

Article

Public Support Schemes and Multifunctional Rural Development: The Case of Agritourism in Albania

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Abstract

Agritourism has emerged as an increasingly important strategy for rural diversification and multifunctional agricultural development, particularly in transition economies characterized by fragmented farm structures, limited rural investment capacity, and growing tourism demand. Despite the expansion of agricultural support schemes aimed at promoting rural diversification, empirical evidence on their effectiveness in supporting agritourism development at the farm level remains limited, especially in Southeast European contexts. Against this background, the study addresses the following research question: To what extent have agricultural support schemes contributed to agritourism development, rural diversification, and rural resilience in Albania, and what factors constrain their long-term effectiveness? To answer this question, the study examines the role of agricultural support schemes in shaping agritourism development in Albania, with particular emphasis on farm diversification, rural resilience, and implementation constraints. The study adopts a mixed-methods case study approach, combining secondary policy and statistical analysis with primary field research. The fieldwork involved 60 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with agritourism farm owners across the regions of Korçë, Berat, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Lezhë, conducted during September–October 2025. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to assess investment patterns, perceived socio-economic impacts, and institutional barriers associated with agricultural support schemes. The results show that agricultural support schemes primarily function as catalysts for investment and diversification rather than stand-alone drivers of sustainable rural transformation. However, persistent structural constraints were identified, including administrative complexity, limited marketing capacity, infrastructure deficiencies, and a strong dependence on seasonal tourism demand. These factors reduce the long-term sustainability and scalability of agritourism enterprises. The paper contributes to the literature on agritourism and rural development by providing empirical evidence from the context of a transition economy and demonstrating that financial support alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable rural transformation.

Keywords: agritourism; rural diversification; multifunctionality; agricultural subsidies; rural resilience; Albania

Academic Editor: Lewis Ting On Cheung

Received: 15 May 2026

Revised: 20 June 2026

Accepted: 22 June 2026

Published: 14 July 2026

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1. Introduction

Agritourism has increasingly emerged as an important instrument for rural diversification, multifunctional agriculture, and sustainable territorial development. Growing

international demand for authentic rural experiences, local gastronomy, ecological products, and experience-based tourism has expanded the role of agritourism beyond traditional farm accommodation towards more integrated rural development models that link agriculture, tourism, culture, and local value chains. Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2011) argue that agritourism contributes to the sustainability of agricultural systems by reducing dependence on conventional agricultural production and generating additional income opportunities for rural households. Similarly, Negmatovich and Bakhtiyorovich (2022) emphasize that agricultural diversification through agritourism can strengthen the long-term sustainability and resilience of rural economies.

The increasing importance of agritourism is closely associated with broader structural transformations affecting rural areas globally. In many developing and transition economies, agriculture continues to face persistent challenges, including fragmented farm structures, declining profitability, aging rural populations, limited access to finance, and weak market integration. Under these conditions, diversification into tourism-related activities has become an increasingly important strategy for improving farm viability and reducing rural economic vulnerability. Research conducted in Indonesia by Sriyadi and Istiyanti (2021) demonstrates that agritourism development positively contributes to farmers' income levels and increases the value added of agricultural products through direct sales, gastronomy services, and tourism experiences. Similarly, Willaddara and Ranaweera (2024), in their study of rural Sri Lanka, found that agritourism generates broader multiplier effects in rural economies by stimulating local entrepreneurship, employment creation, and service-sector development. Beyond economic diversification, agritourism also plays an important social and territorial role in rural development processes. Sekar et al. (2023) highlight that community-based agritourism initiatives contribute to local participation, the preservation of rural heritage, and the sustainable management of agricultural resources. In Vietnam, Nguyen et al. (2018) found that local residents' perceptions and participation significantly influence the sustainability of agritourism initiatives and rural tourism governance. Similarly, Bailoa et al. (2025), analyzing rural Portugal, argue that agritourism fosters social innovation and territorial sustainability by strengthening local identity, cooperation networks, and community-based economic activities. These studies suggest that agritourism should be understood not only as a farm diversification strategy but also as a broader mechanism for integrated rural and territorial development.

Public policy support has become increasingly important in facilitating agritourism expansion, particularly in transition economies where rural entrepreneurs face substantial financial and institutional barriers. Investments in accommodation infrastructure, agro-processing facilities, hospitality services, digital marketing, and compliance with tourism and food safety standards often require financial resources that exceed the investment capacity of small rural farms. Consequently, agricultural support schemes and rural development policies play a critical role in reducing investment barriers and encouraging rural entrepreneurship. Yasin and Bacsı (2025), in their analysis of agritourism development and public-private cooperation, argue that sustainable agritourism growth depends not only on financial subsidies but also on institutional coordination, local stakeholder engagement, and integrated governance mechanisms. Similarly, Paimen et al. (2026), through a systematic review of sustainable agritourism development in Malaysia, identify infrastructure quality, managerial capacity, governance effectiveness, and long-term strategic planning as critical determinants of agritourism sustainability.

Within this broader international context, Albania represents an important case for examining the relationship between agricultural support schemes and agritourism development in a transition economy. Agriculture continues to play a significant role in the Albanian economy, particularly in terms of employment generation and rural livelihoods.

According to national statistics, it remains one of the principal sectors supporting socio-economic stability in rural areas. At the same time, Albania has experienced substantial tourism growth over the last decade, driven by increasing international demand for coastal tourism, cultural heritage, mountain tourism, and traditional gastronomy. The interaction between these two sectors has created favorable conditions for the expansion of agritourism across rural regions. Albania possesses important comparative advantages for agritourism development, including rich biodiversity, mountainous landscapes, traditional food systems, wine production, and strong regional cultural identities. However, despite these advantages, the agricultural sector continues to face significant structural constraints, including fragmented land ownership, low levels of technological modernization, insufficient rural infrastructure, limited access to finance, and weak integration into formal tourism markets. These limitations reduce agricultural competitiveness and constrain the capacity of rural farms to diversify into higher value-added activities. In response to these challenges, agritourism and rural diversification have increasingly been incorporated into Albanian agricultural and rural development policies. Through the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA), national support schemes and IPARD-funded programs have promoted investments in rural accommodation, farm modernization, agro-processing, traditional gastronomy, and local product promotion. These measures aim to strengthen multifunctional rural development and improve income diversification opportunities for rural households.

Despite growing institutional support and increasing policy attention, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes in promoting sustainable agritourism development in Albania remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on tourism potential, descriptive tourism trends, or agricultural policy implementation, while relatively little attention has been devoted to farm-level experiences, diversification behavior, investment outcomes, and implementation challenges associated with public support schemes.

Furthermore, although agritourism has received increasing scholarly attention internationally, empirical evidence from Southeast European transition economies remains comparatively limited and underrepresented in the literature. To address this gap, the present study investigates the relationship between agricultural support schemes and agritourism development in Albania during the 2015–2018 programming period, while assessing medium-term outcomes observed up to 2024. More specifically, the study addresses the following research question: to what extent have agricultural support schemes contributed to agritourism development, rural diversification, and rural resilience in Albania, and what factors constrain their long-term effectiveness? To answer this question, the study adopts a mixed-methods case study approach, combining secondary statistical and policy analysis with primary field evidence collected through 60 semi-structured interviews with agritourism farm owners located in Korçë, Berat, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Lezhë. The analysis focuses on investment patterns, diversification processes, perceived socio-economic effects, and institutional barriers associated with public support schemes.

The significance of this study extends beyond the Albanian case. By examining how agricultural support schemes influence agritourism development within a transition economy context, the research contributes to broader debates on multifunctional agriculture, rural diversification, and territorial development. The study provides empirical evidence on whether subsidies act merely as investment catalysts or contribute to wider rural transformation processes. In doing so, it offers policy-relevant insights for the design of integrated rural development strategies that combine financial support with infrastructure development, institutional capacity building, and market integration mechanisms. The paper contributes to the literature in three principal ways. First, it provides empirical ev-

idence from a Southeast European transition economy where research on agritourism policy effectiveness remains limited. Second, it advances understanding of how agricultural support schemes contribute to farm diversification, rural resilience, and multifunctional rural development. Third, it highlights the importance of integrated territorial approaches in achieving sustainable agritourism development beyond the provision of financial support alone.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

2.1. *Agritourism as a Multifunctional Rural Development Strategy*

Agritourism has emerged as one of the most dynamic forms of rural tourism and an increasingly important strategy for agricultural diversification and sustainable rural development. Although definitions vary across countries and institutional contexts, agritourism is generally understood as a set of tourism activities directly linked to working farms and agricultural environments, where visitors experience farming practices, local food production, rural lifestyles, and cultural traditions (Barbieri, 2013). Agritourism commonly includes farm accommodation, gastronomic experiences, participation in agricultural activities, wine tourism, agro-processing demonstrations, educational visits, and the direct sale of local products. The growing interest in agritourism reflects broader changes in tourism demand, characterized by an increasing consumer preference for authentic, experience-based, and environmentally sustainable tourism products. Lane and Kastenholz (2015) argue that rural tourism has evolved from passive sightseeing towards more experiential forms of tourism that emphasize participation, authenticity, and local engagement. Within this context, agritourism enables visitors to establish direct connections with agricultural production, rural culture, and local food systems.

The literature consistently identifies agritourism as an important mechanism for farm diversification and income generation. Tew and Barbieri (2012) demonstrate that agritourism contributes to farm viability by creating alternative revenue streams while reducing dependence on agricultural production alone. Similarly, Negmatovich and Bakhtiyorovich (2022) argue that diversification through agritourism strengthens the economic resilience of rural households and improves their capacity to cope with market fluctuations and external shocks. Beyond economic benefits, agritourism contributes to broader territorial development objectives. Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2011) emphasize that agritourism represents a practical expression of agricultural multifunctionality by simultaneously generating economic, environmental, cultural, and social benefits. Agritourism supports the preservation of traditional farming practices, maintenance of rural landscapes, promotion of local gastronomy, and conservation of cultural heritage. Community participation and local stakeholder engagement are also considered critical determinants of successful agritourism development, particularly in rural areas seeking inclusive and sustainable growth.

Recent studies further highlight the role of gastronomy and local food experiences as key drivers of agritourism demand. García-Pérez and Castillo-Ortiz (2024), Rousta and Jamshidi (2020), and Yang et al. (2024) demonstrate that authentic food experiences significantly influence tourist satisfaction, destination loyalty, and revisit intentions. Consequently, agritourism increasingly serves as a bridge connecting agricultural production, tourism services, local identity, and rural entrepreneurship.

Given these multiple functions, agritourism is widely recognized as a strategic instrument for sustainable rural development, particularly in transition economies where agricultural restructuring, rural depopulation, and limited employment opportunities create pressures for economic diversification. This perspective provides the conceptual foundation for examining how public agricultural support schemes can facilitate agritourism development and contribute to broader rural transformation processes in Albania.

2.2. Agriculture, Rural Development, and Multifunctionality

Agriculture has long been recognized as a central component of rural economies, particularly in developing and transition countries, where it contributes significantly to employment, food security, social cohesion, and territorial stability. Contemporary rural development literature increasingly conceptualizes agriculture not solely as a productive sector but as a multifunctional system capable of generating economic, environmental, cultural, and social value (Wilson, 2007). Within this perspective, rural territories are viewed as integrated socio-economic spaces where agriculture contributes to landscape preservation, biodiversity protection, cultural heritage, and local identity formation alongside food production. The concept of multifunctionality became particularly influential within European rural development policy through the evolution of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which progressively shifted from production-oriented support towards integrated territorial development approaches emphasizing diversification, sustainability, and rural resilience. Hernández-Mogollón et al. (2011) argue that agritourism represents one of the most important practical expressions of agricultural multifunctionality because it links farming activities with tourism services, local gastronomy, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage preservation. Similarly, Barbieri (2013) emphasizes that agritourism enables rural households to diversify their income sources while preserving traditional farming systems and strengthening rural identity.

Rural diversification has therefore emerged as a strategic response to structural agricultural challenges, including declining farm profitability, fragmented landholdings, rural depopulation, and increasing market volatility. According to Negmatovich and Bakhtiyorovich (2022), diversification enhances the economic resilience of agricultural systems by reducing dependence on conventional agricultural production and creating complementary income-generating activities. Agritourism is frequently identified as one of the most sustainable diversification strategies because it combines local agricultural resources with experiential tourism demand. Agritourism generally refers to tourism activities directly connected to agricultural environments, including farm accommodation, local gastronomy, wine tourism, agro-processing experiences, participation in farming activities, and the direct marketing of traditional products. Unlike mass tourism, agritourism is strongly embedded within local territories and relies heavily on authenticity, local participation, and cultural interaction. Tew and Barbieri (2012) argue that agritourism contributes not only to farm-level diversification but also to broader rural economic development through employment generation, the stimulation of local supply chains, and increased value added for agricultural products.

Recent literature demonstrates that agritourism demand is increasingly shaped by experiential consumption patterns. Visitors increasingly seek authentic rural experiences connected to local food systems, agricultural traditions, and environmental sustainability rather than standardized tourism products. Lane and Kastenholz (2015) note that rural tourism has evolved toward experience-based tourism models emphasizing authenticity, participation, and local embeddedness. Similarly, García-Pérez and Castillo-Ortiz (2024), in their systematic review of gastro-tourism experiences, conclude that local gastronomy and cultural authenticity are among the strongest determinants of tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty. Food-related experiences have become particularly important within agritourism development. Roustae and Jamshidi (2020) demonstrate that food tourism experiences significantly influence tourists' intention to revisit destinations, while Yang et al. (2024) show that gastronomy-based tourism positively affects tourists' subjective well-being and overall destination satisfaction. Muskat et al. (2024) further argue that perceived authenticity and quality of local food experiences strongly influence tourists' behavioral intentions and willingness to recommend rural destinations.

The literature additionally highlights the growing importance of sustainability within rural tourism and agritourism development. Dangi and Jamal (2016) emphasize that sustainable community-based tourism requires integration between local participation, environmental management, and economic benefits for rural communities. Similarly, Giampiccoli and Mtapuri (2020) argue that agritourism and community-based tourism share common objectives related to local empowerment, cultural preservation, and inclusive rural development. Community participation represents another critical dimension within agritourism literature. Ap (1992) argued that residents' support for tourism development is influenced by their evaluation of the benefits and costs associated with tourism, with support increasing when perceived benefits outweigh perceived costs. This perspective is closely linked to Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), which suggests that communities are more likely to support tourism initiatives when they perceive positive socio-economic returns. Nunkoo et al. (2012) further emphasize that trust in institutions and perceived fairness of tourism development significantly affect community participation and long-term sustainability.

Within transition economies, agritourism is increasingly viewed as an instrument for addressing structural rural challenges while promoting sustainable territorial development. Studies from Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe, and Mediterranean regions demonstrate that agritourism contributes positively to income diversification, local entrepreneurship, preservation of cultural heritage, and reduction in rural poverty (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Zapata et al., 2011; Lee & Jan, 2019). Sekar et al. (2023) similarly conclude that agritourism initiatives strengthen community-based agricultural management while generating broader rural development benefits. The Albanian context reflects many of the structural conditions identified in the international literature. Albanian agriculture remains characterized by fragmented landholdings, relatively low productivity, limited technological modernization, and weak market integration. Under these conditions, agritourism represents an important opportunity for multifunctional rural development capable of integrating tourism demand with local agricultural production, gastronomy, and cultural heritage.

2.3. Agricultural Support Schemes and Rural Diversification

The development of agritourism typically requires substantial investment in accommodation infrastructure, food processing facilities, hospitality services, sanitation standards, digital marketing, and tourism-related activities. However, access to financial capital remains one of the principal barriers affecting small-scale rural entrepreneurs in developing and transition economies. Consequently, public support schemes and agricultural subsidies have become important instruments for stimulating rural diversification and reducing investment risks. Within the European rural development framework, agricultural policy has progressively shifted from productivity-oriented support towards integrated rural development approaches emphasizing diversification, sustainability, and territorial competitiveness. The CAP increasingly promotes investments in rural tourism, agro-processing, local food systems, and multifunctional agriculture rather than focusing exclusively on agricultural output. Empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of agricultural subsidies remains mixed and context-dependent. Minviel and Latruffe (2017) argue that the effectiveness of agricultural support depends heavily on institutional quality, targeting mechanisms, and local economic conditions. While subsidies may facilitate modernization and investment capacity, poorly designed support mechanisms can generate dependency effects and inefficient resource allocation.

In the context of agritourism, public financial support plays a particularly important role in overcoming initial entry barriers. Flanigan et al. (2014) emphasize that subsidies enable rural entrepreneurs to invest in accommodation facilities, gastronomy services, vis-

itor infrastructure, and branding activities that would otherwise be financially inaccessible. Similarly, Sriyadi and Istiyanti, (2021), found that agritourism development significantly increased value-added agricultural production and household income among rural communities in Indonesia. Evidence from developing economies also demonstrates positive socio-economic effects associated with agritourism support schemes. Willaddara and Ranaweera (2024), examining agro-tourism initiatives in Sri Lanka, found that agritourism contributes positively to local economic development through employment generation, tourism diversification, and strengthening of agricultural supply chains. Similarly, Bwana et al. (2015) identified significant socio-economic benefits associated with agritourism development in Kenya, particularly regarding rural employment and local entrepreneurship.

Recent studies increasingly emphasize the importance of governance, institutional coordination, and stakeholder collaboration within agritourism development. Thanh and Lee (2025) demonstrate that public–private partnerships significantly enhance agritourism competitiveness by improving coordination between tourism operators, local governments, and agricultural stakeholders. Similarly, Achmad et al. (2023) argue that sustainable tourism development depends heavily on collaborative governance structures, stakeholder integration, and institutional support systems. Infrastructure quality also plays a critical role in determining tourism competitiveness and rural accessibility. Corbos et al. (2024) highlight that tourism infrastructure investments directly influence destination attractiveness, visitor satisfaction, and local economic performance. Lovato-Torres et al. (2024) further demonstrate that deficiencies in transport infrastructure, connectivity, and public services significantly reduce tourist satisfaction in rural destinations.

Marketing capacity and service quality additionally influence agritourism sustainability and competitiveness. Parasuraman et al. (1988) and Cronin and Taylor (1992) emphasize the importance of perceived service quality in shaping customer satisfaction and behavioral intentions. More recent tourism studies confirm that tourist satisfaction strongly affects destination loyalty, revisit intentions, and willingness to recommend destinations (Chen & Tsai, 2007; Hussain et al., 2023). Within agritourism contexts, local gastronomy and authenticity are increasingly recognized as major determinants of visitor satisfaction. Ali et al. (2020) found that tourists' satisfaction with local food experiences significantly influences loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion. Durmaz et al. (2022) similarly argue that gastronomy tourism positively affects consumer behavior and destination attractiveness, particularly in post-pandemic tourism markets. In Albania, agricultural support policies have evolved substantially during the post-socialist transition period. Earlier agricultural interventions primarily focused on production recovery and market stabilization, while more recent strategies increasingly emphasize diversification, agro-processing, rural entrepreneurship, and tourism-related activities aligned with European rural development approaches. Support is currently implemented through national schemes administered by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA), alongside European Union-funded IPARD programs. These mechanisms increasingly support investments in agritourism infrastructure, farm modernization, local product processing, and rural accommodation services. Despite growing policy attention, empirical evidence examining the farm-level effects of these support schemes remains relatively limited in Albania. Existing studies mainly focus on descriptive tourism trends or agricultural policy implementation, while fewer studies examine beneficiary experiences, diversification behavior, and perceived socio-economic outcomes associated with public support schemes.

2.4. Agritourism Challenges in Transition Economies and the Albanian Context

Although agritourism presents important opportunities for rural diversification, its development in transition economies remains constrained by multiple structural and institutional challenges. Research from Southeast Europe and Mediterranean countries indicates that fragmented land ownership, informality, limited managerial capacity, inadequate infrastructure, and weak institutional coordination frequently reduce the competitiveness of rural tourism enterprises (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007). In Albania, many of these structural constraints continue to affect rural development. Small-scale farms often lack access to financial resources, technical expertise, and administrative capacity necessary to implement diversification investments successfully. Compliance with subsidy requirements frequently involves complex administrative procedures, including taxation, formal registration, invoicing standards, licensing, and food safety regulations, which may create barriers for small family-based enterprises. Administrative complexity has been widely recognized as a constraint affecting tourism development in developing economies. Dias et al. (2026) argue that excessive bureaucracy and weak institutional coordination reduce the effectiveness of sustainable tourism policies and discourage small operators from participating in formal support mechanisms.

Seasonality represents another major challenge affecting agritourism sustainability. Rural tourism enterprises frequently experience strong fluctuations in visitor demand between peak and off-peak seasons, generating unstable revenues and underutilization of capacities. Tosun and Timothy (2001) similarly identified seasonality and institutional weakness as critical barriers affecting sustainable tourism development in developing countries. Infrastructure deficiencies further constrain rural tourism expansion. Limited road accessibility, poor waste management systems, weak digital connectivity, and insufficient public services negatively affect both visitor experiences and business competitiveness. Munir et al. (2025) demonstrate that tourism infrastructure and institutional quality significantly influence sustainable tourism performance and destination resilience.

Marketing limitations additionally reduce the competitiveness of agritourism enterprises. Many rural operators remain dependent on informal promotion channels, including social media and word-of-mouth marketing, due to limited integration into organized tourism networks. Zielinski et al. (2021) note that insufficient marketing capacity and weak destination branding are common barriers affecting community-based tourism development in developing economies. Recent external shocks have further highlighted vulnerabilities within tourism-dependent rural economies. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses related to tourism seasonality, limited business resilience, and dependence on international visitor flows. Nevertheless, the crisis also reinforced the importance of local food systems, domestic tourism, and rural resilience. Abdou et al. (2022) emphasize that service quality, tourist trust, and destination satisfaction became increasingly important determinants of tourism recovery in post-pandemic contexts.

Despite increasing policy attention toward agritourism and rural diversification in Albania, important research gaps remain. Existing studies largely provide descriptive analyses of tourism growth and agricultural policies without adequately examining how agricultural support schemes influence farm-level diversification strategies, beneficiary experiences, and rural socio-economic outcomes. This study addresses these gaps by combining secondary statistical analysis with field-based evidence collected from agritourism beneficiaries across major rural regions of Albania. Drawing on the theoretical perspectives of multifunctionality, rural diversification, and community-based tourism, the research provides empirical insights into how agricultural support schemes contribute to agritourism development, rural entrepreneurship, and territorial sustainability within a transition economy context.

To synthesize the theoretical perspectives discussed above and guide the empirical analysis, a conceptual framework was developed. The framework illustrates how agricul-

tural support schemes stimulate farm-level investments that facilitate agritourism development and contribute to broader rural development outcomes. At the same time, the framework recognizes the influence of structural constraints that may limit the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study develops a conceptual framework illustrating the relationship between agricultural support schemes, farm-level investment activation, agritourism development, and rural development outcomes, while accounting for structural and territorial constraints (Figure 1). The framework guides both the empirical design and the interpretation of results.

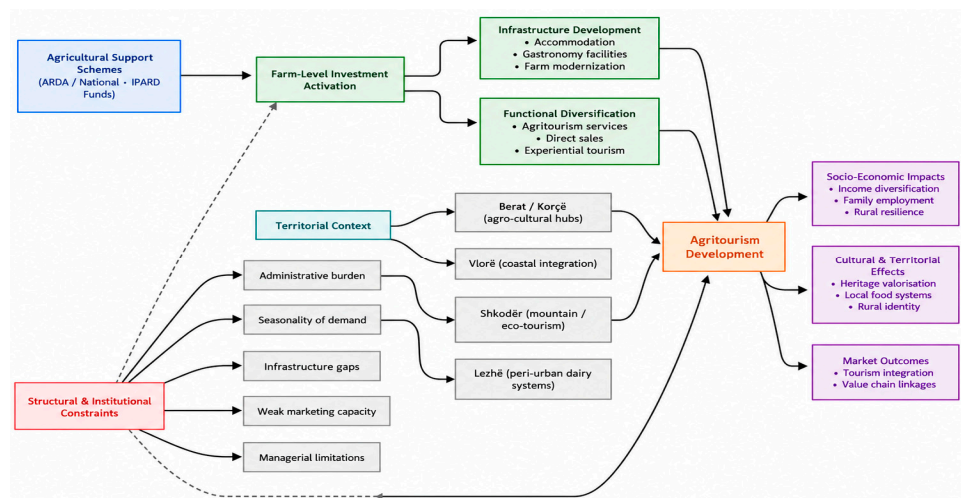


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study. Source: Authors' elaboration based on the reviewed literature.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study follows a structured mixed-methods design combining qualitative thematic analysis with descriptive statistical analysis of survey data collected from the same respondents. The use of mixed methods enables a more comprehensive understanding of both measurable socio-economic outcomes and the subjective experiences of agritourism beneficiaries (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). Mixed-methods approaches are increasingly applied in rural development and tourism research because they allow researchers to combine contextual interpretation with empirical measurement of socio-economic dynamics (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020). In agritourism research specifically, qualitative evidence is considered particularly valuable for understanding diversification behavior, local entrepreneurship, institutional barriers, and territorial development processes that cannot be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone (Barbieri, 2013; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). The study is theoretically grounded in the concepts of agricultural multifunctionality and rural diversification, which conceptualize agritourism as an integrated rural development strategy combining tourism services, agricultural production, gastronomy, local identity, and cultural heritage (Wilson, 2007; Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2011). The exploratory case study design was selected because empirical evidence regarding agritourism support schemes in Albania remains limited, particularly at the farm and beneficiary level. Case study approaches are widely recommended when investigating contemporary socio-economic phenomena within real-life institutional and territorial contexts (Yin, 2018). The methodological framework follows a convergent mixed-methods logic whereby qualitative and quantitative evidence are analyzed sepa-

rately and integrated during interpretation of findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023). Similar methodological approaches have been employed in studies examining community-based tourism, agritourism sustainability, and rural diversification in developing and transition economies (Yanes et al., 2019; Sekar et al., 2023; Willaddara & Ranaweera, 2024).

3.2. Data Collection

Primary data were collected through 60 face-to-face interviews with agritourism farm owners and rural entrepreneurs between September and October 2025. The interviews were conducted across five Albanian regions with significant agritourism activity: Korçë, Berat, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Lezhë. These regions were purposively selected to capture territorial diversity, including mountainous, coastal, and mixed rural tourism systems (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The interview guide covered six main themes: (i) farm and business characteristics, (ii) use of subsidy support, (iii) investment decisions, (iv) diversification outcomes, (v) socio-economic effects, and (vi) administrative and institutional challenges. The respondent group consisted of 60 agritourism farm owners and rural entrepreneurs who had received support through national agricultural support schemes and rural development measures. Respondents were identified from beneficiary lists obtained from publicly available records of national support schemes and were selected to ensure representation across regions, agritourism activities, and farm business models. This approach ensured the inclusion of beneficiaries with direct experience in implementing agritourism-related investments. The sample included operators engaged in various agritourism activities, such as rural accommodation, traditional gastronomy, agro-processing, wine tourism, and the direct marketing of local agricultural products. Respondents were drawn from five regions (Korçë, Berat, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Lezhë), which reflect different territorial and tourism development profiles, ensuring representation of mountainous, coastal, and mixed rural tourism areas. The sample also included farms with diverse operational characteristics and business models, reflecting the heterogeneity of agritourism development in Albania. Most respondents had several years of experience managing agricultural holdings and tourism-related activities, allowing the study to capture informed perspectives on investment decisions, diversification processes, and the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes. All respondents were beneficiaries of national agricultural support schemes implemented during the 2015–2018 programming period.

The agricultural support scheme investments included a range of agritourism-related activities, such as the construction or renovation of accommodation facilities, development of traditional gastronomy services, establishment of agro-processing units, wine tourism infrastructure, visitor reception areas, and facilities for the direct marketing of local products. While subsidy amounts varied among beneficiaries depending on project type and eligibility criteria, all respondents had received financial support through national rural development measures during the 2015–2018 programming period. Each interview lasted approximately 40–45 min and was conducted at the farm premises, enabling direct observation of agritourism infrastructure, accommodation facilities, processing units, and tourism-related services. The interview instrument combined semi-structured questions addressing diversification strategies, investment behavior, institutional experiences, and perceived policy effectiveness, with structured survey items measuring perceived socio-economic effects, including income changes, employment generation, investment dependency, and diversification outcomes. The combination of qualitative and structured survey questions enabled the collection of both contextual insights and quantifiable perceptions, thereby strengthening methodological triangulation and internal consistency (Saunders et al., 2019). Secondary data were obtained from official institutional sources, including the Albanian Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), the Ministry of

Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), and the Agricultural and Rural Development Agency (ARDA). These data included annual subsidy allocations, numbers of applications and beneficiaries, and policy implementation reports related to agritourism and rural diversification. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents prior to data collection.

3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Interview notes and responses were reviewed repeatedly to identify recurring patterns and themes. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently grouped into broader analytical categories. The final coding structure focused on four principal dimensions: (i) diversification effects and business development outcomes, (ii) investment and infrastructure effects, (iii) institutional and administrative barriers, and (iv) regional development patterns and territorial differences. The coding process aimed to identify common experiences and perceptions among respondents while preserving contextual interpretation of individual cases. The analysis was intended to provide exploratory empirical evidence rather than statistical generalization to the wider population. Methodological triangulation between interviews, structured responses, field observations, and secondary institutional data enhanced the credibility and reliability of findings (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

Qualitative data were organized and coded using NVivo software. The coding process followed an inductive–deductive approach whereby initial codes emerging from interview responses were refined and grouped into broader themes aligned with the study’s conceptual framework. Theme validation was conducted through iterative comparison of coded interview excerpts, survey findings, field observations, and secondary data sources to ensure analytical consistency and coherence. The use of NVivo facilitated systematic organization of qualitative evidence and supported transparency in the identification of recurring patterns across respondents. Figure 2 presents the NVivo hierarchy chart generated from the thematic analysis, illustrating the main themes and sub-themes identified from the interview data and their relationships within the overall coding structure.

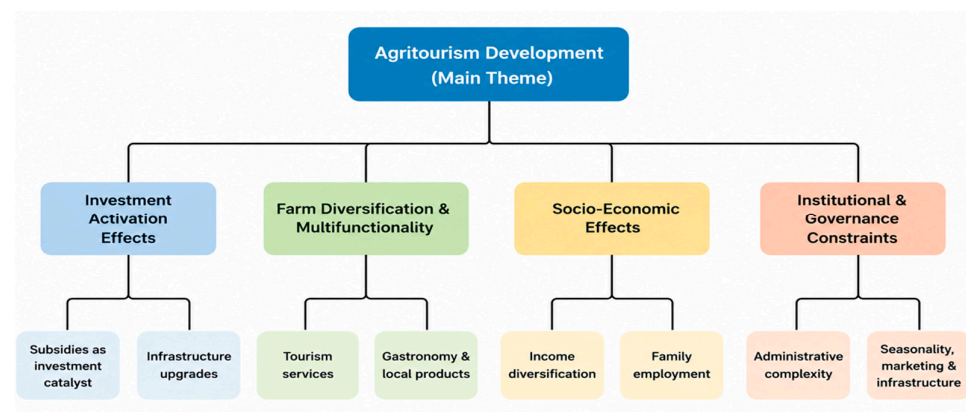


Figure 2. NVivo Hierarchy Chart of Main Themes and Sub-Themes Identified Through Thematic Analysis. Source: Authors’ thematic analysis of interview data ($n = 60$) using NVivo-assisted coding.

To strengthen analytical validity, findings from the different data sources were integrated through a triangulation approach. Qualitative interview evidence was used to explain and contextualize patterns identified through the structured survey responses, while secondary institutional data from ARDA, MARD, and INSTAT were used to situate farm-level findings within broader national trends related to agricultural support and agritour-

ism development. The integration of data occurred during the interpretation stage, where recurring themes emerging from interviews were compared with quantitative response patterns and institutional statistics. Convergence across these sources increased confidence in the findings, while divergences were examined to identify contextual and regional differences in agritourism development experiences.

3.4. Research Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on purposive sampling and a relatively small sample size, which limits statistical generalizability. Second, the analysis is primarily based on beneficiaries' self-reported perceptions, which may introduce response bias. Third, the research adopts a cross-sectional design and therefore cannot fully capture the long-term causal effects of agricultural support schemes over time. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods approach, triangulation of multiple data sources, and direct field observations provide robust exploratory evidence regarding the role of agricultural support schemes in agritourism development in Albania. The study focuses exclusively on beneficiaries of agricultural support schemes, as its primary objective is to examine investment experiences, diversification outcomes, and perceived impacts among supported agritourism operators. The absence of a non-beneficiary comparison group represents a limitation and an avenue for future research. Representative interview quotations were not included because the study prioritizes thematic synthesis and aggregated interpretation of respondents' experiences. Future studies may incorporate more extensive qualitative excerpts to further illustrate individual perspectives.

4. Results

Section 4.1 provides the broader agricultural and rural development context within which agritourism has evolved in Albania. The subsequent Sections 4.2–4.6 present the empirical findings according to five analytical dimensions: investment activation effects of agricultural support schemes, farm diversification and multifunctional development outcomes, socio-economic effects on rural households, perceived impacts of support schemes, and institutional constraints affecting long-term sustainability. This structure reflects the study's research objective and conceptual framework.

4.1. Structural Characteristics of the Agricultural Sector and Rural Development Context

The Albanian agricultural sector continues to play a central role in the national economy and rural livelihoods, contributing approximately 21% of GDP and employing a substantial proportion of the rural population (INSTAT, 2022). Despite its socio-economic importance, the sector remains structurally constrained by fragmented landholdings, low levels of mechanization, weak vertical integration, and limited access to finance and technology. These structural characteristics are typical of post-socialist and transition economies, where agriculture frequently performs both productive and social protection functions (Kizos & Iosifides, 2007; Wilson, 2007). From a rural development perspective, these limitations reduce the capacity of conventional agricultural production alone to generate sustainable rural incomes. Consequently, rural households increasingly adopt diversification strategies aimed at reducing vulnerability to agricultural price instability, climate risks, and limited market access. Within this context, agritourism has emerged as an important diversification pathway that combines agricultural production with tourism-related services, gastronomy, cultural heritage, and experiential activities. The findings support the multifunctionality framework proposed by Wilson (2007) and Barbieri (2013), according to which rural farms increasingly evolve from purely productive units into multifunctional enterprises generating economic, cultural, environmental, and recreational value. In Albania, this transition appears particularly relevant due to the coexistence of

rich natural landscapes, traditional food systems, and relatively underutilized rural tourism potential. The analysis further demonstrates that limited rural financial intermediation remains a major structural constraint. Respondents frequently reported difficulties in accessing commercial credit due to collateral limitations, high interest rates, and low institutional trust in small-scale agricultural enterprises. One interviewee stated, “Accessing bank credit was almost impossible without strong collateral, even for small investments with clear business potential” (R2); similar findings are reported by Flanigan et al. (2014), who identify restricted access to finance as one of the principal barriers limiting agritourism development in peripheral rural economies. Under such conditions, public subsidies become a critical mechanism enabling initial investment and entrepreneurial diversification. These findings indicate that agritourism development in Albania should not be interpreted solely as a tourism phenomenon, but rather as part of a broader structural adaptation process through which rural households seek to improve resilience, diversify income sources, and increase the value added of agricultural activities.

4.2. Investment Activation Effects of Agricultural Support Schemes

The first analytical dimension examined in this study concerns the extent to which agricultural support schemes have stimulated investment and reduced financial barriers to agritourism development. Understanding the investment-triggering effect of public support is essential for assessing the contribution of subsidies to rural diversification and multifunctional rural development. The empirical evidence demonstrates that agricultural support schemes have played a decisive enabling role in the emergence and expansion of agritourism activities in Albania. Survey findings reveal that approximately 72% of respondents identified public subsidies as the principal source of investment capital, while 68% stated that planned investments would not have been implemented without financial support schemes. These results confirm that public support schemes function primarily as investment-triggering instruments that reduce liquidity constraints and investment risk in rural areas characterized by weak financial markets and limited private capital accumulation. In practical terms, subsidies enabled beneficiaries to renovate farmhouses, construct accommodation facilities, improve food-processing infrastructure, establish visitor reception areas, and upgrade sanitation and hospitality standards; one of the respondents stated, “The grant reduced the financial risk and gave us confidence to invest in tourism services” (R12). These findings are consistent with Flanigan et al. (2014), who argue that rural tourism subsidies reduce market-entry barriers for small agricultural entrepreneurs, particularly in regions with underdeveloped credit systems. Similarly, Barbieri (2013) emphasizes that agritourism development often depends on external financial support during the early stages of business diversification. However, the results also indicate that the developmental effect of subsidies is conditional and non-linear. Although financial support facilitated infrastructure development and diversification, it did not automatically ensure long-term business competitiveness or market sustainability. Several respondents highlighted that the absence of marketing support, professional training, and institutional coordination limited the capacity of agritourism enterprises to expand beyond local or seasonal markets. This suggests that subsidies alone are insufficient to generate structural transformation in rural economies. One participant noted, “The subsidy helped us start the business, but we received no guidance on marketing or how to attract visitors consistently” (R4), while another respondent highlighted institutional limitations: “Without training and promotional support, it is difficult to grow beyond a small seasonal activity” (R6). These findings indicate that agritourism development in Albania should not be interpreted solely as a tourism phenomenon, but rather as part of a broader structural adaptation process. Instead, the effectiveness of support schemes depends on complementary territorial conditions, including tourism demand,

infrastructure quality, entrepreneurial capacity, and institutional support systems. This conclusion is consistent with Minviel and Latruffe (2017), who show that agricultural support policies generate heterogeneous outcomes depending on local institutional and territorial contexts. Therefore, agricultural subsidies in Albania should be interpreted primarily as catalytic mechanisms that facilitate entry into agritourism activities rather than as self-sufficient instruments capable of ensuring sustainable rural transformation. Overall, the findings suggest that agricultural support schemes function mainly as investment catalysts enabling the initial establishment and expansion of agritourism enterprises. Their long-term effectiveness, however, depends on complementary territorial and institutional conditions that support business sustainability.

4.3. Farm Diversification and Multifunctional Rural Development Outcomes

The second analytical dimension focuses on the role of public support in facilitating farm diversification and promoting multifunctional rural development. Particular attention is given to how supported farms have expanded beyond conventional agricultural production into tourism-related and value-added activities. The findings provide strong empirical evidence that agritourism contributes significantly to the multifunctional transformation of rural farms in Albania. Approximately 81% of surveyed respondents reported diversifying their activities beyond conventional agricultural production into tourism-related services, including accommodation, traditional gastronomy, wine tasting, agro-processing demonstrations, direct sales of local products, and experiential tourism activities. One respondent explained the motivation for diversification: “Agriculture alone could not sustain our household, so we added guest accommodation and food services” (R5). Another noted, “Tourists are interested in authentic experiences, so we started offering homemade food and farm visits” (R7). This diversification reflects a structural shift from productivist agriculture toward multifunctional rural entrepreneurship, where farms simultaneously produce agricultural goods, tourism experiences, cultural services, and local identity value; one respondent stated, “Today we earn income from farming, accommodation, and selling homemade products. We no longer depend on a single activity” (R18). This finding is consistent with Sachaleli (2022), who argues that agritourism contributes to sustainable rural development by strengthening the multifunctional role of agriculture, diversifying rural income sources, and enhancing the socio-economic vitality of rural communities. Such results strongly support the multifunctionality framework proposed by Wilson (2007) and further developed in agritourism studies by Barbieri (2013). Importantly, the diversification process is territorially differentiated rather than homogeneous across Albania. Regional patterns indicate that agritourism development is highly dependent on local comparative advantages, territorial capital, and tourism accessibility.

The regional analysis reveals distinct specialization trajectories. Berat is strongly associated with wine tourism and gastronomy, reflecting the integration of viticulture, culinary heritage, and cultural tourism. A local operator stated: “Wine production and tourism go hand in hand here; most visitors come during harvest season” (R2—Berat). Agritourism enterprises in this region capitalize on traditional wine production and UNESCO-related cultural assets, generating high value-added tourism experiences. In Korçë, gastronomy plays a central role: “Our main attraction is traditional food and local recipes that visitors cannot find elsewhere” (R11—Korçë). Farms in this region combine agricultural production with food transformation and culinary tourism, thereby strengthening local value chains and product differentiation. Vlorë demonstrates a hybrid coastal-rural tourism model, where agritourism benefits from spillover demand generated by coastal tourism flows, as one respondent stated: “Many tourists from the coast visit us for a day trip to experience rural life” (R6—Vlorë). The regional analysis reveals distinct spe-

cialization trajectories across the study regions. As summarized in Table 1, each region exhibits a distinct agritourism model shaped by its agricultural resources, cultural assets, tourism demand, and territorial characteristics.

Table 1. Dominant agritourism model by region.

Region	Dominant Agritourism Model	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Berat	Wine tourism & gastronomy	8	13.3
Korçë	Rural gastronomy & agro-processing	10	16.7
Vlorë	Coastal–rural hybrid tourism	18	30.0
Shkodër	Nature & livestock tourism	14	23.3
Lezhë	Dairy & small farm tourism	10	16.7
Total		60	100.0

Source: Authors' survey data ($n = 60$, 2025).

This proximity to mass tourism markets provides stronger integration opportunities compared to inland regions. Shkodër is characterized by nature-based and livestock-oriented agritourism linked to mountainous landscapes, pastoral systems, and eco-tourism experiences. Here, agritourism relies heavily on environmental assets and authenticity-driven tourism demand. Lezhë shows a stronger orientation toward dairy production and small-scale farm tourism, supported by peri-urban market access and short agricultural value chains. These regional differences confirm that agritourism development in Albania is territorially embedded and strongly shaped by agro-ecological conditions, local identity, and tourism accessibility. Similar conclusions are reported by Lane and Kastenholtz (2015), who emphasize that rural tourism development depends on place-based resources and localized territorial dynamics rather than standardized policy interventions.

Consequently, the findings suggest that national agritourism policies should avoid uniform approaches and instead adopt territorially differentiated strategies tailored to regional resource endowments and tourism specialization patterns. Overall, the results demonstrate that agricultural support schemes contribute not only to tourism development but also to the multifunctional transformation of rural farms through the diversification of income sources, services, and local value-creation activities.

4.4. Socio-Economic Effects of Supported Agritourism Investments

The third analytical dimension examines the socio-economic impacts generated by agritourism investments supported through public funding schemes. Particular emphasis is placed on income diversification, employment creation, and household resilience. The findings indicate that agritourism generates important socio-economic effects at household and community level, particularly through income diversification, family employment, and enhancement of rural resilience.

The socio-economic profile of respondents demonstrates that agritourism in Albania remains predominantly composed of small-scale, family-based enterprises rather than large commercial tourism operators. Approximately 78% of surveyed farms are family-owned and managed, while 65% operate on holdings smaller than 5 hectares. These structural characteristics indicate that agritourism functions primarily as a household-level adaptation strategy aimed at compensating for limited agricultural profitability. The dominance of mixed agricultural–tourism activities (81%) confirms that most respondents continue to combine primary agricultural production with tourism services rather than fully abandoning farming activities. The findings further reveal that agritourism contributes positively to rural income stabilization and labor absorption. Approximately 74% of respondents reported increases in annual household income following investment support, while 64% indicated that agritourism generated additional employment opportunities for

family members. One respondent emphasized income stability: “Before agritourism, our income depended only on farming; now we have more stable earnings throughout the year” (R22). Another highlighted household employment: “My wife and children now work in the guesthouse during the tourism season” (R25). Around 41% also reported hiring seasonal workers during peak tourism periods; one respondent stated, “During the summer season we employ local young people, which creates additional income opportunities within the village” (R27). These results suggest that agritourism strengthens rural resilience by reducing dependence on volatile agricultural income and creating supplementary economic opportunities within rural households. Similar conclusions are reached by Tew and Barbieri (2012), who identify agritourism as an effective risk-diversification strategy in vulnerable rural economies. However, the employment effects remain predominantly family-based and seasonal rather than fully institutionalized within formal rural labor markets. This indicates that agritourism in Albania continues to operate largely as a supplementary household economic activity rather than a mature tourism industry capable of generating stable year-round employment. An additional important finding concerns the role of gastronomy and local products in shaping tourism demand. More than 70% of respondents identified traditional cuisine, homemade products, and farm-based food experiences as the primary motivations attracting visitors; one of the respondents emphasized that “Visitors often tell us that traditional food is the main reason they choose our farm instead of a hotel” (R30). This confirms that agritourism contributes not only to economic diversification but also to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, local identity, and short agricultural value chains. These findings align with Liang et al. (2021) and García-Pérez and Castillo-Ortiz (2024), who emphasize the growing importance of authentic gastronomic experiences and cultural immersion in contemporary rural tourism demand. Therefore, the benefits of agritourism extend beyond individual farm performance and contribute to broader rural development objectives, including economic diversification, social resilience, and the preservation of local cultural resources.

As presented in Table 2, the surveyed agritourism enterprises are predominantly family-owned and small-scale operations, with most respondents combining agricultural production with agritourism activities. The sample also reflects the regional distribution of beneficiaries across the five study areas.

Table 2. Socio-economic profile of agritourism respondents ($n = 60$).

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Farm type	Family-owned farm	48	80.0
	Cooperative/enterprise	12	20.0
Total		60	100.0
Main activity	Mixed agriculture + agritourism	49	81.7
	Pure agriculture	11	18.3
Total		60	100.0
Farm size	<5 hectares	39	65.0
	5–10 hectares	11	18.3
	>10 hectares	10	16.7
Total		60	100.0
Education level	Secondary education	48	80.0
	University degree	8	13.3
	Primary education	4	6.7
Total		60	100.0
Region	Berat	8	13.3
	Korçë	10	16.7

Vlorë	18	30.0
Shkodër	14	23.3
Lezhë	10	16.7
Total	60	100.0

Source: Authors' survey ($n = 60$, 2025).

4.5. Sustainability Challenges and Limits of Subsidies Support Schemes

While public support schemes generated significant investment and diversification benefits, respondents also identified several limitations affecting the long-term sustainability of agritourism enterprises.

As shown in Table 3, respondents perceived agricultural support schemes as having the strongest effects on investment initiation and farm diversification, while also reporting persistent challenges related to seasonality and market access.

Table 3. Perceived impact of agricultural support schemes ($n = 60$).

Perceived Impact Indicator	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Subsidy as main investment source	8	14
Investment would not occur without subsidy	8	13
Diversification into agritourism services	10	16
Increase in household income	8	14
Family employment creation	7	12
Seasonal employment generated	5	8
Marketing via informal channels	6	10
Dependence on seasonality	8	13
Total	60	100

Source: Authors' survey data ($n = 60$, 2025).

The results on perceived effects further confirm the central role of agricultural support schemes in facilitating agritourism development. The strongest reported effect concerns investment initiation, where 72% of respondents identified subsidies as the principal source of capital. The diversification effect is equally significant, with 81% reporting expansion into agritourism services after receiving support. This demonstrates that subsidies encouraged structural adaptation toward multifunctional rural activities and service-based entrepreneurship. Positive socio-economic effects are also evident through reported increases in household income (74%) and family employment creation (64%). Nevertheless, the results simultaneously reveal persistent structural weaknesses. A high proportion of respondents (67%) reported strong dependence on tourism seasonality, one of the respondents emphasized that “Most of our income is generated during only a few months of the year, making long-term planning difficult” (R15). While 54% relied mainly on informal marketing channels such as social media and word-of-mouth promotion, one respondent noted “We know how to use Facebook, but we lack the knowledge and resources for professional marketing campaigns” (R19), and another respondent noted, “In winter months, we almost have no visitors, so the business becomes financially difficult” (R13). Another stated, “Most of our clients come through Facebook or recommendations, not official tourism platforms” (R14). These findings indicate limited integration into professional tourism networks and insufficient market institutionalization. Consequently, while subsidies effectively stimulate initial investment and diversification, they do not fully address structural barriers related to market access, business professionalization, and long-term sustainability. Agritourism therefore appears to function primarily as a rural adaptation mechanism rather than a fully consolidated tourism industry. These results indicate that financial assistance alone cannot guarantee sustainable agritourism develop-

ment and must be complemented by measures that strengthen market access, professionalization, and business competitiveness.

4.6. Institutional and Governance Constraints Affecting Agritourism Development

The final analytical dimension concerns institutional and governance-related barriers that influence the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes and the long-term development of agritourism enterprises. Despite the positive developmental outcomes identified, the findings reveal substantial institutional and structural barriers limiting the sustainability and scalability of agritourism development. As presented in Table 4, administrative complexity and seasonality of demand were identified as the most significant constraints, followed by limited marketing capacity, compliance costs, infrastructure limitations, and limited advisory services.

Table 4. Distribution of Institutional Constraints Faced by Respondents ($n = 60$).

Institutional Constraint	Frequency (%)
Administrative complexity	20
Seasonality of demand	20
Limited marketing capacity	16
Compliance costs	16
Infrastructure limitations	15
Limited advisory services	13
Total	100

Source: Authors' survey data ($n = 60$, 2025).

Administrative complexity emerged as one of the most significant constraints, reported by 67% of respondents. A participant explained, “The application process is very complicated and requires too many documents and repeated visits” (R3). Beneficiaries highlighted difficulties related to documentation requirements, application procedures, reporting obligations, and delays in administrative processing. These findings are consistent with Minviel and Latruffe (2017), who argue that excessive bureaucratic procedures reduce the efficiency and accessibility of agricultural support schemes. Seasonality also represents a major structural limitation. Approximately 45% of respondents reported strong fluctuations in visitor demand between peak and off-peak periods, resulting in unstable revenues and underutilized capacity. Similar patterns are widely documented in the rural tourism literature as a persistent constraint affecting peripheral tourism economies (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). Marketing limitations constitute another important barrier. Around 54% of respondents rely primarily on informal promotion channels, reflecting limited digital marketing skills, weak destination branding, and insufficient integration into organized tourism networks; one respondent noted “We don’t receive support in promoting our services or connecting with tourism agencies” (R21). Infrastructure deficiencies remain particularly problematic in remote and mountainous areas. Infrastructure deficiencies were also emphasized: “The road access is poor, and this discourages many visitors from coming” (R4). Approximately 49% of respondents identified poor road conditions, weak internet connectivity, inadequate water systems, and insufficient waste management infrastructure as barriers limiting service quality and tourism expansion. Corbos et al. (2024) similarly demonstrate that rural tourism competitiveness is strongly dependent on infrastructure quality and accessibility. Finally, compliance costs associated with food safety standards, licensing requirements, and business formalization were perceived as financially burdensome, especially for small family-based enterprises. While regulatory frameworks improve service quality and consumer protection, they may simultaneously create exclusionary pressures for smaller rural operators. Compliance costs

were perceived as burdensome, as one respondent noted that “Food safety standards are important, but for small farms they are expensive and difficult to implement” (R6). Overall, the findings indicate that agritourism development in Albania is shaped by the interaction of three interrelated dimensions: (i) financial support mechanisms that enable investment and diversification; (ii) territorial conditions that influence accessibility, tourism attractiveness, and market opportunities; and (iii) institutional and governance factors that determine implementation effectiveness and long-term competitiveness. While public support schemes effectively address investment constraints, sustainable rural development outcomes increasingly depend on improvements in infrastructure, institutional coordination, advisory services, marketing integration, and local governance capacity. Consequently, agritourism policy should move beyond a subsidy-oriented approach toward a more integrated territorial development model.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

5.1. Interpretation of Main Findings

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence that agricultural support schemes have played a significant role in facilitating agritourism development and rural diversification in Albania. Consistent with the literature on rural entrepreneurship and agricultural multifunctionality (Wilson, 2007; Barbieri, 2013), agricultural support schemes have acted primarily as investment catalysts, enabling rural households to overcome financial constraints and engage in new economic activities beyond conventional agricultural production. The results indicate that subsidies were particularly important during the initial stages of business establishment, when access to commercial credit and private investment remained limited. This finding supports previous studies suggesting that agritourism development in transition economies is often highly dependent on external financial support due to structural limitations in rural financial markets (Flanigan et al., 2014). The study further confirms the relevance of the multifunctionality perspective in explaining contemporary rural transformation processes. Supported farms increasingly combine agricultural production with tourism services, gastronomy, agro-processing activities, and direct marketing of local products. Rather than replacing agricultural production, agritourism complements existing farming activities and generates additional sources of income. This finding is consistent with the argument that multifunctional agriculture contributes not only to economic diversification but also to the preservation of cultural heritage, local identity, and traditional food systems (Hernández-Mogollón et al., 2011; Barbieri, 2013). The results therefore suggest that agritourism should be understood as an integrated rural development strategy rather than merely a tourism activity.

5.2. Comparison with Previous Studies

An important contribution of the study concerns the territorial dimension of agritourism development. The findings reveal substantial regional variation in agritourism specialization and development trajectories. Regions such as Berat, Korçë, Vlorë, Shkodër, and Lezhë have developed distinct agritourism models based on their specific agricultural resources, cultural assets, geographical characteristics, and tourism markets. These results support place-based approaches to rural development, which emphasize that local resources and territorial capital significantly influence development outcomes (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015). Consequently, uniform policy interventions may be less effective than territorially differentiated strategies tailored to regional development potential and local comparative advantages.

The study also demonstrates that agritourism generates broader socio-economic benefits beyond farm-level income diversification. Respondents reported improvements in

household income, family employment, and business resilience. Agritourism activities additionally contributed to the promotion of local gastronomy, preservation of cultural traditions, and strengthening of local value chains. These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the contribution of agritourism to rural resilience and community development (Tew & Barbieri, 2012; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2020). However, the results also indicate that employment creation remains largely family-based and seasonal, suggesting that agritourism in Albania is still evolving toward a more mature and institutionalized rural tourism sector.

5.3. Theoretical Contributions and Implications

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the relevance of the multifunctionality and rural diversification frameworks used in this study. Despite the positive effects identified, the findings reveal several structural and institutional constraints that limit the long-term sustainability of agritourism enterprises. Administrative complexity, limited marketing capacity, tourism seasonality, infrastructure deficiencies, and weak institutional coordination continue to affect business performance and competitiveness. These findings suggest that financial support alone is insufficient to ensure sustainable rural transformation. Instead, the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes depends on the broader institutional and territorial environment within which beneficiaries operate. Similar conclusions have been reported in studies examining rural tourism development in other transition and developing economies, where governance quality, infrastructure provision, and stakeholder coordination significantly influence development outcomes (Minviel & Latruffe, 2017; Corbos et al., 2024).

5.4. Policy Implications

The findings carry several implications for agricultural and rural development policy in Albania. First, agricultural support schemes should continue to support agritourism investments, given their demonstrated contribution to farm diversification and rural income generation. However, future interventions should move beyond a predominantly subsidy-oriented approach and adopt a more integrated territorial development perspective.

Second, greater attention should be devoted to improving rural infrastructure, particularly road accessibility, digital connectivity, water supply systems, and waste management services. Infrastructure improvements would enhance both visitor experiences and the competitiveness of rural enterprises.

Third, the simplification of administrative procedures could improve access to support schemes, particularly for small family-based operators. Respondents frequently identified bureaucratic requirements and administrative burdens as significant obstacles to participation and investment implementation.

Fourth, stronger advisory and extension services are needed to support agritourism operators in areas such as business planning, financial management, service quality, digital marketing, and product development. Capacity-building initiatives could improve business sustainability and facilitate integration into wider tourism markets.

Fifth, policies should support destination branding, local tourism networks, and co-operation among agritourism enterprises, municipalities, tourism organizations, and agricultural stakeholders. Enhanced collaboration could strengthen local value chains and improve the visibility of rural destinations.

Finally, efforts to reduce tourism seasonality should be prioritized through the development of year-round tourism products linked to gastronomy, cultural heritage, traditional events, agro-processing experiences, and nature-based activities. Such measures

would contribute to more stable visitor flows and improve the economic sustainability of agritourism enterprises.

Overall, the findings suggest that the future success of agritourism in Albania will depend not only on continued financial support but also on the capacity of public institutions to foster an enabling environment that combines infrastructure development, institutional coordination, entrepreneurial support, and place-based rural development strategies.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the role of agricultural support schemes in promoting agritourism development and rural diversification in Albania. Drawing on evidence from 60 agritourism beneficiaries across five regions, the findings demonstrate that public support schemes have played a significant role in facilitating investment, encouraging farm diversification, and supporting the multifunctional transformation of rural economies.

The results show that agritourism contributes positively to income diversification, family employment, local food systems, and the valorization of cultural and gastronomic heritage. At the same time, agritourism development remains territorially uneven and constrained by administrative complexity, infrastructure deficiencies, marketing limitations, and a strong dependence on seasonal tourism demand.

A key contribution of the study is the demonstration that agricultural subsidies act primarily as catalysts for investment and diversification rather than as standalone instruments of rural transformation. The findings indicate that sustainable agritourism development depends on the interaction between financial support, territorial conditions, and institutional capacity.

The study contributes to the agritourism and rural development literature by providing empirical evidence from a Southeast European transition economy, where research on the effectiveness of agricultural support schemes remains limited. The Albanian case illustrates how agritourism can emerge as a multifunctional rural development strategy under conditions of fragmented farm structures, limited capitalization, and evolving institutional frameworks.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study is based on a purposive sample of 60 beneficiaries and relies partly on self-reported perceptions. Future research could employ larger samples, comparative regional analyses, longitudinal approaches, and quantitative impact assessment methods to further evaluate the long-term economic, social, and environmental effects of agritourism support policies.

Overall, the findings confirm that agritourism represents an important mechanism for rural diversification and multifunctional rural development in Albania, while highlighting the need for integrated approaches that combine financial support with broader territorial and institutional development measures.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.G.; Methodology, M.G.; Software, E.M.; Validation, E.K.; Formal analysis, M.G.; Investigation, E.K.; Writing—original draft, E.M.; Writing—review & editing, E.M.; Visualization, E.M.; Supervision, E.M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by National Agency for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (AKKSHI) grant number prot102012025.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the Agricultural University of Tirana. The research complied with general ethical principles and standards of academic integrity. In line with institutional regulations and Albanian legislation, including Law No. 80/2015 on Higher Education and Scientific Re-

search, formal Ethics Committee approval is not required for anonymous, non-invasive survey-based research of this type.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in arda and mard. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: <https://bujqesia.gov.al/en/> (accessed on 20 June 2026).

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to National Agency for Scientific Research, Technology and Innovation (AKKSHI) for its institutional support and contribution to the advancement of scientific research and innovation in Albania. The support provided by AKKSHI has been valuable in facilitating research activities related to rural development, agricultural policy analysis, and agritourism studies.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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