RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sustainable Development and Workforce Dynamics in Albania's Rural Tourism Sector: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Rural tourism in Albania has emerged as a strategic pathway for regional development, leveraging the country's rich cultural heritage and natural assets to stimulate employment and socio-economic revitalization in underdeveloped areas. These opportunities are accompaigned by persistent worforce challenges, including seasonal employment, limited career progression, low digital literacy, and gaps in specialized skills. While sustainable tourism discourse increasingly addresses environmenral and economic dimensions, workforce and employment considerations remain comparatively underexplored. Aligning with the emerging field of sustainable human resource management, this study situates workforce development at the center of Albania's rural tourism sustainability agenda, highlighting its relevance to the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research combines secondary data analysis from national statistics, policy documents, and literature on tourism workforce development with semi-structured interviews with local tourism operators, vocational training providers, and representatives from tourism associations. The findings underscore a growing need for digital competencies, particularly in online marketing, digital booking systems, and social media engagement, along institutional mecanisms that can strengthen workforce adaptability. By foregrounding employment dynamics within the sustainable tourism narrative, the study offers practical insights for policymakers, training institutions, and development agencies seeking to build a resilient and competitive rural tourism sector in the context of global digital transformation.

Keywords: rural tourism, workforce development, digital skills, human resource menagement.

1. Introduction

Rural tourism in Albania is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for economic diversification and regional development, particularly in historic and peripheral areas rich in architectural heritage, traditional crafts, and dinstictive landscapes. Institutions such as the Word Bank and UNESCO have repeatedly emphasized the strategic potential to rural tourism to stimulate local employment, safeguard cultural assets, and foster inclusive growth (World Bank, 2025; UNESCO, 2020). However, the sector long-term contribution to sustainable development remains constrained by persistent workforce challenges, including limited professional training, reliance on seasonal labor, and particularly low digital fluency among tourism workers. These challenges directly hinder the capacity of rural entereprises to capitalize on essential tools such as online booking systems, digital marketing, and social media engagement, competencies that now shape competitiveness and destination visibility.

Although workforce issues lie at the core of tourism development, they have received comparatively limited attention within the broader discourse on sustainable tourism. While the United Nations' Agenda explicitly references the need for "decent work and economic growth", scholars argue that workforce considerations permeate several other goals relating to equity, innovation, and sustainable community development (ILO, 2016). Yet, debates on sustainable

tourism continue to focus predominantly on environmental and economic indicators, often neglecting the human dimension of work, employment conditions, and skills development. This omission is particularly striking given that achieving sustainability in tourism is contingent on a well-trained, stable, and empowered workforce. As emerging scholarship on sustainable human resource management (HRM) suggests, advancing sustainable tourism requires positioning employment quality, skills advancement, and workforce adaptability at the center of the sustainability narrative.

Addressing this gap is especially relevant for Albania, where the sustainability of rural tourism depends not only on preserving heritage and landscapes but also on cultivating a capable and resilient labor force. Enhancing workforce adaptability can strengthen local employment retention, reduce dependency on seasonal labor, and stimulate entrepreneurship in rural regions (Sulaj et al., 2022). To contribute to this emerging discussion, this paper investigates the demographic, educational, and technological factors shaping the adaptability and competitiveness of Albania's rural tourism workforce. Specifically, it seeks to answer two central research questions:

How to demographic and educational characteristics influence workforce adaptability in rural tourism?

Which skills and competencies are lacking among rural tourism workers and how do these gaps affect sectoral performance and sustainability?

By examining these workforce dynamics through the lens of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda, the study aims to foreground employment and human resource strategies as a critical pillar of sustainable rural tourism in Albania.

1.1. Rural Tourism and Workforce Development in Albania

Rural tourism has become an increasingly important driver of sustainable development and socio-economic revitalization in Albania's peripheral regions. The country's rural landscape, marked by diverse ecosystems, traditional crafts, and rich intangible cultural heritage, offers strong potential for community based tourism models that combine environmental conservation with improved local livelihoods (Sulaj & Themelko, 2024). In recent years, this potential has stimulated the emergence of new rural enterprises, guesthouses, agritourism units, and cultural routes. However, despite this expansion, the sector's workforce remains fragmented, underdeveloped, and insufficiently prepared to meet evolving market demands.

Structural constraints within rural labor markets continue to limit the professionalization of the rural tourism workforce. Many rural areas lack vocational training infrastructure and face persistent outmigration of young and educated individuals to urban centers or abroad, resulting in a shrinking pool of skill workers (INSTAT, 2023; OECD, 2020). This demographic shift has left rural tourism entreprises reliant on an aging workforce and seasonal or part-time labor, ultimately affecting service quality and destination competitiveness (Caraba & Păduraru, 2017). Workforce shortages are further compounded by the season and often informal nature of employment, which exposes workers to job insecurity and limited access to encounter difficulties in converting tourism growth into stable, equitable, and high-quality employment opportunities.

The complexity of workforce development in tourism has been widely acknowledged in the literature. Baum et al. (2016) conceptualize tourism workforce research across three interlinked levels, micro (individual workers), meso (organizational structures), and macro (destination-level conditions), emphasing the interplay between personal skills, institutional capacities, and broader socio-economic environments. Building on this, these authors argue that human resource development (HRD) in tourism must consider not only industry personnel but also host communities and tourists, recognizing tourism as a people-centered activity that requires multi-dimensional skills ans social competences. This perspective moves beyond conventional HMR approaches, which focus predominantly on organizational objectives and overlook broader community and destination level dynamics.

Workforce considerations are also central to global policy debates on sustainable development. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 8 underscores the importance of creating full, productive, and decent work for all. However, as Urry (2002) notes, economic growth often depends on the mobility of workers, a dimension that tourism research tends to overlook in favor of studying tourist mobility. In Albania, patterns of domestic and transnational migration have profoundly shaped rural labor markets (Sulaj & Themelko, 2015). The continued outflow of skilled youth constrains the capacity of rural tourism to build

a competitive and adaptive workforce, reinforcing regional disparities and limiting inclusive growth.

To respond to these challenges, national policy frameworks and international development programs have increasingly prioritized human capital development in rural areas. The National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development (2020-2030) and the National Employment Skills Strategy highlight vocational education, rural entrepreneurship, and capacity building as essential tools for strengtheneing the tourism workforce. Complementing these efforts, organizations such as GIZ, FAO, and UNDP have implemented interventions aimed at improving digital literacy, advancing agritourism certification, and enhancing managerial and hospital skills (FAO, 2021; UNDP Albania, 2022).

Nevertheless, globalization and rapid digital transformation continue to reshape the nature of tourism work. Digital platforms now influence marketing, communication, booking systems, and customer engagement, creating new expectations for technological adaptability. Many rural tourism workers, however, face barriers to acquiring digital skills due to limited training access and persistent urban-rural divides (OECD, 2020). As such, the digital transformation risks deepening existing inequalities in Albania's labor market, unless targeted strategies are implemented to strengthen digital competencies and workforce resilience in rural areas.

2. Material and Methods

The study adopts a qualitative method research design to examine workforce adaptability and skills development within Albania's rural tourism sector. This approach is particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the limited empirical evidence on workforce dynamics in rural tourism in transitional economies. By combining

3. Results and Discussion

The rural tourism workforce in Albania faces persistent shortages in both digital and professional competencies, particularly in areas such as online marketing, digital booking management, and communication technologies. These deficits constrain the sector's capacity to remain competitive and adaptable within an increasingly digitalized tourism market. Moreover, employment patterns in rural tourism are predominantly seasonal and informal,

qualitative insights with secondary quantitative data, the study captures both the lived experiences of tourism actors and the structural conditions shaping employment and skills development. The empirical focus is on rural tourism destinations across Albania, with special attention to historic and peripheral regions characterized by cultural heritage assets, agritourism initiatives, and family-scale tourism enterprises. These areas have been prioritized due to their strategic importance in national tourism development policies and their heightened vulnerability to labor shortages, outmigration, and digital exclusion.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews that balanced flexibility with consistency and engaged three key stakeholder groups: rural tourism operators, vocational education and training providers, and represasntives of tourism associations, development agencies involved in workforce development. Participants were selected using purpose sampling, while ensuring representation across regions, enterprise types, and institutional roles. In total, 25 interviews were conducted, sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and relationships between workforce characteristics, skill needs, and institutional interventions (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Interview themes included: (a) workforce demographics and educational background, (b) skill requirements and perceived skill gaps, (c) digital competencies and barriers to digital adoption, (d) employment conditions and seasonality, (e) access to training and institutional support, and (f) perceptions of sustainability in rural tourism. The data were coded, using both predetermined categories based on the research questions and new themes that appeared naturally during data analysis. Findings from interviews were triangulated with secondary data to enhance analytical rigor and validity.

contributing to income instability, low wage levels, and inadequate social protection. Such conditions and demographic dynamics diminish the attractiveness of tourism-related employment and hinder workforce retention in Albanian rural communities.

3.1. Workforce Demographics and Educational Backgrounds

The findings reveal that rural tourism workforce in Albania remains predominantly characterized by small, family-run enterprises, often relying on informal labor

arrangements and seasonal workers. Interview data show that many operators possess secondary education or vocational training unrelated to tourism, while only a minority report specialized training in hospitality or management. Interviews further suggest that educational background strongly correlates with the adoption of sustainable practices and digital tools: workers with hospitality or business training demonstrate greater adaptability than those with agricultural or manuar labor backgrounds. This aligns with national labor statistics indicating limited professionalization outside major urban centers. Such educational profiles contribute to constrained capacity for innovation, particularly in areas requiring digital competencies or sustainable practice adoption, and amplify regional disparities given that remote areas have fewer training opportunities.

3.2. Skills Gaps and Professional Development

A consistent theme across interviews was the presence of critical skill shortages, particularly in customer service, languages, digital literacy, and destination marketing. Operators frequently described the lack of structured training pathways and limited access to continuous professional development, especially in remote regions where vocational programs are scarce. This is consistent with UNESCO (2020) and Word Bank (2025) findings that rural tourism outpaces human capital development. Secondary data sustain these findings, demonstrating insufficient integration of tourism-specific curricula and limited public-private collaboration in training provision. This skills deficit directly hinders enterprise adaptability, reducing competitiveness in emerging markets that rely on online visibility and diversified service offerings. Furthermore, the absence of certified training discourages workforce retention and innovation, limiting the capacity of businesses to differentiate services or develop cultural heritage products.

3.3. Digital Competencies and Technological Barriers

Digitalization emerged as one of the most significant weakness within rural tourism enterprises. Many operators rely on informal advertisements channels and traditional booking methods, with limited knowledge of online booking platforms, data analytics, or social media engagement. Interviews indicate that while digital tools are increasingly recognized as essential, barriers persist due to lack of training, insufficient digital infrastructure in rural areas, and perceived complexity of technological systems. These constraints reduce visibility, limit direct bookings, and reinforce reliance on intermediaries, ultimately restricting revenue potential. The results highlight that digital skills are not merely technical competencies but crucial determinants of sustainability, market integration, and resilience in rural tourism.

3.4. Employment Conditions and Seasonality

The research also undercores the adverse impact of seasonality on employment stability. Seasonality emerges as a challenge affecting income stability, training investment, and workforce retention. Tourism operators frequently describe difficulties in retaining skilled staff due to short term contracts, limited career progression, and the absence of institutional incentives to support long-term employment. Workers are often employed only 4-6 months per year, leading to migration or job switching. Such precarious conditions discourage training investment, perpetuate reliance on informal and family labor, and contribute to workforce turnover. The gap between seasonal labor supply and sustainability goals further demonstrates the sector's vulnerability and highlights the need for targeted policy interventions.

Table 1. Seasonality and employment

Variables	High season	Low season	Consequences
Number of employees	Increase	Decrease	Job precarity
Revenue	Peak	Decline	Limited reinvestment
Training activity	Minimal	Minimal	Skill stagnation

3.5. Institutional Support and Policy Alignment

Despite the existence of national policy frameworks that reference sustainable tourism and workforce development, implementation gaps remain evident. Interviewees report limited coordination between tourism authorities, vocational institutions, and local governments actors. This fragmentation limits rural enterprises' access to funding and support training schemes. While secondary data show increased policy attention to tourism development, the omission of human resource considerations from many strategic documents perpetuates a gap between sustainability discourse an workforce realities. In addition, the findings reinforce the need for coherent governance structures and cross-sectoral collaboration to advance sustainable rural tourism.

3.6. Toward a Sustainable Workforce for Rural Tourism

The results strongly indicate that workforce development, particularly education, digital fluency, and employment stability, is central to defining and advancing the sustainability trajectory of rural tourism. Workforce gaps not only constrain economic growth but also impede cultural preservation, heritage interpretation, and local participation. The discussion suggests that sustainable human resource management frameworks can serve as a lens to integrate social, economic, and digital priorities, thereby reinforcing the expansion of rural tourism enterprises. The lack of digital skills, professional training, and stable employment undermines Albania's potential to build resilient rural economies. The integration of sustainable human resource management can foster entrepreneurship, reduce seasonality-driven precarity, and support heritage based value chains. Ultimately, addressing human capital constraints is essential to achievieng SDG commitments and transforming rural tourism into a driver of inclusive growth.

4. Conclusions

The study demonstrates that the sustainability and competitiveness of rural tourism in Albania are fundamentally dependent on the capacity and resilience of its workforce. Although rural tourism has emerged as a strategic avenue for regional development, leveraging cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and growing market demand, persistent challenges in workforce qualification, digital literacy, and employment stability continue to limit its transformative potential. The findings underscore that demographic trends such as youth outmigration and an aging labor force, combined with seasonal and informal employment patterns, impede the sector's ability to deliver stable and equitable work opportunities.

Strengthening vocational education and training in tourism, with an emphasis on digital literacy, entrepreneurship, and sustainable management, is essential. Partnerships between local training centers, municipalities, and tourism associations could bridge rural–urban skill gaps and enhance youth employability. Enhancing digital transformation is another priority through expanding rural broadband infrastructure and supporting small enterprises through digital competence programs would improve access to online booking, marketing, and data management tools. Government grants and private–public partnerships could help rural entrepreneurs adapt to new technologies, promoting competitiveness and visibility in global tourism markets. From an institutional perspective, better policy coordination is crucial while integrating tourism, education, and rural development strategies through regional tourism councils would encourage multi-sector collaboration and sustainable innovation. Recognizing the workforce as a core driver of sustainability offers a more holistic roadmap for rural tourism policy in Albania and contributes to advancing equitable and inclusive development in rural areas.

5. Acknowledgements

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