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Editors


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The Role of European Funding in the Development of Rural Tourism



Sónia P. Nogueira, Joana M. S. R. Fernandes, and Luís C. M. Pires

Abstract The development of rural regions and the promotion of tourism within these areas are crucial for fostering economic growth, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring social inclusivity. Governments, particularly in Europe, play a vital supporting role through funding and strategic initiatives. This paper highlights the importance of European funding in driving the development of rural regions and enhancing their tourism potential, through the project “Creation of business cooperation networks in rural cross-border regions between companies in the gourmet agri-food and tourism sectors”, with the Portuguese acronym CRECEER. Within this project, it was possible to involve 20 enterprises, specifically rural accommodation enterprises (RAE) and manufacturing endogenous products’ enterprises, from cross-border regions of northern Portugal. It was understandable that the development of rural regions and the promotion of tourism within these areas are essential for sustainable economic growth, cultural preservation, and social inclusivity. It was also found that European funding is pivotal in providing the necessary resources and support to overcome infrastructure and marketing challenges, foster regional development, and empower local communities. By investing in rural regions, governments and the European Union play a crucial role in harnessing the immense potential of these areas, thereby ensuring a more balanced and prosperous society.

Keywords Rural regions · Tourism · Sustainable economic · Local communities · Funds

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1 Introduction

The development of rural regions and the promotion of tourism within these areas are crucial for fostering economic growth, preserving cultural heritage, and ensuring social inclusivity. Governments, particularly in Europe, play a vital supporting role through funding and strategic initiatives.

This paper highlights the importance of European funding in driving the development of rural regions and enhancing their tourism potential, through the project “Creation of business cooperation networks in rural cross-border regions between companies in the gourmet agri-food and tourism sectors”, with the Portuguese acronym CRECEER.

2 Literature Review

Economically underdeveloped rural regions in Europe have been grappling with persistent issues, such as depopulation, low levels of investment, and limited access to basic services and resources (Castellano-Alvarez et al., 2019; Vaishar & Stastna, 2023).

These low-density and remote regions often face challenges related to economic decline, outmigration, and environmental degradation (Castanho et al., 2023). These challenges have hindered the region’s potential for economic growth and have had a detrimental impact on the quality of life for residents (Castellano-Alvarez et al., 2019; Vaishar & Stastna, 2023). Nonetheless, these regions possess unique cultural and natural assets that can be leveraged through tourism development to foster sustainable growth (Castanho et al., 2023).

It is necessary to revitalize rural areas and agricultural regions for sustainable economic development (Castellano-Alvarez et al., 2019; Vaishar & Stastna, 2023). The authors argue that rural and creative tourism, with their focus on authentic experiences and cultural heritage, are particularly suitable for these regions and can promote sustainable development (Castanho et al., 2023).

Tourism has emerged as a powerful catalyst for sustainable regional development, particularly in low-density and remote regions. There is in fact the potential of tourism as a driver for economic growth, environmental preservation, and social well-being in remote areas (Castanho et al., 2023).

Specifically, rural tourism can serve as an effective development strategy in low-density areas. It contributes to economic growth by generating income and employment opportunities for local communities. The tourism sector can stimulate entrepreneurship, encourage the development of small businesses, and diversify the local economy (Masot & Rodriguez, 2020). It also has a positive social impact in low-density areas. It helps to preserve and promote local cultural heritage and traditions, fostering a sense of pride, and identity among residents. Additionally, tourism

can facilitate community engagement and interaction, enhancing social cohesion and strengthening local networks (Masot & Rodriguez, 2020).

Other authors also referred the significance of rural tourism as a potential driver for economic diversification and regional development, community empowerment, and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Fafurida & Mulyaningsih, 2023).

As describe previously, it is consistent in literature the potential of rural tourism as a development strategy in low-density areas (Masot & Rodriguez, 2020).

However, there are various factors that hinder the effectiveness of rural tourism initiatives, including inadequate infrastructure, limited marketing efforts, insufficient governance structures, and potential social and environmental impacts (Castellano-Alvarez et al., 2019). Leal-Solis and Robina-Ramirez (2022) also add lack of coordination among stakeholders, and insufficient investment in human resources. Sometimes, what is lacking is something as essential as tourist accommodation infrastructure (Tascu et al., 2016).

It is urgent to address these issues and identifies strategies that could lead to sustainable development in the region. The potential benefits of implementing the proposed strategies requires collaborative efforts among stakeholders at various levels. Policymakers and local communities have to embrace innovative approaches and take decisive actions to unlock the region's untapped potential and improve the livelihoods of the residents (Vaishar & Stastna, 2023).

Among the most referred factors in literature that can contribute to rural tourism development, one can highlight community participation, marketing strategies, sustainable practices, and policy framework (Fafurida & Mulyaningsih, 2023).

Community participation is one of the factors that as a crucial role in successful rural tourism development. Between community-based initiatives, one can highlight homestays, community-owned enterprises, and local cultural events, which empower local residents and enhance the authenticity of the tourism experience (Fafurida & Mulyaningsih, 2023). The involvement and participation of local communities in the planning and development of touristic offers are vital for long-term economic sustainability. Engaging communities in decision-making processes, fostering entrepreneurship, and ensuring that tourism benefits are distributed equitably contribute to the overall success and acceptance of tourism initiatives in rural areas (Moriche et al., 2021).

Another factor are the marketing strategies that are employed in rural tourism development, such as the use of digital platforms, destination branding, and niche marketing to attract tourists and differentiate rural destinations (Leal-Solis & Robina-Ramirez, 2022). Effective marketing and promotion strategies are crucial for the economic sustainability of touristic offers in rural areas (Masot & Rodriguez, 2020; Moriche et al., 2021). Fafurida and Mulyaningsih (2023) highlight the importance of leveraging unique local characteristics and creating compelling narratives to enhance the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations.

Sustainable practices in rural tourism, including environmental conservation, responsible tourism, and the preservation of cultural heritage are crucial to balance economic development with environmental and socio-cultural considerations. The implementation of sustainable practices can mitigate social and environmental

impacts and promote the preservation of biodiversity (Castellano-Alvarez et al., 2019; Masot & Rodriguez, 2020).

Finally, policy frameworks have an important role in supporting rural tourism development, including government support, public–private partnerships, and the integration of tourism into broader rural development strategies. The review highlights the importance of policy coherence, stakeholder engagement, and long-term planning for sustainable rural tourism development (Fafurida & Mulyaningsih, 2023; Leal-Solis & Robina-Ramirez, 2022).

This last factor is also strongly considered due to the importance of supportive policy frameworks that encourage innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable agricultural practices. Policy measures such as financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and stakeholder collaboration, that prioritize community participation, cultural preservation, environmental sustainability, and infrastructure development are needed to foster a cohesive and inclusive approach to regional development (Vaishar & Stastna, 2023; Zhu, 2023).

Due to the economic development of these regions, or the lack of development, and the coherent regional entrepreneurship level with micro enterprises being the majority of the entrepreneurial context, there is a strong need for financial incentives, since regional companies do not have the capacity to invest. In fact, “98.9% of EU businesses forming part of the non-financial business economy were micro or small enterprises employing fewer than 50 persons” (Eurostat, 2023). The financial incentives that can make a difference are the fundings from official sources, such as the European funds.

European Union Structural Funds are financial instruments designed to support regional development and convergence within member states (Kehagia & Kyriazi, 2021).

From the various funding programs that target the development of rural or deprived regions, several come from European Union Funding Programs, such as the LEADER program (LEADER—*Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*—Links between actions for the development of the rural economy). The potential benefits of accessing European funds, include increased competitiveness, improved quality standards, and enhanced tourism experiences (Tascu et al., 2016).

A study highlights the positive impact of the LEADER approach in generating innovative practices, fostering collaboration and knowledge exchange among stakeholders, and enhancing the competitiveness of rural tourism destinations. The authors also highlights the potential role of the LEADER method in fostering innovative practices (Salchner, 2013). Kehagia and Kyriazi (2021) emphasized the role of Structural Funds in regional economic growth in Greece. The authors highlight the positive impact of these funds in reducing regional disparities and promoting convergence, since the funds contribute to bridging the economic gap between different regions by providing financial support for development projects in less developed areas (Kehagia & Kyriazi, 2021).

Another study concluded that the LEADER program had a positive impact in the Brkini Region, showcasing its potential as a model for rural development and

empowerment, with evidence of increased community involvement, improved cooperation among stakeholders, and positive changes in rural development practices (Slavic, 2022). Dan and Popescu (2017) also highlight the positive outcomes and contributions of these programs in promoting entrepreneurship and economic development in rural areas also enhancing the positive impacts, such as increased business opportunities, job creation, and enhanced skills and knowledge.

However, to access these funds, entrepreneurs have to apply to the programs and comply to the rules. There are some challenges experienced by rural entrepreneurs in accessing and utilizing EU funding, including administrative complexities, limited access to information, and financial constraints. There is need to streamlining administrative procedures, improving access to information and guidance, enhancing financial support mechanisms, and fostering collaboration and networking among entrepreneurs and support organizations (Dan & Popescu, 2017).

The literature review sustains that EU funding programs facilitated business development in rural areas. The availability of financial resources allowed entrepreneurs to invest in infrastructure, technology, and marketing, leading to the expansion of their businesses. This, in turn, contributed to job creation and economic growth in these regions (Dan & Popescu, 2017; Kehagia & Kyriazi, 2021; Salchner, 2013; Slavič, 2022).

To maximize the potential of structural funds for regional development, there is the need for more effective management and coordination among stakeholders, enhancing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and promoting private sector engagement (Kehagia & Kyriazi, 2021).

3 Methodology

This paper describes the implementation of a European funding project named “Creation of business cooperation networks in rural cross-border regions between companies in the gourmet agri-food and tourism sectors”, with the Portuguese acronym CRECEER. The project was implemented in the Douro and Terras de Trás-os-Montes regions, in northeast of Portugal, encompassing a total of 28 municipalities.

The focus was on a thriving trend in the region: the production of endogenous products with gourmet potential and rural accommodations.

The aim was to understand the primary challenges faced by these companies, their business expectations, and their perception of the necessary actions to expand their market beyond the regions. The CRECEER project sought to present better options for increasing their competitiveness and fostering cooperation among them to access different channels for commercialization and broaden their customer base.

The research methodology employed an interpretative approach supported by qualitative research. Data collection involved gathering official documents, regional reports, various data from official sources, and conducting in-depth semi-structured

interviews with company owners or managers. The interviews focused on characterizing the company, exploring aspects such as innovation, competition, internationalization, ICT utilization, and perceptions of existing collaborative marketing networks. The questionnaire is summarized in Table 1.

The interviews were transcribed, and content analysis was conducted to code the transcript text and identify important themes. The data collected helped identify both individual and common needs and difficulties, which guided subsequent steps.

At the regional level, a coordination group was established comprising core regional entities such as regional leaders, business leaders, and other key players. This group developed and supervised the strategic regional plan to support the creation of a collaborative network among regional stakeholders.

Individual on-site visits were conducted, and personalized analyses were carried out to produce diagnostic reports on various aspects, including ICT usage, product or service development, quality, design, innovation, marketing, and commercialization.

The involvement of the regional coordination group and, particularly, the companies themselves in their efforts to improve and enhance their products and services led to the main outcome of this project: the creation of a collaborative network between companies producing gourmet products and rural tourism enterprises that allowed them to increase their competitiveness and reach for markets other than in regional context.

Table 1 Questionnaire applied in the semi-structure interviews

| Main area | Questions |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Information about the company | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main activity? • Years of activity? • Organogram? |
| Strategic business lines | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main products/services manufactured or commercialized? • Main markets? • Main clients? • Main competition? • Current manufacturing capacity? • Human resources? • Product/service differentiation? • Investment in new products/innovations? • Investment in new business lines? • Potential of new markets? • Internationalization? Which international markets? • Positioning? • Long term perspectives? • Main difficulties? |

Source CRECEER (2017, as cited in Fernandes et al., 2023)

4 Results

The project encompassed a diverse range of manufacturing companies specializing in various products, including olive oil, wine, fruit, cheese, smoked sausages, and honey. Complementing these enterprises were rural accommodation enterprises (RAE), representing the tourism sector.

During the in-depth interviews conducted with these companies, it became evident that they possessed comprehensive knowledge about their competitors and other participants within the project. They adeptly distinguished themselves from their rivals based on factors such as product offerings, customer base, sales volumes, and recent investments. Business representatives acknowledged that competitors with higher economic returns were more capable of making substantial investments, which undoubtedly contributed to their success.

Although the majority of the interviewed companies sold their products in markets beyond Portugal, they emphasized that the regional and national markets remained their primary focus. They candidly expressed the challenges they encountered in terms of internationalization, particularly due to the cost barriers associated with participating in international fairs to showcase their offerings.

Regarding online presence and sales, only a limited number of companies possessed a website or an online platform, with even fewer conducting actual sales through these channels. The prevailing sentiment among most companies was that establishing an online presence was neither necessary nor cost-effective since they were already able to sell their entire production without it.

However, when presented with the concept of a collaborative network that would facilitate joint development of an online platform to promote and sell their products, shared costs for attending international fairs, and mutual promotion among each other's clientele, all the companies enthusiastically recognized the tremendous value in such an initiative. They expressed feelings of being inadequately supported by local entities and acknowledged that sharing information among competitors would benefit all parties involved by enhancing promotional efforts. Moreover, in a region characterized by a relatively small market where competitors were familiar with each other and had fostered friendly relationships, they readily acknowledged the challenges of expanding regionally and securing investment funds. Consequently, they realized the necessity of concerted efforts to enhance their competitiveness in new or broader markets.

Following the visits to these companies and conducting thorough on-site analyses, the project team made a well-informed decision to identify the primary challenges faced by the managers. Specialists engaged in the project then focused on enhancing different areas within the companies, including business organization, IT infrastructure, marketing strategies, quality control, design aspects, and more.

Detailed individual analyses were conducted, resulting in the development of tailored improvement plans to address the specific areas in which each company required assistance the most. The managers expressed unwavering confidence in and

approval of the proposed improvements and changes. However, they did voice reservations regarding the associated costs. Some managers readily acknowledged that other companies enjoyed greater success due to their investments in improvements that were in high demand within the market.

Hence, the project took into account the implementation of all measures that solely necessitated training and expert knowledge, as this significantly influenced the managers' perspective. They collectively admitted that if they possessed the required resources, they would wholeheartedly implement all the proposed measures.

It was unmistakable that, without the support of the funded project, these companies would have been unable to benefit from expert analysis and personalized improvement plans addressing their critical areas. The collaborative network established among the participating companies also bolstered their ability to provide combined services and promotions. Consequently, it became feasible to develop tourist packages that seamlessly integrated rural accommodations with visits to the manufacturing companies. Additionally, selected products were showcased and sold within the touristic accommodations, creating supplementary revenue streams for all the companies involved. This symbiotic relationship further contributed to the overall success and growth of the participants.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, it was evident that the companies involved in the funded project experienced significant internal growth and an improved external presence. They underwent transformations in various areas, including their online presence, product quality, marketing strategies, and promotional efforts. Most importantly, they embraced collaboration with other companies, recognizing the value of joint promotion to attract more tourists to the region.

All the companies unanimously agreed that if they had the financial means, they would eagerly implement all the proposed changes outlined in their individual improvement plans. They understood that doing so would enhance their competitive position in the market and increase their chances of success.

Furthermore, it became apparent that some companies lacked knowledge about how to apply for European funds. However, they expressed a keen interest in participating in the future funding opportunities. They acknowledged that securing such funds was likely the only viable way to obtain the necessary resources for implementing the required changes that would better meet the demands of their customers.

By embracing the project, the companies underwent a positive transformation. They not only improved their own operations but also contributed to the development of the region as a whole. Through their collaborative efforts, they fostered a stronger tourism industry, attracting more visitors and generating economic growth.

As a result of the project, the companies became more aware of their strengths and weaknesses. They gained a deeper understanding of the importance of innovation,

adaptability, and continuous improvement. By actively participating in the project, they demonstrated their commitment to growth and their willingness to explore new opportunities.

The project's impact extended beyond the individual companies involved. It created a ripple effect in the region, inspiring other businesses to consider similar collaborative initiatives. The success stories of the participating companies served as examples, encouraging others to seek funding, embrace change, and foster a supportive network within the industry.

Looking ahead, it is crucial for the companies to build on the momentum gained during the project. They should continue to seek funding opportunities, whether through European funds or other available resources, to sustain their growth and competitiveness. By staying proactive and adaptive, they can further strengthen their presence in the market, attract more visitors, and contribute to the overall prosperity of the region.

In conclusion, the funded project served as a catalyst for positive transformation and growth. The companies involved not only evolved internally but also enhanced their external presence through improved online visibility, enhanced product quality, effective marketing strategies, and collaborative promotion. Recognizing the value of future funding opportunities, they expressed a strong desire to apply for European funds and other resources to implement necessary changes and better meet customer demands. By embracing innovation and collaboration, these companies have positioned themselves for long-term success and have contributed to the development of a thriving tourism industry in the region.

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