



The Role of Agritourism in Rural Economy Diversification: Do Georgian Farmers Fully Leverage Its Potential?

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Abstract

Agritourism development is considered to be an effective way to raise the income of rural households and address their vulnerabilities associated with overdependence on agricultural activities by proposing additional activities on the farms. This has incentivized farmers and governments to introduce and invest in developing so-called “non-agricultural” undertakings, including under EU CAP. However, as various scholars have identified based on economic analysis, agritourism demonstrates quite varying results as regards farm size, output, experience, location and other factors. Its complex and varying nature has only been exacerbated by the non-existence of a single definition and cross-cutting nature causing confusion with rural tourism. In light of the newly adopted law of Georgia “on Tourism” and proposed tax cuts for agritourism service providers, this research aims to identify agritourism service providers in Georgia and the activities they offer to the visitors by conducting qualitative in-depth interviewing and on-site observation enabling to elaborate recommendations to better manage and address the needs of rural households in diversifying their income and making effective use of the existing agritourism potential. In addition, the research contributes to the everlasting challenge to define agritourism as it is essential prerequisite to develop adequate and needs-based policy framework for agritourism, allowing to provide tailored support to rural households in a long run. In this regard, local context should serve as the cornerstone.

Keywords: Agritourism, rural tourism, rural economy, diversification, policy framework for agritourism.

Introduction

Agritourism is an emerging segment of tourism that creates opportunities to diversify the income of farms by adding new activities, attractions, and experiences, allowing these rural households to break into new markets, attract more visitors, and reduce the risks associated with overreliance on a single activity (Wu et al., 2024). As various studies have shown, agritourism has a positive impact on farm income, and the income growth rate of farmers engaged in agritourism is higher than that of non-agritourism farms (Grillini et al., 2023), from the perspective of service providers, agritourism is a source of higher and more stable income for not only exclusively agritourism service providers but also in the broader community, on regional level, in general, as the increased number of tourists positively influences the turnover of local businesses, groceries, museums, etc. (Martinus et al., 2024).

In addition, there is a growing scholarly interest in this phenomenon. As Ndhlovu & Dube's bibliometric search and content analysis have shown, an increasing number of studies are devoted to the relationship between agrotourism and sustainable development. However, on the one hand, there are signs of the "North-South dichotomies", expressed in a quite uneven distribution of studies conducted in developed and developing countries, and, on the other hand, the studies tend to focus on economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability and to a lesser extent on socio-cultural-historical aspects of agritourism (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024), while one of the key components of agritourism is storytelling.

At the same time, the number of tourism service providers in Georgia is increasing, who promote their services and position their destinations as agritourism destinations, accompanied by increased state engagement to regulate and support the industry. In 2023, the law of Georgia “on Tourism” was adopted, which defines agritourism ([Law of Georgia “on Tourism”, 2023](#)), while the Tax Code of Georgia envisages a special tax regime for agritourism service providers (operators).

In light of the abovementioned developments, it should be noted that there is a lack of consensus among scholars regarding the definition of agritourism, as the concept fully or partially overlaps with Rural Tourism, Gastronomic Tourism, Cultural, Heritage, and Historical Tourism.

This research aims to identify and further analyse agritourism destinations in Georgia and their proposed activities, and to develop recommendations for diversifying farms and increasing income. We defined the units of observation as the agritourism destinations listed in the ELKANA and AGROGATE databases, as well as those found through personal contact. Moreover, we tried to collect observations not only from agritourism service providers and study the activities they carry out, but also, a secondary objective of our inquiry was to assess the perspectives of tourists and visitors themselves who are receiving such services.

To achieve the aim of the study, the following two research questions were defined:

What types of agritourism activities are offered to visitors/tourists in Georgia?

What is needed to utilise Georgia's agritourism resources and potential efficiently?

Methods and Materials

Given the nature of the research topic and the ambiguity in the definition of agritourism, the research was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, we conducted an in-depth analysis of relevant literature to conceptualise agritourism and articulate an appropriate conceptual definition. This was essential to avoid confusion between agritourism and rural tourism, enabling proper selection for the survey. Considering that there is no official (officially recognised) list of agritourism facilities in Georgia, which could have served as a basis for quantitative research, it was considered appropriate to conduct an in-depth qualitative study. Several non-probability sampling techniques were used to select the respondents for the survey, in particular, quota and purposive sampling ([Neuman, 2014](#)). As part of the selection, in the first stage, we selected relevant cases that, to a certain extent, aligned with the study's purpose. This sample was drawn from the ELKANA and AGROGATE databases and from personal contacts. Afterwards, quota sampling was conducted based on three criteria: gender, location, and the services/activities offered. This was important, especially for the service/activities category, as the study was mainly conducted in a wine-producing region of Georgia, and we tried to avoid surveying 'only wineries', which would have biased the study.

Finally, based on the literature review and survey results, recommendations were developed to better utilise agritourism potential in Georgia's rural areas.

Study Area

As mentioned earlier, there is still no unified list of agritourism destinations in Georgia, making it difficult to identify relevant service providers. Therefore, obtaining generalizable results at the national level is difficult. Consequently, given the research budget and other limitations, it was decided to focus the research on two regions of Georgia: Kakheti and Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti. More precisely, we focused on the Zemo (Upper) Racha part of the Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti region.

It is also worth noting that Kakheti, according to information obtained from ELKANA and AGROGATE databases and personal contacts, is characterised by a high concentration of agritourism destinations compared to other regions of Georgia.

Results

Conceptualizing Agritourism

One of the most obvious challenges of the relevant scientific literature on agritourism and tourism is the lack of clarity and improper definition/conceptualisation of key terms and concepts. Agritourism is one segment of rural tourism, although, for some scholars, the two terms have the same meaning. For example, Brandth and Haugen use “farm tourism” and “Agritourism” ([Brandth & Haugen, 2010](#)) interchangeably. Grillini et al. consider agritourism part of rural tourism, which involves agricultural activities and attracting visitors to the farm ([Grillini et al., 2023](#)). Considering agritourism's complex

and overlapping nature, some researchers refer to it as "enigmatic" (Martinus et al., 2024), reflecting the challenges associated with its conceptualisation.

"Rural tourism" or "tourism in rural areas (activities that are carried out in rural areas)" can include various activities and types of tourism services, such as Agri, ecological, ethnographic, cultural and cognitive, medical, and some types of sports tourism.

Rural tourism development began in the 1970s in Spain, Italy, the US, France, and other countries, while in developing countries it commenced later, in the 1990s. In today's world, rural tourism is considered an alternative way to stimulate entrepreneurship and rural economic development, helping revive lagging rural areas and local economies and transferring capital and jobs from cities and developed areas to non-industrial areas (Khartishvili et al., 2019). It is also noteworthy that currently, rural tourism accounts for 15% of Europe's tourism industry (Kusters & Khartishvili, 2019).

The prerequisites for the development of rural tourism are the need of city residents for recreation in a new, ecologically clean environment and a new way of life, which is due to the growth of urbanization; low prices for recreation in rural areas; the possibility of consuming ecologically clean products; various opportunities for organizing rest; engagement in agricultural activities on the farm and familiarization with local culture, gastronomy, and customs (Aleksandrova, 2010).

Rural tourism is considered one of the priority destinations of tourism by the World Tourism Organization, and to encourage it, every year the tourist village of the year is named (in 2023, Mestia was the best tourist village in the world).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1994) describes rural tourism as "tourism that takes place in rural areas" and specifies that rural tourism is a complex, multifaceted activity; It is not just farm tourism. It includes farm stays, ecotourism activities, hiking, horse riding, adventure, sports and wellness tourism, hunting and fishing, educational travel, art, cultural heritage tourism, and, in some cases, ethnographic tourism (Development Committee on Tourism Secretariat, 1994).

According to another definition (Comox Valley, 2010), "rural tourism" is travel from an urban environment to rural areas for the traveler to enjoy and experience natural beauty, the tranquility of small towns, the richness of culture, and escape from the pressures of urban life to have pleasant experiences and improve the quality of life" (Khartishvili, 2020).

Rural tourism in Georgia is a relatively new type of tourism, although it has important traditions. Due to the close familial ties between the urban and rural populations of Georgia in the 20th century, it was common, especially in the summer and sometimes in the winter, to rest in rural areas with relatives or in their own homes or rented apartments, especially for families with children. "Tourists" mainly rented homes in those villages that served as resorts or resort areas and had facilities for the treatment and recovery of the population, since there were not enough accommodations in those resorts, and the distribution of trips there was carried out under conditions of a centrally planned economy. Since the 1970s, this phenomenon has been supplemented by the transfer of garden plots in the outskirts of large and medium-sized cities a very low prices to employees of enterprise institutions. This form of recreation was closer to today's concept of rural tourism, since the owners of garden plots were themselves involved in agricultural activities on their family farms, rather than the previously discussed forms of stays with relatives or in rented apartments, which involved less involvement in village life and farming. Most such settlements, especially near big cities, still serve their original functions.

Agritourism is a special form of tourism that combines organised and unorganised recreational activities for tourists in rural areas to connect with rural nature, lifestyle, and agricultural traditions. This type of tourism is distinguished by special forms of spending free time, such as taking care of cattle, working in a garden, a vegetable garden, or a vineyard, tasting local cuisine, walking, and arranging picnics in rural areas (Aleksandrova, 2010).

In the Law of Georgia "on Tourism" that was adopted in 2023, agritourism is defined as a type of tourism, the activities of which are carried out on a farm and encompasses receiving tourists, providing meals, sharing /familiarizing with a rural lifestyle, local traditions, and sights, engaging tourists in agricultural activities, providing them with locally produced agricultural products and performing other activities related to tourism and agriculture (Law of Georgia "on Tourism", 2023). As evidenced by this definition, it covers a wide range of activities, including other tourist services that are not directly related to agritourism. However, it is geographically limited because, according to the definition, agritourism is carried out only on farms.

The mentioned definition is mainly consistent with the definition provided by Martinus et al (2024), which is also shared by the authors of this article, according to which, agritourism is "economic

exchange via a range of on/off-farm and authentic/staged experiences directly or indirectly related to agriculture” (Martinus et al., 2024, p. 3).

The local context should also be taken into account when conceptualising. Among agritourism facilities in Georgia, wine cellars are the most sought-after, primarily destinations for gastronomic or wine tourism rather than agritourism; however, many of these destinations offer accommodation and host tourists who often participate in harvest and wine-pressing activities.

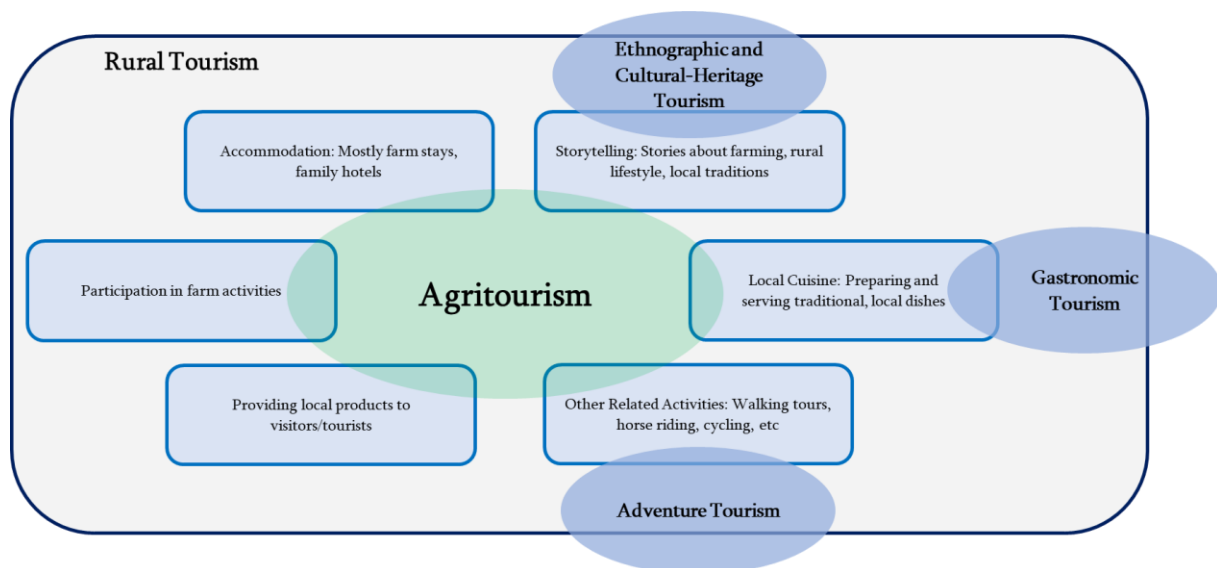


Figure 1. Defining Agritourism (based on a literature review)

The Results of the Survey

As part of the survey, 17 respondents were interviewed in two regions of Georgia, namely Kakheti and Racha-Lechkhumi and Kvemo Svaneti (in particular, Zemo (Upper) Racha–Oni Municipality) through face-to-face in-depth interviews. The geographical distribution of the respondents in terms of the municipality was as follows: Akhmeta Municipality (6 respondents), Telavi Municipality (3 respondents), Gurjaani Municipality (2 respondents), one respondent each from Signaghi, Kvareli and Sagarejo municipalities and three respondents from Oni Municipality (Zemo (Upper) Racha). The varying levels of agritourism activity explain such a distribution of respondents and are largely proportional to the geographical distribution of the agritourism destinations.

The Results of the Survey in Kakheti Region

Kakheti region, both from the historical perspective and at the current stage, is the centre of viticulture and winemaking in Georgia. According to the 2023 data, out of the 221.2 thousand tons of grapes processed in Georgia, 204 thousand tons of grapes were processed in the Kakheti region; at the same time, more than 81% of the income from the sale of grapes comes from Kakheti (National Wine Agency of Georgia, 2023). Therefore, one of the criteria for selecting respondents for the survey was their activity and location, so the research was not limited to the perspective of winery owners, who are quite a few in Kakheti. The question of whether the agritourism destination was located on the "Wine Route" served as a filter/contingency question. As a result, of the 14 selected respondents, only 6 own an agritourism destination located on the "Wine Route", which enabled us to draw conclusions about the challenges facing the agritourism sector in the region and to develop relevant recommendations.

In selecting respondents, it should be noted that before the face-to-face interview, we did not ask detailed questions about their activities and limited ourselves to more general questions, for example, "Do you consider your activity as agritourism?" "Are you currently engaged in agritourism activity?" These questions allowed us to exclude from the initial list the agrotourism destinations that no longer considered their activities to be agrotourism and/or did not express a willingness to discuss their experience.

As a result, 14 respondents were interviewed face-to-face, and the general information about them is summarised in Table 1.

Gender	
Male	14%
Female	86%
Age	
18 -34	21%
35 - 54	36%
55 and over	43%
Household Size	
1	0%
2 - 4	64%
5 and more	36%
Educational Level	
Graduate (at least bachelor's degree or equivalent)	100%

Table 1. The general information about the respondents of the Survey in the Kakheti Region

The majority of respondents (84%) have been engaged in tourism activities for at least 5 years and have been providing "agritourism" services, 8% of respondents had 3-4 years of experience in delivering agritourism services. Therefore, the interviewed agritourism service providers had significant practical experience in this area, which enabled us to ask detailed questions about their activities, existing challenges, and opportunities.

Since the public's perception and understanding of "agritourism" are not uniform or accurate, before asking detailed questions about their activities, it was important for us to understand how our respondents perceive agritourism and whether the "agritourism" services they provide align with their understanding of the phenomenon. For this purpose, during the survey, we asked the respondents to name 3-5 words or phrases that they associate with agritourism, and the results of this exercise are summarised in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Word Cloud - How do the respondents understand "agritourism"?

After this, we asked the respondents to evaluate how their activities correspond to the vision of agritourism they described, and we got the following result: 14% of the respondents believe that their activity "corresponds to some extent", 57% believe that their activity "corresponds", and 29% believe that their activity "fully corresponds". It should be noted that one of our respondents (Respondent_10) considered that her destination was closer to being ecotourism than agritourism, although she did not substantiate her answer. While describing agritourism and the activities she offers, she used words/phrases such as "family environment" and "tranquillity/quietness", and "close/direct contact with tourists", which, in our opinion, are elements of agritourism.

In terms of employment, the survey results show that tourism activities, including agritourism, are a source of income for many people living in rural areas. Most of our respondents (73%) are assisted by at least one household member in delivering agritourism activities. In addition, it is significant that each of our respondents employs at least one person (excluding household members) with varying intensity. Respondent_11 mentioned that during the summer-autumn season, in addition to household members, she employs seven people in agritourism activities. However, as already mentioned, this usually has seasonal/episodic character and largely depends on the demand and the type of service that tourists

request (Respondent_12 mentioned that she periodically employs a cook when there is a demand from tourists for a master class in cooking local dishes, and Respondent_10 mentioned that she periodically employs a neighbour when there is a demand for a horse tour).

Agritourism activities require specific education/experience on which to base the business's success. As highlighted by Martinus et al. (2024), respondents engaged in agritourism service provision had „deep prior experience in agriculture“ (p. 3), which served as a basis for their subsequent activities. Therefore, an important part of our questionnaire was devoted to the experience and support (in terms of education or material-technical assistance) that our respondent agritourism service providers received in starting or expanding their businesses.

Before the start of agritourism activities, agriculture (primary production or processing) was the main activity of only 33% of the respondents. In comparison, the main activity for 67% was non-agricultural. The majority of respondents were employed in the public sector, predominantly in the field of law, and their activities did not intersect with tourism or agriculture. In addition, from an educational perspective, we can consider the education of only 29% of respondents to be in line with their current activities, namely, tourism, viticulture-winemaking, food technology, and agribusiness. The results of our research provide a different picture in this respect compared to the results of Martinus et al.'s study, which was conducted in Western Australia.

The words "spontaneously", "by chance", "personal initiative", and "own imagination" predominated in the answers of the majority of respondents to the question "What prompted you to start your agritourism business?". As a result, we can conclude that the majority of agrotourism service providers surveyed in Kakheti did not have a prior clear vision of their tourism business development when they started their activities, and according to their answers, the initiation of tourism business and the formation of relevant service types are mainly the result of random processes. All respondents indicate that they get information from different sources to expand their agritourism activities. These sources include: information available on the Internet in open access, personal or family members' travel/living abroad and services received there, and services/activities requested by tourists.

86% of the surveyed agritourism service providers in Kakheti benefited from "state or international/non-governmental organisation grant/co-financing or other assistance, and most of them benefited from various financial assistance schemes. It should be noted that the majority of respondents found it difficult to accurately recall all the assistance they received to start or expand agritourism activities, as most participated in 3 or more projects, indicating a high level of investment in this segment of economic activity.

Another block of questions was devoted to the types of provided agritourism services and the profile of visitors/tourists.

From a service point of view, it should be noted that the vast majority of respondents offer a wide range of services to visitors/tourists. The clarifying questions revealed that the majority of surveyed agritourism service providers do not offer a standard set of services to guests and use a very flexible approach. This approach involves pre-arranging the types of services in agreement with the visitor/tourist or the connecting travel company, and planning the services accordingly. For example, Respondent_08 mentioned that "tourists agree on the service in advance and the tour is planned accordingly", and Respondent_12 mentioned that "they always know exactly who is coming, when and what service they want".

The services provided by the respondents are diverse; however, it is noteworthy that when we asked whether they involved their guests in farming activities, only half (50%) offered such services, while 79% of the respondents had a farm and engaged in agricultural activities (primary production). Therefore, despite having a farm, some of the agritourism service providers preferred not to engage the guests in their farming activities, for example, Respondent_12 has several varieties of grapes planted in her vineyard, and despite the request of tourists to participate in the process of picking grapes, she says no, because "tourists may not pay attention to what kind of grapes they are picking", which will damage the quality of her wine.

According to the survey results, the most popular services are serving local dishes/drinks (93% of respondents), involving guests in the preparation of local dishes (71%), and getting to know the ethnic characteristics (71%). In addition to activities and master classes related to viticulture and winemaking, such as wine pressing, Churchkhela preparation, etc., as well as Khinkali master classes (such services are provided by more than half of the respondents), about a third of our respondents offer quite unique food/beverages to guests, such as mulberry leaf tea, Khinkali made from nettle leaves, etc. About a third

of the respondents also use the harvest from their vegetable gardens/plots for cooking, and about 20% involve guests in the picking process.

In our opinion, to fully share the agritourism experience, service providers need to accommodate guests, as more extended stays facilitate sharing this experience through Storytelling. Accordingly, we inquired whether the respondents had accommodation and how much time on average they spent communicating with visitors/tourists. Based on the survey results, 64% of agritourism service providers can accommodate guests. In addition, only 36% of respondents spend more than 3 hours a day in direct contact with tourists. In terms of average visit duration, two groups of agritourism service providers were distinguished. The first group mainly focuses on short visits, and the average visit duration with these respondents is less than 6 hours. The second group offers a broader range of services to customers, including accommodation. This group of respondents (50% of respondents) named 1-4 days as the average duration of the visit.

Concerning Storytelling, only 29% of the respondents indicated that their service provision involves telling stories about local traditions and ethnic characteristics. We can consider the mentioned aspect as the main challenge of the interviewed agritourism service providers, as, in our opinion, a close connection should exist between agritourism services and Storytelling.

Regarding the profile of visitors/tourists, first, it should be noted that the absolute majority (over 90%) of the surveyed agritourism service providers received more than half of their visitors/guests from abroad (i.e., non-residents). Only one destination (Respondent_07) was predominantly visited by citizens of Georgia (up to 60% of visitors), but the pandemic significantly changed their visitor profile, with 80% of guests being foreign residents by 2020. This dynamic coincides with the tendency mentioned by another respondent (Respondent_05) that "the number of local tourists significantly increased after the pandemic (Covid-19)". Despite this trend, the general conclusion is that the surveyed agritourism destinations in the Kakheti region are less popular with the population of Georgia, as Respondent_03 noted, "I do not even remember the last time I received a guest from Georgia."

We also asked our respondents to recall the "countries from which they received the most guests" and "the farthest settlement or country from which they received a guest". The results were quite impressive as the respondents were able to recall visitors from Japan and the USA (Respondent_08), Canada (Respondent_07), South Korea (Respondent_05 and Respondent_06), New Zealand, Australia, the USA, Canada and Japan (Respondent_11). In the case of Respondent_04, the host had collected banknotes (national currency) of "all the countries of the world", most of which had been left by the visitors.

As for the most visitors, according to our respondents, tourists mostly visited from European countries, mainly Germany, Poland and France. It should be noted that, although Russian citizens predominate among international tourists in Georgia, only one of our respondents (Respondent_05) listed Russian tourists among their main guests. We did not ask the respondents to explain our observation, only during an in-depth interview with one respondent (Respondent_12), she touched on this issue and explained, "I am also surprised that I do not have Russian tourists... maybe it is the result of high prices. However, in the case of another respondent (Respondent_06), who allowed visitors to leave their initials and the name of their hometown/country on the walls, we noticed many inscriptions referring to several Russian cities, including during the last year, although the respondent did not name tourists from Russia as the main country of origin."

Another issue we touched upon during the in-depth interviews was the means of promoting agritourism destinations/services and the significance of the location of the respondent's "agritourism destination". In terms of advertising their services, the majority of respondents use a wide range of communication channels and involve almost all household members who can do so. It should also be noted that those members of the respondent's household who are fluent in English or other foreign languages (Respondents_04, _08, and _12) are particularly actively involved in communication with potential customers. In the case of Respondent_07, she used "sign language" to communicate with a French tourist who visited her tourist attraction without prior reservation.

While assessing the importance of location for the success of agritourism activities, more than 80% of respondents consider the location of their destination to be "very important or important".

Challenges and Opportunities of Agritourism in Kakheti Region - The Perspective of our Respondents

As a result of the survey, a wide range of impending circumstances was revealed, ranging from the personal/household level to current processes in the region and the world, which, according to the

respondents, negatively impact their activities. When answering this question, the respondents also remembered funny stories. One female respondent mentioned that her family member told her the following when she started agritourism activities: "You harm my image/reputation by taking money for food" (Respondent_04). Apart from these relatively "funny" moments, about 20% of female respondents found "stereotypes" to be a challenge, though this was less about the female role than about ethnic aspects.

"Massive influx of non-resident guides" (Respondent_03), "non-existing tax benefits" (Respondent_05), and "political situation in the Region and the World" (Respondent_11) were named as other hindering factors.

Most of the respondents named "access to finance" as an obstacle; however, at the same time, they mentioned the help they received through various state, international, and other aid instruments. As mentioned in the survey, almost 90% of respondents have benefited from various financial assistance mechanisms, and the majority have participated in more than one support scheme.

Regarding the contributing factors, the most frequent answers were: "location", "support from the family", "knowledge of languages", "tradition of hospitality", and "authenticity".

Speaking about prospects, the majority of respondents mentioned the need for greater financial support for business expansion and for government regulation of the agritourism sector.

The Results of the Survey in Zemo (Upper)Racha Region

Zemo (Upper) Racha region was chosen as the study area to assess the trends, challenges, and opportunities of agritourism development in Georgia from a "non-traditional" agritourism region perspective. Zemo (Upper) Racha is currently characterised by quite severe socio-economic conditions, with growing depopulation accompanied by complex natural processes that hinder tourism development in the region. As mentioned, Kakheti is the centre of winemaking and viticulture in Georgia; at the same time, it has a higher concentration of farms than Zemo (Upper) Racha, and its proximity to the capital should be considered a contributing factor to the development of the agritourism industry in Kakheti.

Despite the different geographical and socio-economic characteristics, the research conducted in Zemo (Upper) Racha region revealed largely similar, and in some respects identical, results.

Out of the 3 agritourism service providers whom we interviewed, 2 respondents have more than 5 years of experience, and one has been delivering agritourism services for about a year. Therefore, they have significant practical experience in agritourism. However, similar to the results in Kakheti, before starting the agritourism business, 2/3 of respondents in the Zemo (Upper) Racha region had no prior experience in agriculture or agritourism (or related fields); in particular, they were employed in a public institution (i.e., public servants).

From the service types perspective, it is worth noting that, as in Kakheti, the interviewed agritourism operators in Zemo (Upper) Racha offer tourists a wide range of services. However, they do not offer guests a standard set of activities that adequately reflect the true identity of their agritourism destination. As Respondent_16 pointed out, a tourist's request for specific services is crucial. As a result, in our opinion, the identity of the agritourism destination is to a certain extent compromised.

The questions asked about the profile of visitors/tourists also showed us similar results, in particular, international tourists accounted for the most significant part of the income of 2 out of 3 respondents, while in the case of one respondent (Respondent_16), the distribution was essentially equal. In the case of Zemo (Upper) Racha, the agritourism destinations mainly were visited by guests from European countries (similar to the results from Kakheti), and the respondents used various means of communication to contact international tourists. In the case of Respondent_17, whose agritourism destination was mainly visited by Polish tourists, a member of the household of Polish origin played a crucial role in communication with international visitors.

The level of investment and access to financial resources should be considered as the main differentiating circumstances revealed as a result of the survey conducted in the two target areas. In particular, only one of the three interviewed respondents (Respondent_15) had used a grant/co-financing from the state or an international/local organization or other financial instruments to start or expand his or her agritourism business. In contrast, 86% of the surveyed agritourism service providers in Kakheti have benefited from such assistance and most of them have participated in at least 3 different support schemes.

Discussions

Questions about the motivation for starting agritourism activities revealed that respondents' decision was not driven by the decline in agricultural activities, consistent with a study by Wu et al. in Taiwan. This study found that farm diversification was driven more by the desire to generate additional income and use existing resources more efficiently than by reducing "traditional" farming activities (Wu et al., 2024).

The survey conducted in both Kakheti and Zemo (Upper) Racha clearly showed that the surveyed agritourism destinations depend to a significant extent on income from international tourism, thereby increasing the vulnerability of these service providers to global political, economic, or social processes, especially crises. The economic analysis conducted by Bacsı and Száltekei (2022) shows that agritourism is characterized by similar trends in farm output and income during the financial crisis (such as a 2008 financial crisis), however, in the case of the Covid-19 crisis in 2020, farm incomes from agricultural production have been largely stable, while agritourism incomes have declined by 35% in 2019-2020 (Bacsı & Száltekei, 2022), indicating the acute sensitivity of agritourism to mobility-related constraints.

Concerning the income of surveyed agritourism destinations in Kakheti and Zemo (Upper) Racha regions, according to the results of the survey, a visitor spends on average less than 1000 GEL per visit in the surveyed agritourism destinations; a more detailed distribution is presented in Figure 3.

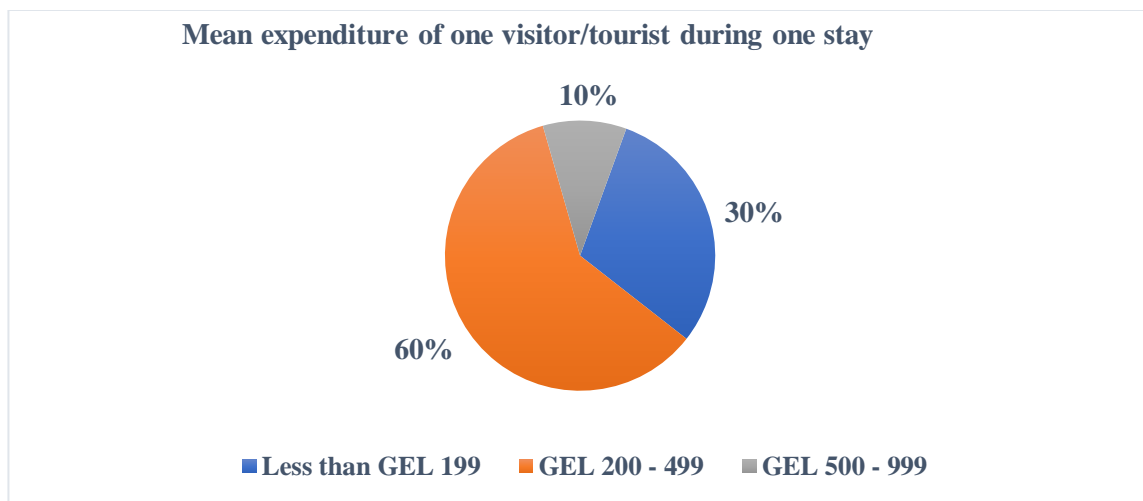


Figure 3. On average, how much a visitor/tourist spends per visit (service providers' perspective)

The success of agritourism as a business activity is significantly influenced by "farm identity" (Brandth & Haugen, 2010), which encompasses not only the farm's location and proximity to natural and cultural attractions but also the farmers themselves. As one of the respondents of Brandth and Haugen's (2010) research pointed out, they become part of the tourism product willingly or unwillingly (Brandth & Haugen, 2010). However, location remains one of the most important factors shaping a visitor's experience (Martinus et al., 2024). This opinion is confirmed by our research results, as mentioned, more than 80% of respondents in Kakheti consider the location of their destination "very important or important".

The popularity of the agritourism product and the willingness to repeat the visit are also significantly influenced by "engagement", which is manifested in the host's ability to create a pleasant and friendly environment for the visitor, to ensure their involvement in farming activities and to share the rural lifestyle and experience (Martinus et al., 2024). The role of the host involves Storytelling, telling a unique story related to a village or a farm to the visitors, preparing dishes based on local recipes or engaging guests in their preparation, as well as carrying out farming activities in a traditional way, not through modern technologies (Brandth & Haugen, 2010). Storytelling is considered one of the key elements in the context of the visitor experience, enhancing the sense of authenticity and belonging/connection to the place, which in turn ensures repeat visits to the farm; however, this requires „a holistic and coordinated approach“ (Martinus et al., 2024). Despite the recognised role and importance of storytelling in agritourism, our survey revealed that less than a third of our respondents employ storytelling techniques as part of their agritourism experience.

Both internal and external factors influence farm diversification. The results of the study by Wu et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of external factors in this process, in particular, the attractiveness

of agritourism service (demand for this type of service in the tourist market), improvement of transport infrastructure and technological progress in the field of communication were named as determining factors (Wu et al., 2024, p. 8), which brings these destinations closer to consumers and increases the motivation to invest. The survey conducted as part of our study showed that the majority of agritourism service providers actively use various communication channels, which may increase tourists' interest, including international tourists'. It is also important to note that most respondents have used various available financial assistance schemes to improve/expand their agritourism businesses.

When discussing the importance and promotion of agritourism, its economic and social aspects should be adequately considered. A study by Grillini et al. (2023) in the Austrian-Italian border region, examining the intersection of agritourism (ATFs) and non-agritourism (non-ATFs) farms with sustainability, revealed differences in sustainability outcomes. In particular, the results differed across the three indicators of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental). From an economic perspective, the income of agritourism farms has been increasing, but their agricultural output has been decreasing, which may ultimately negatively impact food security. From a social perspective, relationships between people within the farm are strengthened. However, communication among community residents is reduced, and, from an environmental perspective, agritourism farms rely more on agri-environmental-climatic practices, thereby making their production more sustainable in this regard (Grillini et al., 2023). Based on Bacsi and Száteleki's (2022) study, the relationship between agritourism income and farm output/performance was not straightforward. However, medium-sized farms in the EU were more involved in agritourism service provision and therefore received more income from these activities (Bacsi & Száteleki, 2022).

As for the state's support of agrotourism, it is important to analyse both its positive and negative aspects. Grillini et al (2023) consider that when planning to support agritourism, support should be limited to farms with limited potential for agricultural development, for example, smallholders, areas with an unfavorable climate, or other hindering factors that have little effect on agricultural production (Grillini et al., 2023).

Martinus et. al. (2024) consider the lack of visitors' and users' perceptions/impressions as a limitation of their research and a promising direction for further research (Martinus et al., 2024) because it could reveal different tendencies and factors, rather than studying the issue from the perspective of tourism service providers.

The present study sought to fill this gap in the literature, although in most of the agritourism destinations we visited, tourists were absent. In those agritourism destinations where services were provided to tourists, the service was either not agritourism in nature or, in other cases, our intervention could have hindered agritourism service delivery to consumers.

Conclusion

Agritourism, first of all, means diversifying the agricultural activities of farms in rural areas by adding non-agricultural activities. This is aimed at reducing the overdependence of farms and farmers on primary agricultural production and the risks associated with it. Agritourism creates additional income and employment opportunities in rural areas and reduces the risks associated with seasonality, which was confirmed by our research.

As mentioned, agritourism intersects with various types of tourism, including gastronomic, cultural heritage, and adventure tourism. In our opinion, the starting point for agritourism services should be raising tourists' awareness of farming practices through demonstrations and/or storytelling, and increasing the country's population's interest in the countryside in general. On the other hand, the experience of the agritourism service provider is important. Our survey showed that the majority of people involved in agritourism lack a clear vision for developing their agritourism business.

More than half of the respondents also offer accommodation to guests, facilitating direct contact with tourists, although only a third employ storytelling strategies, a key element of agritourism.

According to our survey results, the main challenge for agritourism destinations is the risk of authenticity and excessive dependence on international tourism. Research conducted in Kakheti and Zemo Racha highlighted the sector's excessive reliance on income from international visitors, leaving agritourism operators vulnerable to international political developments.

In addition, the mix of different tourist services, in our opinion, reduces the likelihood of an authentic agritourism experience. At the same time, as various studies indicate, the farm's identity is essential for repeat visits to agritourism destinations. In our opinion, this challenge can be addressed by offering a niche agritourism product/service.

The fact that the agritourism destinations included in this study are not attractive to local tourists suggests a lack of authenticity in the surveyed destinations. In other words, the agritourism destinations participating in the research and their products/services are authentic with respect to Georgia, that is, they express the national identity, and are a visiting card of Georgia, but are not authentic on the farm/destination level. To increase Georgian tourists' involvement, it is necessary to understand better the state of play and study agritourists' perceptions and impressions.

The respondents of the survey consider that the factors contributing to the development of their agritourism destination include a good location, family support, language proficiency, the tradition of Georgian hospitality, and the authenticity of the tourist attraction. Certain stereotypes, the absence of economic benefits, and the global and regional political situations were identified as obstacles. By generalising these factors, we think that, in parallel with the development of agriculture in Georgia and through financial and other incentives provided by the state, further successful development of agritourism is possible.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contribution

A.S. conceived of the presented idea. Both authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research and the writing of the manuscript. Both authors provided critical feedback and helped shape the research, analysis, and manuscript.

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