LOCAL AGRITOURISM BUSINESS CONCEPTS AS A PLACE-SENSITIVE STRATEGY TO EMPOWER RURAL COMMUNITIES IN ALBANIA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.18509/GBP26219k
UDC: 338.48-6:63(496.5)

Andreas Koch
Department of Sociology and Social Geography, University of Salzburg, **Austria**

ABSTRACT

This article develops a theoretical and empirical framework for understanding place-based rural development as a strategy to counteract the structural forces of commodification, centralization, and territorialization that shape contemporary socio-ecological crises. It argues that rural marginalization is not a natural condition but the outcome of political-economic and discursive processes that privilege urban growth models while systematically devaluing local specificities. In response, the paper proposes a strategic triad—decentralization, decommodification, and relational spatial concepts—as the normative and analytical foundation for strengthening rural communities. Places are conceptualized not as static containers but as relational, material, and discursive assemblages that can function as resources for emancipatory practice, participation, and collective empowerment. Commons are introduced as an exemplary institutional form through which local communities can partially detach essential goods and services from market logics while expanding democratic self-governance.
The second part of the article applies this framework to agritourism in Albania. Based on qualitative case studies of three agritourism enterprises—Sabriu Guest House, Kulla Hupi, and Mrizi i Zanave—the study examines whether and how agritourism can function as a decentralized, commons-like strategy of rural development. The findings indicate that, despite private ownership structures, these initiatives operate through dense local networks of cooperation, shared production systems, and participatory economic practices. They generate economic diversification, support local employment, foster ecological awareness, and strengthen community cohesion. At the same time, their transformative potential remains contingent upon municipal embedding, infrastructural development, and protection against re-commodification. The article concludes that agritourism can contribute to sustainable rural development when embedded in broader governance frameworks that prioritize collective agency, social justice, and relational connectivity beyond territorial boundaries.

Keywords: decommodification, decentralization, deterritorialization, municipalism, commons

GLOBAL CHALLENGES OF COMMODIFICATION, CENTRALIZATION, AND TERRITORIALIZATION

Contemporary socio-ecological crises—climate change, the erosion of social reproduction, demographic aging, and political alienation—cannot be understood as isolated phenomena. Instead, they reflect deep structural changes in capitalist societies that manifest spatially in specific patterns [1]. Three interconnected processes are especially important here: commodification, centralization, and territorialization [2; 3].

Commodification involves the gradual shifting of essential goods, services, and social relationships into market-driven entities. Housing, energy, mobility, health care, care work, and education are increasingly treated as commodities, with access mainly determined by purchasing power [4]. This trend is not purely economic but is also reinforced legally and politically. Property and contract laws favor private ownership and capital accumulation, while collective usage is systematically marginalized or disadvantaged [5]. Consequently, social reproduction becomes more externalized and individualized, causing significant gaps in service provision—especially in rural areas with limited purchasing power and aging infrastructure.

Centralization functions as the political-institutional counterpart to economic commodification. Decision-making, investment, and innovation are concentrated in a small number of urban nodes, while rural areas are functionally reduced to supplier, compensation, or extraction spaces [6]. This spatial asymmetry is reinforced by national and supranational governance logics, funding regimes, and digital and infrastructural networks [2]. Centralization thus entails not only the concentration of power but also the standardization of norms, procedures, and evaluation criteria that systematically devalue local specificities.

Territorialization ultimately describes the dominant spatial logic of modern statehood. Social belonging, rights, and participation opportunities are connected to clearly defined spaces that are internally uniform and organized in an exclusionary way externally [7]. While this logic makes political control and legal systems easier, it also creates social barriers and prevents recognition of relational and translocal life realities. Territorial imaginaries influence not only political institutions but also scientific analyses, statistical methods, and public discourses. In their broad form, they help sustain social inequalities [4].

Taken together, commodification, centralization, and territorialization generate a structure of "sustainable non-sustainability," in which crises are not perceived as system failures but as functional by-products of market rationality [1]. For rural areas, this implies a double marginalization: they are affected by both economic devaluation and political and discursive marginalization [2].

Regional Challenges of Demographic and Climate Change, of Regional Disparities and Peripherization

The global structural processes outlined above materialize at the regional level in specific forms of peripherization. Rural areas are particularly affected by demographic change. The outmigration of young and highly educated populations, increasing ageing, and selective in-migration not only transform population structures but also reshape local labor markets, social networks, and political capacities for action [3]. These developments should not be interpreted as quasi-natural by-products of modernization but rather as the outcome of political-economic decisions that systematically privilege urban growth models.

Demographic change worsens existing disparities. Falling population numbers often cause the withdrawal of public and private infrastructure, which then speeds up outmigration. In many rural areas, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle of infrastructural decline, social separation, and political marginalization [2]. These processes are closely connected to centralized governance and funding models that prioritize efficiency through economies of scale and do not adequately consider local needs.

Climate change acts as a multiplier of crisis within these regional transformation processes. Rural areas often bear the ecological burdens of energy transition, resource extraction, or intensive agricultural production without receiving a proportional share of the economic benefits. At the same time, responsibilities for adaptation and transformation—such as renewable energy production, sustainable mobility, or regional food systems—are increasingly shifted to the local level without providing adequate resources or decision-making authority [8]. As a result, climate change worsens existing inequalities between centers and peripheries.

Regional disparities do not manifest solely between prosperous core regions and structurally weak peripheral areas but also in the form of so-called internal peripheries within formally affluent states. These spaces are characterized by limited access to infrastructure, services, and political decision-making processes. Discursively, they are often constructed ambivalently: on the one hand as deficient, backward, or dependent; on the other as resource-rich, authentic, or close to nature. This ambivalence legitimizes extractive development models that mobilize local resources for supra-regional needs without sustainably strengthening local value creation or self-determination [9].

A key driver of these dynamics is the urban-centric view, which normatively elevates urban lifestyles and economic forms while construing rural spaces as functionally subordinate. Urban attributes such as openness, innovation, and creativity serve as implicit benchmarks for development, whereas rural development trajectories appear deficient or lagging [2]. Alternatively, place-based development models grounded in local cooperation, social proximity, and ecological embeddedness are thereby systematically marginalized.

In summary, peripherization arises not as a physical location but as a relational process that is constantly recreated through political, economic, and discursive practices. For place-based strategies aimed at strengthening rural communities, this means the need not just to offset these processes but to directly address their root causes.

Strategic Orientations: Decentralization, Decommodification, and Relational Concepts

Against the backdrop of the global and regional challenges described above, three strategic orientations can be identified that form the conceptual foundation of place-based development strategies: decentralization, decommodification, and the establishment of relational spatial concepts. These orientations should not be understood as isolated measures but as interrelated political, economic, and socio-spatial trajectories.

Decentralization aims to redistribute decision-making and power to the local level. In contrast to state-centered or market-liberal governance models, it does not imply a romanticized notion of local autarky but rather polycentric arrangements that link local autonomy with translocal responsibility. Decentralization entails taking local knowledge bases, social networks, and institutional capacities seriously and strengthening them politically without disconnecting them from overarching normative and legal frameworks.

From a social-geographical perspective, decentralization is closely linked to the question of agency. Local communities can only act as agents of societal transformation if they possess real decision-making and dispositional capacities. Centralized systems, by contrast, tend to level local diversity in favor of standardized solutions and to delegate responsibility downward without transferring power [3]. Decentralization thus represents not primarily an organizational but a power-political strategy.

Decommodification constitutes the second central orientation. It refers to the partial decoupling of essential goods and services from market logics and their re-embedding in contexts of social reproduction. In rural areas, this particularly concerns housing, energy provision, mobility, social infrastructure, and basic services. Collective forms of use and ownership allow use values to be prioritized over exchange values, thereby opening new spaces for social security and collective responsibility [10].

The significance of decommodification lies not only in material relief for low-income households but in the re-politicization of social reproduction. When provision is no longer organized exclusively through markets, questions of need, justice, and sustainability become objects of collective negotiation once again [4]. At the same time, decommodification remains inherently conflictual, as it challenges established property and power relations [5].

The theoretical framework integrating these orientations is provided by relational spatial concepts. Relational geographies understand space not as a pre-given container but as a constellation of social, material, and discursive relations produced and transformed through concrete practices [11], [12]. Places are thus not closed entities but nodes within networks of varying reach, simultaneously locally embedded and translocally connected. For place-based strategies, this perspective is essential because it provides an alternative to territorial spatial logics that rely on homogenization and exclusion. Relational spatial concepts allow us to recognize local specificities without reducing them to stereotypes and to define responsibility not by territorial borders but through the quality of relationships. In this way, they create new forms of political agency that connect local autonomy with global responsibility.

Taken together, decentralization, decommodification, and relational spatial concepts can be understood as a strategic triad forming the basis of place-based development approaches. For rural communities, this means that their future viability depends less on external integration into overarching growth models than on their capacity to self-determine how to organize local resources, relationships, and meanings while remaining translocally connected.

Places as Resources of Emancipatory Practice, Participation, and Empowerment

The preceding considerations have shown that place-based strategies cannot be justified solely by a normative preference for the local. Rather, they require a conceptually precise understanding of place as an active resource of societal practice. From a social-geographical perspective, places are neither static containers nor mere backdrops for social action; rather, they are both outcomes and preconditions of social, material, and discursive processes.

This understanding first emphasizes the material aspect of places. Places are shaped by their natural and constructed environments—buildings, infrastructures, landscapes, and technical systems—that either enable or restrict action. This materiality is not fixed but relationally mediated: it influences social practice without completely determining it. For rural communities, this means that existing material resources—such as shared spaces, agricultural land, or local infrastructures—can be starting points for collective action [2].

Beyond materiality, the relational constitution of places is central. Places emerge through social relations, networks, and power structures that are locally grounded yet translocally intertwined. From this perspective, the local is never isolated but always part of broader relational assemblages [11]. For place-based strategies, this implies that local

development cannot be confined to endogenous resources; it also depends on the quality of relationships among actors, places, and scalar levels.

A third, often underestimated dimension concerns the discursive constitution of places. Places are narrated, described, and evaluated—in political programs, media representations, and scientific analyses. These discursive constructions are not neutral; they structure perceptions of possibilities and limits. Rural areas are frequently portrayed in dominant discourses as deficient, backward, or dependent, while urban spaces are associated with innovation and openness. Such narratives contribute to the reproduction of unequal power relations and constrain local self-perception and claims to agency [13].

Against this backdrop, places can be conceptualized as potential spaces of emancipatory practice. Emancipation does not primarily denote individual self-realization but collective processes of appropriation, negotiation, and self-organization. Participation is therefore not reduced to formal consultation procedures but understood as an everyday practice of collective decision-making. Empowerment emerges from collective control over material resources, social relations, and symbolic meanings.

Especially in rural communities, social proximity, spatial closeness, and shared daily practices can create favorable conditions for such processes. However, proximity is not inherently inclusive. Places can also serve as spaces of social closure, power imbalances, and exclusion. Emancipatory place-based strategies must therefore critically address internal hierarchies, gender dynamics, class positions, and migration-related differences [4].

Emphasizing places as resources of emancipatory practice thus does not entail a romanticization of the local but rather a politicized re-reading of socio-spatial relations. Places become arenas in which global crisis dynamics are rendered tangible and, at the same time, actionable. For place-based strategies aimed at strengthening rural communities, this entails deliberately enhancing material, relational, and discursive place resources and translating them into open and participatory arrangements.

Commons as an Exemplary Strategy of Place-Based Development

Building on the preceding conceptual considerations, commons can be understood as an exemplary—but not exclusive—strategy of place-based development. Commons are not primarily defined as specific goods or resources but as a social practice of commoning: the collective organization of use, responsibility, and decision-making beyond market and state logics [10], [14]. For rural communities, commons open up specific opportunities to anchor material provision, social reproduction, and political participation locally while remaining translocally connected.

From a social-geographical perspective, commons are always rooted in specific places. They arise within tangible spatial contexts where material resources, social relationships, and discursive meanings intersect in particular ways. In this sense, commons directly build upon the place resources discussed in the previous chapter. Shared infrastructure, collectively used land, or local service arrangements form the material basis; trust, reciprocity, and formal rules shape relational aspects; and stories of solidarity, responsibility, or autonomy influence the discursive layer.

At the same time, research on the commons has shown that collective resource use does not automatically produce fair or inclusive outcomes. Classic studies on common-pool resources have shown that stable commons need institutional arrangements that clearly outline access rules, decision-making processes, and conflict-resolution mechanisms [10]. More recent critical social-geographical contributions also highlight that social

inequalities, power imbalances, and unequal capital endowments still exist within commons arrangements. Especially in rural areas, there is a risk that existing social hierarchies—based on class, gender, or background—are recreated.

A key critique addresses the positivist idealization of communal practices in parts of the commons literature. Concepts like community, trust, or resilience are often viewed as inherently positive without systematically examining their social conditions and mechanisms of exclusion. Empirical studies show that socially homogeneous groups tend to benefit more from commons projects, while marginalized populations usually remain excluded or have limited access [3]. For place-based strategies, this highlights the importance of explicitly connecting commons to social justice and poverty reduction.

In this context, municipalist and communitarian approaches gain relevance, as they conceptualize commons not as isolated micro-projects but as elements of broader local self-governance. Municipalism aims to strengthen local democratic institutions and to politically secure collective forms of ownership and use [15]. For rural areas, this implies embedding commons within municipal strategies of public service provision, regional development, and infrastructure planning rather than treating them as voluntary supplements to state or market provision.

Commons can thus be interpreted as an interface between decentralization and decommodification. They expand local decision-making and action capacities while simultaneously, at least partially, removing essential goods from market logics. Their emancipatory quality, however, crucially depends on institutional embeddedness, social openness, and reflexive capacity. Without these conditions, commons risk either remaining politically marginal or being absorbed into market-oriented dynamics.

For place-based strategies focused on strengthening rural communities, this results in a nuanced understanding of the commons. They are neither universal cures nor merely niche experiments, but conflictual, context-dependent practices of societal change. Their power lies in making global crisis dynamics manageable at the local level and in testing collective agency. Their limitations, however, highlight the need for political framing and translocal networks. In this way, commons form a key—but not the only—building block of place-based development strategies, which the second part of this article will examine.

Agritourism in Albania: An Overview and Characteristic Forms

Over the past decade, agritourism has become one of the most dynamic areas of rural development in Albania. Situated at the crossroads of agriculture, tourism, and local cultural heritage, agritourism has been increasingly promoted by the Albanian government, international donors, and local entrepreneurs as a way to diversify rural economies, generate income, and combat depopulation. National policies, such as the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development and the “100+ Villages Programme,” explicitly recognize agritourism as a key sector for rural areas.

Empirically, agritourism in Albania features a diverse range of initiatives. These include small, family-run guesthouses and farm stays, as well as larger, professionally managed farm-to-table restaurants and multifunctional rural tourism complexes. A key aspect of the Albanian situation is that many agritourism ventures are not solely based on traditional farming. Instead, many operate as hybrid businesses that rely on networks of local farmers to source food and raw materials, while tourism services are provided by separate entrepreneurial entities [17]. Iconic examples like Mrizi i Zanave illustrate this model, combining local agricultural production, culinary tradition, and tourism experiences through cooperation with hundreds of nearby rural households.

Spatially, agritourism projects are unevenly distributed but becoming more widespread. Early development was focused on regions with strong cultural landscapes and tourist visibility, such as Gjirokastër, Berat, Korçë, the Albanian Alps (Theth, Valbona), and coastal hinterlands. More recently, agritourism units have also increased in peri-urban and accessible rural areas near Tirana, Durrës, and Lezhë, reflecting both market proximity and infrastructural benefits [16]. Most certified agritourism units highlight local cuisine, organic or traditional food production, limited accommodations, and experiential offerings like participation in farming activities, food processing, or cultural events [28].

Despite its rapid growth, the sector still exhibits structural asymmetries. Official certification figures remain relatively low compared to the estimated number of active initiatives, reflecting regulatory barriers, limited administrative capacity, and uneven access to information and funding. Additionally, demand-side promotion remains underdeveloped, with public policies mainly focused on boosting supply rather than coordinating regional agritourism networks or value chains [16].

Agritourism and the Theoretical Framework: Convergences and Tensions

When assessed against the theoretical foundations developed in the previous sections—decommodification, decentralization, deterritorialization, municipalism, and places as resources of emancipatory practice—agritourism in Albania reveals both significant convergences and critical tensions.

From a decommodification perspective, agritourism could shift economic activity away from mass tourism and industrial agriculture toward practices focused on use-value, rooted in local food systems, cultural heritage, and social relations. Many Albanian agritourism projects highlight short supply chains, on-site food processing, and the promotion of traditional knowledge. In doing so, they partly detach rural livelihoods from volatile agricultural commodity markets and global tourism value chains [17], [18]. However, this potential for decommodification remains fragile. As demand increases, there is a risk that agritourism experiences themselves become commodified and standardized, reinforcing branding, exclusivity, and price-based access, which can limit social inclusiveness.

Decentralization constitutes another key point of alignment. Agritourism initiatives often emerge from local entrepreneurial agency and rely on place-specific resources, knowledge, and networks. They help diversify rural economies beyond centralized agricultural or industrial development models and can strengthen local governance capacities when embedded in municipal strategies. Nevertheless, empirical evidence from Albania indicates that many initiatives remain weakly institutionalized at the municipal level and are poorly integrated into broader local development planning. This limits their transformative potential and exposes them to market dependencies and external shocks.

In terms of deterritorialization, agritourism projects illustrate relational spatial practices that link local places to transnational networks of tourists, consumers, and cultural imaginaries. Instead of depending on territorially limited development ideas, successful agritourism efforts work through relational geographies that connect rural Albania to global tourism markets, diasporic networks, and worldwide conversations on sustainability and authenticity. At the same time, these links can create new dependencies and imbalances, especially when local participants lack bargaining power within tourism value chains.

Municipalism provides a critical lens for assessing whether agritourism can be embedded in democratic local governance structures. While Albanian agritourism policies rhetorically emphasize community development, empirical studies suggest that most initiatives function as private or family-based enterprises rather than as collectively governed commons. Opportunities for municipal coordination, cooperative ownership, and collective benefit-sharing remain underdeveloped, despite their relevance for long-term sustainability and social equity.

Streifeneder [19], in his approach to define "authentic agritourism and differentiate it from countryside tourism," provides reasonable arguments to support local non-commercial agritourism companies in order to protect the interdependence between sustainable agriculture and tourism. Therefore, his emphasis on authenticity is clearly outlined to prevent a dominant profit-driven touristic effort "[…] to lower the risk of commercial hotel-like enterprises misusing the positive image of agritourism […] (p. 252), and to address the "[…] commodification of the rural world" (p. 256). However, to maintain the authenticity of agritourism—meaning decentralizing, decommodifying, and deterritorializing activities—some ambiguity in definitions is necessary. From this perspective, it is not essential to require that "[…] agricultural activities are predominant over the touristic ones […]" (p. 252), as farms can "[…] practice intensive agro-industrial […] farming" (ibid.). Additionally, the types of activities and interactions at agritourism farms can vary widely and are not confined to a territorial definition of farmland (p. 256). The Albanian agritourism projects, which the author has empirically studied, demonstrate a notable diversity of farming and tourism activities that still follow a local, network-oriented, and commons-like strategy.

Agritourism and Sustainable Rural Development: Opportunities and Challenges

The broader tourism literature consistently highlights rural tourism and agritourism as potential drivers of sustainable rural development. According to the UN World Tourism Organization [20], rural tourism can contribute to economic diversification, job creation, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental conservation, while mitigating depopulation and regional inequalities. In Albania, these opportunities are particularly salient given the structural challenges facing rural areas, including outmigration, aging populations, and limited access to services.

Agritourism offers specific advantages compared to conventional tourism. It tends to generate higher local multiplier effects by sourcing goods and services locally, fostering backward linkages to agriculture and crafts, and extending tourism benefits beyond peak seasons. Empirical studies indicate that agritourism contributes to income diversification and resilience, especially for small and medium-sized farms and rural households [21], [22].

However, agritourism faces several challenges. Infrastructure gaps, limited professional training, seasonal fluctuations, and unequal access to capital restrict the sector's growth. Additionally, without proper regulation and governance, agritourism could lead to environmental pressures, land-use conflicts, and social exclusion. Experiences from other European contexts show that tourism benefits can escape local economies if ownership structures and supply chains are not locally rooted [23].

In Albania, these challenges are compounded by weak coordination between agricultural, tourism, and rural development policies. While donor-funded programs and fiscal incentives have stimulated investment, long-term strategies for skills development, cooperative governance, and territorial integration remain insufficiently developed.

Economic, Ecological, and Social Potentials of Agritourism in Local Contexts

Economically, agritourism in Albania shows strong potential to boost farm incomes, generate jobs, and promote local entrepreneurship. While revenues from agritourism rarely fully replace agricultural earnings, they offer vital diversification that strengthens household resilience [21]. Comparative studies across Europe indicate that small and medium-sized farms benefit more significantly from agritourism, a trend that aligns with the Albanian context, where land fragmentation and limited capital are common [22].

Ecologically, agritourism can incentivize environmentally sustainable practices by linking economic value to landscape preservation, biodiversity, and traditional farming methods. Many Albanian agritourism projects emphasize organic production, low-intensity agriculture, and the conservation of cultural landscapes. Nevertheless, ecological benefits are contingent on governance arrangements and carrying-capacity considerations. Unregulated growth may increase resource consumption, waste generation, and pressure on fragile ecosystems, particularly in mountainous and coastal hinterlands.

Socially, agritourism holds substantial emancipatory potential. Studies on women's empowerment in rural Albania demonstrate that agritourism creates opportunities for income generation, entrepreneurship, and social recognition, challenging traditional gender roles and enhancing women's participation in decision-making [24]. Agritourism also fosters social cohesion by reinforcing community identities, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and local pride. At the same time, benefits are unevenly distributed, and marginalized groups may remain excluded unless explicit inclusion strategies are pursued.

From a shared resources perspective, agritourism can serve as a practical form of commoning when resources, knowledge, and benefits are collaboratively managed. Cooperative marketing efforts, shared infrastructure, and municipally supported networks are promising but underused strategies in Albania. Without such arrangements, agritourism risks falling into individualized entrepreneurial models that limit its transformative potential.

Agritourism as a Place-Based Commons-Oriented Strategy: Concluding Reflections

In summary, agritourism in Albania demonstrates both the opportunities and challenges of place-based development approaches. Its strengths include the ability to leverage local resources, reconnect agriculture with tourism, and create economic, ecological, and social benefits at the local level. When aligned with principles of decommodification, decentralization, deterritorialization, and municipalism, agritourism can support empowering rural communities and fostering community development.

However, realizing this potential requires moving beyond fragmented, market-driven initiatives toward more integrated governance frameworks. Strengthening municipal capacities, fostering cooperative and commons-based models, and embedding agritourism within broader rural development strategies are essential steps. In this sense, agritourism should not be understood as an end in itself, but as a situated practice within a wider transformation of rural places as spaces of collective agency, participation, and sustainable livelihoods.

Empirical Study of Agritourism in Albania: Methodology and Case Studies

To examine the empowering, commons-like mechanisms of local community strategies, three agritourism businesses in Albania have been studied empirically. We aim to assess their ability to develop economically, ecologically, and socially to counteract the dominant forces of commodification, centralization, and territorialization. Although the three examples vary in size and the ratio of farming to tourism activities [19], they are similar in establishing neighborhood networks, encouraging local self-organization, and fostering a sharing economy. Additionally, all three are located in peripheral regions, far from the nearest urban center. All three agritourism businesses are privately owned commons.

The three case studies are:

- **Sabriu Guest House** is located in the small village of Rabdisht, 6 km east of Peshkopi near the North Macedonian border. The guest house offers double rooms and dormitories and includes a community kitchen for guests. Sabriu features a garden and a small farm growing fruits and vegetables for its own use. Due to increasing tourist demand, several villagers have renovated their homes to provide bed & breakfast services in partnership with Sabriu Guest House. Others have expanded their fruit and vegetable production, also working with Sabriu. Rabdisht village has been chosen as one of six Albanian villages by the Albanian Ministry of Tourism and Environment to compete for the "best tourist villages of the world" [25].
- **Kulla Hupi Guest House** is located near the village of Fushë-Bulqizë, 60 km northeast of Tirana. It is a restored tower that offers single and double rooms, dormitories, and a breakfast area. They also sell local food produced in the guest house's garden and the surrounding area. Like in the case of Sabriu, Kulla Hupi works with local residents to supply fruits and vegetables for the guest house's visitors. They promote authenticity and the region's cultural heritage [26].
- **Mrizi i Zanave** is an agritourism business located in the village of Fishta, 30 km southeast of Shkodra. It is the first agritourism company in Albania (opened in 2010) [27] and the largest of the three examples, with 120 staff members. It offers rooms from one to four bedrooms in a renovated shepherd's hut, along with a campsite, a large restaurant, and a shop that sells local foods. The tourist complex is surrounded by farmland and has its own food processing facilities, producing cheese, ham, syrup, liquor, wine, marmalade, and more. Similar to Kulla Hupi and Sabriu, Mrizi i Zanave has expanded its agricultural and tourism activities by working with residents in nearby villages. The number of participating residents, through providing apartments and agricultural products, is significantly higher than in the other two cases.

The interviews were conducted with the individuals managing the agritourism businesses. In the case of Sabriu Guest House, it was the couple; for Kulla Hupi, it was the male operator; and for Mrizi i Zanave, it was the head of the kitchen and the owner of the company. They are listed as follows:

agritourism company	interview partners
Sabriu Guest House	IP_SGH
Kulla Hupi Guest House	IP_KHGH
Mrizi i Zanave	IP_MiZ_I and IP_MiZ_II

The interviews were conducted in August 2025.

RESULTS

Even though they are privately owned, all three agritourism companies function as commons-like, decentralized, and collectively self-organized institutions. All interviewees explicitly expressed commitment to economic, social, and ecological sustainability. Not only do the guest houses benefit from local cooperation, but the farmers and apartment owners involved also gain. Local farmers benefit from a network that organizes food production and regional distribution collectively (IP_SGH). Seventy to eighty percent of all food products offered at Kulla Hupi Guest House come from nearby villages (IP_KHGH). In Mrizi i Zanave, 30 to 35 farmers participate in a production network that collaborates to produce wine, cheese, fruits, and vegetables. Similarly, village residents benefit from Sabriu Guest House, as it helps accommodate tourists when it is fully booked. Sabriu Guest House manages check-in and check-out procedures for participating local residents. Additionally, a cooperative information infrastructure has been established in Mrizi i Zanave with residents from five surrounding villages who offer apartments—either newly built or renovated—due to the rising demand for beds in Mrizi i Zanave (IP_MiZ_I, IP_MiZ_II).

In this respect, the three agritourism companies represent social-spatial networks of relations that merge with the territorial ones, with their political and legal agendas.

Private ownership of guest houses does not limit a participatory economy. Local cooperation follows the principle of slow and steady economic growth, avoiding a focus on profit. This cooperation has developed smoothly over the past five years (IP_SGH, IP_KHGH) or 15 years (IP_MiZ_I) since the renovations of the main buildings began. However, investing in rural outskirts can be difficult due to banking loan restrictions in ‘undervalued areas’ (IP_MiZ_II). For example, owners of Mrizi i Zanave purchased land along the coast and used it as collateral. Ideals also seem important, as the owner of Kulla Hupi pointed out: he was born in the village, moved to Greece for a few years, and later returned to renovate the castle tower. “What is easy to achieve is less valuable” (IP_KHGH); or: “To promote local community wealth is more important than to become individually rich” (IP_MIZ_II).

Furthermore, decommodifying strategies can be inferred from the occupational context. All three interviewees emphasized that all staff working for the guest houses are locals. They successfully addressed the brain drain problem that many rural areas face. For example, most employees at Mrizi i Zanave studied tourism economics elsewhere and then returned to their villages to work for the agritourism company. In farming, the goal was (and still is) to establish traditional Albanian food production and sell it regionally. Through this steady networking strategy, relationships among residents have strengthened.

To succeed in all three aspects of sustainability, transport and communication infrastructure is essential. Infrastructure also helps address issues related to commodification, territorialization, and centralization. While road infrastructure has improved in the Rabdisht-Peshkopi and Fishte regions, it still faces challenges in the Fushë-Bulqizë area. Public transportation between Tirana Airport and Peshkopi is well developed for travelers heading to Sabriu Guest House (IP_SGH).

Communication networks are used extensively in all three cases. Social media tools and booking platforms are essential for promoting agritourism in Albania (IP_SGH, IP_KHGH, IP_MiZ_I). In addition to these virtual and local collaborative networks, regional networks play a vital role in knowledge sharing. Agritourism operators learn

from each other's experiences in integrating their self-organized businesses into a regional economic infrastructure (IP_KHGH). These regional networks are not necessarily confined to Albania but may extend to neighboring countries such as North Macedonia, Kosovo, or Montenegro (IP_SGH).
The interview partner of Mrizi i Zanave, owner of the agritourism company (together with his brother), drew a meaningful conclusion from his statements: the communist period destroyed much of Albania's traditional heritage and local knowledge. With their large farming associations, they overlooked the importance of ecological requirements and regional differences. Today, challenges include developing a new identity as a farmer and a better understanding of a farming economy that combines social and ecological knowledge. As a result, he sees increased regional investment in agricultural education and a strategy to survive economically by moving away from the market-profit mindset (IP_MiZ_II).

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to develop a theoretical framework for place-based rural development grounded in the critique of commodification, centralization, and territorialization, and to test its analytical relevance through an empirical study of agritourism initiatives in Albania. The empirical findings both confirm and qualify the theoretical outline presented in the first half of the paper.
First, regarding decommodification, the case studies demonstrate that agritourism can partially decouple rural livelihoods from volatile agricultural commodity markets and standardized tourism chains. All three enterprises—Sabriu Guest House, Kulla Hupi, and Mrizi i Zanave—rely on short supply chains, local labor, and regionally embedded production networks. Food production, accommodation, and service provision are interwoven with neighborhood cooperation, thereby prioritizing use values, trust-based relations, and gradual growth over profit maximization. In this respect, agritourism functions as a counter-practice to commodification. However, the empirical evidence also reveals structural limits: reliance on booking platforms, private ownership, and banking constraints illustrates that these initiatives remain embedded in broader market logics. Decommodification thus appears as a relative and contested process rather than a complete transformation.
Second, concerning decentralization, the cases strongly support the theoretical argument that local agency is decisive. The agritourism projects studied operate as decentralized, network-oriented systems that strengthen local employment, reduce brain drain, and foster collective self-organization. Decision-making and value creation are largely retained within the region. Yet the findings also underscore the importance of supportive infrastructure—roads, communication networks, and access to credit—showing that decentralization requires enabling frameworks rather than merely the withdrawal of the state.
Third, regarding deterritorialization and relational spatiality, the Albanian cases vividly illustrate how rural places function as nodes within translocal networks. Social media, diasporic ties, and cross-border regional cooperation connect peripheral villages to wider tourism circuits without dissolving local embeddedness. These relational configurations confirm the theoretical claim that place-based strategies do not imply isolation but depend on translocal connectivity.

Finally, the empirical material supports the notion of agritourism as a commons-like practice, even under private ownership. Cooperative production networks, shared infrastructures, and collective knowledge-building reflect principles of commoning and municipal self-organization. At the same time, the absence of formal cooperative governance structures indicates that municipalist embedding remains underdeveloped.
Overall, the Albanian cases substantiate the theoretical proposition that rural places can become arenas of emancipatory practice when decentralization, decommodification, and relational connectivity intersect. Agritourism emerges not as a panacea, but as a situated, fragile, and yet promising pathway toward commons-oriented rural transformation.

REFERENCES

[1] Blühdorn, I. Nachhaltige Nicht-Nachhaltigkeit [Sustainable Non-Sustainability]. Bielefeld, 2020.

[2] Koch, A. Orte als Ressource emanzipatorischer sozialräumlicher Praktiken [Places as a Resource for Empowering Social-Spatial Practices]. Sozialwissenschaftliche Rundschau, No. 64, vol. 2/2024, pp 160-176, 2024.

[3] Koch, A. Ein kritischer Blick auf Commons zur Bekämpfung und Prävention von Armut [A Critical View on Commons as an Approach to Combat and Prevent Poverty]. Leßmann, O, Marquardsen, K. (eds.): Armut erforschen: Akteursperspektive, strukturelle Bedingungen und politische Implikationen. Duisburg, pp 257-264, 2025.

[4] Lessenich, S. Grenzen der Demokratie [Limits to Democracy], Ditzingen, 2019.

[5] Pistor, K. The Code of Capital, Princeton, 2019.

[6] Castells, M. Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age, Cambridge, 2015.

[7] Beck, U. & Poferl, A. Einleitung [Introduction]. Beck, U., Poferl, A. (eds.): Große Armut, großer Reichtum. Zur Transnationalisierung sozialer Ungleichheit. Berlin, pp 9-22, 2010.

[8] Brand, U. & Schickert, C. Ökosozialistische Strategien für eine sozial-ökologische Transformation [Eco-Social Strategies for a Social-Ecological Transformation]. Dörre, K. & Schickert, C. (eds.): Neosozialismus, München, pp165-183, 2019.

[9] Willett, J. & Williams, M. & Akerman, L. & Rawlinson, H. & Ghezal, A. & Pitts, F. H. Peripheralization and economic development: a multi-causal approach. European Planning Studies, vol. 33, Issue 4, pp 471-490, 2025.

[10] Ostrom, E. Jenseits von Markt und Staat [Beyond Market and State], Ditzingen, 2022.

[11] Massey, D. For Space, London, 2005.

[12] Jones, M. Phase space: Geography, relational thinking, and beyond. Progress in Human Geography 33(4), pp 487-506, 2009.

[13] Rau, S. Räume [Spaces]. Frankfurt a.M., 2013.

[14] Helfrich, S. & Bollier, D. Commons – Für eine neue Politik jenseits von Markt und Staat [Commons – A New Policy beyond Market and State], Bielefeld, 2009.

[15] Bookchin, M. Die nächste Revolution [The Next Revolution], Münster, 2020.

[16] Çiço, O. & Krasniqi, Y. Agritourism in Albania – Overview and Need for Support. International Scientific Journal Monte, vol. 4, No. 2, pp 107-112, 2021.

[17] Mulita, R. & Sefa, B. Agritourism management in sustainable rural development and cultural heritage preservation. Economics Ecology Socium, vol. 9, Issue 1, pp 65-76, 2025.

[18] Koch, A. Introducing Structural Peripheries in the European Union. Ballinger, P. & Sedmak, C. (eds.) The Routledge Handbook of Peripheries in European Studies, London and New York, pp 217-232, 2026.

[19] Streifeneder, T. Agriculture first: Assessing European policies and scientific typologies to define authentic agritourism and differentiate it from countryside tourism. Tourism Management Perspectives No. 20, pp 251-264, 2016.

[20] UN World Tourism Organization. Tourism and Rural Development: A Policy Perspective. New York, 2023.

[21] Przezbórska-Skobiej, L. & Ryś-Jurek, R. Revenues from Agritourism and their Determinants for the European Farms. European Research Studies Journal, vol. XXVII, Issue 4, pp 905-920, 2024.

[22] Bacsi, Z. & Szálteleki, P. Farm Profitability and Agritourism in the EU – Does Size Matter? DETUROPE, vol. 14, Issue 2, pp 152-171, 2022.

[23] Koutsouris, A. & Gidarakou, I. & Grava, F. & Michailidis, A. The phantom of (agri)tourism and agriculture symbiosis? A Greek case study. Tourism Management Perspectives, vol. 12, pp 94-103, 2014.

[24] Sulaj, A. & Themelko, H. Agritourism as a Pathway to Women's Empowerment: Insights from Rural Albania. European Countryside, vol. 16, No. 4, pp 628-646, 2024.

[25] Albinfo.ch. Rabdisht village belongs to the 100 tourist villages of Albania. https://www.albinfo.ch/de/das-albanische-dorf-im-rennen-um-den-titel-beste-touristische-doerfer-der-welt/ [2026-02-09], 2026.

[26] Kulla Hupi. The Guest House's Website. https://kullahupi.al/about-kulla-hupi/ [2026-02-09], 2026.

[27] Mrizi i Zanave. The Guest House's Website https://www.mrizizanave.al [2026-02-09], 2026.

[28] United Nations Albania. Albania: investing in agritourism as an engine for shared prosperity. https://albania.un.org/en/264242-albania-investing-agritourism-engine-shared-prosperity [2026-02-09], 2026.