

Article

Evaluating Farm Tourism Development for Sustainability: A Case Study of Farms in the Peri-Urban Area of Novi Sad (Serbia)

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Abstract: Farm tourism is often considered a form of tourism whose main characteristic is sustainability. Nevertheless, the existing literature also provides a partial approach, where the development of farm tourism is analyzed within the context of sustainable development and crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the paper is to analyze environmental, social, and economic factors as vectors for the sustainable development of farm tourism by applying a specially designed SFT model. An empirical study was carried out on a sample of nine farms in the peri-urban area of the city of Novi Sad (the Republic of Serbia). Sustainable development was analyzed using dynamic social, economic, and environmental indicators with the aim of finding a model that could be used to ensure more stable economic income for the population, social equality, and environmental protection. By applying the SFT model, it was determined that the current position of farm tourism is not fully compliant with the aims of sustainable development due to its clearly dominant economic dimension and less developed social and environmental sustainability. The results were further analyzed with the aim of achieving a balanced development of farm tourism, which needs to be based on the continued application of the concept of sustainability. The results could be used by public and private institutions in the tourism sector, as well as creators of legal regulations and strategies in the field of sustainable and rural tourism, with the aim of further developing and improving its sustainability.

Keywords: farm tourism; sustainable development; rural tourism; SFT model; sustainability matrix



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1. Introduction

Mass travel in the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century put great pressure on natural resources where, for the sake of economic development, social and ecological aspects did not receive much care [1–3]. Sustainable development is a global term, while shaping and implementing sustainable tourist development is outlined in detail in the action plan for sustainable development—Agenda 21, verified at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. Twenty years later, at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also held in Rio de Janeiro (Rio + 20) in 2012, a discussion was held regarding the progress made in sustainable development. An initiative was created to adopt the goals of sustainable development and track them with precision using suitable indicators.

The aims that were agreed upon and verified were formally enacted at a UN meeting held in late 2015. The implementation of these aims on a global level officially began on 1 January 2016. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were designed as blocks, in the sense that it was possible to combine several individual aims to realize “larger” aims of sustainable development, that is, to respond to the complexity of the problems of the modern-day world. Therefore, the principle of sustainable tourism, as part of the sustainable development paradigm of material and social development of humanity in the 21st century, is increasingly accepted, whereby conflict between tourism and nature must be reduced to a minimum. Sustainable development groups combine all the segments of development, including economic, social, and environmental categories, which are integrated into the holistic model of development [4]. Modern industry is considered the main cause of environmental problems, given that its development tends to be counter-ecological [5]. The tourism industry and the consequences of tourist activities also play a large part in it.

Current tourism trends include outdoor activities in protected natural areas and rural environments and activities and recreation in indoor spaces, as well as exposure to cultural content [6,7]. In other words, people are not trying to dominate nature but are instead trying to find their place in it. With the popularization of tourist activities, rural areas are exposed to numerous pressures. They were, both around the world and in Serbia, particularly exposed to pressure during the COVID-19 pandemic [8–11]. The number of people who spend their travel time and holiday time outdoors has increased, as has the desire to preserve the environment and the actualization of issues of sustainable development in conditions of increasingly greater air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, deforestation, fire, floods, and other catastrophes that have long-term effects on the climate of our planet [12–14]. That is why concepts of sustainable tourism, rural tourism, green tourism, ecotourism, nature-based tourism, low carbon tourism, and others have become dominant topics in the tourism literature [15–19].

The sudden and sometimes chaotic development of tourism must be controlled in accordance with the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable tourism presents a concept of development that will balance out the ecological, socio-cultural, and economic components of the environment on the one hand and tourist satisfaction on the other. According to the definition provided by the World Tourist Organization, sustainable tourism limits current and future economic, social, and ecological impacts and provides optimum support for the needs of the tourists, those employed in tourism, and the local communities while preserving the natural environment [20]. “Sustainable tourism” often encompasses only tourism based on nature, or ecotourism, which is not acceptable. Sustainability must be a feature of all forms of tourism, especially mass tourism, as it potentially has the greatest impact on the economy, environment, and cultural heritage.

Rural tourism includes a broad spectrum of tourist attractions and activities that take place in rural areas. It reflects the need of tourists for authentic experiences, including interaction with the local population. This is why rural tourism is considered sustainable, as it mainly attracts a small number of visitors interested in the local culture and traditions. However, sustainability is not always easily achieved, especially economic sustainability, as touristic demands are seasonal by nature, the accommodation capacities are not always full, and considerable investment is needed to build or adapt the tourist facilities in rural areas [21]. Based on the tourists’ motives for visiting rural areas, it is possible to define various forms of rural tourism. For example, farm tourism is an authentic form of rural tourism in Vojvodina [22], which usually includes providing room and board on the farm itself as well as offering experience with farm work.

The aim of this paper is to analyze factors of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic) in the everyday business activities of farms and their importance for the development of farm tourism. The initial assumption is that farm tourism in the peri-urban area of Novi Sad is based on the principles of sustainable development. An evaluation of three groups of sub-indicators will determine the extent to which this assumption is valid,

indicate the weak points, and provide guidelines for future development. This concept enables the development of an optimal model of tourist development that will not deplete existing resources so that future generations can satisfy their own tourist needs.

The research approach adopted in this paper differs from those of previous studies of farm tourism in Serbia since it foregrounds tourist facilities and not the consumers of the tourist product, i.e., the tourists. In addition, the study focuses on farm tourism in the second-largest peri-urban agglomeration in Serbia, which has not been studied to date. The paper also addresses the lack of adequate literature on farm tourism sustainability in peri-urban areas in Serbia and aims to provide an overview of the subject to be used as a reference, thus providing adequate insight into farm tourism development as a field of study.

The paper is structured as follows: it first provides a literature review, predominantly focused on the concepts of rural tourism and farm tourism. Then it provides a methodological framework based on the measurements of three indicators of sustainable development. The following section presents the results of an empirical study of nine farms. In the discussion section, the sustainability indicators are analyzed first, and then the conceptual model of the farm tourism sector is presented. The conclusion outlines the theoretical and practical implications, as well as suggestions for further study.

2. Literature Review

The development of rural tourism is receiving increasingly more attention, as it can contribute to the social and economic renewal of rural areas, provide supplemental income and employment, and also contribute to the possibility of repopulation and the elimination of social isolation in an area. In that sense, tourism is viewed as a way of overcoming a series of problems in the development of rural areas around the world. This statement is confirmed by a more intensive development of rural tourism, which has been enhanced by the COVID-19 pandemic [23–25]. Rural tourism is becoming the force behind economic development and the increase in the living standard in rural communities since it is based on principles of sustainable development and the preservation of natural resources [26,27]. The fundamental resource for the development of rural tourism is nature, and it is estimated that approximately three-quarters of the total global tourist demand is aimed precisely at natural values and “untouched” areas. The motives behind visiting rural areas include peace, quiet, pollution-free air and water, untouched nature, meeting local people, healthy food, a slower pace of life, leisure, and physical activity, all of which are responsible for the emergence of rural tourism, which focuses on the individual tourist and their needs [28,29]. Those needs and motives were considerably foregrounded during the pandemic, when public spaces attracted a larger number of domestic tourists.

Rural tourism is an activity that connects economic, social, and environmental components of sustainability and is strongly linked to the local communities and their attitudes towards tourism [30,31]. In addition, it can also be seen as an environmentally responsible way of traveling and visiting relatively untouched natural areas in order to enjoy them and show respect to all the accompanying cultural objects, characterized by the low impact of visitors. It can also enable the active social-economic inclusion of the local population [32]. There are indications that the development of rural tourism contributed to the creation of equality and more visible economic and social assistance, both for the local community and the broader environment; i.e., rural tourism is now being recognized as an important factor in the revitalization of rural areas [33]. These assumptions were also confirmed during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, when a massive number of people turned to rural areas. This trend was noted in Serbia [23], but also in the Czech Republic, where the COVID-19 pandemic created new opportunities for the development of rural tourism. Several rural regions even noted an increase in the number of tourists compared to the pre-pandemic period [34].

Furthermore, rural tourism includes areas meant for outdoor recreational activities, designed to protect sensitive natural resources, improve accommodation facilities where

welcoming staff offer true hospitality, provide a diversity of events celebrating the pride that members of the local community have for their natural surroundings and cultural heritage, and promote the development of small local businesses, including food stalls and other types of tradecraft businesses whose owners are locals [35].

Some authors foreground rural tourism and farm tourism [36] as forms of tourism that contribute to visitors becoming increasingly aware of the environment and more ecologically oriented. By including environmental-oriented ideology in the field of tourism along with the increase in environmental awareness, it is reasonable to expect an increase in the importance of sustainable development in the field of tourism [37,38].

Rural tourism is one of the priorities of tourist development in numerous European countries [39–45], especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic [34,46]. Today, one of the main uses of rural areas is tourism, which at the same time is probably the most important cause of change and rural development. It seems to be a suitable means of revitalizing abandoned rural areas and providing their sustainability for the future by preserving businesses or creating new jobs, increasing the diversity of occupations, the levels of preservation of landscapes and nature in general, or supporting the preservation of rural crafts, ethnic diversity, and food gastronomy as touristic attractions [47]. Rural tourism often provides support for the development of infrastructure, which in turn contributes to the growth of other economic activities in rural areas. There are multiple socio-cultural benefits of farm tourism, including the prevention of depopulation [48], the preservation of cultural heritage, and the improvement of social stability compared to farms that are not involved in tourism [49,50]. Additional advantages include an improved way of life, the revitalization of old trade crafts, customs, and culture, and the restoration of traditional buildings and the identity of the communities [48]. A special benefit of the development of rural tourism is increased opportunities for social interaction among local individuals, who often live relatively isolated lives in rural communities [51].

Farm Tourism: Issues and Challenges

Farm tourism is not a novel occurrence. It is a specific form of rural tourism that, in some destinations, dates back to the 1980s [52,53]. It has been on the rise in many parts of the world over the past few decades [54], including Serbia. Nilsson [55] cites that farm tourism is mostly small-scale, but in more popular tourist destinations, farm tourism could bring in a significant economic income. The general increase in tourism, caused, among other things, by introducing laws regarding holidays as well as an increase in income [56], also had an impact on farm tourism, which has recently been increasing steadily [57–59]. Despite strong non-material motivation, many farmers view farm tourism as an irreplaceable source of income for maintaining family agricultural land and the farming way of life [60].

Germany and Austria have a rich history of farm tourism. Austria is considered one of the leading countries in Europe with a developed farm tourism industry. Farmers founded the first tourist organizations in the Austrian Alps at the beginning of the 1970s [56]. State policies favorably oriented towards the development of tourist sites in rural areas and providing subventions and development programs can also be found in Italy [61] and France [62]. Traditionally, people from western countries move from the cities into more rural areas for recreation and rest. However, due to globalization, farm tourism is facing an increasing demand for a variety of services, professionalism, flexibility, quality, and competence [63].

In addition to Europe, the significance of farms for the development of tourism has been pointed out by numerous studies in North America [64,65], Asia [66,67], and Oceania [68]. The development of farm tourism in Asian countries is most prevalent in China, which has become recognizable for its “Nong Jia Le: A Happy Farm-house” brand of tourism [69].

The development of rural tourism in Serbia, as well as the commercialization of traditional hospitality, began in the 1970s in certain parts of central Serbia (in approximately

50 villages), which offered accommodation for approximately 4000 guests. During the initial phase of development, only individual households took part in this type of tourism (approximately 800 households), and therefore the development of rural tourism was mostly aimed at local tourists. Additionally, more recently, they have also begun to attract foreign tourists to Serbia [21]. Rural tourism has, over time, gained increasing attention. In the meantime, promotional marketing has advertised Serbia under the slogan “A clean and green Serbia”, which can offer tourists an active holiday, including walking, rafting, spending time in rural households, healthy and organic food, culture, and everything that is on offer in an ecologically healthy rural environment [70], which indirectly affects the development of rural tourism.

In the autonomous province of Vojvodina (Northern Serbia), the dominant form of rural tourism is farm tourism. The concept of a “farm” includes a house that is meant to provide accommodation and the adjoining farm buildings and land on which people always, or only occasionally, spend time and whose existence is based on its own agricultural production [71].

The term *salaš* was first used in the 18th century and can be found in the languages of various peoples in the territories of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, from Hungary to Azerbaijan and Turkey, and from the Ukraine to Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia, and all the surrounding countries. Initially, they were temporary, and later they became permanent settlements for Hungarian nomads in the Pannonian Basin or Plain. On old Hungarian language monuments, the word “*szállás*” refers to an agricultural household with an organized economic yard, erected housing, and production facilities. Today, this term, when referring to a temporary type of settlement, has been retained only among the Slavic peoples, while among the Hungarians, since the beginning of the 18th century, it has been replaced by the term “*tanya*” [72]. In western culture, a suitable analogy to the *salaš* is the ranch, hacienda, etc.

Farms are independent agricultural households that are physically separate from the main settlement and were massively built during the 19th and 20th centuries in Vojvodina. In the beginning of the 20th century and later, during the 1950s and 1960s, these were very important and frequent forms of housing for the agricultural population. However, soon after, they were abandoned, and today most farms are completely empty, while some have been converted into ethnic museums or restaurants. To date, very few farms have been preserved, especially in their original functions. One way of reviving farms in Vojvodina is certainly their repurposing as touristic locations, which occurred at the beginning of the 21st century, when farms were added to the tourist map of Serbia. Numerous farms have been redesigned and adapted to meet contemporary needs, primarily touristic, so they now include pools, sports fields, and other recreational content, including stables, zoos, ethno-museums, etc. Farms can offer many other attractive activities or additional services that complete the stay of the guests, such as workshops focusing on old crafts, cooking classes or workshops on how to prepare dishes, recreational riding, trips (walking tours, cycling tours, visits to cultural sites, fishing), and other activities [73].

The problems that farm tourism in Vojvodina is facing today are related to the integrative approach to the creation of a touristic product, since there are still problems regarding coordination between the local authorities, the government sector, and agencies for the development of tourism on the one hand and problems regarding cooperation between rural household associations on the other. In addition, it is difficult to achieve a complementary effect of all the activities relevant for farm tourism, such as agriculture, old trades and crafts, and good roads. Furthermore, there are considerable problems related to effective marketing (the web portal of the entire rural tourist offer, instructing the hosts on how to use the internet, opening local information centers), providing financial support and incentives for the development of farm tourism, as well as the standardization and categorization of facilities (all of the facilities need to be categorized, registered, marked, and monitored).

Rural tourism, and thus farm tourism as well, are often considered examples of tourism characterized by sustainability. Recently, the majority of studies have focused on the development of rural sustainable tourism [53,74,75], with an emphasis on its importance during the COVID-19 pandemic [76,77]. Sustainability refers to the ability of a destination to maintain production over time despite long-term limitations and pressures. It has been pointed out that rural tourism draws in very few visitors, that it does not need a developed infrastructure and suprastructure, and that the tourists are usually genuinely interested in the local culture and tradition [78–80]. However, the question is: are all these forms of rural tourism sustainable? Does the fact that a tourist attraction is located in a rural environment or in a protected nature reserve directly imply its sustainability? Therefore, the main research question of this paper is the following: is farm tourism in the peri-urban area of the city of Novi Sad sustainable?

Previous studies have included a partial approach that analyzes farm tourism in the context of sustainable development from various points of view. The focus is mostly on the impact of visitors on the environment [81], economic activity and the contribution of farm tourism to achieving economic sustainability [82–84], gender and social equality [85,86], but also on how farms operate based on the principles of sustainable development.

Furthermore, the existing literature on farms in Vojvodina places emphasis on the importance of farms for the preservation of tradition, way of life, and business, their touristic valorization, the possibility of touristic activation and presentation, the visitor experience, and the gastronomic experience [71,87–91].

Despite the extensive literature on farms, based mainly on individual case studies, most studies were not based on an overall evaluation of the components of sustainable development. What is also evident is the lack of a unique methodology for international comparison. This paper aims to fill the gap in the existing literature and offer a methodology for the evaluation of farms based on the principles of sustainable development.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Locations

The study was carried out on farms in the areas of Čenej, Rumenka, and Futog, which belong to the peri-urban area of Novi Sad. A peri-urban area is a zone of suburbanization outside the city limits. These are usually mixed areas, that is, transit or interactive zones under urban influence but with a rural morphology. Therefore, they are predominantly a rural phenomenon in which endogenic rural development interacts with urban influence, changing the role and function of rural areas [92,93]. Following World War II, the settlements in the vicinity of Novi Sad underwent a period of expansion. Important transformations took place in these areas, including enhanced construction, socio-economic development, and changes in the number of citizens, while the newly erected housing areas retained the spatial structure characteristic of rural areas. The tourist activation of these mixed areas can be traced back to the beginning of the 21st century, when tourism became an additional activity for the population, which had previously mostly been agricultural or employed in the industry centers of Novi Sad.

The study included registered farms in these areas. Of the 15 registered farms, the study ultimately included 9. The remaining farms did not choose to participate. The research locations are shown in Figure 1.

Data were compiled during field research from 10 April to 25 April 2023. Approval had previously been obtained from the farm owners or farm management. That is, when compiling the data, all the ethical principles were adhered to, and the farm owners and managers voluntarily agreed to take part in the study. During the field research, the members of the research team visited the aforementioned farms and, by observing and interviewing the owners or employees on the farms, obtained information that they used as input for a previously prepared Google Forms questionnaire. The items are shown in the tables in the results section. This was meant to achieve objectivity in the evaluation of sustainability factors, that is, avoid a subjective or biased evaluation on the part of the

owners or employees, which might present a potential problem in the final assessment score if it turned out to be unrealistically high.



Figure 1. Locations of the studied farms.

3.2. Research Design

For the purpose of this study, a suitable sustainable farm tourism model (SFT model) was created. The study was organized based on a research model of touristic valorization [94,95], a model of the spatial-demographic valorization of settlements [96,97], and a model of functional valorization [98]. The model is based on the measurement of three dimensions of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic), of which each is displayed through 10 sub-indicators and the level of their gradation (Table 1).

Table 1. The sustainability matrix for determining the types of farms based on the dimensions of sustainable development.

Types of Farms Based on the Dominant Dimension of Sustainable Development		Maximum and Minimum Values (%) for Each of the Dimensions of Sustainable Development					
		I		II		III	
		Max	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min
F1	Environmental	100	60	40	0	40	0
F2	Environmentally-social	60	33.3	50	20	33.3	0
F3	Environmentally-economic	60	33.3	33.3	0	50	20
F4	Social	40	0	100	60	40	0
F5	Socially-environmental	50	20	60	33.3	33.3	0
F6	Socially-economic	33.3	0	60	33.3	50	20
F7	Economic	40	0	40	0	100	60
F8	Economically-environmental	50	20	33.3	0	60	33.3
F9	Economically-social	33.3	0	50	20	60	33.3

The checklist has four parts. The first part consists of 11 questions of a general type through which data were obtained on the year the farm was built, the material used during the construction process, the number and structure of the employees, the services offered, the accommodation and reception capacities of the farms, as well as the number and structure of the visitors. The second part consists of questions pertaining to the environmental dimension of sustainability, with 10 sub-indicators. The third part refers to questions related to the social dimension of sustainability, with 10 sub-indicators. The

fourth part refers to questions related to the economic dimension of sustainability, with 10 sub-indicators.

The SFT model consisted of a total of 30 sub-indicators, divided into three dimensions, as shown in Tables 2–4. The evaluation of the sub-indicators included a grading system ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 is poor, 2 is marginal, 3 is adequate (medium), 4 is good, and 5 is excellent. The number of sub-indicators within each dimension was determined to achieve equal representation when determining the final score.

Table 2. The environmental dimension of sustainability.

Sub-Indicators	Sasa Farm	Mita Farm	Roda Farm	Brka Farm	Familija Farm	Deda Farm	Farm 137	Peja Farm	Volic Farm
Waste separation	5	1	1	1	1	1	3	1	1
Recycling	5	1	1	1	2	1	2	1	1
Water supply from the farm's own well	5	4	4	5	4	2	2	3	5
City sewer	1	2	1	1	4	3	5	2	1
Electric energy from renewable sources	1	1	1	2	3	1	3	1	1
Heating from renewable sources	1	5	1	1	2	1	1	1	4
The absence of fossil fuels	5	2	5	5	4	2	4	4	5
Protection from natural disasters	5	5	1	3	2	4	3	4	3
Climatization	3	3	2	2	5	5	5	5	3
Degradation of the living environment	1	1	1	2	3	2	3	2	1
Total score	32	25	18	23	30	22	31	24	25

Table 3. The social dimension of sustainability.

Sub-Indicators	Sasa Farm	Mita Farm	Roda Farm	Brka Farm	Familija Farm	Deda Farm	Farm 137	Peja Farm	Volic Farm
Employs family members	5	5	5	5	3	3	4	4	5
Gender equality	3	1	1	1	4	3	2	3	1
Age equity	4	2	1	1	2	4	4	3	1
Inclusiveness	1	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	1
Foreign languages	5	4	4	4	3	4	5	5	5
Employees from the surrounding area	3	1	5	1	2	3	3	5	1
National minorities	1	1	1	1	2	4	2	3	1
Means of transportation for work	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	3
Education	4	4	1	3	1	4	5	1	5
Personal data protection	4	3	5	4	3	5	5	5	4
Total score	35	27	29	26	27	37	36	36	27

Table 4. The economic dimension of sustainability.

Sub-Indicators	Sasa Farm	Mita Farm	Roda Farm	Brka Farm	Familija Farm	Deda Farm	Farm 137	Peja Farm	Volic Farm
Independent food production	5	4	5	5	1	1	2	2	5
Provisions obtained from surrounding farms	2	5	1	5	4	1	3	3	1
Cooperation with other farms	3	5	2	4	2	3	3	3	2
Dishes prepared with organic products	5	5	5	5	1	3	4	3	5
Traditional dishes from Vojvodina	5	4	5	5	3	5	5	5	5
Handling food waste	1	1	5	5	1	1	1	1	1
Selling traditional home-made products	5	5	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Free parking	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Tourism infrastructure	5	3	2	5	5	5	5	5	5
The positive effects of the proximity of a larger tourist center	4	2	1	1	1	2	3	4	2
Total score	40	39	32	41	24	27	32	32	32

The obtained means for each dimension of sustainability were normalized, and then, using a sustainability matrix for classifying the type of farm (Table 1), the type of each farm was determined based on the dominant dimension of sustainable development. The sustainability matrix consists of three basic types (F1, F4, and F7) and six mixed types, depending on which dimension of sustainable development is dominant in the overall score.

For the graphic representation of the results, a ternary diagram method was used. The ternary diagram is a customary graphic means of presenting the relationship between three variables or components. In order for the variables to be presented on a ternary graph, their values must be normalized to a constant, which is usually 1 or 100%. The advantage of such diagrams is that three variables can be presented in a two-dimensional way. Each side of the diagram presents a percentage (1–100%) of a certain dimension, while the position of each farm in the area of the triangle depends on the combination of percentages in the structure of each farm. The location of the point of intersection of the tie lines from the segments, which correspond to the percentages on the sides of the triangle, represents the structure of a given farm. By dividing the triangle into segments, it is possible to group farms, that is, to classify them based on similarities in sustainable development. Deviations from the optimum point (the center of gravity of the triangle) in the direction of one of the angles of the triangle are interpreted as a focus or specialization pertaining to that segment of sustainable development. Figure 2 outlines the design process for the ternary diagram.

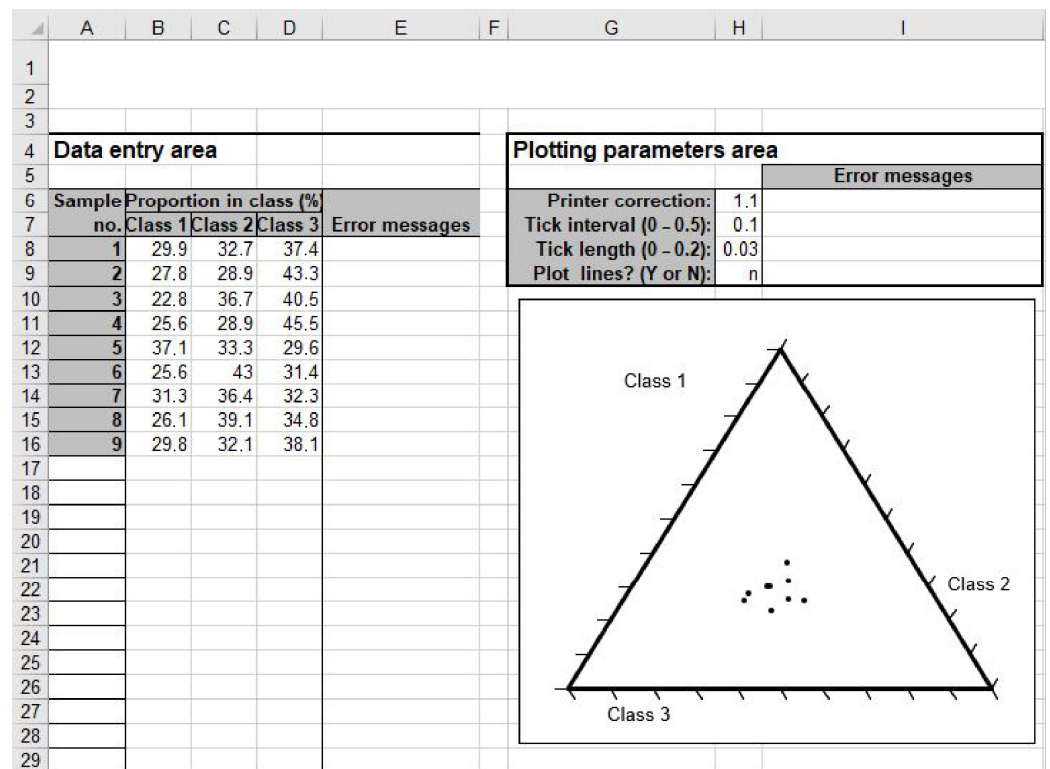


Figure 2. The input and visualization of the data in the ternary diagram.

The presented model might be of interest for a variety of reasons. Based on its position in the ternary diagram, it is possible to note which dimension is dominant for each of the analyzed farms. In addition, a combination of the dimensions of sustainability in the overall structure is taken into consideration, not just the specialization based on the dominant dimension. This provides objectivity and clarity to this typology. Specifically, this model is based on a comparison, a deviation from an ideal model, imagined along the typological points of the ternary diagram.

4. Results

The first part of the study focused on obtaining general information on farm business activities based on data obtained directly from the farm owners or managers.

The data obtained indicate that farm owners live mostly on the farms themselves with their families, while additional facilities on the farm are used for tourist services. Therefore, a tourist is in constant and direct contact with the owners of the farms and their families. During a visit to the farm, tourists have the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the customs and traditions, the way and culture of living, the micro-culture, individual agricultural products, and the local gastronomy.

Farm tourism in the peri-urban area of Novi Sad has been developing since the beginning of the 21st century. Therefore, the building materials used to construct most of the analyzed farms were brick and wood, while only one farm was built using adobe or mudbrick.

When it comes to the labor force working on the farms taking part in farm tourism, only three of them have full-time employees. The remaining six farms mostly employ their own family members. During larger tourist visits, that is, when the farms are being visited by a greater number of tourists, workers are hired to work on these farms when needed, mostly from local rural areas. Of the overall number of permanently employed workers (56) on the nine farms, the majority (35) are male. Most of the workers hired as waiters, cooks, and gardeners have a high school education, while only 3% of them have a higher education. The accommodation capacities on farms that provide accommodation and hospitality services vary from 30 guests (the Mita farm) to 200 guests (the Deda farm). Most farms have opted to provide basic services, including accommodation and meals. Except for individual family lunches, other events are organized on the farms, such as weddings, christenings, excursions, business meetings, smaller seminars, round tables, etc.

The structure of the farm guests is heterogeneous. Farms are visited not only by local tourists but also by foreign tourists, which indicates that this type of tourist offer is equally attractive to various categories of visitors. Most of the foreign tourists originate from Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Italy, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Over the past few years, the presence of tourists from China, America, and Russia has also been noted.

Visitors come to a farm for a short period of time, such as on single-day trips, use the services of the restaurants (have lunch or dinner consisting of traditional dishes or sample traditional products that are produced on the farm itself), or stay for a weekend (two to three days). If the visitors use the accommodation services, the offer includes additional activities that could provide sufficient entertainment for a period longer than three days.

The main part of the study refers to the essential questions of sustainable farm tourism. This includes an evaluation of environmental, social, and economic sustainability. All three dimensions of sustainable development are presented through ten of the most significant sub-indicators, whose scores are provided in Tables 2–4.

The environmental sub-indicators were evaluated with a cumulative score of 230 out of the maximum 450. The lowest score was noted for the sub-indicator related to the use of electric energy from renewable sources, followed by the problem of recycling, and then waste separation. The highest score was noted for the sub-indicators related to the use of fossil fuels and water management.

The sub-indicators of the social dimension of sustainability were evaluated with a cumulative score of 280 out of 450. The lowest score was noted for sub-indicators related to inclusiveness, national minorities, and gender equality. The highest score was noted for sub-indicators related to hiring in the family and the protection of personality data.

The sub-indicators of the economic dimension of sustainability were evaluated with a cumulative score of 299 out of 450. The lowest score was noted for sub-indicators related to the sale of traditional local products and handling food waste. The highest score was noted for sub-indicators related to the services offered on the farms.

Viewed as a whole, the highest scores were noted for the economic dimension of sustainability, followed by the social one, while the lowest scores were noted for the sub-indicators of the environmental dimension.

After that, individual farms were analyzed (Table 5). For the environmental dimension, the scores range from 18 to 32 (out of a maximum of 50). The highest score was noted for the Sasa farm and the lowest for the Roda farm. For the social dimension, the scores range from 26 to 37 (out of a maximum of 50). The highest scores were noted for the Deda farm and the lowest for the Brka farm. For the social dimension, the scores are somewhat higher and range from 24 to 41 (out of a maximum of 50). The highest scores were noted for the Brka farm and the lowest for the Familija farm. When we view all three dimensions in sum, the highest score (107) was noted for the Sasa farm, which is the highest-ranked farm. The positions of the other farms can be seen in Table 5.

Table 5. The cumulative scores based on the dimensions of sustainable development and the rank of the farm.

Farm	I	II	III	Total Score	Rank
Sasa farm	32	35	40	107	1
Mita farm	25	27	39	91	4
Roda farm	18	29	32	79	9
Brka farm	23	26	41	90	5
Familija farm	30	27	24	81	8
Deda farm	22	37	27	86	6
Farm 137	31	36	32	99	2
Peja farm	24	36	32	92	3
Volic farm	25	27	32	84	7

After that, cumulative scores for each farm were normalized to 100% so that their relative values could be comparable (Table 6). The values were then used as input for a sustainability matrix, based on which the type of each analyzed farm was determined.

Table 6. The normalized values of the sub-indicators and the type of farm.

Farm	I	II	III	Type
Sasa farm	29.9	32.7	37.4	F9
Mita farm	27.8	28.9	43.3	F9
Roda farm	22.8	36.7	40.5	F9
Brka farm	25.6	28.9	45.5	F9
Familija farm	37.1	33.3	29.6	F2
Deda farm	25.6	43.0	31.4	F6
Farm 137	31.3	36.4	32.3	F6
Peja farm	26.1	39.1	34.8	F6
Volic farm	29.8	32.1	38.1	F9

To present the results more clearly, a ternary diagram was drawn in the final step. A predefined Excel form was created, and the normalized values were used as input. The results are shown in Figure 3.

In the preceding analysis, a higher score was noted for the economic dimension of sustainable development. This is why it is not surprising that most farms (5 out of 9) belong to the F9 category, where the dominant dimension of sustainability is the economic one, with a somewhat smaller segment of the social dimension and the smallest segment of the environmental dimension of sustainability. Three farms belong to the F6 category, which includes a dominant social dimension, a smaller segment of the economic dimension, and the smallest segment of the environmental dimension of sustainability. Only one farm belongs to the F2 category, which is dominated by the environmental dimension, with a smaller segment of the social dimension and the smallest segment of the environmental dimension.

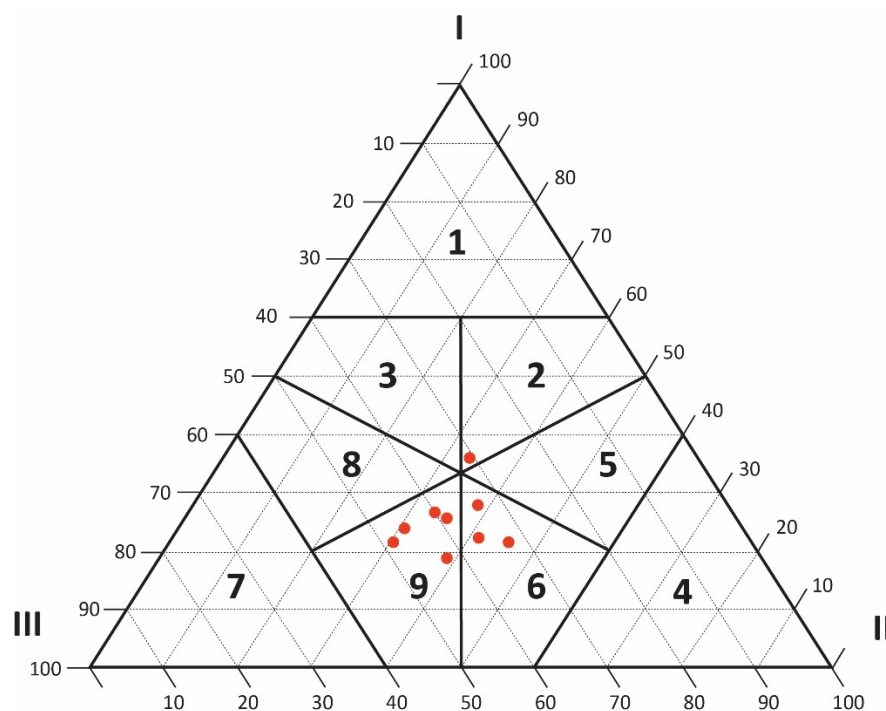


Figure 3. The ternary diagram positions of the farms based on the dimensions of sustainable development.

5. Discussion

When analyzing the general characteristics of the farms, it was concluded that positive examples were noted for farm construction in accordance with the principles of low-energy construction and sustainability. These findings are consistent with those of some previous studies [99]. All of the farms were built using natural materials such as brick, wood, and adobe or mudbrick, which are suited to their natural environment. Thus, they have not altered the appearance and structure of the landscape and have left a minimum negative impact on the environment and the comfort of the visitors.

However, when it comes to the business activities of the farms themselves, it was concluded that only three of the farms are open every day, while the other farms operate based on a booking schedule and reservations made by tourists. It should be emphasized that this is a direct consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic because, in the pre-pandemic period, all of the farms worked daily. All the farms do provide food for their guests, and the offer is based on farm cuisine prepared the old-fashioned way, which is the main advantage of this type of tourism in Vojvodina as a traditional gastronomic region. This confirms the results presented in more recent studies on the importance of gastronomic heritage [100]. All this has an impact on the trend of the increased presence of foreign tourists, which could have a positive effect on the sustainability of farms, not only in terms of economic sustainability but also in the environmental and social dimensions.

The main part of the study, which refers to the evaluation of farms for the purpose of sustainable development, has shown numerous shortcomings and drawbacks in the functioning of the farms that offer touristic products. The positions of the farms on the ternary diagram clearly indicate that they are grouped around the central area of the triangle, with a greater tendency toward the economic and social dimension of sustainable development. This opens up the possibility of discussing several important questions.

What is worrisome is the virtual lack of waste separation, which is fully practiced on only one farm, as is recycling, and the relatively low level of using renewable sources to produce electric energy. Positive examples include the use of water from the farm's own well to provide water for the animals and the use of the city sewer system for wastewater. In addition, the low use of fossil fuel also speaks in favor of sustainability since plant

remains from agricultural production are mostly used to provide heat for the farms. All this is, to an extent, compliant with the sustainable development goals related to clean water and sanitation, as well as affordable and clean energy [101]. It could be concluded that the impact on the environment is not considerable but does exist, and work should be done to decrease it. Focusing on achieving profit often leads to a degradation of the farm environment and the emergence of ecological problems. As cited in previous studies [102], researchers and the creators of developmental policies have focused relatively little attention on the negative impact that tourism has on the environment. People are more likely to understand how to reduce their impact on the environment through their everyday consumption than through touristic consumption.

These problems leave a lot of room for improvement, and in order to achieve any higher aims, greater involvement of the farm owners and management is needed, as well as that of entire communities. A large role in the preservation of natural resources and the implementation of strategies of sustainable development in the domain of tourism is played by the state, the local authorities, and the local communities. Countries, with their laws, regulations, and incentives, can contribute to the localities of rural and sustainable tourism becoming places where tourism can, to a considerable extent, develop following the principles of sustainability, while education can be used to win over the local communities for the purpose of cooperation and the implementation of sustainable development. As stated by Pesonen et al. [103], the skills of the local population and local entrepreneurs are vital for the development of rural tourism, with the aim of introducing new products and satisfying the volatile market demands. This is the only way to guarantee that sustainability projects will actually be sustainable [104].

An assessment of the role that sustainable development of tourist locations plays in the framework of integral spatial development is necessary to understand the mutual impact of the natural environment and tourism [105]. According to the Law on Tourism of the Republic of Serbia, it should be coordinated with systems of technological, economic, and social activities to ensure economic development, as well as the preservation of natural and cultural assets and the preservation and development of the local community [106]. It is the quality of the environment, as well as the degree of its preservation, that provide an opportunity for the development of tourism. The importance of features such as these only increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Higher scores were noted for the group of sub-indicators of the social dimension, indicating a better overall situation. Farms, as small family households, mostly employ family members, which is an established practice around the world. Similar findings have also been obtained in previous studies on family businesses in tourism [107,108]. The additional hired workers are mostly people from the nearby local community who come to work on foot or by bicycle. This establishes a strong bond in the local community, which is one of the aims of sustainable development. Room for improvement exists in the development of gender and age equity, inclusiveness, and national minorities. Mostly males and younger individuals work on farms. Further development should be directed towards the greater inclusion of women, since some other studies have previously indicated the importance of farm tourism for the affirmation of female entrepreneurship [85].

The development of farm tourism cannot be viewed separately from economic indicators, but it is necessary to re-evaluate the concept based on which these indicators are the sole measure of successful development. The gastronomic offer on farms is highly ranked, which is certainly the greatest generator of economic wealth. The impression is that the focus on a rich gastronomic offer, whereby the food products originate from the farm itself and are often produced organically, overshadowed all the other sub-indicators. This is not surprising if we take into consideration the significance of food in the gastronomic culture of Vojvodina. These findings support those of recent studies on the significance of traditional gastronomic products and their importance for tourism and hospitality in Vojvodina [109,110]. In addition to the prevalence of the gastronomic culture, the consumption of food on farms was increased by the COVID-19 pandemic because many catering

facilities in the city centers were closed. In the same period, a large number of farms functioned according to the principles of scheduling and making reservations for tourists in small groups, serving food in an open area, and observing all pandemic measures.

Even though the pronounced dominance of the economic dimension of sustainable development was noted for most of the farms, there is still room for progress, especially in terms of how food waste is handled or the placement of traditional products. Most farms use their waste food to feed their animals, and only two of the farms share it with the poor families in the neighborhood. Greater involvement in this area could lead to the eradication of hunger as one of the sustainable development goals.

The development of tourism is undoubtedly a welcome addition to the support provided by the state and plays a role in eradicating poverty. Most European countries see their chance of fighting poverty precisely in emphasizing the sustainability of rural areas [111]. However, the benefits that tourism brings to small rural areas are still small, considering that most tourists are more interested in visiting large cities, developed destinations, urban settings, etc. Still, it is not possible to separate the effects that the urban population feels as a result of rural poverty. For example, the migration of the rural population puts great pressure on the labor market in urban areas. In addition, there is a rise in poverty in the cities. As stated by Sharpley and Vass [112], agricultural policy reforms have undergone some fundamental changes over the past 50 years, which have resulted in the diversification of farms and their inclusion in farm tourism, thus reducing the rate of poverty.

According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, farm tourism is a special-interest type of tourism. What is foregrounded in this strategy is the development of eco-tourism villages, a healthy and pleasant environment for an active holiday, as well as ethnographic and other culturally historic values [113]. The demand for recreational activities on farms has increased over the past decades [48,58], with the greatest expansion during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of sustainable development, economic development and the quality of the environment are not mutually exclusive when it comes to farm tourism. The preservation of non-renewable tourist resources can be made possible by a combination of modern technology and improved behavioral patterns among both tourists and the local population. The income from tourism is invested in preserving the natural environment, which further increases its tourist appeal. Sustainable development cannot be overlooked, either as an ethical or existential issue in the case of tourism, which can only continue if natural resources are not depleted.

An analysis of the current situation in tourism, both locally and globally, and the effects of existing policies led to the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (2016–2025). The strategy identifies rural tourism as vital for economic development, as it plays an important role in the sustainable development of rural communities. It is seen as a source of additional income achieved through a spectrum of activities and services that rural households offer, which were particularly highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Previous studies have also presented similar expectations that rural tourism will encourage employment and bring a revival to rural areas [114], which will have an impact on the rural economy [115]. However, Forbord et al. [57] believe that the turnover from farm tourism is small and that it is not economically viable.

Apart from the aforementioned strategy, what is also worth mentioning are the programs financed from the agricultural budget, which refer to supporting the diversification of the rural economy through an improvement in agri-ecotourism, traditional crafts, and food preparation. A chance to develop tourism in rural areas also lies in programs of cross-border cooperation between states in the region, financed by the European Union [116].

The concept of sustainable development is a vital segment in the development of tourism in rural areas since, in the long run, the successful development of rural tourism depends on the quality and availability of natural resources. Consequently, the link between sustainable and farm tourism is of particular importance. First of all, farm tourism in rural areas provides a living for the local population by opening up new jobs and encouraging

public-private partnerships and agricultural production. The development of tourism in rural areas improves the relationship between people of different demographic characteristics, that is, people from urban and rural environments. This increases the attractiveness of the local culture and traditions, in which tourists are particularly interested. The benefits for rural areas are achieved through the interpretation of the environment. This can include activities in which tourists walk around or take roads marked by informative signposts and billboards. Often, there is also information pertaining to the environment so that tourists can learn about the natural and cultural resources. However, the concept of the sustainability of rural tourism contributes to the realization of multiple goals: the preservation of the local culture and the character of the local community; the preservation of natural landscapes and natural “habitats”; the sustainable development of the rural economy; the sustainable development of the tourist industry in the long run; the development of leadership and the realization of the vision of decision-makers in areas that they believe pose a danger to the development of tourism; and finally, achieving a balanced and diversified rural economy.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study support the idea of establishing an ecologically desirable and healthy relationship between contemporary man and nature, as well as a critical awareness of the increased ecological danger. The environmental pollution of cities has led to the idea of reverting back to the ideals of the farm and the rural way of life. It represents a need to revert back to the natural environment and is of exceptional importance in an era of growing urbanization and crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

It can be expected that the local community will take up the role of leader in promoting sustainable tourism by encouraging economic development, environmental protection, and better social policies. Sustainable development, and thus sustainable tourism, must set the guidelines for the further development of farm tourism. What this development encompasses is environmental, social, and economic sustainability, the preservation of the environment and its cultural-historic heritage, as well as a positive relationship between the locals and the tourists.

One of the main attractions of farm tourism is the personal interaction with the local community, so that both the visitors and the locals are able to exchange ideas and knowledge. Hence, tourism can fulfill its role as the “peace industry”, as a means of general understanding and, as such, provide an opportunity for the local community to develop and have a positive impact on socio-economic prosperity and the preservation of the environment. This is why farms have become favorite places for family gatherings and organizing smaller events in the post-COVID-19 era.

To achieve a balanced development of farm tourism, it is necessary for it to be based on the consistent implementation of the concept of sustainability. There is an urgent need for efficient strategies that support the intentions of farm owners to diversify into agritourism; in other words, the economic and non-economic gains provided through diversification are of fundamental importance for farm sustainability. In the future, it will be necessary to provide the missing strategic documentation, define priorities in terms of the development of farm tourism, and continue to invest in its development as it is authentic for Vojvodina. In addition, the diversification of farms would provide additional income for the local population. The fundamental explanation is that diversification into agritourism is one of the most efficient strategies for stabilizing income and improving it, especially for small farms and farms in unfavorable circumstances [117,118].

It is particularly important to stimulate the development of farm tourism in peri-urban areas, which, due to the proximity of city centers, can have a comparative advantage in attracting tourists for short visits and stays. Peri-urban development is closely bound to contemporary technological development (motor vehicles, telecommunications, and the IT sector) and infrastructural development, as well as socio-economic processes [119]. As a result, the spread of peri-urban areas will probably become one of the main trends

of development in rural areas in the future, and rural diversification will become the ultimate necessity.

Further steps should include the improvement and inclusion of basic geotourism infrastructure and promotion, since farms provide a timely perspective on a potentially sustainable geotourism destination such as Vojvodina. However, numerous farms in the rural areas of Vojvodina are non-competitive on the tourism market due to a lack of labor, poor management skills, and a lack of financial support. These problems might lead to families selling or abandoning their farms or land.

6.1. Theoretical Contributions

In a theoretical sense, this paper and the proposed SFT model distinguish between the dominant theories of the development of rural tourism, which are mostly dependent on factors of supply and demand as well as on tourist requirements. Tourism does not always bring positive results, so one of the main problems in the development of rural tourism is the reduction or elimination of the negative impact of the development of tourism on the environment. Therefore, this model focuses on the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, as their lack of complementarity results in the uneven development of tourism on various farms. In addition, the paper analyzes the development of farm tourism in a peri-urban area, which has received little attention in academic research. The advantage of this model lies in the fact that it is not based solely on the needs and behavior of tourists but also takes into consideration both the physical and spatial changes that occur as a consequence of the development of tourism.

6.2. Practical Implications

This study outlines theoretical facts from the field of sustainable farm tourism to date. The study itself was carried out using a specially designed SFT model, which makes it possible for similar studies to be carried out on various farms or other locations of sustainable tourism with the aim of providing deeper insight into their sustainability so as to promote them on the tourism market.

The results obtained provide useful information for public and private institutions working in the tourism and hospitality sectors and for creators of legal regulations and strategies working in the field of sustainable and rural tourism. Finally, the results obtained related to the analyzed sub-indicators are of use to farm owners and managers, as they enable them to see any shortcomings and can offer them support and clear guidelines for further improvement. All this could impact the achievement of more significant environmental, economic, and social sustainability on farms.

6.3. Research Limitations

Several limitations have been noted in this study, which could be rectified in future work. First, the paper presents an analysis of a relatively small number of farms, that is, case studies from the peri-urban area of Novi Sad. The scope of the study might be extended to include a greater number of farms and rural environments in other regions of Serbia. Second, the list of sub-indicators could be expanded to include several new ones. Third, the sample is incomplete, as some of the farm owners refused to participate in the study. In the near future, more work should be done to educate and encourage people to participate in similar studies, as this could have numerous benefits.

6.4. Indications for Future Research

In accordance with the high level of flexibility of the used methodological framework, future studies focusing on farms could evaluate the sustainability of other rural areas with the required modifications to the model, that is, adaptation of the selected evaluation criteria.

A suggestion for future studies would be to analyze farms in some other parts of Vojvodina (around Sombor, Subotica, or Srbobran), as well as provide their comparative

analysis. In addition, a study could be carried out in other, primarily mountainous areas of Serbia, which offer other forms of rural tourism and could provide regional comparisons. By applying the aforementioned list of sub-indicators or modifying them in accordance with the developmental tendencies of farm tourism in a certain area, these studies could be applied anywhere in the world. In addition, similar studies can be carried out in neighboring countries that share the same or similar patterns of rural tourism development (primarily countries of the former Yugoslavia), as well as other neighboring European countries (Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria). A comparative analysis of these countries would provide a more complete image of the development of farm tourism in accordance with the principles of sustainable development in the region of southeast Europe.

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