfare. On the other hand, the noise and active presence of visitors can stress the animals, requiring appropriate behavior and careful management of the contact between tourists and livestock (Grillini G. *et al*, 2023).

Agritourism offers also the opportunity to educate tourists about agricultural production nature and conservation practices (Choo H., Jamal

T., 2009). By interacting with life on the farm, rural visitors become more aware of the need to reduce the consumption of natural resources and to protect the natural environment (Barry J., Hellerstein D., 2004).

Social sustainability of agritourism.

Agritourism could affect the quality of life of farmers both negatively and positively. Although the management of agritourism activities requires additional effort and time, most studies indicate that the positive impact is superior to the negative effects. (Chase L. *et al*, 2013; Ciolac R. *et al*, 2020; Grillini G. *et al*, 2023) Farmers can get satisfaction in their work and enjoy sharing with tourists a lifestyle that combines human relationships with agriculture, but visitors' intrusion into personal life is not always a pleasant experience (Sharpley R., Vass A., 2006). Despite these shortcomings, farmers are satisfied that through agritourism they can maintain their traditional lifestyle, engaged in agricultural production, and keep the farm running to secure their livelihood (Schilling B.J. *et al*, 2014; Stotten R. *et al*, 2019).

Agritourism may have, also, a strong positive impact on local community life and well-being: alternative incomes; attracting more local investments; improve the standard of living (López-Sanz J.M. *et al*, 2021) and the quality of recreational facilities (Barbieri C., Mshenga P.M., 2008); new jobs and employment opportunities for women (Ollenburg C., Buckley R., 2007); infrastructure improvement (modernization of roads, better sanitation, etc.); conservation of local heritage and local cultural practices (López-Sanz J.M. *et al*, 2021). All these advantages participate in preventing the depopulation of the villages, and especially the migration of the youth to the urban area. farms (Ollenburg C., Buckley R., 2007).

Tourists also benefit from agritourism, being able to enjoy various opportunities for relaxation and education: getting to know the rural lifestyle and cultural values of local communities (Barbieri C., Mshenga P.M., 2008); information on food production and safety (Sharpley R., Telfer D.J., 2002); knowledge about environmental protection, agriculture and organic food, etc. (Bello F.G. *et al*, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

Agritourism is frequently mentioned in the available literature as a strategy for sustainable diversification. The development of sustainable agritourism is due to the action of specific factors, which must be taken into account at both the micro

and macro level. These factors that affect the sustainability of agritourism work in three directions: ecological, economic and social. Based on the specialized literature, it can be concluded that not only the factors direct related to the farm are important for sustainability (good skills and competences, environmentally friendly farming practices and methods adopted by farmers, the preservation of natural resources, good infrastructure and accessibility, family involvement, quality products and services, education and training, etc.), but also some external factors. The success of agritourism also depends on local community support and other actors in tourism: the government, through promoted policies, specific legislation and financing programs; tour operators, who can establish partnerships with agritourism guesthouses; other farmers, by establishing mutually beneficial collaborative relationships.

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