

Article

Sustainability of Agritourism Activity. Initiatives and Challenges in Romanian Mountain Rural Regions

Tabita Adamov ¹, Ramona Ciolac ^{1,*} , Tiberiu Iancu ^{1,*}, Ioan Brad ¹, Elena Peț ¹, Gabriela Popescu ^{1,*} and Laura Șmuleac ² 

¹ Faculty of Management and Rural Tourism, Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania", Calea Aradului no.119, 300645 Timișoara, Romania; tabitaadamov@usab-tm.ro (T.A.); bradioan@usab-tm.ro (I.B.); elenapet@usab-tm.ro (E.P.)

² Faculty of Agriculture, Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine "King Michael I of Romania", Calea Aradului no.119, 300645 Timișoara, Romania; laurasmuleac@usab-tm.ro

* Correspondence: ramonamarianaciolac@usab-tm.ro or ramonablaga2005@yahoo.com (R.C.); tiberuiiancu@usab-tm.ro (T.I.); gabrielapopescu@usab-tm.ro (G.P.)

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Abstract: Sustainability has become a priority in the last decades. If we consider rural regions, agritourism, an activity strongly related to local communities, represents an opportunity to ensure the sustainability of rural settlements and of the environment, and at the same time an innovative and diversifying possibility for the economic support of rural settlements. Many studies have shown that the sustainability trend of the current period can be achieved by combining rural and local resources and traditional products specific to the rural regions with tourist activities, the challenge being the revitalization of rural economy. A large number of Romanian mountain rural regions can provide opportunities for sustaining agritourism activity; some of them may succeed to capitalize on the niche characteristic of agritourism, and through appropriate and effective strategies to move from the pioneering stage to an economically and socially valuable chance for improving the living conditions from rural area and finally to ensure sustainable development of rural communities. This paper begins from the importance of agritourism for rural regions. It aims at identifying the current situation of the agritourism activity in three regions and at developing proposals that are based strictly on the specific needs of the regions. In our opinion, the implementation of these specific actions would represent future challenges and at the same time ways of supporting the sustainable development of agritourism activities and of local settlements.

Keywords: agritourism; sustainability of rural settlements; initiatives and challenges; the priorities of an eventual action plan

1. Introduction

The accommodation of tourists in rural regions is not a recent phenomenon, as it has been practiced for decades in European Union countries [1,2]. However, there are a variety of terms that describe the tourism activity in rural regions: tourism, farm tourism, rural tourism, relaxation tourism, alternative tourism and many others, with different meanings from one country to another. Many researchers have pointed out that it is difficult to avoid confusion related to these names, because the term "rural tourism" was adopted by the European Community with reference to the entire tourism activity in rural regions. [3] Rural tourism, as a specific activity for rural regions, is centered on rural regions as a destination, offering functional accommodation structures and other specific services [3,4]. Across the world, activities included under the term of "tourism in rural regions" (see Figure 1) have been recognized as:

- An alternative to the declining agricultural sector, which is unable to sustain the living necessities of rural populations [4];
- As a possibility to stimulate the entrepreneurship opportunities for rural region farmers [5], insuring stability through the new jobs created.

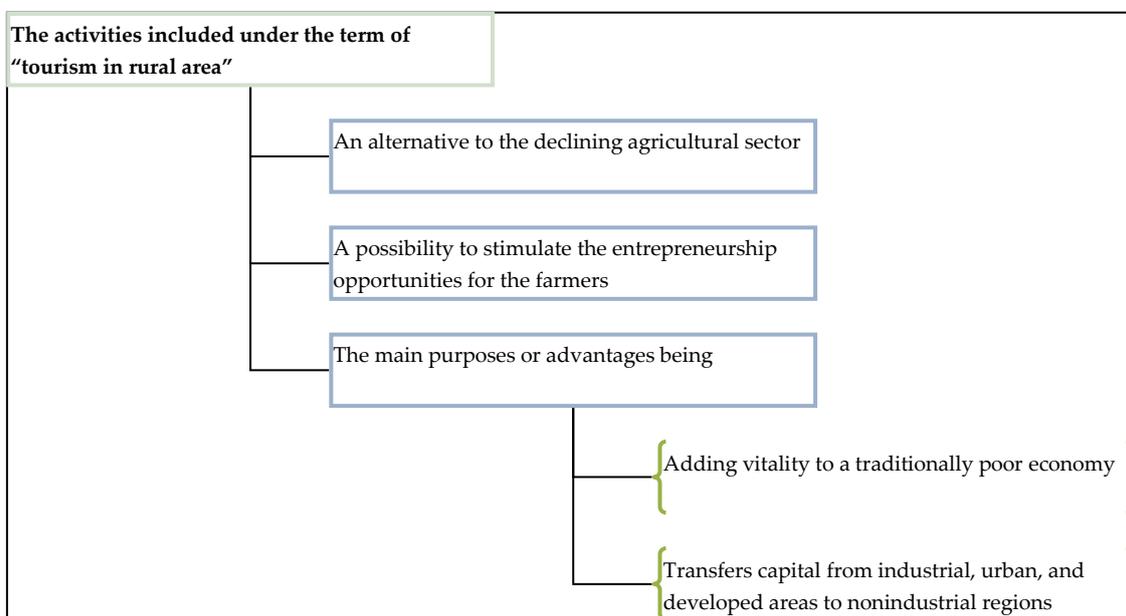


Figure 1. Activities included under the term of “tourism in rural regions” (processing after [2–4]).

Therefore the main purposes or advantages would be adding vitality to a historically poor economy by transferring capital, income and employment from industrial, urban and developed regions to non-industrial regions; altogether it ensures sustainable development for rural regions [6].

Among the forms of rural tourism, agritourism has lately been experiencing a strong evolution and is enjoying greater attention. This is because the authenticity of rural regions is an increasingly demanded quality under the conditions of present life.

1.1. Literature Review

In European countries, agritourism has become a priority in local development policies in the last decades, as an activity that links the economic, social and environmental components of sustainability [7] and is strongly related to local communities [8–10]. This can help fulfill the aim of ensuring the sustainability of the rural environment and communities. The practice of agritourism implies the existence of the following elements [10]:

- The existence of a prosperous rural region, rich in natural and anthropic resources;
- People interested in practicing such an activity;
- The services offered by these people: accommodation and meals;
- The existence of a material basis (i.e., means of transport, access roads, tourist units, various leisure possibilities) and an appropriate legislative framework for carrying out this activity.

Linking the most important components of sustainability [11–14], agritourism can ensure an innovative and diversifying strategy for farms [15], including recreational and leisure activities for tourists, with many economic and non-economic benefits for farmers, visitors and communities [16]. Not every type of tourism in rural regions, or rural tourism, could be considered agritourism. Defining agritourism broadly, one can explain that it is a form of rural tourism, practiced inside farms. As a tourism offer, agritourism appeared in Europe around the 1960s [4,17–23]. In the case of agritourism,

agricultural and tourist activity are always related, ultimately being an activity that complements the income of farmers. Therefore agritourism implies the existence of two main activities: the agricultural one practiced by the tourists' hosts (which involves production activities, processing of agricultural products in the household and their marketing) and the tourist one, which in turn implies the three elements specific to any tourist product with some particularities: accommodation, food and leisure. It is true that agritourism (the key aspects of the definition are synthesized in Table 1) is a form of rural tourism, but in order to be considered as true agritourism activity, it must:

- Firstly, be developed as a complementary activity to agriculture, with the purpose of revitalizing unprofitable agricultural activities, capitalizing products from that farm through tourism activities;
- Secondly, to use all existing tourism resources from rural regions, with a focus on illustrating the specifics of rural farm life.

Table 1. The essence of agritourism—the key aspects of the definition.

Criteria Taken into Consideration for Defining Agritourism	The Key Aspects of the Definition	Benefits from Agritourism Activities
Defining agritourism from the perspective of tourist reception structures	Capitalization of the surplus of the accommodation spaces existing in a guesthouse—these spaces must be arranged and prepared for the reception of the tourists	<i>Benefits for communities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating new jobs, direct revenue generation • Development of new market niches • Increasing the sustainability of agricultural businesses • Improvement of living conditions and standards
Defining agritourism from the perspective of activities	A set of goods and services offered to tourists by the guesthouse for consumption through direct involvement, active but non-remunerated	<i>Benefits for the tourism industry</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversifying the tourist products, positioning agritourism as a rarity <i>Advantages for farmers</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing interest in agricultural local products and ensuring their direct capitalization
Defining agritourism from the perspective of the local economy	A source of achieving and increasing the local income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The opportunity to maintain and use agricultural land • The income goes directly to the farmers' families

Source: authors' processing of various bibliographic sources [19–23].

Hence the main difference between rural tourism and agritourism is the existence of farm/agricultural activities. Agritourism must take into account some aspects (see Figure 2) [17]:

1. Agritourism must not come as a substitute for traditional agricultural occupations; thus it is essential that the owner of the rural guesthouse/farm pursues agricultural activities;
2. Because the essence of this form of tourism is rural regions and activities, the emphasis in creating a tourism product [18] must fall on activities specific to rural regions, otherwise the aim (combining tourism with agriculture) would be lost.

The uniqueness of agritourism products includes four specific identities: landscape; traditions, traditional food and art and culture; the country/farm life; life in nature.

In order to sustain a rural world, with all that it signifies from an economic, social and cultural point of view, the development of agritourism activity can be also taken into account. Thus agritourism participates in maintaining the viability and stability, i.e., the sustainability, of the rural localities, considering that the depopulation phenomenon is clearly manifested by the departure of young people to urban regions and by the abandonment of old houses and lands. Agritourism as an activity might be considered an ally of agriculture, especially when perceived from the point of view of the conservation and protection of the rural landscape and of cultural elements. The integration of the tourist business within the localities and the establishing of appropriate correlations between the above are key aspects of sustainability. By developing the services of hosting and capitalizing personal and local products, agritourism offers a sustainable solution for rural guesthouses. It is able to capitalize on the excellent accommodation existing in the peasant guesthouses, which is particularly prepared and arranged for the reception of guests, and to offer a series of activities that revolve around the peasant guesthouse and are aimed at entertaining the people who, for a certain period of time, come to rural regions for

relaxation and leisure, therapeutic care, initiation in the art of traditional crafts and for studies and documentaries, as well as other specific activities.

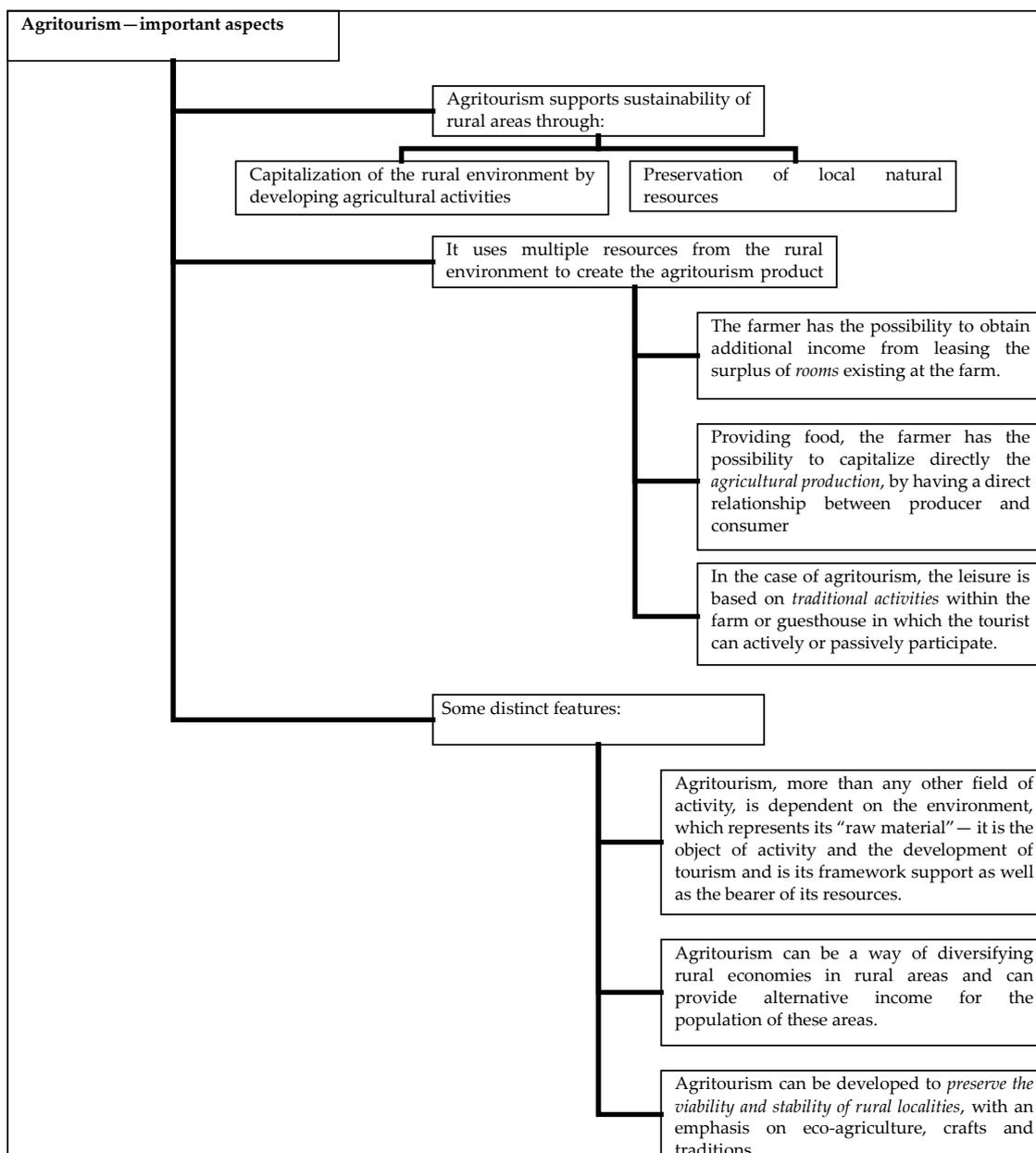


Figure 2. Agritourism in rural regions—important and relevant aspects that support its sustainability (processing after [24–26]).

The life quality in rural regions could improve if agritourism activity were involved, through the capitalization of local elements, the improvement of local infrastructure, improving the specialized training of human resources, sustaining and capitalizing the spiritual life and heritage of the communities and technical endowments; thus rural regions will become places where all elements of local sustainable development will be assembled [6,9,16,19].

1.2. The Aim of the Paper

This paper is based on the importance of agritourism for capitalizing local resources in rural regions, in order to be economically viable and environmentally friendly, so as to achieve sustainability. Therefore we begin from the idea of the existence of numerous locations with agritourist potential, and

of regions that can provide large opportunities to ensure an economically sustainable development of the Romanian rural region. We next highlight the following:

- Identification of the essence of agritourism—bringing to the foreground some key aspects of the definition and particularities of agritourism in rural regions;
- Underlining the main initiatives and challenges undertaken in the field of agritourism; in this case, multiple cases and regions where agritourism is developed, generally from the mountainous regions of Romania, have been chosen and compared;
- Identification of actions and measures specific to the local community in supporting the development of agritourism, the purpose being to capitalize on the local resources, thus supporting the future sustainable development of the community;
- Developing recommendations and relevant actions, in the form of a management plan, for a sustainable development of agritourism activity in the future.

2. Materials and Methods

The study was conducted and placed in Romanian rural regions, a region with a high potential for agritourism, which could offer a great variety of unique tourist products due to the authenticity of the life in the countryside. Consequently three regions, developed from an agritourist point of view, were chosen, compared and analyzed. A questionnaire was then applied and some proposals were formulated based on the conclusions drawn.

2.1. Research Methods

In order to follow the purpose of the paper of identifying the current situation, but also to identify actions and challenges for this type of activity in three regions considered by us representative both for agritourism and for the Romanian region, we have conducted several steps (see Figure 3): firstly the information sources were identified and the theoretical framework was prepared (office research, bibliographic studies and statistical information from the National Institute of Statistics) and data was collected from the field (through a questionnaire, meaning a tool for quantitative research) in order to obtain a general image of the tourism potential of the region; and secondly, statistical data were analyzed for drawing the main conclusions, to the extent that some possible actions and measures for future development might be supported.

Regarding the limits of the study, some critical aspects were interfered during the research period:

- A first problem was the application of the 526 questionnaires, the geographical region of research being very large, which caused their application to take a long time;
- The identification of the purely agritourist structures represented a critical aspect; a clear delimitation between the agritourist structures and rural structures was necessary at the beginning of our survey.

However, once these critical points have been eliminated, the application of the empirical analysis of the collected data, the structuring of the results and the formulation of some conclusions proceeded without further problems.

The items included in the questionnaire were grouped in the following categories:

- Identifying the characteristics of the respondents, owners of agritourism structures;
- Identifying aspects related to the knowledge of the essential characteristics of agritourism activity and the existence/non-existence of specialized training among the owners of agritourism structures;
- Identifying aspects related to the favorability of the regions for agritourism activities, through the access and tourism infrastructures, and at the same time the identification of some restrictive factors that have slowed the development of the activity so far;
- Identifying aspects related to the extent to which agritourism represented an opportunity for economic growth and development of their personal guesthouses/farms by capitalizing on the

products/crafts/services in terms of the tourist product, and identifying the resources of the region/personal guesthouse that they have relied on for the carrying out the agritourism activity so far;

- Identifying aspects related to the elements that the agritourism product from the analyzed regions, must have in order to be known on the international profile market, and the actions needed to support the improvement by the local community;
- Identifying aspects related to the involvement of the local community authorities in supporting the agritourism activities in rural regions, and the willingness of the owners of the agritourism structures to cooperate with authorities and other entities, and identifying the possible actions/measures needed for the efficient development of the agritourism activity.

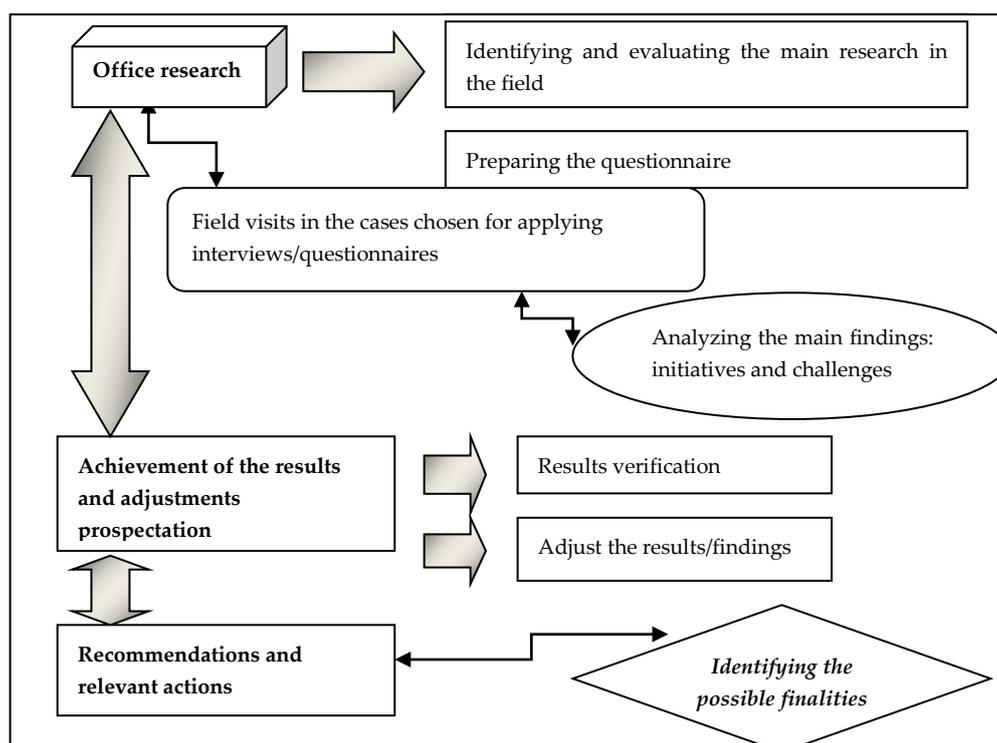


Figure 3. Research steps and actions. This figure is realized by authors, is it not taken over or processed from any source.

The questionnaire was applied by two members of our team of researchers during 2019 (in the winter and summer seasons) through face-to-face interviews, addressed directly to those involved in developing this activity, i.e., the owners of agritourism structures (ones practicing both agriculture and tourism).

The selection of agritourism guesthouses from each of the above-mentioned three regions proceeded as follows: the definition of an agritourism guesthouse (structures having a maximum accommodation capacity of up to eight rooms, with the obligation to provide meals from natural products and prepared in their own household, i.e., combining agricultural activities as main activities with tourist activities as complementary activities) served as a starting point, after which the guesthouses' representativeness for agritourism activity, their number within each region and their economic representativeness were quantified. Thus the selected guesthouses were as follows:

- For the Bran-Moeciu region, from the 383 existing agritourism guesthouses we took into consideration the 270 most representative ones. Despite the fact that not all the owners wanted to answer our questionnaire, we considered the questionnaires of the ones who answered valid, and we introduce in the study only the ones that were answered—266 structures;

- The Apuseni Mountains region has a 258 agritourism guesthouses, from which we considered 190 structures as being the most representative for our research; from these only 185 owners answered our questions;
- The Maramures region has 174 agritourism guesthouses, out of which we considered 80 as the most representative; from these we questioned 75 agritourism structures and five of them refused to provide any kind of information, leaving 70 valid questionnaires.

In conclusion, there were 14 owners (four from the Bran-Moeciu region, five from the Apuseni Mountains region and five from the Maramures region) that did not want to answer any question and thus were not included in this study; the remaining 526, from all three regions, responded entirely to all of the questions and were thus included in this study.

The varying sample size in the three explored regions was established directly in proportion with the total number of agritourism guesthouses existing in each region, having as a starting point the definition of an agritourism guesthouse, and the features of each of the three regions: the Bran-Moeciu region is the oldest region with agritourism structures in the country; the Apuseni Mountains region is the largest geographic region, but is less developed in the number of existing agritourism structures; and the Maramures region is a smaller geographical region and also has a smaller number of agritourism structures.

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS computer software, and statistical calculations were performed and findings were presented using tables and charts for interpretation.

2.2. Research Objectives

We consider the main aim as being the “target”, and the research objectives as being the “means/steps” that help us to reach the target. In order to achieve the main aim of the paper, i.e., the initiatives and challenges of agritourism activity from several mountain rural regions, we will follow some aspects in our research:

1. Identification and description of the tourist structures that capitalize the specific resources for rural environments through tourist activities.
2. Presentation of some rural regions, in terms of their favorability for agritourism activities (taking into consideration the existing potential), and also identification of some aspects which the three regions still have to develop in order to make the agritourism product visible on the market.
3. Determining the extent to which the agritourism activity is considered by the local owners of a guesthouse or farm as a possibility of economic growth and development.
4. Identification of the elements of an agritourist product and of the directions for possible improvements in the regions subjected to analysis.
5. Underling the involvement of the local community authorities in supporting the agritourism activities by identifying some possible actions/measures, and creating a possible action plan to support the efficient development of this activity.

3. Results

3.1. Agritourism in Romania—Initiatives and the Current Situation

The research aimed at the beginning towards the identification and summary of the main initiatives and challenges undertaken for Romanian agritourism development (Table 2).

Table 2. Agritourism in Romania—initiatives and challenges undertaken to support its development.

Steps for Romanian Agritourism Development	Actions	Consequences/Benefits
The first attempts of organized tourism were made in 1967–1968.	A series of measures have been taken in order to ensure the accommodation and thus the fluidization of the Romanian Black Sea coast.	It was a promising start.
In 1972, the Ministry of Tourism elaborated Order 297/1972.	The Research Center for the Promotion of International Tourism continues identifying and selecting representative rural localities appropriate for rural tourism activity.	It has been established that about 118 rural localities can serve domestic and international tourism.
On July 16 th , 1973 the Order of the Ministry of Tourism number 744/1973 was issued.	Experimentally, 14 localities were declared villages of tourist interest, called “tourist villages”: Leresti (Arges County), Fundata Sirmea (Brasov), Sibiel (Sibiu), Tismana (Gorj County), Murighiol and Crisan (Tulcea), Racos (Timis County), Sfantu Gheorghe (Tulcea), Bogdan Voda (Maramures County), Vatra Moldovitei (Suceava County), Poiana salted water (Bacau), and Valcea (Vaideeni) [27].	The introduction of the possibility of rural environment capitalization through tourist activities.
Through the Decree 225/1974 accommodation of foreign tourists in private homes was forbidden.	Tourist villages become non-functional for external tourism. In many localities, guesthouses met the conditions of accommodation (Rucar, Vatra Moldovitei, Vaideeni) but it was forbidden to accommodate foreign tourists. With very small exceptions, this situation lasted until 1989.	The short period of the “formalization” of rural tourism did not make possible the organization of the activity or the proper arrangement of the tourist villages.
The period of 1989 and after	Support for the proper development of agritourism activity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The first guesthouses registered for rural tourism were in the Moeciu-Bran-Rucar region. The guesthouses registered in rural regions were then expanded. - The first house from Romania that obtained the certificate of an agritourist guesthouse was the villa “Santa Maria” located between the ridges of the Bucegi and Pietra Craiului Mountains, with Mrs. Mioara Stoian as owner. 	Agritourism has become a certainty in Romania as it presents itself as a complex and well-articulated activity.

Source: Processing of data from [1,2,4,5,27].

According to the theoretical framework and bibliographic sources, a large number of Romanian mountain rural regions can provide wide opportunities for sustaining agritourism activities, by combining local economic interests in such a way as to promote the sustainability of the development of communities through appropriate and effective strategies for capitalizing local resources.

In this regard, there are plenty of examples according to which many other European places manage to transform agritourism activities into a real valuable alternative in socio-economic terms [10,17,19,22,23,25,28–31]. Rural tourism in Romania has been practiced since ancient times, but in a spontaneous, sporadic, accidental, and especially unorganized manner; it began in the 1920s–1930s in the form of the accommodation of occasional visitors to rural settlements; after 1989 it began to meet economic, social, cultural, spiritual and other needs (see Table 2).

According to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, at Romania’s level, regarding the dynamics in the evolution of some statistical-economic indicators, we must make the following statements (see Table 3):

- Regarding the number of agritourism guesthouses registered at the national level, in the analyzed period, we note an evolution in terms of their number, from 1354 registered in 2010 up to 2800 registered in 2019, the predominant share having the agritourism structures of two and three daisies/flowers (specific classification of agrotourism guesthouses fom Romania).
- The index of net use of the accommodation capacity also had an ascending development during the analyzed period, from 12.4% in 2010 to 23.2% in 2019, a possible cause being the consolidation of the agritourism image among the consumers of tourism.

Table 3. Agritourism in Romania—current situation.

Specification	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of agritourism guesthouses	1354	1210	1569	1598	1665	1918	2028	2556	2821	2800
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity (%)	12.4	13.8	13.2	12.6	13.2	15.1	15.5	15.7	18.9	23.2

Source: Processing of data from the National Institute of Statistics, <http://statistici.insse.ro>, consulted on 4 December 2019 [32].

Many studies [10,17,19,22,23,25,28–30] have shown that tourism, combined with rural or local resources and traditional/rural specific products, would be an important “tool” for revitalizing the rural economy and for the sustainability of rural regions, and that this should be an essential component in the strategy of the development of the rural economy.

Some of the potent localities from the country have succeeded in capitalizing the niche character of agritourism, and by applying adequate and efficient strategies of capitalizing traditional resources and products through agritourism managed to move from the pioneer stage to an economically-socially valuable alternative for the rural environment [28–30].

3.2. Representative Agritourism Regions in Romania—Analysis and Comparisons

The regions taken for analysis in this paper are: the Bran-Moeciu region, the Apuseni Mountains region and the Maramures region; in this section we will describe the main resources of those regions that can contribute to sustaining agritourism resources.

The peculiarities of the tourist offer from the first region, *Bran-Moeciu*, are outlined based on the local tourist heritage, resources and services involved in the development of tourism activity. The region consists of three large communes, each with several villages, as follows: the Bran Commune, consisting of the villages Bran, Predelut, Sohodol, Shimon and Poarta; the Moeciu Commune, consisting of the villages Moeciu de Jos, Moeciu de Sus, Cheia, Magura and Pestera; the Fundata Commune with the villages Drumul Carului, Fundata, Fundatica and Sirnea. Until not long ago, the main occupation of the inhabitants of the region was mountain agriculture, the main focus being on animal husbandry. In recent years, agritourism has gone through unprecedented development, and it tends to become the main economic activity in the whole Bran region. Moreover, in the region of the Moeciu Commune there are some of the most famous agritourism guesthouses from the whole Bran region.

Being one of the oldest regions in the country, in terms of the official establishment and development of the agritourism activity, the representative tourist resources of the Bran-Moeciu region (see Figure 4) can be a future basis for sustaining this tourist region.

A second region, recently promoted and internationally recognized as one with an immense potential for the development of agritourism, and therefore chosen for analysis in this research, is the *Apuseni Mountains region*, which has been the subject of much research over time regarding the possibility of agritourism development [33–36]. According to experts, the total region of the Apuseni Mountains is approximately 16,200 km² (about 7% of the country’s surface region), and it covers the territory of six counties—Alba, Arad, Bihor, Cluj, Hunedoara and Salaj. The region is characterized by a low degree of urbanization, of about 30%, and 15 tourist regions, each having specific features and characterized by certain forms of tourism that can be developed, with many of the rural localities having a remarkable potential (see Figure 5). The 258 agritourism guesthouses (see Table 4) subject to comparison and existing in the region of the Apuseni Mountains have numerous aspects considered representative of the rural environment, which are capitalized and available to be further capitalized through agritourism. These aspects ensure the sustainability of the rural environment, the capitalization of these local products being an initiative but also a future challenge. The tourist resources specific to the region are capitalized by introducing them into some tourism programs, which emphasize quietness and beautiful landscapes. The traditions, customs, natural tourist resources and typical gastronomic products are also advantages, but the studied region still has to develop from this point of view, especially when marketing these products. For instance, they should create other paths through which to promote their products rather than the food given in guesthouses; in other words, there is a high potential with multiple challenges.

The *Maramureş region* [37] region is considered unique and inviting repeated visits, due to its mixture of notable landscapes, good-natured people, wooden architecture and famous churches whose towers can be seen from a long distance make Maramures region an “easy” and interesting place to visit. The fact that local people have kept their traditions, perhaps better than in any other Romanian

community, still wearing folk costume, weaving textiles, carving wooden objects and so on, adds to the region’s appeal.

Regarding the technical and material basis of the three regions under study and comparison (see Table 4), one can notice an almost constant evolution from a quantitative point of view, and a significant structural position of the agritourism guesthouses can be noticed from a qualitative point of view.

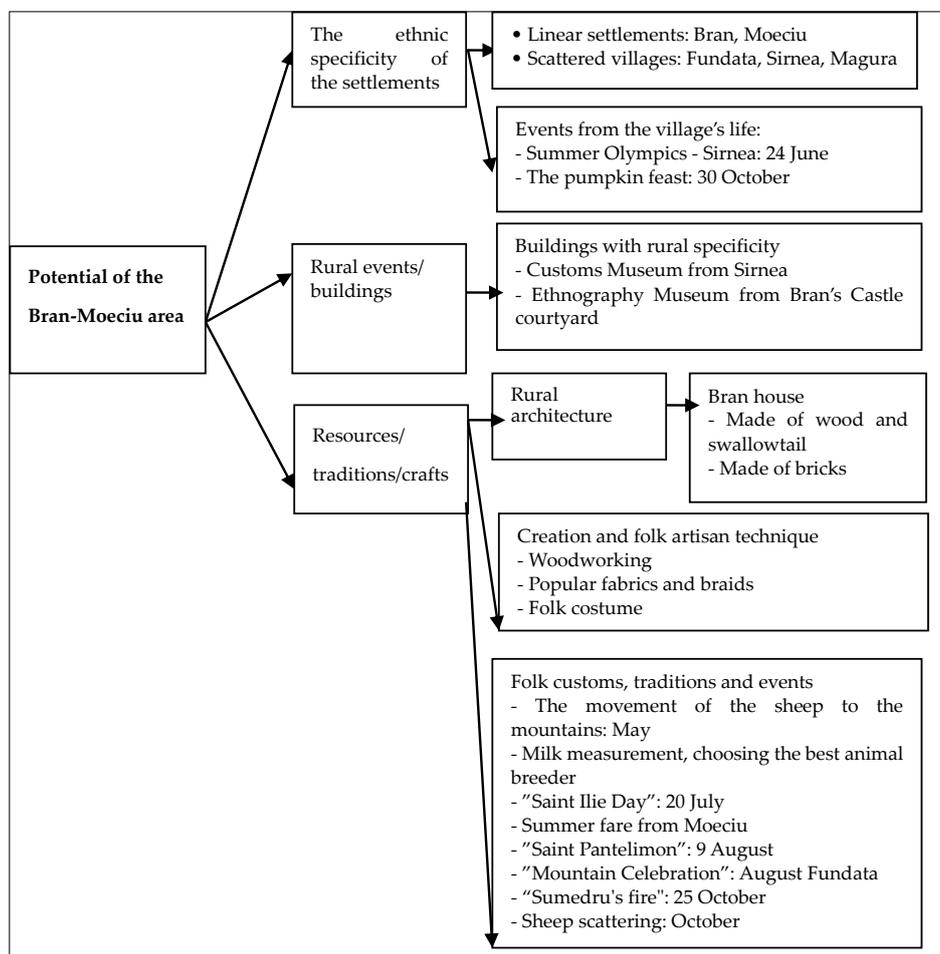


Figure 4. The Bran-Moeciu region—representative tourist resources.

Table 4. Representative agritourism regions in Romania—analysis and comparisons.

Agritourism in the Bran-Moeciu region—current situation										
Specification	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	177	186	260	286	299	347	352	411	402	383
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity	12.4	13.8	13.2	12.6	13.2	15.1	15.5	16.4	18	12.4
Agritourism in the Apuseni Mountains region—current situation										
Specification	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	154	121	150	142	139	149	161	249	254	258
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity	10.2	11.4	13.5	12.6	12.9	14.3	15.4	15.6	15.7	15.9
Agritourism in Maramures region—current situation										
Specification	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
No. of agritourism guesthouses (number)	104	77	78	78	71	79	104	147	144	147
Index of net use of agritourism accommodation capacity	11.4	12.2	13.1	12.7	13.2	14.1	14.8	15.4	16.4	13.2

Source: Processing of data from the National Institute of Statistics, <http://statistici.insse.ro>, consulted on 4 December 2019 [32].

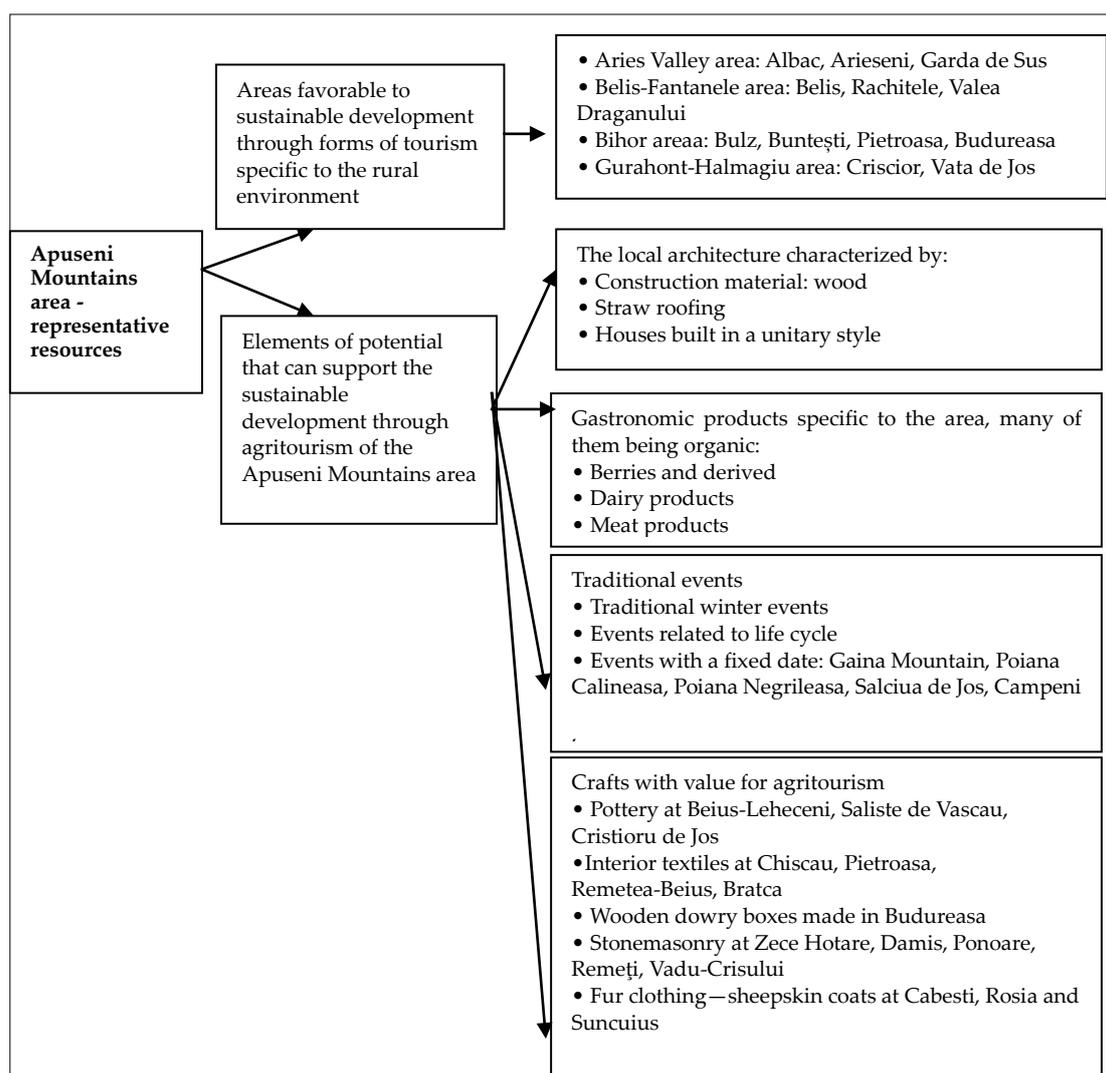


Figure 5. Apuseni Mountains region—representative tourist resources.

3.3. Identifying the Current Situation and Challenges of Agritourism Activity in the Regions Taken under Study

Considering that some comparisons relevant for the Romanian agritourism activity was desired, we started from identifying some regions at the national level with a tradition in practicing this activity, including the Bran-Moeciu region, the Maramures region (which came to light on an international level due to its great amount of traditions and very well preserved ancestral crafts) and the Apuseni Mountains region (with a more recent debut in the agritourism activity, but internationally considered as “one of the 20 most beautiful tourist destinations” [38] and one of the most “well-kept secrets from Eastern Europe” according to CNN).

3.3.1. Identifying the Characteristics of the Respondents (Owners of Agritourism Structures)

Processing the data (see Table 5) following the application of the 566 questionnaires, the following respondent characteristics were observed: in the Bran-Moeciu region, which represents 50.57% of the total questionnaires applied, 55.26% of the owners of agritourism structures were male and 47.73% female. In the second region, the Apuseni Mountains, which represents 35.17% of the total questionnaires applied, 61.62% male respondents predominate among the owners of agritourism structures. In case of the Maramures region, which represents 14.25% of the total number of respondents, the majority share of respondents is represented by female owners of agritourism structures, at 57.33%,

a possible explanation deriving from the fact that it is perhaps the region in which the traditions/crafts are not only best kept and used until today, but are largely practiced by female gender representatives; additionally, in this region the creative spirit has somehow intersected with the entrepreneurial style, thus launching agritourism structures.

Table 5. The characteristics of the respondents, owners of agritourism structures.

Studied Region	Measure Unit	Men	Women	Total	
				No.	%
Bran-Moeciu region	No.	147	119	266	50.57
	%	55.26	47.73		
Apuseni Mountains region	No.	114	71	185	35.17
	%	61.62	38.37		
Maramures region	No.	32	43	75	14.25
	%	42.66	57.33		

3.3.2. Identifying Aspects Related to the Knowledge of Agritourism Activity's Essential Characteristics and the Existence/Non-Existence of Specialized Training among the Owners of Agritourism Structures

At the Romanian rural environment level, there are numerous tourist structures that capitalize specific resources of the rural environment through tourist activities, but not all of these are agritourist structures. Even though there are very small differences between the rural tourism structures and the agritourism structures, the benefits brought by the two types of rural environment structures are totally different, namely the strong support for the sustainability of the rural environment brought through the agritourism structures. Therefore we considered *the knowledge of the essential characteristics of the agritourism activity* to be an aspect worth analyzing (see Table 6 and Figure 6), especially when it comes to the owners of agritourism structures. Thus, for the first region subjected to study and comparison, the Bran-Moeciu region, from the 266 owners questioned, 65.48% did not differentiate between the concepts of rural tourism and agritourism, failing to identify the particularities of the agritourism activity. The second region, the Apuseni Mountains, is geographically larger, and may be less known and accessible to tourists, and among the owners of agritourism structures. Among the owners of agritourism structures from Maramures, the third region analyzed, unfortunately it is registered a high weight, 81.33%, of owners did not differentiate between the two forms of tourism specific to the rural environment, but unlike the previously analyzed regions, the specific lifestyle of the region is much better integrated into the tourist product. The second aspect pursued, *the existence/non-existence of specialized training among the owners of agritourism structures* (see Table 6), shows that there is room for improvement in all the three regions subject to the study, the percentage of those who have a specialized training in the field of agritourism is lower than of those who do not have any training.

Table 6. Aspects related to the knowledge of the essential characteristics of agritourism activity and the existence/non-existence of specialized training.

Studied Region	Measure Unit	Knowledge of the Essential Characteristics of the Agritourism Activity		Existence/Non-existence of Specialized Training for Owners of Guesthouses		Total Questioned/Percentage
		Yes	No	Yes	No	
Bran-Moeciu region	No.	78	148	83	183	266
	%	34.51	65.48	31.20	68.79	
Apuseni Mountains region	No.	67	118	65	120	185
	%	36.21	63.78	35.13	68.86	
Maramures region	No.	14	61	24	51	75
	%	18.66	81.33	32.00	68.00	

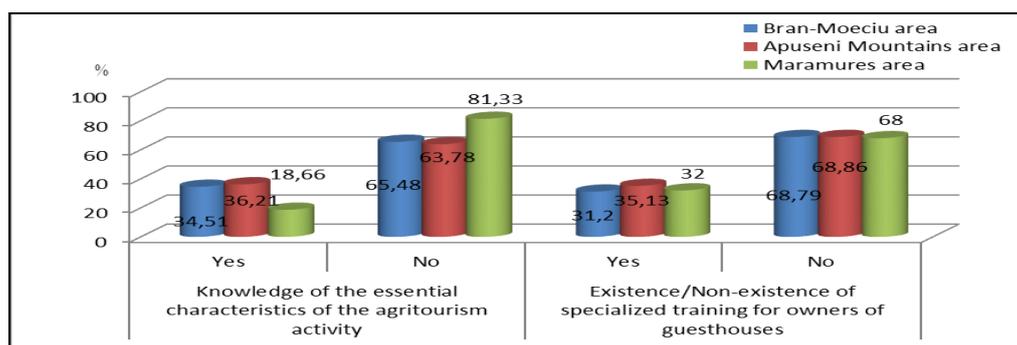


Figure 6. Aspects related to the knowledge of the essential characteristics of the agritourism activity and the existence/non-existence of specialized training.

Identifying aspects related to the favorability for agritourism activities, in terms of the access infrastructure and the necessary infrastructure for the tourist activities, and at the same time the nomination of some restrictive factors that have slowed down the development of the activity so far are also important aspects that highlight the role of the local community in the development of agritourism activity (see Table 7 and Figure 7).

Table 7. Aspects related to the favorability of the regions under study for agritourism activities and restrictive factors.

Studied Region	Measure Unit	Favorability of the Regions Subject to the Study for Agritourism Activities—Access and Tourist Infrastructure		Restrictive Factors That Have Slowed down the Development of Agritourism Activity
		Yes	No	
Bran-Moeciu region	No. %	184 69.17	82 30.82	Lack of a structure of assistance strictly for agritourism Lack of financial resources Lack of marketing knowledge in such a way that the agritourist product can “make itself visible”
Apuseni Mountains region	No. %	98 52.97	87 47.02	
Maramures region	No. %	53 70.66	22 29.33	

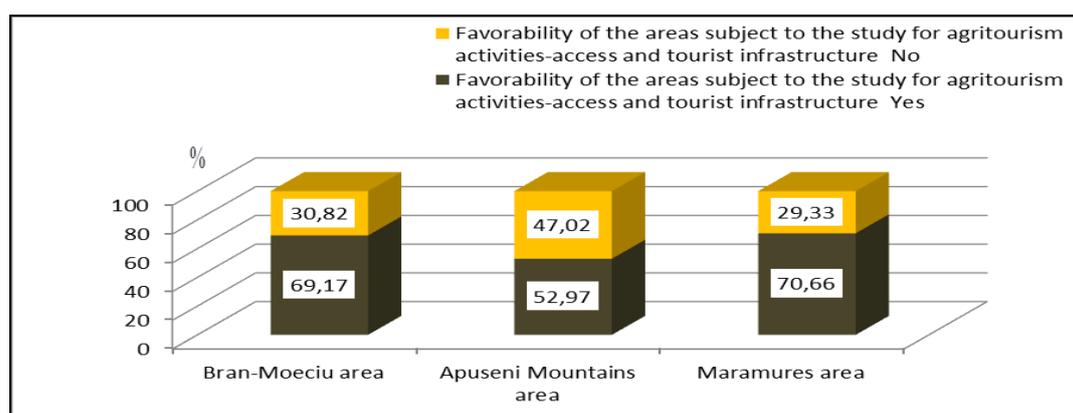


Figure 7. Aspects related to the favorability of the regions under study for agritourism activities.

The access and tourist infrastructures, even if they are somewhat problematic incomplete, do not stop the agritourism activity in the regions under study, but rather slow it down. In order to support any action of sustainable development of a region, we consider that it is very important to know the restrictive factors that have slowed down the process so far, and in the case of the three regions subjected to our comparison, the owners of agritourism have nominated factors such as: lack of a structure of assistance strictly for agritourism, lack of financial resources and lack of marketing knowledge so that the agritourist product can “make itself visible”.

3.3.3. Identifying Aspects Related to the Extent to which Agritourism Represents a Chance of Economic Growth and Development of own Guesthouse/Farm by Capitalizing the Products/Crafts/Services through the Tourist Product and the Identification of the Resources of the Region/Guesthouse to Rely on In Case of Agritourism Activity

With the first aspect followed, i.e., the extent to which agritourism represented a chance of economic growth and development of own guesthouse/farm by capitalizing the products/crafts/services through the tourist product (see Table 8 and Figure 8a,b) we wanted to highlight the confidence of the agritourism structures' owners in the viability of the tourist activity carried out—viability that would support their own development, and also the findings that strengthened the belief according to which a significant percentage of those carrying out this activity are convinced that they are on the right track (see Figure 8a).

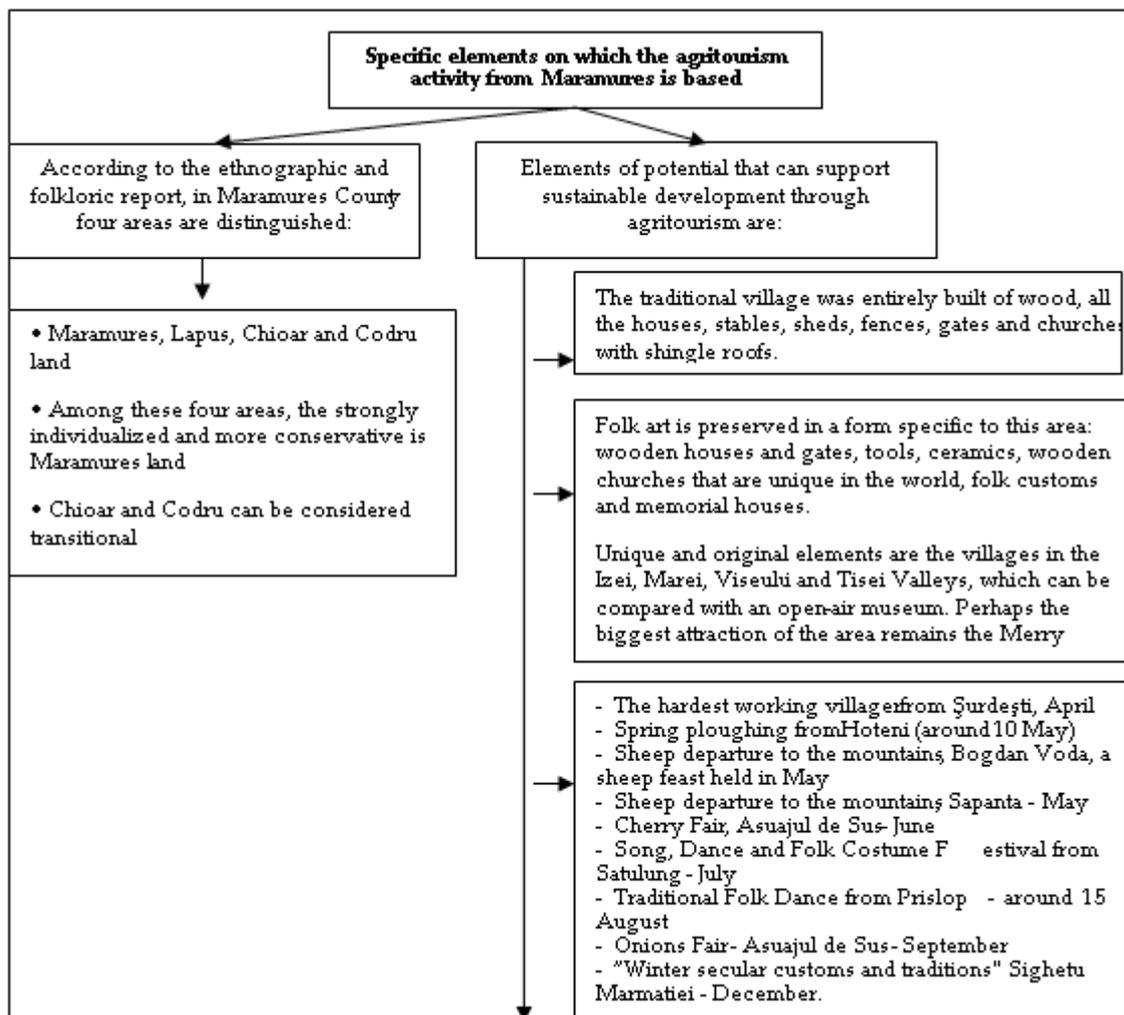


Figure 8. (a) The extent to which agritourism represented an opportunity of economic growth and development of own guesthouse; (b) The resources of the region/own guesthouse to rely on in case of agritourism activity.

Table 8. The extent to which agritourism represents a chance of economic growth and development of own guesthouse/farm by capitalizing products/crafts/services.

Studied Region	Measure Unit	Identifying The Extent To Which Agritourism Represented An Opportunity Of Economic Growth And Development Of Own Guesthouse/Farm		Identification of the Resources of the Region/Own Guesthouse to Rely on in Case of Agritourism Activity			
		Yes	No	Unique Resources of the Location	Activities Specific to the Life on the Farm in the Mountain Region	Gastronomy	Traditions and Customs, Crafts
Bran-Moeciu region	No. %	165 62.03	101 37.96	112 42.10	76 28.57	36 13.53	42 15.78
Apuseni Mountains region	No. %	117 63.24	68 36.75	76 41.08	25 13.51	32 17.29	52 28.10
Maramures region	No. %	62 82.66	13 17.33	23 30.66	6 8.00	18 24.00	28 37.33

As far as the second aspect is concerned, i.e., *the resources of the region/own guesthouse to rely on in case of agritourism activity*, (see Figure 8b) the answers were highlighted by grouping into four categories of resources, and, from the analysis of the share of these categories of resources in supporting the agritourism activity (see Table 8), the reality specific to each region is made apparent, but also the fact that the owners of agritourism structures have largely succeeded in identifying the resources of the region and to capitalize them to some extent through agritourism:

- In the Bran-Moeciu region, the owners of agritourism structures have relied on developing activity based on the unique resources relevant to the location, and on activities specific to the life on an agricultural farm;
- In the Apuseni Mountains region, the existence of numerous unique resources, as well as the numerous traditions/customs/crafts, are the main strengths on the basis of which the majority of agritourism structures are built;
- The Maramures region's representative elements for agritourism are numerous traditions, numerous rural resources (see Figure 9), some known on international level, and moreover well-preserved gastronomic elements—these aspects being highlighted from the responses of interviewed owners of agritourism structures.

3.3.4. Identifying Elements that Agritourist Product Must Have In Order to Be Known on the International Profile Market, and the Role of the Local Community in Supporting the Improvement Directions of Tourist Products, so as to Ensure the Sustainable Development of the Local Community

Recently, the return to nature and natural products or to the rural environment is becoming more pronounced; therefore the tourist focuses on the most natural food and wants an active involvement in the life of the community, as was highlighted by numerous studies [25,39,40]. The owners of agritourism structures from the regions under study (see Table 9 and Figure 10a,b) are aware of this aspect, as was proven by the survey. The question was elaborated with three answer options, and the agritourism structures' owners were not limited to choosing a single answer. The results showed (see Figure 10a) that:

- A total of 461 out of the 526 owners questioned, i.e., 87.63%, consider that the return to nature and active relaxation (1) would be the element that the agritourist product from the three regions under study should rely on in order to be known on the international profile market, and within the regions analyzed, the owners from Bran-Moeciu region put this aspect first;
- A total of 389 out of the 526 owners questioned, i.e., 73.94%, believe that the focus should be on healthy food/products (2) so that the Romanian agritourist product would be known internationally, and within the regions analyzed, the owners from Apuseni Mountains region were the ones who put this aspect first;
- A total of 327 out of the 526 owners questioned, i.e., 62.15%, believe that the participation in the life of the rural community (3) would be the element needed by the Romanian agritourist product

in order to make itself known, and a large proportion of those from the Maramures region relied on this aspect.

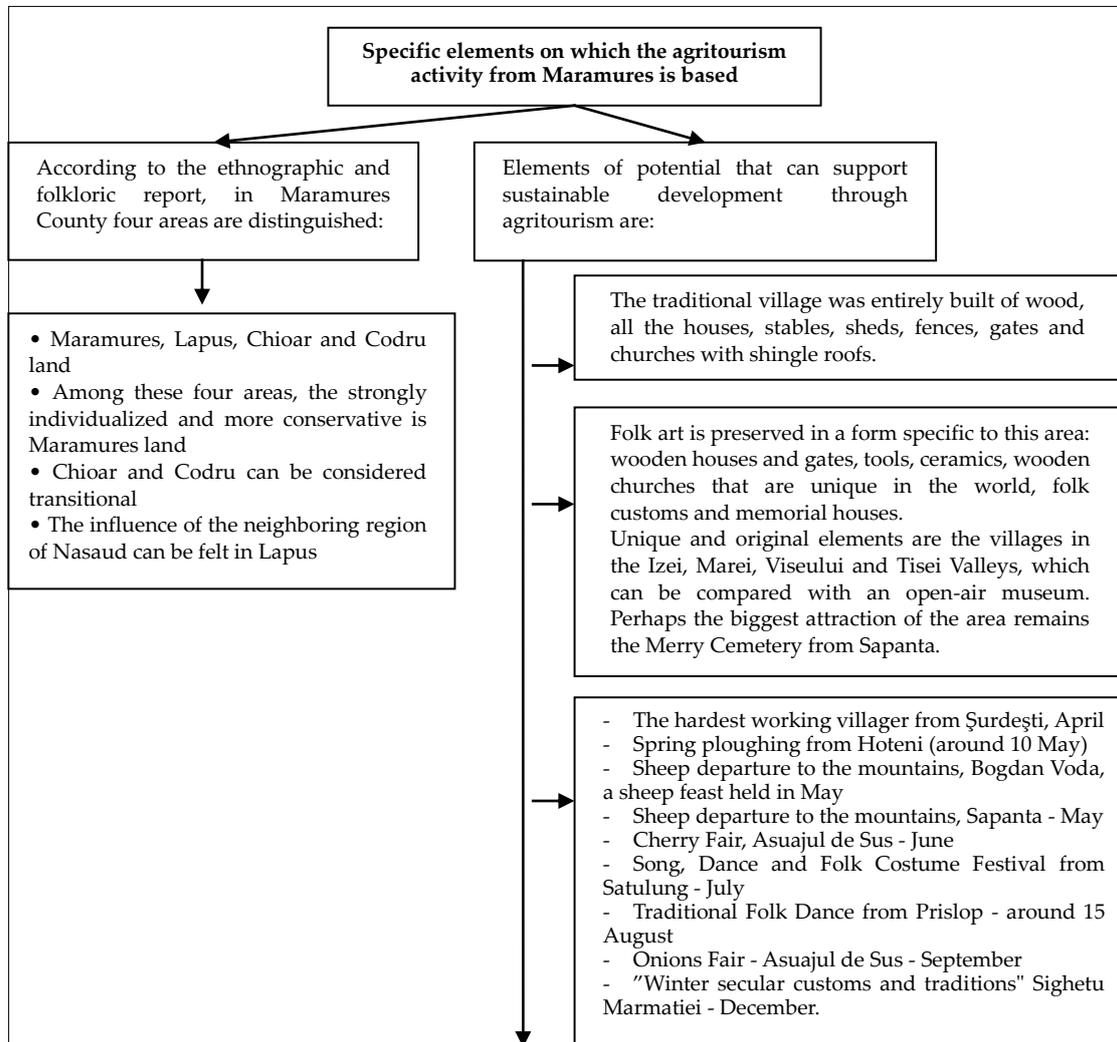


Figure 9. Maramures region—representative tourist resources.

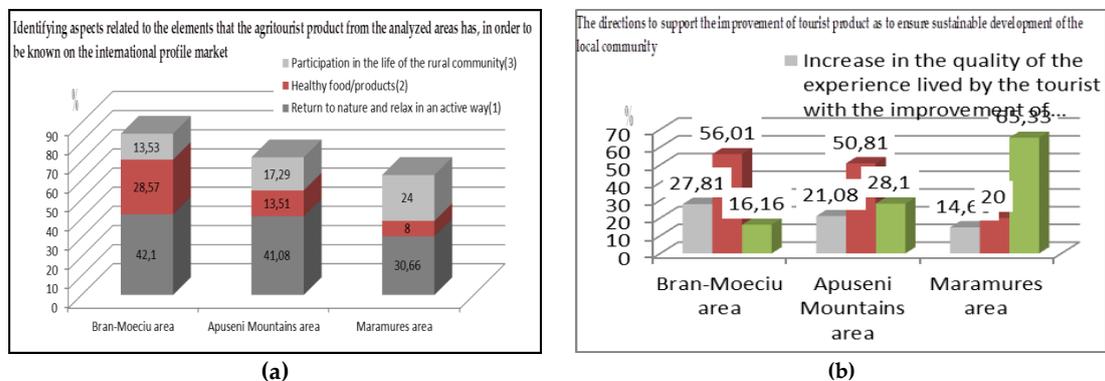


Figure 10. (a) Identifying aspects related to the elements that the agritourist product from the analyzed regions has in order to be known on the international profile market; (b) The directions to support the improvement of the tourist product so as to ensure the sustainable development of the local community.

Agritourism is a field of activity which, through the specificity of the tourist product, can support the future sustainable development of the community, the role of the community being to identify *the directions to support the improvement of tourist product by the local community* (Table 9, Figure 10b). The sustainable development of the community would be supported through the three directions identified for the long term. The question was provided with three answer variants, with the owners of agritourism structures being limited to a single answer. The results were as following (see Figure 10b):

- An increase of the quality of the tourist experience by improving the accommodation (a) was chosen by respondents from the Bran-Moeciu and Apuseni regions;
- A focus on the agritourism activities used to attract tourists (b) is the main element possible to be sustained by the local community in order to improve the tourist product chosen by respondents from the Bran-Moeciu region and from the Apuseni Mountains;
- The introduction of local gastronomic products (c) is the direction that can be supported by the local community in order to improve the tourist product, according to respondents from the Maramures region and the Apuseni Mountains.

Table 9. The elements that the agritourist product from the analyzed regions should rely on in order to be known on the international profile market, and the directions to support the improvement of the tourist product by the local community.

Studied Region	MEASURE UNIT	Identifying Aspects Related to the Elements that the Agritourist Product from the Analyzed Regions has in order to be Known on the International Profile Market			The Directions to Support the Improvement of the Tourist Product so as to Ensure the Sustainable Development of the Local Community		
		Return to Nature and Active Relaxation (1)	Healthy Food/Products (2)	Participation in the Life of the Rural Community (3)	Increasing the Quality of the Tourists' Experience with the Improvement of Accommodation (a)	Focus on the Agritourism Activities Used to Attract the Tourist (b)	Introduction of Local Gastronomic Products (c)
Bran-Moeciu region	No.	204	136	119	74	149	43
	%	38.78	25.85	22.62	27.81	56.01	16.16
Apuseni Mountains region	No.	185	178	143	39	94	52
	%	35.17	33.84	27.18	21.08	50.81	28.10
Maramures region	No.	72	75	65	11	15	49
	%	13.68	14.25	12.35	14.66	20.00	65.33

3.3.5. Identifying Aspects Related to the Involvement of the Local Community Authorities in Supporting Agritourism Activities and the Willingness of the Owners of Agritourism Structures to Cooperate with Authorities and Other Entities, in order to Identify the Possible Actions/Measures for Efficient Sustainable Development of Agritourism Activities

Regarding the role of the local community in the development of agritourism (see Table 10), it can be noticed (albeit at a discrete level) that the owners of agritourism structures are aware of the involvement of the authorities, and among the support actions they have listed: operativity in the actions of establishing/creating agritourism structures; road signaling for the existence of agritourism structures; and discreet promotion by including the agritourism structure on the city hall's website. 100% of the respondents expressed their availability and willingness to collaborate with the local community authorities. Additionally, those questioned were those who identified the possible actions/measures for the efficient development of their agritourism activity.

As far as the sustainability of this activity is concerned, the practice of agritourism represents the tourist capitalization of those three rural regions of specific natural resources, of cultural heritage, of village traditions, and of the specific agricultural products, and are an adequate response to the needs of modern society recreation that aim to:

- Encourage the practice of traditional activities in the neighboring rural communities,
- Stop the land abandonment and the chaotic development of tourism activities, in deep disagreement with the representative features of the region, supporting farmers to add complementary income to their farm;

- Support the preservation of and at the same time add value to rural traditions and cultural initiatives;
- Capitalize “specific” rural products that will improve the relationship between city and countryside.

The sustainability of agritourism in rural regions cannot be dissociated from the economic, social and cultural life of the community in which it manifests itself, and has a multiplier effect on all the domains with which it interacts.

It is true that tourist activity, in general, does not always mean sustainability for a region, as it could sometimes cause damage to the environment, but as agritourism is concerned, it promotes the idea of combining the economic interests with the sustainable development of communities, and also with the conservation of nature. Hence, starting from the consideration that sustainability encourages those actions that support the economic purposes of rural settlements, but with a strong emphasis on harmonious environmental principles, we can state, with the help of other specialists [28–30,41–46], that agritourism is, in our times, a chance perhaps to ensure both economic development of rural settlements and the “health” of the environment, in other words to achieve the sustainability of rural regions.

Table 10. The involvement of the local community authorities in supporting agritourism activities and possible actions/measures for the efficient development of agritourism activity.

Studied Region	Measure Unit	The Involvement of the Local Community Authorities in Supporting Agritourism Activities			The Possible Actions/Measures for the Efficient Sustainable Development of Agritourism Activity	
		Yes	Mention Some Actions	No		
Bran-Moeciu region	No.	138	Operativity in the actions of establishing/creating agritourism structures	128	-	Help for increasing the low visibility of agritourism product at national and international level
	%	51.87		45.11		
Apuseni Mountains region	No.	98	Road signaling for the existence of agritourism structures	87	-	Providing financial support or consulting to companies operating in the agritourism activity
	%	52.97		47.02		
Maramures region	No.	52	Discreet promotion by including the agritourism structure on the city hall’s website	23		
	%	69.33		30.66		

4. Discussion

Rural settlements are equally the work of different communities and of time. They must be preserved as a cultural heritage of humanity. For the regions in which the habitat is preserved in the traditional forms, two imperatives appear: on the one hand, the necessity of preserving the villages and nature with all the elements that form a coherent environment, and on the other hand a maximum effort to raise the awareness concerning their invaluable cultural heritage in order to ensure a sustainable development. The revival of rural settlements represents a model of entrepreneurship [47] and a difficult effort that requires study, time and funds; a sustainable solution for the revival of villages can be their introduction into the agritourism activity.

There are many rural regions that have used tourism as a way of which they are proud of providing a living and additional revenues. The development of rural tourism leads to the sustainable economic development of these rural localities [48–53]. The defining feature is that those who live in rural regions must be the main actors in the development of agritourism activity. The interest of the local community in the future foundation of agritourism activities must concentrate on elaborating a strategy, or a development plan, starting from the current realities and with the aim of sustainable development in the long term.

Starting from the statement above, our desire was not to cease at identifying the current situation of the agritourism activity in the three regions under study, but to provide some proposals (based strictly on the needs of the regions arising resulting from the study), whose implementation, in our opinion, represents future challenges and ways of supporting the agritourism activity.

Developing some recommendations and relevant actions (see Table 11), starting from the current initiatives, represent a real challenge for the studied regions, in the form of a management plan, in order to ensure the sustainable development of agritourism in the future. Modern agritourism strongly depends on innovative management and good leadership [54,55]. Agritourism promotes the idea

of combining in the development of communities economic interests with those that seek nature conservation. The entrepreneurs from these regions can have a successful model [56] to capitalize the tourist potential and to supplement their income by adding a modest income from the tourist activities. Such a proposal aims at an approach focused on the regions, which capitalizes the advantages of the regions: agriculture, tourism and recreational activities.

Table 11. Sustainability of agritourism activities—the priorities of an eventual action plan: initiatives and challenges for the future.

Specific Priorities	Measures Necessary to Achieve the Proposed Priority	Target Groups	Eventual Possible Benefits for the Community
<i>Creating some brand tourist products, specific to each region, which reflect the identity/authenticity of the region</i>	Focus on returning to nature and active relaxation and participation in the life of the rural community, with an emphasis on the main resources of each region Increasing the quality of the tourism experience with the improvement of accommodation and activities Possible collaborative partnerships with producers in rural regions, to ensure healthy food/products	Residents and tourists who are willing to “rely” on agritourism activities	Stimulation of those who carry out agricultural activities Additional income for the inhabitants of the region Capitalizing on local resources through new tourist establishments
<i>Human resources development in the agritourism sector</i>	Creating the possibility, by the local authorities, for owners of agritourism structures to participate in some training courses, because in all the three regions of our study, the percentage of those who have a specialized training in the field of agritourism is lower than those who do not have any training	Farmers, employees and freelancers	Efficiency and knowledge in creating the tourist product Possibility of diversifying the services offered to the tourist
<i>Development of the public–private partnership [57] in agritourism</i>	Conducting information campaigns on the possibility of practicing agritourism and the advantages that agritourism presents Creating a form of association between local administrations and owners of agritourism structures and local farmers/producers Technical assistance for creating the agritourism structure from an administrative point of view Development of some consulting forms for tourism initiatives	Tourist units in the region Local public administrations Associations of producers of traditional products Various private partners (producers/farmers of traditional products)	Protection of local values Development of rural tourism by encouraging local investments in this field of activity Encouraging the development of agritourism projects

Source: own proposals of the authors based on the conclusion of the research.

5. Conclusions

We stated in the opening of the paper that the idea of this paper is to emphasize the necessity and importance of agritourism for rural regions, and in order to achieve our goal we chose to study three of the Romanian rural mountain regions. Therefore, in order to achieve the main aim of the paper we tried to highlight:

- Aspects related to the knowledge of agritourism activity’s essential characteristics and the existence/non-existence of specialized training among the owners of agritourism structures;
- The favorability for agritourism activities, in terms of the access and tourism infrastructure, and at the same time the nomination of some restrictive factors;
- The extent to which agritourism represents an opportunity for economic growth and development of questionnaire respondents’ guesthouses/farms by capitalizing products/crafts/services through the tourist product, and the identification of the resources of the region/guesthouses can rely on in case of agritourism activity;
- The elements that an agritourist product needs in order to be known on the international profile market, and the role of the local community in supporting the improvement directions of the tourist product, so as to ensure the sustainable development of the local community;
- The involvement of the local community authorities in supporting agritourism activities and the willingness of the owners of agritourism structures to cooperate with authorities and other entities, in order to identify the possible actions/measures for the efficient sustainable development of agritourism activity.

Looking at the results obtained from the research, the main findings of the actions proposed are synthesized in several discussions:

At the Romanian rural environment level, there are numerous tourist structures that capitalize the specific resources from the rural environment through tourist activities, with three regions being

representative: Bran-Moeciu, Apuseni Mountains and Maramures. For the three regions, less than 50% of the owners of agritourism structures questioned differentiated between the two forms of tourism specific to the rural environment, i.e., rural tourism and agritourism, an explanation being probably that the percentage of those who have specialized training in the field of agritourism is inferior to those who do not have any training whatsoever (see Table 6 and Figure 7). This demonstrates the necessity of organizing this form of tourism with the involvement of the authorities and of the local community [53,58] so that it is economically viable for both.

The favorability of the regions subjected to study for agritourism activities derives from the existence of a representative potential, presented in Figures 4–6; despite the supporting infrastructure being somewhat incomplete in the analyzed regions, it does not necessarily cause the activity to stagnate. However, there are some aspects that the three regions still have to develop in order to make the agritourism product visible on the market, and the focus is on the importance of the support structures at the central level, especially when it comes to the necessary marketing actions or financial support resources (see Table 7 and Figure 8).

Significant percentages of those who carry out agritourism activities are convinced that agritourism would represent a chance of economic growth and development of their personal guesthouses/farms, and see this activity as a possibility of capitalizing their products/crafts/services. The owners of agritourism structures manage to identify the resources that are a priority for the region and use them through agritourism, but nevertheless the services offered to agritourism consumers show very low diversity (consisting in general accommodation or accommodation and meals, with the activities specific to the rural lifestyle being almost non-existent in the agritourism product) (see Table 8 and Figure 8a,b).

Based on the current trend of the return to nature, to natural products or to the rural environment, the owners of agritourism structures from the three regions subject to our study have identified the following elements of the agritourism product as helpful to achieving visibility in the international profile market: return to nature and active relaxation; healthy food/products; and participation in the life of the rural community. These elements are able to support the future sustainable development of the local community. Increasing the quality of the tourism experience when purchasing the accommodation consists of attracting tourists with activities specific to the rural world or through the food products (see Table 9 and Figure 10a and b).

The necessity of the involvement of the local community authorities in supporting agritourism activities is made recognized by the majority of the owners of agritourism structures from all three analyzed regions. It also highlights their desire to collaborate with the authorities or with support structures of this activity, a desire that manifests even when identifying some possible actions/measures that would assure the efficient development of agritourism activities (see Table 10).

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