Approach on sustainable development through the involvement of local community in tourism food industry: a case study of Azuga resort, Romania

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Abstract: In the context of sustainable development, sustainable tourist destinations must focus on the stability and well-being of local communities, which play a defining role in the destination by maintaining the quality standards of the landscapes and through their involvement in the activities of the tourist area. In this context, the aim of the study is to analyze the level of involvement of the local community in the food industry through their inputs and outputs in Azuga mountain resort. The methodology consisted of: consulting national and international literature on the involvement of local communities in tourist services as an intrinsic element of the sustainable development of tourist destinations; field research and observations in the year 2017; research methods and tools such as investigation and semi-structured interviews. Graphs and charts were processed using Microsoft Office - Excel 2016 software and maps were processed using ArcGis 10.4.1. The results show that the involvement of the population in the food services sector is moderately sustainable and that it can be maximized; the cause for this is the migration of the work force from the surrounding towns and communes to Azuga, which leads to an increased carbon footprint because of the constant commute. The local food system involved in tourism as well as the local entrepreneurial initiatives tend to be sustainable, but they can be improved by including products of local mountain farming. The study concludes that national tourism policies and local authorities should take steps to encourage the involvement of the local community in the food services sector. The study is useful for the research of this topic, as well as for tourism stakeholders and government administrations in the hope of bringing positive change to the management policies of sustainable destinations.

Key words: sustainable development, local community, food services, tourist destination, Azuga

1. Introduction

Azuga is an area with great tourism potential on both a national and an international level, whose assets must be maximized in the context of the Carpathian
Sustainable Tourism Strategy by encouraging the involvement of the local community in its own development (Matei, Mika, 2017).

The host community, defined as a heterogeneous group of people (Ap & Crompton, 1998; Easterling, 2005; Wall & Mathieson, 2006), is a key factor in the sustainable development of tourism. Therefore, on the one hand, tourism development influences the well-being of local residents (Kim, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2013), and, on the other hand, their support is essential for the tourism industry because they greatly contribute to the tourist experience (Ap, 1992).

Besides, more and more studies draw attention to “the importance of local communities’ involvement, as it is the major factor in tourist satisfaction and important for the success of the tourism industry” (Fong Sook Fun et al., 2014).

Community involvement can be defined as the magnitude to which the residents are involved in the daily activities within the communities they live in (Lee, 2013). The concept refers to the community’s overall involvement in local groups and activities, starting with civic actions (Allen et al., 1988; Ko & Stewart, 2002) and ending with business related actions. Allen et al. (1988) argue that negative attitudes toward tourism are influenced by opportunities for civic involvement. In other words, if residents are involved in the community life concerning both tourism related and non-related issues, they are more likely to have a positive attitude toward tourism development (Lundberg, 2017). However, an examination of local communities leads to the identification of a variety of attitudes and beliefs related to the impact of tourism and, more often than not, “residents are not homogeneous in their attitudes toward tourism” (Lankford & Howard, 1994: 135).

Studies show that the attitudes and perceptions of local communities toward tourism and tourism development fluctuate between negative and positive (Harrill & Potts, 2003). While the economic effects are mostly perceived as positive, the sociocultural, legal, and environmental impacts are viewed as negative (Tosun, 2002).

The local community’s perception of the costs and benefits of tourism is a major factor in tourist satisfaction and, therefore, it is extremely important for the success of the tourism industry (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003).

From an economic point of view, residents have various opportunities: they can invest in tourism infrastructure, find employment in the tourist services sector or become suppliers of tourism products (souvenirs, food products, etc.).

In the tourism food industry, the easiest way to get involved is to find employment as a staff member, but there’s no guarantee this will be a long-term plan, as tourism is usually season based and salaries in this sector are not so attractive as to ensure workforce stability. This might be one more reason to employ local workforce, since
in the off-seasons and in their free time they can take up other complementary activities or be involved in the community by simply living their lives and seeing to their own needs.

Another option is to get involved in the local food system and in alternative food networks, which can create trust among consumers (Allen, 2010) and represent an attraction/rejection factor in tourism. This comes in response to the perceived failures of the global industrial food system in relation to economic, environmental, health, and social indicators (Gössling & Hall, 2013). In tourism literature, consumer trust is considered a key factor for building relationships with hotels (Lovell, 2009) and, to a lesser extent, with restaurants (Oh, 2002; Ok, Back, & Shanklin, 2005).

Local food systems are often considered a more sustainable alternative to global food systems (Gössling & Hall, 2013; Hall & Gössling, 2016). Therefore, reorientation toward local food systems is considered a sustainable approach, as this, in fact, means engaging and employing the people who actually produce the food, while reducing the distance the food needs to travel from producer to consumer and, inherently, reducing its carbon footprint (Matei, 2016), all the while making a larger contribution to the local economy, including through the hospitality sector (Hall & Gössling, 2013).

Defining what local food actually means is a complex process, as are the implications for small producers (Trivette, 2015). Most definitions are based on a “general idea of where local food is coming from” (Dunne et al., 2011), although places of origin may range from municipal to national level (or even beyond) and vary according to the different types of food (Roy, Hall & Ballantine, 2017).

Local food is considered to increase sustainability potential in the tourism sector (Green & Dougherty, 2009). Gössling & Hall (2013) introduced the concept of "sustainable culinary systems" to explain the environmental, economic and social relations that develop in the value chains of hospitality, the flow of food materials and the institutions that make it possible for the system to function. In the case of tourist venues with food production capacity, the use of local food through hospitality and tourism operations can strengthen the destination’s brands, can contribute to agricultural diversification and innovation, and will contribute to the development of new exports of goods and to the development of long-term customer relationships (Hall & Gössling, 2016; Mitchell & Hall, 2004).

The interest tourists take in local food can also serve to promote local agricultural practices and foodways (Hall, Mitchell, & Sharples, 2003).

Tourism is often defined by its supporters as “an engine for economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability” (UNWTO, 2013), with a positive contribution to well-being (WTTC, 2013) and the potential to reduce the urban-rural imbalance (Liu, Nijkamp, & Derong, 2017).
Better local sourcing and the use of local agricultural supplies have been identified as a critical best practice for responsible tourism (Pillay & Rogerson, 2013, p. 53). Redirecting services toward local food supply chains can help destinations deal with many limitations in agriculture and tourism, such as it has been identified over the years by theorists like Lundgren (1973), Belisle (1983), Telfer and Wall (2000), Torres (2003), Meyer (2007), Lacher and Nepal (2010), Pillay and Rogerson (2013).

2. Research Methodology

Starting from the base statement that geography is a science of space and society and that geographical scientific research employs theoretical, applicative, specific or tailored, interdisciplinary means and methods (Matei, 2016), the present study is based on a methodology specific to human geography.

The study is based on a literature review of national and international sources and databases in order to build the theoretical background and on field observations and mapping of food service facilities with the help of GPS in order to represent the facilities on a map by using GIS. The cartography elements were made using ArcGis 10.4.1 software. The databases used are free, from free sources (geo-spatial.org, OpenStreetMap or Geofabrik).

Research methods and tools include investigation and semi-structured interviews conducted in person and aimed at individuals involved in the food services sector in order to identify their age, gender, education level and location of professional or vocational training, place of residence, job title, etc. The interviews were conducted between the dates of 23rd and 27th November 2016 in Azuga, on a sample of 100 people.

Processing the data obtained from the interviews followed a series of steps: data transcription, data reduction by coding to ensure the protection of the interviewees’ personal information (Saghin et al., 2017); the data was processed manually or using the Microsoft Office Excel 2016 software and is accompanied by interpretation in order to provide a clear picture of the studied phenomena. Secondary data was collected during official visits to local institutions and stakeholders (City Hall and various businesses) in the years 2016 and 2017.

3. Results and discussions

In terms of location, most of the food service facilities are spread in an uneven manner throughout Azuga mountain resort; they are mostly found in the east, by the ski area (next to the gondola, Sorica slope, etc.) and they largely belong to the two and three star categories (Government Act 65 10/06/2013) (Figure1.).
From a quantitative point of view (number and size of facilities), the hotel sector and tourism food services in Azuga show positive dynamics. In the time interval between the years 2000 and 2008 a notable growth can be observed in this sector, followed by a slight decrease in 2009 as a result of the economic crisis that affected Romania as well as many other states of the world. The increase in the number of companies in the hotel sector and food services resumes in 2010 and continues slightly until 2016 (Figure 2).

In fact, the hotel sector and, by implication, the tourism food services in Azuga have shown an upward trend, especially between the years 2004 and 2007, which happened to be Romania’s preparation period for accession to the European Union, which finally happened in 2007. During this period, Romania gained access to structural programmes and funds, and Azuga focused mainly on the development of the ski area, which led to an increase in tourist visibility for the resort.

The hotel sector and, by implication, the tourism food services in Azuga experienced a noticeable growth in the years 2007 and 2008, when various new restaurants opened in the resort, as well as bars and other beverage serving establishments, both inside or adjacent to hotels and independently. This growth was due in good measure to the development of the Prahova Valley destination and to the growing tourist demand.
Azuga mountain resort’s food service facilities have a total seating capacity of 1192, distributed among various types of facilities. Most of the food service facilities in Azuga have been awarded two (46%) or three stars (46%), and they are either adjacent to a hotel or they stand alone; there are two food service facilities in Azuga that have been awarded five stars (6%). From a seating capacity point of view, 46% of the total have a two star rating, 37% have a three star rating and only 17% have a five star rating (Lux Garden, located in close proximity to the Azuga slope) (Figure 3).

In Azuga mountain resort, restaurants represent the highest percentage (50%) of all types of food service facilities and they account for 66% of the total seating capacity of the food service facilities in town. They second highest percentage is represented by day bars (19%), followed by snack bars with 13% and cafe bars, disco bars and pizzerias with 6% each (Figure 4 and 5).
Figure 4. Percentage distribution of food service facilities by type. Source: processed data from the National Tourism Authority in Romania, 2016.

Figure 5. Types of food service facilities in Azuga mountain resort. Processed after the data collected through the field research.

A significant percentage of the food service facilities in Azuga resort specialize in fast food products. These facilities are most often located in the areas most frequented by tourists, which are the areas around Sorica Sud and Cazacu ski slopes.

A high percentage is also represented more by classic restaurants and less by the ones that specialize in national cuisine, which includes game meat such as wild boar and venison; Lux Garden in a good example in this sense.
Investors are predominantly local, originating either from the tourist industry or from other sectors (such as construction materials, motor vehicle sales, etc), but their companies have a smaller turnover compared to that of the three companies that entered the Azuga market from a national and international level.

As far as the local food network is concerned, its two main pillars are Azuga mineral water and the sparkling wine that has been produced here by the Rhein wine cellars since 1892. In addition, some local families and guesthouses also produce and provide cheese and berries. Therefore, even though the area’s main focus is tourism, we could raise the issue of an indirect contribution brought about by the vast surrounding mountainous area used for raising sheep and picking berries, which could become a supply of ecological food products (dairy, mutton and berries). This could solve a part of the "bio" culinary orientation need emerging in tourism, as well as the demands of sustainable development. The work force at the Rhein wine cellar and at the mineral water bottling plant falls into the same category.

The involvement of the local work force is mostly done through jobs in the food processing and food serving sector, the employment of folk artists by restaurants that offer live musical performances, and jobs in accounting and in technical services. Gender distribution among the employees working in the food industry in Azuga mountain resort shows that the number of female staff is higher than the number of male staff. Concerning the staff directly involved in food services, Azuga resort reports a number of 103 people, out of whom 53% are women and the remaining 47% are men.

The difference between the two categories is not that noteworthy, even though studies show that at a national level there is more female staff in the food services sector (75%), while the percentage of male staff is much lower (25%). In the case of Azuga, the small difference in percentages of gender distribution could be interpreted as a significant aspect of sustainable development.

The work force employed in the food services sector of Azuga’s economy is mostly local, but by a majority of only 59%. This relatively low percentage is largely due to the city’s demographic aging process, as well as to the migration of the younger population toward the larger economical centres of the country (such as Brașov and Bucharest).

The percentage distribution of the work force in Azuga shows that a significant percentage of the staff in the food services sector originates from towns and communes located in the immediate vicinity of Azuga, such as Predeal and Poiana Țapului, both only approximately 10 km away from the resort. Most of the people who
are employed in Azuga but do not reside here practice some form of commute (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

**Figure 6.** Origin of the work force employed in the food services sector of Azuga. Processed using data collected through the field research.

The completion of the Comarnic-Brașov motorway could intensify the tourist flow in the Prahova Valley area and, as a result, in the near future, small towns such as Azuga could start to attract the work force from nearby (Nistorești, Breaza, Secăria, Timișul de Jos, etc.). The origin of the work force employed in food services shows a strong concentration of the local population in this sector, as well as in the accommodation sector, mainly due to the education opportunities the staff has on both a local level (Azuga Theoretical High School) and a regional level (Transilvania University in Brașov). The other places of origin of the work force employed in the food services sector are in the vicinity of the town and make up 41% of the total, a significant percentage that translates into an actual of 43 people.

The largest age group is made up of people aged 18 to 29 years old, graduates of either higher education institutions or high schools with a theoretical profile (Azuga Theoretical High School) (Figure 7). 90% of the people employed in the food services sector in Azuga are adults and young adults, while the percentage of employees who are over 50 years old is rather low (only 10%).
Romanian folk music bands come from various parts of the country, especially from Oltenia and Muntenia, but on special occasions and for special events they come from all over Romania.

No restaurant relies on a single type of music or a single type of live performer to entertain its clients, there is always a mix. In bars, most often the music plays on the radio, on TV or the staff puts on music using a laptop (Figure 8).

As far as the cleaning staff is concerned, the people employed in these jobs are exclusively locals and there are no cleaning services employed from outside Azuga.
Lux Garden Hotel and Restaurant is the only facility that sends out their textiles to be cleaned in another town (in Predeal).

4. Conclusions
The sustainable development of this destination, judging by the residents’ employment in tourism and in the food services sector, is ensured by the high percentage of the local population involved in the work force (approximately 60%), which makes it sustainable. Another aspect ensuring sustainability is the fact that the work force is predominantly young and benefits from specific, secondary education. Cleaning services also employ local staff since this option is cheaper and more accessible. However, as far as encouraging local customs and folk music goes, there is no discernible trend since the folk bands and performers employed by the food service facilities are not local. When taking into account the staff directly involved in the food services sector in Azuga, the overall involvement percentage slightly increases.

To aid this matter, national policies and local authorities should encourage companies and facilities in the tourism and food services sectors (and in other sectors as well) to hire local work force by exempting employers from various taxes or by implementing legislation that focuses on sustainable development. These measures would help reduce migration and raise the economic well-being of the population, increase incomes at a local administration level, and stimulate entrepreneurship by reducing the number of commuters; given that Prahova Valley is the most congested tourist axis of the country, reducing commute traffic would make room for an increased tourist flow.

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