



CHALLENGES FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract

Community-based rural tourism is promoted as a low-impact and environmentally sensitive way of travel, linking many components of sustainable development, which was the main motif for investigating the possibility for a rapid screening of rural tourism in the Republic of North Macedonia. The focus was put on its general characteristics. In this line, following the qualitative approach, the paper illustrates the main ambient for developing tourism in selected small, depopulated and economically depressed villages in North Macedonia. The findings indicate that the sampled rural areas have a significant base for tourism development, but many important measures and activities need to be scheduled as strategic priority actions within the regional development programs and strategic documents.

Key words: Rural areas; Rural tourism; Limitations; Tourism development.

INTRODUCTION

Today, contemporary rural societies are faced with numerous challenges. Many rural areas in Europe are facing dilemmas about their future existence due to the provoked economic changes of global scopes. Generally, the less-favored and least-developed regions, which are dependent on natural resources and agriculture, are under heavy pressure. Hence, rural economy is facing the need for alternatives in overcoming many conditions such as low production, poor agricultural incomes, rural abandonment, unemployment, increase in poverty levels, as well as environmental pollution. Furthermore, a large number of villages have suffered from extreme levels of emigration, often by the youngest and most active and reproductive groups, as well as females. This has particularly eroded the vitality of villages and rural communities. Therefore, tourism is seen as a way out in providing additional financial input for rural households.

Rural areas in North Macedonia, especially the small villages, are considered extremely vulnerable in terms of social and economic issues. This study discusses the possibilities for introducing tourism as an alternative for sustainable rural economies in several selected villages, keeping in mind that their rural livelihoods possess capabilities, assets (both, material and social resources) as well as activities required for providing basic means of living in rural communities. Moreover, the study highlights that selected villages have preserved the natural environment, traditional ambience, local organic food and gastronomic dishes, tranquility and stress free experiences. So, rural tourism may be encouraged for such rural areas in North Macedonia. Hence, the objective of this paper is to illustrate the ambient for rural tourism development by highlighting the barriers from a perspective of a problem or a challenge.

The paper is structured in several parts. After the introductory part, section two presents the background material in terms of a literature review and the general institutional framework for rural tourism development. After that, the applied methodology is noted along with the main research findings. The barriers and challenges are presented in the last section. The paper contributes to the literature review on the rural tourism in North Macedonia, in addition to some previous findings (Dimitrov & Petrevska, 2012; Dimitrov et al., 2019; Petrevska & Dimitrov, 2013; Petrevska et al., 2019).

BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Literature Review

The concept of rural tourism has been vastly explored. Its complex nature results in strong interconnectivity between the elements and issues, thus making its defining very problematic (Beeton, 2006). Furthermore, in order to describe tourism in rural areas, many terms are used, for example: farm tourism, green tourism, soft tourism, country experience, ecotourism, agritourism, village tourism etc. Hence, a variety of interpretation is offered but generally all include activities and interests in farms, nature, adventure, sport, health, education, arts and heritage. It was found that rural areas often build tourism due to the existence of local amenities like historical sites, natural beauty and clean air (Fredericks, 1993). To that Hardy (1988) and Millar (1989) add cultural traditions and values, while Weiler & Hall (1992) and Pedford (1996) further include family patterns, folklore, social customs, museums, monuments, historical structures and landmarks. This was further developed by Turnock (1999).

Rural areas are often identified as places for relaxation and escape from the overcrowded and stressful urban life (Urry, 2002), in finding mental peacefulness (Mak et al., 2009), pure air (Dong et al., 2013) and trying to gain a sense of balance (Lehto et al., 2006).



Woods (2010) argues that rural can be approached from different facets: those of spatial practices (rural localities), representations of space (formal representations of the rural) and lived spaces (everyday rural lives). Likewise, the attributes of rural areas are opposite to the urban image, and give the most 'authentic' nature, food (wild food, countryside food, traditional food), peace and quiet, safety, freedom, uncrowdedness, non-violence, traditions and cultural experiences (Pesonen & Tuohino, 2016). So, rurality is the fundamental attraction of the countryside as a rural tourism destination (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015). On the other hand, the small scale tourism becomes an important activity often promoting employment, vitality and sustainability of rural areas (Hall et al., 2003; Kneafsey, 2000; Ploeg, 2008).

Institutional Framework for Rural Tourism Development in North Macedonia

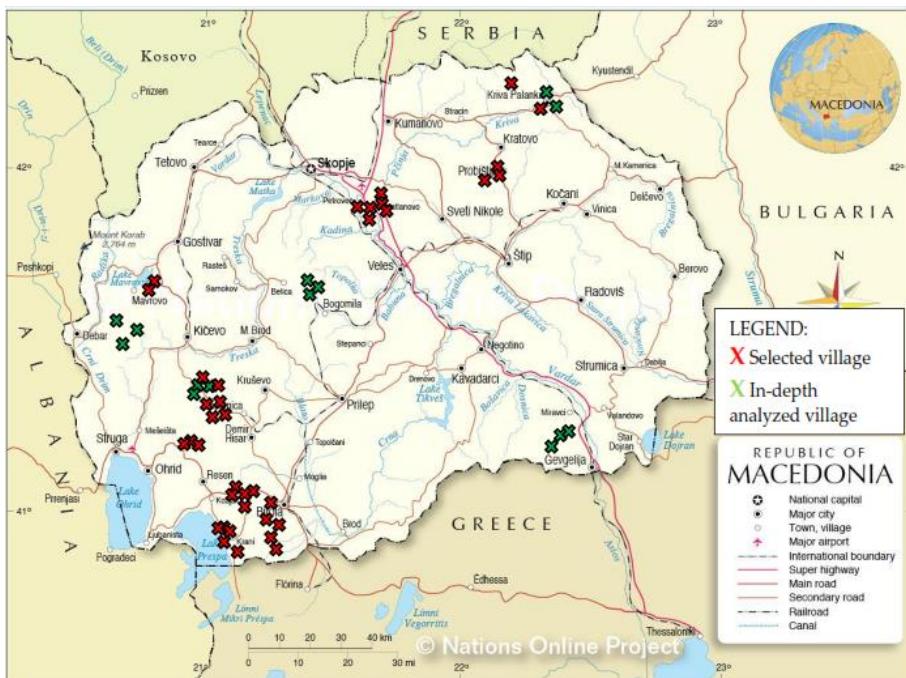
As of the early 2000s, the Republic of North Macedonia began to develop tourism in rural areas mainly by donor funded projects. From a legislative point of view, this issue is covered by the Law on Tourism (2004), Law on Hospitality (2004) and Law on Tourism Development Zones (2012). This urged the need of preparing many essential documents related to rural tourism development on various levels. In this regard, Macedonia has many strategic documents, such as: National Strategy for Regional Development 2009-2019, National Strategy for Sustainable Development 2009-2030, National Strategy for Tourism 2016-2021 and National Strategy for Rural Tourism 2012-2017. Furthermore, municipalities develop strategic documents on a local level, like local economic development strategies, local action plans, annual programs, etc. They also prepare various studies and documents for developing tourism and some specific tourism forms for the destinations.

Several key institutions on various levels are responsible for supporting the rural tourism development in the country. National policy level consists of the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Transport and Communications (for the issues of infrastructure, airports, loans, etc.), Agency for Tourism Promotion, Agency for Support of Agriculture Development, Agency for Financial Support of Underdeveloped Agricultural Regions, etc. Regional policy level consists of regional development centers and local branch offices of the Ministry of Agriculture. Local executive policy level is consisted of municipalities, local action groups, and various local networks responsible for supporting and fostering rural development. There were, and still are, some cross level (policy and executive) actors, like: the donors (EU, GIZ, UNDP, SDC, SIDA, SWG, USAID, World Bank), tourism chambers, educational institutions, business sector (providers, guides, locals, farmers, etc.), etc.

STUDY METHODOLOGY

The study describes the main ambient and general characteristics of the rural tourism in small rural areas in the Republic of North Macedonia. The analysis is based on a qualitative research method, mainly by exploring a conceptual literature review, along with a rapid evaluation of selected rural areas. The data was collected during ten field trips across eight regions and 51 villages, over the period September 2018 – November 2019 (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. FIELD RESEARCH



Source: Nations Online Project

The focus was on small, depopulated and economically depressed villages. More precisely, the main criteria for sampling locations were:

- Being a small village in terms of the number of local inhabitants (maximum 50 permanent local inhabitants) that face problems of aging, productivity, poverty along with some strong migration and depopulation processes;
- Having attractions in the rural environment and a resource base (already attractive tourist center) in the area of 10-20km with good connectivity to an urban center;
- Self-providing accommodation or at least in the near-by vicinity; and
- Having a potential for practicing activities in a traditional way in a direct contact with the nature and offering participation into the life of the rural population.

After a rapid assessment of 51 small villages throughout the entire territory, an in-depth analysis was conducted only on several selected villages based upon the first-hand experience gained from the field research. The sample consisted of 14 villages belonging



to six municipalities from six regions in North Macedonia. Due to their territorial dispersion, the villages were grouped (2-3 villages); thus comprising five potential rural tourism destinations (Table 1). Additionally, they are visually presented in Figure 2.

TABLE 1. IDENTIFIED RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Tourism destination	Region	Municipality	Villages
1	Northeast	Kriva Palanka	B's
			Varoviste
2	Southeast	Gevgelija	Konsko
			Sermenin
			Huma
3	Pelagonia	Demir Hisar	Velmevci
			Golemo Ilino
			Zeleznec
4	Polog	Mavrovo Rostusa	Jance
			Tresonice
	Southwest	Debar	Gari
5	Vardar	Caska	Nezilovo
			Orese
			Papradiste

Source: Authors' field research

FIGURE 2. SAMPLED RURAL TOURISM DESTINATIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA (No. 1: B's and Varoviste; No. 2: Konsko, Sermenin and Huma; No. 3: Velmevci, Golemo Ilino and Zelez nec; No. 4: Jance, Tresonice and Gari; and No. 5: Nezilovo, Orese and Papradiste)



Source: Nations Online Project

FINDINGS

When entering the field trip, the researchers had discussions with the local residents of the visited locations about various community-related issues. It was noticed that the selected tourism destinations offer various activities that could be developed as tourism products and sustainable practices, thus contributing to the local economic development. Hence it can be stated that the identified rural areas have a wide range of opportunities to be profiled as tourist destinations among tourists and travellers.

Furthermore, it was found out that the selected villages have core elements for developing a small scale rural tourism. They all: possess attractions and accommodation in a rural environment, provide a personalized contact, allow practicing activities in a traditional way in a direct contact with the nature and offer a "life practising technique" (participating in the life of the local rural inhabitants). At the same time, the evaluated locations represent a complex pattern of rural environment, economy and tradition, where the local community has the possibility to use a high share of tourism revenues. Furthermore, the research revealed that many rural destinations may identify specific rural activity packages (for example, to walk in the nature trails and pick berries, engage in a cattle breeding process and experience a forest therapy, etc.) and design services and promotions. So, if tourism is supported in the selected rural areas, it may provoke numerous positive impulses particularly in terms of diversifying the local economy, providing a new source of income for the local farmers, introducing a new form of destination resilience and encouraging some new forms of businesses.

Notwithstanding, the study ascertains that the sampled villages are facing some general weaknesses which have severe negative impacts on their development, such as: a constant rapid decrease in the size of population; an unfavourable age structure; small and old households; an unfavourable educational structure; lethargy; a lack of awareness; a lack of finance; etc. Taking all this into consideration, various potential threats may act as additional barriers for initiating and supporting the rural tourism development in the sampled villages, like: neglecting the traditions; degradation of the natural and anthropogenic surrounding; fear of a new way of thinking and acting; etc.

In addition, it was found out that villages in North Macedonia must be granted serious incentives for: the infrastructure improvement; accommodation renovation; improvement of the electricity empowering system; reanimation of the private sector; revival of the neglected and forgotten traditional professions; education and training on positive effects of rural tourism; preservation of the natural, anthropogenic and cultural values; etc.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Global changes in the economic and social way of living provoked a major modification and a huge transformation in the concept of small rural communities functioning. This resulted in reducing the farmstead returns being accompanied with high rates of unemployment, mass migrations of productive workforce and unbalanced demographic patterns (Gallent et al., 2008; Khaleel & Ngah, 2013). Consequently, many rural areas, particularly small villages, are greatly influenced by unfavorable demographic and socioeconomic changes, thus increasing the social and cultural divergence and affecting the local values and ways of living (Theodoropoulou & Panagiotis, 2008; Khaleel & Ngah, 2013).

Based on the first-hand experience supported by a literature review, a rapid assessment of the selected rural areas in North Macedonia was done. It was stated that villages must modify their lifestyle in order to recover, not forgetting that these changes may often be large and long-lasting (Gaillard, 2007). The study revealed that the initiation for developing a rural tourism in the selected small villages strongly depends on:

- Public policies directed towards specific investments tailored according to the needs of a specific region;
- Efforts to increase the tourist accommodation capacity and occupancy rate; and
- Significant efforts to increase the rural tourism income as a precondition for region's tourism development.

Finally, the study concludes that it is not to be expected that the small and depressed villages will be able to attract tourists and travelers by itself, but they must be seen as an additional supply to already known attractive resource base (tourist centers, attractions and destinations). This implies the need of establishing and maintaining strong link of interconnectivity between the small village and a near-by main attraction. If being supported by an ambitious promotion, each sampled village has good chances to be further developed for tourism purposes, thus contributing to the less-developed and some of the underdeveloped regions in North Macedonia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is part of the project "Evaluation of preconditions for tourism activities in rural depopulated areas – a comparative study between Macedonia and Serbia", carried out by the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of North Macedonia and the Geographical Institute "Jovan Cvijić" – Belgrade, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

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