

# Experiences of community-based tourism in Romania: chances and challenges

Experiences of  
community-  
based tourism

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Received 9 August 2019  
Revised 12 November 2019  
Accepted 17 December 2019

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to analyse community-based tourism (CBT) initiatives in the post-socialist rural Romania in terms of the holism of the tourist project and the implementation of the local participation. The paper focusses on chances and challenges of CBT.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Once the main objective was established, three research interests arose: How and why tourism played a significant role in the economic and social development of the rural local community? How has the local community participated in the starting and maintenance of the CBT projects and who played a key part? How can the level of success of the CBT implementations be qualitatively measured? Qualitative methodologies (interviews, on-site observations, informal discussions) were applied to survey the four case studies.

**Findings** – Natural and cultural features ensure a versatile potential for touristic exploitation of the Romanian rural area, but the villages are endangered by post-socialist economic and social transformations. Innovative approaches of CBT in rural areas ignited by charismatic leaders with entrepreneurial spirit develop based on the existent social, natural and cultural capital, but on the other hand, endeavours can be vulnerable because of hindering local municipalities or sustainability issues.

**Practical implications** – The findings facilitate recommendations in favour of effective CBT ventures.

**Originality/value** – Learning about the contribution of CBT to a sustainable development of rural regions with no/little tradition of private entrepreneurship can contribute to the revitalization of rural areas facing post-socialist challenges.

**Keywords** Community-based tourism, Participative development, Rural Romania

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Sustainability is an essential quality for the tourism sector. It ensures a long-term vision of tourist activities by not jeopardizing the tourist and human resources put in value in a particular territory.

According to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), sustainable tourism “takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the

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The authors would like to thank to the interview and discussion partners for their time, courtesy and valuable input.



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needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”[1]. This definition shows the relevance of three key elements in sustainable tourist processes:

- (1) the territory with its tourist potential and fragility;
- (2) the tourism industry itself and the social agents participating in these economic processes; and
- (3) both visitors and the host communities.

Host communities are vital agents who should hold the difficult post of being the guarantors of the economic processes taking place in their territories, tourism activities included. Without a doubt, local communities are directly interested in promoting economic operations in their places of residence, but not at any cost for them or the environment.

Müller and Flügel (1999) already defined the five elements of their pentagonal pyramid of sustainable tourism:

- (1) unspoiled nature and protection of resources;
- (2) subjective well-being of the residents;
- (3) economic prosperity;
- (4) healthy culture; and
- (5) optimum satisfaction of guest requirements.

The authors lowered the importance of economic prosperity expected from tourist activities by enhancing the respect to host communities, the respect to their socio-cultural authenticity and environment and the commitment with the general community well-being. The fifth element was focussed on visitors, who were also expected to reach a high level of satisfaction in their tourist experience.

Because there is a large number of tourist destinations that have witnessed the block and removal of local communities from the decision-making and management of the tourist activity, local agents are meant to be empowered for guaranteeing sustainable tourism in the territories they belong to and achieving a better quality of life (Blackstock, 2005; Amir, 2015; Juma and Vidr, 2019).

In fact, the WTO (2019) considers that “sustainable tourism development is ecologically sustainable, economically viable as well as ethically and socially equitable”[1]. This can be achieved by applying CBT operations according to their major attributes (Asker *et al.*, 2010):

- hosting tourists in the local community;
- managing a tourism scheme communally;
- sharing the profits/benefits equitably;
- using a portion of the profits/resources for community development and/or to maintain or protect a community cultural or natural heritage asset; and
- involving communities in tourism planning, on-going decision-making and development and operations.

This means that host communities are supposed to participate to a greater extent in any part of the tourism development process (Blackstock, 2005) to run successful tourist projects and to assure an equal redistribution of economic benefits, while also being responsible towards their cultural and natural heritage.

Thus, the more tourism follows a community-based approach, the higher should be the commitment of the tourism economic development to the sustainability of the projects and the positive impact in the community and environment with a long-term vision (Tamir, 2015).

In this context, CBT is central for the sustainability of tourism (Okazaki, 2008; Iorio and Corsale, 2014) and keeps its focus on the involvement of the host community in planning and maintaining tourist activities to create a more sustainable industry (Hall in Blackstock, 2005).

CBT is seen also as a local reaction against the excessive control that external businesspeople or investors can provoke in a place (Wang and Wal, 2005) when using its touristic potential in a conventional way. Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2017) point directly at the inequalities conventional tourism causes in developing countries and the financial leakage that hampers social and economic development related to this activity at the tourist destination.

By identifying a participative approach, its tools for managing local participation, the holism of the tourist development initiative and the way these projects have been implemented, it is possible to show the different rhythms, status and forms of tourism development in these areas and the impacts they have had in the community.

In this regard, the ladder of participation of Arnstein (1969) helps to understand the situation of tourist destination communities and the current state of local involvement in tourism development allocating participation in a range of eight rungs, grouped in three major phases of participation, namely, *non-participation*, *tokenism* and *citizen power*. The categories range from the illusion of participation through *consultation*, *partnership to citizen control*, the purest demonstration of real participation of a community. Selin and Chavez (1995) also included the evolution of participation from the settings of the project to the arrival of the first outcomes and beyond. Projects under a CBT approach should have a high degree of participation and thus should not be below *citizen power*, particularly in the decisive phases of the project: problem-setting, direction-setting, structuring and outcomes (Selin and Chavez, 1995).

#### *Community-based tourism in the local action*

CBT can be considered a tourist typology regarding the kind of management carried out on a tourist destination. The community participation approach has been largely considered as “an integral part of sustainable tourism development” (Okazaki, 2008, p. 511; Tamir, 2015) because it contributes to cultural and environmental conservation (Jalani, 2012; Garcia Lucchetti and Font, 2013) for considering tourism as an economic complement to traditional activities (Giampiccoli and Mtapuri, 2017). Moreover, public involvement works as a driving force to protect the community’s natural environment and culture (Felstead in Okazaki, 2008; Amir, 2015) from abuses.

CBT addresses social needs, provides power (Arnstein, 1969) as well as costs and benefits redistribution and sharing of decision-making (Haywood, 1988) among a larger number of stakeholders, including more local agents, usually neglected in a non-CBT tourism management approach.

Johnson (2010, p. 150) defined CBT as “a form of locally situated development that uses tourism to generate economic, social and cultural benefits within a community”, highlighting that this kind of management is better implemented when applied to rural, small-scale municipalities or even small regions (Asker *et al.*, 2010).

In the opposite direction, Giampiccoli *et al.* (2015) and Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2017) considered that CBT does not need to be implemented at a small geographical scale. In fact, these authors considered in their E’s CBT model, a list of key words related to CBT tourism which can be perfectly implantable to conventional tourism, being endogenous, environment, education, empowerment, equity, evolving, enduring, entrepreneurship, ethical, externalities, exclusive, experience, enjoyment and ethnic.

Another crucial element for [Blackstock \(2005\)](#) and [Johnson's \(2010\)](#) CBT definition is the conceptualization of community, which cannot be generically applied for any CBT project. The traditional feature included in the more basic definitions is a group of people living in the same geographical area who might share similar goals for using their own territorial resources properly with tourism purposes. But reality shows that the concept of community is much more complex and difficult to define. [Iorio and Corsale \(2014\)](#) underlined the heterogeneity and stratification of local agents, who instead of willing to cooperate can become perfect competitors among them. At the same time, [Sheller and Urry \(2006\)](#) considered globalization, with its connections and contacts with external agents or the arrival of new alien agents, as a disruptor element of homogeneity in local communities.

In fact, [Juma and Vidr \(2019\)](#) highlighted the intrinsic heterogeneity of local communities to guarantee inclusivity in the CBT projects. By dividing the community in socio-cultural groups according to their gender, age, birthplace, level of education or participation in tourist activities or associations, the CBT projects can better assign distinct roles to the participants whose concerns and priorities enrich tourism management processes.

In this sense, it is more and more difficult to talk about isolated, genuine and pure communities ([Blackstock, 2005](#)), which, at the same time, are not a requisite for understanding the CBT projects. Participation of the local community is necessary to develop the valuation of cultural and natural territorial resources correctly, but it can be interpreted in different ways. [Johnson \(2010\)](#) and [Juma and Vidr \(2019\)](#) included local residents and communities as the active participants in the process of tourism development, whereas [Asker et al. \(2010\)](#) also recognized the presence of external agents operating in local communities such as NGOs, trusts or associations managed for the community and by the community. [Cioce et al. \(2007\)](#) defined the CBT as sustainable development projects created by the community, whereas [Garcia Lucchetti and Font \(2013\)](#) and [Amir \(2015\)](#) gave an even more cultural approach, considering the CBT as a grassroots development in which tourists visit these communities and learn about the culture and the local environment.

Cooperation of the local community is essential to detect and develop the cultural assets used to create a sustainable tourist destination (Murphy in [Okazaki, 2008](#)).

Again, the concept of community embodies the inherent difficulties to pursue collective interest and the common good beyond individual needs and aspirations. In this sense, [Getz and Jamal \(1994\)](#) stressed that there are high transaction costs not only in terms of start-up, management and maintenance of a project but also in terms of time-consumption ([Okazaki, 2008](#)) and real possibilities for delegating power in the community. That is why the CBT has also been perceived as a "naive and unrealistic" territorial and social management ([Iorio and Corsale, 2014, p. 234](#)) or a "romantic" approach ([Taylor, 1995](#)). [Craig \(2003\)](#) quoting Marjorie Mayo, focussed on community development, went one step further by assuring that community development can be an imposter driven by economic imperatives and a neoliberal agenda, rather than having values of empowerment and social justice on a local scale. The CBT does not take into account possible clashes, exclusion or fairness between members of the community ([Sproule, 1996](#)). And, of course, it can empower local people burdened naturally with lack of education, business experience or leadership. That is why [Tamir \(2015\)](#) considered that the CBT must enhance confidence and skills of the local community, whereas [Yoopetch \(2015\)](#) mentioned the creation of social capital and the redistribution of power in the CBT projects.

[Juma and Vidr \(2019\)](#) stated that the CBT projects must consider an all-inclusive community participation at all levels of development, which can be difficult to implement. For this reason, there are many ways to delegate power in some agents who are more socially active, qualified and trained to solve problems and represent the community than

the average. The apparition or detection of a “cosmopolitan leader” or “cosmopolitan local”, as [Iorio and Wall \(2012\)](#) defined it, can be decisive for leading to success of the tourist development process. This local person, belonging and tied to the community, has the potential to set in motion an economic project that works well for the community in a sustainable and long-lasting way. The potential and capacity of the cosmopolitan local make this person suitable to use the acquired knowledge and external influences she/he got in a wise way for the economic development of the community.

In conclusion, the CBT grows as a reaction from local communities or from organizations working on behalf of local communities. There are so many examples in the world for understanding what *laissez faire* means to conventional tourism operators in emerging destinations, that CBT management means firstly preservation and control of the tourist development process.

### Methodological approach

The main objective of this research is to analyse how the CBT has been performed in four rural settlements in the historical region of Transylvania in terms of the holism of the tourism project and the implementation of the local participation. Based on this survey, we would like to understand better the chances and challenges the CBT projects face in a post-socialist country as Romania.

Once this main objective was established, three main research interests arose, which are as follows:

- RQ1. How and why tourism played a significant role in the economic and social development of the rural local community?
- RQ2. How has the local community participated in starting and maintenance of the CBT projects, and who played the key and decisive part?
- RQ3. How can the level of success of the CBT implementations be measured qualitatively?

The villages chosen for this study are Viscri (German: Deutsch-Weißkirch), Sâncraiu (Hungarian: Kalotaszentkirály), Rimetea (Hungarian: Torockó) and Roşia Montană (Hungarian: Verespatak) with existing and ongoing CBT implementations on different levels of development and implication ([Figure 1](#)).

Fieldwork was carried out by both authors between 2013 and 2018, during several field trips and academic visits to the four localities. Because the aim of the study was to understand the implementation of the CBT projects in these settlements, it was crucial to use a qualitative method of analysis. Community building and CBT are very subjective social processes that imply a more in-depth understanding of the community with a personalized approach, especially in the cases where cosmopolitan leaders initiated the projects.

In this context, the qualitative approach included active observation, social interaction, informal discussions with community members both tourism service providers and non-active members in tourism and in-depth interviews with the representatives of the communities and the main actors in the CBT management. In-depth interviews were carried out with cosmopolitan leaders in Viscri and Sâncraiu, representatives of NGOs and action groups involved in the villages (ADEPT Foundation, Transylvania Trust, Trai cu Rost, Made in Roşia Montană) and representatives of local municipalities, with some of the stakeholders even repeatedly during the years. These interactions with the various actors enabled a multi-layered insight into the situation in each village and made a comparison possible so to give answers to the research questions.

**Figure 1.**  
The location of the  
investigated  
settlements



Because we have been visiting these four municipalities during the past six years, we were able to assess the evolution of tourist activities and to observe chances and challenges of the endeavours.

To understand the current state of the local involvement in tourism development, we employed the ladder of participation of [Arnstein \(1969\)](#) to the surveyed villages, allocating the communities into the rugs according to their current achievements. Further on, we applied the instrument of measuring the success of the CBT initiatives developed by [Garcia Lucchetti and Font \(2013\)](#) and assessed the initiatives according to their four indicators:

- (1) planning;
- (2) partnerships;
- (3) community's capacity to deliver; and
- (4) funding and micro-credits.

### **Socio-political and economic context of the surveyed community-based tourism initiatives**

In the second half of the twentieth century, the tourism industry in Romania was state-operated, and the development of touristic infrastructure was controlled by state agencies ([Rădulescu and Stănculescu, 2012; Pațac, 2008](#)), and private community initiatives were not supported. Further on, the incoming tourism was monitored and channelled to certain selected destinations (Black seaside, designated mountain resorts and some spa and health resorts) ([Rădulescu and Stănculescu, 2012; Pațac, 2008](#)). During that time, the analysed villages were not designated as touristic settlements, so no tourism investments were conducted. Rimetea had rudimentary informal touristic activity with accommodation services based on its natural potential, but faced a decline in the 1970s as it was forbidden by law to accommodate tourists in private houses.

The political changes of 1989 represent a clear seizure in the history of Romania, and thus several economic, social and political phenomenon show different courses before and after this year. The CBT experiences analysed in the study were conceived in a

post-socialist, rather capitalist, economic context; a new economic settling which encouraged private property and entrepreneurship as an economic and social experiment. Yet, their location in peripheral rural areas makes them rather exceptional.

It is a fact that rural areas face numerous challenges: such as structural changes in agriculture, which cause loss of jobs; lower average income than in urban areas; narrower skill base because of thinning education and selective emigration of young better educated people; less developed service sector; and deficient health-care supply services (Havadi-Nagy *et al.*, 2017), which all together cause a rather disadvantageous demographical structure with thin potential for initiative, innovation or entrepreneurship. In Romania, administrative, social, economic and advisory supportive structures are also underdeveloped and with low coverage. Local administrations have limited planning and financial capacity to access EU funds (Jordan *et al.*, 2016). The main economic driving force is still the agriculture, and the diversification of economy and income possibilities is yet limited (Havadi-Nagy *et al.*, 2017).

Tourism is lately seen by European and national development strategies as a strong and viable tool of economic and social progress in rural areas. Yet, even before these tendencies arose in political discourse, some of the villages perceived tourism as an alternative or complementary income source in the context of declining agricultural or industrial activities because of the powerful economic, social and demographic transformations induced by the political turn of 1989. These stakeholders were pioneers in igniting rural tourism endeavours already in the early 1990s in Romania and in alleviating the endangered rural communities and their natural and cultural heritage by focussing the interest of the tourists towards local traditions, customs, values, skills and knowledge of the rural areas, and thus contributing significantly to appreciation of the values and endorsement of communities to cherish and preserve them.

The four analysed rural communities share a relative geographic isolation, because of a rather remote location from the main roads, which fostered the preservation of local cultural and natural heritage for decades, but it has also perpetuated economic marginality and infrastructural peripheralisation contributing to rural exodus.

Each village has an important mixture of cultural and natural resources that make them very appealing for tourism development. The location at the fringe of the Apuseni Mountains of Sâncraiu and Rimetea guarantee a rich natural potential, combined with intangible cultural resources of the Hungarian ethnic group and the built heritage. Viscri enjoys a rich Saxon cultural and built heritage, whereas Roşia Montană has a unique mining history that dates back to Roman times.

Viscri (Braşov county), one of five villages of Buneşti commune, is a small village with about 403 (2011) inhabitants and lays in a remote hilly area in Southern Transylvania. This region is well known as the stronghold of the Transylvanian Saxons community, which has shaped the area during the past 800 years. With the fall of Communism, a large majority of this German ethnic community left the villages and towns of Transylvania, leaving behind a specific cultural landscape and an important built cultural heritage as a remaining trace of the centuries of their presence. On the strength of this heritage developed a preservation initiative combined with soft touristic activities.

Sâncraiu (Cluj county) is a well-known settlement of another geographically, historically and ethnographically defined particular Transylvanian region, known by the Hungarian population as Kalotaszeg (Romanian: Călata). The region between Huedin (Hungarian: Bánffyhyunyad) and Cluj-Napoca (Hungarian: Kolozsvár), with approximately 42 villages, is traditionally inhabited mainly by Hungarian ethnics, where Hungarian culture still persists. The commune lies 6 km from Huedin, at the fringe of the Apuseni Mountains, in a nice hilly scenery (Havadi Nagy and Sebestyén, 2016). The living traditions and crafts ignited mainly a cultural tourism endeavour of the community.

Rimetea (Alba county) is a commune with two villages, namely, Rimetea and Colț estî (Hungarian: Torockószentgyörgy) with an ethnic Hungarian majority in the Apuseni Mountains. Once a town (seventeenth century) and a mining centre, it is a quiet village with an impressive village scape, in a beautiful natural scenery, at the foot of the Pietra Secuiului Mountain. The exemplary activity for protecting vernacular architecture and preserving the built cultural heritage has transformed Rimetea into one of the most appealing and famous villages of Transylvania (Ilovan *et al.*, 2016).

Roșia Montană (Alba county) is a village in the Golden Quadrangle, the ancient Romanian gold and silver deposits, in the Metaliferi Mountains, a division of the Apuseni Mountains. The town has a two millennial mining history, and it turned internationally famous in the past decades because of a gold and silver mining project, which, if approved, would become Europe's largest open-pit gold mine, and it would use the gold cyanidation mining technique. As a result of the significant resistance that it met, the project is currently (January 2020) on hold, yet the long-lasting struggle left its mark on the settlement and its inhabitants. Several initiatives try to activate alternative development measures for the town and its remaining citizens, some showing the CBT features.

### Results and discussions

The results of this research are presented in three subsections which, at the same time, are answering the main research questions set out at the beginning of the study.

#### *Role of tourism in the economic and social development of the rural local community*

The yearly (since 1991) organized traditional dance and music festival (Figure 2) had a major impact on the development of Sâncraiu as a tourist destination , which contributed largely to the visibility and appreciation of the village. This event showed the need for



**Figure 2.**  
Musicians in  
Sâncraiu; by courtesy  
of Michael  
Schneeberger

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creating a net of accommodation facilities for tourists interested in the intangible cultural heritage of the Călata region. At the first event in 1991, the festival attendees were accommodated in 15 houses of the villagers, using the empty, available rooms they had. As the manager of the local travel agency in Sâncraiu said in the interview:

[. . .] we never thought that we would have pensions and guests! Never! [. . .] The rest of the year there were no tourists coming to the village. I thought it was not enough. If we wanted to make money to live from this activity, it was not enough.

Because the interviewee, a former teacher, was unemployed at that time, he saw the potential of the collaboration between those interested in tourism in the village and he became the “cosmopolitan leader” of the village for the tourism promotion:

I said to these 15 pensions if it was ok for them, if I would go to different national or international organisations and fairs to promote not only me or my pension, but the whole community, all the pensions.

It was this “change agent” who fostered the settlement and development of the tourist offer in the village. So, even though at the beginning there was a support from the organizers of the dance festival, this enterprise in tourism activities originated mainly from locals.

The tourism activity, based primarily on cultural heritage (built heritage, customs, traditional music, dances and crafts), turned into a significant initiative to diversify the locals’ income possibilities. Apart from the accommodation offer and the natural resources, Sâncraiu provides a rich variety of eco-tourist workshops related to local cultural heritage, such as traditional trades, wood carving or embroidering, run by villagers in collaboration with the local leader.

The Sâncraiu tourist development has been thought as a sectorial activity, not irradiating to the rest of the community. It is true that tourism has provoked a contagious beautification of the village and has helped to promote a circular economy in the village, but tourism has grown in parallel to the rest of economic activities, not invading or inviting greater connection or interactions. However, besides the share of the local population directly engaged in touristic activities (mainly accommodation and catering), other benefit indirectly, to a larger or smaller extent, from them (transport company, grocery, gift shop, souvenir production and selling of local products).

Nowadays, Sâncraiu has 40 pensions organized in an association and working together in a local travel agency. Unlike the leader, the rest of tourism operators work mainly on agriculture, and tourism is still a complementary, more or less important, income source for them, and “generally women are in charge of tourism and pensions and men are working on workshops not related to the tourism sector”. Because of cultural tourism being a complementary source of income, inhabitants are also more motivated to protect and preserve cultural heritage to maintain customs and various identity defining values of the commune.

The feeling of belonging and community was a general phenomenon in rural communities, especially in those with a major part of ethnic minorities. After the exodus of the German ethnic group in the early 1990s, the mixture of the population in the villages changed, and with it the identity and the feeling of community as well. Also in *Viscri* (Figure 3), with the vast majority of the traditional village community gone, almost nobody remained who cared about and knew how to maintain the village. This meant that cultural heritage was in danger. As in the preceding example, Viscri also counted on a “cosmopolitan leader” in the community, a lady of Saxon offspring, one of the few who stayed, whose goal was much broader than the tourist development of the village. As she said in the interview:

**Figure 3.**  
Viscri streetscape; by  
courtesy of Michael  
Schneeberger



I was interested in helping my community. I wanted to help people to have a better life in my village [ . . . ] When the Saxons all left for Germany, we decided not to leave. For two reasons: to try to preserve what our ancestors did in the past and I thought that we had the opportunity to live in a democracy and do something for the community.

Further on, the structural changes in the economy caused high unemployment for the remaining population. In her endeavour to do something for her community, the Saxon lady got into local politics, became the first representative of Viscri in the municipality council and undertook several projects to mobilize the community.

Already some years before tourism turned into a major topic in the village, she started to create activities which tied the community together. Repairing the school building was the first community project and numerous others followed:

I became a teacher because the previous teacher went to Germany and the village needed a new teacher. Parents were not sending children to the school. So, I had to find how to talk to them and I organised events. Now I see that was creating the community by intuition.

The authentic village scape, with the fortified church (listed as UNESCO cultural heritage site since 1993), and the structure of the village with typical Saxon households preserve important features of the Saxon traditions (Ilovan *et al.*, 2016), boosted the arrival of tourists, and the local leader got in touch with the majority of them, “almost every visitor who came, by that time very few, passed by my kitchen to talk and try to find partners for my dream”. Spontaneously, she offered accommodation for some of these tourists until one French tourist asked her if she wanted to start tourism.

So, I said Let’s ask the community [ . . . ] In one of the village meetings I asked if someone wanted to start with tourism and five families, including mine, said yes. So, we started.

In Viscri, tourism was never seen as a substitute to traditional rural activities. In fact, it rose as an outcome of the renewal of the built Saxon cultural heritage, which was also seen as an

opportunity for employing the underprivileged population of Viscri, particularly of Roma ethnicity, tying them to the Saxon built cultural heritage and the rest of the community, enlarging their chances of employment, to be proud and self-confident and improve their quality of life.

The restoration of the traditional homesteads and other buildings had a really positive impact in the village. This happened with the support and expertise of NGOs, such as the Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET)[2], which focusses on the built cultural heritage, which offers training, the learning of crafts in house restorations, brick manufacturing or even guesthouse management for the affected population.

With the gathered experience, inside knowledge and the support of the experts, the local leader created a whole village project:

With this intuitive approach, we started the village project with its three dimensions. The first one was to give people the opportunity to learn a traditional trade by using local methods materials and methods, which inevitably cut prices on the building sector.

Since underprivileged people got a better income and a status in the community, we also got the social approach of the project. Lastly, the cultural aspect of the whole village project was based on my wish that Roma would take responsibility for the Saxon built heritage. Since they haven't built them, they did not have any attachment, respect or responsibility [...] We started to help them repair their facades because they were very proud that they (Roma) could do something. The entire village was proud that the village started to look nicer”.

The mainly unspoiled, for Western standards archaic, traditional village scape, the remote quiet location, its Saxon character and the built cultural heritage with the UNESCO listed fortified church and main street with its households confer the settlement a certain tourist potential (Jordan *et al.*, 2016). In the village project, tourism was seen as a key activity for the economic and social development of the village, especially for those with no education or any professional training, but always under control of the community. In fact, according to statistics provided by MET in 2018, tourism is the third activity in terms of employability of Viscri, after agriculture (both self-employment and day labourers) and crafts, fourth if considering pensioners, and it is still a complementary source of income for the majority of the people working on it. The main income source in the village is subsidized agriculture. Subsistence agriculture and the small-scale production of traditional products (jam, cheese, honey, etc.) for direct sale are also important for villagers.

Also at in middle of 1990s, it is possible to set the beginning of tourism and heritage protection activities in Rimetea, with a decisive implication of an organization, which took over the role of the “cosmopolitan leader”. The first steps towards a broader built cultural heritage protection were taken in 1993-1994 when students and young researchers identified Rimetea and its entire ensemble of vernacular architecture as worthy of being restored and preserved. As the village gained international attention, a founder and former vice-president of ICOMOS established a grant program to sponsor the rehabilitation of the traditional houses. The supervising entity of the grant program is the Transylvania Trust (TT), a registered charity which focusses on the conservation and promotion of Transylvania's built heritage and prompts society to be receptive towards and value the built environment (Ilovan *et al.*, 2016). As interview partners concluded, the Trust marked its presence in the village at an opportune moment:

[...] they came in the right moment back then, before 1999 [...] and persuaded, but no much effort was needed, the people of Torockó, to preserve it like it is, this beautiful row of white houses.

[...] and by that supporting the endeavours of the villagers to develop tourism based on their cultural values, encouraging to consider vernacular architecture as precious and worthy to be cherished and protected, as a possible income source.

The conservation work (Figure 4) in Rimetea conducted by the community with the support of TT received international recognition, which further stimulated the conservation works, the international fame and tourism based on uniqueness and authenticity (Ilovan *et al.*, 2016).

As earlier research shows, tourism is confined to the spring–summer season, with few exceptions, and generates for the most operators moderate revenues because of just a few opportunities to spend money for accommodation, catering and souvenirs. This means that for the major part of the population tourism is for a greater or lesser extent an important secondary income (Jordan *et al.*, 2016). There are also entrepreneurs who run touristic family businesses. According to one of the tourist entrepreneurs, “there are a lot of [business] possibilities to explore”, but he imputes lack of entrepreneurship of the locals or the missing guidance as a major impediment. For the time being, it seems as if the combination of tourism, agriculture and commuting to nearby cities is a viable economic model in Rimetea.

Roşia Montană is the only surveyed village at an incipient state of tourism development. The mining settlement is suffering from the major social and economic shifts caused by the long period of uncertainty, the social conflict between different actor groups and from the relocation efforts conducted by the mining company. The number of inhabitants declined heavily, many houses are abandoned and deserted, and there are scarce opportunities (like commuting to nearby towns, agriculture) to secure livelihoods, and basic services (like healthcare) are missing.

In this context, certain locals and external activists, with a strong link to the settlement because of the long-lasting protest movement, try to infuse life in the remained community



**Figure 4.**  
Rimetea,  
rehabilitating  
traditional houses; by  
courtesy of Michael  
Schneeberger

and tackle major topics such as income possibilities, entrepreneurship, youth and village scape. The Boy Scouts initiative attempts to educate the kids in an entrepreneurial and environmentalist spirit. A social enterprise gathers some 40 knitting ladies and supports them in manufacturing and selling qualitative handcrafted products. Architects, with the support of volunteers, also started a project to rehabilitate some of the houses.

Trai cu Rost (meaningful life) is an action group attempting to facilitate touristic activities and diversify income sources. The initiators, activists and locals consider that “there is no tourism without community”, so they have an integrative way of approaching tourism. Their aim is to activate and foster touristic offers based on the local natural and cultural potential, and to create an information platform connecting and presenting the different initiatives, services and activities that the community can facilitate and keep up. They want to create opportunities for the locals by promoting their skills and aptitudes to raise awareness of alternative income possibilities and to improve livelihood. First achievement is an internet presentation site, but also marked hiking and biking trails, as well as further activities, where the visitors can learn about the culture, people and economy of the region (Figure 5).

The devotion and commitment of the initiators, the existing and functioning network developed during the protest movement and, to some extent, the fame of Roşia Montană could be significant factors of success for the endeavours. Yet the “cosmopolitan leaders” face lots of impediments:

- a general lack of entrepreneurship, typical for marginal areas;
- significant shortage of resources (social, financial, human);
- no support from the local and regional administration; and
- insecurity and reluctance of the people.



**Figure 5.**  
Roşia Montană,  
guiding visitors; by  
courtesy of Michael  
Schneeberger

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*Participation of the local community in the starting and maintenance of the community-based tourism projects*

The local community is a very complex definition of agents, interests and agreements in a small geographical area. Although CBT empowers and involves the community in the decision-making of the tourism model, it does not mean that all the members of the community participate constantly in an equal and active way and monitor any phase of the whole process. In fact, the presence of the “cosmopolitan leader” is a trigger force that lightens and hurries all the processes because the person binds together the community because of his/her reputation and savoir-faire in the community.

In the case of Sâncraiu, even though a process of delegation of power occurred on behalf of the “cosmopolitan leader”, it is remarkable that the organization of the providers of touristic services in a well-functioning association, with yearly meetings (where they set the fees and prices, schedule the commune events, etc.), with the use of a system for the fair distribution of the tourists, good online presence and significant cooperation with several foreign and domestic travel agencies (Havadi Nagy and Sebestyén, 2016). This initiative has a committed strong personality (the president of the association) as the driving force, and the tourism operators delegate their participation to a steering committee. The president of the association is an internal agent, well-known by the community, who leads the idea of promoting tourism in the whole village. He had a tourism-based approach because the main goal of the CBT project was to establish and maintain an offer of local accommodation facilities joined into a local travel agency, managed by the steering committee.

The project included the put in value of the cultural heritage through ecotourism activities in collaboration with many members of the community. The cooperation with the public administration is also important, at least for the provision of the infrastructure of all kinds (transportation, water supply and canalization, health care and education) and also in maintaining a neat and pleasant village scape. Yet, even the major of the commune participates actively in tourism by running a pension.

As Felstead (quoted in Okazaki, 2008) considered, CBT must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions. Viscri is a very good example of this process. The system of monthly meeting for consultation, debate and decision-making developed during the past decades and evolved from a gathering of shy villagers into a well-elaborated managerial instrument for implementing citizen power, where various interest groups are represented and given a voice. These regular consultations provided the frame for setting priorities and realizing projects such as house restorations, an ecological sewage plant, waste management and leisure activities for tourists. These measures aim to solve the social, cultural and economic problems of the local community. Consultations and decision-making regarding tourism were also conducted in these meetings. Further on, this tool also works as a conversational instrument with the local government.

The presence of NGOs such as ADEPT Foundation[3] and MET as partners with local and external members and experts, their expertise and their contribution to the measures conducted in the village, working directly with the local leader also permitted a wider holism of the project.

In Viscri, the goal of the endeavour was based on the common good from the very beginning. The social approach of this village obliged to formulate the tourism development process in a very different way, because tourism was meant to be an integration tool for the most deprived dwellers and a complementary source of income for the majority, which would reduce income disparities among inhabitants. Thus, this approach encouraged the endorsement and promotion of further leaders in the village, who were empowered to

represent different groups of interest according to the existing trades, activities, neighbourhoods, women or age groups at meetings.

Viscri community is regulated by a social contract (called locally as the document of values) established in the monthly meetings:

[. . .] we made a village board to administrate our values and the problems that tourism could cause to our authentic lifestyle. We try to find solutions. Since every group of interest is represented, each month there are two partners who prepare the meeting and moderate the session.

This constant monitoring and control of the tourism activity have resulted in a conscious limitation of tourism in a high season for six months and a controlled lack of activity for the rest of the year. When asked about the way tourism is managed in Viscri, the “cosmopolitan leader” said:

If tourists park the car in front of the well, animals can't drink anymore in the afternoon when they come back from the fields. This is why we dictate what we want. In six months, we don't get tourists, we work with the community. Six months we earn money and six months are for us. We don't want to have tourists at any cost. We can do it because we have so many tourists [. . .] in other villages are still trying to make it work.

The case of Rimetea is similar to the one in Viscri in the context that both villages ignited tourism activities based on their valuable built cultural heritage and its protection. Despite the fame and success of the village, tourism is not especially well organized, mainly because of lack of leadership and weak cooperation between tourism entrepreneurs and the communal administration. On the one hand, the local authorities are not regarded as leaders, and on the other hand, there is no local leader – as in Viscri or Sâncraiu – whom everybody accepted. Groups form around several strong personalities (mostly entrepreneurs in tourism), and these groups are rather competing with each other instead of working together for a common interest (Ilovan *et al.*, 2016). The consulting Transylvania Trust[4] is partner and expert for cultural heritage protection, but not on tourism business and development.

The tourism in Rimetea is community-based and run by community members, several local SMEs with tourism profile and services established in the village. For many families, tourism is a viable primary or secondary income source, it contributes to the protection of natural and cultural heritage, but we cannot identify this feature of striving for the general well-being of the community, as it is present in Viscri or in Sâncraiu. This is also reflected in the testament of one of the successful tourism entrepreneurs, who considers tourism “a market, which has to be taken cared of”.

Different is the situation in Roşia Montană, where local and external initiators encourage tourism activities as an alternative and complementary income source, as a tool to use the local and regional natural and cultural potential for the welfare of the entire community, but face scepticism of a great share of the population and total rejection of the administration.

#### *Measuring the success of the community-based tourism projects in the four surveyed villages*

Participation of the community in the setting and development of the CBT project is difficult to measure from a quantitative point of view, because goodwill, commitment, participation or solidarity among other values are intangible and unmeasurable. Moreover, the degree of participation and commitment among agents can vary along all the phases of the CBT project.

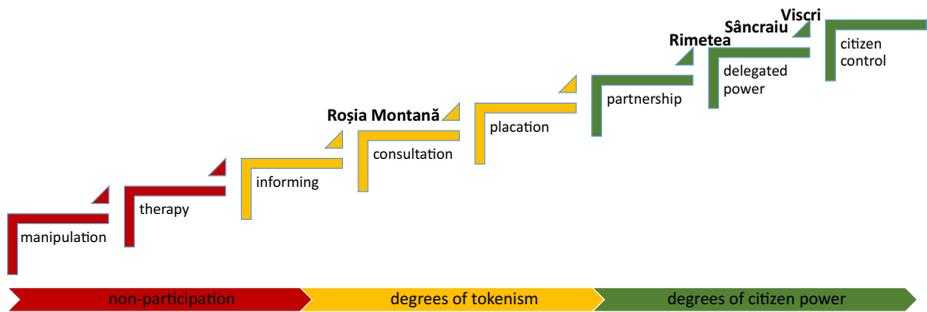
According to our findings about the achievements of the surveyed communities in tourism development, we allocated the four analysed villages into the ladder of participation by Arnstein (1969). We consider that the CBT implementations in Viscri, Sâncraiu and

Rimetea have achieved a high share of community involvement and participation, and thus occupying a high position on the ladder of participation. We position these projects of CBT on a transition level between delegated power and citizen control, whereat Viscri definitely has the strongest participation, also because of the fact that participation and community involvement is significant in the overall community management (Figure 6).

Further considerations show the limits of full control, as a result of several reasons, but the most important being the lack of political will and regulatory structures that would support, foster and facilitate this kind of endeavours at the regional and national level. So, even though in these examples the community is empowered and it mostly overcame social and psychological barriers of participation, the ultimate level of participation is yet blocked. This is strongly felt even at the local municipality level in Roşia Montană, where the political support for the CBT is non-existent. Here, the initiators face further impediments as well, such as disbelief and reluctance from a share of the population. Yet the situation in Roşia Montană is more complicated because of the recent history of conflicts. We should not forget that this initiative, comparing with the other surveyed villages, is at an incipient stage. This context makes it hard to correctly determine the level of participation in the CBT implementations.

As explained in the methodological approach section, we applied the instrument of measuring the success of CBT initiatives stated by Garcia Lucchetti and Font in 2013. Applying the suggested four categories to our case studies, we concluded the following:

- All the surveyed villages have various and valuable available “tourism assets”, both natural and cultural.
- Because of different reasons and circumstances (level of empowerment of the community, interest, capacities and resources), we can find different levels of “willingness to engage in tourism”.
- All the surveyed initiatives laid major emphasis on identifying community skills and on applying measures to develop missing “requirements” as awareness raising or entrepreneurial know-how for a successful CBT.
- External fund-dependency is relative, as private investments, reinvestment of income out of tourism activities and self-acquired “financial inputs” (such as grants) exceed the importance of financial support from NGOs or other donor agencies, and the projects strive self-sufficiency.



**Figure 6.**  
The analysed CBT initiatives on the ladder of participation

**Source:** Own representations based on Arnstein (1969)

- The aspect of the partnership is also well covered, even though it manifests in different ways and strengths with various stakeholders. In Sâncraiu, Rimetea and Viscri, there are strong relations with travel agencies. Sâncraiu and Viscri have a rather well functioning relationship and cooperation with an active local municipality, which is weaker in Rimetea, and it lacks totally in Roşia Montană. NGOs are present in all the case studies, but in some cases, they are only indirectly significant for the tourism activities, such as TT in Rimetea or Adoptă o casă in Roşia Montană focussing mainly on built cultural preservation work.
- Planning, monitoring and evaluating are the strongest in Viscri, followed by Sâncraiu, where the actors have established an organically grown planning with the involvement of a large share of the affected community. Whereas it is important to mention that in case of Viscri, this goes way beyond tourism and applies to a whole range of social and economic issues of the village. In Rimetea, we did not notice planning on community level, but rather on the individual enterprise level.

According to these findings, we can conclude that Viscri and Sâncraiu are the most successful, whereat, the initiative with CBT features in Roşia Montană is a new development, lacking the longevity of the other surveyed CBT implementations (Table I).

### Conclusions and further research

As to be seen in the analysis, tourism plays a significant role in the economic and social development of the surveyed rural settlements, but it is a part of a complex structure with manifold stakeholders and interests.

As expected, the level and intensity of participation of different community members in the starting and maintenance of the CBT projects varies over time. Similar is the situation with the individual economic revenues, as well with the social, cultural or environmental benefits of the ventures for the communities, whereas an increase of the gains for the interest of the community as a whole is evident.

Decisive for the success of CBT endeavours are, on the one hand, empowered communities, but also a legal and normative framework for the implementations of CBT enterprises. Further on, local co-operation, trust and networking and partnerships with external stakeholders (NGOs, experts) are elementary as well. This kind of approaches also needs vision and leadership, entrepreneurial skills and mobilization of resources.

Obviously the presence of a “cosmopolitan leader” in the setting and perpetuation of the CBT endeavour is decisive, as they are capable to lead the community and its tourist or non-tourist projects towards the economy for the common good. However, this kind of individual leadership can show many risks associated to the subjectivity of the vision of the leader, charisma and personal appeal and the difficulties for replacement and delegation once the leader wants/needs to reduce his/her personal exposure to the project. Thus, this major advantage of having a strongly engaged leader could turn into a weakness of the management model, and under a new, less charismatic management, the projects could fail.

In the four cases analysed, tourism is still a rather non-invasive activity because of the growing, but controlled market demand, and no major unsolvable dilemmas have arisen from the possible arrival of external stakeholders who are capable to alter the rhythm and the schedule of the community. Yet, some peak season phenomena such as crowding or irregularly parked cars which hinder traffic and damage the aesthetic experience occur in these villages as well.

Surveyed settlement	Planning	Partnerships, bridging and bounding	Community's capacity to deliver	Funding
Viscri	Continuous planning with regularly meetings	MET external experts; travel agencies; UNESCO	Available tourism assets (natural and cultural); willingness to engage in tourism; skills within the community and capacity building requirements	Various grants, mostly initial funding needed but strives self-sustainability
Sâncraiu	Annual meeting of the association; not a regularly strategic plan but discussing and deciding together	In the association with cooperative and active local government and cooperation with travel agencies		Private, self-acquired EU-funds
Rimetea	Lacks planning on community level	Cooperation between larger guest house owners and accommodation providers; no cooperation between the larger guest house owners; disrespect towards the local government; donor agency; cooperation with travel agencies; TT		Private, donor agency for the built cultural heritage
Roşia Montană	Consultations with interested locals	Cooperation between locals and externs; network of activists and supporters; local government is an impediment; cooperation with NGOs		Private, donations and NGOs; partially dependent on external funding (ex. Adoptă o casă)

**Table I.**  
Level of success of the surveyed CBT initiatives

**Source:** Own representation based on [Garcia Lucchetti and Font \(2013\)](#)

A further challenge of the CBT projects are the local and regional administrations, which in many cases are rather reluctant towards innovative approaches, where citizens take over power, or they have no instruments or the will to support these endeavours. The CBT projects need to work in parallel with the public administration, not overlapping and exceeding its control in the territory. A vision of long-term progress direction and coordination is needed, so that different measures or development strategies do not counteract or hinder each other.

Decisive in the case studies was also the early realization of the valuable cultural heritage to be used in economic purposes, before major interventions in the buildings and environment would have spoiled the appealing village scape, as it is the case of many settlements and by that ruining a significant structure and foundation for unfolding rural tourism. Cultural tourism also supports the preservation and maintenance of traditions and practices of intangible heritage, endangered by rural exodus as well.

In conclusion, these villages could be beacons for their regions and role models for other CBT ventures in the area and beyond, based on their community-building and management, as well as the respectful use of natural and cultural heritage resources. Their experiences could be incorporated into good practice recommendations and even into rural tourism development policies in post-socialist context.

## Notes

1. World Trade Organisation (WTO): <http://sdt.unwto.org/content/about-us-5> (Retrieved in March 2019).
2. Mihai Eminescu Trust (MET): <https://www.mihaieminescutrust.ro/>
3. ADEPT Foundation: <https://fundatia-adept.org/>
4. Transylvania Trust (TT): [www.transylvaniatrust.ro/](http://www.transylvaniatrust.ro/)

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