

## **Potentiality of Agro-tourism in Nepal: Post COVID-19 perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Agro-tourism has become an opportunity to increase income for many farmers and agribusinesses across the country. Three main features differentiate agro-tourism from conventional tourism. It allows tourists to experience a real and authentic rural life by participating in farms and different activities. In Nepal, agro-tourism is a very new concept despite the long history of agriculture in the country. There are many potentialities for the agro-tourism industry in Nepal as agriculture has long been rooted in society. Presently, agro-tourism is emerging as an industry in the form of the tourism sector which opens the gateway for visitors to the agriculture farm and ranch. However, COVID-19 has harmed tourism including agro-tourism, but it also realized the importance of agro-tourism. Agro-tourism is continuing to be the backbone of the nation's economy to some extent. Post-COVID-19 paves the way for agro-tourism development in terms of production and tourism aspects. Particular attention should be paid to improving the infrastructure, institutional framework, marketing and cooperation of all stakeholders in the field.

**Keywords:** Agribusinesses, Agriculture, Agro-tourism, Economy, Rural, Tourism

### **Introduction**

Agro-tourism has several synonyms such as agritainment, agricultural tourism, agritourism, or farm tourism. In action, it is the practice of attracting visitors and travelers to agricultural areas, generally for

educational and recreational purposes. Due to economic hardships and changes in the farming and livestock industries across the globe, many farmers especially those with small, family-owned farms have realized that they must supplement their agricultural business model and explore new ways of generating income. Connecting it with income generation and livelihood is necessary. Agro-tourism has become an opportunity to increase income for many farmers and agribusinesses around the nation. It is now being recognized as an industry. Some producers, related organizations, federal, provincial and local government agencies, universities, professional consultants, and the media are promoting the concept of agro-tourism.

The term agro-tourism is understood differently by tourists and providers of agro-tourist services. For a tourist, agro-tourism means familiarizing oneself with agricultural production or recreation in the agricultural environment or it may include an opportunity to help with farming tasks during the visit. However, this definition does not fully render what the term agro-tourism means to people providing agro-tourist services. In fact, agro-tourism is a term introduced by representatives of the supply party representing the interests of farms providing agro-tourist services. This resulted in a considerable extension of the term to all activities related to providing services for tourists and holidaymakers. Therefore the entities providing agro-tourist services include the term agro-tourism various forms of the accommodation industry. In the absence of a formal definition, agro-tourism can be summarized as it could connect consumers with heritage,

and natural resource experiences unique to the agricultural industry of rural areas (Wilson, J., Thilmany, D., & Sullins, M., 2007).

There are no reasons why agro-tourism and rural tourism should not be distinguished although the concept of rurality varies depending upon the individual experiences of tourists and their cultural backgrounds. Three main features that differentiate agro-tourism from conventional tourism are socio-psychological; economic; spatial and environmental. The first feature is the possibility to satisfy the human need with practical participation in the process of food production in the life of a rural family and a rural community. The second characteristic quality of agro-tourism in relation to conventional tourism is the possibility to satisfy the human cognitive need within farming production or ethnography. The third feature of agro-tourism is the possibility to satisfy emotional needs, which is the willingness to have direct contact with domestic animals, plant and animal products and the products of processing, and the need to experience the idyllic countryside associated with the atmosphere of rusticity, silence, sounds or even smells of the country and farm.

China, USA, Some European countries, Brazil, and Japan are the leading countries in agro-tourism and the global agro-tourism market is anticipated to exhibit astonishing growth in the near future because of the success of governmental initiatives to refine the agricultural economy through agro-tourism. Literature shows that the market size of USD 69.24 billion in 2019 is projected to reach upto USD 117.37 billion by 2027 (Fortune Business Insights of July 22, 2020), In the case of Nepal, the exact share of

agro-tourism in the national economy has not yet formally reported but the observation suggests a high possibility.

## **Objectives**

The objectives of this paper are the followings:

- 1) To provide a holistic outlook of the different perspectives of agro-tourism in Nepal which support the sustainable development of rural areas;
- 2) To provide information on global and local market facts of agro-tourism; and
- 3) To suggest measures for agro-tourism for future development.

## **Methods**

A systematic review of the available literature in order to point out the linkages between agro-tourism and sustainability was done. Similarly, discussions with five knowledgeable persons on the impacts of COVID-19 on agro-tourism were made and to the possible extent, the published and unpublished literature on agro-tourism in Nepal and abroad were studied thoroughly for making suggestions and conclusions.

## **Reflections: Agro-tourism and Rural Development**

Since the second half of the last century, a series of social, economic, and environmental changes have considerably altered the planetary balances, generating events such as climate change, pollution, and loss of biological diversity (Robert, Parris, & Leiserowitz, 2005). The growing gap between

rich and poor countries and the resource crisis in the energy, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors has grown more and more with the years, making essential a new concept of development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own need” (WCED, 1987). Consequences of continuous economic growth (i.e., high social costs, indiscriminate use of natural resources, generalized pollution, etc.) led to a common understanding that the development pathways are no more sustainable and radical changes are needed (Ammirato, Della Gala, & Volpentesta, 2013). A “new trajectory for development” is emerging, highlighting on the one side, the limits, and contradictions of the traditional development paradigm, on the other side, the need to transition to sustainable development strategies able to balance economic growth with cultural and natural resource conservation (Ammirato & Felicetti, 2014). The fundamentals of such strategies are the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social, and environmental), which are best known as the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (Thapa, 2013). Several authors recognized the fundamental contribution of the agriculture sector to the sustainable development of rural areas, indicating evolutionary paths of differentiation and integration able to produce long-lasting development. More recent patterns of the agricultural sector evolution highlight structural changes on both the demand and the supply side. On the demand side, consumers become more and more attentive to aspects linked up to the quality and typicality of production, while the supply side is characterized by new supply chain configurations, based on a closer relationship between

producer and consumer. To better exploit such evolution patterns, farmers and other organizations have started organizing themselves in rural networks deploying alternative business models aimed to guarantee competitive advantages, improve farm revenue streams, resume taking an active role in the food system, and develop new consumer market niches. Such models are characterized by a re-connection among producers and consumers with these explicit ethical and political goals: re-vitalization of territory identity and rural community relations to local food and agriculture, linking with sustainable agriculture, economically viable, and socially responsible practices.

In fact, consumers are paying more and more attention to viable practices like the “zero kilometers” approach, where the supply and consumption of food products to consumers occur in the same location. These networks aim at shortening the physical and social distances between producers and consumers by minimizing the number of intermediaries in the food supply chain, having the potential to positively affect the sustainable development of rural areas along all three pillars of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) in agricultural systems. In this context, consideration of a particular model of agricultural business, namely agro-tourism, where farms, which deploy tourism activities, represent a touchpoint between a network of rural actors (no-profit organizations, local firms, public administrations) and tourists interested in enjoying the local territory. Rural tourism represents a growing market offering to rural communities’ growth opportunities that arise from the emerging trends in

tourism demand, which tend to pay more attention to the values of culture, food, and the countryside. It can bring a valuable contribution to the sustainable development of rural areas. Its contribution can be expressed not only in financial terms but also in terms of jobs, creation and revitalization of community pride. In this sense, agro-tourism represents an authentic form of rural tourism as it allows tourists to live a real and authentic rural experience on a working farm, participating in farm different activities (e.g., cultivating, harvesting, milking) being in contact with animals and nature and enjoying locally produced food. Nowadays scholars from different perspectives agree that agro-tourism can be the right tool to balance the needs of rural tourists with those of rural communities, offering real opportunities for economic and social development while mitigating undesirable impacts on the environment and other socio-cultural aspects.

Agritainment (agro-tourism and entertainment farming enterprises) has an extensive history in developed countries. Farm-related recreation and tourism can be traced back to the late 1800s when families visited farming relatives in an attempt to escape from the city's summer heat. Visiting the country or village became even more popular with the widespread use of the automobile in the 1920s. Rural recreation gained interest again in the 1930s and 1940s by folks seeking an escape from the stresses of the Great Depression and World War II. These demands for rural recreation led to widespread interest in horseback riding, farm petting zoos and farm

nostalgia during the 1960s and 1970s. Farm vacations, bed and breakfasts, and commercial farm tours were popularized in the 1980s and 1990s.

But in Nepal agro-tourism is a very new concept despite a long history of agriculture. Agriculture remains the main source of livelihood and food security for more than 60% population for many generations, whereas tourism became an important sector to explore the cultures and picturesque Himalayan landscapes. In 1953, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa conquered destination for the international tourists (GoN, 2009). There are many potentialities and popular forms of tourism industries in Nepal at present and agriculture remains an important sector in the tourism industry providing quality, healthy, organic and nutritious food for tourists. Furthermore, the tea states in eastern Nepal have been famous for domestic and international tourists for recreational and beautiful landscapes. Eastern hills are also popular for agricultural diversity in addition to tea states such as potato, cardamom), ginger, *Akabare Khursani* (red round big chilly), milk and milk product, and broom. Such diversity is helpful to promote agritourism by augmenting the farm business with tourism activities resources (Maharjan, 2006). Moreover, agro-tourism is emerging as an industry in the tourism sector which opens the gateway for visitors to the agricultural farm and ranch. It involves various activities related to agriculture like feeding, milking of animals, production of crop packaging, honey making, nursery management, rearing of earthworms, horse riding and so on. It is also related to vacations in which tourists used to visit the farm and acknowledge the farming system and other ongoing activities.

Furthermore, tourists interested in agriculture can also involve in the local level of production and management. So agro-tourism is the platform for the expansion of the tourism sector in the suburban and rural areas of Nepal.

However, the scenario has been changing over the years since the agricultural labor forces, especially youth, are bit decreasing from this sector (Chaudhary, 2018) which is an issue not only in Nepal but also in many other developing and even developed countries. Damage to tourism including agritourism caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine measures has added up for tourism service providers, transport companies and state budgets. The financial losses of agro-tourism service providers have already been enormous. Unemployment forecasts have greatly increased, including in the tourism sector. Many tourist service providers are likely to disappear.

COVID-19 also exposed Nepal's vulnerability to dependency on other countries for inputs required in the production of crops, livestock, and poultry. The second possible scenario is a long-term reduction in tourism that could result if intense COVID-19 and other pandemics other attacks continue without a successful vaccine. A decline in household income is expected in connection with the pandemic. These households are unlikely to give up holidays but may be looking for a cheaper domestic option and that option could be agro-tourism. Service providers in tourism and related industries are requesting assistance from the government.

In the post-COVID-19 scenario, the concept of Restart, Revive and Rethink can be streamlined for sustaining and streaming agro-tourism in the new normal. A public-private collaborative approach for tourism resilient building and preparedness for future possible crisis management should be the prime concern of the sensitive tourism industry including agro-tourism. Covid-19 has forced people all over the world to reconnect with nature. There are tremendous windows of opportunity to implement strong measures ensuring green recovery activities both at the local and provincial levels.

### **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for the development of agro-tourism that primarily focuses on domestic production and domestic tourists with the possibility of later expansion to foreign clients. In addition to greater security, the countryside can offer many historical, natural, and cultural attractions. The dense network of small towns and the frequency of public transport can create a favorable territorial base. Particular attention should be paid to improving the infrastructure, institutional framework, marketing, and cooperation of all stakeholders in the field. Most importantly, be smart and safe so that agro-tourism can continue to be an important tool for sustainable development in your area. For this, agro-tourism should be offered extra support under the rural development fund. Agro-tourism could continue even during the crisis, under certain conditions, suggesting that agritourism should be considered

separately from the rest of the tourism sector. So the need of the hours is to function all stakeholders of this sector in a collaborative and coordinated manner not only to mitigate the repercussions of this volatile pandemic but also to formulate short-term, mid-term and long-term plans to ease the recovery.

### ***Implications***

Agro-tourism has great potential to be the backbone of the nation's economy as it can contribute more than 23.9% (GoN, 2022) to the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the country. Post-COVID potential modalities to revive agro-tourism need to be developed and implemented, for which the following measures are suggested:

1. Collaboration of all stakeholders to assess the damage and preparation of collaborative recovery plan to revive the sector.
2. Promotion of agro-tourism as Nepal has a tremendous opportunity to compensate impending depletion of foreign tourism by remodeling internal tourism.
3. Establishment of internationally recognized tests and accredited laboratories to ensure quality health services across the country as well as acquirement of COVID-19-free legal acknowledgment papers from WHO or UN Agencies to travel by prospective travelers.
4. Application of immune certificate (like Yellow Fever booklet) requirement for potential visitors.

5. Issuance of “Immunity Passports” so that people can leave the lockdown which has been considered by the United Kingdom.
6. Facilitation of quick, easy, reliable and hassle-free online visa procedures or waiving visas straight away as part of bilateral arrangements.
7. Rejuvenation of Village Tourism with the introduction of a myriad of quality farms or homestays as future tourism will have a great paradigm shift; most of the prospective tourists might end spending time more in mountains or isolated destinations rather than being in the middle of the hustle bustle of cities.
8. Advancement of road infrastructures as well as modes of surface transportation with all required sanitation utilities as upcoming tourism may have a huge transition from Air transportation to Land Transportation to brush off the trepidation of being in the crowd of different airports.
9. Development of family-oriented tour packages to avoid mixing up any stranger in a group to ward off any potential contamination from the outsider.
10. Prioritization of sustainable and eco-friendly agro-tourism plans and strategies as there may be a shift of perspective tourist’s demand towards nature-friendly tourism enriched by local production and food.

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Article history: Received: 20 Dec. 2022 and Accepted: 03 Jan. 2023