

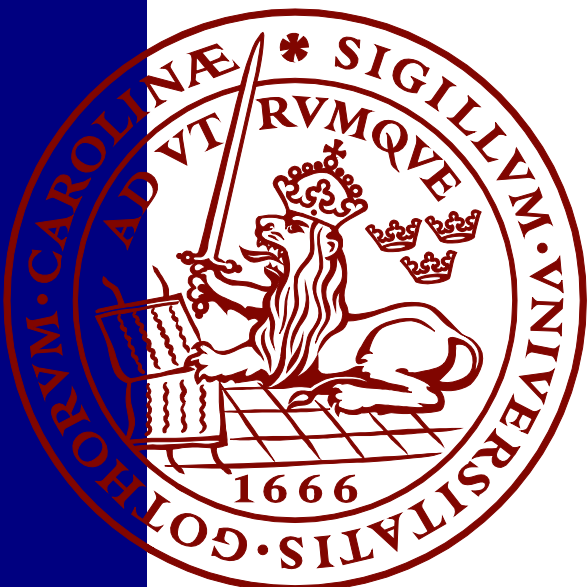
Between modernization and heritage:

Sustainable Rural Tourism as a viable alternative for Transylvania's countryside.

Monica Sturza

Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,
No 2022:042

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University
International Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science
(30hp/credits)



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Monica Andreea Sturza

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Lund University International
Master's Programme in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science

Submitted May 11, 2022

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Abstract:

Transylvania's countryside, characterized by a mostly agrarian society with a rich multicultural heritage is being threatened by Romania's tendencies of chaotic modernization and rapid urbanization. This research aims to find a viable solution for sustaining the cultural, natural, and social environment in rural Transylvania, by analysing the potential of tourism development. Integrated Rural Tourism Theory was used, which endorses a holistic approach in development, using seven dimensions (sustainability, networks, scale, endogeneity, embeddedness, complementarity, and empowerment) to assess the integration of tourism within the community and the benefits it fosters. A combination of qualitative data collection was employed to highlight the opportunities and challenges in a microregion from Transylvania. The results highlight the potential with special emphasis on heritage preservation for tourism destination building. This thesis suggest that a strategic plan guided by the principles of IRT is beneficial for sustainable rural development.

Keywords: sustainable development, multiculturality, Integrated Rural Tourism, holistic approach, tourism destination building.

World count: 12000

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everybody who supported me and helped me in this process.

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Inge-Merete Hougaard for the advice and patience. I would like to send my greatest gratitude to the LUCSUS professors and staff who made my learning experience in Lund amazing and got me to this moment in time.

Thank you to my thesis group for the best input and emotional support. And special thank you to my LUMES crew, Oli, Mark, Sim, Suz and Ruta for being there, encouraging me and helping me along the way. I couldn't have done this without you.

Special thank you to my family for always believing in me.

" (...) Eternity, I believe was born in a village.

Here every thought is more slow

and your heart pulses less frequently,

as if beating not in your chest

but deep in the earth somewhere.

Here the thirst for redemption is met,

and if you have got your feet bloody

you can rest on a clay bank. (...)" - Lucian Blaga, Romanian author

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Abbreviations

- IRT Integrated rural tourism

- OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

- SDG Sustainable Development Goals

- UNESCO The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

- UNWATO World Tourism Organisation

1. Introduction

Rural areas are changing. The exposure to global markets and globalisation lead to a decrease in traditional livelihoods and employment opportunities, fostering migrations and demographic decline (Ashley & Maxwell, 2001). These changes bring a new multifaceted understanding of rural spaces, beyond agricultural production (Saxena et al., 2007; Saarinen & Lenao, 2014). Therefore, sustainable development and new income opportunities become of interest for rural areas (Ashley & Maxwell, 2001; Ivona, 2021), with tourism being considered a solution for the revitalization of rural spaces by emphasising the local cuisine, arts, crafts, manufacturing, and heritage (Saxena et al., 2007; Saarinen & Lenao, 2014; Ivona, 2021). Rural tourism demand has seen a massive growth especially in Europe, In the last twenty years (Gavrilă-Paven, 2015). Thus, tourism can become an important source of income and mechanism for socio-economic development in rural spaces (Epuran et al., 2020).

Acknowledged for the potential benefits it may foster, tourism research does not fall short on the critique either. There are many scientific articles focusing on the negative effects it has on the host communities (Xie et al., 2014), natural environment (Paramati et al., 2017; Balsalobre-Lorente et al., 2020) and heritage and culture (Pandey et al., 1995; Kirtsoglou & Theodossopoulos, 2004). From depletion of natural resources and contributing to Co2 emissions, tourism also accounts for 5% of the total emissions worldwide, accelerating climate change (Paramati et al., 2017).

Focusing on the positive, tourism is considered essential for achieving the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNWTO, 2017) and can have positive impacts on the natural, cultural, and social environment (Candela & Figini, 2012). Because tourism accounts for 10% of the world's total GDP and is directly interlinked with other industries, it can have positive impacts on sustainable development (UNWTO, 2017). World Tourism Organisation and United Nations Development Programme (2017) emphasise on five positive impacts that the industry can have across multiple dimensions: “ (1) sustainable economic growth, (2) social inclusiveness, employment and poverty reduction, (3) resource efficiency, environmental protection and climate change, (4) cultural values, diversity and heritage, and (5) mutual understanding, peace and security” (UNWATO, 2017, p. 15).

Implementing sustainable and ecological practices in the field actively reduces the CO2 emissions and lowers the negative effects tourism has on the environment (Paramati et al., 2017). Therefore, sustainability principles had become significantly more important in tourism activities in recent years (Epuran et al., 2020; Salvatore et al., 2018). Tourists are becoming more interested in their ecological

footprint, and this can be noticed in their patterns of choosing a tourism destination (Campos-Soria et al., 2020) or accommodation type (Amatulli et al., 2021; Apostolakis et al., 2020). Mass tourism attractions and popular destinations are being replaced by niche establishments like rural tourism which is viewed as an eco-friendlier alternative (Salvatore et al., 2018). The concept of rural tourism is not a novelty in Romania, however rural tourism activities appear mostly sporadically and in many areas without considering sustainability aspects (Galluzzo, 2021) and without following any plan or regulation, often leading to negative impacts (Ibănescu et al., 2018).

This thesis focuses on a microregion in the Southern part of Transylvania, "Tarnava Mica Inferioara", which is a regional cluster of villages situated in a beautiful natural landscape. The Transylvanian microregion, is not an established tourist destination; however, characterised by a diverse history, customs, and traditions due to the multiculturalism of the area, inhabited by Romanians, Hungarians, Saxons and Roma (Anghel, 2016; Kiss et al., 2017). According to Galluzzo (2021) in rural areas the focal attraction and opportunity comes from the local resources, from cultural identities, landscapes and scenery to communities, traditions, and cuisine, all sustained over time (Galluzzo, 2021). With the growing interest in heritage tourism, culture and history are becoming important factors for rural tourism development (Hargrove, 2002). Aligned with sustainability principles, heritage tourism is built on the preservation of cultural, social, and natural resources that should be experienced by the future generations as well (Fyall & Garrod, 1998; Hargrove, 2002). The varied cultural input has a great potential to support rural tourism development and sustainable development of the countryside (Gavrilă-Paven, 2015).

In 2020, the world took a 180 degree turn from the normality of everyday life, and the fear of a new recession or economic collapse needed competent reactions from all sectors of the society (Nicola et al., 2020). However, these new challenges and limitations, as necessary as they were for 'flattening the curve' and human health, had devastating effects on the tourism industry, resulting in negative impacts on hospitality businesses all over the world (Duarte Alonso et al., 2020). At the same time, going back to the same exploitative industry without making any changes should not be an option for the future (Polukhina et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

1.1 Research aim

The aim of this research is to explore how sustainable rural tourism could be developed in Transylvania's microregion and how it can bring positive change in rural areas by preserving and protecting the environment, local community, and heritage without compromising it.

The Integrated Rural Tourism theory and framework proposes a holistic approach that can foster sustainable development in rural areas, and thus bringing new opportunities. This research hopes to minimise the knowledge gap in rural tourism development and its implication for sustainable tourism development in Transylvania's multicultural regions. To address this topic, this thesis addresses the following research question:

1. How can sustainable rural tourism be developed in Tarnava Mica inferioara microregion?

With its following sub-questions:

- a. What are the touristic opportunities and potential encountered for rural tourism development in the case study microregion?
- b. How can Integrated Rural Tourism framework analyse and guide sustainable rural tourism development in the microregion?

1.2 Contribution to sustainability science

This thesis focuses on understanding the complexity of problems that can arise between human and environment relationships (Kates et al., 2001). With the world constantly changing, new challenges arise such as climate change and resource depletion, which pose further pressure on the fragile areas already burdened by older social issues such as poverty and inequality (Jerneck et al., 2011). Sustainability science identifies these problems as "wicked" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), being complex and difficult to solve (Jerneck et al., 2011) without understanding the interconnections between nature and society and endorsing an integrated and inclusive approach including both natural and social sciences (Jerneck et al., 2011; Kates et al. 2001).

Aligned with the objectives of the SDG's, this research subscribes to the idea of developing vulnerable areas while minimising the negative effects on the environment (Saito et al., 2017). Sustainable development is defined as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs (Barnaby, 1987, p. 217), which implies a strategic approach to resource management. This research focuses on all types of resources including traditions, heritage, and the local communities (Candela & Figini, 2012).

Interdisciplinarity in this research aims to change the narrative of how sustainability can be achieved. Drawing from anthropology, this research brings forward issues of socio-cultural values and power relations which contribute to development agendas and tourism research (Nunkoo et al., 2021).

Using the concepts of heritage tourism, this thesis aims to point out the similarities between what sustainability wants to achieve and how tourism fit under these aspirations. Heritage is about

preservation and efficient resource management, implying a consideration for future generation (Fyall & Garrod, 1998; Hargrove, 2002).

2. Background

According to Hartel et al., (2016) Transylvania is of touristic interest due to the rich cultural heritage. The Southern part of Transylvania is historically multi-ethnic inhabited by Romanians, Hungarians, Szeklersz, Roma and Saxons. Besides the multiple spoken languages, traditions and customs, Transylvania, like other multicultural regions, exposes a dynamic understanding of ethnic identity at different levels in the society (Felecan, 2021). It is safe to say that Transylvania's history is complex and laced with conflicts throughout the years. For a long time, Transylvania was under Austro-Hungarian rule. However, Transylvania holds a very powerful intellectual spark in the history of Romania, despite the hardships, being a very important area for the national identity (Baár & Ritivoi, 2006). On the other hand, the Hungarian state kept a close connection across the borders in Transylvania to keep the cultural identity intact even if the territory was divided (Obenchain et al., 2014, Ferdinand, 2021). These contested territories highlight the complexity of ethnicity and multiculturalism in a post war era, where there are different patterns of national identification (Motta, 2021).

2.1 Tarnava Mica Inferioara microregion, Transylvania

The microregion is located in Mures county, in the central-eastern part of Transylvania, Romania. Mures county encompasses 4 Municipalities, 7 cities, 91 communes and 464 villages (Directia Judeteana de Statistica Mures, 2021) in 6696 square meters (Consiliul Judetean Mures, 2020). Located less than 100km from four important cities - Tarnaveni, Targu-Mures, Sibiu and Sighisoara, the villages of the microregion (Figure 1) are accessible and reachable with different means of transportation. Accessibility is defined in simple terms by looking at the capacity of a location and/or activity to be reached from other locations using a means of transportation (Man et al., 2015). The International European Road E60 is linked to National Roads which reach the microregion; thus, it is easy to reach the destination from multiple directions. In addition, the primary highway in Transylvania (A3) also connects the major cities nearby with the rest of the country offering access for tourists from different parts of the country or international tourists coming from the connected airports (Targu Mures, Cluj Napoca, Oradea).

According to OECD the tourism sector accounts for 2.8% of the total GDP in Romania in 2017 supporting over 350000 jobs (OECD, 2020). Mures county is not a popular touristic destination, however, is known for the methane gas deposits and salt deposits. In addition, mineral waters, salty lakes, and mud are found in the area and represent a resource for wellness tourism (Consiliul Judetean Mures, 2020).

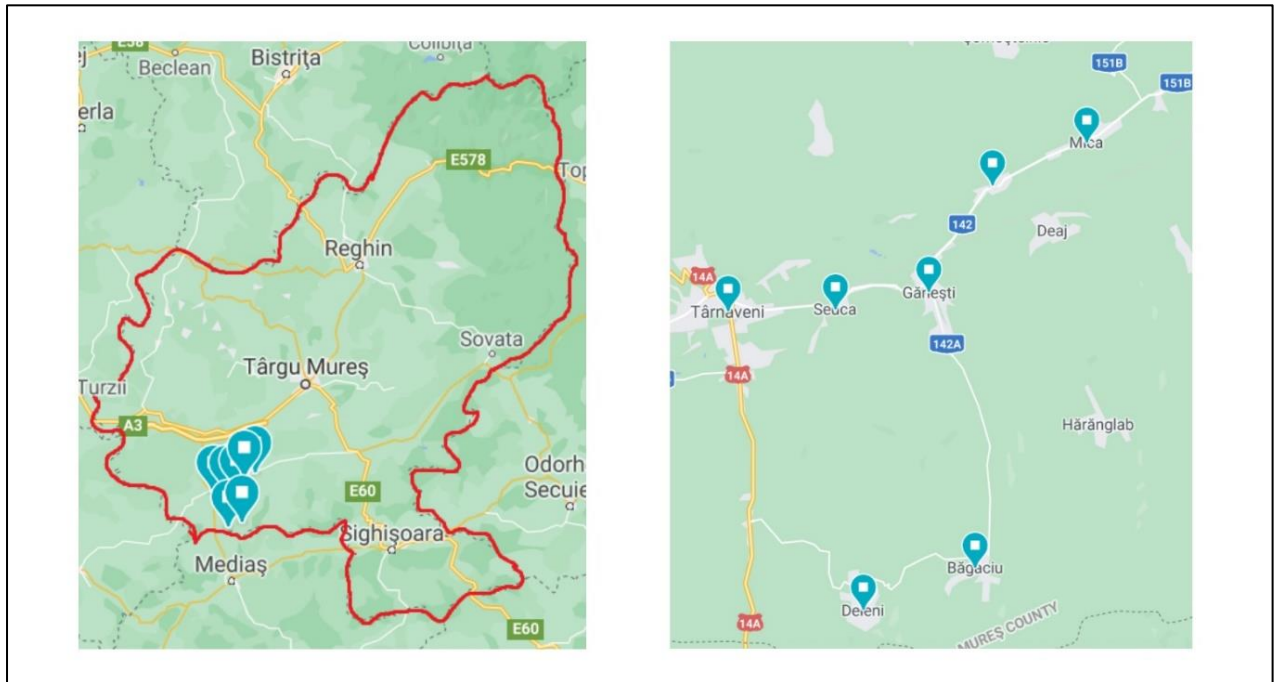


Figure 1. "Tarnava Mica Inferioara" microregion, Mures County. The blue marks on the map represent the villages and city (Tarnaveni) included in the microregion (Illustration made by the Author using Google Maps).

Almost half of the population in Romania lives in rural areas (National Institute of statistics, 2015), which have low-income opportunities and standards of living with limited sustainable development initiatives (Hartel et al., 2016). In the rural areas of the county, the predominant economic activity is agriculture. However, there is a significant amount of people which have a small-scale farm which is not registered officially as an economic revenue, but it does encompass part of their livelihoods. A problem identified is the multitude of small villages present in the county (under 500 people) which live in marginal areas without many income opportunities. Demographic decline due to migration incite towards the urgency to revitalize these settlements by creating opportunities and make the population return to these villages. The local council had acknowledged the importance of communication and collaboration in the region thus several microregional clusters exist in the county which in theory would foster development and valorize local values (Consiliul Judetean Mures, 2020).

3 Theory

3.1 Integrated Rural Tourism

Academic publications have written on rural tourism since 1994 when Bernard Lane's publication identified rural tourism as a tourism type and defined it as the cluster of activities conducted in the countryside not exclusively linked to agriculture, but involving heritage, education, and arts. However, rural tourism should also be viewed as dynamic, encompassing different types of tourism depending on the areas and resources (Bramwell, 1994). Sustainable tourism was conceptualised by integrating environmental concerns in tourism development (Liu, 2003). Rural tourism is associated with ecotourism – nature-based tourism aiming to protect natural landscapes, but with more affinity towards traditional and cultural landscapes linked to already existing farms which can provide local produce, accommodation, and different touristic activities, meeting the new tourism demands and sustainability characteristics (Pan et al., 2018).

Resources in rural areas are often linked to culture and heritage, concepts which were also integrated under the umbrella of tourism to foster beneficial outcomes for the host communities and aid the preservation of the cultural environment (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). However, recent studies underline the importance of empowerment, ownership, and participation of the local community in the decision making in the tourism business (Saxena et al., 2007). Therefore, in simple terms, Integrated Rural Tourism comes as a solution that integrates multiple aspects debated before in tourism research to achieve a holistic outcome and foster environmental, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

Rural development through small-scale tourism is viewed as a particularly attractive option in weaker regions where the countryside can offer a variety of "attractions" and activities within its boundaries (Neumeier & Pollermann, 2014). Cultural tourism is built around heritage, rich traditions and culture which can incite sustainable development and foster revenue (Stefan et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the countryside is not only attractive for landscapes or cultural activities, but also sometimes deeper than that, with a connection at a spiritual level with what rural means for people (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015).

IRT was conceptualised as encompassing seven dimensions: networking, scale, endogeneity, sustainability, embeddedness, complementarity, and empowerment (Table 1) (Saxena et al., 2007; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The seven dimensions of IRT were conceptualised in studies within the EU's SPRITE project (Supporting and Promoting Integrated Rural Tourism in Europe's Lagging Rural Regions)

which aimed to assess the integration of rural tourism in specific areas in Europe (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). Different scholars conceptualise the framework suited for their applied case study, adapting the concepts and interpretation to their research (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008). The previous mentioned articles, stand as inspiration for this study for the interpretation and conceptualisation of the dimensions of IRT.

Table 1. The seven dimensions of IRT. Table synthesised and constructed after (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Saxena et al., 2007)

IRT dimensions	Synthesised definition
Sustainability	Using the resources of the area without damaging them but rather enhancing and protecting them.
Networks	Collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders..
Scale	Distribution (time and geographically) of tourism in an area bearing in mind the carrying capacity of the area.
Endogeneity	Recognition of tourism in an area as based on the resources of that area.
Embeddedness	Role of tourism in the political and cultural life of the local population
Complementarity	The degree to which tourism provides benefits in the community and complements the existing activities.
Empowerment	Planning, control and decision-making capacities at a local level.

IRT supports the idea of including new income sources which complement the existing livelihoods (Saxena et al., 2007; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008). Within the context of the European agricultural policy shift towards a more ecological and inclusive ideology which supports new initiatives in rural areas that benefit the local communities (van Zanten et al., 2014), IRT stands as a guideline and at the basis of future strategies that need to be developed in rural areas with touristic potential. IRT highlights areas that need attention to successfully develop a tourism destination that benefits all the stakeholders involved such as the importance of network promotion and support, institutional development, sustainable resource management, avoiding conflicts, policy development and support and the need to empower and involve the local community in the decision making (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The IRT framework tries to overcome limitations from previous studies in rural tourism. It follows an inclusive and interdisciplinary approach, compared to previous research in rural tourism development which tends to focus on one aspect (Saxena et al., 2007).

The IRT framework is proposed for this study as a way of thinking critically and analysing the way rural tourism is developing and can be developed in rural areas with touristic potential that could benefit from it. According to Saxena et al. (2007, p. 352), IRT can bring several benefits when implemented as a model in rural tourism development, such as:

- a) economic benefits to the communities and increased employment opportunities,
- b) experiential benefits-knowledge sharing resulting in better experiences for both tourists and local communities,
- c) conservation benefits- opportunities for resource regeneration, increasing the capacity for sustainable development,
- d) developmental benefits- rural multifunctionality bringing new opportunities in less developed regions and regions with agricultural decline,
- e) synergic benefits- better institutional policies for rural development due to new networks and partnerships, collaboration, and participation at different levels for rural development.

3.1.1 Sustainability - preserving the social, cultural, and natural environment

Sustainable tourism is an alternative for reducing the negative impacts the industry has on the environment and society (Pan et al., 2018). In theory, achieving sustainability within the IRT framework, means optimising, protecting, and enhancing the resources of a rural area (Butler, 1999; Saarinen, 2006). Building a sustainable tourism destination is dependent on tourist satisfaction and demand that can generate income and support the activities. However, respecting the local communities, the natural environment and the heritage and culture is detrimental for its success (Candela & Figini, 2012). In simpler terms, it is important to not destroy the resources on which tourism activities depend on in the future (Swarbrooke 1999, p. 13).

The relationship between tourism and the environment is defined by the types of environments: natural environment, human-made environment, and socio-cultural environment (Swarbrooke, 1999). Budowski (1976), theorised this relationship and divided it in three categories: coexistence - tourism and the environment exist separately with few connections; conflict - when tourism affects the environment negatively; symbiosis - tourism and the environment benefit from one another (Budowski, 1976). These classifications were made for the natural environment; however, they can be easily used for cultural and social environments, to understand the interaction with tourism (Candela

& Figini, 2012). According to Sharpley (2000), sustainable tourism, per se, is impossible to achieve as the tourism sphere is strongly ingrained in economic growth paradigms. However, IRT brings forward a more inclusive and concrete solution for the development of sustainable rural tourism that can limit the negative impacts of the industry (Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Saxena et al., 2007). Therefore, tourism development without regulation and management of local resources can lead to depletion and destruction of physical environments, social structures, and cultures which all impact local communities (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

To achieve sustainable rural tourism, a series of key points need to be considered. These key points will constitute the elements for the analytical framework used to analyse the data, to illustrate the current relation between tourism and the environment in the microregion and how IRT can foster positive change.

1. Creating a relation of symbiosis between tourism development and the local resources (Budowski, 1976; Candela & Figini, 2012) by optimising, protecting, and enhancing the local resources (Butler, 1999; Saarinen, 2006).
2. The economic benefits that resulted from touristic activities should further benefit the community and resources (Northcote & Macbeth, 2006; Saxena et al., 2007; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

3.2.2 Networking - collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders

Networks or actors cooperating at different levels create the basis for the tourism industry (Björk & Virtanen, 2005; Atterton, 2007; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Fløysand & Sjøholt, 2007; Saxena et al., 2007;). Networks in the tourism sector imply that individuals and/ or organisations are not isolated, but they cooperate and form partnerships which mobilise information and resources (Jesus & Franco, 2016) leading to a more sustainable approach (Timur & Getz, 2008) and better economic success and tourist satisfaction (March & Wilkinson, 2009). The academic literature analyses networks in different contexts in social sciences, however communication, reciprocity and trust have been encountered as characteristics of network relationships (Björk & Virtanen, 2005; March & Wilkinson, 2009; Murdoch, 2000; Timur & Getz, 2008; Tyler & Dinan, 2001). These characteristics are maintained through information, knowledge, and resource sharing between the involved parties. A strong connection between actors improves the flow of information and resources and vice versa promoting further collaboration and cooperation.

The tourism sector encompasses diverse stakeholder's dependent on each other for achieving common set goals. Thus, creating networks and partnerships helps find the commonalities and strategies to achieve the best outcome; the nature of the partnerships is as important as the actors themselves, for the tourism destination development (Jesus & Franco, 2016). The networking dimension is the characteristic that sets apart Integrated Rural Tourism from Sustainable Tourism. Networking enables actors to make use of local resources of any kind, access knowledge, cooperate and attract tourists (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). Not all actors or stakeholders are involved in the same way, however, IRT emphasis on integration brings change in the way new collaborations and networks can be formed (Saxena & Ilbery, 2008).

Fragmented and small-scale, rural tourism is dependent on collaborations among actors and stakeholders to gain recognition and function. In the development of rural tourism, network formation can be more difficult to establish because of the scale of the enterprises and touristic activities, implying limited resources and information and lack of qualifications and expertise of the workers (Jesus & Franco, 2016). According to Cawley and Gillmor (2008), networks can either be represented as horizontal linkages which are beneficial to product creation, business growth and tourism destination development, linking tourism to the local resources and community; and vertical networks which bring external support that can come in different shapes and forms. It is almost impossible to develop a tourism destination without some external input and connection to external markets. Networks within the rural community and external ones, foster knowledge sharing and thus increase the adapting capacity to changing environments (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

To operationalize theory, this research is following the conceptualization of networks in rural settings elaborated by Saxena et al. (2007) and building on the two types of networks defined by Cawley & Gillmor (2008). Therefore, the following indicators will be used in the analysis of the existing rural networks in the microregion:

1. Networks must reinforce cultural identities. This means that connections and ties are formed based on shared values, traditions and customs which influence the relationships; these relationships and collaborations are horizontal, within the community, leading to opportunities for co-production, co-marketing between local authorities, NGOs, and the local community. Horizontal networks are built on the objective to keep the maximum benefits in the rural areas by adding values to the natural, social, and cultural resources (Saxena et al., 2007).

2. However, because this implies a limited access to markets, networks in rural settings also must be disembedded, to connect the rural areas with external markets. These types of relations are characterised as vertical, bringing new external input in the community (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). Vertical networks can lead to negative impacts such as cultural separation and financial outflow from the community. Externally determined decisions do not always match the internal needs and thus, local values might get damaged and local participation and empowerment limited. However, within the IRT, they can facilitate knowledge sharing and innovation. This connection to the exterior allows the process to shift and adapt to new market demands and technologies, bringing benefits to the rural areas (Saxena et al., 2007).

3.1.3 Scale - within sustainable development

Tourism development is linked to spatial distribution. As a dynamic process, rural tourism development changes over time either increasing or decreasing in scale and network connections, with a more limited expansion possibility (Saxena et al, 2007). However, small-scale tourism can be just as beneficial for poverty alleviation and community development as larger establishments if developed in an inclusive and sustainable way (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). Therefore, rural tourism should find its competitive advantage in the smaller scale it operates within, offering different experiences to visitors (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

The scale dimension is linked to other elements of the IRT framework influencing the overall long-term development of networks, a sustainable agenda for tourism development or community involvement in the process. Rural tourism is usually smaller in scale compared to other types of tourism; and bound to the rural area it functions within. Thus, it might seem that it cannot compete on the market (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). However, according to Cawley and Gillmor (2008), small scale rural tourism can have multiple benefits and from a business perspective it can generate jobs and secure livelihoods at a community level. Among them, the opportunities offered by sustainable alternative experiences are in growing demand and specific for rural settings. In addition, a sustainable management of local resources limits the exploitative tendencies of mass tourism. Keeping the scale of rural tourism in the parameters of the geographic, social, and environmental conditions of the area is beneficial for the overall success of a rural tourism destination (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

3.1.4 Endogeneity - protecting and promoting the resources and preserving their ownership

Endogenous development is conducted at a scale appropriate to local environmental and social resources and often incorporates complementary use of resources and should ideally lead to increased partnership and synergy. It encourages strong local participation in decision making about resource use and enables local actors to adapt external opportunities to their own needs (Saxena et al., 2007). Endogeneity refers to the level of recognition and ownership protection of local resources (Oliver & Jenkins, 2003; Clark & Chabrel, 2007; Saxena et al., 2007). In other terms, the recognition of a place, in a tourism setting, based on the local pool of resources (Clark & Chabrel, 2007).

The focus of achieving endogeneity in tourism development refers to maximising the benefits for the local community by adding value to the local resources and keeping the resources within the community (Saxena et al., 2007). External ownership limits local control and decision-making (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). Therefore, adding value to the local resources increases the feeling of belonging and appreciation of a space which further supports local participation in the decision making. Limited access to education, innovation, and external market tendencies in rural areas, might hinder the implementation of successful strategies for tourism destination development. Therefore, endogeneity is not limiting beneficial external input that keeps a dynamic evolution and transformation of the business without negatively impacting the resources and the local community (Saxena et al., 2007).

3.1.5 Embeddedness, complementarity, and empowerment

Tourism embeddedness in a local community refers to the positive impacts that it generates by creating livelihoods and employment opportunities. It fosters a sense of identity and strengthens the values of the locals, therefore, creating a more authentic experience for the visitors (Lenao & Saarinen, 2015). The concept is closely linked to endogeneity because the local environmental, cultural, and social resources are the pillars for a destination identity which further enhances the success of tourism development tendencies (Saxena et al., 2007).

Tourism development in a rural setting should increase the life quality for the local communities (Ho & Lee, 2020), and complementarity, like embeddedness, refers to how tourism is benefiting the people who are not directly involved in the sphere. Tourism has the capacity to make changes in its development thus leading to social conflict, environmental degradation, and culture loss. Conflict can be avoided by assuring that tourism development complements the already functioning structures and activities in the rural areas. Rural tourism development needs to compensate for lack of income opportunities whilst preserving the resources without creating commotion and social instability (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

Empowerment, just as sustainability can be considered almost a goal of the IRT, something that will be achieved. Within the IRT, empowerment refers to community empowerment which concerns the reallocation of power between groups, thus, making the whole community involved in the decision making and benefiting from it (Saxena et al., 2007). Empowerment of host communities is essential for sustainable rural tourism development, placing people and the environment above profit, giving them the means to be in control of their life and environment. Empowerment is more than just participation, the community is actively involved in decision-making, action taking and solution seeking (Boley & McGehee, 2014).

4 Methods

4.1 Research design

Critically observing the rural areas of the region, the study began as a reflection upon the possibilities and theoretical paradigms for overcoming the challenges which rural areas and rural tourism development processes go through. The data collection of this study combined literature review with field research (participatory observation) and qualitative, semi-structured interviews. Data analysis consisted of data preparation (transcribing the interviews, translating them, organising field notes), classification and categorization of the interviews and field notes and thematic content analysis of the interviews and notes (Figure 2). This research endorses a qualitative approach which offers a robust understanding on the topic of the study with great value attributed to people's experiences (Leavy, 2017).

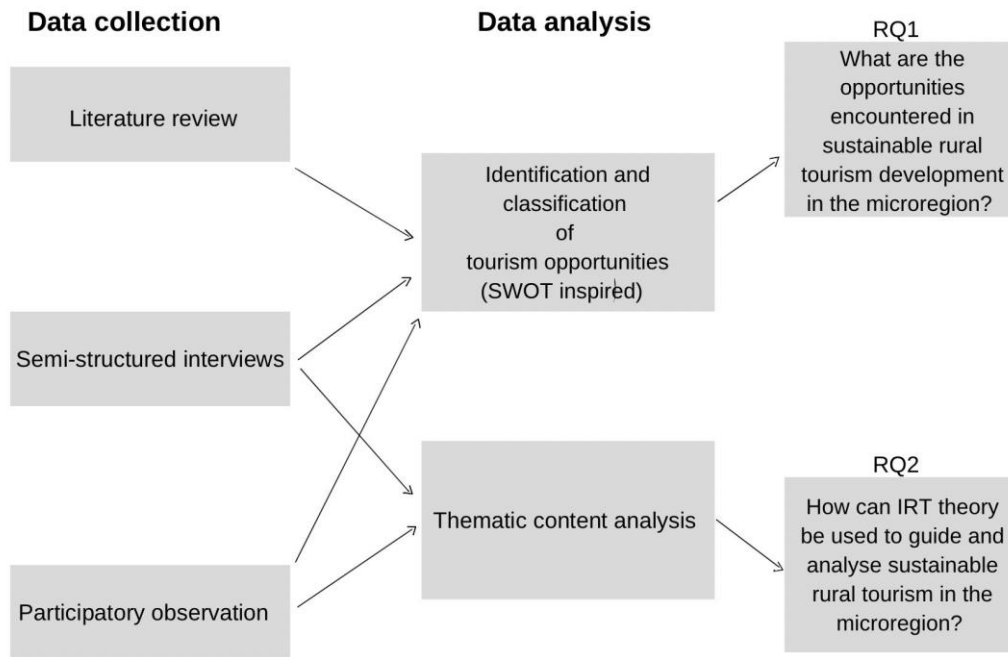


Figure 2. Visual representation of Research design. To answer the research questions (RQ), a specific combination of data collection was employed (Figure created by the author).

4.2 Data Collection

4.1.1 Literature review

The process of literature review was divided into two sections: 1) literature review was conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the context, concepts, and general topic of the research, creating a basis of knowledge from previous studies in the field; 2) a more specific literature review was conducted to support the findings of the research, complementary to the data retrieved from the interviews and participant observation.

Academic literature such as peer-reviewed and published articles on topics such as: sustainable tourism, rural tourism, networks in tourism, sustainable development, integrated rural tourism were retrieved from online databases (Google Scholar, Lub Search, Web of Science) and used to frame the study and build the analytical framework. Secondary data was retrieved from the National Institute of Statistics (Romania), official documents and reports emitted by the United Nations, World Tourism Organisation and European Union.

4.1.2 Semi-structured interviews

To capture important nuances of how people perceive rural tourism development in the area and the current development status, semi-structured interviews were used. To select the stakeholders to participate in the semi-structured interview, a mixed sampling strategy was used. For some stakeholders such as the business owners in the microregion a purposeful sampling approach was used, namely selecting the people who represent the best cases for the research to answer the research questions and produce qualitative results (Leavy, 2017). For the interviews with the locals, a snowball sampling was used, which implies that the participants identified from the participatory observation or previous knowledge of the area lead to selection of other participants (Leavy, 2017).

The stakeholders identified were then divided into six categories (Figure 3), from which three were included in the research: locals (L, n=4), local business owners (B, n=2), NGO (N, n=1). Before the interviews, the participants were asked if they consent to participate in the study using a guide document which includes all the details (Annex A). This document was also sent via email. An interview guide which was based on the concepts encompassed in the Integrated Rural Tourism Theory (sustainability, networks, scale, endogeneity, embeddedness, complementarity, and empowerment) with the focus on concepts that are relevant at this stage of development was used to lead the semi-structured interviews tailored for each stakeholder group (Annex B). The interview lasted between 25-35 minutes and the majority were held in person (the interview with the NGO representative was held over Zoom); the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

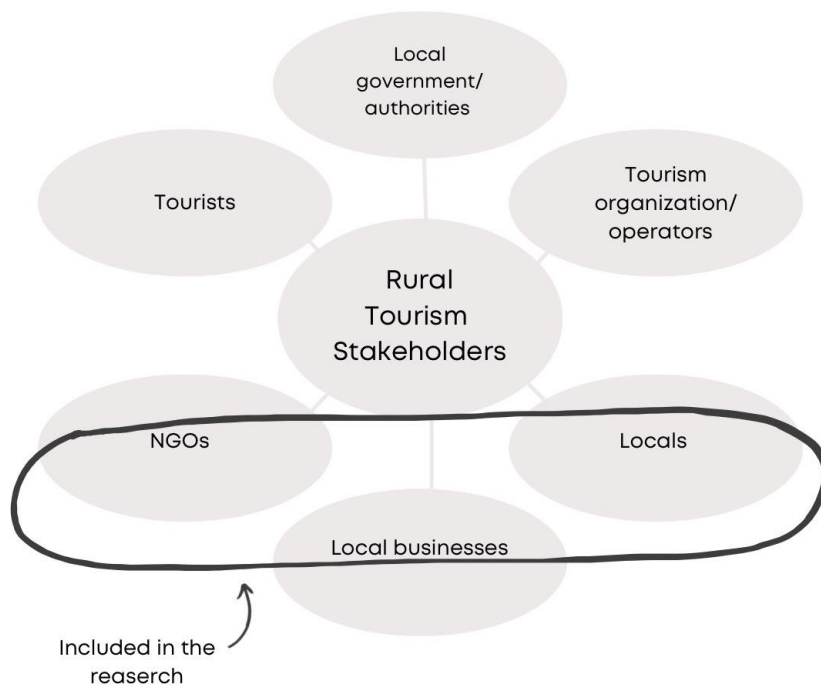


Figure 3. Stakeholders involved in the rural tourism development (Illustration created by the Author, inspired by Boronyak, 2010)

4.1.3 Participatory observation

Participatory observation was conducted officially during the field work between January and April 2021 and March and April 2022 in the microregion of interest in Mures county. The data was recorded by strolling the main streets of the villages, markets, stores and visiting important sites in the area in addition to local's home, where informal conversations could be held with the locals. During the process of participant observation, field notes were collected comprising descriptions, reflections, summary notes, conversation, and interview notes. This method of gathering data was endorsed to gain valuable insights into how the locals perceive the countryside development and rural tourism development, collaborations, sustainability aspects, values and identity, touristic features of the microregion and challenges.

According to Leavy (2017), a successful data collection with participatory observation is bound to the access the researcher has within the community, area, activities studied. Thus, my previous experiences in the area, connection with the culture and people proved to be beneficial for a deeper

understanding of the problems and struggles of the community, the current state of development, practices, heritage, customs, and activities in the villages (see Sub-chapter 4.4). As a pragmatic approach, participatory observation draws from reality and practices and avoids speculations (Rock, 1979). It also facilitates the understanding of social life from the perspective of the participants (Leavy, 2017).

4.3 Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed using the Speech Recognition in Microsoft Word or manually. A thematic analysis was conducted by dividing the data into text segments and coding accordingly to the thematic similarities and concepts (Guest et al., 2012). Because the themes for this research are outlined in the theory and because the transcripts from the interviews did not produce an exceeding amount of data, the text segmentation and coding were easily done. In addition, it brought an advantage because more attention could be attributed to the context of the conversation and the nuances in speech, which, enable a better understanding of the answers (Guest et al., 2012).

To answer the first research question (What are the opportunities encountered in the sustainable rural tourism development in the case study?), the data was analysed to highlight the main opportunities encountered in the microregion (Annex C). The identification and analysis of strengths and opportunities was inspired by the SWOT Matrix (Appendix D), which is used to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in organisations and businesses to achieve the desired goals (Gürel, 2017). The data was organised by descriptive coding and segmentation which was used to categorise and organise the findings according to the opportunities discovered.

To answer the second research question (How can integrated Rural theory be used to guide and analyse sustainable rural tourism development in the microregion?) the data collected was thematically analysed, coded, and categorised according to the Integrated Rural Tourism Theory concepts, which facilitated writing the results section (Appendix E).

4.4 Positionality statement and limitations

Previous encounter with the area, before the research begun, made the data gathering much more transparent, as some level of trust was already built, and the locals did not perceive me as an outsider and acted naturally which is considered an advantage for data collection during fieldwork (Leavy, 2017). However, as much of an advantage, the familiarity, previous experiences, values, and identity highlighted the limitations. The challenge and biggest limitation came from the process of removing

myself from the area and analysing the data without biases or previously formed subjective opinions (Kawulich, 2005), as Romanian-Hungarian, growing up in Transylvania and forming my own subjective opinion on the microregion.

The timing of the thesis with the pandemic was also a factor influencing the thesis design, changing plans, and limiting fieldworks altogether. All the safety measures were taken during the process and the best alternatives were endorsed. This meant less stakeholders due to accessibility reasons. Lastly, data collection was also limited by the lack of responses or interest coming from stakeholders identified for the study.

5 Results and discussions

5.1 Analysis of touristic potential of “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” microregion (RQ1)

The conducted research resulted in the discovery of key features of the microregion, which, with the correct strategy and planning can offer income opportunities and sustainable alternatives for a better standard of living in Romania’s countryside while keeping the integrity of the environment. The findings were divided into three sub-sections: Environment and resources, Rural tourism opportunities and NGOs and community building (Appendix C).

5.1.1 Environment and Resources

5.1.1.1 Heritage and cultural resources

The multicultural background has a visible influence in the villages of the ‘Tarnava Mica Inferioara’ microregion. Cultural resources and heritage stand as pillars for the experience offered in certain tourism destinations (Galluzzo, 2021). In Mures county four ethnic groups co-exist: Romanians accounting for most of the population - 52.6%, Hungarians - 38.09%, Rroma – 8.9% and Germans (Saxons) – 0.28 % (Figure 4) (Directia Judeteana de Statistica Mures, 2021). The multicultural history of the area is an important attraction for international tourists, especially from Hungary and Germany, which represent minorities in the area, but also for other international tourists who are interested to discover the interesting history of Transylvania through its heritage (Iorio & Corsale, 2013).

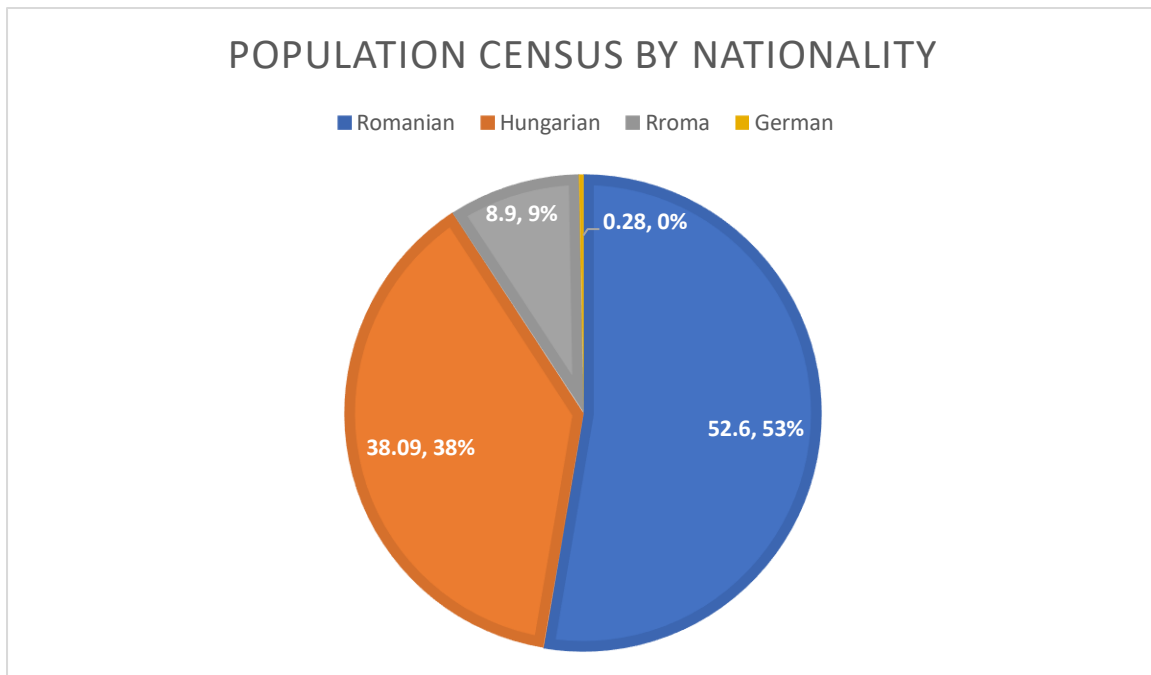


Figure 4. Population Census by Nationality in Mures County, Romania; (Illustration made by the author using secondary data from Directia Judeteana de Statistica (2021).

The Saxon villages in the southern part of Transylvania have significant importance for the heritage of Romania because of the mediaeval landscapes they offer. The area extends beyond the microregion, including 150 villages which are the home of old Saxon Fortified Churches and other buildings with architectural importance. Some of the fortified churches were declared UNESCO heritage sites (Petre, 2020).

An important ecclesiastic cultural heritage attraction, in the microregion, is the Evangelical Church of Bagaciu dating from the 15th century, one of the Saxon Fortified Churches in Romania (Figure 5, image b). One of the villages from the microregion, Delenii, is the home of one of the biggest wood church bells (Figure 5, image a). The bell, dating since 1699, is built separate from the Unitarian Church, and it is made entirely out of wood. The gate of the Unitarian Church is a Szekler wooden gate, these types of gate style can still be found in the area (Figure 5, image d). Also, according to the locals, the Unitarian Church together with the Hungarian community, collected traditional garments and artefacts from the village in a small museum that can be visited by the public with the help of the locals (Figure 5, image e). Besides the ecclesiastic cultural heritage, the area is filled with Saxon manors, villas, and beautiful buildings (Figure 6) dating since the Austro-Hungarian Empire was ruling Transylvania.

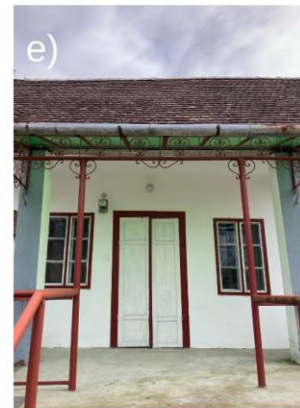


Figure 5. a) Wooden Bell in Delenii, b) Fortified Saxon Church in Bagaciu, c) Unitarian church and Szekler monuments, d) Traditional Szekler gate, e) the village museum, in Delenii (pictures taken by the Author).



Figure 6. Traditional Saxon and Hungarian manors and houses in the villages of Bagaciu and Ganesti (pictures taken by the Author).

The intangible elements such as traditions and values, play a key role in shaping the identity of a community. The link between the landscape, heritage and identity provides a more in-depth understanding of the rural communities, boosting its persistence and sustainability (Pătru-Stupariu et al., 2019). Because of its rich multicultural background, the traditions, customs, and cuisine are unique and interesting and some of them inspired local events and festivals. The local governments celebrate the community by organising carnivals for the village days; local youth organisation KIK, emphasises the importance of local traditional food, folklore, garments and dance and they often organise events for the community (Section 5.1.3).

Drawing from academic literature, it is important to find a balance between tourism development and preservation of the cultural sites and heritage. Therefore, following a strategy, and development plan would create a favorable outcome (Park & Yoon, 2011; Garau, 2015). Nonetheless, building a strong identity based on the local values should be the basis of developing a tourist destination in a rural area, where the connection with the place, customs and traditions is a point of attraction (Pătru-Stupariu et al., 2019).

5.1.1.2 Natural resources

The natural resources and landscape set the background for many types of tourism destinations and activities. However, the relationship between tourism and the environment it functions in, is complex and interdependent (Candela & Figini, 2012). "Tarnava Mica" microregion is in a geographic area with diverse landscapes. The Transylvanian meadows, vineyards and evergreen forests surrounding the area make for great outdoor activities and supply the local population with the necessary resources. There is also potential for balneary tourism development due to the salty creeks flowing in the surroundings creating shallow lakes with therapeutic mud which the locals use.

One of the most appreciated natural resources in the area are vineyards. Wine production is a tradition in the area with many of the locals producing their own homemade wine. At a bigger scale, there are two established wineries in the microregion (see section 5.1.2.2 Wine tourism). Outdoor tourism activities are underdeveloped. An adventure park nearby the region offers outdoor activities for potential tourists residing in the area (Peppermint Park in Mica). Outdoor activities are organised by the local established tourism enterprises such as: truffle hunting, off-road vehicles renting and vineyard visits. There is initiative to make motorbike renting facilities and more accommodation spots for the tourists interested in exploring the landscapes. Important to note is that resources in rural areas can be under pressure from tourism development, thus, a sustainable approach in the management of the resources is pivotal (Garrod et al., 2006; Su et al., 2019).

5.1.2 Rural tourism opportunities

For a better conceptualization and with support from academic literature, the features identified during the interviews and fieldwork were divided into five subtypes of rural tourism (Agritourism, Wine tourism, Cultural tourism, Balneary tourism, Outdoor tourism), which could contribute to the recognition and sustainable development of the area, based on the resources and opportunities within the region (Figure 7). According to UNWATO (2020), the development of tourism destinations, products and experiences should be made after the assessment of opportunities and strengths (UNWATO,2020).

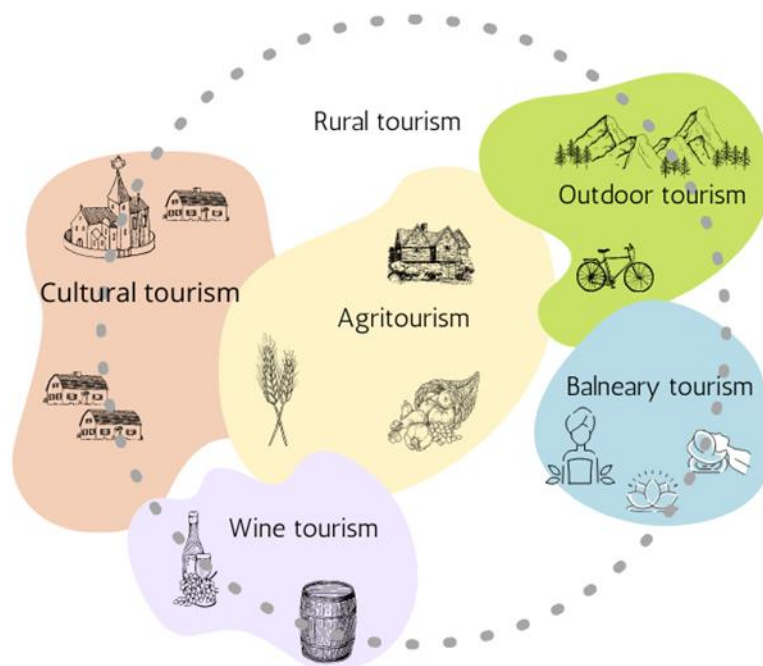


Figure 7. Visualization of sustainable rural tourism development opportunities in Tarnava Mica Inferioara Microregion (illustration created by the Author)

5.1.2.1 Agritourism

The concepts of agritourism or agrotourism are defined in numerous ways in academia. The common trait being the endorsement of a touristic activity in an agricultural setting (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008; Sharpley & Sharpley, 1997). Several academic sources mention the characteristic of being small scale (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007), inhabited by the owners (Marques, 2006; Sonnino, 2004) and being set in a rural area (Clarke, 1999; Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; McGehee, 2007). The traditional Romanian rural settlements have a self-managed small farm and garden which is either a source of income or and just a source of food for the family. This alone holds multiple opportunities in terms of agritourism development as an additional source of income in a declining agricultural society. All the locals participating in the study have their own little farm and garden either for their own use or for commercial purposes. An interview with a local from one of the villages included in the study, highlights this aspect, considered a normal characteristic that holds value for the locals:

“You have your own products, all natural, without any chemicals added. I basically do not even water my garden, it is all ecological, as natural as possible. People could come and see how to grow vegetables and fruits, to see the vineyards and to basically see how we work the land here” (Local_1).

Agritourism is beneficial in terms of keeping the land’s biodiversity, maintaining a sustainable and ecological practice, and promoting local products. In addition, previous studies in the field show a

positive impact of entrepreneurship in the agrotourism field for sustainable development of the rural regions, job creation, low environmental impacts and emphasis on the local values and heritage (Drăgoi et al., 2017).

“All can be sourced locally. This way the money will stay in the community and small producers would not have to sell their products for little money to foreign corporations with foreign capital, which happens.” (Businessowner_2)

5.1.2.2 Wine tourism

Wine tourism consists of vineyards and wineries visitations, festivals and other activities related to wine which attract tourists (Carlsen, 2004). The region of southern Transylvania is favourable for viticulture due to its landforms, soil type and climate, thus, it is an old activity in these areas. Wine production is considered as a form of heritage, linked with folklore, cuisine, natural landscapes, and history (Nedelcu, 2014). “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” microregion encompasses viticulture land and vineyards. Among the most famous are the “Le Barron” and Villa Vinea” which both offer wine tasting experiences and vineyard openings. However, there is viticulture land owned by locals, producing wine at a small scale. The interview with the local NGO emphasised the opportunities hidden within these small-scale authentic practices, which, unfortunately are not valorised at their true potential:

“Even though there are many small-scale local producers, there is no collaboration within the community, no support. It would be great to have tourists coming, showing them small cellars where local traditional wine is made, to taste it here and then go to another cellar. We don’t have this infrastructure.” (NGO_1)

Drawing from the fieldnotes, the cultural connection that people have with wine production could be a great starting point for the development of wine tourism supported by the traditional practices and favorable environment. However, the lack of support from authorities, lack of marketing skills and funds hinder the potential.

5.1.2.3 Cultural tourism

Cultural tourism or heritage tourism is viewed as a niche in the business, with a growing number of tourists showing interests in arts, heritage, and culture rich areas (Turnock, 2002). The heritage products were not designed for tourism exploitation, thus careful planning is necessary for a successful development of cultural tourism which would ensure beneficial outcomes for all parties involved (Ho * & McKercher, 2004). Anthropologic studies highlight this duality of heritage preservation and tourism. On one hand, tourism can commodify culture and thus traditions and heritage risk to lose

their meaning for the local communities. On the other hand, however, tourism can do the exact opposite and be an agent of change and shift the perception of local communities, add value, and strengthen local identities (Stronza, 2001).

The local NGO from Ganesti village acknowledges the influence that tourism can have on heritage preservation in the area:

"I think tourism could help with traditions preservation. The westernization and modernization tendencies are slowly being replaced by going back to simpler things, traditional and authentic. I think there is so much potential in the region where we live." (NGO_1)

The heritage and cultural resources can foster a lot of touristic activities and help develop the tourism destination. Thus, the multiculturalism of the area is an asset and opportunity which can foster benefits for the community (Constantin & Mitrut, 2008). The heritage of the microregion can offer authentic experiences of the Romanian countryside and bring value to potential visitors through the architecture, cuisine, customs, and crafts (Sasu & Epuran, 2016). Although authenticity is disputed among scholars because of the incapacity to fully experience the past (Nilsson, 2018), usually rural areas tend to be the hubs of authentic tourism experiences (Sasu & Epuran, 2016; Jyotsna & Maurya, 2019).

5.1.2.4 Balneary tourism

Balneary tourism is the combination between tourism and healthcare linked to the existence of natural resources used for primarily bathing purposes with therapeutic properties (Turtureanu & Chițu, 2020). The Tarnava Mica Inferioară microregion is situated in an area where there are salt deposits and clay soils. During the interviews, the lake Raioasa was mentioned several times by the locals: *"There is a lake here, Raioasa, with extraordinary beneficial mud (...). Think about how much the area would have developed if something was done."* (Local_2). The lake is situated near Ganesti village, and it is known by the locals for the benefic mud and salty waters. There are no investments in the area, locals and people who know about the place go there for the benefits that it provides. Investment and development in the area could be a big opportunity for the local population, generating jobs and promoting the area (Epuran et al., 2020).

5.1.2.5 Outdoor tourism

Like balneary tourism, outdoor tourism is dependent on the natural resources the area provides, being linked to health benefits. Besides the direct positive impacts on the visitors, nature-based tourism such as outdoor tourism is contributing to income growth which benefits conservation efforts and the local

communities as well (Winter et al., 2019). Besides the heritage and traditions of the area, the simple tranquility and peace that the countryside can offer can be just the right thing for some visitors coming from a busier city lifestyle. The Tarnava mica valley is just the place for that, with beautiful scenery and vineyards, farms and orchards and a lush evergreen forest nearby. The potential for outdoor activities is emphasized in an interview with a local entrepreneur:

“And of course, you cannot go outside on the hills from the middle of the city; these areas especially, is surrounded by hills and forests. Like majority of Transylvania, a lot of forest everywhere, hills and open fields.” (Businessowner_2)

As mentioned in the Natural Resources sub-chapter, resources are under pressure when the human-nature relationship is unbalanced, thus, any development using natural resources should be made accruing to the environmental boundaries (Garrod et al., 2006; Su et al., 2019). On a positive note, the entrepreneur from Delenii, aware of the negative side effects of motor sports, aims to minimize the effects as much as possible:

“I know it can be damaging for the soil and nature if done in a wrong way. (...) People passionate by this motor sport will always exist. I would do it in a way in which people would go on the same paths and they would not damage large surface off soil and vegetation in the surrounding environment. In Romania there is a problem with this there are plenty of this type of businesses (...) they create a big disbalance in nature. With special paths and protected areas, it would be a lot better on the long run.” (Businessowner_2)

5.1.3 NGOs and community building

NGOs are known to keep accountability and secure the benefits for the community they are working with (Liburd, 2004), fostering sustainable and ethical practices, community involvement and empowerment in a tourism setting (Kennedy & Dornan, 2009). The existence of NGOs involved in preserving the heritage of the area (from the Hungarian community- Kokenyes, KIK) is a positive feature of the microregion. In an interview with the KIK founder, the motivation of the organization is highlighted: *“We thought of putting our region on the map, the Tarnave region does not exist. There are the big cities but not us (...). To be honest nothing was being made for our community.”* (NGO_1). The organization works towards community building, is involved in humanitarian projects and sustainability and ecological activities, teaching the locals whilst strengthening the community. This work is essential to build the basis for further sustainable tourism development. Without a united community, tourism development can be harmful, leading to conflicts (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The

divide between ethnicities in the area is also a topic of interest for KIK. Even if they began as a Hungarian NGO, they aim to include the whole community into projects and events, understanding the importance of overcoming past conflicts that do not involve their generation: *“There is a visible rupture, and we want to build a community that is united”*. (NGO_1).

The NGO aims to get involved and be part of the development in the future by fostering partnerships with small businesses and promoting traditional crafts and artisanal products. They aim to create in Ganesti a similar village museum as the one in Delenii, where traditional garments, objects and artefacts can be stored and preserved to keep a fragment of the old traditional ways of living.

5.2 Understanding the process and challenges of sustainable rural tourism development in the Tarnava Mica Inferioara Microregion through the Integrated Rural Tourism Framework (RQ2)

As the main obstacle for the future, the findings of this research suggest that 71.4% of the interview participants consider “lack of value” as the main challenge for future rural tourism development, followed by “money”, “lack of governmental support”, “complicated bureaucracy” and “lack of marketing and promotion (Table 3). The following sub-chapters, organised by the IRT concepts, will deepen the understanding of the process and challenges for rural tourism development in the microregion by further analysing the interview data (Appendix E).

Table 2. Reoccurring themes from the interviews on the topic of challenges for the development of rural tourism in “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” microregion (table created by the author).

Challenges for rural tourism development in the microregion	% Of participants mentioning and commenting on the theme	Example of comment
No governmental support	42.8%	“(…) they told me that the support in this business is really missing and it’s a shame” (NGO_1)
Money	57.1%	“I wanted to make accommodation rentals from part of my house. But with what money?” (Local_2)
Lack of collaboration	42.8%	“There is no communication nor collaboration between the locals and the authorities.” (Local_4)
Complicated bureaucracy	42.8%	“Bureaucracy, a lot of bureaucracy, these make everything more difficult. You

		need a lot of permits and papers.” (Local_3)
Lack of values	71.4%	“Everything starts from the fact that we lost our identity, (...) they don't value the fact that they were born in this country.” (Local_2)
Education	28.5%	People in Romania are not educated enough to appreciate what we have here.” (Businessowner_2)
Lack of promotion and marketing	42.8%	“There are no direction signs, you would get lost. There is not a lot of information in this area” (Businessowner_2)

5.2.1 Protecting and preserving the environment (natural, social, and cultural)

A sustainable approach in tourism aims to keep the balance between the environment (natural, cultural, and social) and the economic development and exploitative tendencies of the tourism industry whilst creating a favourable situation for the community and resources (Saxena et al., 2007). The analytical framework was constructed around two key points, summarised from the theory, namely that tourism has to be in a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding environment (Budowski, 1976; Candela & Figini, 2012), therefore optimising and enhancing the local resources (Butler, 1999; Saarinen, 2006) and the economic benefits of tourism should directly benefit the community and be used in the scope to further protect the surrounding environment (Northcote & Macbeth, 2006; Saxena et al., 2007; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

5.2.1.1 Natural resources and environmental protection

Developing sustainable rural tourism activities in the microregion could sustain the rich agricultural biodiversity and bring financial opportunities in the community (Privitera, 2010). One of the many resources found in Transylvania’s countryside are the agricultural lands which make up a large part of the biodiversity (Toth et al., 2020). In addition, small-scale farms support the livelihoods of farmers in rural areas. The households are settled on the farmlands which have double functionality, economic, and social, by providing produce for the family (Tudor, 2015).

The locals cultivate their land for fresh produce for their families and for selling it in the marketplace. This type of activity is carried from generation to generation, however, a decrease in practice can be noticed in the past years by one of the locals: *“The young are not so keen to do this anymore, out of*

comfort. They just go and buy what they need, now it is not as expensive, who can afford it will buy it'' (Local_3).

Access to food and different commodities was limited and most of the agricultural land was controlled by the state during the communist regime in Romania (Borşa, 2013). Even with the transition to a market economy and accession to the European Union, Romania's agriculture largely remained deeply rooted in tradition, with many small-scale farms that secure food self-sufficiency (Hubbard et al., 2014; Tudor, 2015). There is a deep connection with the land and food in the countryside, the locals possess the knowledge passed down through generations on how to work the land and understand the local resources. Drawing from the fieldnotes, a collective public conception is noticeable, where produce from the countryside is natural, organic, and superior to the one found in supermarkets. Small farm owners supply friends and relatives living in cities with produce. Therefore, this connection and value attributed to food production and its rootedness in tradition represents a significant advantage for tourism in rural areas (Privitera, 2010).

Maintaining the biodiverse farmlands characteristic of Southern Transylvania sustained through a more traditional and ecological farming practice could be a beneficial situation for the microregion (Mikulcak et al., 2013). Therefore, the idea of a new source of income linked to the existing resources was not completely foreign to some of the locals, however the lack of skills in the tourism business, the secure livelihoods that some have in the nearby cities and sometimes the lack of finances to support such development, hinder the initiative (Table 2).

In terms of landscapes and outdoor tourism opportunities, one of the entrepreneurs interviewed, calls attention to the importance of strengthening the relationship between human and nature, and how outdoor tourism can be an agent of change:

"They would spend time outside and they would see what nature means. they would explore the landscapes when taking a break and just get submerged in nature. This type of activities strengthens the bond between people and nature. And this means that maybe you would want in the future to protect it and preserve it more." (Businessowner_2)

5.2.1.2 Socio-cultural resources and heritage

The multiculturalism of the area influences traditions, customs, architecture, and cuisine (Anghel, 2016; Kiss et al., 2017). During the fieldwork, a shift in architecture towards a more modern aesthetic was noticed. The traditional characteristic Hungarian and Saxon architecture being replaced by modern houses: *"There is no development plan to strategize what to modernize and how"* (Local_2). The

interview with one of the hotel owners, also highlights the importance of maintaining the traditional architecture for tourism development advantage:

“There are thousands of other Romanian hotels and pensions, but they do not restore or build to fit the area, they do something completely different. (...) ‘We tried to keep it the way it was, to restore the main building, the villa, and parts of the existing surrounding buildings.’” (Businessowner_1)

The owner talked about a different class of people, who want to experience the authenticity of the countryside, underlining the fact that this is a general practice in other parts of Europe, *“to have this culture can be learned, but you must want to learn it”*. This statement underlines the lack of value that most of the locals’ attribute to local architecture and multicultural heritage in rural Romania. In the hopes of better standards of living and modernization tendencies, the traditional houses in the villages researched are slowly replaced by modern alternatives, customs are less practiced, and traditions are being forgotten. Interestingly, many of the local people interviewed are aware of this trend, but the majority remain hopeless.

The IRT theory holistic approach brings interdisciplinary knowledge into the discourse, with issues such as socio-cultural values which shift the understanding of how sustainability can be achieved (Nunkoo et al., 2021). In addition, positive perception and strong local identity of the community are key factors for a successful rural tourism destination, where heritage stands as the main attraction (Giles et al., 2013; Knaps & Herrmann, 2018).

“People have a certain mentality, which perceives something old as being poor, that you don’t have the money to modernise it (...). Here, we still did not figure out the true value of things. In Germany for example, they keep the identity of a village, the culture and history, but there it does not mean you don’t have money.” (Local_4)

Interviews and informal discussion with locals highlight the fact that Romanian legislation does not condone any modernization projects in privately owned households, the decisions are up to the owners. This implies that the solution is a shift in local community perception on the importance of keeping the visual identity as much as the intrinsic values.

“Maybe this is the answer, trough tourism people would be convinced (...). More people would come, more money would be spent, and more money produced nationally for local businesses and for the local community. (...). With time people will start to appreciate it more.” (Businessowner_2)

Drawing from anthropological studies, tourism can be a key factor in the revitalization of values and ethnic identity which in turn boost heritage preservation (Stronza, 2001). With the correct strategy

such as placing tourism as a key pillar for rural development with policies which consider the wellbeing of the environments at their core (UNWATO,2020), rural tourism can have a positive impact in the protection and preservation of heritage sites and buildings as well as maintaining traditions and customs characteristic of the area (Privitera, 2010; Candela & Figini, 2012).

5.2.2 Collaboration as starting point for development

As described in the theory, networks in this thesis are understood as a cooperation and partnership formed between individuals and/or organisations at various levels to share resources and information (Björk & Virtanen, 2005; Jesus & Franco, 2016). This cooperation contributes to the overall revenue inside the community, tourism satisfaction (March & Wilkinson, 2009) and development of a more sustainable approach (Timur & Getz, 2008). Network formation is an essential step, contributing to reaching the benefits that IRT promises, namely financial opportunities, knowledge sharing, conservation, developmental opportunities, and synergic benefits (Saxena et al., 2007).

Specific to rural areas, most networks are usually formed based on friendships and kinships (Atterton, 2007). Following the theoretical concepts, this implies that networks are based on shared values and traditions and contribute to the reinforcement of the cultural identity. These networks are horizontal, within the community (Saxena et al., 2007). Collaboration and relationships are understood differently within the community. From the business owners' perspective, relations are beneficial for all the parties involved. Promoting the local produce to tourists by the accommodation establishment in Ganesti, helps the community according to the owner. People buy from local producers' items they remarked in the restaurant, or in cuisine and wine tasting events. These types of relationships foster financial opportunities for small producers from the villages. They also reinforce the cultural identity which is strongly linked to food and cuisine in the area, promoting traditional dishes, beverages, and products. Horizontal linkages also form between business and authorities, these can have a great impact on the financial and marketing strategy (Saxena et al., 2007). Positive feedback was received for the collaborations with the local authorities from the established business perspective. The same positive review was received from the local NGO, which had a successful collaboration with the local authorities.

On the other hand, when it comes to relationships within the community, between the locals, some duality is highlighted. The interview with the NGO points out the divide within the community, which besides the many similarities and shared values, are also divided by the ethnicity and language barriers, leading to conflicts of interest. People usually get along at the surface level, but the internal differences and conflicts still shine through when political and economic issues are discussed. On a positive note,

the local NGO works towards reconciliation and unity within the multicultural community in the microregion:

“There is a visible rupture and we want to build a community that is united, to have events where everybody comes, and people are together. (...) We need to create a bond between us.” (NGO_1)

In addition, small scale initiatives are viewed by the locals as a possibility but not necessarily supported by the rest of the community. Envy and hostile attitude toward success within the community was pointed out by some of the interview participants.

From 42.8% of the interviewees (Table 2), the perception on the role local authorities play in the development of rural tourism is negative, implying a difficult collaboration and communication. When networks play such an important role in the successful development of integrated rural tourism, this perception and mistrust represents an issue (Saxena et al., 2007). Because of the ethnic differences, according to one respondent from Delenii, constant dispute is undergoing within local institutions: *“There is no collaboration, each party pulls in different directions. There is no cooperation between people to make the decisions for the community”* (Local_4).

To maximise the benefits and opportunities that the open market has to offer, networks as an agent for rural tourism development must also be vertical, exogenous and disembedded (Saxena et al., 2007). In this sense, there is positive initiative coming from local authorities and NGOs to pursue collaborations with neighboring localities for future cooperation that could benefit the region.

The results highlight the limitations that networking formation has in a rural setting in Romania. The lack of a tourism organization that can foster some of the collaboration impacts the outcomes. At the same time, lack of funding or governmental projects that could benefit the development of sustainable tourism in the rural areas also leads to distrust and the abandonment feeling that the locals have towards the authorities. There are so many small-scale producers in the microregion who would love to promote and sell their product or service but without a functioning system it is difficult to succeed and create a stable livelihood. Therefore, people are pushed to abandon their traditional way of life and find alternatives for income. In doing so, the values attributed to these activities are also lost, together with other defining identity traits that make the countryside so unique.

5.3.3 Tourism at the scale of environmental capacity

For this research scale is understood in relation to sustainability, meaning the development of the tourism business is not supposed to suffocate neither the environment nor community for economic

gains. Therefore, the development should be contained to the rural setting in which rural tourism is being developed and within the boundaries the environment has (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). This usually involves a smaller scale development. However, proven from previous cases and analyses from the academia, bigger scale is not bound to successful community development nor to poverty alleviation (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). Therefore, smaller-scale enterprises and activities in rural areas can be beneficial and an actual advantage by offering alternative experiences which are growing in demand (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The initial stages of recognition and development as a tourism destination bring the advantage of mapping the objectives and challenges from the beginning and avoiding the problems that appear in sporadically developed regions (Galluzzo, 2021).

At first glance and drawing from the interviews, the microregion is not developed on a great scale from a touristic perspective, meaning that the current existing activities do not threaten the existing resources. Therefore, there is room for further growth *“the more, the marrier, it gives you alternatives”* (Businessowner_1). The locals interviewed expect action to be taken in this regard both privately and with state initiatives, with many resources being considered underdeveloped and opportunities being missed.

External knowledge is used as an advantage in rural areas of Romania where most of the locals are not aware of the opportunities, nor they do not have the possibilities to invest in business opportunities. Because of the limited number of enterprises, accommodation facilities and other tourist activities, there is a lack of competition. This implies according to an interview participant that there is opportunity besides the already established tourism enterprises and activities and there is still room for sustainable development. However, the lack of regulations can pose a threat in the future by exceeding the boundaries of the environment and leading to resource depletion. In this sense it is important for policy makers to tackle this area and implement specific guidelines in tourism development in rural areas (Hartman et al., 2020). Further research is needed to establish the scientific parameters for future development and the implications for the natural environment, community, and heritage. In this sense, development without a sustainable strategy can lead to negative consequences (Gica et al., 2021; Stefan et al., 2021).

5.3.4 Resource recognition and value attribution

Endogeneity refers to the concept that a place is recognized as a touristic destination based on the local pool of resources both natural and manufactured such as: traditions, culture, cuisine, heritage and so on (Clark & Chabrel, 2007). Using and promoting local resources while endorsing strong community participation leads to increasing synergy and collaborations. IRT aims at highlighting the

potential and opportunities in rural areas and boost recognition based on the existing local resources (Saxena et al., 2007). According to Saxena et al. (2007), reinterpretation of both exogenous and endogenous elements is significant for the success of rural tourism development but with emphasis on keeping and promoting the local resources which represent the opportunity to attract tourists (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

The perception of the local people, on the resources is complex and dependent on the type of resource analysed, with some having more recognition and value attributed than others. The local population is aware of some of the possibilities in the area in terms of tourism, but the actions are cut short by the lack of financial opportunities, decision-making powers, or interests. Investments at Lake Raioasa, rehabilitation of heritage sites, marketing and promotion of the area, support for aspiring entrepreneurs are some of the actions mentioned by the interviewees (Appendix E).

Recognition of the area based on resources is limited. Lack of knowledge can be seen in the way architectural heritage is destroyed, which in fact represents a resource for tourism development. As a general driver for recognition of resources, is the community perception on the resources and environment. The fortified Saxon Church from the village of Bagaciu is barely standing, it is closed, and the locals say the lack of funds delays the restoration of the building. The neighbouring area is gaining recognition for its Saxon influence and heritage but the "Tarnava Mica Inferioara" microregion is being left out and lagging in comparison. All these resources, which could be a focal point of tourism and development attraction, are being mishandled by the local governments, authorities, and local people.

"People do not realise, and if nothing is done soon it is going to be too late"(Local_4), is the highlighted idea of one of the locals interviewed from Delenii, who understands the importance of sustaining the traditions and heritage as they have so much value and importance for the community and identity of the place.

Besides the intrinsic values that play a significant role in the recognition, endogeneity is also supported and achieved through promotion of the area's resources and the local's think that the authorities do almost nothing to help promote the area. For the established entrepreneurs, the connection between resources and tourism is very clear, and it is visible- keeping the identity of the villas they restored, making everything as authentic as possible and promoting the heritage of the area. The most recognition brought to the area is by the established businesses, which through the tourism promotion and engagement have built to some extent and at a very small scale, an image of the microregion. In addition, the local population perceives the established enterprises with pride and are happy about tourists coming and learning about the area, especially when they are international tourists.

For better recognition and value building rural destinations should be promoted by national, regional, and local governments, with a special emphasis on the importance of preserving the cultural heritage and the authentic experiences the countryside can offer (UNWATO, 2020).

5.5.5 Embeddedness, Complementarity and Empowerment

Because the “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” tourism destination is still developing, it is difficult to talk about the degree to which tourism is embedded or complements the local culture and community. From the interviews interpretations there some recognition from the locals of the resources but there is an inherited lack of value added to them. The topic of **embeddedness** and identity is also divided between ethnicities which in a way makes the holistic approach difficult and fractioned. For a region like Transylvania, where identity and authenticity were disputed amongst the multitude of ethnicities inhabiting the area, it is not surprising to encounter a division at a community level. However, this division poses limitations when it comes to future collaborations and opportunities.

Complementarity refers to how tourism development complements other existing activities. Complementary is essential for avoiding future conflicts (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). At the current stage of development, the locals have a positive view on the existing tourism enterprises and activities, however, it cannot be said that tourism complements the rural community. Taking complementarity into account for future developments it is shown to be beneficial for social and cultural stability (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008).

Empowerment building within the microregion is closely linked to embeddedness. There is lack of recognition of small business owners which could build the identity of the area based on the local resources and produce. The division between the already established business and the aspiring small entrepreneurs hinders empowerment and brings forward a sense of incapacity. Fear of failure, without a financial safety net, implies there is not a lot of initiative coming from inside the communities in the rural tourism development.

“My dad is part of a small local viticulture community. I talked to him, and more members of the community and they told me that the support in this business is really missing and it's a shame considering this area is perfect for wine production. (...) Besides the bigger vineyards (Villa Vinea, Le Baron) there are no established small producers, and it would be so beneficial for them.” (NGO_1)

The interview with the local NGO form Ganesti highlights the ‘good ideas’ participation in decision making can foster, emphasising the many events organised for the community in collaboration with the local authorities and opportunities for future endeavours.

The IRT concepts can be used as guides to highlight the importance of taking an integrated approach in tourism development (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). For future projects and plans for rural development through sustainable tourism, local communities should be fully engaged in the decision-making process (UNWTO, 2020).

6 Conclusion

Sustainable development and new income opportunities become of interest for Transylvania's rural areas which are being threatened by chaotic modernization, migrations and economic decline. By analysing the potential of sustainable rural development in "Tarnava Mica Inferioara" microregion this research builds on the idea that tourism is a viable option for revitalizing rural spaces by emphasizing their local traditions, landscapes, cuisine, arts, manufacturing, and heritage. The positive characteristics of the microregion, namely the local resources, local NGO, infrastructure, and environment that can support diverse touristic activities and rural tourism types, highlighting the opportunities and sustainable alternatives. Agritourism, wine tourism, cultural tourism, balneary tourism and outdoor tourism have the potential to foster benefits for the local community.

The results also highlighted the main challenges identified by the locals, namely the lack of values and faulty perception of the resources and heritage of the microregion being the biggest challenge for tourism development. In addition, money, lack of government support, complicated bureaucracy and lack of collaborations were also identified. To overcome the challenges, tourism should be included in national, regional, and local development policies targeting rural areas where the wellbeing of the environment (cultural, social and natural) is at their core. Investments and marketing efforts would boost rural destinations and highlight their potential for offering authentic experiences by preserving their unique heritage. To keep the integrity of the natural, social, and cultural environments, the IRT can be used to guide an integrated approach to sustainable rural tourism development.

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8 Appendices

Appendix A

Informed consent for participating in the study on sustainable rural tourism development in Mures county, Transylvania

I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

I am aware that my interview will be audio-recorded.

I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially and not shared with any third part.

I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the produced text, and related presentations.

I understand that signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be retained in the researcher's private computer.

I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.



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Appendix B

Interview guide

“Thanks so much for talking with me today. I’m doing research for my Master thesis on the sustainable rural tourism development in Romania, Mures County, and I become interested in the possibility to engage different stakeholders and actors to potentially identify challenges and opportunities in this sector. The purpose of this interview is to get a broad sense of how you understand rural tourism and sustainable tourism in Romania. So that I can better remember the conversation, is it OK if I audio record our interview? You will remain anonymous. The interview will not last longer than 30 minutes and it is completely voluntary, you can stop anytime and if you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to ask me.”

Guiding questions

Could you please describe yourself a little? -role in the community, work, place

How do you understand development, a word that has been used a lot in official documents by local and state authorities?

How do you understand rural tourism?

How do you understand sustainability?

What is the motivation behind this project/ agenda/ business?

What do you mean by ... (consult websites, documents of the interviewed stakeholders) ?

What do you think are the biggest challenges we encounter in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?

Do you think there are some potential areas that can be developed sustainably in the county in terms of rural tourism?

What do you think is the role of local governments and authorities in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?

Are there any things that should be done differently from a governance level?

Looking forward, what do you think could help a sustainable development of this sector that could benefit all parties involved?

Do you think strengthening collaboration between stakeholders would be beneficial? How?

What type of collaboration could be fostered (marketing and promotion, supply of goods and services, strategy and policy design, research, and knowledge exchange, accessing funds/common products creation, sponsorships)?

How can the local resources be valorised?

How can the cultural identity of touristic areas be enhanced, promoted, and maintained?

Do you think all the community and local population should benefit in some way from this industry?

How can the control and planning be kept in the community?

Thanks so much for your time today. I have learned a lot talking to you and your input will be helpful for my thesis. If you have any questions in the future about the research, feel free to contact me. I am also interested in your opinion on others I should talk to. In addition, I want to hear if I may contact you if a couple of follow-up questions should arise.

“Thanks so much for your time today. I have learned a lot talking to you and your input will be helpful for my thesis. If you have any questions in the future about the research, feel free to contact me. I am also interested in your opinion on others I should talk to. In addition, I want to hear if I may contact you if a couple of follow-up questions should arise. ”

Appendix C

Interview analysis: Opportunities for rural tourism development in the “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” microregion

Reoccurring themes: opportunities for rural tourism development in the “Tarnava Mica Inferioara” microregion	% Of participants mentioning and commenting on the theme	Example of comments
Heritage tourism (Bagaciu and Ganesti village with Saxon influence, traditions, and customs, multiculturality)	100%	<p>“ I think tourism could help with traditions preservation. The westernization and modernization tendencies are slowly being replaced by going back to simpler things, traditional and authentic. I think there is so much potential in the region where we live.”</p> <p>“We have everything here, at hands reach. People always try to find this breakthrough ideas, but everything is right in front of our eyes. Simplicity and Tradition is the most appreciated. We must promote it locally first and then all types of visitors will come.”(NGO_1)</p> <p>“ it is a mix of traditions, from a culinary point of view and all points of views.” (Local_1)</p> <p>“Bagaciu, the neighbouring village would be an interesting touristic destination, but its left unchecked and its destroying, there is no investment made to keep it.” (Local_2)</p> <p>“ Rural tourism could be a possibility here. We don’t have anything of sorts here in our village, but in the surrounding ones, Bagaciu, Ganesti, there was, it is not anymore, there used to come international tourists, especially from Denmark. But since the planes are not flying anymore, they cancelled a route that was used a lot, to Targu Mures (the biggest city in Mures County).”</p> <p>“ What is also nice here, we have an old traditional house, near the unitarian church. I think it can be visited, it is not as exposed now for the public, but if somebody wants to see it, they can. The locals , women brought all their old stuff from their late families, and they created and arranged that house as it was before.” (Local_3)</p> <p>The Christmas traditions could be very interesting for tourists. Many programmes can be organised regarding traditional Hungarian cuisine. Making</p>

		<p>gulyas¹ outside, stews, langos², donuts, kurtos kalacs³, traditional bread made in the oven outside. So many opportunities in this sense". (Local_4)</p> <p>We tried to keep everything the way it was, we restored the main building, the villa and parts of the surrounding buildings, where a restaurant is functioning and a hotel. Small, but refined. (...) We produce ecological products, and we eat as healthy as we can, from healthy sources, because we believe in it, (...)that's what we try to implement here". (Businessowner_1)</p>
<p>Agritourism (organic agriculture, small scale farms, local traditional produce)</p>	<p>71.4%</p>	<p>" There could be a lot of work force and income kept inside the community, there are a lot of farms." (NGO_1)</p> <p>"A lot can be done in terms of agrotourism with organic products from the locals."</p> <p>"You have your own products, all natural, without any chemicals. I basically don't even water my garden, all its ecologic as natural as possible."</p> <p>(...) Visitors could garden, go to vineyards, see how the land is worked." (Local_1)</p> <p>"I believe that the countryside brings an interesting experience for the people living in urban areas (...), they like to experiment a simpler life." (Local_4)</p> <p>"There is space for other business. The more the marrier, it gives you alternatives. You know how many people go and buy locally, if you tell them that we buy our products from X. They also want it." (Businessowner_1)</p> <p>"It's bad because people from rural areas who can produce almost anything they need, in an organic way but its less practiced and appreciated. They prefer to buy it from supermarkets. This is not a financial loss it also diminished the quality of life (...)." (Businessowner_2)</p>
<p>Wine Tourism (viticulture potential, small wine producers, wine yards)</p>	<p>42.8%</p>	<p>" My dad is part of a viticulture community. They have this small community and organise some events for the passionate in this domain like wine tastings and so on. I talked to him, and more members of the community and they told me that the support in this business is really missing and it's a shame considering this area is perfect for wine production."</p> <p>"Besides the bigger vineyards (Villa Vinea, Le Baron) there are no established small producers and it would be so beneficial for them." (NGO_1)</p>

¹ Traditional Hungarian stew

² Traditional fried dough served with different toppings like garlic sauce and salty cheese

³ Traditional sweet pastry made in the Szekler region of Transylvania; cooked outside on open fire.

		<p>“People could go visit vineyard and go to wine tastings”. (Local_1)</p> <p>“We have a wine cellar besides the hotel and restaurant where we organise wine tastings.” (Businessowner_1)</p>
Balneary tourism (Raioasa Lake, salty creeks)	42.8%	<p>“There is salty water and balneary mud at Raioasa, here over the hill. But no investment was made. People go anyways, in the open field, no infrastructure, to use the mud.” (Local_1)</p> <p>“There is a lake here, Raioasa, with extraordinary beneficial mud (...). Think about how much the area would have developed if something was done.” (Local_2)</p> <p>“In the past, we had an area, like a pool. That could also be reopened, it was with salty water, like in Bazna (a wellness area in Sibiu County, close to Deleni). There is also Raioasa. There is also nothing being done.” (Local_3)</p>
Outdoor tourism (landscapes, natural environment)	42.8%	<p>“Here in Deleni, the best potential would come from hikes in the forest, motocross in the areas or other outdoor activities. There are people coming here with the motocross. There is a bike tour organized from the neighbouring county, and the route passes through the village. The people are outside and they offer water for the participants.” (Local_3)</p> <p>“Yes, I think it's perfect of course there is the issue with fossil fuel burning and the impact it can have on the environment if it's not controlled but on the other side there are many good benefits like discovering nature. And many people who get into the sports they will not go daily to practise it but maybe their love for nature will be sparked by the time spent outside. (...) I think it's a good way to promote nature amongst the younger people especially the people who like extreme sports. They would spend time outside and they would see what nature means. they would explore the landscapes when taking a break and just get submerged in nature. This type of activities strengthens the bond between people and nature. And this means that maybe you would want in the future to protect it and preserve it more. (...) And of course you cannot go outside on the hills from the middle of the city; this areas especially, is surrounded by hills and forests. Like majority of Transylvania, a lot of forest everywhere, hills and open fields.” (Businessowner_2)</p>

Appendix D

The SWOT Matrix inspired the identification and analysis of strengths and opportunities in the microregion. For a better visualization of the identified strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats, the findings were divided into the four categories of the SWOT Matrix.

SWOT Matrix. Illustrating the strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats identified in the microregion Tarnava Mica Inferioara (Table created by the Author).

<p style="text-align: center;">Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Resources• Landscape• NGOs	<p style="text-align: center;">Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Development gap between urban and rural areas• Resources are not valorised• Heritage sites in bad condition• No touristic information points, signs, marketing
<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Growth in demand for rural tourism• Fund accessibility for rural development• Tourism activities options	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Weak investment strategies• Globalisation leading to heritage loss• Lack of information and awareness• Population migrations• Marginalisation• Negative environmental impacts

Appendix E

Interview analysis: following the Integrated Rural Tourism concepts

The following Table shows the seven conceptual elements comprised in the Integrated Rural Tourism Theory, corresponding interview questions and the relevant answers from the interviews. Only the questions that produced relevant answers for the understanding of the IRT concepts were transcribed in this Table. Important to note that the questions and answers can fit under more than one category within the IRT. Therefore, the answers are selected and divided to be as useful as possible for the analysis.

Integrated Rural Tourism Theory	Interview Questions	Corresponding answers
Sustainability	<p>How do you understand sustainability?</p> <p>How would you contribute?</p> <p>Do you think it is important to build a business on sustainable practices?</p>	<p>Local_1. "We are just learning (...) Anything is possible. it starts with a person; everybody must acknowledge that its it better and it needs to be done. The truth is that in the villages there is not much recycling going on, however the food waste is either composted or is given to the animals. now we have a recycling service, to pick up the plastic and different waste."</p> <p>NGO. " I think it is very beneficial for the village and the community to foster this sustainability idea, starting with recycling and gathering the trash selectively, to participate in some way at helping the planet."</p> <p>Business_2. "I am and enduro enthusiasts although I know it can be damaging for the soil and nature if done in a wrong way. people do it anyways and people passionate by this motor sports will always exist. I would do it in a way that there would be like a dedicated pathway where you can go in this way people would go on the same paths and they would not damage launch surface off soil and vegetation in the surrounding environment. In Romania there is a problem with this there are plenty of this type of businesses built with European money so in which tourists can book ATV or motors or anything and they ride where when wherever they want, and they create a big disbalance in nature. An if they would be like special paths and protected areas it would be a lot better on the long run."</p>
	<p>What do you think are the biggest challenges we</p>	<p>Local_1. "There are no funds to conserve the monuments and there are no funds allocated. But at least to be maintained in their actual state if not</p>

	<p>encounter in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?</p>	<p>restored (...) people don't understand, that's all that they know. They don't have culture.”</p> <p>Local_2. “There is no development plan to strategize what to modernize and how.</p> <p>I wanted to make accommodation rentals from part of my house. But with what money? Also, the projects aimed to help you require so much money that I would not need them if I had that.</p> <p>Generally, things are done badly.”</p> <p>NGO_1. “My dad is part of a small local viticulture community. I talked to him, and more members of the community and they told me that the support in this business is really missing and it's a shame considering this area is perfect for wine production.”</p> <p>Business_2. “ In Romania is a big problem from a bureaucratic point of view and legislative point of view. This means that the matters are a bit too complicated for the simple men people living in rural areas. There are no guides or nothing that would help people do this kind of stuff, made in a simple way to be understood by anyone.”</p>
	<p>How can the local resources be valorised?</p>	<p>Local_1. “Rural tourism development could be an idea, because, for the small producers would be easier, the resources and production would be better valorised, being opened to a bigger market than going to the local marketplace to sell.”</p> <p>Local_3. “Rural tourism could be a possibility here. We don't have anything of sorts here in our village, but in the surrounding ones, Bagaciu, Ganesti, there was, it is not anymore, there used to come international tourists, especially from Denmark.”</p> <p>Local_4. “I noticed that people began moving to the countryside, thus rural tourism could potentially have a future (...). I believe that the countryside brings an interesting experience for the people living in urban areas (...), they like to experiment a simpler life.”</p> <p>Ngo_1. “We want to collaborate with small vineyards and wine producers, to organise workshops cuisine related, and different events where we what to invite local artisans.”</p> <p>Business_2. “They would spend time outside and they would see what nature means. they would explore the landscapes when taking a break and just get submerged in nature. This type of activities strengthens the bond between people and nature. And this means that maybe you would want in the future to protect it and preserve it more.</p> <p>And of course, you cannot go outside on the hills from the middle of the city; these areas especially, is surrounded by hills and forests. Like majority of</p>

		<p>Transylvania, a lot of forest everywhere, hills and open fields.</p> <p>Maybe this is the answer, trough tourism people would be convinced of the true value that is here. More people would come, more money would be spent, and more money produced nationally for local businesses and for the local community. In this way maybe people would realise the reason behind all this people coming. With time people will start to appreciate it more.”</p>
<p>Networks</p>	<p>What do you think are the biggest challenges we encounter in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?</p>	<p>Local_1. “Bureaucracy is a problem. Marketing can be now done online, but it’s not. ”</p> <p>Local_2. “The problem is that we don't have a sense of community. (...) If I am doing well, then everybody is doing well. However, the culture level in Romania is underdeveloped and we can't have these expectations.</p> <p>The laws are mostly against you because in key positions are incompetent people.”</p> <p>Local_3. “Bureaucracy, a lot of bureaucracy, these make everything more difficult. You need a lot of permits and papers, and these make it difficult. Money wise, you can make it through a loan with European funds. ”</p> <p>Local_4. “There is no collaboration, each party pulls in different directions. There is no cooperation between people to make the decisions for the community.’ (...) Here there is no communication nor collaboration between the locals and the authorities. I can’t remember the last time something was organised for the community. Nothing fun or for the people. Since the pandemic, the narrative of buying more locally produced goods, to support the national economy was promoted. But, out of jealousy and spite people don't buy from one another, locally, they don't want to help each other. Maybe if they had something to win, there would be collaboration.”</p> <p>NGO. “There is a visible rupture (between the Romanians and Hungarian community) and we want to build a community that is united, to have events where everybody comes and people are together. (...) We need to create a bond between us.’</p> <p>Even though there are many small-scale local producers, there is no collaboration within the community, no support. It would be great to have tourists coming, showing them small cellars where local traditional wine is made, to taste it here and then go to another cellar. We don’t have this infrastructure”.</p> <p>Businessowner_1. “We did not have a lot of challenges, we could collaborate very well with the</p>

		authorities, they were helpful is they could. It is beneficial for them as well, for their image.”
What do you think is the role of local governments and authorities in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?		<p>Local_1. “If the buildings are private, they could only constrain the owners in some ways (...) to keep them from completely being ruined. I don't think there are laws for this (about the role of authorities in keeping the traditional architecture).”</p> <p>Local_2. “The authorities in general do not get involved. The problem in Romania is that I consider that it is all anti-Romanian. It is like they want us to go the wrong way. Foreigners come who never saw Romania before and they are amazed by it, and the authorities do nothing, and they don't care.”</p> <p>NGO_1. “ Financial aids, from the local Councils, they can also create the networks between small producers, ground the industry. (...) People should have available projects to apply for, or if somebody has an idea of a project, they should have the possibility to go to the authorities and get the help needed.”</p> <p>Business_2. “There is a lot of confusion, and you can't really figure out how to do the whole process. The government authorities the state could have some sort of programmes to guide and positively influenced the local people to go maybe start something like this in their area there are no such programmes there only the European funds that you can access for which there's a lot of bureaucratic work and nobody knows how to access them. You also need money to have to get started in this process. They could establish a set of clearly defined regulations when wanting to start a business in tourism in rural areas. Verry little is being done. There are no direction signs, you would get lost. There is not a lot of information in this area. And maybe the signs are not very well placed. You have to search them very well to find directions, not the best strategy.”</p>
Do you think strengthening collaboration between stakeholders would be beneficial? How?		<p>Local_2. “Collaboration within the community to strengthen the community.”</p> <p>Local_4. “Something at small scale can be done like collaboration between the locals. Buying homemade bread from someone, then fruit marmalade from someone else. You can organise gulyas making, this way you include more people.”</p> <p>NGO_1. “The authorities were open and willing to get involved if their image was enhanced. We hope that in the future the communication would be just as</p>

		<p>good. (...) We received a large sum of money to organise our events.”</p> <p>Businessowner_1. “We collaborate a lot with the private sector for different artisan products. It is very important to have good product, quality.”</p> <p>Businessowner_2. “Collaboration is essential. I just got an idea; how great it would be to create an association that would deal with promoting these types of businesses.”</p>
Endogeneity	<p>What do you think are the biggest challenges we encounter in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?</p>	<p>Local_2. “Unfortunately, the Saxon houses, which used to be beautiful now they are inhabited by the gypsies. There was an old house in the village, beautiful, they changed the windows and original design, you can't do that.”</p> <p>Local_3. “Everybody has their own garden, a little farm, especially the elderly. The young are not so keen to do this anymore, out of comfort. They just go and buy what they need, now it's not as expensive, who can afford it will buy it. (...)</p> <p>But since the planes are not flying anymore, they cancelled a route that was used a lot, to Targu Mures (the biggest city in Mures County). The accommodation facility is still open, but no more international tourists are coming.</p> <p>People are ruining the traditional houses, but I think there should be a law that would keep them. In Bagaciu, the Saxons kept them to some extent, they had those big houses with big gates. ”</p> <p>Local_4. “With every year passing, I notice more traditions not being kept (...) I think this happens because there is a high standard of living in this village (Delenii) with good job opportunities (the gas extraction). The people are modernizing and keeping up with the world.</p> <p>People have a certain mentality, which perceives something old as being poor, that you don't have the money to modernise it (...). Here, we still did not figure out the true value of things. In Germany for example, they keep the identity of a village, the culture and history, but there it does not mean you don't have money.</p> <p>I think there is a big association between keeping the traditions and money, with the income and standards of living. In smaller, underdeveloped villages, it seems like more traditions are kept.”</p> <p>NGO_1. “We have everything here, at hands reach. People always try to find these breakthrough ideas, but everything is right in front of our eyes. Simplicity and Tradition is the most appreciated. We must</p>

		<p>promote it locally first and then all types of visitors will come.”</p> <p>Business_2. “People in Romania are not educated enough to appreciate what we have here and thus they are not going to spend the money on the experiences that they could have here in Romania. (...) Another problem that I noticed is that most of the businesses developed in rural areas here especially foreign business is owned by foreigners not by local people. local people are just simple employees with of course small wage is typical to Eastern Europe. In the Romanian eye, a foreign brand or product is above anything produced here, in the country. They don’t appreciate enough local products or local services.”</p>
	<p>Do you think there are some potential areas that can be developed sustainably in the county in terms of rural tourism?</p>	<p>Local_1. “You have your own products, all natural, without any chemicals added. I basically do not even water my garden, it is all ecological, as natural as possible. People could come and see how to grow vegetables and fruits, to see the vineyards and to basically see how we work the land here.</p> <p>There is a touristic enterprise in the neighbouring village which brought tourists from Denmark to show them the area (...) A Saxon villa was restored here in the village as well (Ganesti), people come from everywhere.</p> <p>A lot can be done in terms of agrotourism with organic products from the locals.</p> <p>There is salty water and balneary mud at Raioasa, here over the hill. But no investment was made. People go anyways, in the open field, no infrastructure, to use the mud.</p> <p>The area is favourable for wine production.”</p> <p>Local_2. “Bagaciu, the neighbouring village would be an interesting touristic destination, but its left unchecked and its destroying, there is no investment made to keep it.</p> <p>There is a lake here, Raioasa, with extraordinary beneficial mud (...). Think about how much the area would have developed if something was done.”</p> <p>Local_3. “Here in Deleni, the best potential would come from hikes in the forest, motocross in the areas or other outdoor activities. There are people coming here with the motocross.</p> <p>In the past, we had an area, like a pool. That could also be reopened, it was with salty water, like in Bazna (a wellness area in Sibiu County, close to Deleni). There is also Raioasa, but nothing is being done there.</p> <p>We have an old traditional house, near the Unitarian church. I think it can be visited, it is not as exposed now</p>

<p>Embeddedness, Complementarity, Empowerment</p>		<p>for the public, but if somebody wants to see it, they can. The locals, women brought all their old stuff from their late families, and they created and arranged that house as it was before.”</p> <p>Local_4. “In the neighbouring villages there are some beautiful things that can attract tourists, but it is important to have some sort of a system.”</p> <p>NGO_1. “I think tourism could help with traditions preservation. The westernization and modernization tendencies are slowly being replaced by going back to simpler things, traditional and authentic. I think there is so much potential in the region where we live.”</p> <p>Businessowner_1. “It started to be more attractive, this type of rural tourism concept, but for specific types of people, the majority does not understand it yet. Rural areas with rich heritage, villas, or castles. In the west it has existed for some time, here it landed a bit later. (...)</p> <p>The area has a huge potential. Small taxes, good connection flights. (...) People are growing an interest in developing countries.”</p> <p>Businessowner_2. And of course you cannot go outside on the hills from the middle of the city; this areas especially, is surrounded by hills and forests. Like majority of Transylvania, a lot of forest everywhere, hills and open fields.</p>
	<p>How can the cultural identity of touristic areas be enhanced, promoted, and maintained?</p>	<p>Local_1. “Not a lot is done, but it could be. All is dependent on education and if in schools the local and national values are not thought and there is no emphasis on these matters than people don't realize their importance. They don't know what they must do, they don't think.”</p> <p>Local_2. “The young generation could be keeping the traditions and identity alive, but they don't have this mentality.</p> <p>(...) The peasant is the essence of the Romanian people. If they did not exist, we wouldn't.”</p> <p>Local_3. “In the past more carnivals and special balls were organised. Now, especially with covid there is barely any initiative.”</p> <p>Local_4. “There is no one to teach the new generations the traditional dance. Literally the children in these villages don't know their traditional dance. I think that tourism can help in a way maintain these traditions.</p> <p>On one hand we can still preserve some things. We should start with education, but you see, in this village, soon we will not have kindergarten, or school, kids from the village go to school in the city.”</p>

		<p>NGO_1. "Young people are leaving, they leave to Cluj, leave to Targu Mures (bigger cities in Transylvania) but nobody stays here, in our area, the Tarnave area. To be honest nothing was being made for the community. (...)We thought to put our region on the map, the Tarnave region does not exist. There are the big cities but not us.</p> <p>it would be nice if we would send an invite for the events to the surrounding villages authorities and councils so they can also come and participate, the idea is to host people from the region not just Ganesti village. We need to create a bond between us, to not be so divided between villages and localities."</p> <p>Businessowner_1. "There are thousands of other Romanian hotels and pensions, but they do not restore or build to fit the area, they do something completely different. We tried to keep everything the way it was, to restore the main building, the villa and parts of the surrounding buildings, where a restaurant is functioning and a hotel. Small, but refined. (...) We produce ecological products, and we eat as healthy as we can, from healthy sources because we believe in it, (...) that's what we try to implement here."</p> <p>Businessowner_2. "It is not being done because the appearance of many villages is ruined by the uneducated people who renovate houses however, they want to. With seven colours of roofs and seven types of roofs and so on. This thing could be regulated, like okay this village is with Saxon influence, everybody should remodel their home in a particular way imposed."</p>
	<p>What do you think are the biggest challenges we encounter in the development of rural tourism in Mures County?</p>	<p>Local_2. "We became ashamed of being Romanians. It is a big problem; we lost our identity. (...) Everything starts from the fact that we lost our identity, a child does not know the national anthem anymore, they don't know the minimum history, they don't know to cherish the fact that they were born in this country."</p> <p>Businessowner_2. "And unfortunately, local things, values are not trending. Especially young people have no idea what local values are, they do not identify with them."</p>
	<p>Do you think all the community and local population should benefit in some way from this industry?</p>	<p>Local_1. "From my point of view and from all points of view, increase in tourism and visitors would bring benefits for everyone."</p> <p>NGO. "Besides the bigger vineyards (Villa Vinea, Le Baron) there are no established small producers, and it would be so beneficial for them.</p> <p>Tourism would help a lot, especially because our region is perfect for it, but you see it is not used. It would create jobs, income."</p>

		<p>Businessowner_1. "There is space for other business. The more the marrier, it gives you alternatives. You know how many people go and buy locally, if you tell them that we buy our products from X. They also want it."</p> <p>Businessowner_2. "Of course, a lot of villages from this area would be involved, and the community can be involved. From local produces to services to anything. All can be sourced locally. This way the money will stay in the community and small producers would not have to sell their products for little money to foreign corporations with foreign capital, which happens."</p>
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