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THE ROLE OF AGROTOURISM IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONVERSION OF RURAL AREAS

Summary

Agrotourism plays a huge role in the activation of rural areas. Its position and market power affects a number of external components and mechanisms. And although its positive impact on the economic and social development rural areas is noticeable, it also reveals a number of barriers related. An important aspect is to strengthen awareness of local communities concerning benefits resulting from the development of this non-agricultural source of income. Only then it will trigger a multiplier effect that will eventually lead to reduction of unemployment, job creation in sectors serving tourists, revenue growth and will improve both living standard and working conditions of the population actively involved. Improving the visibility of rural values, processing, traditional crafts, rural buildings can become a powerful magnet for tourists, tourists looking for new unconventional forms of recreation. Benefits of the development of rural tourism can become real if there is visible involvement and close cooperation between both – service providers and local authorities (government).

Key words: agrotourism, rural development

INTRODUCTION

Agrotourism is an important element of sustainable development and rural transformation. As a result of decline in profitability of agricultural production and deterioration of living standards of rural residents, these activities – as reported in many countries, conducted observations of the economic activity of farming families in the field of tourism – is mainly a consequence of seeking additional or alternative incomes in many areas related to agriculture. A particular need to improve farming situation occurs in Poland. Market economy

have posed problems of rural residents in the situation significantly reduce the possibility of disposing of agricultural production at low and unstable prices, rising production costs, relatively high unemployment, reduce the chances of advancement in life of rural youth and lower living standards [Gurgul, 2005]. The phenomenon of non agricultural activities on the farm occurs in all countries of the world, even the richest, where income per capita is much higher than in Poland, the production costs and food prices are lower than ours, wealthy village and highly efficient agriculture [Żelazna and Popielarska, 2001, Mysiak, 2000].

THE SCOPE AND METHOD OF THE STUDY

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the role of tourism in the development and conversion of rural areas. There were attempts to look at these issues taking into account examples from the available literature, statistical studies of the Institute of Tourism in Warsaw, and collected statistics (interviews with owners of 78 agrotourism facilities). The study was conducted in selected areas of the Kujawsko-Pomorskie province. These were areas with lower values of the natural environment, selected based on typology of municipalities carried out by Iwicki [1998]. In the field study a questionnaire was used, in which respondents were asked seven questions. They referred to advantages that service providers derive from agrotourism (of the 15 proposed, the respondents were to select 3 major ones), the share of income from tourism in the farm personal income, the booking system (well in advance or not), and also cooperation between service providers (11 factors supporting coordination of these activities to choose from). To illustrate the role and importance of agrotourism – for individual territorial units (municipalities) – the respondents were asked what, in their opinion, was of essential importance. The respondents were to evaluate conditions and opportunities for development of such activities in the areas where they lived (26 responses to choose from) and indicate what had the greatest positive impact on organization of this form of recreation (choose one main out of 22 examples and 3-4 complementary ones). Moreover, they were asked what sort of investment and modernization they make, to raise attractiveness of the vicinity of their farms. The responses received showed the obstacles and incentives stimulating or hindering development of rural areas through agrotourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In Poland agrotourism is growing fastest in areas which are highly attractive due to nature. There are regions where this activity is concentrated, and

those in which it practically does not occur. Speaking about the agrotouristic areas, we mean those, where many providers of the discussed services can be found [Sznajder and Przezbórska, 2006]. Młynarczyk [2002] states that areas where the discussed potential dominates include the following: Szczecin, Koszalin and Gdańsk Shorelands; selected macroregions of the Pomeranian Lake District, Mazury, Suwałki and Lubuskie Lake Districts, and foothills of the Sudety and the Sudety, the Cracow-Częstochowa Upland, Roztocze, Podkarpacie and the Carpathians. However, regions of lower natural attractiveness also have receptive capabilities. The research carried out in selected areas of Kujawy and Pomorze countryside show that even though agrotourism activity is not of mass scale there are still chances for it to develop. The same applies to other businesses that shape the countryside and at the same time bring financial benefits not only to the providers, but also to the whole areas where the business is located.

A concept of multifunctional development of rural areas means it is necessary to extend and complement the basic business of farming land by other economic activities that have a significant impact on reducing the unemployment rate and also the welfare-income disparity of countryside populations [Chudy-Hyski and Żemła, 2001]. Interpreting the concept of multifunctional development you must remember that in different regions of the world, it is understood differently, depending, among others, on the level of economic development, the importance of agriculture in the economy and employment, on the number of rural population, etc. The development is understood not only as economic growth and improvement of the economic situation of the rural population, but as a sustainable demographic, economic and social development. Such a broad definition of multifunctional development is especially important in countries where rural communities, especially farming communities, have a small share in total population and refers to countries such as the USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia [Sznajder and Przezbórska 2006].

The study shows that agrotourism in the Kujawsko-Pomorskie province brings the providers tangible benefits, not only financial but also immaterial. The share of income from agrotourism in the surveyed households' personal income is as an average for all at the level of 28.3%. And although the assumption is that agrotourism should be an additional source of income for farm families, there was group of 12 (15.4%) providers, for whom it was the main source of income. All the involved in the project had different goals, expectations and hopes. Most of them (80.8%) pointed out that that it was a great opportunity to meet new people. The economic factor i.e. the additional source of income ranked second (61.5%). The third major advantage mentioned by the hosts was a possibility to use spare rooms (38.5%). The three overriding benefits have also emerged in the findings obtained by the Żelazna and Popielarska [2001] and Żbikowski et al. [2006]. The remaining responses included acquisition of new

experiences (24.3%), development of interest (21.8%), raising standards and aesthetics of buildings (16.7%), the main source of income (11.5%) and farm development (11.5%). Less than 10% of respondents treated it as stimulus for learning languages getting knowledge (7.7%), a free time activity (5.1%), learning new customs (3.8%), sales of manufactured goods (3.8%), an opportunity to learn more about the history of their region (3.8%) [Cichowska, 2009].

Sznajder and Przezbórska [2006] claim that agrotourism is developing because of the following reasons: low income from farming, urbanization, redistribution of urban population income to farm tourism facilities and consequently to the entire rural population, the condition of rural infrastructure and related to it the level of "urbanization" and local government policy. Respondents from Kujawy and Pomorze countryside seem to confirm that. However, next to the positive aspects that could be of vital importance while running agrotourism business, they also indicate main problems to overcome. From the standpoint of the service providers, conditions and possibilities of agrotourism development in the areas where they live, are not the most favorable (most often they received medium and poor notes). Difficulties are associated mainly with the existing unemployment (93.6% of the hosts evaluate this as poor), lack of employment opportunities (73.4% – poor) and lack of profitability of agricultural production (50.0% – poor). The survey also shows that mechanisms of market economy to a large extent prevent access to crediting this form of investment on favorable terms (42.3% – poor, 32.0% – good). Most of the respondents assessed costs of preparing the farm for agrotourism (56.4%), agrotourism as a source of income and their own capital resources (50.0%) as poor. The same note is assigned to the lack of competition, which would reinforce fair competition in relation to the remaining households (70.5%) or other forms of recreation existing there (69.2%). The study also shows that the efforts of local authorities to stimulate development of agrotourism activities are of commitment (51.3% – poor rating). Activity of rural residents was also assessed as rather poor (47.7% – poor, 35.9% – average). The hosts also consider promotion and advertising activities as well as tourist information functioning ineffective (47.4% – poor, 29.5% – average). According to the respondents, another barrier that influences poor development of agrotourism is lack of diversity of folklore and folk culture (35.9% – average and 29.5% – poor). Concerning technical infrastructure, the quality of roads received the lowest notes (51.3%), other elements were assessed as good or average, and of social infrastructure – accommodation facilities (47.8%). Even though it was emphasized that development of agrotourism is not supported properly by local authorities, the possibility of receiving professional advice was assessed as good (46.1%). Top marks were very rare – none of the following was assessed as very good: the quality of roads, level of knowledge and mentality of the people, their activity or factors affecting economic efficiency of farms – unemployment, possibility of having extra source of income, farm

production profitability, costs of agrotourism and competitive activities. On the other hand, 32% of respondents assessed telephone infrastructure positively (very good). The remaining factors received only a few top marks (from 1 to 7). No doubt it is easy to notice that the hosts perceive forests and landscape values of the area where they live as aspects positively influencing development of agrotourism. Out of 78 farms surveyed, 60 assessed them positively (in 41.0% considered that they are good, and 35.9% very good). The existing trade, service and catering service network and the level of public safety was assessed as good or average. A huge percentage of respondents also point out that tax regulations help in running these services (51.3% evaluate themas good and 7.7% as very good) [Cichowska, 2008].

Agrotourist activity brings multiple benefits to both farmers and the local communities [Balińska, 2001], as it triggers so called multiplier effect that drives local economic situation [Sikora, 1995]. As a result, the revenue received from tourists increase the demand for other products and services that may not have anything in common with tourism. Presence of tourists in rural areas is a factor stimulating growth of trade, craft, catering and recreation services [Jalnik, 2005].

The research has shown that the respondents pay special attention to improving the appearance of farms (69.9% of respondents), being aware that this is an important element, responsible for tourists' first impression. They do a lot of investment work to improve the area around the house. Such behavior also stimulates other inhabitants (not only those who are engaged in agrotourism). They care about cleanliness and beautify their farms, making the village more attractive. They take care of cleanliness and make their farms look more attractive. The providers make sure that grass surfaces dominate (69.9%) (Photo 1), playgrounds for children (61.5%) (Photo 2) and recreation facilities for adults (61.5%) are available, and that yards are paved (69.9%). Most importantly, a large group of owners invest in order to improve safety of their guests (79.5%). Access roads are assessed as very poor. Their quality is one of the elements that significantly reduce the development of the discussed services.

Młynarczyk *et al*. [2001] claim that agrotourism has a growing group of supporters, preferring sustainable development of rural areas providing great opportunities to use agricultural production areas, and – as Dębniewska and Suchta [1995] – add an opportunity for the development and activation of entire settlements. Local people have completely new possibilities of using the rural areas, agricultural facilities and local infrastructure [Sikorska and Kajszczak 2001]. Nawrocka [2002] emphasizes that one of the important determinants of the development of the discussed issue is the appropriate approach of local authorities. And organizing an efficient system of promotion is the basis for the long-term success and the success of agrotourism activities [Woźniak and Kuźniar, 2000]. Service providers from the examined areas share this opinion.

Photo 1. The surfaces of grass around the apartment building

Photo 2. Playgrounds for children

They emphasize that the following factors are essential for the effective development of tourism: support from local authorities (13.2%), then promotion (10.3%), good tourist information on the Internet (9.2%) and change in mentality of the inhabitants (8.1%). However, in their opinion (20.5%) access to preferential loans and other and other forms of financial assistance to start the business is very important. The providers are fully aware of the factors that influence functioning and development of agrotourism. Agrotourism Organized by both local community as well as by external bodies, contributes not only to reduction of unemployment, creation of new jobs in industries serving tourists or increase of income and improvement of their living and working conditions, but also helps to overcome feelings of helplessness and apathy prevailing in the rural environment [Długołęcka and Łejmel, 2001].

We think that development of agrotourism should be carried out in close cooperation of service providers with local authorities. Such an approach may lead, according to Majewski [2002], to creating better tourist products based on rural resources. Moreover, he believes that a broader range of services available not only attracts more tourists, but also more people are involved in product creation which results in creating more jobs. In his view, only tourism can become a real factor of development of rural areas through exploitation of rural assets – food processing, traditional craft, folklore or country buildings as well as it may contribute to a higher activity of local authorities and leaders or marketing properly carried out.

In many countries agrotourism is an integral part and a kind of drive wheel of the economy in rural areas. The immediate cause of this process is a change in tastes of urban population concerning spending free time and a continuous increase in the cost of holidays in well known resorts [Marks et al., 2001]. Nowadays, a modern tourist is looking for places free from contamination, active (cognitive) leisure activities or offers that allow for trying a taste of life that is different than the city and experience a new lifestyle. Besides, it is a chance to taste another cuisine. Definitely, it should also be pointed out that a potential tourists to appreciate peace quiet and direct contact with nature [Marks et al., 2001]. Agritourism meets those expectations.

Tourists who want to stay at agrotourism facilities must book places, especially during the season as demand for such services is very large then. For 57.7% (45) it is perfect if they do it in a week's advance 53.8% (42) found that it is best to book their places a month before coming. Of course, these figures should be treated as a local phenomenon, for the information of the Institute of Tourism shows that in 2010 only 4% of tourists participating in long-term stays (5 days and more) chose agrotourism facilities and as compared to the previous year it was 1% less. In case of short-term travels (2-4 days) the stay at these facilities has not changed and amounted to 2%.

The authors agree with Sikora [1998] that agrotourism development plans (especially at the municipal level) should include activities among the people to change their mentality and behavior, and overcoming the fear of risks arising from this project. Both local communities and authorities need to understand what there is to gain or to lose as a result of undertaking or promoting agrotourism. Thus, awakening interest in agrotourism activities must be supported by adequate promotion of agrotourism, and supported by a full understanding of its nature and role by local authorities. However, in order for the agrotourism to fulfill the set hopes and become a real factor and not only a potential chance for development of rural areas, it requires a new more complex approach Majewski [2002]. Reconstruction of rural areas is unavoidable, expected and forecast since early 90s [Stasiak, 2000]. Important tasks include elimination of open unemployment through the activation of non-agricultural sources of employment, reduction of employment in agriculture and finding jobs for people leaving agriculture; stopping outflow of people from rural areas, technological modernization of agriculture towards organic farming, conservation and restoration of natural and cultural environment, creating basis for development of services, including culture and entertainment; sustainable spatial development and development of technical infrastructure.

The providers from the areas analyzed are aware that cooperation is important not only with local authorities, but also between the farms. Therefore, 52.6% (41) service providers work together in different areas. The most common subject of action is exchange of visitors (87.8%), followed by exchange of experience (70.7%) and information (65.8%). Next was joint promotion (48.8%) and exchange of culinary proposals, regarding catering (26.8%).

Taking into account the positive aspects of agrotourism we must also remember that the effects of its development do not always have to be beneficial. This is primarily due to increased inflow of people, which contributes to higher consumption of water and increase in the amount of household waste. Moreover, in principle, all forms of tourism go along with the development of transportation which in turn implies the need to allocate additional land for transportation infrastructure, increased pollution and noise. Providing accommodation may require construction of additional facilities, sometimes architecturally inadequate to the area. In addition, tourists' use of forests, especially collecting fruits of undergrowth may contribute to their degradation.

However, despite the presented fears, the importance of tourism is very high. First, the situation in which profitability of agriculture is permanently deteriorating it creates new jobs on farms and their immediate surroundings.

Secondly, relations between urban and rural residents favor the circulation of knowledge and influence attitudes of quite conservative rural population. Thirdly, people from cities who visit farms have an opportunity to see problems of agriculture and the countryside and personally ascertain what the importance of this industry to quality of life is and which largely depends on the wholesomeness of food and the environment. Last but not least, the encounter with rural culture and agricultural ethos increases interests in regional cuisine and products derived directly from the farm [Lusowa, 2002].

CONCLUSIONS

Factors that play a key role in development of rural areas through agrotourism are the following: low farm income, development and expansion of cities, redistribution of financial resources of the urban population to agrotourism facilities (and the whole villages) and local government policy.

Material resources of agrotourist farms, their promotional activities, mutual cooperation between hosts, but also a departure from passive attitude and manifestation of initiative and willingness to take risks – these are essential elements that co-create the discussed activity.

Top-down solutions used at various levels of government, must respond to emerging opportunities and create incentives for addressing the obstacles encountered while starting agrotourism services.

For the rural areas examined, due to barriers associated primarily with the lower values of the natural environment, support for all initiatives for those who want to deal with this kind of business (especially on local level) should be the factor requiring reduction of load in this particular area.

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