

# **AGRITOURISM IN POLAND – SELF GOVERNMENTS’ VIEWS VERSUS REALITY**

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## **Introduction**

There are many definitions of agritourism, though they do not differ significantly from each other. All of them stress the importance of combining tourism and agriculture: providing tourist services by farmer’s families. The fundamental feature which distinguishes agritourism from other forms of tourism is a working farm in which accommodation and other services related to farming and countryside are offered to tourists (*Wojciechowska, 2009*).

The idea of agritourism development has been very popular since the beginning of political-economic transformation in Poland. Agritourism is perceived in different circles (self-governments, scientists, media) as an opportunity of development of many rural regions.

The self-governments’ views on agritourism and on its potential significance for rural areas, as contained in the selected regional and local strategies, programmes and plans, are reviewed in the paper. Against this background, the actual situation in agritourism in Poland is presented.

## **Agritourism in plans and programmes of regional self-governments**

Polish regional self-governments prepare and adopt several types of documents (strategies, programmes, plans) which include main directions in socio-economic and spatial policy of voivodeships (NUTS 2). In order to discover how agritourism is presented by regional authorities, how its role in regional development is perceived, the plans of spatial organisation and programmes (strategies, audits) of tourism development of all Polish voivodeships were analysed from the point of view of agritourism.

The results show that agritourism development constitutes one of the directions of spatial policy of all Polish voivodeships. The plans of spatial organisation are differentiated in terms of accuracy and depth of the formulations related to agritourism. In some of the documents the formulations appear sporadically (eg. the Opole and the Mazovian voivodeships) and they are vague and basic. In other ones agritourism is described and analysed in detail (the Podlasie and the Subcarpathian

voivodeships). In regional programmes and strategies of tourism development agritourism is analysed more widely than in plans of spatial organisation.

The characteristic aspects of agritourism-related formulations are presented below.

Firstly, a common belief prevails in the documents that agritourism can be successfully developed in the areas of moderate tourist attractiveness. In general, authors find favourable conditions for agritourism development in the majority of rural areas, including those as yet not used for tourism purposes. A good example is the Łódź voivodeship (central Poland). The SWOT analysis indicates that dynamic development of rural tourism, including agritourism, and potential for its further development is an "Opportunity". However, in the whole voivodeship in 2007, there were in total only 175 agritourism farms (0,09% of all farms) and tourism in rural areas cannot be expected to thrive in the relatively unattractive region as compared to other Polish regions. The increase in the number of agritourism farms which took place in Lodzkie for several years, resulting in less than 200 facilities, cannot be recognised as a "dynamic development". Another example comes from the Strategy of Tourism Development for the Mazovian voivodeship. It seems incomprehensible why the summer-resorts (situated close to Warsaw) and some localities of suburban character are perceived in the document as potential agritourism centres, even for tourists from beyond Mazovia. Then, in the spatial plan of the Opole voivodeship (part of Silesia), almost half of the voivodeship area was intended for agritourism development, whereas the whole region is – in general – not attractive for agritourists, as compared to other regions. There are only about 120 facilities in the entire voivodeship.

The authors of the Strategy of Tourism Development in the Subcarpathian voivodeship (south-eastern Poland) assume that a disproportion between the southern and northern part of the region in terms of tourism development level should be eliminated. Such approach is wrong because the disproportion is obvious – it results from the spatial differentiation of the region (mountainous, attractive South versus densely populated and intensively used North). There is a slight chance that an attempt to change the situation will succeed. The next example comes from the Tourist Audit of the Lublin voivodeship (eastern Poland) which is a predominantly agricultural region. According to the document, the Lublin region could become one of the most important agritourism regions in Poland and agritourism is a great chance for the area. However, there are no signs that it might happen (excluding a few small parts of the region).

The examples presented above reveal that regional leaders who prepare or adopt such documents overestimate the opportunities for tourism development. They believe that the majority of rural areas are well adapted to agritourism and can be successful in its development. The demand for such tourist services is overestimated or not actually taken into account.

A review of the regional documents shows that agritourism is often perceived as a “development lever” for the areas characterised by accumulated socio-economic problems (high unemployment, low entrepreneurship, weak economy). The possibilities of creating competitive tourist products by small, traditional farms are overvalued. The authors often overlook the fact that providing agritourism services requires – like other businesses – entrepreneurial spirit and some financial capital to invest in the creation of tourist products or promotion. Insufficient entrepreneurship, human and financial capital significantly hinder the possibilities of creating tourist functions in the peripheral areas. Lack of money is a basic barrier for a small farmer to start an agritourism business. The accessibility of European funds supporting farmers who plan to invest in agritourism facilities has not substantially changed the situation. Actually, these funds are available mostly to well-educated farmers who already have a proper amount of money because of complicated formalities and necessity to cover the costs of investments (which are partially re-funded by the end of the project). *Wojciechowska* (2009) notices that in north-western Poland, where unemployment in rural areas – resulting from the collapse of state farms – is a serious problem, mostly “big”, relatively well-off farmers engage in agritourism business. Agritourism is not a satisfactory remedy for problems of rural unemployment faced in various regions.

The understanding of factors behind agritourism development in the studied documents is oversimplified. Protected areas (landscape parks, areas around national parks, areas of protected landscape) seem to be perceived as sufficient conditions for agritourism development. Other factors and conditions (social, cultural, economic – mentioned above) are taken into account only to a limited extent.

In some of the documents, the authors propose, within the same area, the combination of economic functions which logically exclude each other. On the one hand, the traditional, agricultural landscape and rural character of the villages should be cultivated in the agritourism areas. On the other hand, a high level of different services typical for urban areas is expected there (easy access to entertainment and cultural facilities, financial services, different shops etc.). There was one case of the plan of spatial organisation (the Wielkopolska voivodeship), in which a zone assigned for recreation purposes (including agritourism) partially overlapped with a zone assigned for industry. These activities should be indisputably spatially separate.

Agritourism is expected to reconcile contradictory goals: the economic development of agricultural areas and ensuring calm and tranquil holidays for tourists in the rural landscape, close to nature. The main asset of agritourism facilities, which is advertised by their providers, is their location far from densely built villages and close to natural areas. However, it is inconsistent with basic rules of spatial organisation of rural areas (especially protected ones), which tend to prevent the dispersion of buildings. The dispersion of dwellings is a threat for landscape

and nature, as well as it results in difficulties in providing technical infrastructure (*Raszka, 1998*).

Agritourism is generally perceived in terms of its economic functions; its non-material roles for local societies are underestimated. Agritourism is treated almost only as a source of income, whereas research reveals that in many areas, especially peripheral ones, agritourism is perceived by their providers mostly in terms of socialising, hobby or an interesting way of spending free time (*Bednarek-Szczepańska, 2010*).

The authors of the investigated documents often expect that agritourism development will generate new jobs. Such assumptions are too optimistic. One should rather expect a more effective use of working time of farmers and members of their families. Mainly the members of families deal with serving tourists. Because of the low number of beds in agritourist facilities (the average in Poland is 10) and the low number of tourists who are served simultaneously, there is no need to employ additional workers.

Good prospects for agritourism are anticipated even in areas in which only a few agritourism facilities operate. The conclusions on the future importance of agritourism in local and regional economies are based on weak arguments.

### **Agritourism in strategies of selected local self-governments**

The next part of the study was a review of local development strategies adopted by municipal authorities. These documents are a basis for local socio-economic policy and spatial planning mid- and long-term directions of development are defined there. They constitute a necessary condition for the obtainment of European funds.

The survey was conducted on documents of rural and urban-rural municipalities in which there were not any agritourism facilities, according to the data of the Institute of Tourism. Documents of those municipalities where agritourism exists were not analysed. In their case, formulations concerning agritourism are self-evident and probably extremely common.

From among 850 Polish communes without any agritourism facilities, every tenth (from the alphabetical list) was chosen for the study. Local strategies were reviewed from the point of view of agritourism-related formulations. Finally, the study was carried out on documents of 81 municipalities. The research shows that in most cases – i.e. 86% of the investigated municipalities – local authorities include in the documents formulations related to agritourism. It is a significant share, bearing in mind the fact that there is no agritourism in the studied municipalities.

In the majority of the documents analysed by the SWOT, the lack of agritourism development is included among “Weaknesses” and possibilities of its development are included among “Opportunities”. Formulations concerning local

natural and cultural resources, which are not, but should be – from the author’s point of view – utilised for agritourism development, are common in the documents. The authors are often on the opinion that, for example, woods, a monumental church and fresh air could successfully attract tourists. They do not take into account that such assets exist in the majority of Polish rural areas, being anything but special. There are inadequate descriptions of the conditions for agritourism development: “excellent”, “ideal”, and the like. The authors seem to be disappointed that farmers are not willing to conduct agritourism business. Such an approach is most common in the investigated plans and strategies no matter who was the author – external experts or local authorities, depending on what kind of municipality it was: urban-rural or rural, peripheral or well-located.

The authors of the documents in most cases do not survey opinions of farmers on their potential involvement in agritourism development as well as on their interest in providing tourist services. The farmers are expected to be the executors of the local agritourism programmes. Despite the lack of rural inhabitants’ engagement in agritourism business – since they prefer other sources of non-agricultural income – tourism is still strongly promoted as one of the development priorities.

Strangely enough, the local leaders, who are well acquainted with the difficult reality of rural areas; that is, the place where they live, also tend to formulate unrealistic visions of agritourism development. They believe in an immense value of natural and cultural capital lying in their communes and in the capabilities of its utilisation for tourism purposes in the economic sense. Local governments of the investigated areas are susceptible to the new vogue for treating tourism development as an important element or even pillar of rural areas multi-functionality. Besides, such approach is also conditioned by local patriotism and home-related emotions. Although the manifestation of such feelings is a positive phenomenon, they cannot form a basis for rational policies.

There is a widespread opinion on the supposed significant increase in the urban population’s demand for agritourist services. Such notions are taken at face value and copied into local plans and strategies. It is to serve as an evidence of a future agritourism success. The authors seem to believe that the modernisation of infrastructure, creating some tourist tracks, organisation of a training course for farmers and publishing a simple map are enough to be a catalyst for agritourism development. Though the necessity of creating tourist products is declared in some documents, these are not accompanied by any definite, clear-cut programmes. The authors seem not to fully realise how difficult and multidimensional undertaking it is to create an attractive tourist product, especially in the area without tourism traditions: it needs a good original idea, followed by constant, systematic work on its putting into practice, financial capital, as well as the involvement of many actors. It is very difficult for an average rural municipality to fulfil these conditions. Analy-

sis of local strategic documents from the point of view of tourism leads to not so optimistic conclusions. Are local leaders able to do anything more than to copy commonplace, even hackneyed models and slogans which are often inadequate to local conditions? Do they suffer from a chronic shortage of their own ideas for development? Or maybe a plan or strategy is nothing more than only a fulfilment of a criterion required in applying for EU funds?

### **Agritourism in Poland**

There were ca. 8850 agritourism farms in Poland in 2007 (the latest available data), according to the Institute of Tourism. Almost all of them (98%) were situated in rural and urban-rural municipalities. They were hugely dispersed – as they existed in 55% (1350) of all Polish municipalities. Is it a great number from a point of view of economic role in rural areas? Nearly nine thousand agritourism farms constitute only 0.55% of farms above 1 hectare in Poland (0.38% of all farms). There were poor 6 municipalities in Poland in which the share of agritourism farms in the overall number of farms was higher than 10%. Simultaneously, only in 47 municipalities was the number of facilities 30 or more. According to *Wojciechowska* (2009), there are merely a few villages in Poland, in which agritourism farms are integrated and situated closely to each other. It must be sadly admitted that agritourism is a phenomenon of marginal significance for the betterment of farmers' economic situation and the diversification of farming activity in Poland.

About 40% of municipalities, in which the number of agritourism facilities was 30 or more, were situated in the Malopolska and the Subcarpathian voivodeships. Agritourism is best-developed in the Carpathians (around the Tatras, the Pienins and the Beskids). Besides, agritourism is well-developed in some parts of the Mazurian Lake District and – to a less extent – in the Pomeranian Lake District. In general, tourism on farms exists mostly in the most attractive tourist regions. In the majority of agricultural areas, characterised by low or moderate attractiveness, it is a phenomenon of marginal scale, despite the ambitious plans of its development drawn up by local and regional authorities. As regards 600 municipalities, there were only 1 or 2 facilities.

The actual data on agritourism facilities overall numbers, published by the Institute of Tourism, might be overstated. Part of these facilities are probably not located on farms, but on non-agricultural households in which guest rooms are rented. Their owners who meet only formal requirements for agritourism (for example the possession of some farmland) take advantage of tax benefits related to agritourism. Besides, they use the fashionable term as a sales pitch to attract tourists. *Drzewiecki* (2002) states that there are very few real, authentic agritourism farms. In the Lublin region, the research results show that some of the small-scale

accommodation providers buy farmland only to prove to the revenue office that they possess a farm.

According to the studies conducted by the Institute of Tourism, the use of bed-places capacity is relatively low – 20% (*Legienis*, 2004). As a result, the share of income from tourism in the whole household's incomes is of no great importance. Studies from different Polish regions confirm the fact. In the Koszalin region (on the Baltic Sea), 75% of the surveyed agritourism providers declared that share of income from tourism is up to 20% of their whole income. Tourism-generated income had similar importance for 84% of the respondents in Southern Podlasie (*Godlewski*, 2004). For the most of the surveyed agritourism providers, in the Lublin voivodeship, the share was as high as 10–30% (*Bednarek-Szczepańska*, 2010). The research study by *Kosmaczewska* (2007) in the Wielkopolska region shows that for 56% of the respondents the share was as high as 10–30%.

When we analyse the situation and prospects for agritourism in Poland it is worthwhile to give attention to a phenomenon which leads to a decline of its importance in some areas. In the tourism attractive areas, in which the incomes of households from rooms renting keep on growing, the importance of agricultural (production) functions for farms is declining. Farmers reduce their scope of agricultural activity when tourism services become more profitable. Incomes obtained from tourists allow them to invest and extend the scope of tourism services. Agricultural activity is only “simulated” in order to maintain the agritourism character of the offer or in order to meet the requirements of a revenue office and to get a tax release. In extreme cases, agricultural activity declines totally. In his study, *Górz* (2007) gives an example. He notices that agritourism is superseded by non-agritourism, small-scale tourist accommodations in the attractive mountainous areas of the Spisz and the Pieniny regions. In Czorsztyn (one of the municipalities there), the majority of households provide tourist services but only a few of them are typical agritourism farms.

To sum up, typical agritourism, based on a working farm, is very often only a stage in the tourism economic activity. Economic success in providing tourist services leads to the end of farming activity. On the other hand, the lack of the satisfying income hinders the development of tourist products, leads to stagnation and, finally, the cessation of tourist activity by farmers.

Results of the survey sample representative for the Polish population, carried out for the Institute of Tourism, show that interest in agritourism among Poles is not as high as compared to other forms of tourism: 5% of the surveyed interviewees, who in 2002 took long holidays travelling across Poland, used agritourism facilities; simultaneously, 4% of them admitted that they preferred that form of accommodation. In case of shorter stays at a destination, these shares were as high as 2%. According to the surveys conducted six and seven years later (2008, 2009), the preferences of Poles changed not at all – 5% of the respondents used agri-

tourism facilities during long vacation stays in Poland, and 1–2% – during shorter stays (Krajowe i zagraniczne..., 2009; Krajowe i zagraniczne..., 2010). These findings are confirmed by similar results from the survey carried out by the Main Statistical Office. That survey reveals that a share of agritourism facilities in providing accommodation to tourists amounts to 1–3% and the share do not increase (Turystyka i wypoczynek..., 2010).

It is worth considering, however, why agritourism is not very attractive and popular among Polish tourists. Contact with agriculture and rural lifestyle is widespread in Polish society. There are still somewhat less than 2 millions farms in Poland. Rural roots are common even among the contemporary city dwellers. This is an effect of ruralisation of Polish cities which took place during the period of communist rule in Poland (there were intensive migration from countryside to cities). Wasilewski (*Perepeczko – Majewski*, 2004 after Wasilewski, 1986) estimated that only about 15% of families living in towns and cities do not have rural or peasants' roots (if taking into consideration generation of grandparents). A survey sample representative for Polish society, conducted in 2003, shows that 86% of the respondents had relatives in the countryside, and almost half of them were brought up there (*Perepeczko–Majewski*, 2004). Rusticity, rural lifestyle and landscape etc. are still a well known, common and easily available experience for Polish society (also for its urban part); thus, these rural assets are not treated as a tourist product which can be purchased.

*Kocik* (2000) stresses that urban inhabitants (especially, the descendants of rural ancestry) have a strong sense of belonging to rural patrimony. Visiting families in the countryside is very popular among city or town dwellers. The study of Poles' tourist activity of 2008 shows that the share of relatives' dwellings, used as accommodation during long vacation stays, was 2.5 times higher than that of agritourism facilities. In case of shorter stays, that share was 7.5 times higher (*Łaciak*, 2009).

Although holiday and recreation preferences of Poles are changing, a predominant model of spending vacation is still leisure tourism on the Baltic Sea comparable to 3S model. According to the concept of phases concerning the tourism demand changes by *Opaschowski* (*Alejziak*, 1999 after *Opaschowski*, 1992), it might appear that Polish society is still in the second phase, characterised by the dominance of passive leisure activities; that is, of entertainment- and consumption-orientated forms of recreation. The study of the Main Statistical Office (2009) revealed that the most popular way of spending time during holidays were passive leisure activities and getting together (Turystyka i wypoczynek..., 2010). The preferences, likewise in developed countries, are evolving into 3E model of tourism (entertainment, excitement, education), based largely on artificial attractions which entertain, frighten or make one think (*Alejziak*, 1999). It is difficult to place the typical agritourism based on the authenticity of rural environment, on the

continuum 3S–3E. *Kozak* (2009) points out that the issue of authenticity in tourism is on the decline. The possibilities of spending time in an unusual, fascinating and innovative way are becoming increasingly important for tourists. That is why different theme parks or other attractions not necessary related to cultural or natural resources, but based on an original idea, are so popular and visited on a mass scale. On the other hand, there is a shortage of specialisation, innovation, client-orientation in Polish agritourism. Agritourism providers prepare mostly the basic and simple products: only accommodation or accommodation together with half or full board. According to *Wojciechowska's* estimation (2009), facilities providing full product, encompassing not only accommodation and full board, but also attractions, constitute 15–20% of all agritourism facilities. The share of attractions that could be described as innovative or original is insignificant.

### Summary

Analysis of the development documents on the regional scale confirms an assumption that regional authorities are very interested in agritourism development. Unfortunately, the formulations related to agritourism suggest (are indicative of) superficial knowledge of that matter possessed by the authors of the documents, lack of in-depth analysis of internal and external conditions, including competition with other regions. The authors in most cases copy the “fashionable” models of rural development. It is difficult to find rational reasons for descriptions of relatively unattractive areas as having “great potential”, “ideal” or even “excellent” possibilities of agritourism development. Such rhetoric is typical for the investigated documents, and is indicative of mythologizing of agritourism.

*Bukraba-Rylska* (2005) notices another phenomenon, related to discourse on rural areas, that well explains dissonance between the high degree of regional elites' interest in agritourism and the actual, relatively low level of rural tourism development. The discourse on rural areas – and seeking solutions to their problems – is going on among urban elites and experts who elaborate, often in a patronising and instrumental way, more and more new strategies of rural areas development. These strategies often ignore the socio-cultural and economic conditions of Poland's countryside. In this connection there is little likelihood of their implementation. Also, they serve as models which are copied into local policies, due to the apparent lack of other ideas for rural development on the part of local elites. It seems that planning and expectations concerned with agritourism development, which are so widely reflected in regional governments' strategic documents, is a good example of such phenomenon.

The review of local documents reveals a great discrepancy between local self governments' views on agritourism and the reality. Despite the fact that there were

no agritourism facilities in the investigated communes and that the communes’ attractiveness for this kind of tourism was rather low, the popularity of the agritourism concept was very high among local self-governments.

Regional as well as local authorities are susceptible to the new vogue for treating tourism development as an important element of rural areas’ multi-functionality. This kind of “fashion for agritourism” (as many other cultural and socio-economic patterns) came from Western Europe, and is strongly supported by the Common Agricultural Policy of the EU. There appear to be extremely favourable conditions for the development of agritourism concept in Poland, since rurality is deeply rooted in the national culture. In other words, the phenomenon of popularity of agritourism concept is strictly related to the fact that Poland’s population is very closely attached to rural way of life. Values related to countryside have a special position in the national culture (*Bukraba-Rylska*, 2005, 2006; *Kłoskowska*, 1996). Also, the rural myth is well alive in Poland. The popularity of the agritourism concept is a present-day expression of that myth. A willingness to improve the poor economic situation of Polish farmers via agritourism development is also related to the specific attitude to rurality.

Results of a sample survey representative for Polish population shows clearly that a favourable and positive attitude to the countryside is most prevalent in the Polish society. The fact confirms the importance of and respect to rural values among Poles. However, the countryside is relatively rarely linked by respondents to recreation and tourism. As mentioned above, due to the strong rural roots of Polish society, rusticity, rural lifestyle etc. are still a well-known, widespread and easy available experience; thus, rural assets are not treated as a commercial tourist product.

At the end of the 20-year period of transformation, agritourism is still in marginal position against the background of the whole tourism business in Poland – despite the ambitious plans of its intensive development. The concept of agritourism as a development opportunity for Polish rural areas has a lot in common with a myth – a kind of illusion existing not only in self-governmental, but also in non-governmental and academic circles.

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