

Regional Revitalization in Albania: Leveraging Natural, Cultural and Food Resources for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

This study examined the prospects for sustainable regional revitalization in Albania through the strategic use of natural resources, cultural heritage, and traditional food practices. It analyzed the interactions between environmental conservation, cultural identity promotion, and agrotourism development as key factors of integrated rural development. The methodology involves a mixed-methods approach, combining direct field observations, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, and analysis of policies and development plans. The results show that Albania possesses considerable potential for the reconfiguration of rural areas through development models based on heritage, biodiversity, and local products. We recommended the design and implementation of cross-sectoral and sustainable strategies, cultural heritage conservation and rural entrepreneurship, to promote inclusive and resilient development at the local and regional levels.

Keywords: Albanian regional revitalization, cultural heritage, traditional food, agritourism

1. INTRODUCTION

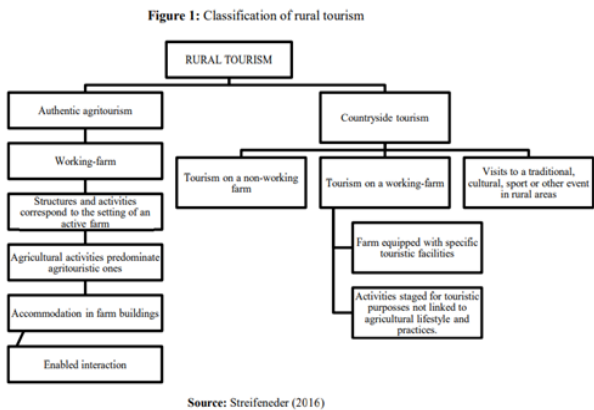
(1) The concept of agritourism and sustainability

Agritourism is a segment of rural tourism encompassing recreational, educational, and cultural activities conducted on agricultural farms, offering genuine experiences for visitors and supplementary income for farmers (Phillip et al., 2010). It integrates tourism with active agriculture and fosters direct engagement between tourists and rural people. Agritourism is a concept that integrates industry, agriculture, and tourism, creating new markets for farm products, promoting agricultural goods to local communities, bolstering the rural economy, preserving local cultures, traditional values, and cultural heritage, while also aiding in poverty alleviation and income generation. Agritourism encompasses activities conducted on a farm or in a rural environment, when tourists participate in agricultural, educational, recreational, or gastronomic experiences, fostering a direct connection between consumers and producers (Phillip, Hunter, & Blackstock, 2010). This kind of tourism involves direct interaction with farmers and local communities, fostering territorial authenticity and sustainability.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO, 2021) asserts that agritourism is pivotal in enhancing the resilience of rural communities by generating alternative income, promoting local food heritage, and encouraging environmentally sustainable practices, including sustainable agriculture and the preservation of rural biodiversity (FAO, 2021).

Agritourism has emerged as an effective mechanism for delivering social and cultural advantages, enhancing public awareness of organic food products, fostering food security, and underscoring the significance of agriculture for the nation’s economy and overall quality of life (Braholli et al., 2024).

Figure-1 Classification of rural tourism (Streifeneder 2016)



Agritourism is regarded as a vital tool for sustainable rural development globally, facilitating biodiversity conservation, bolstering local economies, promoting traditional products, and safeguarding cultural heritage (OECD, 2020). This multifaceted strategy is intricately associated with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 8, 12, and 15).

Europe leads in the advancement of agritourism, particularly in nations with robust agricultural legacies and decentralized rural tourism frameworks. Countries including Italy, France, Austria, and Spain have formalized agritourism within national rural development policies and incorporated it into financial support initiatives via EU funds, such as the Rural Development Program (RDP) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPARD) (European Commission, 2019).

Agritourism in Italy has been legally regulated since 1985, encompassing over 25,000 registered entities, and plays a crucial role in rural economic growth and the preservation of traditions (ISTAT, 2022). Prominent Italian models like “Agriturismo Toscana” and “Agriturismo Alto Adige” have exemplified successful practices for other transitioning nations.

Agritourism in Japan, referred to as “noson kanko” or green tourism, has experienced continuous growth since the 1990s. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries started the “green tourism” program in 1993, and “The law for promotion of holiday in rural areas” that aimed to promote green tourism was in effect in 1995. Under the framework of this law, green tourism farms that offer accommodation and can provide farm experience services in farming, forestry or fishing are registered (Ohe,

2007). Tourists participate in seasonal agricultural endeavors (e.g., rice, vegetable, or fruit harvesting), traditional culinary practices, accommodations at family-operated farms “minpaku”, and activities associated with local festivals and rural customs (Japan Tourism Agency, 2020).

Agritourism in poor nations serves a dual purpose: it acts as a tool for poverty alleviation and facilitates the preservation of culture and the environment. Successful initiatives have been executed in Latin America (notably Colombia and Peru), Africa (Rwanda, Morocco), and South Asia (Nepal, India), where conventional farms have transformed into appealing tourist destinations, also benefiting from investments by foreign collaborators (FAO, 2021).

The rural regions of Albania, characterized by appealing natural scenery, traditional ways of life, and important agricultural and cultural legacy, present considerable opportunities for sustainable development via agritourism. Agritourism, as an alternative tourism model that combines agricultural production with hospitality, revitalization of the processing industry, and cultural experiences, is increasingly regarded as a strategic instrument for the socio-economic revitalization of rural communities, offering employment opportunities, income diversification, and the preservation of environmental and cultural heritage (Barbieri, 2013).

(2) Favorable conditions for the development of agritourism in Albania

Albania exhibits a unique combination of environmental, cultural, and socio-economic attributes that establish an exceptionally conducive climate for agritourism growth. A nation endowed with abundant natural and cultural heritage, where the agricultural sector is vital for the lives of a considerable portion of the populace, agritourism has been recognized as a strategic option for the sustainable development of rural regions (FAO, 2021; UNWTO, 2022).

Albania, despite its limited land size, exhibits significant agro-ecological diversity, featuring a blend of hilly regions, fertile plains, and a Mediterranean climate conducive to various agricultural products and livestock endeavors (Osmani & Pipero, 2020).

The regions of Dibra, Gjirokastra, Korça, and Shkodra exemplify significant potential for agritourism growth, characterized by their rich culinary traditions, hospitable customs, and well-preserved landscapes (Guri & Doka, 2018).

Over the past decade, Albania has made considerable progress in integrating agritourism into its development objectives. The National Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development 2014–2020 identified agritourism as a priority sector, highlighting its significance in sustaining rural populations, generating revenue, and promoting sustainable rural development (MARD, 2015).

Additionally, European Union-funded programs via the Instrument for Pre-Accession for Rural Development (IPARD II and III) have facilitated numerous initiatives nationwide, encompassing the construction of guesthouses, the establishment of eco-tourism farms, and the promotion of concepts like “from farm to table” (European Commission, 2021).

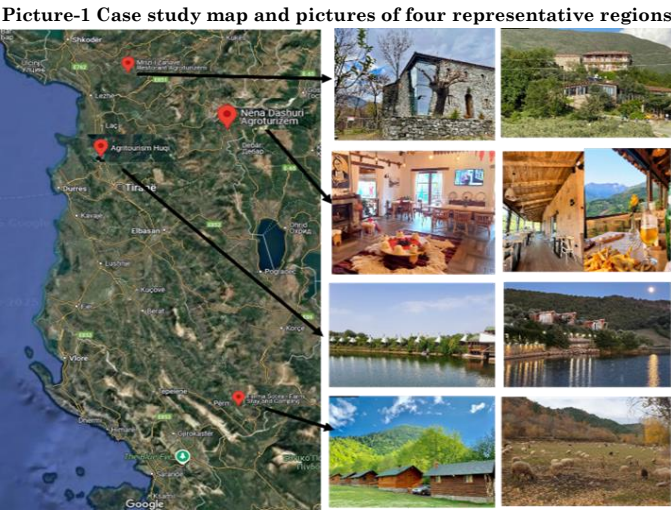
The MAFRD (2020) reports that over 40% of the workforce is employed in agriculture, and a considerable portion of the land remains uncultivated or is farmed using traditional methods-elements that can be leveraged for the advancement of agrotourism products. Nonetheless, obstacles including land fragmentation, absence of certification and standardization for local products, deficiencies in infrastructure and

marketing, and insufficient professional capacity for tourism management persistently impede the comprehensive advancement of this sector (UNDP Albania, 2022).

The Albanian government acknowledges the potential of agritourism and has instituted initiatives like the “100 Villages” initiative to assist local communities in diversifying revenue sources, creating employment possibilities, and promoting traditional local products. The 100 Villages Program seeks to enhance rural regions via comprehensive investments focused on three objectives: upgrading public infrastructure, fostering economic diversification (enhancing tourism potential in rural areas, agritourism, and investing in traditional product production), and cultivating social and human capital. The tourist villages will act as focal places for the advancement and interconnection of investments in agritourism and ecotourism. These villages are designated to receive investments in infrastructure and technical support to foster the development of agritourism enterprises.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

This research applies a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to elucidate the role of agritourism in sustainable rural development in Albania. Four case studies, meticulously chosen to exemplify the geographical, socio-economic, and organizational diversity of agritourism enterprises, were examined: 1) Agrotourism “Nena Dashuri” (Peshkopi, Diber), 2) “Mrizi i Zanave” (Fishte, Lezhe), 3) Agrotourism “Huqi” (Rrushkull, Durrës), and 4) Farm “Sotira” in Lunxheri (Gjirokastra) area, as illustrated in Picture-1.



The analytical framework is grounded in place-based development, a concept that underscores the need of leveraging endogenous resources, natural, cultural, and human to foster economic and social sustainability. The approach, endorsed by authors including Barca, McCann, and Rodríguez-Pose (2012), positions communities and local initiatives as pivotal agents in the transformation of rural landscapes.

The four case studies were chosen based on a mix of geographical variety considerations, including the highlands of Dibra, the plains and hills of Durres and Lezha, as well as the isolated and historical region of Gjirokastra.

The abundance of natural and cultural resources encompasses agricultural regions, forests, water resources, gastronomy, and architectural legacy. The existence of established and rising firms exemplifies various agritourism practices in Albania.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the national and regional context in which these enterprises function, a variety of secondary sources were examined, including national and regional development strategies (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2021), strategic and statistical documents, academic literature on agritourism in the Balkans and Europe (Ramadani et al., 2022; FAO, 2019), reports from international institutions regarding rural development and sustainability (UNDP, 2020; EU, 2021), and statistical data pertaining to tourism and agricultural development in Albania (INSTAT, 2023).

Field visits and observations of the landscape and infrastructure (including accommodation, road access, and recreational facilities), assessments of production and hospitality activities (such as the preparation of traditional foods, artisanal processing of local products, and management of the guesthouse/farm), along with direct interactions with owners and staff were conducted.

Application of the method as delineated in the case study:

1) Diber-Agritourism “Nena Dashuri”

The emphasis was on the relationship between conventional hospitality and the enhancement of local identity. The integration of tourism with rural everyday life and the possibilities for entrepreneurship to generate employment opportunities and enhance cul-tural promotion in an economically underdeveloped region were examined.

2) Lezhe-“Mrizi i Zanave”

A comprehensive investigation of the integrated “farm to table” model was conducted. Vertical integration tactics, collaboration with local producers, the effects on community development, and methods to conserve tradition through rural innovation were explored. It is an integrated illustration that merges the “farm to table” ethos, artisanal processing, and rural innovation, emerging as a national destination (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2021; Ramadani, Gerguri-Rashiti, & Fayolle, 2022).

3) Durres-“Huqi” Agritourism

The relationship between proximity to the urban market (the city of Durres), the availability of fresh agricultural products, and tourist experiences was examined. The influence of road infrastructure was evaluated, along with the feasibility of integrating coastal and rural tourism.

4) Gjirokaster-“Sotira” Farm

The investigation concentrated on the natural and eco-tourism attributes of the endeavor. The preservation of the natural scenery, the respect for biodiversity, and the provision of real experiences for both international and domestic tourists were noted. The results indicate that agritourism may significantly contribute to sustainable rural development in Albania by preserving traditions, fortifying local communities, and promoting the nation’s natural and cultural variety.

The case studies function as dynamic labs to comprehend the transformative potential of agritourism in Albania and to formulate bottom-up strategies grounded in the tangible realities of rural communities.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of four case studies underscored the transformative potential of agritourism in Albania's rural regions, regardless of the structural and infra-structural obstacles encountered by these communities. Each case exemplifies a distinct model of the integration of local resources and entrepreneurial initiative.

1) Agritourism “Nena Dashuri”-Diber

Agritourism “Nena Dashuri” is a familial endeavor that commenced as a modest guest-house on the periphery of Peshkopia, with the objective of fostering traditional Diber hospitality and genuine local cuisine. This initiative, situated in a hilly region with significant natural resources, seeks to highlight rural life, local cuisine derived from agricultural and livestock products, and the Diber way of life. The establishment is operated by a family that has embraced the principles of hospitality, transforming them into a distinctive tourism experience for those seeking tranquility, authenticity, and intimate engagement with nature.

This agritourism strategy, situated in a region with a vulnerable economy and elevated emigration rates, signifies an effort to rejuvenate the local hospitality and culinary traditions. The enterprise is founded on intrinsic resources: regional agricultural commodities, traditional gastronomy, natural scenery, and familial participation. Notwithstanding the absence of contemporary infrastructure, guests value the genuineness and hospitality of the encounter. This case demonstrates that agritourism can promote identity and self-employment even in the most marginalized regions (Barca et al., 2012).

Natural Capital: Adjacent to the Korab-Koritnik Park, which encompasses 55,550 hectares of diverse natural landscapes, including alpine mountain terrains, glacial lakes, and dense forestry, presents significant opportunities for eco-tourism. The deficiency of sufficient infrastructure and promotional techniques constrains the accessibility and advancement of tourism in this region.

Cultural Heritage: Abundant in traditions including epic poetry, traditional dance, and attire.

Food Resources: Dibra presents a significant culinary heritage, characterized by a diverse gastronomic tradition that features meals such as chicken ‘jufka’ and pie, traditional confections, cattle derivatives, cornmeal preparations, fruits, and beverages. Nonetheless, informal markets prevail, and the absence of organized frameworks obstructs further advancement.

Challenges and Potential: The absence of connectivity to tourism networks and institutional support constrains growth; however, there exists potential for development via the incorporation of natural guides and the promotion of local heritage, livestock enhancement, a varied fruit-growing agricultural sector, and remarkable natural features and monuments.

2) “Mrizi i Zanave”-Lezhe

“Mrizi i Zanave” represents one of the most successful narratives of agritourism in Albania. Established by Altin Prenga in 2009 in the village of Fishte, this enterprise is

founded on the “farm to table” principle. It amalgamates agricultural and animal production with the manufacturing and serving of traditional cuisine in the restaurant, establishing a self-sustaining local economic chain utilizing materials sourced from the region, including local farmers and surrounding areas.

“Mrizi i Zanave” has facilitated the economic revitalization of the region by engaging numerous local farmers and craftspeople. This integration of cultural legacy, environmental care, and innovation has established this initiative as a benchmark for sustainable rural development in Albania. An effective methodology that has facilitated the economic reju-venation of the Fishte region and the establishment of a prominent national brand. In 2023, this enterprise attracted more than 70,000 visitors, many of them were international (INSTAT, 2023). The collaboration with local farmers and the closed production cycle (from farm to table) have established a healthy rural ecosystem, enhancing demand for local products and fostering rural jobs.

Ramadani et al. (2022) assert that this model functions as a pioneering laboratory for rural development, concurrently safeguarding cultural and gastronomic identity.

Natural Capital: This region features a hilly terrain with significant biodiversity and a lush natural scenery, encompassing fertile farms and adjacency to the Adriatic Sea. The de-ficiency in investment for tourism infrastructure and inadequate promotion obstruct the continuous development of agritourism in this region.

Cultural Heritage: Encompassing a profound past characterized by cultural monuments, ritual artefacts, archaeological discoveries, and the abundant components of Zadrime, in-cluding traditional attire, items, and architecture. Lezha represents a promising locale for agritourism. Nevertheless, numerous facilities are deteriorating and necessitate heightened focus for their conservation and enhancement.

Food resources: Lezha, known for its pomegranate cultivation, a symbol of the region, has started incorporating this fruit into traditional recipes favored by visitors. Nonetheless, in-sufficient promotion and inadequate infrastructure constrain the sector's full potential.

Challenges and Potential: Seasonality and the preservation of authenticity among an in-flux of tourists present obstacles; yet this serves as an encouraging model for national rural development plans.

3) Agrotourism “Huqi”–Durres

Agrotourism “Huqi” is a family-operated enterprise situated in the Sukthi region, near to city of Durres. This farm-restaurant originated as an extension of the Huqi family's agricultural and livestock endeavors, aiming to provide gastronomic experience utilizing its own goods. The advantageous geographical location (proximity to the city and convenient access from major roads) has rendered this agrotourism appealing to weekend visitors and day travelers seeking fresh cuisine and natural surroundings near urban locales.

The environment is organized using conventional features and provides areas for children and families. This is a recent and evolving instance situated in a flat region adjacent to urban regions. Huqi capitalizes on its accessibility and proximity to the metropolitan market, emphasizing weekend promotions and family-oriented events. This initiative has established a versatile model that integrates agricultural production with seasonal events (themed fes-tivals, open days, etc.), promoting awareness of local product consumption. The primary problem persists in the realms of professional management

and activity diversification, as highlighted in the Ministry of Tourism and Environment's report (2021).

Natural Capital: While recognized for its beaches and historical significance, the rural region surrounding Durres boasts a diverse ecosystem and appealing landscapes that are currently underutilized for agritourism initiatives.

Cultural Heritage: The city boasts a rich cultural legacy, featuring landmarks such as the Durres Amphitheatre and the Venetian Tower. Nonetheless, the absence of promotion and the integration of these assets into the agritourism portfolio continues to pose a barrier.

Food Resources: Durres has a significant gastronomic legacy, including fish, meat, beverages, and traditional agricultural products. Nonetheless, these goods are not entirely incorporated into the region's agrotourism offerings. The menu features traditional local delicacies (earthen casserole, pies, meat in a basket), albeit less prominently than in other instances.

Challenges and Potential: Proximity to the city ensures high accessibility; yet more investment is necessary to distinguish the tourist identity and enhance educational and cultural experience.

4) "Sotira" Farm-Gjirokaster

"Sotira" Farm, situated in the hilly region of Lunxheria in Gjirokaster, exemplifies a distinctive style of ecotourism and sustainability in Albania. The Sotira family established this farm to advocate for a lifestyle of simplicity in alignment with nature. It provides lodging in wooden cabins, farm-sourced cuisine, and outdoor pursuits including hiking, equestrian activities, and environmental exploration. Visitors are drawn by the authenticity, seclusion from urbanity, and the chance to engage in rural life devoid of artificial influence. The farm has received commendation for its biodiversity protection and sustainable management practices.

Set in an undisturbed natural environment, this farm offers a deep eco-tourism and cultural experience. The modest lodging, incorporation of animals and organic products, together with the storytelling of local narratives, entice international tourists desiring engagement with the preserved Albanian history. The farm functions as a standard for sustainable tourism in the southern mountainous region of the country. The proprietors have established a self-sustaining economic structure, conserved the landscape and eschewed aggressive construction (FAO, 2019; UNDP, 2020).

Natural Capital: Besides its cultural legacy, Gjirokastra boasts stunning natural settings, such as Mount Lunxheri, the Drino Valley, and the nearby Vjosa River, which is one of Europe's last wild rivers and was designated a National Park in 2023. However, the lack of linkage between conservation activities and local economic growth remains an issue.

Cultural Heritage: The area is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Gjirokastra features unique stone architecture, music festivals and craft markets that attract thousands of visitors each year. However, tensions between conservation and commercialization, as well as concerns about poorly regulated building, are prominent.

Food resources: Known for its traditional cuisines such as gliko, rakia and byreku, Gjirokastra has started to promote these goods through guesthouses and food festivals. The absence of official labelling procedures constrains competitiveness and export potential. Farmers produce their own products (milk, veggies, eggs), in a traditional style, but adapted for international tourists.

Challenges and Opportunities: Geographical isolation and the absence of certification and institutional endorsement present significant barriers; nonetheless, genuine experiences and sustainability serve as compelling advantages for enhanced promotion.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Four Agrotourism Case Studies in Albania

Comparative Elements	Nena Dashuri – Diber	Mrizi i Zanave – Lezhe	Agrotourism Huqi – Durres	Sotira Farm – Gjirokaster
Geographical Position	Mountainous, suburban area	Hilly area, near the city	Near the city and coastline	Southern mountainous area
Type of Enterprise	Family-run, developing	Consolidated, professional network	Family-run, with urban influence	Family-run, eco-tourism model
Main Focus	Traditional hospitality, local cuisine	“From farm to table”, production chain	Accommodation and local food preparation	Natural experience and relaxation
Accommodation Capacity	Limited (2–3 rooms)	High (hotel-level capacity)	Medium	Medium (bungalows, tents)
Resources Used	Local produce, traditional dishes	Integrated farm, artisanal processing, fruits, vegetables, farm beverages	Nearby market, some local produce	Forests, water sources, livestock products
Hospitality and Staff	Family-based, spontaneous	Professional, trained	Family-based, minimally trained	Family-based, eco-tourism oriented
Activities for Tourists	Traditional food, nature walks	Tastings, demonstrations, handicrafts	Farm visits, local food	Nature exploration, peaceful retreats
Community Involvement	Limited	Extensive (collaboration with farmers)	Partial	Family-based, partially community-oriented
Infrastructure	Poor, limited access	Developed, paved roads	Good access, near the city	Moderate, with nature-preserving elements
Main Challenges	Low promotion, lack of training	Increasing demand vs. capacity	Competition with urban offerings	Distance and public transport
Advantages	Authenticity and traditional experience	Innovative and successful model	Good access and nearby market	Natural environment, tranquility, authenticity
Development Model	Traditional, sustainable with potential	Integrated and exportable model	Urban-rural hybrid	Eco-tourism and sustainable tourism

4. BENEFITS OF AGRITOURISM FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN ALBANIA.

(1) A comparative overview of four study areas

Agrotourism has emerged as a highly promising avenue for sustainable rural development, particularly within the Albanian environment, where natural and cultural heritage represent an underutilized asset. This research examines the advantages of agrotourism in four distinct locations of Albania: Diber, Lezhe, Durres, and Gjirokaster, assessing its effects on the economic, social, cultural, and environmental advancement of rural areas.

In Diber, an area rich in ecological and cultural potential, agrotourism has emerged as a significant instrument for the economic revitalization of rural communities. Conventional guesthouses and the incorporation of local products into the tourism offerings (such as jufka, jams and maize products) generate new revenue streams for rural households. Local women have been organizing into cooperatives and engaging in

training for the processing and sale of organic products, thereby enhancing their economic and social empowerment. Simultaneously, agrotourism aids in the preservation of Dibra's intangible legacy, encompassing epic melodies, traditional attire, and festivals, so reinforcing local cultural identity and stimulating interest in the establishment of museums and cultural trails.

Lezha, a location with significant tourism potential, has the advantage of the linkage between the coastline and the rural hinterland. Agritourism in this region significantly extends the tourist season beyond summer, providing true rural experiences that allow tourists to engage in food production, wine tasting, and the exploration of local culture. The collaboration between farmers and tourism entrepreneurs has established a novel development model that not only generates cash but also fortifies social bonds among communities. Culinary legacy, including the production of pomegranates, wine, and cheese, constitutes a fundamental aspect of identity and a potent marketing instrument to entice visitors.

Agritourism in Durres presents a significant opportunity to expand the city's tourism offerings, which have traditionally centered on seaside tourism. Farm stays in remote regions, such as Sukthi or Shijaku, have commenced providing comprehensive experiences that encompass traditional cuisine, agricultural activities, and visits to cultural landmarks. These advancements contribute to the reclamation of agricultural land value and mitigate the proliferation of informal urbanization. They generate economic opportunities for rural inhabitants, particularly youth, thereby mitigating unemployment and enhancing the sustainability of rural villages surrounding the metropolis.

In Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World legacy city, agritourism serves as a conduit between architectural legacy and rural life. Guesthouses located outside of the city and in adjacent villages provide genuine experiences for guests, encompassing the preparation of gliko, raki tasting, Lunxheris honey, traditional Dropulli cuisine, grilled meats, bidon, and insights into conventional agricultural techniques. This connection between cultural heritage and rural tourism not only enhances community revenue but also aids in the preservation of biodiversity and natural environments, exemplified by the Vjosa Valley, one of Europe's last wild rivers. The participation of younger generations in these activities has favorably impacted the preservation and intergenerational transfer of cultural and gastronomic values.

(2) Challenges and strategic paths of agrotourism for rural development in Albania

Agrotourism in Albania represents a significant possibility for rural development; yet, actualizing its potential encounters several structural, institutional, and social constraints. An examination of the four research regions: Dibra, Lezha, Durres, and Gjirokastra, reveals that although resources are available, insufficient sustainable support and a lack of strategic integration have constrained the enduring effects of agrotourism. The analysis of the tourist potential in the Municipality of Korca, one of the largest municipalities in the country and the fifth largest in agriculture, indicates that "the adaptation of the agricultural structure to local products via the advancement of agrotourism, alongside the landscape and cultural heritage, as well as cultural, natural, and archaeological monuments interwoven within the municipality of Korca, will enhance tourism, agriculture, and the economic and financial dimensions in the rural area". The Municipality of Korca encompasses communities with tourist potential, including Drenova, Boboshtica, Voskopoja, and Dardha, as well as chances for the

advancement of mountain tourism, agrotourism, and ecotourism in other regions of the municipality (Lushaj Sh, Kucaj E, 2025).

The primary difficulties confronting the study areas are inadequate rural infrastructure. Agritourism in Albania, despite its potential, has numerous challenges: inadequate infra-structure, insufficient marketing, limited training for rural hosts, and a poorly developed internet presence. Additionally, fluctuating seasonal demand and variable service quality impact competitiveness.

The absence of infrastructure not only restricts visitor mobility but also escalates operational expenses for guesthouses and agritourism establishments. The absence of targeted funding mechanisms for agritourism, delays in the disbursement of EU grants (such as IPARD), and intricate bureaucratic processes constrain investment prospects for local farmers and businesspeople.

In Diber and Durres, numerous stakeholders indicated a deficiency in understanding re-garding money accessibility or inadequate assistance from local entities. Many local items are devoid of official labelling, certifications of origin, or hygiene and sanitation regulations. This hampers the enhancement of competitiveness in broader markets and diminishes customer confidence. The absence of systematic training in tourism management, marketing, food safety, and communication adversely impacts service quality.

In Diber and Lezha, particularly within the most remote areas, the bulk of tourism operators function autonomously and lack formal business strategies.

The identification of the area's values, including environmental, cultural, social, economic, and historical factors, plays a crucial role in the development of agrotourism in rural regions. This would facilitate the advancement of efforts to utilize local resources for the establishment of year-round agrotourism, centered on locally produced food items from the farm and in collaboration with adjacent farms. Albania presents numerous instances that have been documented in the annals of success within the domain of agrotourism. Established 25 years ago, "Sotira Farm" in the municipality of Kolonja offers agritourism activities, featuring modern wooden cabins for accommodation. The farm utilizes its own food products, including beef, chicken, sheep, fish cultivated in tanks, dairy by-products, vegetables, honey, and eggs, all produced on-site. It breeds livestock for milk and meat production and poultry, representing a financially robust enterprise.

Agrotourism in Albania is poised for success due to its favorable climate and soil for agricultural development, a variety of fruits and vegetables, diverse meat options, stunning natural landscapes, traditional cuisine, and the growth of family tourism. A significant number of Albanian emigrants have repatriated and are investing in agritourism ventures. The invitation to return from emigration is evolving into a government policy, bolstered by legislation and financial assistance for activity growth.

The nation possesses a wealth of cultural heritage and landmarks. In the 100 tourist villages, notable local qualities are identified for each category, including culinary traditions, alcoholic beverage production, fruit processing, meat and fish varieties, olive oil, and wine types. In numerous settlements, agrotourism is integrated with nature-based activities, including sports, hiking, skiing, canyon exploration, thermal baths, and both recreational and mountain tourism. Dhermi, a village on the Ionian coast, possesses promising scenery and is recognized for its olive cultivation and culinary use of olive oil. It also engages in maritime tourism and boasts cultural richness, including 42 churches and several sites that promote agrotourism.

5.CONCLUSIONS

Agrotourism represents a highly promising model of sustainable rural development, integrating the conservation of natural and cultural heritage with the enhancement of the local economy. The situation in Albania illustrates significant potential for sector expansion, attributed to environmental resources, agricultural diversity, genuine traditions, and increasing institutional backing. Agrotourism, territorial diversity, fresh air, varied topography, scenic vistas, expansive natural ecosystems, and a rich cultural history in rural areas have significant possibilities for the advancement of rural tourism in Albania.

Case studies from Albania, including “Mrizi i Zanave” in Fishte, “Ferma Sotira” in Gjirokaster, “Agroturizem Huqi” in Durres, and “Nena Dashuri” in Diber, demonstrate that investment in authentic experiences, local products, and community partnerships has fostered successful models that enhance rural revitalization and promote sustainable tourism development.

International experience, especially in EU countries like Italy and France, as well as Japan, demonstrates that agritourism can achieve sustainable impact exclusively when reinforced by cohesive rural development policies, local community engagement, quality standardization, branding, fostering of human resources and a focus on environmentally and culturally connected new markets.

The Japanese case exemplifies a sophisticated model in which agritourism serves as a national strategy to address the ageing rural population, preserve the agricultural landscape, and educate tourists about the environment, highlighting the significance of technology and intersectoral collaborations like public-private partnership as well as industry-government-academia initiatives.

Nonetheless, obstacles persist insufficient administrative capacity, restricted financial access for farmers, often inadequate infrastructure, and the absence of a definitive legal framework for service standardizations. Strategic interventions are necessary in training, quality certification, regional brand marketing, and the establishment of integrated value chains.

In conclusion, the advancement of agritourism in Albania should be regarded not merely as an avenue for economic expansion, but as a vital mechanism for sustainable rural development, safeguarding cultural identity, and fostering the engagement of local populations in developmental initiatives. The pathway to success is rooted in collaboration among institutions, farmers, the business sector, and communities to establish a harmonious balance of economic, environmental, and social sustainability.

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