

International Conference Meanings of the Rural – between social representations, consumptions and rural development strategies

28-29 September 2015, University of Aveiro, Portugal

Theme 3

***EVENTS IN RURAL AREAS THAT AIM LOCAL TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT: THE HIKING FESTIVAL IN GERÊS, PORTUGAL***

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Tourism is widely regarded as a means to achieve development in destination areas and it is noted that touristic development is usually associated with benefit of countries or regions, also contributing to the creation of opportunities to develop rural areas.

This, because it is considered that tourism is a way of take advantage of resources of the territory, intended as one of the best activities to achieve it and can also constitute an important factor for development, depending on the specificities of each region and the greater or lesser relevance assigned to it (Reis, 2012). At the same time, it is understood that the development of tourism should help the community to reach top-level objectives as the well-being of the population, being related to the coherences in terms of spatial environment (Machado, Coelho & Brázio, 2011).

In Portugal and in accordance with the national strategy for tourism (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros n.º. 24/2013, de 16 de Abril de 2013 – Council of Ministers resolution), it is aimed the development of sustainable tourist destinations, with grounds that sustainability should form the basis of public policies at national, regional and local scale, geared to a long-term development, wealth and employment generator, based on the values and local traditions, contributing to the preservation and conservation of natural resources, wich in fact is directly related to the basic principles of sustainability defended by the World Tourism Organization.

Being understood that tourism is, according to Vieira (2007), in its essence, the experience of emotions provided by the enjoyment of the elements and characteristics of the various features with the diversity of its nature and it is conditioned by personal experience and by expectations of every tourist in all these perspectives, it can be also considered that events are in that way a fundamental instrument in the touristic process, and their contribution does not confine to the increase of the number of visitors, generating income and business, but also enables a drive in the tourism productive chain (Zottis, 2006).

Events are also important since they enable the reduction of the effects of tourism seasonality, as they stimulate flows of people in periods of the year when the demand is usually lower (Oliveira & Januário, 2007).

Holding events in a municipality can, therefore, stimulate the improvement of services and, accordingly, bring improvement to the inhabitants' life quality (*idem*). Also, an event may be considered the sum of efforts and planned actions in order to achieve defined results from the audience (Brito & Fontes, 2002 *cit in* Oliveira & Januário, 2007, p. 55). Thus, a well-succeeded strategy of events is reflected in the creation of an institutional framework, involving businessmen, commerce, services sector and public power, emphasizing the promotion of associations and entrepreneurship (Melo Neto, 2001 *cit in* Zottis, 2006, p. 4).

It is in this theoretical context that fits the study presented here, a kind of quadrangular and consequent relation between tourism, events, local development and sustainability. A study that pretends to assess the essence and the evolution but also the influence on local tourism development of an event that is called Hiking Festival, which takes place since 2013 in the heart of the only National Park in Portugal, the Peneda-Gerês National Park, particularly in Terras de Bouro county, a rural territory and of low population density. A tourist destination that is known in the market as Gerês.

The study can be seen as significant given that the analysed event is carried out in a sensitive territorial area, with natural and cultural heritage of undeniable value, being a predominantly rural and sparsely populated as said and also because it is a recognized tourist destination, mainly in Portugal but also in Europe, although quite affected by the negative effects of seasonality.

This is where appears the contribution of the event to local tourism development and consequently for the development of the rural space where it is integrated. The event results from an established partnership between four local companies dedicated to tourism and

leisure activities, a local tourist companies association settled on the locality, the respective city council and an association that works on the regional and rural development, what means that there are several entities concerned to reduce seasonality, by organizing an event outside high season, in the month of March, boost tourism and consequently maintain jobs and population on the territory. Also, the event allows the maintenance of hiking trails, relevant resources for the tourist experience on the rural and country side, and allows the preservation of existing natural elements in rural environment, since the organization of the event sensitizes participants and the general community for that need.

To the obtainance of results and given the specifications of this type of work that was intended to develop, qualitative and quantitative information and data was collected, namely near the organization of the event, researching in secondary sources and by conducting a survey directed to the participants on the Hiking Festival. This, to make the necessary territorial framework, to understand better the objectives of the event established by its organization and the concerns surrounding it, particularly in terms of tourism and sustainability. Also, to quantify and analyze the evolution of the effective participation.

Within the survey conducted, carried out in each of the years the event was held (2013, 2014 and 2015), in addition to the satisfaction of the participants, it was intended to extract relevant information to help evaluate the range of the promotion of the event and the possible continuity of the Hiking Festival in Gerês, as the origin of the participants, how they had knowledge of the event, if they intend to participate in future editions and if they booked or used other existing tourist services in the region as accommodation and restaurants.

With the survey results, in addition to other information, can be seen that the event has grown year after year and in 2015 became the largest event of its kind in Portugal. In 2013 participated 75 people, 84 in 2014 and in 2015 there was an exponential increase, more specifically 628% compared to 2014. 521 people have participated in 2015. Each year that the event took place the participants represented several Portuguese localities, from of all latitudes and regions of the country, more precisely 51 in 2015, 52 in 2014 and 25 in 2013. It was registered the presence of Spanish and French participants, but in very small numbers, what is therefore not significant in terms of analysis. In all the years, 2013, 2014 and 2015, no less than 80% of respondents reported having been very satisfied with the event in general. Over 90% of the respondents, also in each of the years, reported having interest to participate in a future edition of the event. In 2015, 42% of the inquired booked accommodation services in Gerês and 44% had meals at the local restaurants.

The event's success is proven by the results obtained from the analysis of quantitative data extracted from the conducted surveys, once that the levels of satisfaction of respondents remain very positive and the number of participants increase each year that the event took place.

As result of the analysis and research carried out, one can conclude that the event studied it is a good example of engagement between private entities and the public sector in a joint effort to reach local tourism development of a rural area, aiming the reduction of adverse effects of seasonality and hence the economic sustainability of the destination, bearing in mind the environmental and social issues that are associated.

References

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