

# SOCIAL INCLUSION AND EUROPEAN RURAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY: THE CASE OF NON-AGRICULTURAL TOURISM ACTIVITIES IN RURAL BIHOR COUNTY

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**Abstract.** *Rural areas in Romania face structural vulnerabilities stemming from geographical isolation and limited economic activity, factors that restrict access to sustainable employment opportunities. However, the potential of the private sector and the synergy among local actors are essential drivers of social inclusion, with the rate of job creation serving as the benchmark for the success of development policies. Through Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and funding from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), the European Union has sought to establish a strategic framework aimed at diversifying the rural economy by stimulating non-agricultural activities. However, the absence of a long-term strategic vision has limited the effectiveness of the social inclusion process; although economic diversification is an imperative necessity for rural entrepreneurs and residents, the fragmented implementation of this concept has hindered the achievement of the intended cohesion objectives.*

*This study aims to analyze the contribution of non-agricultural activities to labor market dynamics in rural areas, while also examining the spillover effects on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the tourism sector. The research focuses on the administrative-territorial units of Așeu, Vadu Crișului, Șuncuius, and Bratca (Bihor County), localities located within a tourist area defined in part by the Crișul Repede Gorge protected natural area. The theoretical and empirical foundation of this study is based on the analysis of data from official statistics (European, national, and local), government documents, as well as a rigorous review of the specialized literature, including doctoral dissertations and relevant scientific articles.*

**Keywords:** *rural development, social inclusion, tourism, Romania, Bihor.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Rural areas in Romania face structural vulnerabilities stemming from geographic isolation and restrictive economic dynamics, factors that severely limit access to sustainable employment opportunities. However, the resilience of the private sector and

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the synergy among local actors are essential drivers of **social inclusion**, with the **job creation rate** serving as the benchmark for evaluating the success of cohesion policies.

Within the European Union, Pillar II of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) sought to establish a strategic framework for the diversification of the rural economy by mobilizing resources from the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD). This mechanism aimed to reduce dependence on the primary sector by directly funding non-agricultural activities, considered essential for the modernization of the Romanian countryside. The development of these sectors (tourism, crafts, services) is not merely an economic alternative but an imperative necessity for local entrepreneurs, offering solutions to labor outflow and demographic aging. However, the effectiveness of these instruments has often been undermined by the absence of a long-term strategic vision and fragmented planning. Although the concept of **non-agricultural rural development** is consistent with prevailing market demands, its suboptimal implementation has led to disparities in the process of social inclusion, thereby risking the transformation of one-off investments into interventions lacking true sustainability in the absence of a link between the specific needs of communities and European funding priorities.

**The research objective** of this study is to analyze the contribution of non-agricultural activities to labor market dynamics in rural areas, while also examining the spillover effects on the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in the tourism sector. The units of analysis selected for this study are the communes of *Aușeu*, *Vadu Crișului*, *Șuncuiuș*, and *Bratca* in Bihor County, located within a tourist area that is partially situated within the Crișul Repede Gorge protected/natural area. The information analysed was sourced from a range of European, national, and local statistics, government sources, as well as doctoral theses, articles, and studies published in various academic journals.

The **research hypotheses** from which we proceed in conducting this analysis are:

- H1. A reduction in European funds allocated to the development of non-agricultural activities will lead to fewer jobs in rural areas;
- H2. Continuous financial support from European funds for non-agricultural activities leads to job creation and the development of other businesses in rural areas.

**The research question** addressed throughout the documentation and analysis process is: *What is the impact of investments in non-agricultural activities under the second pillar of the CAP, Rural Development, on the process of social inclusion in rural areas?*

**The research methodology** was designed using the following methods and levels of investigation: documentary analysis (including material found in specialized literature), comparative analysis of quantitative data, qualitative analysis, and analysis of existing statistical data. The research tools employed were case studies, observations and graphical representations in the form of tables and figures. **The investigation period** considered for the case study spans 2000–2022, for which complete data is available for analysis in accordance with the established research methodology and tools.

**The expected results** take into account the fact that the development of non-agricultural activities in the tourism sector within the rural area under analysis contributes directly and indirectly to job creation, fostering social inclusion in the medium and long term.

The private sector in rural Europe received over 60 billion euros in funding between 2000 and 2022 (European Commission, Cohesion Data 2000–2006, 2007–2013, 2014–2020), which helped generate moderate job growth (AGRIDATA, 2026). Between

2000 and 2022, across three multiannual programming periods, over 14 billion euros were allocated through the Common Agricultural Policy to support non-agricultural activities in rural areas (European Commission, 2024), but which, alongside other European programs, supported coherence in the social inclusion process (PNDR 2007–2013, 2015: 445).

Rural social inclusion in Romania is also a priority for the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the institution responsible for rural development. All policy documents on rural development from the period under review identify social inclusion as a central concern and describe the different ways in which MADR has addressed this issue in three European-funded programs.

***The Special Accession Program for Agriculture and Rural Development 2000–2006*** (hereinafter referred to as *SAPARD 2000–2006*) aimed, with regard to job creation, to provide funding, through Measure 3.4 under Priority Axis 3, for projects requiring support for the development of non-agricultural activities. It should be noted that during the 2000–2006 period, from the perspective of specialists at the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), the concept of *non-agricultural activities* was “insignificant in economic terms,” and “the rural economy is poorly diversified and still dependent on agricultural activities” (MADR, 2011: 75). Measure 3.4, titled “*Development and Diversification of Economic Activities Generating Multiple Activities and Alternative Incomes*,” although it does not explicitly include support for non-agricultural activities in its title, is aimed at economic operators in rural areas, who, through the projects they submit, can create new jobs or at least maintain jobs in rural areas through activities unrelated to agriculture (MADR, 2011: 76). At the national level, Measure 3.4 was utilized in 81% of its financial allocation, equivalent to over 68 billion euros. Its effectiveness stemmed precisely from the non-agricultural activities under the *Tourism sub-measure*, which accounted for over 80% of expenditures. According to official evaluations, Measure 3.4 also yielded good results in terms of impact indicators, namely job creation. The SAPARD program created over 8,000 new jobs, of which approximately 2,800 were jobs preserved as a result of this measure’s initiatives, the majority of which—about 85%—were in the tourism sector (MADR, 2011:150–151).

***The 2007–2013 Rural Development Program*** (hereinafter referred to as *the 2007–2013 RDP*) included an economic component, the primary objective of which was also to create jobs in rural areas. With regard to promoting social inclusion, through the PNDR 2007–2013, Romania, in accordance with European rural development policy, set out to support two categories of beneficiaries—public and private—through funding measures. Support focused on funding private beneficiaries specifically aimed to encourage small businesses to develop non-agricultural activities outside the agricultural sector (PNDR 2007–2013, 2015: 349).

To generate alternative income, any entrepreneur or resident in rural areas was encouraged to diversify their activities into the *non-agricultural sector* and to develop activities in the production sector (crafts, service provision) or rural tourism (agritourism, recreational activities). Compared to the previous program (SAPARD 2000–2006), specialists from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR), encouraged by the results achieved previously, created through the National Rural Development Program (PNDR) 2007–2013 two specific measures to support non-agricultural activities aimed at creating at least one job, namely: *M312—Support for the creation and development of micro-enterprises* and *M313—Promotion of tourism activities*. Compared to the previous period, the results achieved fell far short of

expectations According to post-implementation evaluations, M312 achieved 71.86% of its allocated budget in terms of financial effectiveness, while M313 achieved considerably less, only 45.39% of the allocated amount (MADR, 2017: 5–7). In terms of the gross number of jobs created, both measures were deemed ineffective, as the two measures together created only 4,617 new jobs out of the 14,071 projected (MADR, 2017: 6–7).

*The 2014–2020 Rural Development Program* promoted the diversification of the rural economy and the creation of new job opportunities to address the surplus of labor in the agricultural sector and increase rural incomes. In Romania, nearly 4,000 projects were supported for the creation or development of non-agricultural enterprises in rural areas (AFIR, 2025), resulting in the creation of over 13,000 jobs (approximately 5,000 under LEADER).

Compared to the other two programs analyzed, the 2014–2020 National Rural Development Program (PNDR) allocated resources to a single measure, Measure 6, which specifically supported the establishment and development of small rural non-agricultural businesses. An important role in this objective was played by the diversification of economic activities in rural areas and the creation of income alternatives, stimulated by two sub-measures: SM 6.2 and 6.4, respectively. Support was granted based on a business plan and was directed toward the establishment of new non-agricultural activities for the purpose of creating jobs (sM 6.2). Support focused on production, crafts, agritourism, and service activities. To generate alternative sources of income, farmers and their family members were encouraged to diversify their activities into the non-agricultural sector. SM 6.4 aimed to stimulate the rural business environment, particularly in the tourism sector, by creating productive activities (including in sectors with growth potential) and providing essential services to the population. By facilitating access to financing, continuity in the development process was ensured for newly established non-agricultural micro-enterprises and small enterprises, but not for firms in rural areas with entrepreneurial experience or those implementing a project with European funding. This misinterpretation of the process of developing non-agricultural activities in rural Romania resulted in the failure to meet a target indicator set by the program. Of the 21,940 jobs projected under the supported projects (Measure 6, Intervention Area 6A), only 8,092 were created (MADR, 2024:42).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualizing rural development at the level of local or regional administrative units, through the contribution of non-agricultural activities—particularly tourism—requires a broader analytical perspective that includes: 1. regional development policies, programs, and instruments; 2. secondarily, documents referring to the development strategies of these administrative units are also particularly important.

In the context of our paper, the debate regarding regional development as a concept, but also as a direction for public policies, is a highly complex one. In the framework of our analysis, understanding this concept involves both the European and national perspectives, as well as outlining several directions for regional development policy at the level of Bihor County (Pantea and Brie, 2020: 39; Brie and Mészáros, 2015). The conceptual delimitation of our debate must be defined through a broad analysis of not only the concept of regional development, but it must of course refer to the concept of region, but also to that of regional policy. This triad is in a very close regional connection (Hurjui, 2015). *The regional development* policy promoted by the EU focuses

on reducing development disparities between territorial units. The territorial area subject to the implementation of this policy is *the region*. The latter can be defined as „an area of a territory with a set of distinct and consistent own characteristics (these can be physical or human), which gives it a certain significant unity and distinguishes it from other neighbouring areas” (Apud Verga, 2017). In the European context, regions are therefore the subject of regional development policies. *Regional development* is a concept through which "the aim is to boost and diversify economic activities, stimulate investment in the private sector, contribute to reducing unemployment and not least an improvement in living standards" (Cîrnu, 2010: 75). This development must meet present and future needs. It “responds to the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Apud Verga, 2017). Without being prisoners of the concept of development, EU Cohesion Policy allows us to introduce the concepts of *cohesion and regional competitiveness* into the sphere of conceptual debate. Regional competitiveness is closely related to regional territorial development, and the latter is not the result of economic growth, but is one of the causes of growth (Cojanu et al., 2009: 6; Pantea and Brie, 2020: 39).

At the level of Bihor County, *the principles of development* start from the need for a coherent link and organization at the level of development measures and programs. In this sense, a special emphasis is placed on the development of economic competitiveness, as a foundation for the other levels of development of society. In this sense, the following principles are followed (see more Brie and Pantea, 2020):

- *Convergent development* aims to stimulate performance without creating development gaps at the territorial level.
- *The inter-correlation* implies that the objectives of the strategy take into account the objectives of the national and European plans and strategies but also the adaptation of the projects according to the recommendations of the governance policies of the different institutions acting at local and county level.
- *Sustainable development* means proposing a type of development that ensures a balance between social, economic and environmental aspects and that takes into account the issues related to restricting access to resources for future generations.

The international component of this development is becoming increasingly important as European transnational economic interconnection. The positioning of the county in the immediate vicinity of the border imposed a deep inclination on the cross-border dimension of its sustainable development. Cross-border cooperation therefore becomes one of the important vectors of regional development that Bihor County can not only exploit, but must also do. Inter-connectivity at all levels, including cross-border, can ensure a sustainable perspective on development. However, cross-border cooperation is only part of the dimension of international cooperation (see more about the role of international cooperation Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2023; Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2022). A direct example related to the analysis of our case study is the fact that the twinning of the municipality of Vadu Crișului with Körösszegapáti (Hungary), Székkutas (Hungary), and Felsőpakony (Hungary) has led to the organization of cultural events that directly contribute to the growth of tourism activities (Brie, Mărcuț, and Polgar, 2023: 203, 207). In fact, according to a survey on international cooperation conducted in 2022 across all local administrative units in Bihor County, representatives from Aușeu and Vadu Crișului identified the development of international cooperation for tourism development as a priority, and vice versa (Brie, Mărcuț and Polgar, 2023: 211).

Within the CAP, particularly the second pillar—Rural Development—between 2000 and 2020, the issue of diversifying economic activities in rural areas remains linked to agriculture and farm-level economic outcomes. Analyses and studies of the CAP's multiannual programs demonstrate that rural development has, for several years, been part of the post-agricultural productivism paradigm, where the expansion of rural governance to include non-agricultural actors is a key element (Wilson, 2007: 77).

Some researchers argue that the second pillar of the CAP is not particularly concerned with addressing the socioeconomic problems of rural communities through the development of non-agricultural activities (McAreavey, 2009: 15). Recent research supports this view, namely that the main focus of rural development policy has gradually shifted primarily toward supporting multifunctional agriculture, with less emphasis on non-agricultural activities (Pelucha and Kasabov, 2020: 44–47). However, at the EU level, rural non-agricultural firms provide inputs, services, and markets for farms and agricultural businesses and ensure a solid tax base for local governments in rural areas (Green, 2013: 45). For example, investments in the construction of tourist guesthouses generate added value on multiple levels: annual local taxes paid on the construction, diversified jobs, as well as the indirect development of other non-agricultural activities related to tourism. Other scientific studies indicate that entrepreneurs and residents in rural areas believe that non-agricultural activities create a higher quality of life and more stable jobs compared to agricultural activities (Bonaciu, 2025: 364–373).

The results of another study conducted in Romania, which analyzed the development and impact of non-agricultural activities on rural development and income diversification in rural Romania between 2000 and 2020, demonstrate that through EU funding and consistent national policies supporting non-agricultural activities, this new concept is becoming an alternative source of income, a means of job creation, and a way to reduce rural-urban disparities (Sima, 2020: 237–251).

In Spain, between 2007 and 2013, projects that generated business and jobs focused on productive investments such as: increasing the value of agricultural production, tourism, diversifying non-agricultural activities, and creating and developing micro-enterprises. The highest levels of investment per project were recorded in projects promoting tourism activities (Measure 313), many of which involved the development of sports and recreational facilities and diversification into non-agricultural activities (Measure 311). These initiatives by Iberian entrepreneurs were funded with over 100,000 euros per project through the European rural development policy (Cañete, Nieto, Cejudo, 2020: 92–102).

A group of researchers examined, prior to the year 2000, several of the main rural areas facing development challenges in the U.S., China, and Latin America. The results revealed interesting contrasts in rural development opportunities and the constraints facing rural areas in these different contexts. The findings demonstrate that *non-agricultural activities* are not a new concept; on the contrary, they have been used in scientific analyses for several decades. As in the EU, non-agricultural activities contribute to the diversification of the rural economy, reducing exclusive dependence on crops and agriculture; they also lead to job creation and demographic stability, thanks to economic diversification and cooperation between farmers and non-farmers (Dax, 2020: 14; Li Zhang, 2013: 304; Dougherty, 2013: 336; Lucatelli, 2006: 46). Studies conducted in China show that industrial enterprises in rural areas have created employment opportunities on farms (Fei, 1989), absorbing surplus agricultural workers; subsequently, rural enterprises have had the effect of gradually creating a non-agricultural workforce,

which to some extent slows the flow of rural workers to cities (Goldstein, Goldstein, and Gu, 1991: 289–314). For their part, American researchers analyzed the economic transformations in North America through the lens of U.S. non-agricultural programs. Their conclusion was that if these programs are tailored to local populations, they are far more effective than agricultural programs when the goal is to stimulate rural development (Irwin, Isserman, Kilkenny, and Partridge, 2010: 522–553).

In conclusion, based on scientific analyses to date, we observe that non-agricultural jobs are essential globally for the transformation and survival of rural areas, offering a vital alternative to traditional agriculture. They contribute to economic stability and social inclusion by reducing poverty and modernizing communities through the diversification of local economic activities.

### 3. PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION THROUGH THE DEVELOPMENT OF NON-AGRICULTURAL SERVICES IN THE TOURISM SECTOR IN THE BIHOR COUNTY COMMUNES OF AUȘEU, BRATCA, ȘUNCUIUȘ, AND VADU CRIȘULUI. CASE STUDY

#### 3.1. Statistical analysis of the study area

This analysis compares the evolution of three economic indicators over the 2007–2020 period in the four communes under analysis, namely: the number of active firms, turnover, and the average number of employees.

According to NIS statistical data, in the study area—comprising the four municipalities and their respective villages—there were a total of 1,360 active economic entities during the analyzed period, with turnover ranging from 12 to 28 million lei and an average number of employees of 81 per thousand inhabitants. These companies covered all sectors funded by the measures of the National Rural Development Program (PNDR) during the reference period.

**Figure 1.** Evolution of economic indicators during the 2007–2020 period at the level of the communes in the study area

	Economic indicators	No. of active companies 2007-2013	No. of active companies 2014-2020	Turnover (million lei) 2007-2013	Turnover (million lei) 2014-2020	Average number of employees per 1,000 inhabitants 2007-2013	Average number of employees per 1,000 inhabitants 2014-2020
UAT	Aușeu	99	206	28.230	72.091	48	86
	Bratca	99	230	17.219	58.634	50	74
	Șuncuiuș	104	189	12.786	16.245	71	102
	Vadu Crișului	163	270	23.468	24.872	106	118
	<b>Total</b>	<b>465</b>	<b>895</b>	<b>81.703</b>	<b>171.842</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>380</b>

*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2020)

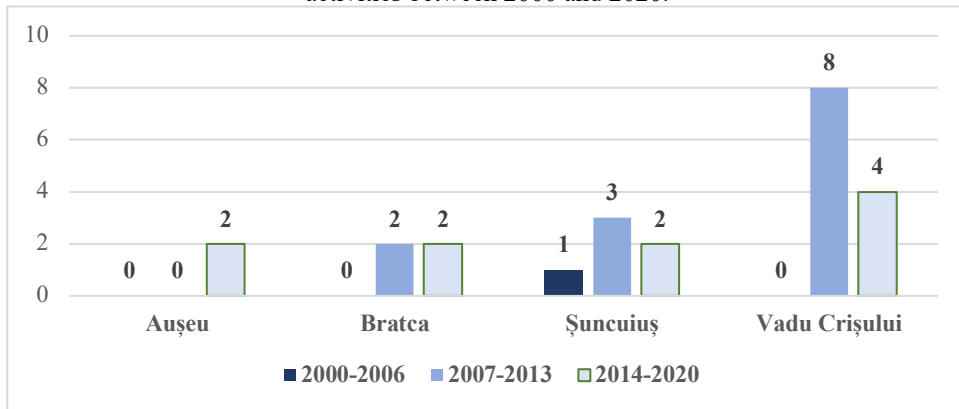
Figure 1 shows that all three indicators analyzed point to a positive trend in all the municipalities included in the analysis. The increase in the number of active firms has also led to a significant increase in turnover, which naturally resulted in an increase in the number of jobs, with this indicator showing a rise in the average number of employees from 275 to 380. These increases indicate that the entrepreneurial ecosystem

was in a period of development, providing the population with jobs and diverse economic activities, which represented a source of potential beneficiaries for rural development programs whose businesses could be funded.

### 3.2. Analysis of projects submitted under non-agricultural measures

During the three programming periods in the study area, 24 non-agricultural businesses were funded through measures (3.4, 313, 6.2, and 6.4). The projects selected for funding were direct investments in the tourism sector and consisted of the construction of accommodation facilities (13 agritourism lodgings, 6 guesthouses, and a campground) and the development of recreational activities (4) in the tourism sector.

**Figure 2.** Distribution of projects funded through support measures for non-agricultural activities between 2000 and 2020.



*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data collected from MADR (2026)

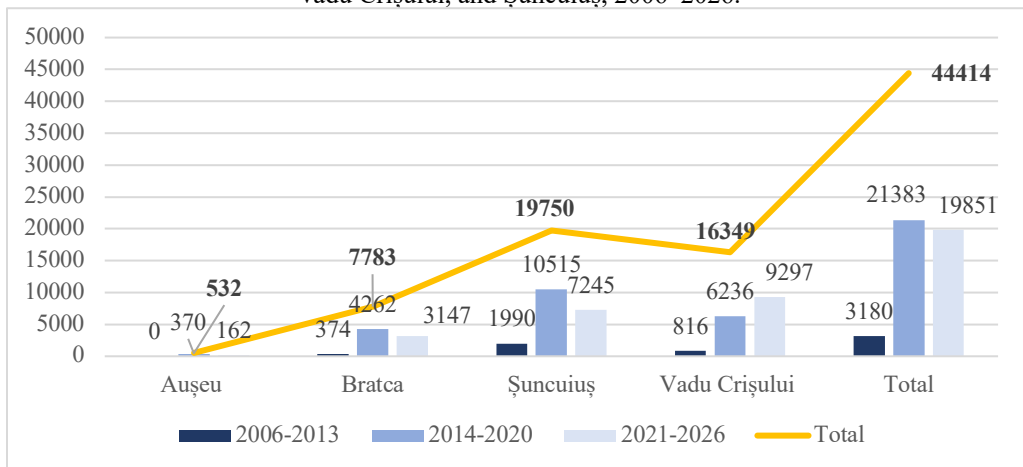
Figure 2 indicates that the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Bihor research area located in the Crișul Repede Gorge responded tentatively to opportunities for financing non-agricultural activities through European funds. As can be seen, during the pre-accession period to the EU (2000–2006), only a single project was submitted at the level of the Șuncuiuș commune. During the 2007–2013 period, the number of projects increased dramatically to 13 funded, only to see a decline in investment projects for non-agricultural activities in the tourism sector to 10 during the third programming period. Although fewer projects were selected for funding, it should be noted that during the 2014–2020 period, compared to the other two periods, four projects were implemented for the first time in the Crișul Repede Gorge, introducing new non-agricultural activities specific to the tourism industry. Through all four projects, new non-agricultural businesses specific to the mountainous area within the analyzed municipalities were established. The investments consisted of purchasing equipment for recreational activities (rafting, via ferrata, caving, cycling tourism, Aușeu, Vadu Crișului) as well as establishing an adventure park (Vadu Crișului). The growth of these investments in non-agricultural activities was driven by the success of other non-agricultural investments, namely the construction of guesthouses and agritourism accommodations. Another finding based on field observations is that all these non-agricultural businesses in the study area, funded with European money, will still be active in 2026, continuing to

generate jobs and income for other economic activities due to the influx of tourists attracted to the tourist area (Appendix 1).

### 3.3. Data analysis

All the investments made in the study area have created new jobs in rural areas, generated revenue for local budgets, stimulated other non-agricultural businesses, and contributed to an increase in the number of tourist arrivals in the area, who in turn have spent considerable amounts on other types of non-agricultural services available in the Crişul Repede Gorge. The impact of investments in non-agricultural activities, the construction of guesthouses, and the establishment of recreational activities is reflected in the trend of tourist arrivals between 2006 and 2026, who utilized tourism services in the study area.

**Figure 3.** Evolution of the number of arrivals at guesthouses and campgrounds in Auşeu, Bratca, Vadu Crişului, and Şuncuiuş, 2006–2026.



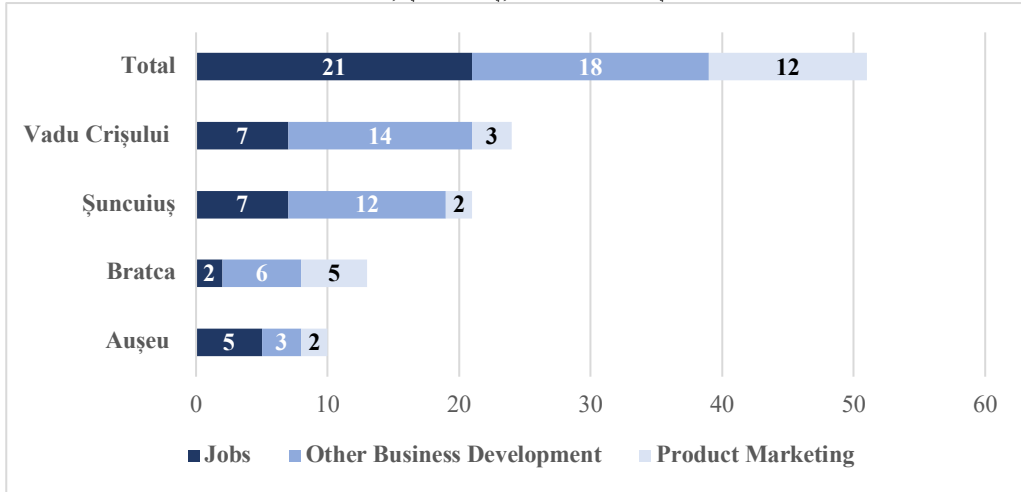
*Source:* Authors' analysis based on data published by the National Institute of Statistics (2026)

The quantitative data in Figure 3 indicate that, due to investments in non-agricultural activities, the number of tourist arrivals has increased significantly, particularly in localities where investment levels were highest. Thus, it can be observed that in the commune of Şuncuiuş, where six guesthouses were built with European funding during the three programming periods analyzed, the number of arrivals increased the most between 2014 and 2020, rising by 19% compared to the 2006–2013 period, and then declined between 2021 and 2026. In the commune of Vadu Crişului, where 9 accommodation units were built and 3 non-agricultural leisure businesses were established, the number of arrivals increased by 9%, in the commune of Bratca, where 4 guesthouses were built, the number of arrivals increased by 8.8% between 2014 and 2020, with a decline projected for 2021–2026. The commune of Auşeu recorded the fewest tourist arrivals; however, statistical data indicate that funding for the two non-agricultural activities—guesthouse construction and the development of leisure services—contributed significantly to the increase in tourist arrivals.

The economic and social effects of active non-agricultural activities in the study area reflect the fact that these investments have been beneficial not only to entrepreneurs but also to local residents. Data collected between December 2023 and March 2024

through semi-structured interviews with 40 residents—10 from each locality—indicate that non-agricultural investments benefit residents of the local communities under analysis.

**Figure 4.** Benefits of non-agricultural investments for residents of the communes of Auşeu, Bratca, Şuncuiuş, and Vadu Crişului.



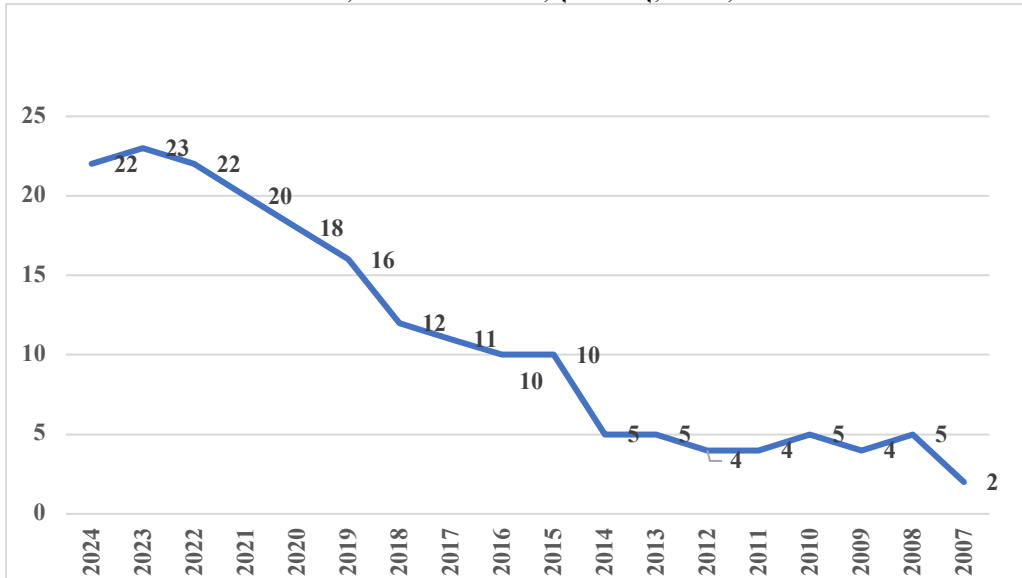
*Source:* authors' interpretation based on a semi-structured interview (Brie, Bonaciu, 2025)

According to the residents interviewed, the main benefit of non-agricultural investments in tourism in their communities is job creation. Of the 40 residents interviewed, 52.5% believe that these local investments have created jobs close to home, 45% say that other local businesses have developed, and 30.0% say they have been able to market various local food products (milk, cheese, jams, traditional pies, beverages), or handicrafts (white pottery from Vadu Crişului).

The most telling example of the success and positive impact of a non-agricultural tourism business on the process of social inclusion in rural areas is that of SC Padaflora SRL in the commune of Şuncuiuş, village of Bălnaca.

In 2005, the Gavrilaş family from the village of Şuncuiuş submitted a funding proposal to OJFIR and received 90,000 euros to build a 6-room guesthouse in the village of Bălnaca. To carry out the investment, they contributed an additional 90,000 euros from their own funds, so that in December 2006 they were able to open six rooms at the new tourist location in the Crişul Repede Gorge, under the name Pensiunea Casa Bucătarului. In the first year after opening, the guesthouse had only two employees: the couple, Dana and Florin. In 2008, with the help of a loan, they increased the number of rooms to 14 (37 beds) and added three more employees. Although the ratio of expenses to revenue was not encouraging, nor was the financial crisis of that period, the couple did not lose heart. In 2011, they made another investment worth 228,000 euros, partly with funds obtained through AFIR and partly from their own resources. This time, with the help of European funds, they built a complex within the guesthouse featuring four solar-heated pools. As a result of these investments, the business gradually began to generate steady income and create jobs for the local community, regardless of the season.

**Figure 5.** Development of the number of jobs created through non-agricultural activities by SC. Padaflora S.R.L., Casa Bucătarului, Șuncuiuș, Bihor, 2007–2024.



*Source:* Compiled by the authors based on data published online by TopFirme (2026)

New job creation began to rise in the first two years of operation, from two people in 2007 to five in 2008. This was followed by a downward trend between 2009 and 2014 due to the financial crisis during that period. Immediately after the completion of investments in 2014, the number of jobs doubled, from 5 to 10 people, in 2015. The upward trend continues annually, reaching an average of 22 employees by 2024. The annual increase in jobs indicates that, in the Crișul Repede Gorge area, the company featured in this case study has become the largest employer in the hospitality sector.

Investments in non-agricultural activities, such as lodging facilities, have generated a ripple effect of economic development across the rural economy of Bihor County. Thanks to these investments, other local non-agricultural businesses have also developed, both in tourism and in other sectors, supporting the establishment of new employment opportunities and increased income for entrepreneurs in rural areas. For example, in Șuncuiuș, a mountaineering club set up several via ferrata routes, which encouraged young people in the area to obtain their guide certification and subsequently provide paid guiding services. Locals have invested in seasonal dining establishments or in infrastructure for street-side souvenir sales. In Bratca, in the village of Valea Crișului, Aventura Trekking, a tour operator based in the commune of Aușeu, has partnered with the local community to develop and offer a new tourism service: traditional brunches (Digi24, 2018, 2019). Through this service, tourists are offered dishes specific to the area, prepared with local ingredients, as well as cultural activities such as visiting wooden churches or exploring protected areas in the region (AMD Bihor, 2017: 2-27). The operator, Interregional Călători, in the field of rail transport, has adapted its train cars and coaches to facilitate the travel of cycling enthusiasts in civilized conditions to recreational areas within the studied region (Digi24, 2018; Bihoreanul, 2025). Local authorities have also set up new, modern campgrounds in the villages of Bratca, Șuncuiuș, and Vadu Crișului, which in turn generate jobs and revenue (Bihoreanul: 2025).

## CONCLUSIONS

The creation of employment opportunities in non-agricultural sectors is a fundamental pillar for the resilience and structural transformation of rural areas, offering a strategic alternative to traditional farms. This economic diversification helps strengthen financial stability and social inclusion, directly contributing to poverty alleviation and the modernization of local communities.

Within the four administrative-territorial units analyzed, the 2007–2020 period (which overlaps with the three financial programming cycles) was marked by a direct correlation between business growth and economic performance. Thus, the proliferation of active legal entities generated a substantial increase in turnover, while also facilitating the consolidation of the labor market; this is reflected in the trend of the average number of employees, which rose from 275 to 380. The positive dynamics of these indicators attest to the maturation of the local entrepreneurial ecosystem, with the diversification of economic activities providing a solid base of potential beneficiaries for the funding lines associated with rural development programs.

During the three programming periods, 24 non-agricultural businesses were funded in the study area. The projects selected for funding were direct investments in the tourism sector and consisted of the construction of accommodation facilities (13 agritourism establishments, 6 guesthouses, and a campground) and the development of recreational activities (4) in the tourism sector.

The investments implemented in the study area generated a significant multiplier effect on the rural economy, contributing to the creation of new jobs and the strengthening of local budget revenues. Economic diversification, through the development of the accommodation sector (guesthouses) and recreational infrastructure, has stimulated interdependence among non-agricultural sectors and fostered increased tourist flows in the Crișul Repede Gorge. The impact of these investments is reflected in the upward trend of the arrival indicator between 2006 and 2026, with tourist flows generating positive externalities through the consumption of complementary services, a factor that has supported the viability of local entrepreneurship.

The economic and social effects of active non-agricultural activities in the study area reflect the fact that these investments have been beneficial not only to entrepreneurs but also to local residents. Data collected between December 2023 and March 2024 through semi-structured interviews with 40 residents—10 from each locality—indicate that non-agricultural investments benefit residents of the local communities under analysis. Investments in non-agricultural activities, such as lodging facilities, have produced a ripple effect of economic development in the rural economy of Bihor County. Thanks to these investments, other local non-agricultural businesses have also developed, both in the tourism sector and in other sectors, contributing to: the creation of new jobs and increased income for entrepreneurs in rural areas.

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## ANNEX 1

**Table of active businesses in the Bihor County communes of Aușeu, Bratca, Șuncuiuș, and Vadu Crișului that provide non-agricultural services in the tourism sector, funded between 2000 and 2022 through the European rural development policy.**

Type of non-agricultural activity	Business Name	Location	Web
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	La vie	Aușeu	<a href="https://cabanesipensiuni.ro/listing/la-vie/">https://cabanesipensiuni.ro/listing/la-vie/</a>
Leisure tourism service	Aventura Trekking	Aușeu	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/AventuraTrekking.ro">https://www.facebook.com/AventuraTrekking.ro</a> <a href="https://youtu.be/rn5teWBONJ4">https://youtu.be/rn5teWBONJ4</a> <a href="https://www.facebook.com/BrunchArdelenesc.ro/">https://www.facebook.com/BrunchArdelenesc.ro/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Grădina cu soare	Bratca	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/Pensiunea-Gr%C4%83dina-cu-soare-100065476029430/">https://www.facebook.com/p/Pensiunea-Gr%C4%83dina-cu-soare-100065476029430/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Lavanda	Bratca	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/PensiuneaLavanda-100084062137045/">https://www.facebook.com/p/PensiuneaLavanda-100084062137045/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Cabana Lorău	Bratca	<a href="https://www.cazaretransilvania.ro/lorau-cazare-cabana_lorau.html">https://www.cazaretransilvania.ro/lorau-cazare-cabana_lorau.html</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Dolina	Bratca	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiunea.dolina">https://www.facebook.com/pensiunea.dolina</a>
Accommodation, restaurant, recreational facilities, guesthouse	Casa Bucătarului	Șuncuiuș	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/">https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/</a>
Accommodation, restaurant, vacation home	Casa bucătarului	Șuncuiuș	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/">https://www.facebook.com/casabucatarului/</a>
Agritourism guesthouse	Gradia	Șuncuiuș	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneagradia/?local_e=ro_RO">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneagradia/?local_e=ro_RO</a>
Accommodation, restaurant, agritourism guesthouse	Lavinia	Șuncuiuș	<a href="http://www.facebook.com/pensiunealaviniasuncuiuș">www.facebook.com/pensiunealaviniasuncuiuș</a>
Apartments for rent	Dolina village	Șuncuiuș	<a href="https://dolinavillage.com/contact/">https://dolinavillage.com/contact/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Corimen	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Cori-men	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/">https://www.facebook.com/pensiuneacorimen/</a>

Type of non-agricultural activity	Business Name	Location	Web
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Cuibul naturii - leisure & retreat	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/p/Cuibul-Naturii-Leisure-Retreat-61578582233741/">https://www.facebook.com/p/Cuibul-Naturii-Leisure-Retreat-61578582233741/</a>
Rooms for rent	La grotta resort	Vadu Crișului	<a href="http://www.lagrottaresort.ro">www.lagrottaresort.ro</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	Retreat belvedere	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/retreat.belvedere.vaducrisului/">https://www.facebook.com/retreat.belvedere.vaducrisului/</a>
Accommodation, agritourism guesthouse	River house	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://pensiuneariverhouse.cazare7.ro/">https://pensiuneariverhouse.cazare7.ro/</a>
Accommodation, restaurant, agritourism guesthouse	Roua Munților	Vadu Crișului	<a href="http://www.pensiunearouamuntilor.ro/">http://www.pensiunearouamuntilor.ro/</a>
Accommodation, camping	Vadu crișului	Vadu Crișului	<a href="http://csabanovak.com/">http://csabanovak.com/</a>
Adventure Park	Tomnatic adventures	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://adventurespark.ro/">https://adventurespark.ro/</a>
Leisure tourism services	Vadu river camp	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://vadurivercamp.ro/">https://vadurivercamp.ro/</a>
Leisure tourism services	Base camp	Vadu Crișului	<a href="https://vadurivercamp.ro/">https://vadurivercamp.ro/</a>

*Source:* Compiled by the authors based on data published by MADR (2010, 2015), AFIR (2020), and MEDAT (2026)