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AGRITOURISM MANAGEMENT IN SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE PRESERVATION

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Introduction. Sustainable rural tourism drives economic growth while respecting nature and preserving cultural traditions. Tourism has become a key driver of national, social, and economic development in Albania. It has emerged as a significant contributor to income generation for the government, businesses, and households, with statistics indicating that tourism plays a central role in a country's economic growth each year.

Aim and tasks. This study examines how agritourism succeeded in Albania by examining its economic, social, and environmental impacts using real-world data. It investigates the relationship between agritourism growth and broader sustainable development in rural areas, testing the hypothesis that enhancing agritourism contributes to sustainability at the territorial level.

Results. This study analyses case studies of 110 agritourism sites in Albania that promote tourism without endangering the environment or local lifestyles. The data collection involved direct observation of agritourism websites and online and phone communications with agritourism operators. The research spans the years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. Quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed with analysis, comparisons, and generalisations based on evaluations across the country. The target population consists of participants from Albania's tourism sector, focusing on agritourism organisations in rural areas. A diverse sample of agritouristic subjects from various administrative districts was selected. The findings demonstrate that agritourism boosts economic gains and supports social cohesion and environmental preservation, making it a vital element of sustainable rural development in Albania.

Conclusions. The study concludes with suggestions for improving Albanian agritourism, highlighting the importance of social and cultural values, environmental conservation, and economic progress for a sustainable model. It is also to highlight that incorporating traditional building materials and cultural elements enhances the distinctiveness of agritourism and aids in preserving local cultures. Rural tourism is vital and receives strong backing from local and national governments.

Keywords: agritourism, sustainability, rural areas, cultural heritage preservation, environmental conservation, social cohesion.

1. Introduction.

Tourism has become the driving force behind Albania's national, social, and economic progress. Statistics show that tourism is a primary source of income for governments, businesses, and families annually. Albania's tourism industry is not only keeping up with global trends but also setting high standards that damage tourism, which generated 4.6 billion euros in 2024, accounting for 26% of the country's GDP. Travel and tourism contributed 9.1% of global GDP in 2023. This figure shows a 23.2% increase from 2022, which is only slightly lower than that in 2019 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025).

According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (2024), the sector is expected to reach a record contribution of \$11.1 trillion. Additionally, it is predicted to support nearly 348 million jobs, which is 13.6 million more than in 2019. In Albania, tourism contributed 21% to the national GDP in 2023, up from 17% in 2019, and the number of international visitors rose to 7.5 million from 6.4 million in 2022 to 4.1 million in 2019. This sector is a significant source of employment.

In 2017, approximately 93,000 people were directly employed, and the total number of jobs in the sector exceeded 291,000 (Ministry of Tourism and Environment, 2019). If these trends continue, experts project that, by 2028, the overall impact of tourism, both directly and indirectly, will make up roughly one-third of Albania's GDP (Albanian Network of Professionals, 2025), and the share of tourism-related jobs is expected to increase from 7.7% to 8.8% of the country's workforce. According to a report by the World Travel and Tourism Council (2025), even though there are excellent prospects, the growth of this sector faces some challenges, particularly seasonality.

However, seasonality remains challenging, with around 80% of tourist visits occurring during the summer months, leaving a significant gap in the rest of the year. Albania's tourism industry is predicted to bring in approximately 5 billion euros by 2030, increasing the country's GDP by an estimated 2–3%. Albania must adopt a more sustainable and inclusive approach to meet this goal, in which rural tourism is essential (INSTAT, 2025).

Owing to the sector's significance, the government is concentrating on agritourism as a calculated approach to diversify the rural economy. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Albania (2018) funds agritourism initiatives under the "100+ Villages Programme". At the same time, the Ministry of Tourism and Environment (2019) certifies agritourism businesses.

The initial goal of the Albanian government policy was to increase farm incomes, but most of agritourism's recent expansion has taken place outside conventional farming environments. Rather than concentrating only on on-farm operations, new "farm-to-table" businesses have surfaced, such as eateries that support local products, even though traditional farmers do not run them. For example, the nation's most significant agritourism business (Mrizi Zanave) sources agricultural and forest goods in collaboration with over 300 rural households. This partnership allows local farms to provide a range of organic fruits, vegetables, meats, wines, slow-food-inspired recipes, and other traditional products.

2. Theoretical framework.

Agritourism is driving local growth, boosting local businesses and communities by generating a multiplier effect and attracting more tourists (Ministry of Tourism and Environment 2025). According to the World Tourism and Travel Council projections, the direct economic impact of tourism may be substantial by 2028, contributing up to 29% of Albania's GDP. Rural tourism is particularly significant in hilly areas; more than 2,500 rural residents are currently employed by more than 300 agritourism businesses, a number that doubles in summer (UNDP, 2022).

The government has invested €7.2 million in 42 agritourism units, with around half being run by young entrepreneurs (European Commission, 2021) as part of initiatives like the IPARD program, which has invested €146 million in the agricultural sector. Albania emphasises the development of local products from remote rural areas. Research indicates that consumers are willing to pay 30–50% more for items known for their high-quality and traditional production methods (UNTO, 2024).

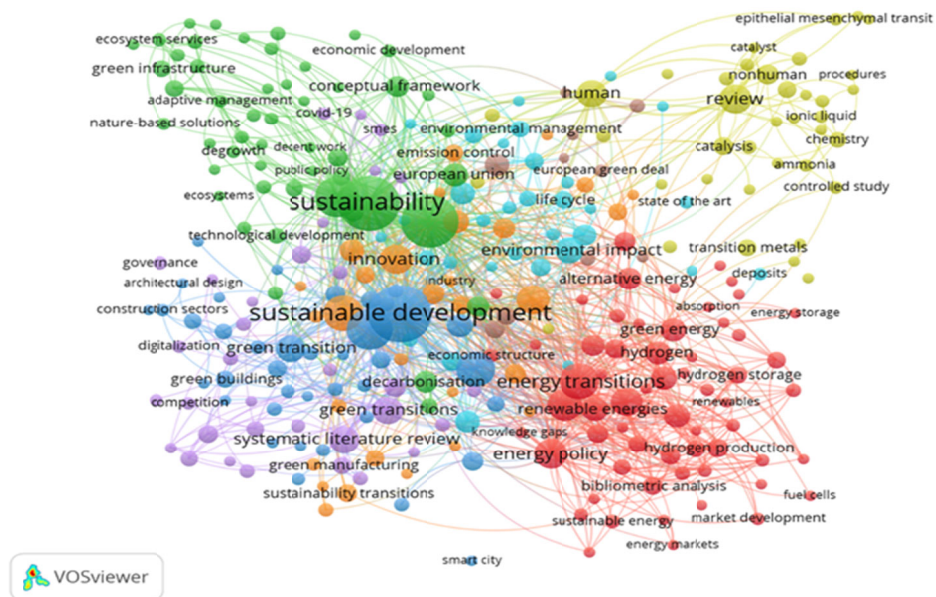


Fig. 1. Visualisation network map of keywords in the analysed documents (361 documents, 2015-2025, Europe).

Source: based on VosViewer.

Figure 1 explains the keywords: “Agritourism”, “Rural Tourism”, “Ecotourism” “Cultural Heritage Preservation”, and “Sustainability” in the analysed 361 documents using VosViewer (2015-2025, Europe).

According to Eurobarometer surveys, 38% of Europeans anticipate taking more domestic trips in the future (European Commission, 2021), and many are eager to change their travel habits to promote more sustainable tourism, such as buying locally produced goods, taking eco-friendly transit, or spending more to help the environment and local communities. Although rural areas offer a wide range of cultural and nature-based activities, environmental resources still need to be safeguarded, which calls for more education and community involvement.

Additionally, according to the anticipated increase in their domestic travel, given national, regional, and international tendencies, agritourism is particularly important to Albania. The nation’s diverse landscapes, extensive history, and enduring agricultural customs provide an ideal setting for this type of travel. Albanian families have been cultivating soil, conserving indigenous cultivars, and upholding traditional farming methods for generations.

By providing tourists with a closer look at these customs, agritourism contributes to their preservation. Agritourism promotes social advancement, environmental preservation, and commercial expansion. It improves education, lowers unemployment and poverty, creates jobs, and increases communal well-being, thus benefiting women and young people. Experience shows that telecommunications and infrastructure improvements generate growth and well-being in local communities. These initiatives also include environmental care. Such initiatives have helped reduce Albania’s migration rates and persuaded some migrants to return to their homelands.

The influence of agritourism fosters a network of economic, social, and environmental benefits that uplift entire regions, revitalise traditional food cultures, and drive sustainable development throughout Albania. The impact of agritourism extends beyond individual farms and guesthouses, creating a network of economic, social, and environmental benefits throughout the region. The neighbourhood benefits from the organic products produced by nearby family companies, which promote healthy eating and the resurgence of traditional cuisine.

By examining energy production, energy efficiency, and the preservation of historical identity, culture, and natural heritage, an attempt was made to quantify how agritourism supports sustainable development. It was hypothesised that agritourism would promote sustainable development at the regional level. It promotes environmental protection and aids in preserving natural and cultural assets, increases economic growth, and lowers poverty and social inequality. Agritourism in Albania, in particular, has the potential to foster year-round tourism and integrate urban and rural communities.

The following research questions (RQ) guide this study:

RQ1. How does rural tourism influence sustainable development at the regional level?

RQ2. Which institutional tools and measures encourage sustainable practices among producers and consumers through agritourism?

3. Literature review.

The UN World Tourism Organization describes rural tourism as an experience in which visitors participate in activities linked to nature, agriculture, rural lifestyles, cultural traditions, fishing, and sightseeing. This type of tourism occurs in distinctly non-urban areas, places characterised by low population density, landscapes primarily used for agriculture and forestry, and a strong sense of traditional community life (UNTO, 2024).

The OECD offers a similar explanation, emphasising that rural tourism occurs in truly rural settings (OECD, 1994). It involves people leaving their regular homes to visit rural areas for leisure anywhere from a day to six months, expecting to enjoy the unique aspects of rural life (OECD, 2024). These places are characterised by their large open spaces, modest businesses, closeness to nature, and preservation of cultural traditions. Pizzoli and Xiaoning (2007) stated that a population density of around 150 people per square kilometre is a crucial indicator of a rural area. Rural areas range from 15% to 50%; primarily urban regions have less than 15%, and rural areas have more than 50% of their population living in rural conditions. These regions can be categorised broadly based on the proportion of rural residents.

Green tourism is another related idea that seeks to create travel that supports sustainability and coexists with natural and social environments. Compared to mass tourism, this strategy is frequently thought to be more environmentally benign. In a similar view, the Council of Europe defines “rural areas” as those tracts of rural terrain, whether inland or coastal, that includes small towns or villages together with territory principally used for conservation, recreation, forestry, aquaculture, fisheries, or agriculture (European Commission, 2000).

These concepts were further developed by the International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography, which points out that many stakeholders are involved in rural tourism (International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, 2009). This encompasses not only travellers and tour companies but also local companies, legislators, resource suppliers, and citizens, each with varying levels of influence over public and private resources. According to this more comprehensive perspective, rural tourism is not just one activity; it includes any travel that honours rural life, art, culture, and tradition while providing economic and social benefits to the local community.

Different characteristics of tourism are highlighted by words such as ecotourism, farm tourism, soft tourism, alternative tourism, and agritourism (Ammirato et al., 2020). Ecotourism, which emphasises visiting pristine natural regions with a dedication to environmental conservation, is closely related to rural tourism. Ecotourism is intended to provide visitors with an enlightening and positive experience while benefiting local communities.

All types of tourism activities in non-urban environments are collectively referred to as rural tourism in the European Union. The definitions differ, especially in terms of agritourism. Hall and Page (2002) defined it as a variety of amenities provided on farms to attract tourists, including food, lodging, and recreational opportunities. Traditional agricultural land is frequently turned into a tourist attraction in rural areas and on town outskirts. Researchers have articulated agritourism as a set of services in which food, recreational patterns, and lodging attract people to farms in rural areas (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008).

Among the different modes of tourism, transforming agricultural territories into agritourism areas is an effective tool, especially in the urban and urban peripheries of the territory. Haggblade et al. (2010) believes that by revitalising local economies, agritourism can help ease extreme economic challenges in rural areas. Other experts consider agritourism as an industry established in rural territories that significantly contributes to the country's economy beyond the direct contribution by providing revenues to local communities.

Agritourism activities preserve the history, heritage, cultural patterns, and habits of local communities in rural territories. It contributes particularly to women and socially excluded categories, generating employment, salaries, and revenues for those mentioned social groups and individuals (Adamov et al., 2020).

The positive consequences of agricultural tourism include increased revenue for agritourism farms, a boost to the local economy through increased sales taxes, an increase in local job creation, and a boost to local businesses (Santeramo & Barbieri, 2017). Agricultural tourism contributes to economic development by increasing demand for local goods and services (Barbieri, 2019). The direct expansion of agritourism has had supplementary consequences for local economies. This indirectly and positively affects the local economic structure of public investment and capital withdrawal from rural areas (Broccardo et al., 2017).

4. Methodology.

This study uses quantitative and qualitative research methods to focus on the agritourism sector in rural areas of Albania. Data were collected from various administrative districts across the country. The independent variables in this study include elements that contribute to and shape the sustainable development model of rural tourism. Specific data collected included producing and using renewable energy sourced from solar power, energy efficiency indicators such as building materials (stone or wood), passive solar design and features such as recycling practices and LED lighting.

In addition to environmental and natural factors, this study examines social aspects that influence the sustainable development model. These include preserving and promoting local heritage, art, culture, and identity and cultivating and consuming indigenous organic products in the agritourism sector as part of local cuisine.

This study assesses how these agritourism elements contribute to the sustainable development model. Qualitative and quantitative instruments were used for this study, as these methods give us a clearer picture of the agritourism sector in the country. Collecting quantitative data provides measurable results for mindsets, patterns, and demographic arguments.

Meanwhile, qualitative instruments and methods give us more understandable perspectives on the local society's local practices, experiences, motivations, and cultural landscapes. Combining both methods ensures that the data collected and its respective analysis are considered, making more reliable findings of this study more in-depth, contextual, and relevant to Albania's rural territories.

The use of other instruments and methods may lead to a mode-imbalanced approach and less reliable conclusions. From a methodological point of view, this research evaluates the relationship between agritourism growth and sustainable development in rural areas, arguing that the expansion of agritourism and rural tourism directly supports sustainable economic, social, and environmental models. This study is linked with the "triple bottom line" concept in business, emphasising social and environmental responsibility alongside business objectives (Ramosacaj & Kushta, 023).

Data for the study were collected empirically and included direct observations of agritourism websites and online and phone communication with agritourism operations. This research spans the years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024. In this study, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Data analysis, comparisons, and generalisations were drawn from the nationwide evaluations. The target population includes all participants in Albania's tourism sector, focusing on agritourism organisations in rural areas.

Agritourism subjects were chosen from various administrative districts in the country to provide a comprehensive view of the sector. The independent variables in this study are considered elements or indicators that shape the sustainable development model in rural tourism. The data collected from the 12 districts were organised into a structured database. Data were compiled separately for each farm to ensure consistency across the districts. Descriptive empirical statistics were calculated for key variables, such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, and construction materials.

As for the social dimensions of agritourism history, art, tradition, culinary, organic indigenous local foods, and drinks were considered for this study. In our case study, we gathered data from selected agritourism entities on factors such as renewable energy production and usage (e.g. solar energy), energy efficiency markers such as the types of building materials used (stone or wood), the orientation of buildings relative to the sun, light, and wind, as well as practices related to recycling and the use of LED lighting. This study also measures social factors that contribute to sustainable development, complementing the economic and environmental dimensions of agritourism's impact in rural territories. These include the preservation and promotion of local heritage, art, culture, identity, and ethnographic traditions at the community level.

Furthermore, this study considers the preservation, cultivation, and consumption of indigenous organic products as key indicators in the sustainable development model for agritourism. Methodologically, this study examines the link between the growth of agritourism and the broader sustainable development model in rural areas.

It tests the hypothesis that enhancing agritourism in rural areas directly contributes to the economic, social, and environmental sustainability of communities at the territorial level. This approach supports the triple bottom line concept, emphasising responsibility towards society and the natural environment. Data were primarily collected through direct observation from websites and communication (both online and by phone) with agritourism operators. This study covers the period from 2022 to 2024, chosen to capture both post-pandemic recovery and the ongoing adaptation of agritourism businesses to changing market conditions.

For the last two years, the selected years have provided a clear perspective on how agritourism operators have adapted and evolved in response to new challenges such as fluctuating visitor numbers, safety protocols, and digital transformations. Focusing on these periods, this study provides insights into recent mindsets, patterns, and habits of agritourism activity in the country, particularly regarding how businesses have reshaped their patterns in response to consumer demand and economic factors in recent years (Kokthi et al., 2021).

5. Results.

This study examined 110 agritourism operations in rural areas. Several independent variables were measured to determine their impact on sustainable rural tourism development.

One key factor is the use of renewable energy, specifically the installation of solar and photovoltaic panels. The study found that 90% of the agritourism sites used solar panels to provide hot water and heating, while 10% used photovoltaic panels to generate electricity (Table 1).

Table 1. Key elements of agritourism and its impact on sustainable development in Albania.

Key elements	Percentages %
Solar Panels for hot water and heating	0.9
Photovoltaics	0.1
Energy Efficiency Elements	0.98
Cultural identity	1
Ethnographic Objects	1
Local Authentic menu	1
Trees, flowers planted and cultivated	1
Woman and girls	0.68
Youth under 40 years old	0.58

Energy efficiency in agritourism equipment was observed in building materials and architectural features. The study observed that 90% of the building structures used locally extracted stones, which is highly effective for maintaining thermal balance. In addition, 70% of these buildings incorporated wood in their construction, interior design, and furnishings.

In addition to their construction elements, stone and wood have complementary decorative functions. Their carvings and finishes enhanced aesthetic appeal and reflected local culture and traditions. Detailed carvings found on walls, ceilings, floors, railings, and furniture showcased important symbols of the community (Fig. 2).

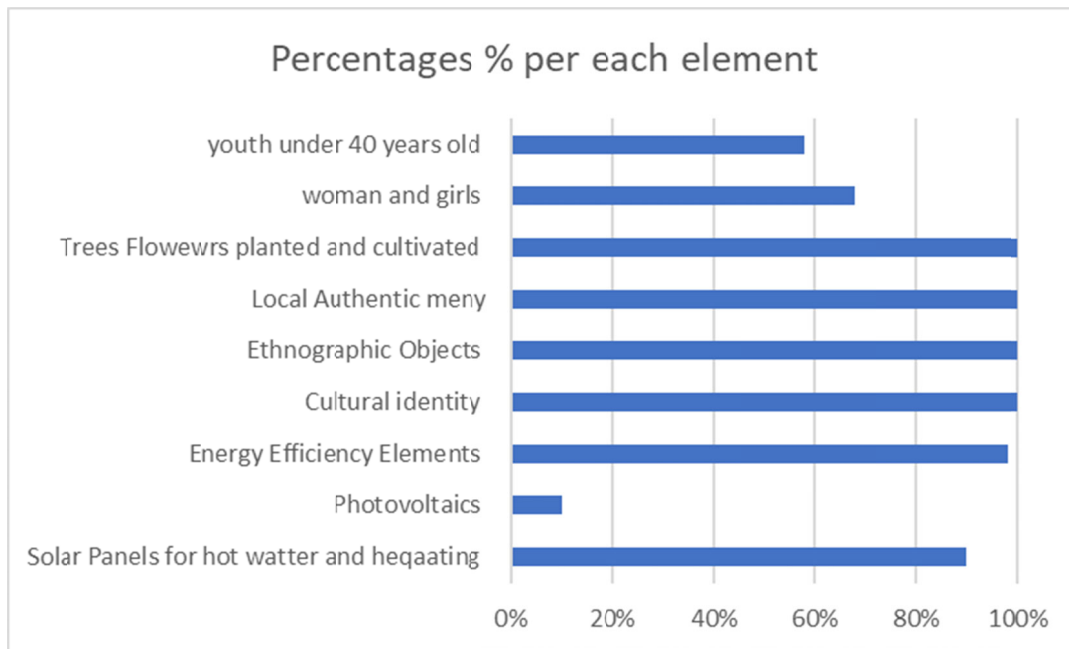


Fig. 2. Percentage distribution of sustainable elements in agritourism activities in Albania.

It was also found that agritourism farms were designed to be affected by natural lighting from sunlight during the day while avoiding cold winds to maximise energy efficiency and

reduce payment bills for electricity . Another significant element of energy efficiency observed was the effective use of roofs (Table 2).

Table 2. The use of Renewable Energies and Energy Efficiency elements in Albania.

Key elements	Percentages %
Solar panels for hot water and heating system	90%
Photovoltaics for energy/ electricity production	10%
Stones and wood construction and decoration materials	100%
Exposure to the sun, the winds and cold streams	95%
The use of roofs in new or reconstructed buildings	98%

These indicators demonstrate agritourism investors' mindsets, patterns, and habits regarding sustainable models of rural tourism practices Agritourism Association in Albania. (2025). In addition, it was found that each

agritourism business is dedicated to planting traditional decorative trees, local fruits, and other flora, and diversities demonstrated the sense of natural heritage protection by respective local communities (Fig. 3).

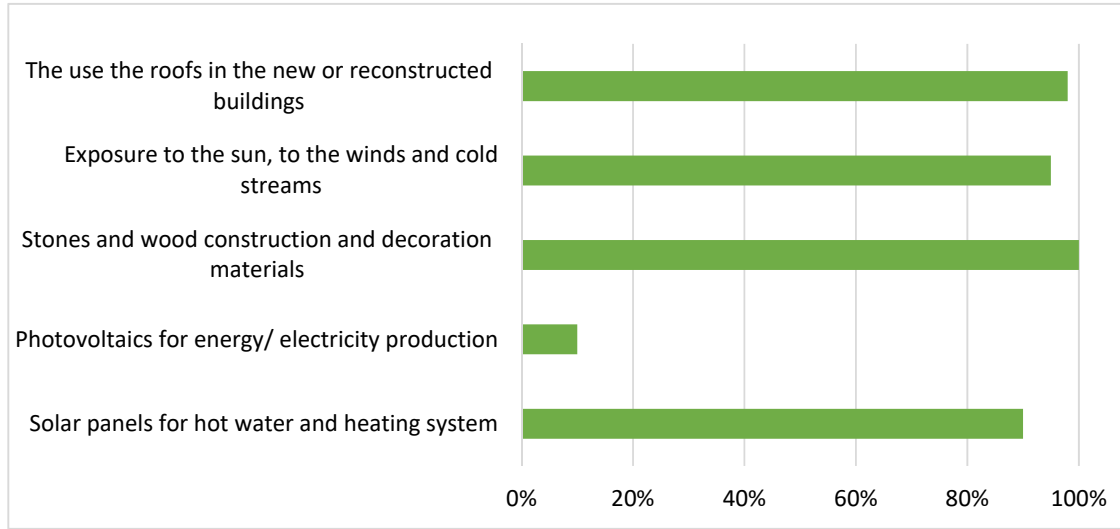


Fig. 3. The use of renewable energies and energy efficiency elements in Albania.

To assess the social aspects of sustainable development in agritourism, we examined how each site highlighted Albania's rich history, identity, and heritage (Agritourism Association in Albania, 2025). These findings show that

every location features at least one item, such as a painting, photograph, sculpture, or another tangible artefact that reflects the traditions and cultural legacy of the Albanian people at both the local and national levels (Table 3).

Table 3. Utilising the Social Dimensions of Rural Sustainable Tourism in Albania.

Key elements	Percentages %
Interiors and courtyards elements of the traditional life of Albanian families	98%
Cooking, making bread, handling grains, making oil, winter shelters, lighting, heating	100%
Tradition on marriage ceremonies, mortal ceremonies, hospitality, etc.	94%
Paintings, photographs, sculptures and living material objects that speak of the history and identity;	100%
Predominance of organic, traditional and indigenous products in the menu of agrotourism facilities	100%
Producing drinks of the country of origin, which are organic and of local origin	98%

Every agritourism site proudly features symbols of Albanian heritage, the national flag, heroes from the liberation war, and other significant local and national historical figures are prominently displayed (Albanian Network of Professionals, 2025). Regarding local production, the menus at these agritourism establishments focus on organic, traditional, and indigenous foods. Approximately 95% of these sites display clear markers of the local way of life and cultural heritage.

Inside the buildings and in their courtyards, one can often observe items and displays that illustrate traditional Albanian practices, such as cooking methods, bread-making techniques, grain handling, oil production, the design of winter shelters, and customs related to and hospitality. The traditional culinary system supports healthy consumers and communities and reinforces cultural traditions as vital elements of local and national identity (Table 4).

Table 4. Sustainable elements of local and autochthon production in Albania.

Local and autochthon production	Percentages %
Organic, traditional and autochthonous foods	98%
Producing drinks of the country of origin, which are organic and of local origin	100%
The cultivation of decorative plants, fruit trees and vegetable plants in the respective areas	100%

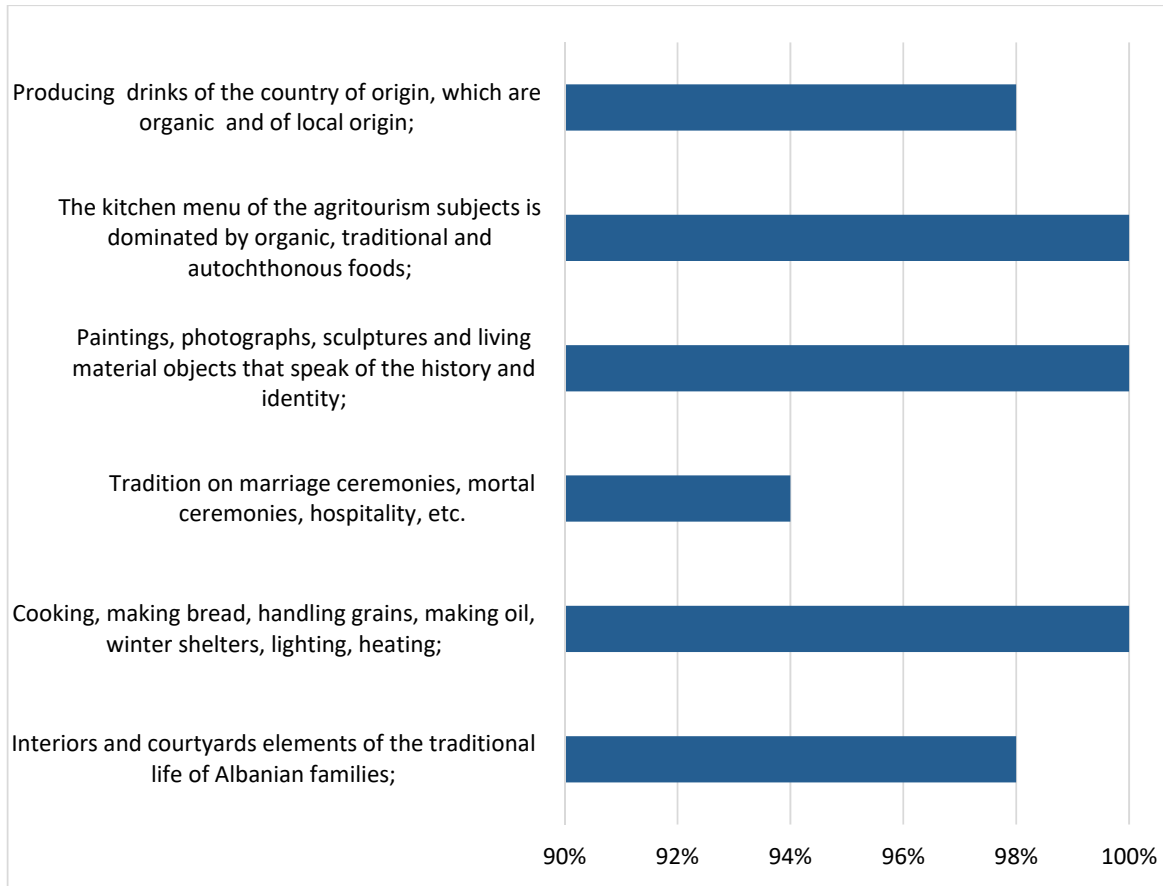


Fig. 4. Sustainable elements of local and autochthon production.

Every agritourism site in rural areas produces and enjoys beverages made from organic, locally sourced ingredients (Fig. 4). For instance, businesses such as Bujtina Cobo, Nurellari, Alpetra, Hadaj, and Pupa demonstrate sustainable development practices in the Berat District. Similarly, in Lezha District, establishments such as Reze e Drita, Mrizi i Zanave, and Arbri embody these sustainable economic, social, and environmental principles. Similar ventures in the northern Shkodra District from Velipoja to Razëm, Bogë, and Theth also reflect this commitment, extending across all regions.

6. Discussion

Albanian tourism activities face significant challenges in protecting the country's natural relief and rich cultural heritage, vital to its tourism economy. Following the global, European, and regional trends of recent tourism developments, even in Albania's sustainable development model, tourism has become a central component of tourism planning and development. Recent experiences have shown that many initiatives seek to implement sustainable tourism designed for local contexts to address environmental and social impacts.

Edgell (2020) argues that properly managed sustainable tourism can contribute to achieving economic objectives while maintaining a socio-cultural and environmental balance. Focusing on the socio-economic and environmental impacts of agritourism, Campbell and Kubikova (2020) note the positive effects of agritourism as it creates social capital among low-income people, providing additional income that leads to employment opportunities for women and youth, as well as the creation of micro-entrepreneurs for people who wish to gain business acumen.

Another perspective views sustainable business models in agritourism as an opportunity to achieve SDGs and circular economic models (Dionizi & Kercini, 2025). This perspective suggests that sustainable tourism is not a “show trend” but an instrumental approach that enhances community development through economic growth and environmental protection. This study examines how using renewable energy, particularly solar and photovoltaic panels, impacts the sustainable development of agritourism in rural areas. This study observed 110 agritourism businesses in the country’s local territory. It was found that almost 90% of agritourism business farms applied solar panels for heating and hot water, demonstrating the widespread adoption of renewable energy to improve energy efficiency.

Nevertheless, only 10% of these subjects have integrated photovoltaic panels for electricity production, indicating the need for greater use of solar energy systems for power generation. These findings highlight the potential contribution of agritourism to sustainable development in rural areas through the promotion of renewable energy.

Sustainable tourism practices in rural areas will contribute to challenging environmental, economic, and social issues in local areas. Considering this perspective, this study offers valuable insights into how agritourism contributes to social, economic, and environmental sustainability and local community growth development. It also demonstrates that Albanian agritourism aligns with the SDG through concrete actions and rural tourism practices at the territorial level.

These actions reduce the environmental impacts and provide business opportunities and marketing advantages that can differentiate agritourism sites in a competitive market.

However, adopting photovoltaic systems, which only account for 10% of energy production, can expand energy production through photovoltaic systems, leading to energy independence and sustainability. New sustainable tourism practices in rural areas will contribute to challenging environmental, economic, and social issues in local areas. This study offers valuable insights into how agritourism applies to social, economic, and environmental sustainability and local community development. It also demonstrates that the Albanian agritourism activity is committed to the European and global SDG through concrete actions and rural tourism practices at the territorial level.

These actions reduce environmental impacts and provide business opportunities and marketing advantages, which can differentiate agritourism sites in a competitive market. However, adopting photovoltaic systems, which currently only account for 10% of energy production, has the potential for improvements, expanding energy production through photovoltaic systems, which leads to energy independence and sustainability.

Sustainable practices have become increasingly vital in this thriving sector, so sustainability is fundamental to tourism planning and development. Numerous projects have aimed to tailor sustainable tourism to local conditions while mitigating environmental and social impacts. This viewpoint underscores that sustainable tourism is far more than a passing trend. This is an essential strategy to help communities achieve economic growth without sacrificing cultural or environmental assets.

These ventures build an inclusive model that benefits the broader community by involving local artisans, chefs and farmers. In addition to these arguments, sailing locally produced food, offering traditional crafts, and making locally made beverages create complementary revenue, improving the long-term financial stability of these businesses.

Social aspects create a multifaceted experience that combines cultural heritage preservation and sustainable tourism practices, distinguishing Albanian agritourism operators in eco-friendly travel.

7. Conclusions.

Agritourism is a key factor in revitalising and developing rural communities in Albania, which significantly impacts their social, cultural and economic environment. It highlighted the importance of supporting local agritourism enterprises as it ensures the sustainability of the tourism industry. With the decline of traditional agricultural practices, agritourism, including ecotourism, green tourism, alternative tourism, and rural tourism, has become an important strategy for addressing socio-economic problems in rural communities. The analysis showed that 90% of agritourism farms in Albania used green technologies, confirming their commitment to renewable energy sources.

In general, sustainable agritourism practices help preserve the ecology and development of rural communities. However, there is room for improvement, especially regarding energy efficiency and the involvement of women and youth.

It is also worth noting that the integration of traditional building materials and cultural elements strengthened the uniqueness of agritourism and contributed to the preservation of local culture. Rural tourism is an important industry and is enthusiastically supported by local and national governments.

The numerous challenges faced by rural businesses require the creation of effective policies to maximise the benefits of rural tourism while minimising its negative impact on the environment.

These programs must use agritourism to apply and preserve the principles of authenticity, tradition, culture, nature, and heritage in Albania.

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