

Agritourism Development Issues In Rural Places: Evidence From Armenia

[https://doi.org/10.21272/sec.4\(4\).29-38.2020](https://doi.org/10.21272/sec.4(4).29-38.2020)

Gayane Tovmasyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4131-6322>

PhD in Economics, Senior researcher at AMBERD Research Center of Armenian State University of Economics, Lecturer at Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Armenia

Samvel Avetisyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3019-4075>

Doctor of Economics, Professor, Senior Expert at "AMBERD" Research Center of the Armenian State University of Economics, the Republic of Armenia

Inga Galustyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6338-4978>

MA student of Public Management at ASUE, the Republic of Armenia

Kristine Tatosyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4593-3747>

MA student of Business administration at ASUE, the Republic of Armenia

Lusya Mirijanyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4101-4826>

MA student of Project Management at ASUE, the Republic of Armenia

Argine Rushanyan, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2068-3078>

MA student of Project Management at ASUE, the Republic of Armenia

Abstract

The following paper summarizes the arguments and counterarguments within the scientific discussion on the issues of agritourism development issues in rural places. Agritourism development is a good source for rural development, as it will contribute to the investments in villages, increase rural income, employment, etc. The main purpose of the article is to analyze agritourism development opportunities and issues in Armenian rural places. The analysis was carried out in Armenian two regions: Lori and Tavush. The investigation of the topic and the results of the analysis state that Armenian regions Lori and Tavush have opportunities to develop different types of tourism based on existing resource potential: historical-cultural, eco, agro, gastronomic, adventure, etc. The research empirically confirms and theoretically proves the existing problems that hinder agritourism development. For the analysis a survey and observation methods were used. Survey was done among village heads and local population-hosts. The main results of the research are then analyzed via SWOT analysis, based on which some suggestions were made. The main conclusion is that it is necessary to implement various actions for agritourism development, such as: involving investments, improving roads and infrastructures, improving legislation and statistics, organizing trainings for hosts and farmers, improving marketing, etc. The development of agritourism will contribute to the development of the community and the whole country, will increase incomes, spread and preserve culture, increase motivation to live in villages, will form a civil society, as constant contact with tourists, continuous development of business skills and aspirations, will enlarge the worldview of population and will contribute to their understanding of the most important problem of preserving the Armenian culture. The results of the research can be useful for the state and municipal organs, private sector, also for researchers of tourism sphere.

Keywords: agritourism, infrastructures, marketing, rural places, tourism, villages.

JEL Classification: L83, Z32.



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Cite as: Tovmasyan, G., Avetisyan, S., Galustyan, I., Tatosyan, K., Mirijanyan, L., Rushanyan, A. (2020). Agritourism Development Issues In Rural Places: Evidence From Armenia. *SocioEconomic Challenges*, 4(4), 29-38. [https://doi.org/10.21272/sec.4\(4\).29-38.2020](https://doi.org/10.21272/sec.4(4).29-38.2020).

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Introduction

Lori and Tavush regions are considered to be the wettest regions in Armenia. The regions are distinguished by their rich nature, climatic conditions, they have oxygen-rich clean air, healing mineral waters, forests, and a plateau rich in medicinal plants. The territory of Lori and Tavush regions is extremely rich in historical and cultural resources: fortresses, castles, monasteries, cross-stones, bridges, monuments, memorial fountains, etc.

The number of historical and cultural monuments in Lori region is 3046, in Tavush – 1996 (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia):

The number of religious objects in Lori region is 427, in Tavush – 291 (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports of the Republic of Armenia): The monastic complexes of Haghpat and Sanahin in Lori region, were included in UNESCO World Heritage List in 1996 (Properties inscribed on the World Heritage List).

Lori and Tavush regions have great prospects for agritourism development. Here tourists can get acquainted with the Armenian rural life, culture, customs, participate in many agricultural activities, etc. Based on the available resources, the following types of tourism may be developed in these regions: historical-cultural, religious, spa-resort, urban, agro, eco, adventure, sports, festival, gastronomic, educational, etc.

According to the statistics 1894377 tourists arrived in Armenia in 2019. Compared to the previous year, the number of visitors increased by 14.7% (The socio-economic situation in the RA in 2019 January-December, p. 139). The number of domestic tourists in Armenia was 1544600 in 2019, compared to the previous year increased by 41.4%. Most of the domestic tourists are tourists traveling for leisure and entertainment (Tovmasyan G., 2020): Unfortunately, there are no official statistics on the number of inbound and outbound tourist visits according to the RA regions.

In recent years, the number of hotel and public catering facilities in Armenia has been growing. There were 702 hotel facilities in Armenia, of which 413 in Yerevan, 18 in Lori and 74 in Tavush. At the same time, the number of inbound tourists staying in the hotels of Lori region was only 394 people, in Tavush - 15368 people. The revenue of hotels in Lori was 354.6 million AMD, in Tavush - 1599.4 million AMD.

In 2019 there were 1894 public catering facilities in the Republic of Armenia, of which 1252 in Yerevan, 18 in Lori, and 124 in Tavush.

Number of travel agencies in Armenia in 2019 amounted to 687, of which 578 - in Yerevan, 14 - in Lori, 7 - in Tavush (RA Statistical Committee). Travel agencies have both inbound and outbound tours, provide a number of services: booking, sale, hotel reservation, visa issuance, excursions in Armenia, etc.

The regions have opportunities to develop agritourism and this paper explores the main obstacles that hinder its development.

Literature review

Agritourism includes a variety of activities, which are offered by farmers and rural people to attract tourists to rural places in order to gain extra money for their businesses (Gannon, 1994).

Rural tourism is a good option for rural development and poverty reduction in rural areas (Xue & Kerstetter, 2018).

Rural tourists consider rural places as a good place to escape the overcrowded and stressful urban life (Urry, 2002).

Rural tourism has micro and macro level effects. At the macro level it helps maintaining the social structure of rural communities, as it creates job opportunities, thus preventing out-migration (Anand, Chandan, & Singh, 2012). And at the micro level, rural tourism may provide rural population an opportunity to create an extra source of income, thus increasing their living standards (Iorio & Corsale, 2010).

Rural tourism development and entrepreneurship cannot work without the participation and collaboration of business persons directly and indirectly involved in tourism (Wilson et al., 2001).

A study by Roget and Gonzalez (2006) in Galicia, Spain shows, that the number of overnight stays in rural tourism establishments depends on price of services in rural tourism establishments, the extent of transport (travel) costs and the economic cycle (tourists' income). Rural tourism demand depends mainly on the reputation (prestige) and peculiarities of each establishment.

Agritourism development will contribute to regional development, as it brings money from visitor expenses and has a multiplier effect, creates new jobs and contributes to poverty decrease, enables new investments and develops infrastructures, contributes to the maintenance of the environment and rational use of natural resources, contributes to the development of other sectors of the economy as well (trade and services, education, technologies, construction, agriculture, etc.) (Tovmasyan, 2019).

Methodology

The purpose of the research is to explore agritourism development opportunities and issues in Armenian rural places in the Republic of Armenia.

The object of the research is agritourism sphere in Armenian two regions: Lori and Tavush. The subject of the research is agritourism development issues in these regions.

In the research a variety of data are used from the Statistical Committee of the RA, etc.

The main methods used in the research are as follows: analysis and synthesis, micro and macro analysis, sociological survey, observation, SWOT analysis.

Sociological survey was conducted in the villages of Lori and Tavush regions among the village heads and local population, who may be considered as hosts, ready to receive agritourists. More than 70 village heads and 27 hosts were surveyed during summer, 2020.

The method of observation was used to see the existing obstacles and problems in villages, for which we have visited some places to explore some issues.

SWOT analysis was used to sum up the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for agritourism development.

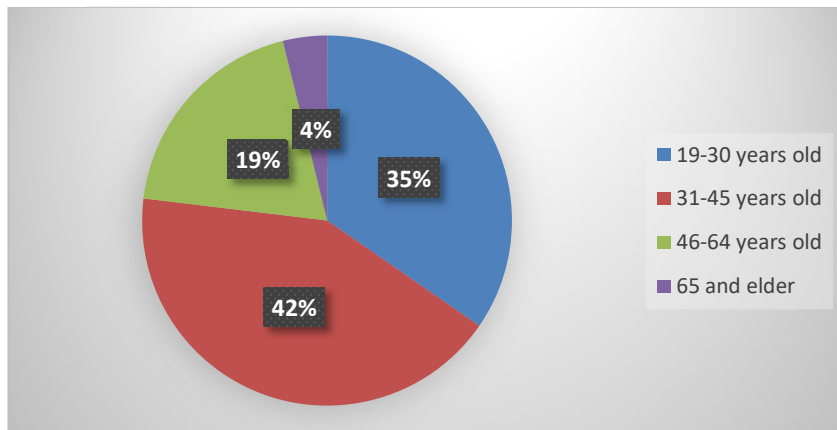
Results

Survey results among hosts

We conducted surveys among the hosts of Lori and Tavush regions. Among the problems hindering the development of agritourism in the Republic of Armenia were the low level of knowledge of foreign languages by the hosts and local population, the unfavorable living conditions, the bad conditions of the roads, etc.

27 hosts from the following communities took part in the survey: Sevqar, Dilijan, Ijevan, Teghut, Vahagnadzor, Pushkino, Mets Parni, Gargar, Dsegh, Vanadzor, Chkalov, Aznavadzor, Stepanavan, Spitak, Amoj, Katnajur, Bendik, Lernapat.

Most of the respondents were 31-45 and 19-30 years old.



Source: Developed by the authors based on the survey results.

Figure 1. Survey participants by age

It turned out that almost everyone perceives agritourism as a quiet rest in rural environment, which is accompanied by involvement in agricultural activities, acquaintance with traditions, visits to historical and cultural sites, and sometimes adventure sports.

92% of the hosts agreed to cooperate with tourism organizations to provide their address, and the remaining 8% found it difficult to answer the question of cooperation. We think the problem here is the low level of trust or lack of previous experience or negative experience. In general, our hosts are ready to provide tourists mainly with the following services:

- Horseback riding (mentioned by about 39% of participants),
- Tractor ride (19%),
- Sledge ride (4%),
- Carriage ride (8%),
- Harvesting different fruits (66%),
- Collection of mushrooms, berries, vegetables (62%),
- Agricultural works (73%);
- Tree planting (42%),
- Fruit and grape picking, wine making (15%),
- Beekeeping (46%),
- Hunting (8%),
- Fishing (31%),
- Embroidery, carpet weaving (8%),
- Craftsmanship, such as pottery (4%),
- Collecting medicinal plants and making herbal medicines (66%),
- Collection of field flowers (77%);
- Making souvenirs (12%),
- Grass haying (54%),
- Livestock activities (54%),
- Cow and sheep milking (50%),
- Sheap shearing (19%),
- Baking lavash and bread (31%),
- Cheese making (66%),
- Preparation of various national dishes (62%);
- Training on farming (39%);
- Rest in nature (8%),

- Fine art lessons (4%),
- All together (4%).

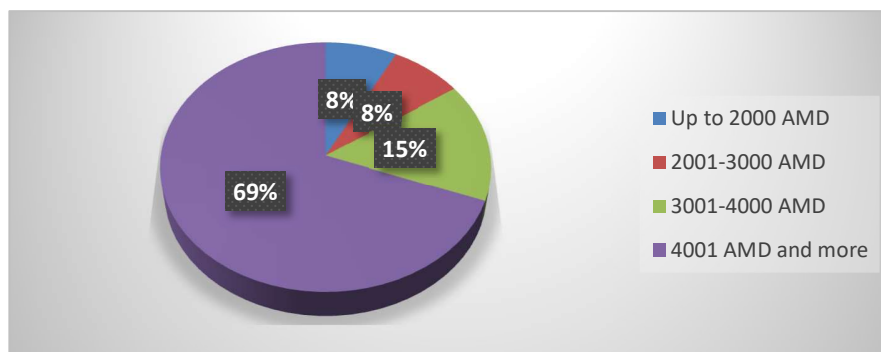
According to the survey, in fact, in Lori and Tavush marzes it is possible to provide a number of services that are part of agritourism.

Gastronomic tourism has a special place and role in agritourism, and the diversity and ancient history of Armenian cuisine is one of the best ways to attract tourists. According to the survey, the hosts are ready to surprise tourists with the variety of Armenian cuisine, in particular, offering many national dishes.

Apart from gastronomy, of course, Lori and Tavush regions are also rich in historical, cultural and picturesque places. According to the respondents, tourists can visit a number of interesting places.

As for the dates of admission, 62% of respondents are always ready to host tourists, and the remaining 38% with some restrictions, especially in only two or three seasons - spring, summer, winter. On average one host can accommodate 6 tourists. Of course, some of the interviewed hosts could receive up to 20 tourists. In terms of comfort, the conditions of almost all respondents are average: hot and cold water available, the rooms are partially repaired.

81% of respondents are ready to receive tourists of any age group, and the remaining 19% with some restrictions (with 1 or 2 children). As for the price, according to the surveys we have the following picture:



Source: Developed by the authors based on the survey results.

Figure 2. Price of rural rest

The price includes bed and breakfast, in case of other services the price will increase. Price differences are due to different levels of comfort.

As we have already mentioned, there are a number of obstacles for the development of agritourism, the most important of which are.

- Language barriers (lack of knowledge of foreign languages) (mentioned by about 35% of participants)
- Financial problems (66%);
- Need for trainings or retrainings (business management, guest service, organization of agritours, etc.) (54%);
- Problems related to the implementation of marketing and promotion activities (31%);
- Low (or no) use of Internet and social media for advertising (8%);
- Poor condition of roads (35%).
- In some areas there is a problem with drinking water in summer, for example in Gargar village of Lori region.

Summing up the survey results, we can say that for the development of agritourism in Lori and Tavush marzes it is necessary to have good roads, developed infrastructures, comfortable summer pavilions, various entertainment and interesting places, financial support, grants, training courses for hosts and farmers, farms powered with sun or wind energy, small guest houses, the availability of information about villages and their touristic places, correct marketing policy, etc.

According to the hosts, the development of agritourism in their communities will enable them to live a prosperous life, expand the circle of communication, develop the business environment of the community, as well as increase the sales of agricultural products, increase income, increase youth activity and motivation to stay in villages and develop it.

Survey results among village heads

In summary, more than 70 village heads were surveyed.

63% of them said, that there are not hotel facilities in their villages, 55% said that there are not catering facilities. 83% answered that there is no public transport in their village.

Table 1. Some data of the survey

| Question | % of respondents |
|---|------------------|
| Are there hotel facilities in your village? | |
| yes | 37 |
| no | 63 |
| Are there catering facilities in your village? | |
| yes | 45 |
| no | 55 |
| Does your village have a public transport with capital Yerevan? | |
| yes | 11 |
| no | 83 |
| we had before, but now no | 6 |
| Does your village receive domestic tourists from Armenia? | |
| yes | 65 |
| no | 28 |
| I do not know | 7 |
| Does your village receive international tourists from abroad? | |
| yes | 54 |
| no | 39 |
| I do not know | 7 |
| What is the condition of the road infrastructure in your village? | |
| very good | 7 |
| good | 24 |
| average | 34 |
| passable | 18 |
| bad | 17 |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the survey results.

About 64% said that there are people in their village who may receive guests at their home.

The village heads also mentioned the main services which may be offered to agritourists:

- ✓ Horseback riding (mentioned by about 67% of participants)
- ✓ Tractor ride (59%),
- ✓ Sledge ride (16%)
- ✓ Carriage ride (16%)
- ✓ Harvesting different fruits (63%),
- ✓ Collection of mushrooms, berries, vegetables (69%),
- ✓ Agricultural works (80%);
- ✓ Tree planting (64%),
- ✓ Fruit and grape picking, wine making (13%),
- ✓ Beekeeping (84%),
- ✓ Hunting (39%)
- ✓ Fishing (39%),
- ✓ Embroidery, carpet weaving (13%)

- ✓ Craftmanship, such as pottery (6%)
- ✓ Collecting medicinal plants and making herbal medicines (69%),
- ✓ Collection of field flowers (81%);
- ✓ Making souvenirs (24%),
- ✓ Grass haying (89%),
- ✓ Livestock activities (80%),
- ✓ Cow and sheep milking (86%),
- ✓ Sheap shearing (63%),
- ✓ Baking lavash and bread (51%),
- ✓ Cheese making (77%),
- ✓ Preparation of various national dishes (73%);
- ✓ Training on farming (37%).

The main problems that hinder agritourism development in villages, were following according to village heads:

- bad conditions of roads and other infrastructures (water, gas, etc.),
- bad social-economic condition of rural population,
- absence of hotel and catering facilities,
- need of special trainings for hosts and farmers,
- need of investments,
- lack of marketing and advertisement,
- migration among rural population because of unemployment,
- language barriers,
- need to process maps in English and other languages, etc.

Based on the survey and observation results, we have conducted SWOT analysis.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of agritourism development

| Strengths | Weaknesses | Opportunities | Threats |
|--|--|---|--|
| Availability of necessary resources for organizing different types of tourism in the regions | A small number of hotel and catering facilities in the regions | Increasing the number of tourists in case of active marketing activities | Low income level of the population |
| Traditions of rural life | Absence of information boards in some places in the regions | Improvement of tourism infrastructure | Poverty level |
| Beautiful nature and fresh air | Low level of tourism marketing and branding efficiency | Improving the legislative base of the sphere, implementing agritourism development programs | Emigration of the population in the regions |
| Healthy, ecologically clean rural food | Incomplete legislation of the sphere | Improving the statistical accounting of the sector | Lack of investments |
| Existence of a large Armenian Diaspora | Incomplete statistical recording of the sector | Training and information courses for farmers and hosts | Deforestation |
| Availability of domestic tours | Language barriers | Construction of roads in case of attracting investments | Poor condition of the roads |
| Organization of festivals | Low level of conservation of natural resources | Combining agritourism services with sports, rehabilitation and medical services | Tensive border situation with Azerbaijan |
| National tasty cuisine | Lack of tourist information | Opportunity to apply for a number of international grant programs | Possible negative impact of poorly developed tourism infrastructures on the number of tourists |

Table 2 (cont.). SWOT analysis of agritourism development

| Strengths | Weaknesses | Opportunities | Threats |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hospitable population | Lack of agritours | Opportunity to implement subvention programs, in particular, to improve infrastructures | The declining trend of the young population |
| Existence of cultural tours in agritours: visit to historical and cultural places, churches | Absence of national associations in the field of agritourism in Armenia | Creating touristic maps of regions and villages in different languages | |

Source: Developed by the authors based on the analyses.

Conclusions, discussion and recommendations

The surveys among village heads and hosts indicate the main problems hindering the development of agritourism in the Republic of Armenia: low level of knowledge of foreign languages by the hosts and local population, unfavorable living conditions, bad conditions of the roads, lack of investments, small number of hotel and catering facilities in villages, lack of marketing etc.

Based on the survey and observation results, SWOT analysis was conducted. As a result we make some suggestions for agritourism development in rural places:

- involving investments to construst roads and other infrastructures,
- constructing hotel and catering facilities in villages,
- improving statistics and legislation of the sphere,
- implementing marketing activities using social media,
- organizing trainings for hosts and farmers on receiving guests, entrepreneurship, etc.
- creating touristic maps of regions,
- adding information signs on the roads,
- organizing agritours combining other types of activities, etc.

Agritourism will contribute to the social-economic development of rural places, increase employment among rural population, preserve rural culture and traditions, etc. So agritourism development programs should be implemented by state and municipal organs.

The development of agritourism will contribute to the development of the community and the whole country, will increase incomes, spread and preserve culture, increase motivation to live in villages, will form a civil society, as constant contact with tourists, continuous development of business skills and aspirations, will enlarge the worldview of population and will contribute to their understanding of the most important problem of preserving the Armenian culture.

Acknowledgements and research funding: The research was carried out within the framework of the research program "Assessment of Agritourism Development Opportunities in RA Marzes (by the example of Tavush and Lori marzes). The program won in the scientific competition announced by the Amberd Research Center of the Armenian State University of Economics and must be done with the involvement of masters and postgraduate students. The funding is done by the Amberd Research Center of the Armenian State University of Economics.

Funding: self-funded.

Author Contributions: conceptualization, Gayane Tovmasyan; Samvel Avetisyan; data curation, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; formal analysis, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; funding acquisition Samvel Avetisyan, Gayane Tovmasyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; investigation, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; methodology, Gayane Tovmasyan; project

administration, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan; resources, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; software, Gayane Tovmasyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; supervision, Gayane Tovmasyan; Samvel Avetisyan; validation, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan; visualization, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan; writing – original draft, Gayane Tovmasyan, Samvel Avetisyan, Kristine Tatosyan, Lusya Mirijanyan, Inga Galustyan, Argine Rushanyan; writing – review & editing, Gayane Tovmasyan.

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