

INNOVATION IN RURAL TOURISM – EVIDENCE FROM CLUJ COUNTY

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ABSTRACT. Innovation in rural tourism represents a source both for increasing productivity and for improving tourists' satisfaction as well. The main benefits reported by innovators are a significant increase in the number of tourists and in the length of stay, while the others are struggling to attract tourists. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the innovation activities implemented by the units acting in Cluj County's rural tourism. We applied a semi structured interview with business owners based on OECD approach of innovation. We focused on the identification of innovative activities (product innovation, process innovation, organizational innovation and marketing innovation) and on the innovation's sources, obstacles and results. We also tried to describe the profile of the innovator in terms of age, level of studies, experience in tourism before starting the business or training in tourism.

Keywords: product innovation, process innovation, organizational innovation, marketing innovation, rural tourism

JEL Classification: L83, O31

1. Introduction

Tourism makes an important and increasing contribution to economic growth and accounts for about 30% of international trade in services in the European area. It also represents one of the best opportunities to create income and employment for less developed

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countries and regions (Korres, 2008:136). Also, the major sectors driving developments in the rural regions of European Union are: energy, tourism, transport, industry, and agriculture (Korres, 2008:137).

Many rural areas are among the most dynamic territories in the European Union, whereas many others suffer due to low population density, a lack of basic services, an inadequate labour market and low basic infrastructure. Innovation activities and new technologies contribute substantially towards the modernization process and the competitiveness level. It is quite important to develop the countryside as a space for recreation and “green tourism”, in order to support the renovation of the villages, encourage agriculture and forestry in their function of maintaining landscapes and respect the environment and natural resources (Korres, 2008:137).

Small and medium sized enterprises, dominant in tourism sector, have to achieve economies of scale and scope in order to reduce transaction costs, increase productivity and gain market power in order to survive in an increasingly competitive and global environment. Horizontal and vertical integration and also flexible structures that encourage product, marketing and organizational innovation help enterprises to adapt to changes and increase their competitiveness (Weiermair, 1998).

Tourism is considered a highly competitive sector therefore companies acting in this field need to be innovative. However, research on the fields of innovation behavior in tourism has been limited and insufficient (Weiermair, 2004).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the innovation activities implemented by the units acting in Cluj County’s rural tourism. We focused on the identification of innovative activities (product innovation, process innovation, organizational innovation and marketing innovation) and on the innovation’s sources, obstacles and results. We also tried to describe the profile of the innovator in terms of age, level of studies and experience in tourism before starting the business or training in tourism.

2. Literature review

Innovation activities and the new technologies are closely related with market competitiveness and the productivity level. Innovative activity has been one of the most important components for the long-term economic growth (Korres, 2008:136).

OECD considers that 'An innovation is the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organizational method in business practices, workplace organization or external relations' (OECD & Statistical Office of the European Communities, 2005, p. 46). Four types of innovations are identified:

(1) Product innovations – new or significantly improved goods or services;

(2) Process innovations – new or significantly improved methods for production or delivery (operational processes);

(3) Organizational innovations – new or significantly improved methods in a firm's business practices, workplace organization or external relations (organizational or managerial processes);

(4) Marketing innovations – new or significantly improved marketing methods.

Product or service innovations refer to changes directly observed by the customer and regarded as new; either in the sense of never seen before, or new to the particular enterprise or destination. Product or service innovations are perceptible to tourists to such an extent that they may well become a factor in the purchase decision (Hjalager, 2010). Studying innovation in tourism, Decelle (2004) emphasized that product innovation is the most common innovation type in tourism, but in the same time is the easiest to imitate. Blake, Sinclair and Soria (2006:1107) reached a similar conclusion, the entrepreneurs in tourism considering the product and marketing innovations the most important types of innovation for tourism sector.

Process innovations refer typically to backstage initiatives which aim at escalating efficiency, productivity and flow. Technology investments are the anchor of mainstream process innovation, sometimes in combination with reengineered layouts for manual work operations. Process innovations may be platforms for improved services that will be recognizable to the customer and add to the value of the product (Hjalager, 2010). Studies conducted on the topic of innovation in tourism conclude that technology is used to improve employee productivity and enhance revenues and limited strategic priority is given to technologies designed to improve guest services in the case of lodging units (Martin, 2004; Sundbo et al., 2007).

In the category of organizational innovations are included new ways of organizing internal collaboration, directing and empowering staff, building careers and compensating work with pay and benefits (Ottenbacher & Gnoth, 2005), as well as new ways of improving workplace satisfaction and nurturing internal knowledge and competence assets (Hall & Williams, 2008; Shaw & Williams, 2009). A main challenge for many tourism enterprises is to develop methods to retain staff, maintain flexibility and control costs (Hjalager, 2010). From a different perspective, the development of networks and clusters represents a more frequent type of innovation in tourism, creating new opportunities for small and medium sized tourism companies (Novelli, Schmitz, Spencer, 2006; Thomas, Wood, 2014).

Barriers to innovation are related to internal factors in all most of the cases. Weiermair and Peters (2002) argue that the major barriers that firms had to face in their innovation activities are lack of time, money or know-how, and risk aversion. Blake, Sinclair and Soria (2006:1103) add to these factors shortages of skilled employees and the resistance to change. Chathoth et al (2014:190) emphasize the role of technology and firm's organizational structure, seeing the top-down approach as a significant barrier to innovation. Regarding the outside forces, particularly in Europe, bureaucracy and politics were pointed out as possible obstacles that prevent the realization of planned innovation activities.

The market needs represent one of the main sources of innovation in tourism (Camisón, Monfort-Mir, 2012:784). The dynamics of tourists' needs represent an incentive for tourism entrepreneurs to develop new products, to improve the existing one or customize their products according to their clients' needs. As a result, experiential learning or "learning by doing, using and interacting" is increasingly used as innovation source in tourism sector. Marketing innovations based on the integration of technology developments into firms' activity bring the tourism suppliers near its clients and provide in the same time opportunities to increase the firm's knowledge base (Aldebert et al, 2011:1206). The support of public institutions and the focus of public policies on tourism facilitate knowledge developments and an appropriate support for tourism innovation activities.

3. Material and method

As we mentioned from the beginning, we consider the innovation an essential source for productivity and tourists' satisfaction improvement. As a consequence, our purpose is to analyze the focus on innovation of rural tourism accommodation units from Cluj County during the time span 2009 - 2012. To achieve our goal, we applied a semi-structured interview to the business owners. We started from the 190 touristic chalets, villas, touristic boarding houses and agro-touristic boarding houses registered in Cluj County and we selected the units developing rural tourism activities (97 units). We contact them and 26 units accepted to participate in our study. The questionnaire was focused on three aspects: what type of innovation was implemented, which were the source of innovations and which barriers and innovation effects were identified in the process of innovation implementation.

During our visits to these businesses, we observed some aspects related to the services provided to the customers, allowing us to make some assumptions about their innovative orientation. We also studied their websites or different other promotional materials.

In order to highlight the characteristics of innovation in rural tourism, we compared our results with the results obtained by Negrusa, Yolal and Rus (2012) when they investigated similar aspects of Cluj Napoca hotels' innovation.

To identify the innovative activities, we followed the OECD and Eurostat taxonomy (2005). There are four main types of innovation: product innovations, process innovations, marketing innovations and organizational innovations. We are in the presence of innovation if following criteria are met: to have a degree of novelty, to generate a significant improvement, and to diffuse it on the market (OECD:2005, 46 - 47). The degree of novelty has three levels: on the first level of innovation, something is new to an institution; on the second level, it is new to the market, on the highest level, it is new to the world (OECD:2005, 57-58).

Next we will present some of the demographics of the investigated sample. The first characteristic is the classification of the accommodation unit; most units (46.2%) are classified in the category three daisies followed by those in the category of two daisies. Over 50% of the businesses were established after 2006. The age of the owner is

between 46 and 60 years for 57.7% of the units and between 30 and 45 years for 26.9% of them. In our sample predominate women owners (61.5%) and owners with high school studies (42.3%) or undergraduate studies (34.6%). In terms of previous experience in tourism before starting the business the majority (65.4%) declared they didn't had any experience but 76.9% stated they received specialized training in tourism.

4. Results and discussions

The most present type of innovation is product innovation. Only 3 companies declared that during the analyzed time span they did not introduce a new product/service or they did not improved any of the products/services provided.

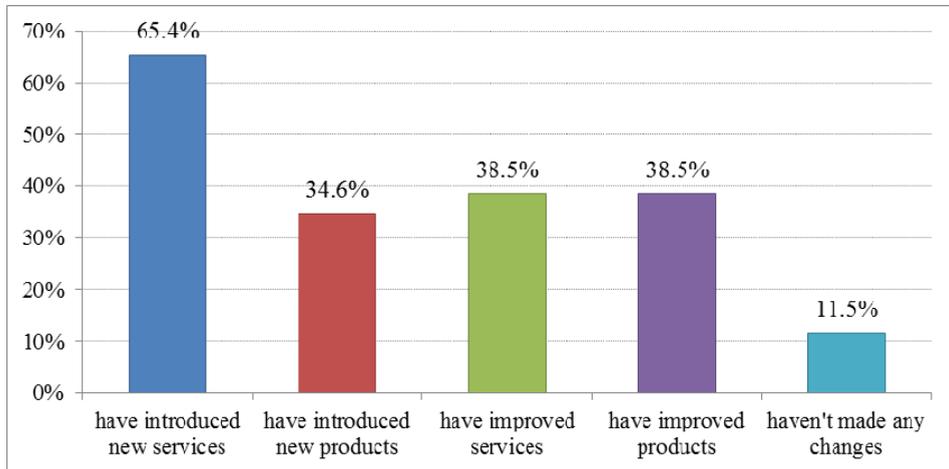


Fig.1. Product innovation

Most of the units declared that before the economic crisis, the demand for their services increased, some of them investing and developing the infrastructure of their units. When the crisis effects reduced the demand, the only option for most of the guesthouses was to increase tourists' experience (the value added of the tourism package) and they began to introduce new or improved products/services.

In terms of innovators' characteristics the results show that most of the businesses (40%) that introduced new services were

established in 2009; the age of the owner is between 46-60 years for approximately 47% of them; 52.9% of the owners are women; 47.1% of the owners have high school studies; 66,7% didn't poses any experience in tourism before starting this business and 86.7% received training in tourism. Those who introduced new product have been established after 2005, have owners with an age between 46 and 60 years (55.6%), are male (55.6%), have an undergraduate degree (55.6%), didn't poses an experience in tourism activities before stating the business and 85.7% pursued training in tourism. Approximately 90% of the businesses that improved their products were established after 2004; 50% of the owners have an age between 46 and 60 years; 80% are women; 50% have an undergraduate diploma; 60% had previous experience in tourism before starting the business and 80% received training in tourism. The characteristics of the businesses that improved their services are the following: 40% of them began their activities in 2009, 70% of the owners are aged between 46 and 60 years, 60% are women, 40% have post high school studies, 70% didn't had any previous experience in tourism and 70% of the owners undertook training in tourism.

Comparing our results with the one obtained by Negrusa, Yolal and Rus (2012:45) - 42% introduced new services/products and 47% implemented improvements in products/services, we observe a higher orientation to introduce new services, the main reason being the previous (before 2009) poor supply of the guesthouses. Also, a characteristic of rural tourism is the presence of customized services. Usually, the hotels are standardized, while the rural units discovered that the characteristics or the rural atmosphere and the focus on the tourists' needs may be a winning option. Previous research on this topic (Toader, Sofica, Petrescu, Negrusa and Balint 2013:515) emphasized that the product innovation in Cluj County is focused on providing a "tourism experience" and not singular tourist elements (Weiermair, 2004), the tourism packages being spiced up with genuine features and characteristics of Romanian rural areas.

The process innovations have also a significant presence in Cluj County rural tourism. The most present innovation involves new or significantly improved kitchen equipment and heating systems. This aspect emphasizes the focus on satisfying the clients' basic needs (accommodation and meal) - 16 units have a restaurant, while the others provide an equipped kitchen to their clients.

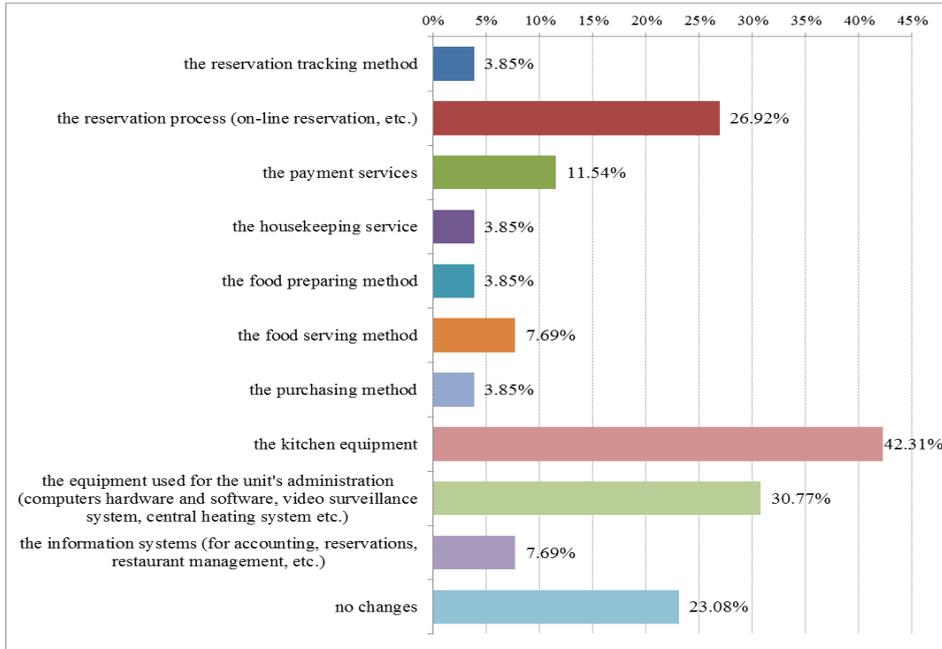


Fig. 2. Process innovation

The profile of the businesses that innovate their reservation system look like: 83.33% were established after 2005; the age of their owner is between 46 and 60 years for 57.1% of them; the owners have high school degree (42.9%) or undergraduate degree (42.9%); 83.33% did not have tourism experience before starting the business and 66.7% of the owners were the beneficiaries of training in tourism. The businesses that improved or introduced new kitchen equipment began their activities after 2004 (88.8%), are owned by women (63.6%); have owners with an age between 46-60 years (63.6%); their owners have undergraduate studies (45.5%); had previous experience in tourism before starting their own business (55.6%) and 77.8% received training in tourism. Another form of process innovation was through improving or introducing new equipment for business administration. This form of innovation was present in mostly all businesses that have owners with an age between 46 and 60 years (62.5%), are owned by females (75%), their owners have after high school or undergraduate studies (37.5 % for each category) and did not poses any experience in tourism before starting the business (71.4%) but benefited from training in tourism (85.7%).

The most common process innovation adopted by the Cluj hotels is the innovation in the reservation process (Negrusa, Yolal and Rus 2012:47). While in the case of hotels we discuss about the introduction of on-line reservation systems or the improvement of the reservation systems – these being the most prevalent front-office application in hotels (Rus 2009:893, [2]), in the case of guesthouses we observed a minor progress from reservations made exclusively by phone to reservations made by phone and email. Also, regarding the information system used, Cluj Napoca hotels use them in their daily activity (Rus 2009:58, [1]), while the majority of guesthouses are using the classical methods, based on paper registers.

Even if they are present in a significant number, unfortunately they have a low added value to the tourists' experience. Because most of the units have a reduced level of financial resources, they do not have the possibility to invest in developing or introducing new activities to enhance the tourists' satisfaction, so they focus on satisfying as good as possible the tourists' basic needs. Unfortunately for these units, the actual tourist became more demanding and they will have to find a way to compensate this weaknesses.

The organizational innovations are less frequent in Cluj County's rural tourism. A half of the units did not implement any change, while from the other half, most of the units tried to initiate or to develop different types of collaborations with the local community or with other units. As a result of the cooperation with local producers, the guesthouses are able to provide to their clients traditional fabrics (cloths - hats, fur coats; carpets; wood carvings), healthy meals (with meat and dairy products, forest fruits and mushrooms, lavender, strawberry, honey, wine, oil) or equestrian services. This type of cooperation describes the process of rural tourism integration in local community: "tourism is explicitly linked to the economic, social, cultural, natural and human structures of the localities in which it takes place" (Saxena and Ilbery, 2010:260). The results show that businesses introducing or improving relations with other companies or institutions have the following characteristics: the age of the owner between 46 and 60 years (62.5%), the owner didn't had any previous experience in tourism before starting the business (75%) and 87.5% of the owners benefited from training in tourism.

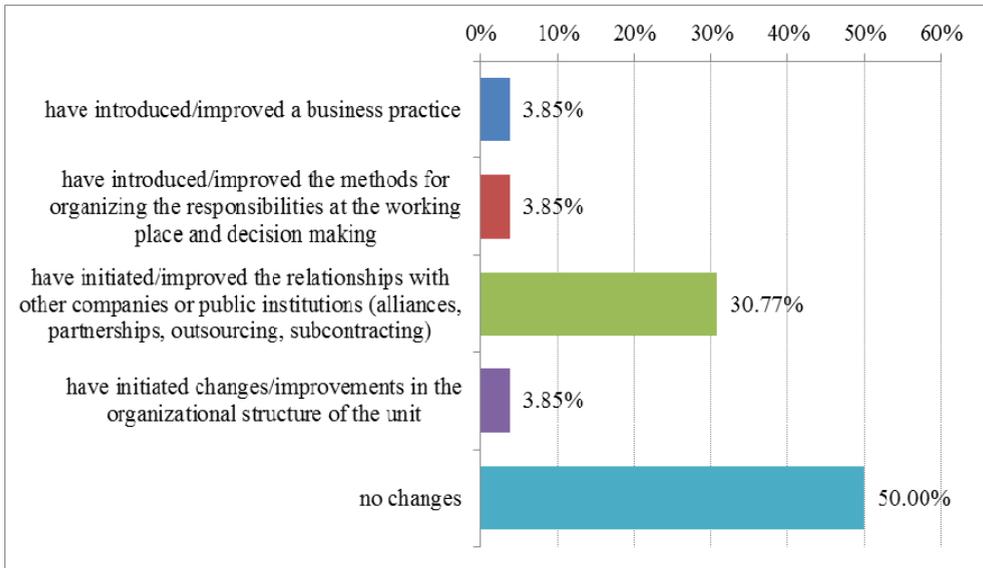


Fig.3. Organizational innovation

Another type of cooperation is with similar units. The “co-opetition” (Decelle, 2004) is present in villages Sancaiu and Marisel, where the accommodation units are working together in developing different activities for tourists (in Sancaiu they developed common tourist packages), events and even infrastructure elements (a village museum in Marisel or a traditional Hungarian house in Sancaiu). It is important to stress the high value added of this type of innovations, increasing tourists’ experience and the attraction capacity of the area.

The marketing innovations identified in rural tourism are similar with the results obtained by Negrusa, Yolal and Rus (2012:47) for hotels in Cluj Napoca, the guesthouses concentrating their actions on introduction/improvement of advertising and promotion techniques and introduction of new sales channels. The social media is used more and more to develop connections with potential clients and to promote the provided services. Other web instruments are also used with the same purpose: Google AdWords, presence on specialized tourism websites (TripAdvisor), media websites (YouTube) and blogs.

The businesses that improved or introduced new forms of advertising are mostly owned by persons with an age between 46-60 years (53.3%), are owned by women (60%), the owners have high

school degree or undergraduate degree (40% each category), 76.9% of the owners had previous experience in tourism before starting the business and 84.6% of them received training in tourism.

Those accommodation units that improved or introduced new sales channels were mostly established after 2005 (52.5%), have owners with an age between 46-60 years, 77.8% of the owners are women, the owners have high school or undergraduate studies (44.4% each category), 75% of them did not have experience in tourism activities before starting the business and 87.5% benefited from training in tourism.

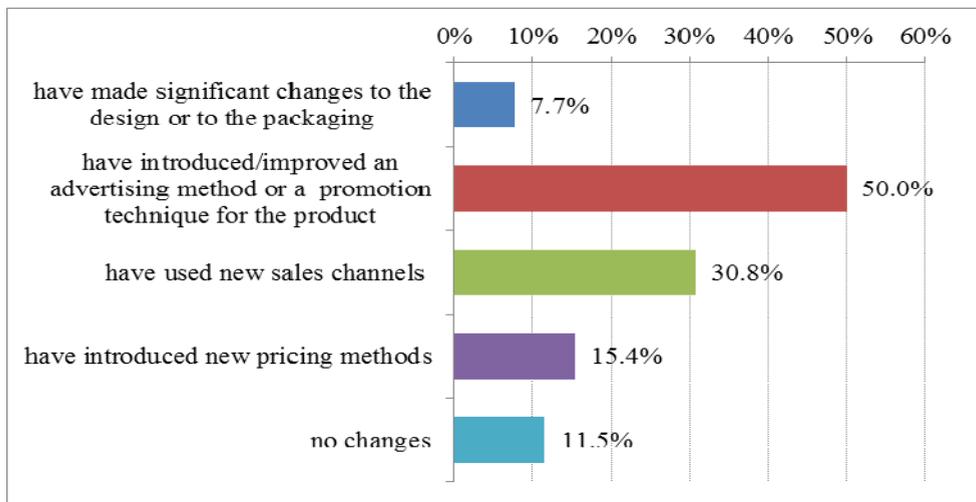


Fig.4. Marketing innovation

Williams and Shaw consider that internationalization is a form of innovation, successful internationalization requires innovation, and internationalization requires firms to have superior knowledge (2011:27). The units mentioned previously in Sancaiu and Marisel innovating at local level by cooperating and using in common the local resources, discovered the opportunity to compete in the tourism industry at global level. The participation at international touristic fairs, the partnerships made there and not in the last, the Internet, allow them to be present in the international market.

Analyzing the main source for the innovations implemented, we conclude that the personal experience and concerns of the guesthouse

owners and the clients' observations represent the main source of innovation in rural tourism. This is typical, if we consider that almost all the units are managed by one or more members of the owner's family, the number of the employees outside the family being reduced. In conclusion, we believe that the entrepreneurial characteristics and the vision of the owner become very important in the process of innovation in rural tourism.

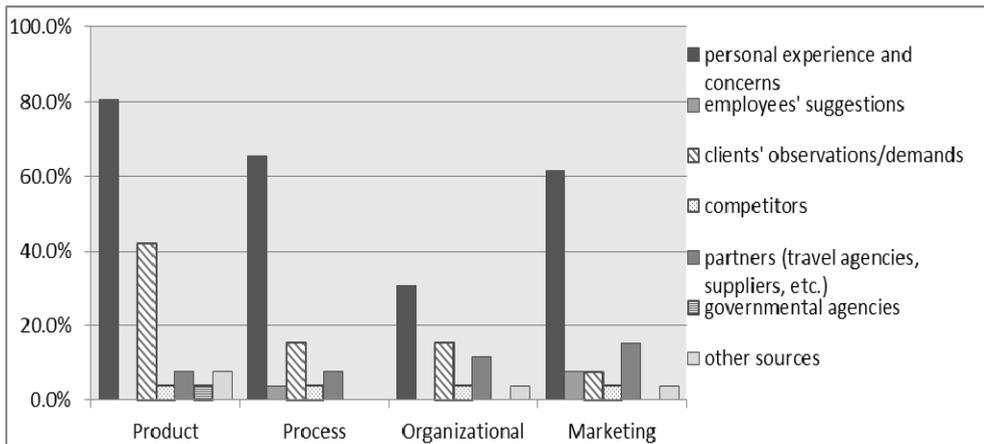


Fig.5. Sources of innovation

Clients are another important source for innovation in rural tourism. Paying attention to their needs, the guesthouses have the opportunity to be on trend, to provide the most appropriate services and to satisfy the clients' needs at a higher level. Customizing the services and including the genuine elements of the area in their products, the units became more competitive, being easier for them to compete with the units from other regions.

The main benefits obtained as a result of innovative activities implemented are presented in Figure 6. In the perceptions of guesthouses owners', the rise in the number of clients, the increase of the guesthouse notoriety and the growth of loyal customers are the main benefits they have as a result of innovations implemented. This conclusion is similar with the results obtained by Negrusa, Yolal and Rus (2012:49-50) in the case of hotels from Cluj Napoca.

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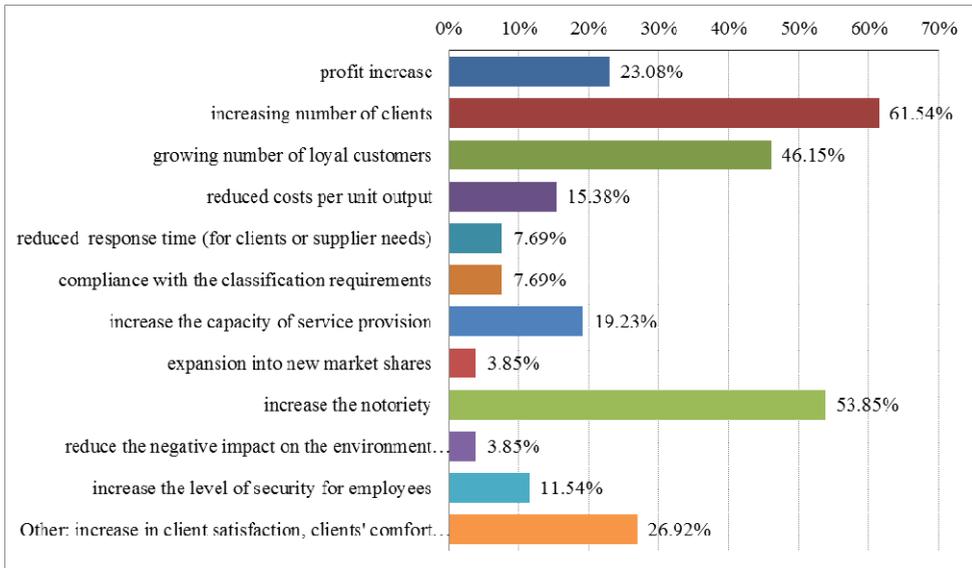


Fig.6. Effects of innovation

Implementing innovations is not always easy – Figure 7 presents the main impediments encountered by the entrepreneurs in rural tourism. Seasonality is the main problem faced by the tourism. In Cluj County rural area, the peak season is developing between June and September and during the winter (especially for holidays). As a result, the owners of guesthouses mentioned that it is not worth to invest in making radical changes or improvements in infrastructure as the tourists' flows are fluctuating along the year.

This aspect may affect also the sources of innovation. In a previous research (Sofică and Toader, 2013:67), we observed that seasonality determines fluctuations of labor force and a negative selection of the specialized workers – the educated and skilled employees tend to migrate to other countries (where they can earn enough money in the peak season) or they choose units which provide them a job for the entire year (in the cities, for example). In this situation, we cannot expect too many suggestions for innovations from the employees of the rural accommodation units.

Another impediment in innovations is the lack of financial resources. We already mentioned this characteristic of the SMEs acting in rural tourism, and it seems that the owners of the guesthouses

perceive the situation in the same manner. Moreover, they consider that usually it is too costly to innovate, especially when they are not able to access EU funds.

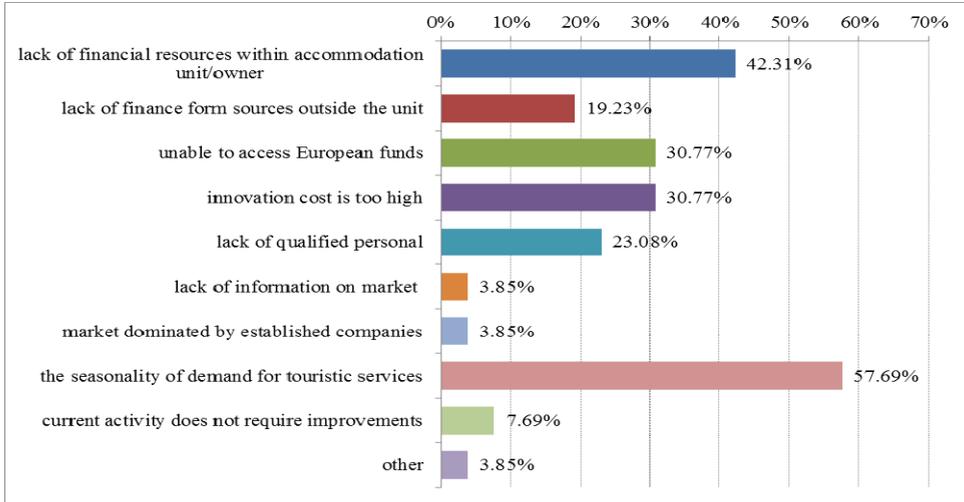


Fig.7. Impediments for innovation

5. Conclusions

The tourism industry is changing, driven notably by new consumer requirements and information technologies. A new tourism is emerging - one which takes into account the complexity and segmentation of tourism demand. Tourism entrepreneurs have realized that innovation is becoming a key element to survive and compete in a dynamic and radically changing environment (Korres, 2008:149).

Analyzing the activity of accommodation units in Cluj County rural tourism, we conclude that the guesthouse owners experience and concerns represent the main source of innovations. The clients' demands have also an important role in introducing new or improved products/services, processes, organizational or marketing activities. An important difference as reported to hotel industry, is the fact that in the rural tourism the employees' suggestions for innovations are almost inexistent.

Comparing the different types of innovations, we observed that the most frequent are product innovations. Before crisis, most of the

units in rural area were providing only basics services (accommodation and food), but the competition and the decrease of demand since 2008 have determined them to identify different ways to attract clients. The product diversification through the inclusion of traditional elements of the area and the creation of additional services to increase the added value of tourists' experience represented the main approaches in the case of product innovation.

Remarkable are also the organizational innovations implemented. The development of rural tourism networks which strengthen the collaboration with local producers, local authorities and most important with similar units, represent a modern and successful way to develop the rural tourism.

The social media represent at this moment a key instrument for marketing activities of many accommodation units.

An innovative tourism policy has to promote coherence and synergy which means that policy makers need to encourage all partners (as for instance, regions, municipalities and the business community) to co-operate more proactively.

The profile of the innovator in rural tourism is the following: established heir business after 2005, has an age between 46-60 years, possesses high school or undergraduate degree, didn't had any previous experience in tourism before starting the business and received training in tourism.

Anyway, there are some methodological limits which constrain the generalization of the results. As we mentioned only 27% of the potential target group accepted to participate to our study. Based on our observation, we consider that these are the open-minded persons, who even have a strong entrepreneurial sense and do not want to give up to their investments or who are really passionate about the tourism.

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