Rural Tourism as Alternate Income for marginalized communities in Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia, and Serbia

OVERVIEW

Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia and Serbia are well renowned for their rich history, geography, abundant natural resources and diverse cultural heritage, reflected in a greatly appreciated warm hospitality. However, the rural economies of these countries are facing a myriad of challenges to develop more competitive and sustainable societies. All these countries are considered to be predominantly rural in the light of the population densities per area and should benefit from their potentials in rural areas.

Rural tourism is considered as tourism offering the benefits of rural environment to the visitors or tourists, by allowing the experience of a combination of nature, culture and people. It implies that the visitor or tourist is going to enjoy the authentic, original experiences and return to the roots what is in the essence of rural lifestyle. It is based on the principles of sustainability containing the elements of rural environment, natural resources, as well as traditional hospitality and values of the local population.

It includes numerous services apart from accommodation such as social events, festivities, outdoor recreation, production and sale of manufactured products and agriculture products, etc. According to a broader definition, “Rural tourism includes a series of activities, services, accommodations offered by farmers, and inhabitants of the rural environment, in order to attract tourists to their respective areas and to generate additional revenues”.

Although similar, the desk research in each country reveals differences in the definition, perception and wording for marginalized communities. As agreed, the common definition to be used is based on the Cornell University approach/definition where any group with reduced access to social status, political influence, economic advancement, educational advancement, health care, information or any of the goods, services, and powers of a society can be considered as marginalized.

Desk research in four of the countries find out existence of laws on tourism, national strategies on tourism and other legislative documents regulating this part of the economy. Lack of specific legislation on rural tourism is common for all four countries.

COUNTRY PROFILES AND RURAL TOURISM POTENTIALS

Armenia is a landlocked country in Southern Caucasus with ancient and rich history. The size of the land is 29,743 sq km territory, number of population about 3,299 million, from which more than 1 million people are concentrated in the capital city of Yerevan.
According to World Bank estimations 36.30 percent of the total population is rural residents making 1,122,422 people.

**Potential for rural tourism development**

Many international experts believe that Armenia has great opportunities for further development of tourism sector. Today main types of existing in country tours are cultural-historical: classic tours offered by touristic agencies are limited to monastery complexes and religious sites. However, the country can offer more diverse and at the same time high quality touristic products, attracting larger groups of consumers with different interests.

Rural tourism is a type of tourism that can be successfully applied and developed in Armenia with a promise to become an important economic activity in the country. It should serve as a useful diversification tool and alternative source of income generation for rural communities in Armenia.

Based on the existing natural resources and cultural heritage Armenia has the potential to offer various types of tourist products within the model of rural tourism. The list may include but is not limited to the following types of leisure and tourist activities:

1. Agro tourism: visits to the small and middle - sized farms, small cheese makers, wineries, you-pick berries, etc.
2. Ecotourism
3. Health tourism - thermal springs, fir forests
4. Adventure travel – hiking, biking, camping, mountain climbing, fishing, etc.
5. Educational tourism and tourism of special interest – Endemic plants and plant recognition, bird watching, rock study, hunting, fishing
6. Cultural tourism – ethno villages, traditions and national cousin, festivals and other events.
7. Vocational tourism for families and kids.
Georgia is a small country with an ancient history and rich cultural heritage. Located at the cross roads of Western Asia and Eastern Europe, it is bounded between the Black and Caspian Sea, to the south of the Great Caucasus Range. Georgia has a population of 4.6 million and occupies an area of 69,700 sq km, which is distinguished by diverse climates and geography. The capital of Georgia is Tbilisi.

There is no official definition of rural areas in Georgia. According to the National Statistics office there are 65 districts and rural areas, which are controlled by rural councils. There are 44 minor towns, 896 rural councils and about 3,668 rural settlements in Georgia.

Legislation related to Georgian tourism consists of two laws: (1) The Law of Georgia that deals with Tourism and Health Resorts; (2) The Law of Georgia that deals with Protective Sanitary Zones and Resorts Localities. These laws came into force in 1997 and 1998, are only focused on spring baths and spas or thermal development in sanitary zones.

Rural tourism: Trends and Potential

There are numerous advantages to spending your vacations in Georgia which include culture, wide range of sightseeing destinations, landscapes, micro-climates and great cuisine. Visitors can enjoy hiking, trekking, horse riding, boating, bird watching, adventure, rafting, fishing, photography, camping in mountains, mountain biking as well as rich historical/religious sides.

There are three main tourism options in Georgia: leisure tourism, educational tourism, and business tourism, each of them includes several value chains.

Leisure tourism has opportunities for growth. Potential products include:

1. Wine/Gourmet/Cultural/Rural tourism
2. Winter/Mountaineering/Adventure/Cave tourism
3. High Value Sun/Sea/Sand tourism
4. Spa and Wellness Tourism.
Within the category of business tourism, MICE tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions) demonstrates potential.

Macedonia is a landlocked country, geographically situated on Balkan Peninsula and shares natural sites and resources with all neighboring countries. “Macedonia has 1,758 rural settlements, out of which 10% are abundant and 50% are with below 150 inhabitants, according the Ministry of Agriculture, forestry and water economy. Number of places can benefit of revitalization in rural areas in the country that strive from negative migration trends supported in the past from villages to towns.

Rural tourism is a new activity in Macedonia, although several projects already exist such as in village of Brajcino, or in the municipality of Zrnovci. Krusevo municipality with its historical importance and deprived economy can benefit from future projects to revive it. National Strategy for Tourism for years 2009-2013 numbers the places of future potential spots of rural tourism such as: Pehcevo, Berovo, Koleshino, Bansko, Mokrino, Smolare, Vevcani and Galicnik. Likely revival of traditional handmade white and yellow cheese in Galicnik will position it as a site to visit. Every year, traditional Macedonian ethnic weeding is celebrated as cultural evidence of life in the past in this village.

With its potentials, villages in the region of Skopje and Tetovo can be promoted as sites close to the main cities, both in the rural and urban environment. Increase in the interest for rural and sparingly for individual tourism, specific village architecture, various customs about the country can improve its existing potential.

Potential domestic and foreign visitors or tourist in Macedonia can enjoy in:

1. Active tourism: skiing, walking, biking
2. Extreme sports: Alpinism, Kayaking, Paragliding
3. Hunting, bird watching
4. Wine tourism: wine tours in a small wineries in different part of the country
5. Cultural tourism: historical and archaeological sites
6. Monastery tourism: enjoy nature in combination with spirituality
7. Rural tourism: home-made food, trails, fishing, walking, hiking, traditional Balkan village architecture.

Serbia is a landlocked country located on the crossroads of Central and Southeast Europe, covering the southern part of the Carpathian basin and the central part of the Balkans. The population size is 7,120,666 based on the last Census on the territory of 77,474 sq km. The capital and largest city of Serbia is Belgrade.

Rural areas: There is no official definition of rural areas in Serbia. Under the OECD definition, rural areas in Serbia account for 85% of the country’s territory with more than half of the total population (55%) living in them.

Potential for rural tourism development reveal that there are 10 different groups of products and 24 sub-products in the portfolio or rural activities that could be developed under the umbrella of rural tourism. These products could be considered as high priority products if the correlation with rural tourism is extremely strong or as medium priority products if they should be further developed to improve the offers of rural tourism.

Groups of products under the high priority are the following:

1. Cultural tourism: cultural heritage, ethno-villages and events, rural lifestyle, gastronomy, wines and spirits
2. Nature and environment: mountains, rivers and lakes; eco-tourism; agro-tourism
3. Sports and adventures: nautical tourism on lakes and rivers; mountain-tourism and aero-tourism
4. Health-tourism: spas; medical-tourism
5. Family and children-tourism: family holidays; youth camps and kid camps; farm life; school- and educational-tourism
6. Organized round trips
7. Tourism of special interest: fishing; hunting; bird watching.
Groups of products of medium priority are the following: tourist tours; individual and group tours; short trips: individual and group; MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions); activities for building the team spirit; small seminars and meetings.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Rural development in Armenia, Georgia, Macedonia and Serbia has been focused mostly on improving agricultural performance, increasing competitiveness, consolidating land and improving market access and orientation in the past. However, it has become obvious that there is a necessity to balance agricultural production with other economic activities, environmental protection, and social development. Integration of alternative rural income generating activities (such as rural tourism) with agricultural production and sustainable use of resources is an essential precondition for the diversification of the rural economy in a socially, economically and environmentally sustainable way.