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SUSTAINABILITY OF AGRITOURISM AS A RURAL DEVELOPMENT FACTOR

ABSTRACT

Agritourism is getting more and more important in the regions, especially for villages, where there are not many industrial activities (ecologically clean areas), but agriculture is well developed and the area is rich in natural and cultural resources. Agritourism sustainability is the challenge for almost every developing country. Nowadays not very many farms and agritourism destinations follow the requirements of sustainable development, because this is not a must and it depends on the owners' choice to make their business ecofriendly or not; however, it seems that, according to the EU regulations, in a few years this will be necessary and sustainability appears to be the way to have a better future.

Georgia, like many other countries, has to overcome the challenges (e.g., new technologies, electric vehicles, sustainable development frameworks, innovations, etc.), which are very important and will be discussed in the article. The main idea of the article is to study what sustainable agritourism means and why it is important, and it also studies the sustainable agritourism farm experiences globally and discuss their experiences. The article, according to the qualitative research method, analyses the main challenges of sustainable agritourism development and the main factors and circumstances for making rural areas competitive agritourism destinations at national, European and global levels.

Key words: rural tourism, rural development, regional development, agritourism, rural business.

JEL Classification: L83, Z32.

1. INTRODUCTION

Long-term agritourism sustainability depends on preserving the quality of the nature-based environment that includes productive agriculture. The NRCS outlines six essential elements of agritourism sustainability – authenticity, fun, values, relationships, learning and involvement (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program, 2021).

Sustainable agritourism seeks to minimize the impacts on the environment by reducing environmental impacts, reusing resources, recycling all useful materials and equipment, prioritizing the quality of services and increasing the number of visitors. Farmers seek social and economic development that also preserve the local culture and activities (Tseng *et al.*, 2019)

During the coronavirus pandemic outbreak, the travel and tourism industry has been completely shut and as a result the agritourism industry is facing a decline. The COVID-19 outbreak resulted in lockdown situation in various countries across the world that has impacted every industry in the market. As the COVID-19 protocols include social distancing, the farms involved in agritourism activities need to follow certain guidelines. But after the lockdown situation there will be a high demand on the agritourism market as there will be a booming demand for recreational activities (<https://www.futuremarketinsights.com/reports/agritourism-market>).

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The tourism industry has been on an upswing in the last three decades. The major driver for this trend is globalization, which has made borders more porous and reduced red-tapism in domestic travel, consequently easing the movement of people. Correspondingly, air, rail and road travel has also become more affordable, as people's increasing disposable incomes in developed and developing countries has encouraged them to travel as a mode of leisure. These factors have helped the industry register strong growth rates that have endured despite several global and localized economic crises in the above-mentioned period. However, the industry has also faced challenges as a result of consumer fatigue. Most travelers are no longer content with sight-seeing and experiencing major tourist attractions in big cities. As a result, new and niche avenues for tourism have been explored and most of these have blossomed, leading to diversification in the tourism industry. Rural tourism has emerged as one such niche to provide a unique experience to travelers, and agritourism is the most sought segment within this niche.

Agritourism differs from rural tourism in that it specifically targets the agricultural aspects of a rural tourist destination, whereas rural tourism encompasses the cultural and social aspects of rural life such as local arts, heritage, music and cuisine in a particular village or region. As a result, the agritourism market has been able to grow into an independent and sustainable market riding on the agritourism industry's strength. This has been possible since the agritourism revenue is generated separately despite the strong interdependency between the rural and agritourism industries. This has helped rural economies in a variety of ways, which becomes especially significant given the variables that rural economies are subjected to; this includes dependency on weather patterns, market factors influencing pricing of agricultural produce, unpredictably changing cropping patterns due to climate change and global warming, etc. (How agritourism benefits rural communities).

The most obvious of the several agritourism benefits is in the form of direct agritourism revenue, which helps farmers involved in crop and horticultural production by giving them an additional source of revenue. This revenue has

become vital to rural communities that have invested in agritourism in recent years since it helped them hedging against traditional agricultural produce markets, where they were often forced to sell their produce at market-dictated prices that they have no control over. Furthermore, certain agritourism enterprises have also been able to emerge as niche brands that are now competing with established food processing companies. Such enterprises hold an edge in terms of reduced chemical content and environment friendliness of their products.

Another key agritourism benefit has come in the form of generating local employment through agritourism enterprises and creating durable supply chains within the local community. Agriculture is a largely seasonal occupation with sowing and harvesting being the most labour-intensive periods. As a result, most people involved in agriculture also act as migrant labourers in major cities; this trend is mainly true for the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In most cases, revenue earned through farmers' status as migrant labourers has become a cornerstone of the livelihood of rural communities. However, this has also led to infrastructural and social strain in many developing countries as accommodating a growing number of migrant labourers poses a plethora of problems. As a result, local employment generated from agritourism can benefit the local population as well as countries at large by reducing the urban drift.

With technological advances in recent years, rural employment has become a major challenge in several countries as the agrarian workforce requirements per acreage have been reduced due to increasing use of machinery. This problem is acute in developing countries that are experiencing a consistent growth of their rural populations. The logical solution to this problem is the development of skills and labour diversion. However, a major roadblock to this solution comes in the form of lack of access to quality education. This limitation is not only in terms of school infrastructure or availability of teachers, but also arises due to limited exposure available to rural children. The agritourism industry has the potential to improve this scenario in both parameters, firstly by providing the necessary financial fillip to build the necessary education infrastructure and enhance instructor capability, and secondly by giving children first-hand exposure to different cultures, people, belief systems and ways of life (How agritourism benefits rural communities).

The ability of agritourism industry to increase social cohesion in rural communities is another hidden benefit. This because it is well understood that agritourism revenue can be greatly enhanced when the different people in a village or community work together in the overall rural tourism industry. This tendency to bring people together can help bridge divides that are often found in multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural communities and reduce inherent animosity. Furthermore, women empowerment is also an area that reaps dividends from rural tourism and agritourism, since women are often at the forefront of rural activities. Traditionally, women could not use this to their advantage since the rural economy was dependent on the community's interactions outside their villages. However,

with the economic movement coming from within villages, women have the advantage of working from their comfort zones.

Agritourism activities can provide the supplemental income necessary to allow for the preservation of small and mid-scale farms, ranches and rural communities. It can be promoted as an outlet for local residents and tourists to experience direct contact and interaction with agriculture and natural resources. Increasing public interaction with local farms and ranches can promote an understanding and appreciation for the working landscapes that help maintain or enhance natural resources (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program, 2021).

Long-term agritourism sustainability depends on preserving the quality of the nature-based environment that includes productive agriculture. The NRCS outlines six essential elements of agritourism sustainability – authenticity, fun, values, relationships, learning, and involvement. Many agritourism operators express a desire to educate visitors or as a tool for community outreach, as some of the key motivating factors in implementing and managing their tourist-focused activities. The vast majority of the US population is not directly engaged in agriculture; agritourism efforts provide an opportunity for these individuals to engage with their local food system. These types of interactions may empower individuals to make more sustainable food and lifestyle choices and can increase the extent of rural advocacy among city dwellers (Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education Program, 2021).

With its storied gastronomic traditions, rich cultural heritage and striking scenery from mountains to shores, Georgia has set its sights on becoming a top sustainable agritourism destination in the Caucasus region in the next decade. It wants to give tourists a chance to sample authentic Georgian food and wine, enjoy the outdoors and appreciate the biodiversity, food diversity and traditions that make its gastronomy so unique. A new roadmap seeks to help Georgia invest in developing its agritourism industry in a responsible, inclusive and eco-friendly manner.

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) are partnering with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Agriculture of Georgia, the Georgian National Tourism Administration, Elkana Biological Farming Association and Georgia's Farmers Association on the initiative (Georgia eyes becoming a sustainable agritourism destination).

Though Georgian authorities have recently drafted a law on agritourism, the country still lacks a clearly defined strategy on agritourism development and governance. That is where the roadmap comes in. Stemming from a series of highly participatory workshops, the roadmap lays out four strategic directions targeting food producers, hotel, restaurant and café industry and agribusinesses. For one, the roadmap recommends developing high-quality and diverse products and services that will make Georgian agritourism more attractive, experiential and competitive. It also looks at ways to help small-scale producers of high-quality

specialty products tap into new markets, including local restaurants, cafés and hotels. The roadmap provides guidance on how to safeguard living cultural heritage while also adapting to climate change and complying with food safety and quality standards. It also sets out ways to develop governance mechanisms to raise awareness on the value of agritourism, enforcing standards and ensuring inclusive development. Sustainable agritourism not only can help revitalize local economies and keep small businesses alive but also preserve what sets Georgia apart, from its gastronomy to its natural wonders. Ultimately, it can contribute to better production, a better environment and a better life for the country's rural communities and small-scale producers (Georgia eyes becoming a sustainable agritourism destination).

The authenticity and desirability of local food and farm experiences is highly appealing. Tourism Australia (TA) and Tourism Events Queensland (TEQ) identify food tourism as a key experience sought by domestic and international visitors. Agritourism offers visitors an opportunity to experience the source of their food, drink, foliage and fibre. Again, the wine industry is perhaps the most successful example of how value added agricultural-based experiences can be attractive to consumers and help expand the offering in a region. The same concept can apply to a broad range of agricultural products enabling farmers to create on farm value-adding, sales and experiences that engage and educate the consumer in the story and process of food and drink production. The other aspect to consider in developing agritourism is the opportunity to support integration of local food into the mainstream tourism offering. Developing a farm to plate connection will have several benefits for the regions. It will help both agriculture and tourism to collaborate and help to differentiate the offering in each region.

Sustainable tourism covers all types/forms of tourism: conventional mass tourism, cultural tourism, mountain tourism, seaside tourism, spa tourism, business tourism, medical tourism, rural tourism, urban tourism, etc. Regardless of the type or tourism activities, they should take on the principles of sustainable tourism: (1) the local community should initiate the tourism activity by its own means, maintaining control over tourism development in the area; (2) tourism should provide jobs to residents, thus improving the quality of life; (3) the accepted international standards in tourism should be used when the guidelines for tour operators, for monitoring the impact of various tourism activities and for setting the acceptability limits for different areas are established; (4) educational and training programs to improve management in the area of protecting natural and cultural resources must be implemented (Jamieson and Noble, 2000).

Agritourism creates opportunities for farmers and regions to thrive, by connecting the agri-food economy with the tourism economy. It enables farmers to convert ordinary farm activities into extraordinary agritourism experiences by creating meaning and value through story. Agritourism is an opportunity for farmers to add value, diversify, use spare capacity and underutilized assets. Agritourism creates jobs and generates revenue (smoothing income); builds resilience; restores pride

and identity; creates a succession or transition pathway to new generations; drives innovation; creates opportunities to build brand value through direct connections with consumers; builds and differentiates Queensland's produce into a strong brand, aligning with #eatqld and the new 'Product of Queensland' and 'Queensland Grown' labeling; transforms farmers from price takers to price makers; provides economic and skilling opportunities and future financial security, particularly for women in agriculture (Queensland-Agritourism-Roadmap).

Best Management Practices for an agritourism business include:

1. Providing an authentic farm or ranch experience
2. Providing an educational experience
3. Providing excellent customer service
4. Providing adequate public facilities
5. Maintaining a safe and accessible environment
6. Creating good community relations
7. Planning for your financial future (Agritourism Best Practices.)

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

The article discusses research papers, literature reviews, as well as books and internet resources of Georgian and foreign scientists. The article uses the case study method to analyze international experience. The research was carried out according to the hypothesis that in order to develop the agritourism in a right way, this should follow the requirements of sustainable development, because agritourism has the potential to be the instrument of it. At the same time agritourism is the way to attain the goals of sustainable development.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

UNWTO, in collaboration with the UN Statistics Division, is propelling the development of the Measuring the Sustainability of Tourism (MST) program to provide a common framework to all countries in the world to measure the impacts and contributions of tourism on the economy, society and the environment, at both national and sub-national levels. The Statistical Framework for MST is a valuable guiding tool for countries to produce credible, comparable and integrated data to better guide decisions and policy with respect to sustainable tourism – including the Sustainable Development Goals. It aims to become the third international standard on tourism after the International Recommendations for Tourism Statistics and the Tourism Satellite Account: Recommended Methodological Framework (Table 1).

Table 1
Methodological Framework

DIMENSION ECONOMIC	Tourism industry value added
	Tourism GDP
	Tourism establishments
	Tourism expenditure
	Tourism infrastructure assets
	Employment in tourism
	Demographics of tourism establishments
	Investment & Infrastructure
DIMENSION ENVIRONMENTAL	Water use in tourism industries (including wastewater flows)
	Energy use in tourism industries
	GHG emissions generated by tourism industries
	Solid waste generated in tourism industries
	Land use (including marine areas)
	Ecosystem condition and services for tourism related areas
	Wildlife in protected areas/parks
DIMENSION SOCIAL	Green jobs
	Culture/heritage
	Health outcomes
	Education
	Community
	Visitor perception
	Tourism governance
	Accessibility
Decent work	

Source: UNWTO

Table 2 presents the sustainable agritourism benefits using the example of Georgia:

Table 2
Sustainable development of agritourism, example of Georgia

Economic	Generates jobs and bring additional income for local people
	Market diversification
	Creates chains for local businesses
	Generates demand and income for traditional crafts and handmade
	Creates Cluster and cooperatives
Social	A chance to promote local cultural heritage to the world
	Engages women in businesses and stops migration
	Visitors learn culture and traditions
	Making friends, social exchange with international friends
Environmental	Local people get access to capacity-building programs
	Cleaner and more beautiful village lanes
	Making eco-friendly infrastructure
Agricultural	Higher awareness of environmental protection
	Better use of available agricultural resources
	Produce bio production
Tourism	Motivate people to remain in agricultural practice
	Develops tourism and helps prevent mass tourism and over tourism

Source: Author

In case the agritourism destination wants to develop business in a sustainable way, they must use local production (bought in surroundings) and offer agritourists food that is obtained with biological methods. The governments of various countries across the world such as India, China, Taiwan and Brazil are undertaking initiatives to protect and nurture the environment and agricultural land in their respective countries. These governments are also focusing on improvements in the agro-industry, as they have understood the importance of creating a sustainable environment. These initiatives have largely boosted the demand for agritourism in these regions. Government and companies in various countries mainly focus on agricultural campaigns and are organizing events aimed at boosting awareness regarding agritourism among people. For instance, in 2017, the Department of Tourism (DoT) of Philippines launched “It’s More Fun in Philippine Farms” campaign. This campaign significantly helped to make people aware of inbound agritourism. In 2016, the government of Philippines launched Farm Tourism Development Act (Republic Act 10816) to promote and develop farm tourism in the country (Agritourism market research). As the research showed there are several countries that have proved good example of sustainable agritourism (see Table 3).

Table 3
Agritourism Destinations

Country	Experience
Taiwan	A couple of things make Taiwan an ideal spot for an in-depth agritourism vacation: Many smaller farms offer homestay accommodation, so guests can mingle with the locals as opposed to staying in hotel rooms, and because the food served and sold is grown locally, this option makes it easier to support sustainable agriculture and lower your carbon footprint while traveling. Lush, rugged Taiwan is an ideal environment for growing sugar, pineapples and citrus fruits, crude tea, and asparagus – the country’s principal cash and export crops. Around 200 “leisure farms” spread across 31 designated rural areas offer tours of the fields and facilities for these crops. They also provide ample chances to sample the products.
Championing sustainable farming in Wales – United Kingdom	The UK’s domestic tourism industry is booming – and although Welsh tourist favorites such as Anglesey, Snowdon and Pembrokeshire have had an overwhelming summer season, they have remained true to their roots in safeguarding local business. Away from the city chain hotels and pubs, you’ll find most community-run restaurants and general stores serving locally grown, seasonal produce. Meals out are often a sumptuously fresh farm-to-table experience – which means that not only are profits going back into the community, but also the region’s sustainable farming practices are being supported (These 7 amazing destinations are pushing for sustainable tourism).
Slovenia’s big push for green tourism	Showing it is serious about embracing a sustainable approach to tourism, Slovenia has introduced a national ‘Green Scheme’ – a certification program that encourages hotels, tour operators and restaurants to embrace more eco-friendly practices. The 11-step process to join the scheme includes producing regular environmental reports, forming a ‘green team’ to raise awareness and being reassessed every three years. The benefit is that the national tourist board will actively promote companies who enroll. Ljubljana, the capital, is already on the list, while a full list of restaurants, accommodation and attractions can be found online.

Table 3 (continued)

Italy's long history of 'agritourism'	Over the last 30 years, Italy has been growing its agritourism industry. Now, more than 20,000 operating farms have signed up to the initiative. From farm stays in Calabria to traditional country retreats in Tuscany, the profits earned from agritourism go straight back into communities, who usually wouldn't benefit from Italy's mass tourism market. Meanwhile, guests can enjoy tranquil countryside with fresh, homemade food served at mealtimes and the opportunity to connect with local families. The project endorses sustainable farms, especially those that invest in soil, land and wildlife conservation (These 7 amazing destinations are pushing for sustainable tourism). Tuscany was one of the first destinations to really coin the concept of farm stays, thanks to its atmospheric <i>agriturismos</i> , old farmhouses that were turned into inns when agriculture in Italy was suffering in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Now, there are an estimated 20,000 of them around the country, offering an authentic and quaint Italian pastoral experience to people who would otherwise only be able to see this region on a group tour. While a few of the estates in Tuscany offer a more educational focus, the attraction of staying in a farmhouse in this region can mostly be attributed to the views, the laidback ambiance, and the locally grown olives, grapes, and other fruits. From wine-soaked stays in the Chianti area to farmhouses that create magic out of homegrown tomatoes, herbs, and cheeses, this sun-drenched region is widely celebrated for its agriculture, provisions, and unmatched scenery (Top 8 Agritourism Destinations in the World).
Mallorca – Spain	On the popular Spanish island of Mallorca, farmhouse inns focus more on providing isolation and solitude than offering hands-on farming experience. With millions of visitors descending on the beaches of Mallorca and other Balearic Islands each summer, peace and quiet is rare and coveted. Mainly located in the hills of inland Mallorca, away from coastal crowds, these inns range from rustic century-old farmhouses to luxury bed-and-breakfasts with spas and swimming pools. Some sit in the middle of orange or fig groves and serve dishes made from ingredients grown on-site (Top 8 Agritourism Destinations in the World).
California	More than a third of the vegetables and two thirds of the fruits and nuts grown in the U.S. come from California. The Golden State is home to a world-famous Wine Country, century-old orchards, avocado farms, fisheries, and more. Naturally, it is an agritourism utopia, and many of the smaller family farms in this West Coast state rely on agritourism to supplement their income. Besides staying in the wineries and vineyards of the Central Coast and Sonoma areas, family farms and large ranches also offer a more hands-on approach. Many teach small-scale farming techniques and even offer strategies for organic growing. The University of California system, one of the largest state-run higher education systems in the U.S., has a small-farm program that helps growers create education-oriented agritourism businesses (Top 8 Agritourism Destinations in the World).
Satoyama and Satoumi, Japan	The Noto peninsula is a microcosm of traditional rural Japan, where mountains, forests and coastal areas are all interlinked in one incredible agricultural system. Hilly terrain is interspersed with wide valleys and fields, all of which is surrounded by a volcanic rock coastline. The peninsula is characterized by a mosaic of satoyama, terrestrial-aquatic landscape ecosystems, and satoumi, marine-coastal ecosystems. Unique to the Noto peninsula, traditional methods of farming and forestry, such as rice drying, charcoal and salt making, traditional fishing and water management, have been practiced in this area for centuries. Noto's communities are working together to sustainably maintain the satoyama and satoumi landscapes and

Table 3 (continued)

	the traditions that have sustained generations for centuries. The government has designated the region as a special green-tourism zone and efforts are being made to raise awareness of the site and promote tourism from urban areas.
Chiloé Agriculture, Chile	In southern Chile, there is an area characterized by islands and large tranquil stretches of coast, with hundreds of brightly coloured houses. This is the Chiloé Archipelago, an area of natural beauty and tradition where farmers have dedicated their time and work for millennia. In 2011, it was also designated as a GIAHS site due to its unique biodiversity and agricultural methods. In the past, rural women carried out biodiversity conservation activities in their family vegetable gardens and small plots, the potato being one of the most important food crops. In fact, it is the potato that the life of many Island dwellers is centered around. It is linked to their cultural traditions, ancestral social practices, beliefs and mythology – many of which are still in use in the dawn of the third millennium. Currently, the local government is developing rural tourist services related to farms, food products and handicrafts (The place of sustainable tourism in preserving four incredible agricultural sites).
Rice Terraces in Southern Mountainous and Hilly areas, China	These mountainous areas in the southern provinces of China are known for their stunning landscapes – but did you know that the people there use some of the world’s most innovative ways to cultivate rice? Ancient settlers in this area built terraced fields for water conservation, making it possible to grow rice in hilly areas. These fascinating agricultural methods are still in use today, and to encourage tourists to visit the region, understand the traditions and help revitalize the rural economy, China is promoting eco-tourism. New eco-tourism projects are one of the government’s strategies to alleviate poverty in these rural areas by helping local communities diversify their incomes. Airbnb and the local government are working together to train local communities on tourist management and accommodation (The place of sustainable tourism in preserving four incredible agricultural sites).

Source: Author

In order to develop agritourism in a sustainable way, countries can face the following problems (see Table 4):

Table 4

Challenges of Sustainable Agritourism Business in Georgia

Challenge	Outcome
Frameworks	Create frameworks that will help follow sustainable development requirements.
Quality Control	Implement ISO standards.
Sustainable Development strategies	Make agritourism sustainable development part of national and regional strategies.
Locals have few information about sustainable development	Create training problems and give information to the locals why sustainable development is important.
Less use of Digital Technologies	Support startups, who are using digital technologies to change villages for the better.
Few farms, which are producing bio production	Support farms that are producing bio products.
Take care of resources and make farm an ecofriendly destination	Give information to the visitors, to take care and use less water and electricity

Source: Author

5. CONCLUSIONS

Agritourism sustainable development is very important, because, as the research shows, it is very close to the goals of sustainable development. In case the countries want to save what, they have for the future generations, especially in the villages, where old traditions and values are still preserved, they must support sustainable ways to develop agritourism and make it as part of strategies and create frameworks to follow sustainable development requirements. Agritourism is a synergy that connects two important industries for the rural areas, i.e. agriculture and tourism. Agritourism benefits open a few unused vistas for rustic communities. In the interim, it can be said with close certainty that tourism as an industry will develop together with all its sub-segments. As a result, the developing selection of agritourism by more nations and country communities is unavoidable.

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