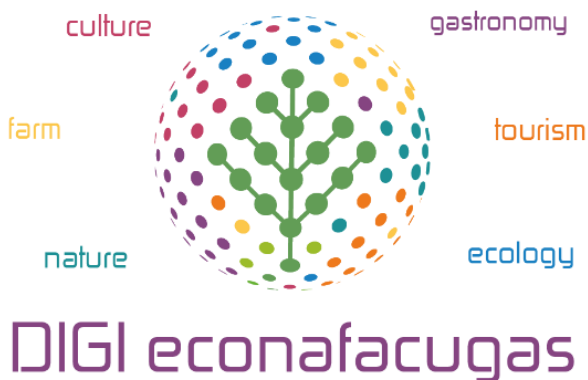


Press Release

First workshop DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS

- Romania, 16-19th of July 2023 -



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First workshop of the DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS Erasmus+ Programme

On 16-19 July 2023, in Richiș, Sibiu county, Romania, took place the first workshop, part of DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS project, with focus on the potential in rural tourism, regarding agricultural and forestry activities in rural areas, took place. The discussions were on the Transylvanian Highlands case study, the largest ecotourism destination in Romania.

The objective of the workshop was to analyse the profile of the applicants of sustainable, ethnocultural and ecological rural tourism in the studied area (Transylvanian Highlands) and to explore the economic activities that can be related to this type of tourism.

This workshop was the first of its kind in the DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS project, a project created by five environmental NGOs: 2 from Spain, 1 from Slovakia, 1 from Austria and 1 from Romania, co-financed by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme - namely: CESEFOR and Fundacion Monte Mediterraneo from Spain, Hochschule FUR AGRAR from Austria, Lišov Muzeum from Slovakia and Propark - Foundation for Protected Areas, from Romania.

The main objective of the DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS project is to analyse the current scenario of rural tourism and the digital tools presented in this sector, in the four partner countries. An experience exchange between the partners will be carried out through two face-to-face workshops in order to define the current needs of

rural, ethnocultural and ecological tourism and to collect examples of good digital practices in this sector.

There are several arguments that can be made for implementing strategies around ecological, nature, agricultural, cultural and gastronomic tourism tools in rural areas in Europe. We can talk about economic benefits, sustainable development, cultural exchange, education and awareness, health and diversification of tourism offers. Overall, implementing strategies around the tools in the above-mentioned areas in Europe can provide a number of benefits for both local communities and visitors.

For example, the development of environmental, nature, agricultural, cultural and gastronomic tourism in rural areas can bring economic benefits to local communities. These can include creating new jobs, stimulating small and local businesses and generating income for rural communities.

Rural tourism can also provide opportunities for education and awareness-raising on important issues such as environmental conservation and sustainable development.

On the first day of the workshop in Richiș, discussions focused on the presentation of the eco-tourism destination Transylvanian Highlands and its vision for sustainable rural development based on natural and cultural values. Each participating NGO also shared the typology of agricultural, livestock and forestry activities, which are currently found in rural tourism in Spain, Slovakia, Austria and Romania.

Transylvanian Highlands case study

This is the area that overlaps the protected areas of Sighișoara, Târnava Mare and the Foothills of Hârtibaciu. The Transylvanian Highlands destination stretches around the Hârtibaciu Valley, the left bank of the Târnava Mare and the right bank of the Olt river, over an area of about 260,000 hectares. More than 100,000 inhabitants live in 44 communes and towns in this area.

Visits to the 9 points of interest within the Transylvanian Highlands area have led to tourism as well as gastronomic, economic and educational experiences.

The 9 points visited were: Noah House, Rihuini Villa and Fortified Church in Richiș, Fortified Church in Biertani, Moșna Bio Farm, Angofa Wildlife Center, Sighișoara, Cornățel and Alma Vii.

Discussions were about:

- local gastronomic points and the development of a gastronomic infrastructure in rural areas, connecting small local producers with tourists;
- how traditional farming practices protect wildlife and promote biodiversity around Transylvanian villages;
- how can small local business can thrive and grow, with small mass tourism;
- how can tourist points, like the fortified church of Alma Vii can host different cultural events, like folk ensembles or art galleries
- the case study of Cornățel School Farm, the story of the family that brought the first horse (saved from starvation) to the concept of farm schooling, a new concept in Romania, but very popular in other countries, especially in the UK, where kindergartens and schools enthusiastically embrace it as an alternative to classical education.
- the example of Angofa Wildlife Center, who through their example of grazing, have managed to restore biodiversity to the meadows near Sighișoara.

In the end of our second discussion session, each participant in the meeting worked together to identify barriers to the development of economic activities in the area.

As a result of these discussions, a profile of the tourists coming to this eco-tourism area and an analysis of the internal and

external environment in terms of tourism and agricultural, livestock and forestry activities in the area was drawn up.

Based on the information provided by the Director of the Transylvanian Highlands, by the producers we met, small entrepreneurs and tourist guides from the visited areas (Richiș, Biertani, Moacșa and Cornățel) we made a SWOT analysis of rural tourism in this eco-tourism area.

Strengths:

- Passionate and educated people who return to these places to create small family businesses;
- a diversity of beneficiaries in these rural areas;
- business growth is made in a way that is conscious of the environment and cultural values of the area;
- international support through the efforts of NGOs investing in the natural and cultural values of the area;
- people with a high level of awareness, who grow their small businesses in line with their own values;
- sufficiently high digital skills of entrepreneurs in the area;
- natural and cultural wealth.

Opportunities:

- ecotourism
- willingness to use digital tools
- preservation of national cultural and natural values in an equitable way

Weaknesses:

- lack of safety in tourism infrastructure;
- lack of tourist information - physical visibility (info points) or online;
- lack of GSM signal in many remote areas;
- poor transport infrastructure - lack of public transport linking points of tourist interest or even between villages;
- presence of stray dogs in many places.

Threats:

- the exodus of young people to big cities in search of better education and better paid jobs;
- proximity to war zone – Ukraine;
- mass tourism, which disrupts the lives of people living in these rural areas;
- conflict between old habits and behaviors vs. new directions of economic and social development.

The first workshop of the DIGI-ECONAFACUGAS Erasmus+ Programme brought a high level of mutual understanding between the partners on what they can achieve together, regarding the changes each country needs in the future. The meeting was productive, lively, full of experiences, meeting along the way people who love nature and are eager to grow in the cultural and natural values of these Transylvanian lands.