

Opportunities for sustainable rural development through agritourism: a case study of customers and local residents' behavior in a small Bulgarian municipality

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Abstract

Current trends in tourism industry development towards sustainable tourism products and practices in accordance to the values of ecological consciousness, respect and preservation of local history and traditions, along with the demand of different and more individual and specialized tourist products, lead to the shift from mass tourism to some alternative and specialized forms targeted at rural regions. Current study examines the opportunities for sustainable rural development through the example of a Bulgarian municipality conducting marketing research and considering the fact that the main incomes in Bulgarian rural regions come from economic activities in the sectors of agriculture and processing of agricultural produce which could be integrated to fact developing tourism activities recently. The problem of regional uneven development and rural depopulation as a whole is considered through the notion of the importance of local population's benefits and the lowest social and ecological load in connection to environmental protection, economic development through incomes diversification and employment, social justice, conservation of culture and accountability for the sustainable use of local resources. Development of agritourism product in small and infamous for now rural regions aiming at their economic and social development would bring many benefits from price to comfort for potential customers too.

Key words: *rural development, agritourism, sustainable development.*

Introduction

Tourism is the leading and fast growing sector of Bulgarian economy regarding the incomes, its share in GDP and the new opportunities for employment all of these closely connected to development of other branches of national economies – transport, communication, agriculture, trade, etc. On the other hand, tourism could contribute to rural areas diversification and their social and economic prosperity through sustainable forms aiming at the impact on the tourists and wise use of resources and integrating the interests of tourists (i.e. visitors) and those of hosts' community according to the goal of sustainable development: to satisfy current needs but preventing and saving natural resources for future (Shopova&Arabska, 2013).

Sustainable development is a fundamental goal interrelating economic and ecological effectiveness for wise use of natural resources and keeping ecological balance (Arabska, 2013). Economic effectiveness, social responsibility and ecological conformability are the three pillars when characterizing sustainable development and sustainable tourism in particular. Sustainable alternative tourism is one of the key sectors with great opportunities for diversifying Bulgaria's rural economy. It minimizes environmental and cultural damage, optimizes visitors' satisfaction, maximizes long-term economic growth, and balances growth potential and the conservation of the environment. Recently, more often the niche tourism products have been discussed that are designed to meet the specific interests of consumers, and in many cases, they are created according to their requirements. There are a variety of niche tourism that can be developed in a destination, depending on the existing infrastructure, tourism products and services. Nontraditional niches for realization of tourism products are a good way to stimulate tourism development in small communities. The marketing shortcomings in alternative tourism and the absence of advertisement and trademarks are among the most important problems (Shopova&Arabska, 2013).

Rural and agritourism have remarkably increased into importance for many world's economies. During the last years rural areas of many countries stopped to be linked to agricultural production, because of the evolutionary economic and social changes of them. Rural areas have overtaken many non-agriculture functions allowing their inhabitants for finding sources of income in different more effective sectors of economy. At the same time small scale rural and agri-tourism, once as an off-farm diversification and shift from agriculture toward tourism, and then shifted to create

niche and new market opportunities within an expanding market have become the phenomenon of the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries (Sznajder &Przezbórska, 2004). Both rural and agri-tourism provide the whole range of services and products. In principle they can be classified by three essential criteria: seasonal availability of rural and agri-tourism services and products, costs of products and services, kinds of activities (Sznajder &Przezbórska, 2004). Rural tourism was initially seen as a cheap form of tourism development because it did not involve a high level of investment – instead it utilized existing spare capacity. However, today's tourists are increasingly seeking their comforts. In the international market place, rural tourism is not such a cheap form of tourism as was earlier thought (McMahon, 1996). Agriculture and tourism are tied together by destiny, facing the same challenges and with a potential for mutual benefits (Daugstad, 2005).

Given the increasing uncertainties of a globalized economy, pluriactivity in general and agritourism, and especially direct marketing, represent a successful combination of resources and an interesting work-life-balance concept for farming families. The current global economic and financial crisis might even benefit the agritourism farms. When tourists are increasingly looking for cheaper recreation and holiday offers, some of them might choose local alternatives such as agritourism (Schmitt, 2010).

If rural communities have the goal of enhancing their economy through tourism, local leaders should identify which agency or institution would be best suited to be responsible for agritourism planning and development (Ramsey&Schaumleffel, 2006). Job creation, economic development, and increasing the quality of rural life are just a few strategies that may prove effective when working to counter negative social, economic, and demographic trends (Ramsey&Schaumleffel, 2006).

Differences found between the agritourism and non-agritourism respondents suggest that it is important to continue the scrutiny of agritourism as a unique farm enterprise (tourism research approach). However, business structural differences regarding the simultaneous development of multiple farm enterprises suggest that it is also important to continue examining agritourism as an element of a broader entrepreneurial diversification scheme (agriculturalist research approach) to further investigate the influence of agritourism on other farm products and enterprises (Barbieri, 2008).

For the agritourism to succeed, it is imperative that the tourists must have: 1. Something to see: Animals, birds, farms, culture of the village, dress and festivals. 2. Something to do: Participating in agricultural operations, riding camel, buffalo, cooking and participating in the rural games i.e. gillidanda, gotti (marble etc.). 3. Something to buy: Rural crafts, dress materials, farm gate fresh processed food are few items (Gopal *et al.*, 2008).

For agritourism operators looking to leverage scarce advertising resources, an analysis of the most likely visitors will yield important information on how to balance investment in marketing materials, word of mouth referrals and loyalty programs. Cooperative and joint advertising partnerships with other travel-related stakeholders appear to be the most effective method of targeting the greatest number of interested consumer segments and engaging both the planner and the spontaneous traveler in considering agritourism in their travel plans. As economic challenges lead some to consider traveling closer to home, agritourism operations may gain some advantage in attracting those who have an interest in the heritage, food aspects or education to be gained from Western farms and ranches. Therefore, thoughtful development of agritourism enterprises and strategic marketing to travelers may yield more return visitors and attract those who have only lightly considered these types of recreation and leisure activities in the past (Gascoigne *et al.*, 2008).

Ecker *et al.* (2010) discuss features and benefits of regional agritourism and food tourism. Regional areas that are successful in agritourism and food tourism tend to display a common set of features, including access to accommodation, appropriate infrastructure and proximity or easy access to nearby urban areas. Agritourism and food tourism regions often present appealing ‘lifestyle drawcards’ which include food and agricultural-based experiences. These include food and wine production and consumption opportunities, aesthetics, rural culture, and farm-based recreational activities. These features of agritourism and food tourism are underpinned by a range of motivating forces and institutional drivers, which are explored in detail in this study. Agritourism and food tourism enterprises can allow farmers to increase their farm-related income, through various forms of enterprise. Enterprises may feature or add value to traditional food and fibre products. Alternatively, some may have little to do with agriculture directly and provide recreation, nature-based, or educational experiences and products. Some can be labour and resource intensive, while others require few inputs. They can operate

seasonally or year-round. They all have a common theme: they help farmers stay on the farm. Through agritourism and food tourism experiences, consumers increase their knowledge of primary production and farming techniques. They can appreciate the aesthetic experiences—what they see, taste, hear, smell, and feel—and the learning opportunity. This kind of tourism increases their connection with growers and rural landscapes. Business operators in this study suggested that Australia's urbanised populations have an increasing desire to connect to the farm. This gives willing farmers an opportunity to tap into a new market (Ecker *et al.*, 2010).

Flanigan *et al.* (2014) further develop conceptual understanding of agritourism by integrating empirical understandings of agritourism with the original typology incorporates three discriminating characteristics, which are fundamentally consistent with the original version: the nature of interaction between visitors and agriculture; whether the product is based on a working farm; and whether the visitor experiences authentic working agriculture. It makes two important contributions to the agritourism literature: 1) it integrates stakeholder perspectives to the agritourism literature; and 2) it exemplifies and examines one way that the typology can be used to underpin further agritourism research (Flanigan *et al.*, 2014).

The development of agritourism takes place in rural communities, characterized by specific mentality, different way of life and different customs of local residents. The level of development of rural communities has also a big impact on planning tourist or para-tourist investments. The components of this development include the state of technical and service infrastructure, employment rate and structure, level of education, transport infrastructure and local government finances. The local authorities' task should be promotion of the vision of regional development that would attract tourist investments. The promotion would enhance investors' activities and make it easier to strike a balance between supply and demand for tourist services in particular rural areas. The results of the study show that undertaking coordinated and comprehensive actions aimed at increasing the number of tourists in the region, including visitors to agritourist farms, should encourage new investments in rural communities and enhance their tourist attractiveness (Kosmaczewska, 2008).

Agritourism is increasingly recognized as a means of enterprise diversification for agricultural producers, especially for its ability to increase cash flows to farm and

ranch operations and in addition to their surrounding communities. Lacking a formal definition, agritourism can be summarized as anything that connects consumers with the heritage, natural resource or culinary experiences unique to the agricultural industry, or a particular region of the country's rural areas. The list of agritourism activities continues to grow, and includes a variety of participant, educational, and spectator experiences including: outdoor recreation (fishing, hunting, wildlife photography, horseback riding); educational experiences (farm and cannery tours, cooking classes, wine tasting, cattle drives, or help work the ranch); entertainment (harvest festivals or corn mazes); hospitality services (farm and ranch stays, guided tours or outfitter services); on-farm direct sales (u-pick operations or roadside stands); and, off-the-farm direct sales (farmers' markets, county and state fairs, special events) (Wilson *et al.*, 2006).

Challenging conditions in the current agricultural context have encouraged farmers to develop agritourism and other enterprises on their farmland. Previous research suggests that a complex set of personal and economic goals drive the creation and maintenance of agritourism and other on-farm diversification ventures. However, the extent to which those goals are accomplished has not been verified. A study examines the level of accomplishment of different goals driving agritourism and on-farm entrepreneurial development in Canada and shows that goals with high levels of both importance and accomplishment are: to continue farming, to enhance personal/family quality of life, to increase or diversify the market, and to respond to a market need or opportunity. Further, results show differences in goals between agritourism and other types of farm entrepreneurs. Study findings suggest that extension agents can focus on the operator goals considered to be most important and to yield higher levels of accomplishment as they promote agritourism and other farm enterprises. These results have important implications for rural well-being, as agritourism is suggested to keep family farms economically feasible and revitalize local communities (Barbieri, 2010).

Many farmers, in addition to normal farming activities, have already turned to agritourism as a source of additional farm income and opportunities. There are numerous benefits to be gained from the development of agritourism: it may strengthen local economy, create job opportunities and develop and promote training and certification programs to introduce young people to agriculture and the environment. Agritourism helps preserve rural lifestyles and landscape and offers the opportunity to provide "sustainable" tourism. Organic agriculture is due to

demand for healthy foods with a high quality standard and limited use of chemical substances. Organic agriculture is closely connected to agritourism and tourism (Privitera, 2009). Mansury& Hara (2006) examine the novel strategy of strengthening the input-output link between tourism and organic agriculture to promote growth in a distressed rural economy. Agritourism is a growing segment within the hospitality industry that increasingly relies on organic farming to attract nature-oriented travelers. This type of tourism activity offers the experience of being in a real agricultural environment through activities such as harvest-related festivals, organic-farm stays, and farmers' markets (Privitera, 2009). An investigation examining the opportunities of sustainable initiatives that combine organic farming and alternative tourism to achieve higher competitiveness of a region concludes that creating new forms of intersectoral networking partnership can only contribute more consumers to be informed and engaged in promoting the destination that will bring it economic as well as social benefits (Shopova&Arabska, 2014). On the basis of the principles of sustainable tourism development¹ and organic farming principles², the authors determine several groups of indicators for sustainable development of intersectoral partnership (Table 1).

Discussing organic production as one of the alternatives for future sustainable development there should be sought effective ways of expanding organic production not only with the purpose of assuring food quality and safety and healthy environment, but also of reaching the optimal balance in respect to economic, social and environmental effectiveness (Arabska, 2012b).

¹National strategy for sustainable tourism development in the Republic of Bulgaria 2009 - 2013

²IFOAM Principles of Organic Agriculture: <http://www.ifoam.org/en/organic-landmarks/principles-organic-agriculture>

**Table1. Indicators for sustainable development of intersectoral partnership
organic production – tourism**

N	Groups	Indicators
1.	Ecology and environmental protection	Biodiversity
		Territories and objects under protection
		Expenditures for protection and restoration of environment
		Long-term assets with ecological use
		Waste of human activities
2.	Social prosperity and social equality	Standard of living
		Health status
		Health care
		Remuneration and labor expenses
		Education and training
3.	Economic viability and local prosperity	Goods and services prices
		Investments in local business and employment
		Certified organic areas
		Number of organic operators
		Energy effectiveness
4.	Cultural and historic wealth and tourism development	Cultural and historical objects
		Preservation and support to local customs and traditions
		Local crafts
		Publications
		Tourist visits and spent nights in lodging places
5.	Local development	Transport infrastructure
		Tourist infrastructure
		Agricultural land and infrastructure
		Scientific and research activities and innovations
		Expenditures and investments in ICT and e-trade

Source: Shopova I., Arabska E. (2014) Sustainable initiatives for integration of organic agriculture and regional tourist product through the example of Eastern Rhodopes mountains, Eleventh International Conference 2014 SMART SPECIALIZATION OF BULGARIA, International Business School, Botevgrad traditional international conference, June 2014, 890-906

Bulgaria is one of the richest European countries regarding biological and landscape diversity. In combination with soil and water pureness, this is a

prerequisite for successful development of organic production. The main problem was found to be the lack of information and motivation. But now, when ways are actively sought for effective use of the country's potentials in agriculture, the methods of organic farming as a multifunctional system which integrates economic and social issues with those of environmental protection, turn to be a proper alternative for producers, processors and traders to find the best solution for organization, management and development of their farms, production or trade enterprises and to find markets for their products (Arabska, 2013).

There should be mentioned however that planning, organization and development of such intersectoral initiatives and partnerships is strongly dependent on local communities and inner and outer interactions. Considering the complex processes of turning regional tourist products in infamous rural regions into desired tourist destinations on national and international markets and the problems in assuring enough competitiveness when comparing to mass tourism sites, a model is proposed concerning demand of alternative forms of tourism and new services with high degree of uniqueness and added value in sustainable development (Fig. 1).

Agriculture and agritourism are important sectors for rural development, and especially for sustainable economic, social and ecological growth. Priorities in different policies and strategies on national and European levels for sustainable and balanced regional development combined with food quality and safety, human health and environmental protection underline the importance of such integrations between agriculture and tourism.

The intuitive development of small and medium size enterprises in rural regions based on traditions, culture and experience, is part of the great entrepreneurial potential. Provision of legislative and institutional support, information, consulting and training activities would give a solid basis for overcoming negative trends (Arabska, 2012a).

Although a detailed resource characteristic of the examined municipality is not included in the study, it should be noted that it provides a clear picture of the tourism potential of the area. Generally development of a methodology for identification and evaluation of tourism resources based on a region characteristic would support the improvement of action plans at regional /local level, and the strategies for integrated development of tourism in the area.

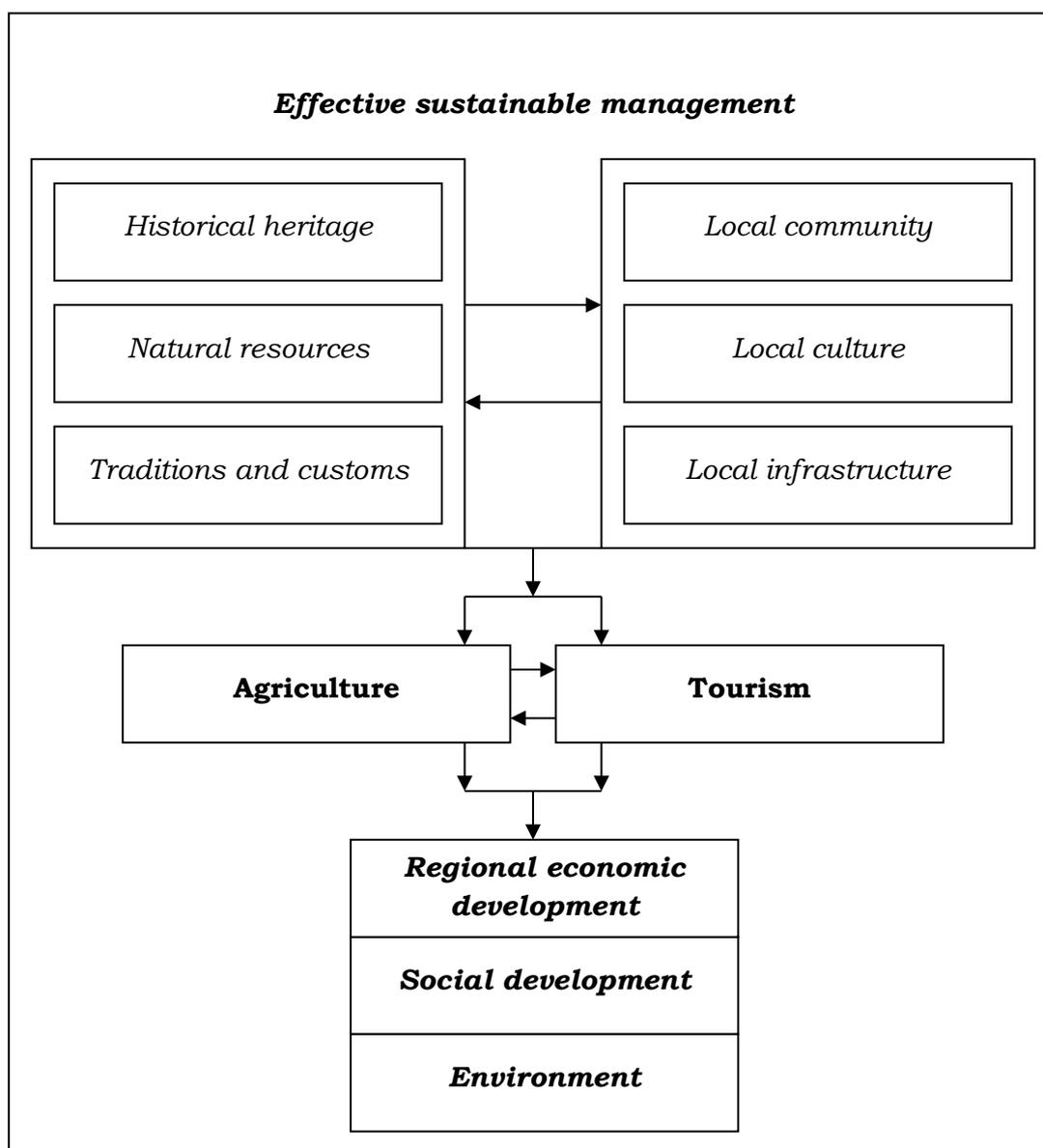


Figure 1. Model of an intersectoral network of partnership agriculture – regional tourist product

Adapted by Shopova I., Arabska E. (2014) Sustainable initiatives for integration of organic agriculture and regional tourist product through the example of Eastern Rhodopes mountains, Eleventh International Conference 2014 SMART SPECIALIZATION OF BULGARIA, International Business School, Botevgrad traditional international conference, June 2014, 890-906

The main stages are planning and preparation activities, conducting operations and reporting the results. Preparation includes a working team, engagement, defining the interested parties, setting goals and objectives, schedule of activities and

allocation of responsibilities, and communication. The second stage includes functional analysis of the current situation and giving some conclusions and recommendations. The final stage of each methodology should give the finished product to the possible implementation and the team is responsible for the applicability of the displayed recommendations and goals (Shopova&Grigorova, 2013).

Current study examines opportunities for sustainable rural development through agritourism making a case study of customers and local residents' behavior in a small Bulgarian municipality called Rhodopes as is the name of one of the biggest Bulgarian mountains.

Rhodopes municipality is part of the region of Plovdiv. It has favorable geographical and climatic conditions because of the situation on the feet of the Rhodopesmountain on the north. The municipality has 21 villages and settlements in the vicinity of a well-developed urban area in the Upper Thracian plain. The negative trends in demographic structure of population characteristic for the whole country are available in that municipality too besides the proximity of towns. The potentials of agricultural sector, rich historical and cultural development and nature protection areas for sustainable tourism development are not used properly which statement is proved also by the poor accommodation base represented by old-fashioned and in bad conditions chalets, boarding houses, bungalows, etc. Small houses welcoming tourists are very rare.

The examined municipality is a typical rural hilly and mountain area facing the common trends and problems in rural abandonment and low development but at the same time bearing great potentials for ecological food production development and its linkage to other sectors. The market research is conducted considering the fact that the problems in marketing are solved in conditions of insecurity and indefiniteness because of the risks in analyses and assessments of future state of inner and outer marketing environment. The decisions for starting new business, offering new service or entering new market segment are taken in such conditions and the ways of reducing risk factors and uncertainty should be sought based on preliminary analyses of market, inner and outer environment and stakeholders' behavior.

Material and methods

Conducted marketing research (2010-2011) aims at analyzing the opportunities for agritourism development in the municipality of Rhodopes in Plovdiv region, Bulgaria, from the point of view of customers' criteria and requirements and representatives of local residents.

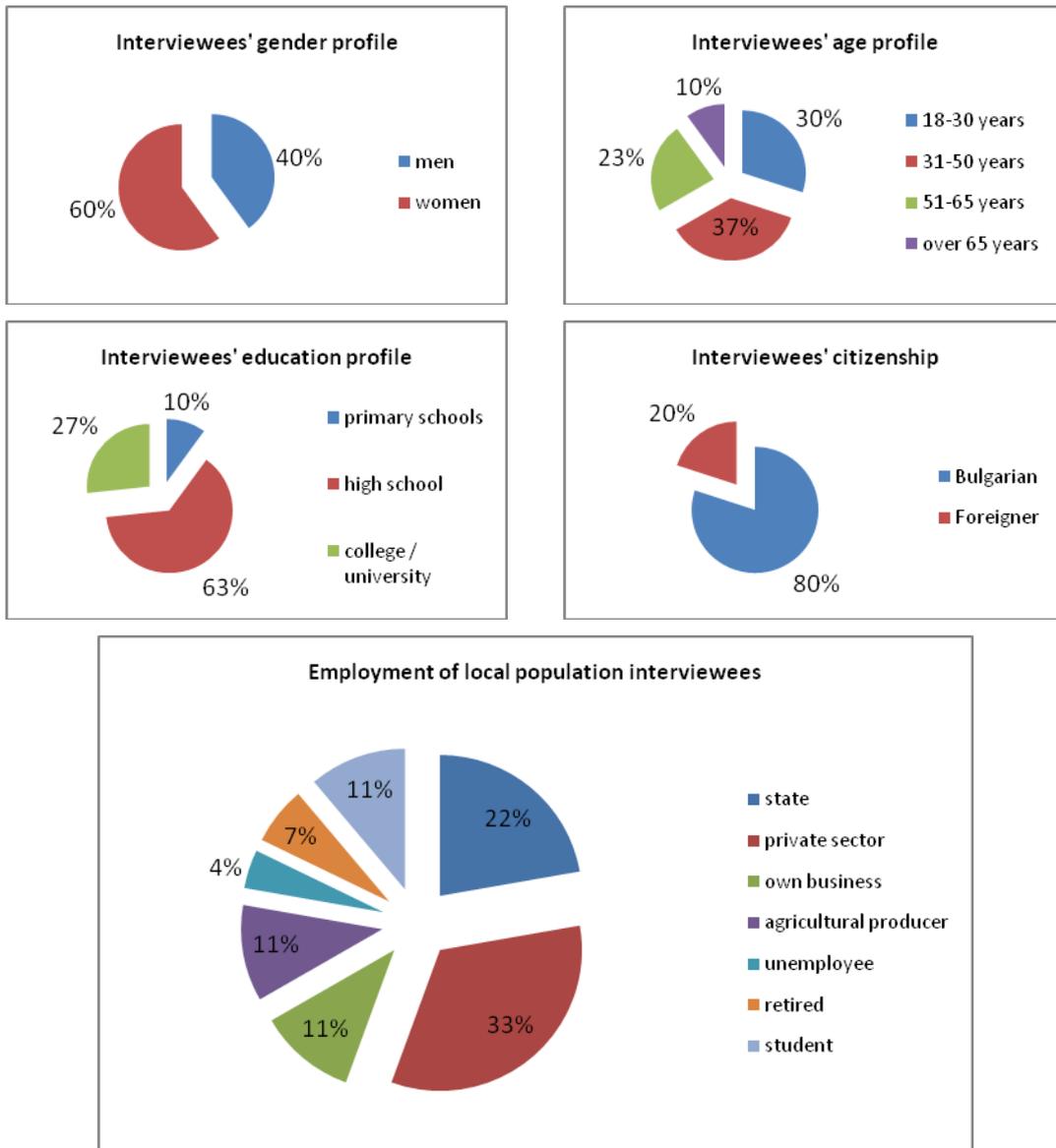
The groups of interviewees are grouped as: citizenship – Bulgarian and foreigner, tourists and local population representatives, visited or not the region before. The analyses include: determining and comparing the notions of different groups regarding Bulgaria as a rural tourist destination), determining the impressions regarding the region as a place for agritourism development, as well as requirements and expectations towards such activities. The study embraces analyses of social and demographic profile of the interviewees, expectations to agritourism development in similar regions, level and structure of individual consumption of tourist products, motivating and demotivating factors in the choice of such rural regions for rest and tourism, image of the region and Bulgaria according to the perceptions of the interviewees. The investigation aims at examination of the market concerning tourist motivation, decision taking in purchasing tourist products, models of consumption, tourists' behavior, etc. The research is targeted at tourists interested in alternative forms of tourism – potential tourists and tourists already visited the region, having impact on the positive image development of the region as a tourist destination, as well as their behavior as consumers of certain tourist products.

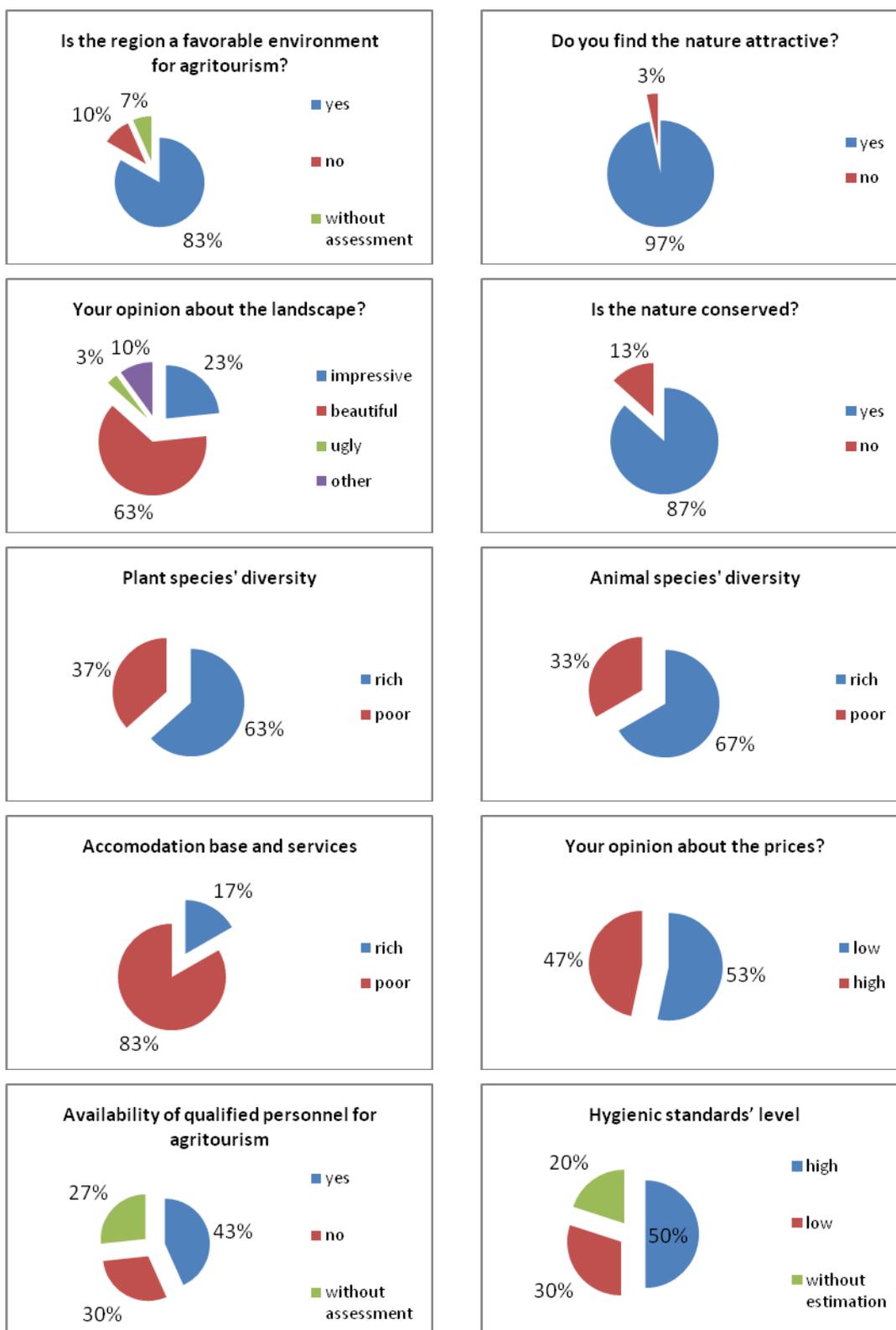
A comparison is made aiming at investigating and comparing the notions and the image of Bulgaria and the studied area of foreign tourists visited the country, and whether they coincide with those of tourists from Bulgaria regarding the main prerequisites for agritourism development and main motivating factors influencing decision taking for tourism in the rural mountain area.

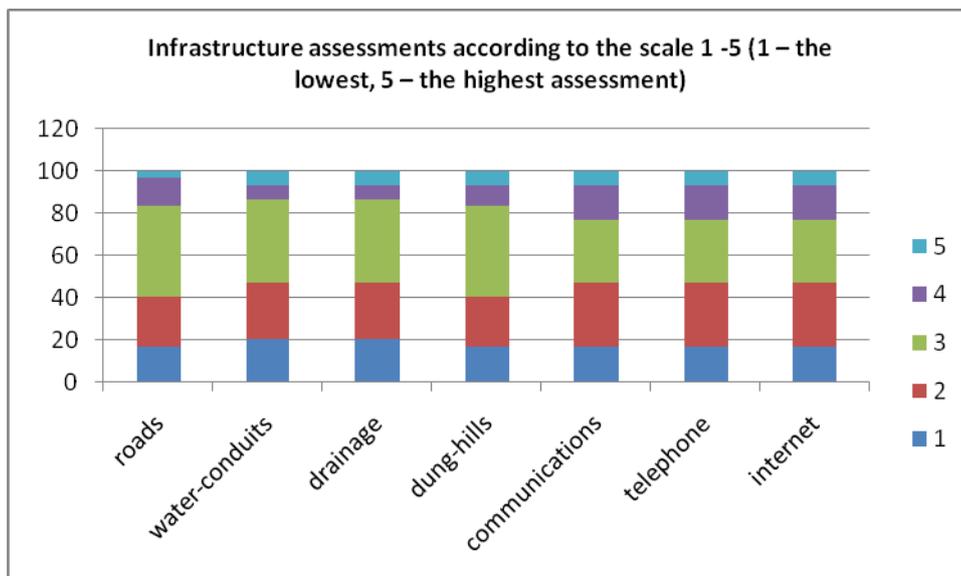
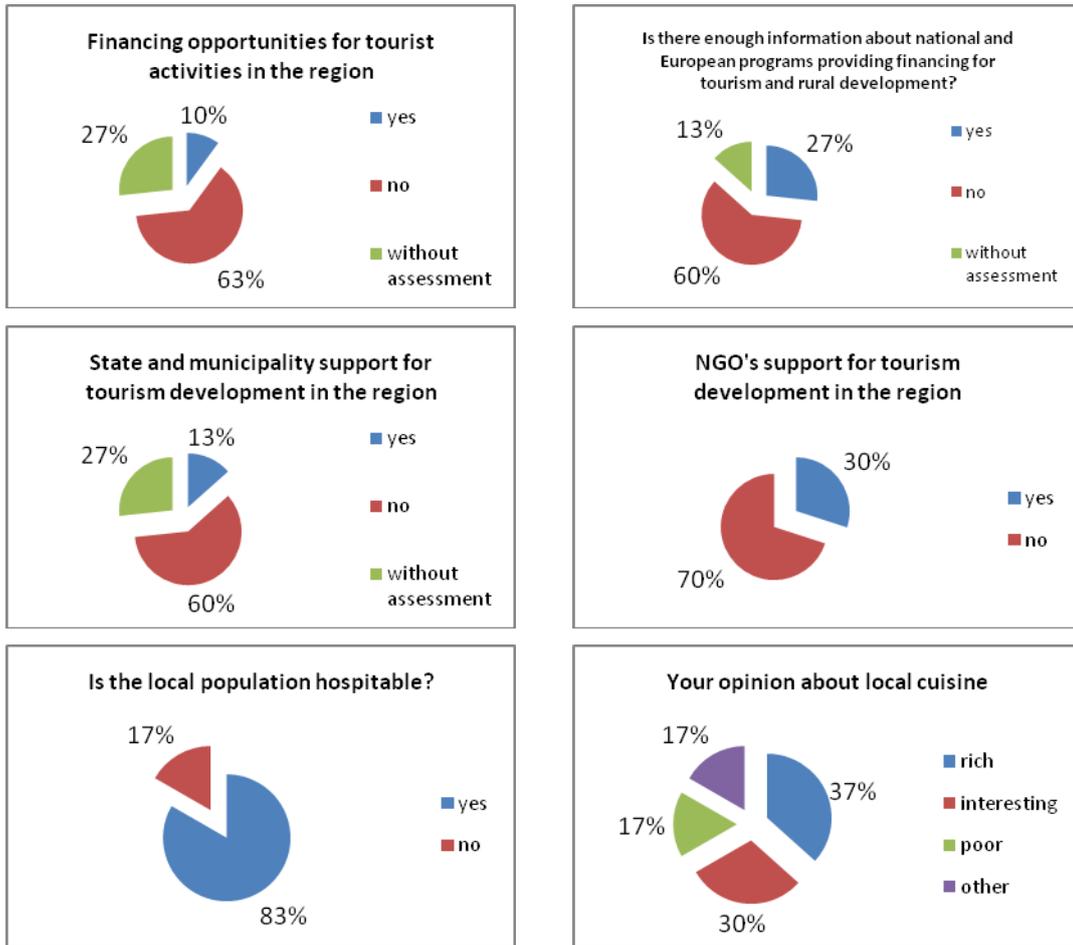
Local population's representatives are questioned to understand their opinion about agritourism and economic development in the region, as well as their motivation of such initiatives.

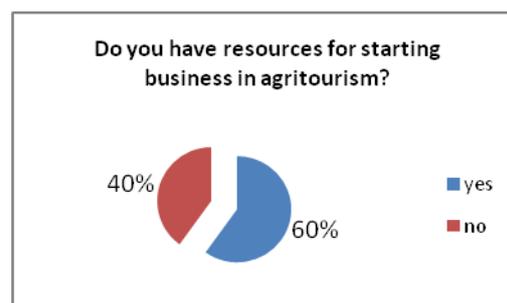
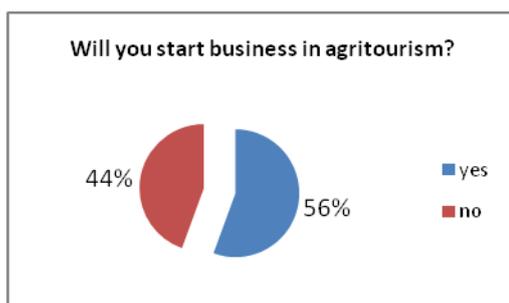
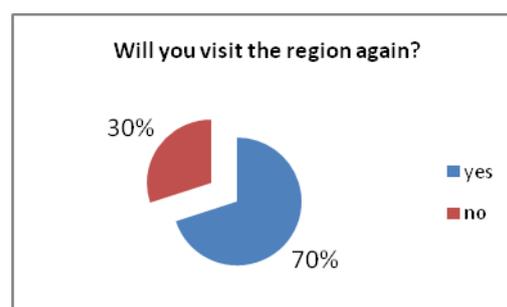
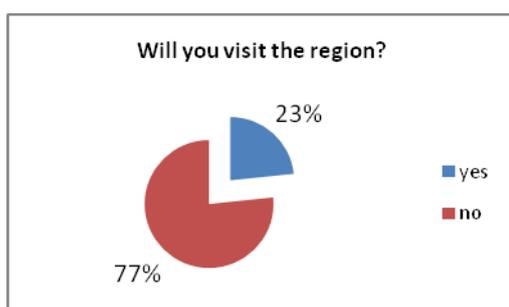
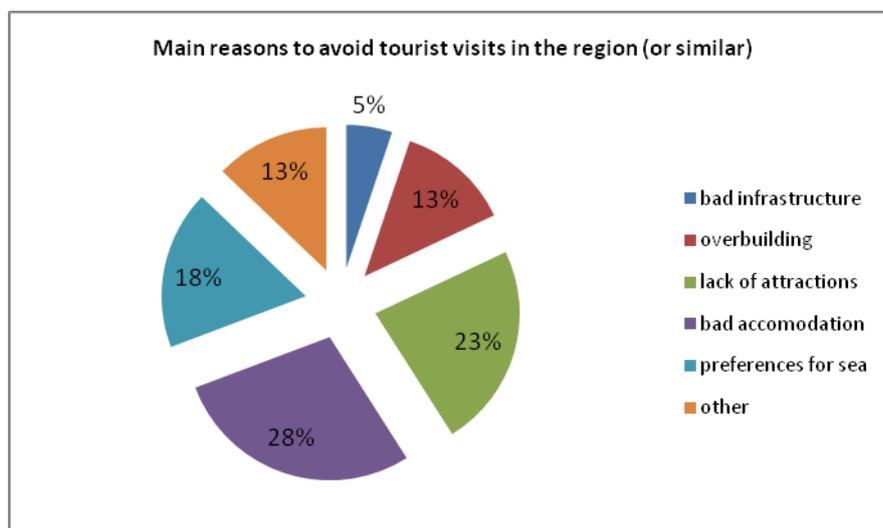
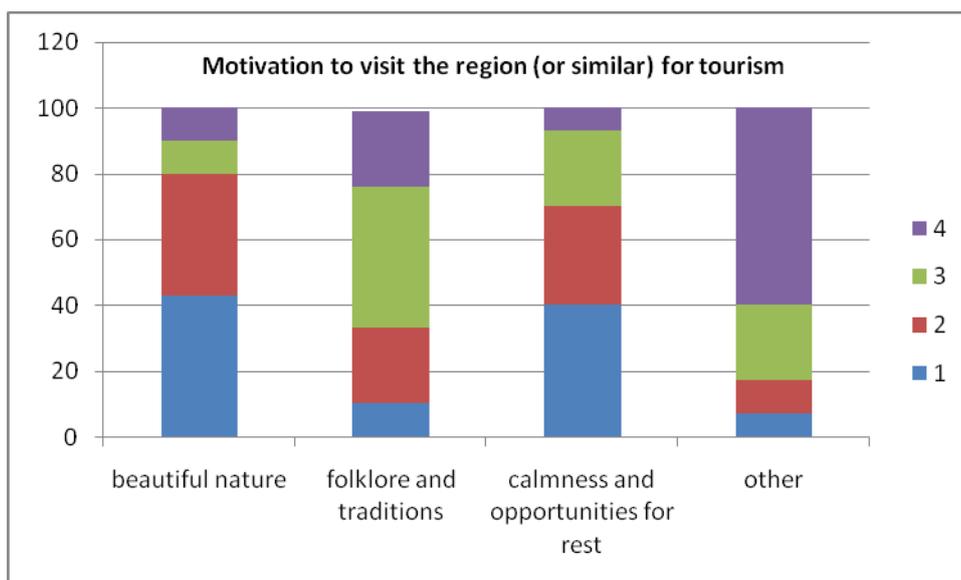
Results

Results from the research are presented below as charts according to the questionnaire used showing the percentage of the interviewees answered to the questions.









Discussion

Interviewees embrace a well-presented sample regarding gender, age and education profiles. Of 80% of Bulgarians 25% are local residents. Employment of local population is diverse representing state and business sector and the segment of non-employed. There is strong support that the region has favorable environment for agritourism development (83%), that the nature is attractive (97%) and conserved (87%). The opinions about landscape, plant and animal diversity are in support to the previous statements too. Regarding the accommodation base and services 83% of the interviewees are not satisfied. There is no consensus about the prices, availability of qualified personnel for agritourism development and hygienic standards' level either. According to the interviewees' opinion (63%) there are financing opportunities for agritourism development in the region but the information about national and European programs providing financing for tourism and rural development is not enough. Most think that state and municipality support is low (60%), as well as non-governmental organizations (70%). The group of tourists thinks that the local population is hospitable (83%) and that local cuisine is rich and interesting. The assessment of the infrastructure show satisfactory results.

The interviewees are asked to order some of the motives to visit the region (or similar) for tourism and the results show that the first place is for beautiful nature, calmness and opportunities for rest, followed by folklore and traditions and others pointed as authentic environment and cultural and historical considerations. Among the main reasons of avoiding tourist visits in the region are: bad accommodation, lack of attractions and amusements, preferences to go to the sea, overbuilding and others as communication problems. The interviewees give more than one answer to that question. On the open question about summarizing the problems in the region as a whole and in agritourism development, over 80% point the economic situation in the country and lack of money.

30% of the interviewed tourists had not visited the region. 70% of them answer that they would do that. The rest answer that they would visit it again. 56% of local residents' group would start business in agritourism and 60% thinks that the resources are enough. Over 90% of the rest answer that they would expect financing from national or European funds. Most of them avoid bank credits – only

1% is ready to apply for a bank credit. Only 53% of both groups, considered that Bulgaria is enough popularized as a tourist destination.

Current study presents the attractiveness of rural mountain regions as agritourism destinations because of tourist preferences to nature, folklore, traditions. On the other hand are the problems with accommodation base and services, infrastructure, lack of information, state and local policies, insufficient work of non-governmental organizations as part of civil society and local communities. Comparing opinions of the groups of interviewees (Bulgarian and foreigners, tourists (visited or not the region) and local residents it can be concluded that the consensus is on the following statements: conserved nature in rural regions keeping national folklore, cuisine and history is a prerequisite for tourism development in rural areas offering a sustainable alternative of mass tourism practices. The potential for this sector development is dimmed out by the quality of tourist resources and low level of information and motivation. The need of additional training and motivation activities for encouragement of entrepreneurship among local population is very prominent.

Conclusion

The concept of sustainable tourism development is attracting more and more the business in Bulgaria, focusing on the balance that must be reached between tourism and other real and potential activities - tourism that is developing in a specific territory in such manner and on such a scale that remains viable for long periods of time without damaging or changing the environment (social and natural), and contributing to the successful development of all other activities and processes (Shopova&Grigorova, 2013).

The studied small mountain municipality, which is a model of such types of tourist destinations in the country, has a potential for future agritourism development which should be the main priority in state and local policies and measures creating favorable environment and popularizing tourist destinations. Agritourism development in the region could be a potential source of new incomes for local population, economic and social development of the region and overcoming the processes of rural abandonment.

The strengths as image of pure nature and conserved biodiversity, favorable climatic conditions, local history and culture, hospitable population, ecological agricultural produce, development of viticulture, wine-producing and fruit-growing,

proximity to the regional center and attractive tourist destinations should be treated in the proper way in order to overcome the weakness as bad accommodation conditions, lack of information and initiatives, limited variety of tourist products, lack of adequate marketing and management.

The opportunities of alternative tourism development, agritourism in particular as a sustainable form, and avoidance of the seasonality dependence should be used for raising incomes and employment of local population, attracting young people working in municipal and regional centers and improvement of age structure of population in the region. For overcoming the threats as economic crisis and low competitiveness it is necessary to provide enough information and training, on one hand, and new marketing and advertising strategies on the other.

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