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RURAL TOURISM – WHAT ITS SUSTAINABILITY?

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The expansion of rural tourism is a trend that is common to many countries in Europe (Eurogites, 2015). The activity is even considered as the second key in rural areas (EC, 2012). Indeed, according to the European Commission (2012), rural tourism has been steadily progressing in recent years, contrary to agriculture and fishery. Its importance is especially pronounced in peripheral and less favoured areas where traditional agrarian activities have declined (Ribeiro & Marques, 2002; Sharpley, 2002). The benefits are often summed up as a three-way yield: for the host community (the economic and social dimension of rural tourism), for the land and buildings themselves (environmental maintenance), and for the tourist (experience and leisure in the countryside), which evidences a sequence of inter-related benefits (Cánoves, Villarino, Priestley, & Blanco, 2004). Rural tourism is also the sector that provides an unique opportunity for integration of many other economic activities such as agriculture, food-industry, fishery, forestry and handicraft, and a sector that builds up on excellent environmental conditions, rich local culture, rural heritage and traditions, high quality local agricultural products and foodstuff and rural hospitality (EC, 2012). Its role will be greater the more it is able to tie together the resources – historical, cultural and environmental – and enhance the interplay between actors and networks (Saxena & Ilbery, 2010).

That is why, from completely absent in the plans and proposals of rural development of the sixties and seventies, rural tourism became the crucial tool of those which are designed and

implemented today. Through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), for instance, the Commission can support the establishment of good practises of rural tourism. Actually *“projects that bring together agriculture and, rural tourism through the promotion of sustainable and responsible tourism in rural areas, and natural and cultural heritage should be encouraged as well as renewable investments”* [Regulation (EU) n° 1305/2013]. On the other hand the paradigm of sustainability constitutes itself as relevant in rural areas, where the impacts of the tourism phenomenon appear more dramatic (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). In general terms, sustainable tourism is defined as (a type of) tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs not only of visitors and the environment, but also the needs of host communities and the industry, including tourism enterprises (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005).

Despite what was previously mentioned, doubts regarding the real potential of tourism for inducing development subsist particularly in socioeconomically depressed areas, where the population is scarce and ageing. In Portugal, for instance, it seems that the activity has not yet reached a position of rural development “motor” nor has it succeeded in improving local community life (Silva, 2005/2006; Figueiredo, 2011; Pato, 2012). Often, this is due to the entrepreneurial strategy adopted (or not adopted) by the promoters in the development of rural tourism (Pato, 2012). Ribeiro (2003) suggests the existence of two types of strategies in the Portuguese rural tourism: “patrimonial strategy” and “entrepreneurial strategy”. The first one is mainly adopted by old individuals who do little in the lodging unit that they have. Overall, these individuals do not consider rural tourism as a business, but as a means to, among others have access to financial support for the restoration of their houses. The second one is adopted by younger individuals, many of whom observe rural tourism as a way of employment or professional opportunity. These individuals do their utmost to attract and have guests, adopting for this reason proactive attitudes in the business.

However, even these promoters have a lot of difficulties concerning the business growth. It must be considered that, like other industries in the rural space, rural tourism business tend to be small, with a higher proportion of micro and one-person businesses, which may suggest that they may have human and financial difficulties. Moreover, the small average size of rural tourism enterprises, combined with their sparse distribution and remoteness, can make the delivery of rural tourism services more difficult in comparison with their urban counterparts. This is even more important in regions without resources sufficiently appealing to improve

rural tourism. It should be noted, that rural tourism continues to have low bed occupancy rates in Portugal (TP, 2013).

For the reasons mentioned in the last paragraph, our research question is “what is the sustainability of rural tourism?” Taking into consideration that sustainable tourism should ensure viable, long term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, including stable employment income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities and tourism entrepreneurs, the main objective of this study is therefore to explore (some) difficulties of rural tourism promoters that want to work in the field and do their utmost to attract and have guests, but whose path has not been easy in the last years. The work uses a case-study approach. Being qualitative in nature, it allows to investigate the phenomenon more deeply. In this case a semi-structured interview was done to a promoter of one of the exceptional examples of a tourism unit officially registered as ‘Turismo no Espaço Rural’ (TER) in one peripheral area of Portugal – *Moimenta da Beira*, district of *Viseu*. The interview was tape-recorded, transcribed and subject to content analysis in order to identify the main issues of promoter’s discourse. After it was complemented with the use of documental analysis (mainly based on electronic documents about the promoter’s initiative) and observation in the community studied.

The rural tourism unit has the eco-label “Green Key” which certifies itself as sustainable and eco-friendly and was one of the case-studies by the University of *Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro* concerning good practices in rural areas. Even so, difficulties for increasing the business and the affirmation of rural tourism in the village and in the region are so many. They concern not only the small size but also the remoteness of the lodging and some lack of knowledge of local people concerning the essence of rural tourism. Moreover, because of the small size of the lodging unit and therefore some lack of economic viability, local people are not involved in tourism activities and naturally benefit very little with the existence of the same unit. Under these conditions, we consider that rural tourism has a weak sustainability of development and affirmation in the community. This study-case provides an original contribution to knowledge because the sustainability of rural tourism, with few exceptions, is a field of research that seems to be neglected in literature, mainly in Portugal.

It would be interesting to extend this case-study to other cases to better support our conclusions, given that the study based mainly on a semi-structured interview is a limitation of the same.

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