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IMPLICATIONS OF IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF TRAINING HUMAN SERVICES AGRITOURISTS IN SOUTH EASTERN ROMANIA

Abstract: Reforms the last decades have changed practically all spheres of life and the activity of the rural population. National trend recorded demand growth of rural tourism has led to some organizational problems, reflected in shortage of qualified staff. A handy solution was offered the allocation by the European Social Fund, funds to train and retrain the trades, tourism and agrotourism.

This research aims to identify the effects generated by investment in staff training, which is reflected in the quality of services offered by agritourism.

Key words: agritourism, human capital, quality of tourism services.

JEL: R11, J24, Z3, O15.

1. Introduction

The approach of this topic comes in a time when human capital is the head element in achieving a responsible business in rural areas.

Clearly, in the last few years all European institutions and bodies have advocated the development of tourism in general and, particularly, tourism in rural areas.

The rural tourism development in the EU and beyond, has two basic coordinates: offering a specific tourism product to a particular area and developing

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an European level network to provide greater accessibility of rural tourism products. [10, pp. 5]. These two coordinates are closely related with the quality item, believed to be a means of tourism development in rural areas as defined by the EU Council Decision 92/421. But the quality, as an independent process, can not be tackled without direct correlation with his decisive factor constituted by human capital. Its value, capacities, skills and abilities are defining elements that directly contribute to shaping a remarkable mechanism, quality-rural tourism and responsibility, because quality and human capital are not sufficient for the completion of “well done” work . The consciousness of human capital, related to the care of future generations, must be the starting point in any business.

The reforms of the past few decades have, practically, changed all spheres of life and the activity of the population. The increasingly stronger trend of free time distribution in order to pursue leisure activities in rural areas, has led to a paradigm namely quality in rural tourism. Numerous studies have tried to solve this paradigm more or less, but most of them agreed on the need for corroboration of human capital potential with tourism potential, working together at the realization of a “cunning piece of work.”

The ability of entrepreneurs from rural tourism, reported in a complex of principles has led to quality management. It actually involves a long-term strategy, which leads to a continuous improvement of products’ quality and rural tourism services, fortified with management’s ability to meet and exceed the needs of tourists, facilitating the increase of productivity and profits.

In the current conditions, in Romania, the concept of quality, conceived only as an adaptation to the standard, must be resized in order to adapt to customer needs and expectations. the South-East of Romania turns out to be a relatively attractive touristic region, of European and even international interest, the varied tourism potential being the starting point for the multiplication of tourism activities and diversification of tourism products. The agritourism is a valuable element for this area so that tourism can become an important economic sector. Although the development strategies highlight the existence of a valuable untapped tourism potential, or only partially exploited, there are no specific measures for in-depth development of forms of tourism appropriate for this potential.

One of the urgent problems faced by the tourism sector in general is human capital. Its implications in achieving some quality parameters leads to the idea that it is actually, beside the natural potential, the key to success in a profitable tourist activity which aims, at a superior level, to meet the tourists’ requirements

At the South East Region level of competence in the tourism sector it is low, due to lack of updated quality standards and adequate standards of training and development. Even if there are regional educational institutions that provide training in tourism and alimentation, staff training in the hospitality industry is poorly developed, with direct implications on the quality of services offered to tourists.

In addition to these resources of occupational there is a series of training programs at EU level which aim to provide performant human capital in all areas. This way, Human Capital Operational Programme (POCU) establishes the investment priorities, the specific objectives and the actions undertaken by Romania in the field of human resources, thus continuing investment made through the European Social Fund in 2007–2013 and also contributing to the overall objective of the Agreement Partnership (AP 2014–2020) – and at the same time, to the European Structural and Investment Funds in Romania, namely to reduce economic and social development disparities between Romania and EU Member States. [14].

2. Theoretical fundamentals

Research on human capital aimed both the concept itself and the measurement of the level of investment in human capital and the link among these ones and economic growth. Adam Smith was the pioneer of roads in this area, defining among the capital elements, the “useful” human skills and knowledge [11, pp. 12].

Even if A. Smith in “The Wealth of Nations – Inquiry into the Nature and its causes” already emphasized the importance of human capital as a determinant of economic growth, there is no doubt that in the last fifty years – economic theory has remarkably improved its understanding on the human capital role in economic development.

The relationship of human capital-economic growth initiated by Robert M. Solow (1957) [9] which was then developed by Edward Denison (1967) [4] and James Maddison gives greater importance to the residual factors (technical progress, education, health) in explaining the performance of economic growth. In long term, this growth is only possible if there is limitless growth of human capital [8].

From studies carried out by the Group of Chicago (1960–1961), coordinated by T. Schultz – have emerged the effects the human capital has on the productivity, this defining human capital as “that productive force of the man which is due to his vocational trainig, to education system and his health”. [11, pp. 16].

From the microeconomic perspective, Gary Becker is considered the father of contemporary economic literature of human capital. Becker’s studies’ purpose is the analysis of social investment decisions in human capital and their individual and family implications. The aimed topics are, among other things, the relationship between the individual request for education and providing educated labor, the variety of the income, which could be explained by differences between human capital components, such as education, experience, migration or health and the link between them and the work productivity.

Subsequently, the evolution of human capital theory based on the ideas of Jacob Mincer, who developed the “human capital model” according to which the observed gains mainly depend on the “human capital” built into a person, turns to demonstrate the role that the investment in human capital gains in productivity growth. The investment in human capital gained new values, human capital theory

paying particular attention to economic efficiency of education and health investment. Nancy Birdsall, Thomas Pinckney and Richard Sabot have studied the relation between economic growth and education in countries with abundant natural resources. The conclusion reached is that these countries spend less on education than other countries. The effects of education are reflected in increased productivity, in the facilitation of the technological progress or technological information purchase and the increase of salaries [11, pp. 20].

Also, for OECD countries, studies have been surveyed by researchers such as Nancy Birdsall [3, pp. 20], Angel de la Fuente [1, pp. 10–11], S. Scarpeta [2] and their conclusions boil down to the fact that education level is, potentially, a decisive-key to economic growth.

In the modern world, dominated by flexibility and competitiveness, the investment study in human capital and accumulation, has become a major area of research. So, after the “human capital revolution” in 1960–1970, researchers like Groot and Maaseen van den Brinks (2000) focused their studies on the needs of education and the determinants of human capital investment.

2.1. Theoretical Foundations on human capital in tourism

In specialized literature, there is a consensus that education and training are important for any business to ensure success in a competitive environment. Especially the tourism and hospitality industry, if the quality of service continues to be the most important differentiating characteristic of the company, the investments in human capital are the foundation of a successful business.

The tourism industry is recognized as one of the most prominent engines of economic development and one of the most important sectors of global economic growth, with 9% of world GDP. [13] This sector represents a key element in reducing poverty and disparities at regional level.

The characteristics of tourism, given in the first place by the direct interference with the tourists, make this field a particular element study on human capital. If specialty literature has particularly established the correlations between human capital, productivity, economic growth for directly productive sectors, for the services, the analysis was confined to a simplistic approach, from the perspective of the whole, without making a pertinent analysis of all its components. However, for the touristic activity it can successfully be applied the substitution principle, the relationship between educated labor and other production factors, the demand for education, the role of education, the political implications or the relationship between migration phenomenon and qualifications. Due to the importance of personal services in the tourism sector, it results the need to study the relationship between service quality and education of employees. Maxwell, M. MacRae, Adam and A. MacVicar [7 pp. 735–744.] in 2001, and also Fleetwood [5] in 2002, concluded that only a properly educated workforce might be able to support the high level of the service, the efficiency and their professionalism, ensuring, this way, the customer's

satisfaction and the profitability of the business. In the past decades the concern of the specialists in the field was directed towards a range of topics such as curriculum planning, assessment, training needs etc. In Table 1 there is a synthesis of the evolution of the main approaches to tourism human capital.

Table 1

Summary of tourism human capital approaches

Nr. crt.	The essence of the approaches	Writer
1	Content of the curriculum	Formica (1996); Airey and Johnson (1999);
2	The relationship between education and training and the importance of training at work for promotion	Finegold and al. (2000); Ladkin (2002)
3	Training needs	Sheldon and Gee (1987); McColl-Kennedy and White (1997); Formica and McCleary (2000); Aktas and al. (2001); Beeton and Graetz (2001); Agut and Grau (2002)
4	Quantification of the incidence of training among workers and companies	Kelliher and Johnson (1997); ILO (2001); Ramos et al. 2004)
5	Evaluation of formal education and training at work	Chung (2000); Churchward and Riley (2002); Collins (2002) Hocutt and Stone (1998); Pizam (1999); Jameson (2000); Davies and al. (2001)
6	The Government's involvement in the process of increasing the stock of human capital in tourism industry	Pollock and Ritchie (1990); Esichaikul and Baum (1998); Light and Dumbraveanu (1999); Pizam (1999)

Source: Author processing after Javier Rey Maquieira, Vicente Ramos and Maria Tugores, Implications of human capital in tourism analysis, International handbook on the economics of tourism, [6].

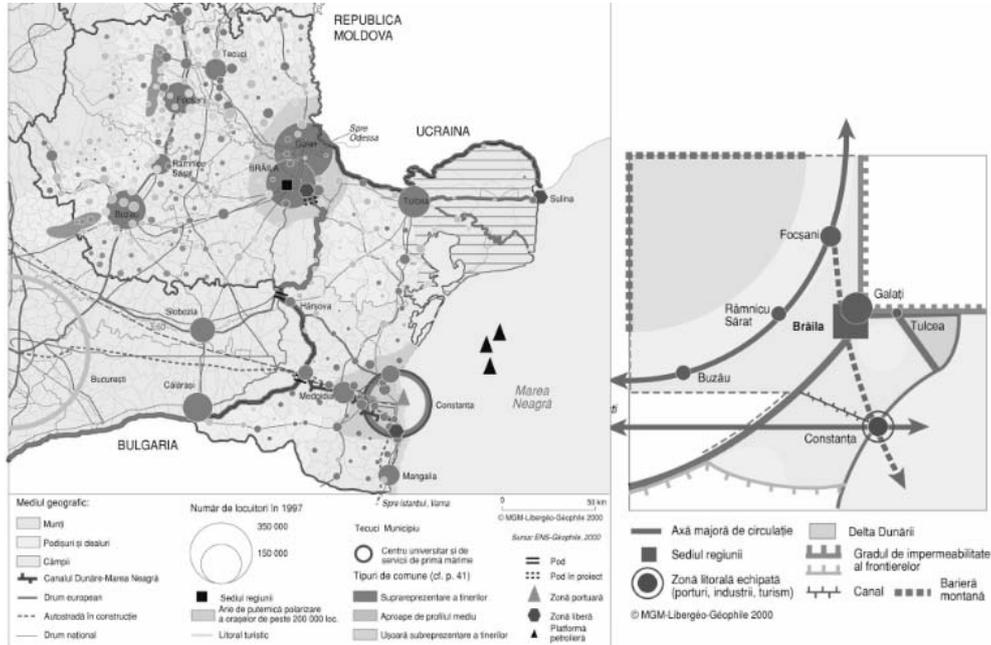
Generalizing the basic approaches of human capital in tourism we can say that this is the measure of the individual's capacities and qualities, formed from the investments, which, used effectively, according to the specific tourism activity, will increase labor productivity and incomes.

3. Study into the human capital formation in rural tourism of the South East Romania

3.1. Analysis of tourist traffic in Southeast Region

The South east Region belongs to physical-geographical province of Eastern Europe and is located in the south-eastern Romania, covering 35 762 km² or 15% of the total area of the country, being the second largest of the 8 regions of Romania. This region contains almost all forms of relief: Meadow of the Danube, The Baragan Plain in the center and the Covurlui Plain in the north, the Dobrogea Plateau in the east and south. In terms of administration, the South East Region comprises six administrative counties: Braila, Buzau, Constanta, Galati, Tulcea and

Vrancea. The settlements are structured as 11 cities, 24 towns and 355 localities with 1,447 villages. [12]



Source: http://www.adrse.ro/Documente/Planificare/Masterplan/Masterplan_10.08.2010.pdf.

Figure 1. The geographic location South East Region.

The rich heritage of natural and cultural resources was the precondition for the development of tourism industry in the region. The degree of diversification is high and includes coastal, mountain, cruise tourism, rural and ecological tourism, cultural and religious tourism, which still presents different levels of development.

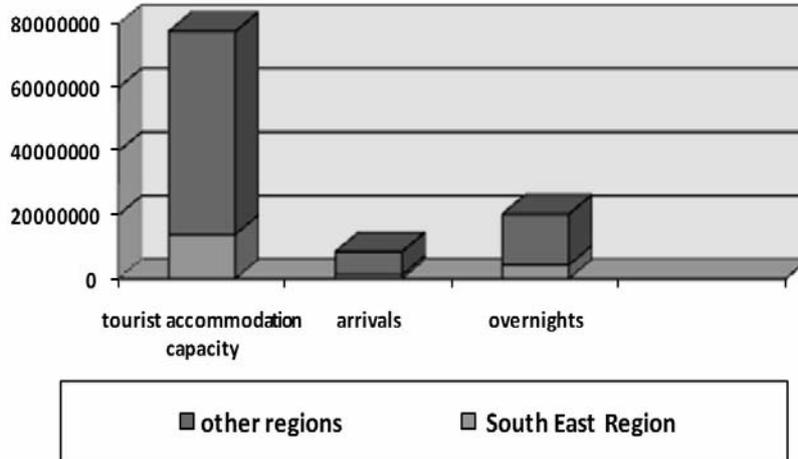
The tourism resources for this region are given in the first place by the the Black Sea, comprising 13 resorts along 70 km of coastline. Another area is the Danube Delta, which represents a scientific attraction and a high tourism potential. The region also benefits from a special spa (Techirghiol Lake, Eforie Nord) with mud that has similar properties with the one from the Dead Sea.

Regarding agritourism, Braila, Tulcea, Vrancea and Buzau counties present significant potential, given both the nature (The Muddy Volcanoes at Berca, the caves of Bozioru, Focul Viu at Andreiasu) and the local customs and traditions, which are still being preserved.

The cultural and historical heritage of the region is characterized by Getics, Roman, Greek and Byzantine cities and monasteries, mostly concentrated in the counties of Tulcea and Constanta.

In Romania, the South-East region is in a position of excellence, confirmed by the national tourism market indicators. In 2014 the region was the first in the country

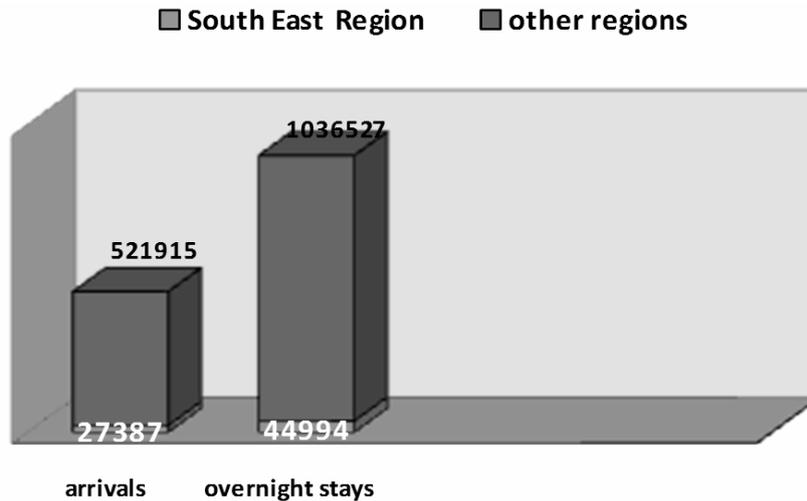
in terms of operating accommodation capacity. The number of arrivals and overnight stays have positioned it as second, being surpassed only by Central Region.



Source: Calculations based on NSI data.

Figure 2. Reception capacity in operation, arrivals and overnight stays, in comparison to the national level (2014).

Regarding rural tourism in this region can not talk about the same positive situation. Even though there are rural areas with particularly valuable touristic potential in the region, they are not sufficiently capitalized.



Source: Calculations based on NSI data.

Figure 3. Number of arrivals and overnight stays in agro hostels, in comparison to the national level 2014.

Major disparities appear within the region, Buzau and Vrancea counties recording the highest values for arrivals and overnight stays, while at the opposite pole Constanta and Galati, the last one having no arrival registered in 2014 in agro hostels. Compared to other regions of the country the number of arrivals in the South East region agro hostels represents only 4.98%, while the number of overnight stays is only 4.16%.

The problems that the region faces are given by basic accommodation, which are very often low-quality, the infrastructure, which is, most of it, outdated, the poor qualification of the staff and the inadequate touristic promotion.

3.2. Training of tourism staff in the South East Region as a solution to quality increase of the services

The staff qualifications of rural tourism activity, in the South East region, is one of the causes of a tourist activity, which, most often, does not fall into lines of quality that economic agents should provide to tourists. The lack of quality only engages a real vicious circle which leads to the decrease of tourists number and to business, mostly unprofitable.

The human capital development and increase competitiveness of rural tourism, by providing access to vocational training and social integration, should be a constant concern of both tourism agents and the local community.

The current legislation requires that the tourism services industry, the working staff must have qualifications to work in that field. According to the Order 65/2013, all restaurant employees, hotels' kitchen and reception are required to have qualifications. Thus, the employees must be 100% qualified, no matter how many stars the unity has.

In the rural tourism activity's case, the agro hostels' management is the administrator's duty, who, according to the law, must have skills gained from a Level 2 training course, conducted in schools or vocational training.

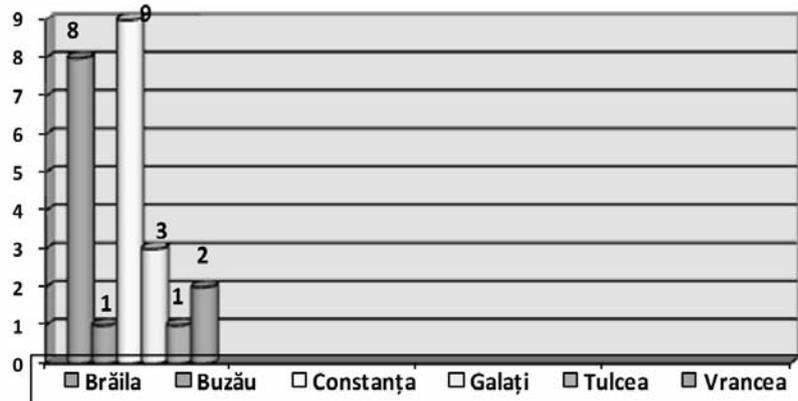
The volume and quality of rural tourism essentially depend upon the manning, the number of workers and their skill level, therefore, it is essential that the pensions have qualified staff.

For the South East Region, by HRD 2007–2013, there were 24 projects that were developed, which generally aimed exactly the human capital development and the increase of the rural tourism competitiveness, through training courses.

These projects had in view the vocational skills development and diversification of inactive people from rural areas, people from rural areas looking for a job, unemployed young people and people employed in subsistence agriculture and rural tourism. All these projects also specifically aimed the skills development in tourism, as this sector represents an area of interest on labor absorption.

Within the projects were conducted courses for Worker boarding house – COR code 514911; Touristic pension administrator COR code 512113; Manager in tourism activity – COR code 122 501; Receptionist COR code 422202; Bartender

COR code 512301; Cook – COR code 512201; Confectioner – COR code 741202; Pastry chef – COR code 741203; Hotel maid COR code 514201; Waiter – COR code 512302.



Source: Calculations based on SMIS data regarding the status of the contracted projects.

Figure 4. Vocational training projects in rural counties contracted in South East Region counties.

One of the projects with significant impact was the one implemented during May 2014 – November 2015 by the Association DORA D’Istria in partnership with SC Abeona LLC, SC Training in Tourism Management – FMT LLC and S.C. Pro Expert S.R.L, entitled “We are pro! Equal Opportunities”, funded by European Social Fund through the Operational Programme of Human Resources Development 2007–2013.

The project concerned, as an area of implementation, the Central, North-West, North-East, West, South-Muntenia, South-East, Bucharest-Ilfov regions.

The project’s objectives were:

- the facilitation of equal access and the increase of job opportunity/ maintenance in the employment marker for at least 1,120 women and people belonging to vulnerable groups, through participation in vocational training programs and promotion/strengthening of equal opportunities/gender or non-discrimination principle in the Centre, the Bucharest-Ilfov, North East, West, North West, South East, South Muntenia regions;

- the informing, awareness and sensitizing the staff of local/central governments and civil society organizations on the need to apply the principles of equality/gender in the labor market and society;

- the improvement of access to employment of at least 804 people in the target group through training/retraining;

- the facilitation of equal access, mobility and equal opportunities in the labor market of the target group by participating in training programs – career development, starting a business or ICT for minimum 195 women.

The target group proposed by the project was a minimum of 1220 persons structured as follows:

- Women – 1108
- Managers of local and central authorities – 10
- Staff of local public central and local authorities – 60
- Staff of civil society organizations – 15
- Staff of social partners – 15
- Other vulnerable groups – 12

The trades for which training courses were organized within the project are divided into skill level 1, 2 and 3 as follows:

➤ Level 1 qualification: Pastry chef, trade worker, aesthetics and human body hygiene worker, animal husbandry worker, **maid**, knitwear worker – clothing

➤ Level 2 qualification: confectioner – pastry chef, **touristic guest house administrator**

➤ Skill level 3: **conference, congresses, fairs and exhibitions organizer**

In the same project, initiation/specialization course were organized, namely: Entrepreneurial Skills (entrepreneurship), Learning Skills (career development), PC Skills (ICT).

We notice that the project addressed the qualifications of several fields, suitable for the main target group – women, among which is found tourism field, expanding towards the **agro-tourism**. These qualifications are: **maid, guest house administrator, conferences, congresses, fairs and exhibitions organizer**.

In South East Region, the counties where the project was implemented were: **Constanța, Tulcea, Galați and Vrancea**. In these counties courses were conducted for the following qualifications: guest house administrator, maid and conferences, congresses, fairs and exhibitions organizer.

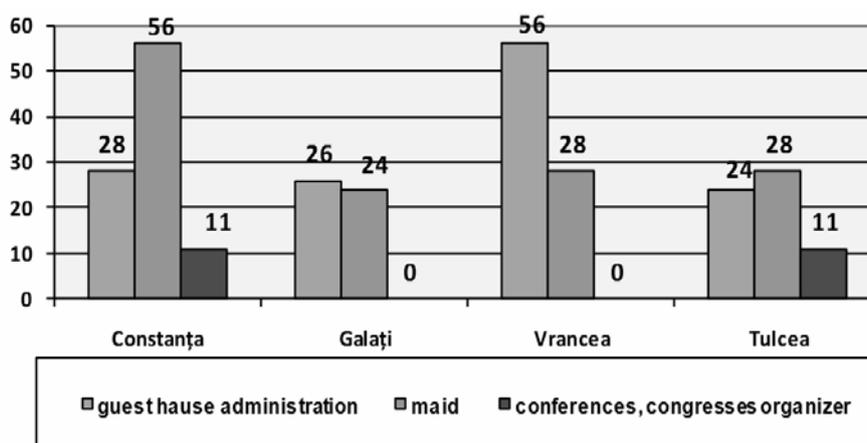


Figure 5. The structure of the county qualifications within the project “We are Pro! Equal Opportunities”.

It must be mentioned that 80% of the participants in these trainings come from rural areas and a total of 28 people were already employed in agro hostels, but with no qualification.

In the implementation of the project, contracts have been signed with agro hostels in the areas of the students' provenience, which was a defining element in the insertion of the graduates in these units. Within these counties a total of 15 people were employed as economic agents, where they had the possibility of an internship. Overall, results after the end of the project led to the conclusion that both rural tourism agents and the local community, represented by trained people, have realized the true value of an educated staff and, even more, staff that has been formed at the workplace.

4. Conclusions

The investment in human capital in Romanian rural tourism is, in the context of the present sustainable development efforts, an action that requires an ABSOLUTE imperative.

The importance of investing in human capital formation and its evaluation is, beyond the action with obvious practical, beneficial endings, an action of national interest.

Future research will go towards the assesion of the training programs, deeply aiming the performance variables: increasing salaries, evaluation of companies performaces, turnover and the absenteeism.

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