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TECHNICAL BRIEF

Sustainable agritourism: an opportunity for **agrifood systems transformation** in the Mediterranean

Sustainable agritourism: an opportunity for agrifood systems transformation in the Mediterranean

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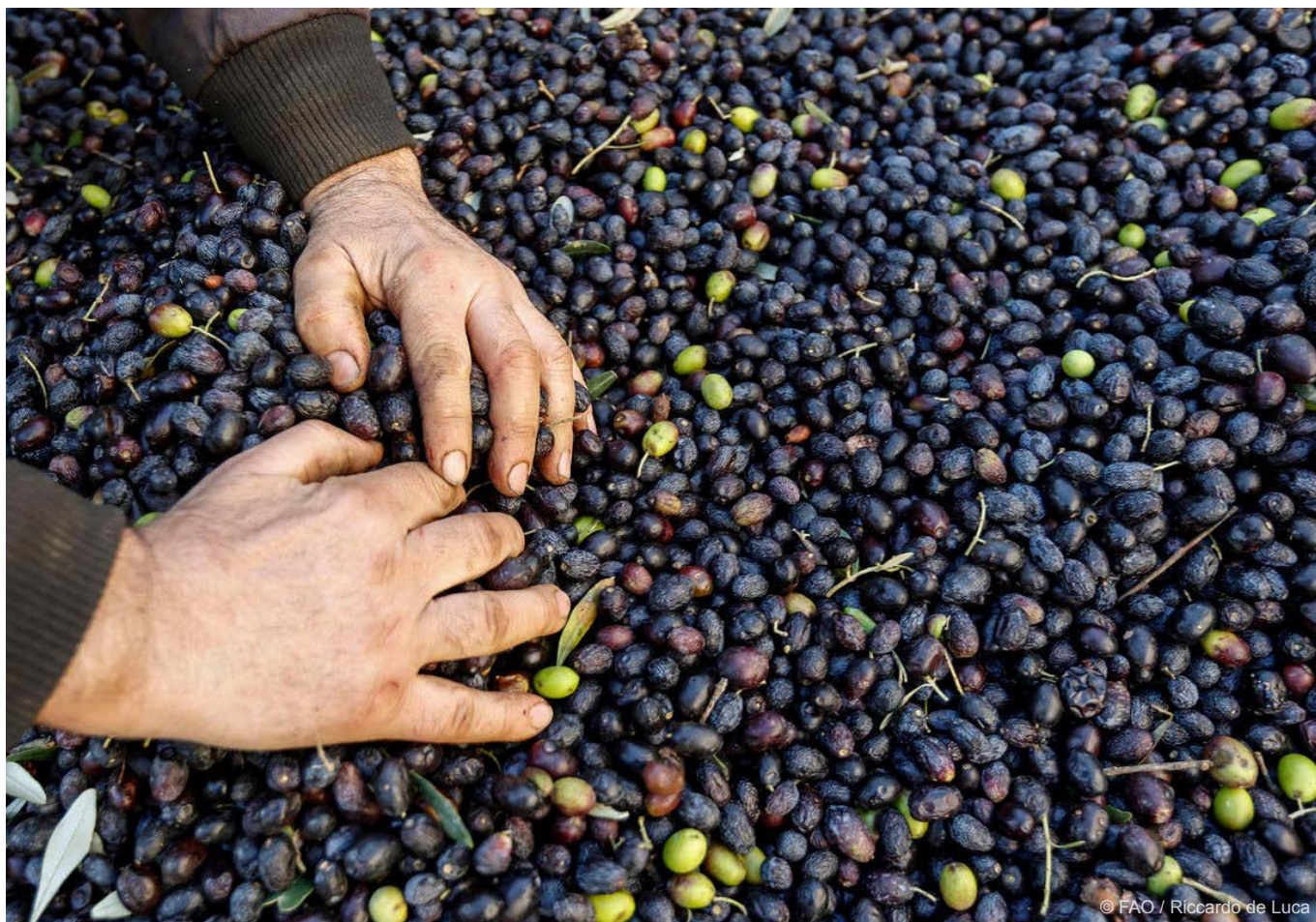
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INTRODUCTION

Mediterranean countries are exploring new strategies to transform agrifood systems into more resilient, inclusive and sustainable models that provide healthy diets for all (Zurayk *et al.*, 2024). Sustainable agritourism¹ is considered a promising solution for driving this transformation (Ammirato and Felicetti, 2013; Pratt, Magbalot-Fernandez and Ohe, 2022). In the last two decades, agritourism has grown significantly in the region, fueled by farmers' move towards sustainable entrepreneurship and rising global interest in sustainable travel, cultural experiences and local foods. Applying a systems approach to sustainable agritourism development creates opportunities to enhance local agrifood systems, benefiting rural livelihoods, preserving cultural and culinary heritage, and protecting biodiversity and

indigenous species. Nonetheless, sustainable agritourism development remains inadequately addressed in food and farming policies (Karampela, Andreopoulos and Koutsouris, 2021).

This policy brief, developed within the framework of the multi-stakeholder initiative for Sustainable Food Systems in the Mediterranean (SFS-MED Platform),² explores the role of sustainable agritourism as a catalyst for transforming agrifood systems in the region. The brief draws on insights from a literature review, key informant interviews and an inter-country learning dialogue (FAO, 2024) that facilitated experience sharing among decision makers and practitioners.³

¹ Despite some inconsistencies in defining "agri", "agro" or "rural" tourism, this brief adopts a working definition based on Phillip, Hunter and Blackstock (2010) and Streifeneder (2016). It includes farms, rural SMEs, and private and cooperative businesses that engage visitors with the agrifood system through lived tourism experiences, ranging from open farms focusing their offer on educational and recreational activities, to those concentrated on traditional food production, as well as farms offering overnight accommodation and leisure activities tied to farming and/or rural heritage.

² The SFS-MED Platform is a multi-stakeholder initiative to advance sustainable agrifood systems in the Mediterranean region, co-led by FAO, the International Center for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (CIHEAM), the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). For further information, see www.oneplanetnetwork.org/programmes/sustainable-food-systems/sfs-med-platform

³ This report does not claim to provide an exhaustive set of case studies for the Mediterranean, but does prioritize geographical balance. It should be noted that only relevant literature in English was consulted.



AGRITOURISM AND AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS SUSTAINABILITY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Agritourism interlinks multiple sectors including agriculture, food processing and retail, tourism, environment and cultural heritage, and involves diverse actors at local, national and international levels. The sustainable development of agritourism can lead to positive economic, social and environmental sustainability outcomes (see Figure 1) through rural development, inclusive growth, enhanced rural-urban linkages, biodiversity conservation, healthy diets from local production and consumption, and multi-level governance (Ait-Yahia Ghidouche, Nechoud and Ghidouche, 2021; Barbieri, 2013; Ciolac *et al.*, 2019; Streifeneder, 2016).

Figure 1. Contribution of agritourism to relevant outcomes for agrifood systems transformation

 Environmental outcomes	• Conserve and enhance plant and animal biodiversity • Adopt ecological production methods (soil conservation, organic production) • Promote short supply chains and “zero food-miles” • Optimize use of water and energy and food waste management • Maintain and restore the natural and agricultural landscape (agricultural cover and land use)
 Economic outcomes	• Improve access of producers to rural and urban markets • Increase competitiveness of local farm products, adding value to local quality produce • Support agrifood systems infrastructure, innovation and digitalization
 Social outcomes	• Educate consumers about sustainability and healthy diets (food literacy) • Increase trust and collaboration among stakeholders throughout the agrifood system • Valorize the role of producers (especially women) in the perception of consumers

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Environmental outcomes

One of the main assets upon which agritourism builds in many countries is the wealth offered by environmental resources. Agritourism leverages sustainable rural development where such development ensures the responsible use of agricultural resources and natural heritage (Ammirato and Felicetti, 2014) as well as the conservation of wildlife habitats and the enhancement of local landscapes (Barbieri, Sotomayor and Aguilar, 2017, Xu *et al.*, 2016). In mountainous areas, tourism is one of the few territory-bound activities that can provide economic growth, but its sustainability depends on preserving fragile ecosystems (World Tourism Organization, 2018). Similarly, the potential of *pescatourism* to contribute to the blue economy while preserving coastal and maritime environments across the Mediterranean (see Box 1) is increasingly being recognized (Koshkalda, 2022).

Agritourism can also reduce environmental impacts by promoting consumers' awareness of seasonal products, minimizing "food miles" through local sourcing (Tomatis, Carità and de Broissia, 2023), and preserving indigenous and wild varieties and biodiversity through Geographical Indication (GI) certifications (Brune *et al.*, 2020; FAO, 2023). An notable example of this approach is the revival of indigenous grape varieties by Wines of Crete.⁴

Additionally, agritourism entrepreneurs increasingly promote and raise awareness of environmentally sustainable and circular agrifood practices such as organic farming, permaculture, land and water conservation, renewable energy use, and food loss and waste reduction (Khanal, Mishra and Omobitan, 2019; Peroff, Morais and Sills, 2022; Valdivia and Barbieri, 2014), as in the case of *Carob House* in Jordan.⁵ Such efforts have been correlated to reduced energy use and lower greenhouse gas emissions (Baipai *et al.*, 2021; Bruci *et al.*, 2012; Mastronardi *et al.*, 2015; Piwowar, 2018).

⁴ Wines of Crete is an initiative launched by various winemaker networks to protect, promote and valorize Cretan wine and indigenous grape varieties through the development of wine tourism. For further information, see www.winesofcrete.gr/en.

⁵ Carob House is a permaculture farm and restaurant on a mission to revive ancestral wisdom by cultivating tasty, nutritious food in harmony with nature. For further information, see <https://carob.earth>.

Box 1. Pioneering pescatourism in Greece

The joint action of 18 fishery local action groups in Greece is shifting attitudes among small fishers towards pescatourism, encouraging them to embrace the potential for income diversification while simultaneously reducing pressure on local fish species. Touristic Sea Routes created by the pescatourism initiative allow tourists to experience sustainable fishing practices first hand, thereby raising awareness of local marine biodiversity and stimulating respect for the contribution of small fishers to sustainable food systems and cultural heritage. Co-funded by Greece and the European Union, the project also offers training to small fishers about legal requirements (e.g. licenses, food safety) and lobbies for the co-creation of a conducive pescatourism legislative framework. The initiative supports coastal and island economies while preserving maritime environments from overfishing.* Fishers use only 0.5 km of nets per day for pescatourism, compared to 5 km per day in commercial fishing, minimizing the impact on marine life.

*CIHEAM, FAO, PRIMA & UfM. 2024. *Blue transformation: Strategies and actions for more sustainable agrifood systems in the Mediterranean – Webinar outcomes*. Rome. openknowledge.fao.org/handle/20.500.14283/cd2219en

Source: Pescatourism in Greece. 2023. *Pescatourism in Greece* [cited 25 September 2024]. pescatourism.gr/en



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Economic outcomes

Agritourism supports economic sustainability by revitalizing local development, creating decent jobs, especially for rural women and youth, and mitigating poverty (Adamov *et al.*, 2020; Bwana *et al.*, 2015; Hara and Naipaul, 2008; Nugraha *et al.*, 2021; Ollenburg and Buckley, 2007). It encourages agri-entrepreneurs to cultivate abandoned land, reversing the widespread phenomenon of rural outmigration (see [Box 2](#) for the example of the founders of Mrizi i Zanave, as well as the example of Grand Albanik in FAO, 2024).

By diversifying farm activities and improving access to rural and urban markets along short food supply chains, agritourism creates more remunerative revenue streams

(Arru *et al.*, 2019). The European Union's vision for rural areas (European Commission, 2021) highlights the capacity to retain higher value added from farming and agrifood activities, including agritourism, as a path to creating prosperous and resilient rural areas and cohesive and integrated development.

Additionally, agritourism drives local infrastructure development, such as farm-to-market roads, agro-processing facilities and telecommunication networks in rural areas, which promote sustainable food systems, inclusive economic growth and rural innovation across the Euro-Mediterranean region (Ammirato *et al.*, 2020; European Economic and Social Committee, 2022; Roman, Roman and Prus, 2020).

Box 2. Short food clusters boosting prosperity in rural Albania

Mrizi i Zanave is a flourishing agritourism business in Albania. Founded by two chef brothers on the basis of Slow Food principles*, it features a 20-hectare organic farm, several processing facilities, a restaurant and visitor accommodation. Located in a remote mountainous region near Fishtë village as part of the government's "100 villages programme" for rural revitalization, this agritourism business helps to boost the local economy by sourcing raw produce, such as honey, mushrooms and chestnuts, from 400 families living within a 10-mile radius. Over time, Mrizi i Zanave has helped to create an informal short food supply cluster, becoming the main income source for half of the participating small farmers.

*Slow Food. n.d. Slow Food [cited 25 September 2024]. www.slowfood.com

Source: Agroturizëm. 2024. *Miri i Zanave*. In: Agroturizëm. Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of Albania [cited 25 September 2024]. agrotourism.gov.al/mrizi-i-zanave-fishta-lezha-county



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Social outcomes

Agritourism promotes social sustainability in agrifood systems by enhancing consumer education and food literacy,⁶ influencing society's perceptions and values about agriculture, food and sustainability, and contributing to social cohesion and a sense of community (Barbieri, Stevenson and Knollenberg, 2019; Birtalan *et al.*, 2020; Grasseni, 2018). Involvement in experiences like farm visits, cooking lessons and pick-your-own food sessions, as well as mechanisms related to the “economy of care” (e.g. voluntarism, adopting a farm animal) (Zurayk, 2012) and community-supported agriculture schemes, which are based on direct contracts between a group of farmers and a community of consumers, bridges the gap between rural producers and urban consumers, a distance that it is not only geographical but also ideological and symbolic (Partalidou, 2015). A remarkable example is the Open Farm platform⁷ in Greece, which facilitates experiential learning and non-formal education through a network of over 100 small farms, several schools and Athens' central vegetable market.

Agritourists are able to acquire a better understanding of healthy diets (Kim and Eves, 2012) and valorize the contribution of producers to the sustainable transition. This awareness builds trust, respect and reciprocity along the agrifood chain, helping to reduce structural inequalities (Partzsch, 2018; Widener and Karides, 2014). Ethnic minorities and women are using community-supported agriculture, agroecology and agritourism to achieve economic and social sustainability and become more competitive, despite facing constraints to accessing land, labour and capital in markets driven by conventional farming (Peroff, Morais and Sills, 2022; Tsiaousi and Partalidou, 2023).

⁶ “Food literacy” includes the positive relationship built through social, cultural and environmental experiences with food, enabling people to make decisions that support health (Cullen *et al.*, 2015).

⁷ The Open Farm platform is a network aimed at raising awareness of the role of farmers and connecting them with citizens in Greece. It provides a database of open farms that are available for citizens to visit. For further information, see <https://openfarm.gr/en/home>

Box 3. Advancing gender equality through agritourism in Jordan

The Princess Taghrid Institute (PTI) in Jordan supports employment and livelihood opportunities for Jordanian and Syrian refugee women and girls. Since many of these women are small-scale food producers and agri-entrepreneurs, PTI invested in agritourism as a channel to upscale market access for the women's food and artisanal products. PTI has opened stores across Jordan and crafted agritourism experiences for domestic and international customers featuring these women and their families. Partnering with FAO's Investment Centre, PTI started training both men and women producers, defying gender norms, while also improving product quality, hygiene and branding. PTI also strives to incorporate gender equality at the core of the activities of a newly established National Agritourism Development Taskforce*. By uniting government, the private sector and non-governmental organizations, their vision is to work across a diversity of perspectives towards a cohesive strategy for Jordan.

* FAO. 2024. *On the road to sustainable agritourism in Jordan*. In: FAO Investment Centre [cited 25 September 2024]. fao.org/investment-centre/latest/news/detail/on-the-road-to-sustainable-agritourism-in-jordan/en

Source: Princess Taghrid Institute for Development and Training (PTI). n.d. PTI [cited 25 September 2024]. pti-jo.com



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RE-FRAMING AGRITOURISM AS A LEVER FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

As demonstrated by the above experiences, agritourism has the transformative potential to address many of contemporary challenges facing agrifood systems, while promoting environmental, economic and social sustainability. The following recommendations drawn from the analysis, key informant interviews and the inter-country learning dialogue highlight some gaps still to be addressed which could fully unlock this potential and re-frame agritourism as a driver of sustainable agrifood systems.

Systemic and localized policies

There is a need for integrated and comprehensive policies that ensure coherence across the sectors involved in agritourism. Agritourism in the Mediterranean has been regulated mostly through fragmented sector-specific policies – concerning tourism, infrastructure, jobs and agriculture – resulting in inconsistent outcomes (Grillini *et al.*, 2002; Potočnik-Slavič and Schmitz, 2013; Streifeneder, 2016; Valdivia and Barbieri, 2014). Additionally, policies should not be tied to short-term funding schemes, so as to allow for long-term planning for sustainability. Bearing in mind that agrifood systems are entwined with the territory, effective policies must consider local values and realities in order to develop transformative solutions (Blay-Palmer *et al.*, 2019).

Box 4. National-to-local collaboration in the Italian regulatory framework

Italy has a well-established regulatory framework that has undergone several reforms between 1985 and 2006 to reduce overlaps or contradictions between different ministries (e.g. tourism, agriculture and health), while also taking into consideration regional needs. The latest reform led to the introduction in 2013 of a National Register listing authorized agritourism farms, a classification system for agritourism with accommodation (similar to the star system in hotels) and the national trademark *Agriturismo Italia* as a guarantee for visitors of respect for sustainability values, as required by law. The trademark, launched by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry Policies, is implemented in collaboration with Regional Administrations and the National Agritourism Association.

Source: Agriturismo Italia. 2024. *The Agriturismo Italia trademark*. In: *Agriturismo Italia* [cited 2 October 2024].



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Spaces for agency

Stronger agency and collaboration can be achieved through the creation of platforms where the voices of diverse groups of women and men are valued and empowered to participate in decision making through multi-level governance frameworks that promote inclusivity and stimulate networked ways of collective learning and innovation.



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Box 5. Inclusive decision making rooted in the reality of rural Albania

Since 2022, Albania's creation of a national agritourism association has strengthened farmers' and entrepreneurs' agency and capacity to achieve normative changes for better rural infrastructure and improved certification criteria. Supported by the SFS-MED project, Albania has developed a national roadmap for food systems transformation, using agritourism as multi-dimensional entry point. This roadmap emerged from local and national dialogues with diverse food systems stakeholders, creating a safe space where participants felt empowered to voice their concerns and ideas. This fostered a willingness among diverse stakeholders to navigate differences, engage in meaningful dialogue and explore collaboration. A key outcome was recognition of the need for stronger ties between vocational schools, agrifood businesses and rural communities to equip youth with skills for future innovation. The process also demonstrated that national initiatives can be rooted in local realities, promoting greater accountability and agency at the local level.

Source: FAO. 2024. *Stories of agrifood systems change: Insights from Côte d'Ivoire, Cambodia, the Pacific, Guatemala and Albania*. Rome. doi.org/10.4060/cd1657en



Investing in rural people to embrace agrifood systems transformation

Investing in sustainable, locally integrated short food supply chains first requires investing in people, in order to enhance the capacity of diverse groups of women and men to drive agrifood systems transformation. Skilled human capital can be developed through tailored training in areas like hospitality, nutrition, food safety and bioeconomy, as well as managerial skills. Pairing skills development with targeted micro-finance for small producers can help them adapt their facilities and improve practices in food safety, resource management and waste reduction. High-quality public infrastructure is essential to support rural communities' transformative role and improve living standards in rural areas. Additionally, gender-responsive value chains and policies are key to empowering women in Mediterranean agritourism development (Poulaki, Lagou and Valeri, 2021).

Collaborative research integrating farmers' views

Research is crucial for bridging knowledge gaps between policymakers and agrifood practitioners, and avoiding fragmented policy approaches. Cross-sector partnerships can integrate research and innovation and foster knowledge exchange among Mediterranean countries, as exemplified by initiatives like Horizon Europe, which promotes the creation of synergetic research environments and mobility schemes like Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs,⁸ which supports new or aspiring entrepreneurs to access practical coaching from experienced entrepreneurs.

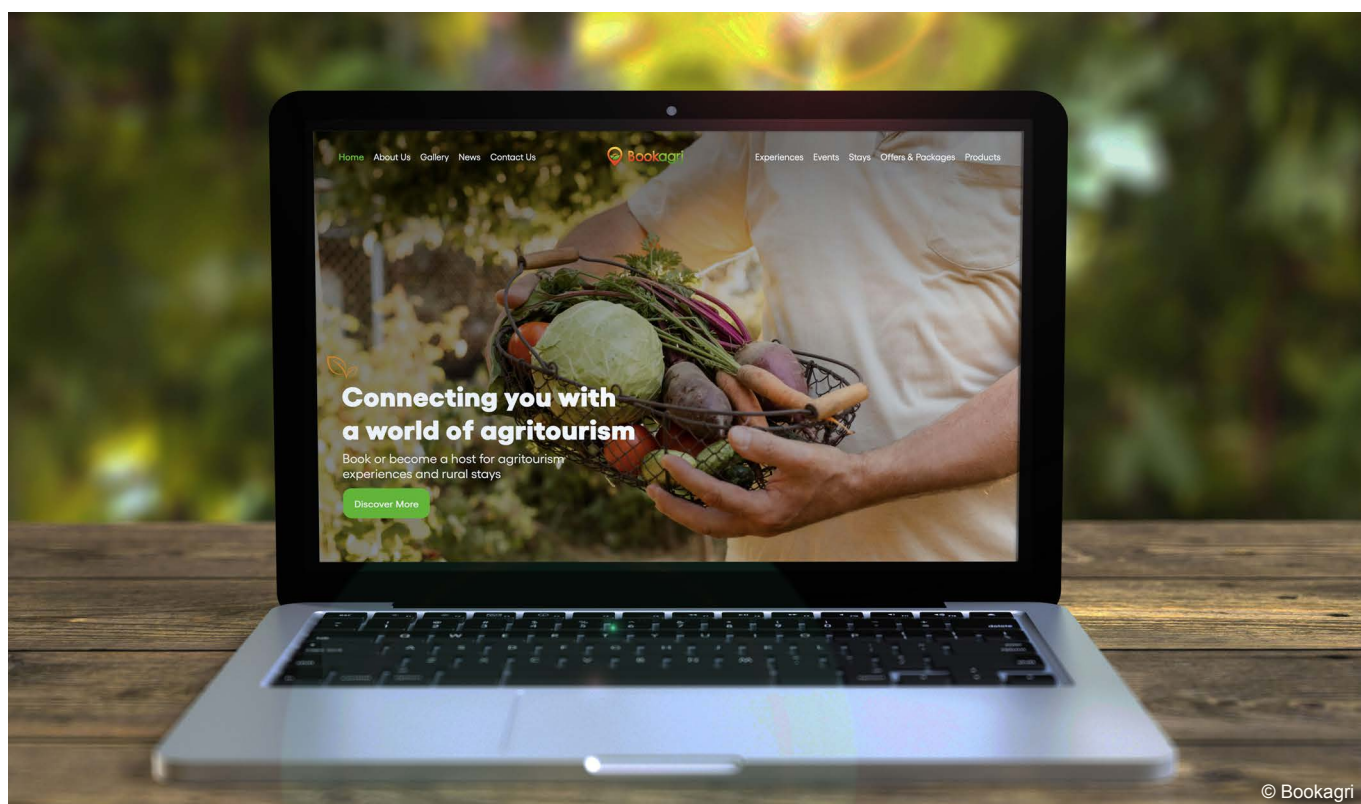
Inter-country collaboration can also enhance comparative research about the different life cycle stages of agritourism, from more mature to emergent systems. Incorporating farmers' perspectives into science-based policies and establishing a localized agritourism observatory can serve to monitor progress and share successful case studies. Such partnerships between farmers and researchers, especially when reflected in policy, can drive transformative solutions for agrifood system challenges (CIHEAM *et al.*, 2023).

⁸ Erasmus for Young Entrepreneurs helps provide aspiring European entrepreneurs with the skills necessary to start and/or successfully run a small business in Europe. For further information, see www.erasmus-entrepreneurs.eu.

Communicate to advance deeper connections

The case studies and literature show that agritourism promotes food literacy, empowering stakeholders to exercise their agency towards more sustainable, healthier and equitable food choices. However, more efforts are needed to communicate the benefits of agrifood system transformation and to highlight the systemic approach of agritourism. One proposed action is equipping food producers with ICT and communication skills and technologies, as seen by Bookagri in Jordan.⁹ Building empathy and trust among agritourism actors through exchanges between farms and key influencers, like chefs and nutrition professionals, can foster informed engagement. This deeper connection helps consumers understand the efforts invested in food production, leading to more sustainable purchasing choices and better connected agrifood system based on supportive relationships between all parties involved.

⁹ Bookagri is a platform launched in 2015 based on the idea of connecting farmers and farming experiences with local and foreign tourists in Jordan. For further information, see <https://bookagri.com>.



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