

## **SAPARD PROGRAMME AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BISTRITA-NĂȘĂUD COUNTY, ROMANIA**

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### **Abstract**

#### **SAPARD Programme and Its Implementation in Tourism Development in Bistrița-Nășăud County, Romania**

Our analysis focused on emphasizing the manner of attracting the financial resources in the sector of tourism in a particular territorial entity (Bistrița-Nășăud County, situated in northern Romania, in the Northwest Development Region), where small private initiatives were representative for Romania's approach to this sector. Sustainable rural development was partly triggered by the implementation of the SAPARD programme during the pre-accession period of Romania to the European Union. Focusing on sustainable tourism in the countryside and Bistrița-Nășăud County was another such example.

#### **Key words**

recent tourism development, impact, feedback.

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## **1. Introduction**

Sustainable development in rural areas supposes a balanced development of environmental, economic, and social components, and all these are integrated into the development of tourism. This is why we thought the touristic approach to the development of rural communities was one of the most appropriate ways for finding sustainable solutions to the problems of the countryside. In order to support this idea, we chose a case study for a Romanian territory with a NUTS 3 level administrative unit. In addition, under the circumstances of the present economic crisis, European Union financing programmes were seen by local communities as one of the most reliable sources of support and implementation of development projects.

Still, one had to take into account the rather difficult, slow and therefore long process of learning about the European Union programmes, which was why the respective process alongside a certain inert characteristic of the Romanian rural communities led to a rather late and inadequate accessing of European funds in some cases. An example of this was the SAPARD programme.

We presented the features of the natural and human resources that determined the location of new touristic activities mainly in the northern part of the studied county. The presence of certain territorial identity features synthesised mostly by the cultural landscape of the rural area (the Land of Năsăud) as well as the presence of a rural natural landscape were the main factors motivating the development of touristic activities in the chosen NUTS 3 level unit.

This study also included several case studies (meant to show the perception of the beneficiaries of the SAPARD funds, their accomplishments and problems as a result of being included in the programme, the lessons learnt), as well as an analysis of spatial disparities induced by the territorial location of touristic activities.

## **2. Methodology**

We based our research on recent studies focusing either on the structural changes that Romanian rural space underwent as a result of implementing the European financing SAPARD programme (Alexandru 2009) or on the development of tourism in Bistrița-Năsăud county, as part of a larger study on the regional development of its northern area (Ilovan 2006, 2009).

In addition, we interviewed the owners of the touristic pensions concerning their experience with accessing European funds through the SAPARD programme. We also looked at to what extent the respective touristic pensions were integrated into touristic activities.

## **3. Main features of the touristic potential and of the touristic activity in Bistrița-Năsăud County, as reflected by general regional development**

Bistrița-Năsăud County lies in northern Romania (Fig. 1).

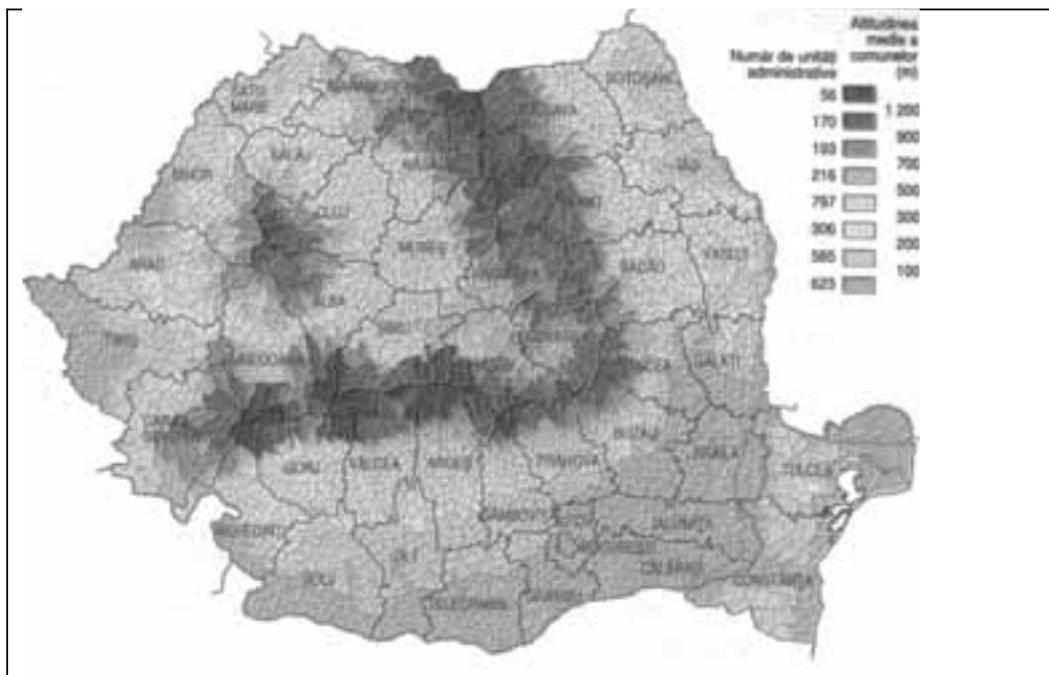


Fig. 1: The position of Bistrița-Năsăud county in Romania (Legend: Număr de unități administrative – number of administrative units; Altitudinea medie a comunelor – Average altitude of communes, in metres).

Source: Rey, Groza, Ianoș, Pătroescu, 2006, p. 35.

The features of natural and human resources, with impact not only on the touristic activity, but also on larger regional development, were synthesised in earlier studies on the northern part of the county (Ilovan 2006, 2009). Many of those features were also characteristic of the entire county. We presented them as part of a SWOT analysis meant to create a complex image of regional development and implicitly of the potential of future touristic activities:

-The strengths of regional development in Bistrița-Năsăud county were the following: balanced geomorphologic space (mountains, hills, and fields); rich and quality hydrographical resources, especially in the north; rich exploited and exploitable mineral water with resources mainly in the north; large pastures and hayfields; continuity of settlements; ethnographical regions present; distinct mental spaces; high communication facilities as a result of small distances between settlements; strong polarising centres (Bistrița and Năsăud); maintenance of a well shaped profile of Năsăud from an educational and ethnographical point of view and of Bistrița as an economic and administrative centre, and a permanent ascending trend in tertiary sector development;

-The weaknesses of regional development in Bistrița-Năsăud county consisted of the following: predominant rural population; massive emigration abroad; emigration of the well-trained labour force; youth emigration; negative migratory growth; decreasing population; loss of the traditional community's values; insufficient works for preventing losses as a result of floods; agricultural land fragmentation; little arable land in the north as compared to the south; lack of modernisation of the agriculture which was still only subsistent; no big economic agents for the largest part of the territory; intraregional (west-east and north-south) disparities from

where the demographic and economic features were concerned; inexistent, non-modernised, or old infrastructure; marginality imposed by the absence of an important road axis in the context of railway transport losing its importance for the northern part of the county, where natural touristic potential is best represented; inexistent cultural life except several important events for the three major urban centres (Bistri a, Năsăud and Beclean) and for some other settlements; lack of perspective in development, as no significant development project existed;

-Opportunities might have been the following: capitalisation of touristic resources; superior capitalising of the woods; investment in the regional business of those who worked abroad; tertiary sector development and investment in education;

-The risks were as follows: chaotic deforestation; geomorphologic, hydrological, and climatic; old population or ageing population; feminisation of the population; intense depopulation in certain areas; high rates of demographical dependency as a result of average life span increase and not because of youth, due to high birth rates; loss of the educational profile of Năsăud; loss of a certain part of the labour force through emigration abroad or to other parts of Romania.

Tourism is a possible development direction for Bistri a-Năsăud County, and especially for its northern part (the Land of Năsăud – Fig. 2), where four of the five touristic pensions developed through SAPARD projects are located.



Fig. 2: The Land of Năsăud – touristic potential and its capitalising (after Ilovan, 2009, Fig. 161 with changes).

The Land of Năsăud, lying between the Someșul Mare Valley in the south and the high peaks of the Rodnei and the Jibleș Mountains in the north, included three landforms: the valley of the above-mentioned river (a modest one in the context of major geostructures); the eastern and central part of the Someșul Mare Hills, very significant where size was concerned; the southern slopes of the Jibleș Mountains, the southern and western slopes belonging to the Rodnei Mountains, and the northern slopes of the Bârgău Mountains, also important according to their size.

The mountainous chain in the northern, eastern, and southeastern periphery of the Land of Năsăud bordered the Ciceu Hills, the Suplai Hills and the Năsăud Hills, where most of the settlements of the region were located. Gr. P. Pop included the Ciceu Hills, the Suplai Hills, and the Năsăud Hills under the name of the Someșul Mare Hills (2001, p. 164).

The support capacity of the territory and its potential was the target – “parameter” that we had to identify in relation to the people. From this point of view, we considered the characteristic features imposed by land use to be significant – the expansion of the hay field and of the pastures against the forested areas, the location of households and the necessity of settling the neighbouring territories with expansion towards the mountainous area, because of the spatial restrictions imposed by the morphology of the micro-basins.

Among the characteristic elements identified for this region and targeting its uniqueness as a territorial entity, the following were significant for the regionalisation of the Land of Năsăud (Pop 2001, pp. 160-161):

- the right side tributaries of the Someșul Mare drained the entire hilly area (the Ilișua, the Jibleș, the Salva, the Gersa, the Rebra, and the Cormaia);

- the tight connection of the hills to the northern mountainous space (the Jibleș and the Rodna Mountains) through the small depression basins and high altitude passes or gorges;

- the summits of the hills were long and parallel along the north-south;

- the links for communication developed longitudinally along the Ilișua and the Zagra valleys, etc. and along their tributaries, but their transversal ones were more difficult, thus leading the authors of *Geografia României, III* to affirm that: “each hydrographical basin has become an individuality where the aspect of human settlement groups is concerned” (p. 524);

- the depressionary micro-basins appeared through processes of differential erosion, within zones of geological and geomorphological contact, between the different structures belonging to the Rodna’s crystalline and the sedimentary and volcano rocks of the Bârgău and of the Jibleș Mountains (Mureșianu 1996, p. 140).

The following types of tourism have potential for development or have been emerging in the recent period in the Land of Năsăud, where four of the five SAPARD pensions are located, and in the county as a whole:

- mountain tourism (winter sports, speleotourism);

- cultural tourism – polarised by the main urban centres of the county and by areas with original rural civilization and culture;

- rural tourism focusing on agro-tourism – chaotic at present, although it is an emerging type of tourism, while internal and external requests for this type of tourism exist;

- balneal tourism;
- religious tourism;
- adventure tourism;
- transit tourism.

We recommend the following directions meant to promote touristic activities in general:

- superior capitalising of the most visited routes through offering adequate material basis and integrating it into major touristic routes;
- stimulating new trends in rural tourism in order to harmoniously integrate their development in local and regional development plans through observing rules for quality of services and environmental rules;
- environmental protection and efficient management of pollution factors in order to ensure sustainable development;
- preservation and protection of natural resources, of historic monuments and of characteristic ethnographic values;
- efficient management of the county image in order to attract tourists;
- taking into account opportunities for ensuring qualified personnel in tourism such as those offered by the faculties in Bistri a and Sighetu Marma iei, specialised in the Geography of tourism.

We believe that the county has all necessary natural premises to ensure a sustainable and intense touristic activity. This potential has not been exploited or has been only chaotically developed.

We discussed the regional development directions from a critical perspective and from the point of view of the resilience of the regional system (Cocean 2005). In this context, although potential existed, tourism was possible not as an immediate, but rather as a postponed solution and ensured sustainable development. Commercial activities and wood exploitation supported the present economy, but only in the context of demographic ageing and population decrease. Regional evolution in the long-term was, therefore, unpredictable, in the context of Romanian society undergoing quick and continuous changes.

#### **4. Implementing SAPARD projects in tourism in Bistrița-Năsăud County**

At the national level, under measure 3.4 (Development and diversifying of economic activities that generate multiple activities and alternative income) and the sub-measure of Rural tourism, Romania started 670 projects for touristic pensions, out of which the Northwest Region of Romania had 89. Within this region, Bistri a-Năsăud County had 5 projects, Bihor, 37, Cluj, 17, Maramureș, 12, Satu Mare, 2, and Sălaj, 16.

The small number of projects in some counties in comparison with others (as was the case in the researched county) was mainly caused by the disparity in the touristic potential and the traditional touristic activity. For instance, Bistri a-Năsăud County developed its touristic activity mainly through balneal tourism in the town of Sângeorz-Băi or cultural tourism in Bistri a city, while the entire rural area was chronically underdeveloped for decades, as the types of tourism it had potential for – rural tourism and tourism for winter sports – were underdeveloped, chaotically developed or not present.

The SAPARD programme (2000-2007) encouraged the development of five projects in the field of tourism in Bistri a-Năsăud County (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Projects focusing on tourism, included in the SAPARD programme in Bistri a-Năsăud County

Settlement	Project title	SAPARD Programme	EC Contribution (euro)	National budget (euro)	Private contribution (euro)
Măgura Ilvei Commune (Măgura Ilvei village)	"Măgura Ilvei" agro-touristic pension	65,538.80	49,154.10	16,384.70	65,538.80
Şan Commune (Valea Mare village)	"Teodora" touristic pension	100,000.00	75,000.00	25,000.00	100,000.00
Telciu Commune (Fiad village)	Rural touristic pension	100,000.00	75,000.00	25,000.00	100,000.00
Bistri a City (Piatra Fântânele village)	Building a touristic pension	100,000.14	75,000.11	25,000.04	100,000.14
Zagra Commune (Zagra village)	Rural touristic pension	99,988.52	74,991.39	24,997.13	99,988.52

All five touristic pensions were started as projects financed by the SAPARD programme in 2006. As a result of interviews with the owners of touristic pensions and of research in the area, we presented either owners' feedback or the most striking features of their activity:

- The owners of the touristic pension in Măgura Ilvei (Fig. 3) were still waiting for the last payment in order to be able to start hosting tourists. Their main problems, similar to others, were the difficulties they encountered in receiving money; it was mostly late or too late; the many necessary trips to Bistri a and Satu Mare in order to meet with those who took care of implementing the SAPARD programme; the poor communication skills of those who implemented and supervised the SAPARD projects and their overall loss of time and patience. The owners of this pension revealed that the sum that they received from SAPARD funds reached only 30% of the total they invested. That was a major problem, as money came according to initial estimated costs, while prices increased;

- The "Teodora" pension in Valea Mare village (Fig. 4) had a very interesting rustic look, while the gate was chained and locked, and a wood processing company was what welcomed tourists before reaching its gate (Fig. 5).

- A touristic pension under construction in Fiad village (Fig. 6). Since 2007, the owner has been trying to solve his problems with the construction company, who declared bankruptcy and stopped the work he was paid for. Too much bureaucracy and stress were other problems mentioned by the pension owner;



Fig. 3: Touristic pension in Măgura Ilvei, 2009.  
(Photo by Oana-Ramona Ilovan)



Fig. 4: "Teodora" pension in Valea Mare village, 2009.  
(Photo by Oana-Ramona Ilovan)



Fig. 5: Wood processing activities neighbouring "Teodora" pension in Valea Mare village, 2009.  
(Photo by Oana-Ramona Ilovan)



Fig. 6: Touristic pension under construction in Fiad village, 2009.  
(Photo by Oana-Ramona Ilovan)

- The touristic pension in Zagra village (Figure 7) still needed arrangement in its surroundings. The owners, a family from Năsăud, welcomed tourists and could be reached by phone (one of the neighbours was assigned to give the owner's phone number to interested tourists). The pension was mainly used during weekends for meetings among colleagues and parties. Sometimes guests preferred to bring their own food and drink, while the owner also offered catering.



Fig. 7: Touristic pension in Zagra village, 2009.  
(Photo by Oana-Ramona Ilovan)

Most owners declared that they would avoid getting involved in the programme if they had to start again and thus avoid unfinished or belated project implementation. Deficiencies of the programme according to the feedback offered by owners of touristic pensions developed as projects of the SAPARD programme were the most mentioned features during interviews. To the deficiencies mentioned above, we added others focusing on negative impact on any touristic activities:

- lack of adequate signalling of touristic pensions or no signs at all;
- inadequate arrangement or no arrangement of the areas neighbouring the touristic pensions;
- poor quality of road infrastructure in most of the county.

Therefore, as far as the SAPARD programme focusing on tourism was concerned in Bistri a-Năsăud County, one might conclude that it was a failure from the point of view of the owners of the touristic pensions.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The results of SAPARD projects started in Bistri a-Năsăud County were the following:

- no pension functions on a regular basis (weekend tourism, unfinished project implementation);
- very few pensions and therefore less attractiveness of the region;
- the discouragement of owners' feedback.

We concluded that the development of touristic activities as a result of projects within the SAPARD programme was only in the stage of "only for myself" and still not working as it should. There is still a long way to a welfare economy based on tourism.

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## **SAPARD PROGRAMME AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN BISTRITA-NĂSĂUD COUNTY, ROMANIA**

### **Summary**

Sustainable development in the rural areas supposes a balanced development of the environmental, economic, and social components and all these are integrated into the development of tourism. That is why we considered that the touristic approach to the development of rural communities was one of the most appropriate ways for finding sustainable solutions to the problems of the countryside. In order to support this idea, we chose a case study for the Romanian territory, that of a NUTS 3 level administrative unit. In addition, under the circumstances of the present economic crisis, European Union financing programmes represent, for local communities, one of the most reliable sources of support and implementation of development projects. Still, one had to take into account the rather difficult, slow and therefore long process of learning about the European Union programmes and that was why the respective process alongside with a certain inertia characteristic of the Romanian rural communities led to a rather late and inadequate accessing of European funds in some cases. An example was that of the SAPARD programme.

Our analysis focused on emphasizing the manner of attracting the above-mentioned resources in a sector field, that of tourism, in a particular territorial entity (Bistrița-Năsăud County, situated in northern Romania, in the North-West Development Region), where private initiatives were representative for Romania's approach to this sector. Sustainable rural development was partly triggered by the implementation of the SAPARD programme, during the pre-accession period of Romania to the European Union, also focusing on sustainable tourism in the countryside and Bistrița-Năsăud County was such an example. We showed the importance that the touristic activities had within the total number of projects for rural development in the county.

This study also included several case studies (meant to show the perception of the beneficiaries of the SAPARD funds, their accomplishments and problems as a result of being included in the programme, the lessons learnt), as well as an analysis of spatial disparities induced by the territorial location of touristic activities.

We presented the features of the natural and human resources that determined the location of new touristic activities mainly in the northern part of the studied county. The presence of certain territorial identity features synthesised mostly by the cultural landscape of the rural area (that of the Land of Năsăud) as well as the presence of a rural natural landscape were the main factors motivating the development of touristic activities in the chosen NUTS 3 level unit.

Moreover, we did a comparison to the other counties and development regions of Romania, focusing on the role of the SAPARD programme in tourism development. In this context we underlined the strengths and weaknesses of the process of implementing the SAPARD programme in Romania, the way the rural communities perceived it and its efficiency.

Our paper concluded with a short analysis of the role of the SAPARD programme after 2007 and of the other programmes that the Romanian state and the European Union initiated in order to support the development of tourism in the rural area of Romania, including that of the chosen case study: Bistrița-Năsăud County.