

## **Title: Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of the Maltese Islands.**

Student name and surname: Andre Refalo

Student ITS number: 2000535/1

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## Abstract

**Author: Andre Refalo**

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This research sets out to examine the current state of rural tourism in Malta and the potential it carries in light of socio-economic development. Moreover, it identifies the main challenges and barriers to its growth. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the *status quo* and the way forward for rural tourism development, a mixed method approach was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were held with representatives of different institutions, whilst also an online survey was put forward to the general public.

The findings reveal that rural tourism in Malta holds significant potential for economic diversification and cultural preservation. However, it faces challenges such as overdevelopment, regulatory constraints and environmental pressures. These findings suggest that immersing oneself in sustainable tourism practices together with enhanced infrastructure are two critical elements enabling the success of rural tourism development.

The conclusions highlight the need for policy reforms and greater collaboration between stakeholders to foster a balance between rural development and environmental conservation. Furthermore, the implications point to the importance of adopting sustainable tourism strategies that preserve Malta's cultural and natural heritage, whilst supporting rural communities.

### Keywords

Rural tourism, sustainable development, Malta, socio-economic impact, tourism challenges, policy reforms

## Declaration of Authenticity



**Student Name and Surname:** Andre Refalo

**Student ITS Number** : 2000535/1

**Programme** : Bachelor Degree In International Hospitality Management

**Research Title** : Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of the Maltese Islands

### Declaration:

I hereby declare that this research study is based on the outcome of my own research. I, as the author, declare that this research study is my own composition which has not been previously produced for any other qualification.

The research study was conducted under the supervision of Ms Fleur Griscti

8<sup>th</sup> September 2024

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Date

*ANDRE REFALO*

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Student's Signature

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# Table of Contents

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>1. Introduction</b>  | <b>1</b> |
| 1.1. Background   | 2        |
| 1.2. Objectives of the Study  | 3        |
| 1.3. Research Questions   | 3        |
| 1.4. Conclusion   | 4        |
| <b>2. Literature Review</b>   | <b>5</b> |
| 2.1. Introduction to the Literature Review  | 5        |
| 2.2. Rural tourism and its significance in the context of economic development, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism practices | 6        |
| 2.3. Cultural Preservation and Sustainability   | 6        |
| 2.4. Global Trends in Tourism Preferences   | 7        |
| 2.5. Economic Impact of Rural Tourism   | 8        |
| 2.6. Contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)   | 8        |
| 2.7. Local Business Development   | 9        |
| 2.8. Stimulating Local Economies Through Infrastructure Development   | 10       |
| 2.9. Case Studies Demonstrating Economic Growth through Rural Tourism   | 10       |
| 2.10. Local Examples  | 11       |
| 2.11. International Examples  | 12       |
| 2.12. Social and Cultural Implications of Rural Tourism   | 13       |
| 2.12.1. Community Cohesion, Cultural Preservation and Heritage Conservation   | 13       |
| 2.12.2. Cultural Exchange and Mutual Enrichment   | 13       |
| 2.12.3. Sustainable Practices and Respect for Culture   | 14       |
| 2.12.4. Sustainable Ecotourism and Promotion  | 14       |
| 2.13. Existing National Policies and Strategies for Rural Tourism Development   | 16       |
| 2.13.1. EU's Policy for Rural Areas   | 16       |
| 2.13.2. Malta's Rural Tourism Framework   | 17       |
| 2.13.3. Malta Rural Development Strategy 2014-2020  | 17       |
| 2.13.4. National Agriculture Policy for the Maltese Islands 2018 - 2028   | 17       |
| 2.13.5. Rural Policy and Design Guidance 2014   | 18       |
| 2.14. Evaluation of Effectiveness and Proposed Improvements   | 18       |
| 2.15. Challenges and Opportunities of Rural Tourism   | 20       |
| 2.16. Role of Technology in Enhancing Rural Tourism   | 21       |
| 2.17. Conclusion  | 22       |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>3. Methodology</b>   | <b>23</b> |
| 3.1. Introduction   | 23        |
| 3.2. Philosophical Assumptions  | 23        |
| 3.3. Research Design  | 23        |
| 3.4. Data Collection Methods  | 24        |
| 3.5. Defining the Research Population   | 24        |
| 3.6. Sampling Methods and Sample Size   | 25        |
| 3.7. Data Collection Procedures   | 26        |
| 3.8. Method of Data Analysis  | 27        |
| 3.8.1. Analytical Approach for Studying the Economic Impact of Rural Tourism  | 27        |
| 3.8.2. Data Analysis Procedures and Techniques  | 27        |
| 3.9. Ethical Considerations   | 28        |
| 3.10. Reliability and Validity of the Study: Ensuring Methodological Rigor  | 29        |
| 3.10.1. Validity  | 29        |
| 3.10.2. Reliability   | 29        |
| 3.11. Control Variables   | 30        |
| 3.12. Research Plan and Timelines   | 30        |
| 3.13. Conclusion  | 31        |
| <b>4. Results, Analysis and Discussion</b>  | <b>32</b> |
| 4.1. Introduction   | 32        |
| 4.2. Demographic Profile of Respondents   | 32        |
| 4.2.1. Question 1: Age  | 32        |
| 4.2.2. Question 2: Gender   | 33        |
| 4.2.3. Question 3: Location   | 33        |
| 4.3. Presentation of Results  | 34        |
| 4.3.1. Question 4: How familiar are you with the concept of rural tourism?  | 34        |
| 4.3.2. Question 5: What is your opinion on the potential benefits of introducing rural tourism in Malta and Gozo?                   | 35        |
| 4.3.3. Question 6: In your view, should the development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo prioritise environmental sustainability? | 36        |
| 4.3.4. Question 7: What do you associate with Rural Tourism?  | 37        |
| 4.3.5. Question 8: Have you ever engaged in any rural tourism experience?   | 37        |
| 4.3.6. Question 9: Kindly provide the location of rural tourism experience.   | 38        |
| 4.3.7. Question 10: Please specify what type of experience  | 39        |
| 4.3.8. Question 11: When you plan your rural experience, how important are the following in helping you choose your destination?    | 40        |
| 4.3.9. Question 12: How important do you think rural tourism could be in contributing to the Maltese economy?                       | 41        |

|           |   |           |
|-----------|---|-----------|
| 4.3.10.   | Question 13: What potential economic benefits do you foresee from the development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo? .....                 | 42        |
| 4.3.11.   | Question 14: If local employment opportunities are prioritised by rural tourism initiatives, how likely would you be to support them? ..... | 43        |
| 4.3.12.   | Question 15: Do you believe that sustainable development is crucial for the long-term success of rural tourism initiatives? .....           | 44        |
| 4.3.13.   | Question 16: Do you know what eco-friendly practices are? .....   | 44        |
| 4.3.14.   | Question 17: How important is it for rural tourism businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices? ...  | 45        |
| 4.3.15.   | Question 18: Are you aware of EU funding opportunities available for rural development projects in Malta and Gozo?.....                     | 45        |
| 4.3.16.   | Question 19: Do you think it is important to integrate cultural heritage preservation into rural tourism development plans?.....            | 46        |
| 4.3.17.   | Question 20: How involved should local communities be in shaping and supporting rural tourism projects? .....                               | 47        |
| 4.3.18.   | Question 21: Would you participate in rural tourism experiences that promote local traditions and cultural heritage? .....                  | 48        |
| 4.4.      | Semi Structured Interviews Analysis .....   | 48        |
| 4.4.1.    | Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry .....   | 49        |
| 4.4.2.    | Main Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector.....  | 49        |
| 4.4.3.    | Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape .....   | 51        |
| 4.4.4.    | Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta .....   | 52        |
| 4.4.5.    | Strategies for Promoting Sustainable and Rural Tourism .....  | 53        |
| 4.4.6.    | Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas .....  | 54        |
| 4.4.7.    | Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism .....  | 55        |
| 4.4.8.    | Adequacy of Current Development Policies .....  | 56        |
| 4.4.9.    | Opportunities for Future Investment and Development in Rural Tourism .....  | 57        |
| 4.4.10.   | Conclusion of Semi-Structured Interviews Analysis .....   | 58        |
| 4.4.11.   | Cross Analysis .....  | 58        |
| 4.5.      | Discussion .....  | 61        |
| 4.5.1.    | Interpretation of Results.....  | 62        |
| 4.5.2.    | Results Organised by Research Questions.....  | 62        |
| 4.5.3.    | Implications for Practice.....  | 64        |
| 4.6.      | Conclusion of the Chapter .....   | 65        |
| <b>5.</b> | <b>Final Arguments .....</b>  | <b>66</b> |
| 5.1.      | Key Findings .....  | 66        |
| 5.2.      | Limitations.....  | 67        |
| 5.3.      | Framework for Future Research.....  | 68        |
| 5.4.      | Recommendations for Implementation.....   | 68        |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 5.5. Evaluation, Reliability, and Validity .....                         | 71        |
| 5.6. Chapter Conclusion .....  | 72        |
| <b>References .....</b>  | <b>74</b> |
| <b>Appendices .....</b>  | <b>80</b> |
| Appendix 1 – Information Note and Consent for Online Questionnaire ..... | 80        |
| Appendix 2 – Information Sheet and Consent for Interviews .....          | 81        |
| Appendix 3 – Transcripts of the interviews conducted .....               | 86        |

## List of Figures

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>Figure 1: Opinion on the Potential Benefits of Introducing Rural Tourism.....</i>                  | 35 |
| <i>Figure 2: Views on Prioritising Environmental Sustainability in Rural Tourism Development.....</i> | 36 |
| <i>Figure 3: Location of Rural Tourism Experience .....</i>   | 38 |
| <i>Figure 4: Importance of Factors in Choosing Rural Tourism Destinations .....</i>                   | 40 |
| <i>Figure 5: Importance of Rural Tourism in Conserving Rural Areas.....</i>                           | 41 |
| <i>Figure 6: Local Employment Opportunities Prioritised by Rural Tourism.....</i>                     | 43 |
| <i>Figure 7: Belief in Sustainable Development for Rural Tourism.....</i>                             | 44 |
| <i>Figure 8: Involvement of Local Communities in Shaping Rural Tourism.....</i>                       | 47 |
| <i>Figure 9: Participation in Rural Tourism Experiences.....</i>                                      | 48 |

## List of Tables

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>Table 1: Age</i> .....   | 32 |
| <i>Table 2: Gender</i> .....  | 33 |
| <i>Table 3: Location</i> .....  | 33 |
| <i>Table 4: Familiarity with Rural Tourism</i> .....  | 34 |
| <i>Table 5: Associations with Rural Tourism</i> .....                                       | 37 |
| <i>Table 6: Engagement in Rural Tourism Experience</i> .....                                | 37 |
| <i>Table 7: Types of Rural Tourism Experiences</i> .....                                    | 39 |
| <i>Table 8: Potential Economic Benefits of Rural Tourism</i> .....                          | 42 |
| <i>Table 9: Knowledge of Eco-Friendly Practices</i> .....                                   | 44 |
| <i>Table 10: Importance of Eco-Friendly Practices for Rural Tourism Businesses</i> .....    | 45 |
| <i>Table 11: Awareness of EU Funding Opportunities for Rural Tourism</i> .....              | 45 |
| <i>Table 12: Importance of Integrating Cultural Heritage into Rural Tourism</i> .....       | 46 |
| <i>Table 13: Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry</i> .....                | 49 |
| <i>Table 14: Main Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector</i> .....                            | 49 |
| <i>Table 15: Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape</i> .....                  | 51 |
| <i>Table 16: Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta</i> .....                                  | 52 |
| <i>Table 17: Strategies for Promoting Sustainable and Rural Tourism</i> .....               | 53 |
| <i>Table 18: Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas</i> .....                                     | 54 |
| <i>Table 19: Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism</i> .....                                     | 55 |
| <i>Table 20: Adequacy of Current Development Policies</i> .....                             | 56 |
| <i>Table 21: Opportunities for Future Investment and Development in Rural Tourism</i> ..... | 57 |
| <i>Table 22: Cross Analysis</i> .....   | 59 |
| <i>Table 22: Officer Gozo Tourism Association</i> .....                                     | 86 |
| <i>Table 23: Investor in the Hospitality Industry</i> .....                                 | 90 |
| <i>Table 24: Building Contractor in Malta</i> .....   | 93 |
| <i>Table 25: Officer of the Planning Authority</i> .....                                    | 95 |

# **Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of the Maltese Islands**

## **1. Introduction**

Rural tourism has indeed become a trend that many countries advocate, it being a sustainable way of bringing over tourists whilst looking after the heritage of the country itself. Definitely, sustainability is a priority. Likewise, rural tourism enables the tourists to form part of the community itself. In fact, the tourists mingle with the locals and engage in activities together. Moreover, seasonality is put aside, knowing that one can visit places all year round. Furthermore, this holidaying approach offers the opportunity for one to immerse oneself in eco-friendly practices whilst also being at one with nature and engaging in hands-on rural experiences.

Having said this, rural tourism is seen as a transformative force that is capable of fostering both economic growth and significant social changes within communities. Its potential extends beyond traditional economic metrics, offering inclusivity across various sectors, contributing to the GDP, whilst also creating employment opportunities (UNWTO, 2023). According to Sharpley and Roberts (2004), rural tourism development plays a vital role in revitalising rural economies, providing sustainable solutions to rural depopulation and unemployment. Moreover, rural tourism presents a unique opportunity to reshape the tourism landscape by minimising seasonal fluctuations (Lane, 1994).

Through rural tourism, visitors engage in hiking, wildlife observation, and experience the serene rhythms of rural life, amongst others. Focusing on the Maltese islands, with their unique and diverse rural terrain, one finds that these offer a distinctive blend of agricultural landscapes, low population densities, rugged topography, meticulously irrigated farmland and terraced fields fortified by traditional rubble walls. These features not only preserve the fertility of the land but also offer a unique experience to anyone who has the opportunity to explore, live and engage in such an ambience (Grech, 2014).

Embedded within these landscapes, there are historic farmhouses, which are largely untouched by modern development and which exemplify the vernacular architecture of the Maltese Islands. The south-facing arched terraces of these buildings stand as enduring symbols of the region's

cultural heritage, allowing tourists to live in such places and experience life of the past. Additionally, those who are fond of architecture will find themselves in a haven of wonder, knowing that few countries offer such uniqueness (Briguglio, 2009).

Keeping this in mind, this study aims not only to explore the role of rural tourism as a catalyst for economic and social transformation but also to advocate the enhancement of societal well-being. Besides advocating economic development, this thesis seeks to elevate the rural tourism sector by promoting the preservation of rural communities, the protection of integrated landscapes and the celebration of the islands' biological and cultural diversity. Central to this vision is the address of the extent to which preservation of local values, traditional practices and gastronomic heritage are momentarily being put aboard and how they can flourish even further.

## **1.1. Background**

With their rich history, diverse landscapes and distinctive cultural heritage, the Maltese Islands are ideally positioned to leverage the trend of promoting and sustaining rural tourism. (Hall, 2015; Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023). The fact that the Maltese islands have, through generations, been conquered by different nations, it makes these islands unique in their architecture, produce and lifestyle.

Indeed, the Phoenicians, Arabs, Romans, French, Italians and the British are amongst the peoples that used the Maltese islands as their home. Once on land, they brought with them their trades, traditions, culture and skills. As a result, Malta can today be seen as a whole mixture of such backgrounds, allowing one to experience an unforgettable venture of different approaches. The farming methods, agricultural approaches, architecture, language, traditions and practices, serve as a testament to what Malta and Gozo have gathered throughout the years (Briguglio, 2009).

All this sheds light on how much Malta has to offer and gain, especially when enabling rural tourism to flourish even further. Just as the locals would share their skills with any foreigner that would inhabit the islands and vice versa, rural tourism shall allow the locals to engage with tourists and offer these people an opportunity to live the Maltese traditional lifestyle (Grech, 2014).

## **1.2. Objectives of the Study**

The primary objectives of this thesis are to:

1. Analyse the current state of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands.
2. Assess the socio-economic and cultural impacts of rural tourism on local communities.
3. Identify the key challenges hindering the development of rural tourism in Malta.
4. Provide strategic recommendations for the sustainable development of rural tourism in Malta.

These objectives align with broader goals of sustainable development and community empowerment, which are central themes in rural tourism discourse. By meeting these objectives, this thesis shall offer practical insights for policymakers, tourism operators and local communities, aiding the development of a tourism industry that is both economically viable and environmentally sustainable (López-Sanz et al., 2021).

## **1.3. Research Questions**

This research is guided by the following key questions:

1. What is the current state of rural tourism in Malta, and how does it compare with other forms of tourism on the islands?
2. How does rural tourism contribute to the socio-economic and cultural development of rural communities in Malta?
3. What are the main challenges and barriers to the development of rural tourism in Malta?
4. What strategies can be implemented to enhance the sustainability and growth of rural tourism in Malta, while preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the islands?

These questions are designed to explore the core issues of rural tourism in Malta and to guide the research toward actionable insights and recommendations. The questions build on existing literature that emphasises the role of rural tourism in regional development and cultural sustainability (Hall & Jenkins, 2004; Schott, 2010).

#### **1.4. Conclusion**

The introduction has outlined the aims and objectives of this study, bringing out also an important background to the topic. Chapter 2 focuses on providing a comprehensive literature review detailing important factors related to rural tourism, both on a national and an international scale. Moreover, Chapter 3 delves into the methodology employed in gathering data aimed at addressing the research questions. Eventually, Chapter 4 analyses the results obtained, focusing on the *status quo* of rural tourism on Malta and Gozo, whilst also considering ways and means on how rural tourism on these islands can be further explored and enhanced. Finally, Chapter 5 brings together important conclusions drawn from the research conducted, and points out relevant recommendations that will aid in fostering and ameliorating this niche market.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Introduction to the Literature Review**

Throughout the years tourism has evolved considerably. As time goes by technology has allowed for one to travel easier, cheaper and more often. For this reason, the approach to one going abroad has changed as well. Indeed, one has arrived to the realisation that it is important to consider the environmental impact of one's decision to travel abroad (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015).

Rural tourism has become an important approach to travelling, considering that one would travel keeping in mind a sustainable approach to the holiday one would be taking. At the same time, knowing that many would be leading a hectic lifestyle in cities, travelling with the intention of visiting and integrating with rural life has become a demand. Definitely, immersing oneself in nature brings with it various advantages, and this is what is enabling tourists to take such decisions. Consequently, rural tourism in the past years, has become a prominent way of holidaying (ibid., 2015).

Considering this, the literature review, aims to delve deeply into the essence of rural tourism, allowing for an experience into its multifaceted significance across three critical dimensions: economic development, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism practices. Undeniably, economic implications of rural tourism extend far beyond simple financial transactions, revealing its transformative potential for regions that are often overlooked in mainstream tourism paradigms (Hall, 2008). Through the appreciation of natural landscapes and cultural heritage, rural tourism becomes a vital catalyst for economic diversification, the creation of new jobs, whilst enabling the empowerment of the community (Richards & Wilson, 2007). Therefore, more than just a channel for tourist engagement, rural tourism serves as an essential instrument for safeguarding local traditions, indigenous knowledge and the vitality of rural life.

Definitely, as tourists immerse themselves in authentic rural experiences, they contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage while local communities benefit economically and socially. Through this dynamic, rural tourism strengthens community resilience, supports long-term sustainability and even regional development (Hall, 2015).

As the Maltese Islands navigate their place in the global tourism landscape, understanding the nuances and implications of rural tourism becomes paramount (Zarlenga and Rodríguez Morató, 2019). This literature review aims to not only bring out existing research but also to pave the way for a comprehensive understanding of how rural tourism can be used to enable sustainable economic growth, cultural vitality and environmental stewardship within this unique context.

## **2.2. Rural tourism and its significance in the context of economic development, cultural preservation and sustainable tourism practices.**

Rural tourism is considered a broad and intricate segment within the tourism industry. It emphasises experiences and attractions in non-urban, countryside settings. Moreover, it embodies a diverse array of activities and accommodations. These offer visitors an authentic immersion into rural life, culture and natural landscapes (Richards, 2016). Unlike conventional mass tourism, rural tourism focuses on the exploration of tranquil and less populated areas. This fosters a deeper connection between tourists and the environment they inhabit (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

## **2.3. Cultural Preservation and Sustainability**

As Richards and Wilson outline, rural tourism is instrumental for preserving cultural heritage and local traditions (2007). It conserves authentic customs, crafts and indigenous knowledge. This result in the safeguarding of the identity and integrity of rural communities (Hall, 2008). Moreover, the interaction between tourists and locals facilitates cultural exchange, fosters mutual understanding and appreciation. Furthermore, it empowers communities to showcase their traditions, arts and culinary delights (Hall & Boyd, 2005).

Sharpley and Telfer continue to state that rural tourism places importance and relevance on sustainable practices (2015). By embracing responsible tourism principles, including environmental conservation, minimal ecological footprint and respect for local customs and resources, Hall declares that rural tourism would maintain a delicate balance between visitor influx and environmental preservation (2015). This said, initiatives promoting eco-friendly accommodations, renewable energy sources and community-based tourism models serve as a framework to ensure the long-term viability of rural tourism destinations (Richards, 2016).

## 2.4. Global Trends in Tourism Preferences

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in holidaying preferences, with there being a growing interest towards rural and nature-based tourism experiences (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). This change reflects a broader global trend, where tourists seek meaningful connections with untouched landscapes, local cultures and immersive encounters that go beyond the traditional, urban-centric experiences (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). This shift is particularly relevant for Malta, where rural tourism offers an opportunity to provide travellers with an authentic experience, this being different from the island's popular coastal areas. Visitors to Gozo, for instance, are drawn to its tranquil landscapes and traditional villages, an approach which offers a sharp contrast to the urban buzz of Valletta and St. Julian's.

Therefore, the demand for rural getaways is brought about by the desire to escape the hustle and bustle of urban life. Indeed, travellers are looking for moments of relaxation, in silence and with a scope of being at one with nature. (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). Indeed, Malta's sister island, Gozo, serves as an excellent example, where tourists can retreat from the crowded main island and immerse themselves in an environment which offers a slow-paced life and a pristine natural environment (Briguglio, 2009).

It is noted that modern travellers increasingly prioritise experiences that offer genuine connections with local cultures, traditions and lifestyles (Richards & Wilson, 2007). Malta's rural areas, with their longstanding agricultural heritage and traditional crafts, provide the perfect setting for visitors seeking to engage with local ways of life. Farm stays and agritourism experiences in Gozo allow tourists to participate in activities such as olive oil production, winemaking and other farming traditions. Consequently, this offers a direct engagement with Maltese rural culture (Briguglio, 2009).

Moreover, the rise in environmental consciousness has led to the appeal of rural tourism. As travellers consider more their ecological footprint, they seek to enjoy destinations that prioritise environmental conservation (Hall, 2015). To this end, Malta's eco-friendly initiatives, such as the Eco-Gozo project, aim to promote sustainability and reduce the environmental impact. These initiatives relate well with tourism that supports destinations that go in line with environmental conservation (Grech, 2014).

On a different note, technology has also played a significant role in increasing the accessibility of rural and nature-based tourism. As stated by Mossberg, digital platforms and social media have alleviated the discovery of hidden rural gems, contributing to the growing popularity of off-the-beaten-path destinations (2020). In Malta, online platforms have been instrumental in promoting rural locations such as the 'Buskett Gardens' and the 'Dingli Cliffs'. These showcase areas which are ideal for hiking and outdoor exploration. Such technological advancements have motivated travellers to explore Malta's countryside with ease, discovering places they may not have known about through traditional tourism channels (Times of Malta, 2023).

This growing interest in rural and nature-based experiences shows a broader transformation in how travellers engage with destinations (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). On Malta, this change presents an opportunity to promote the islands' rural tourism assets. This includes Gozo's untouched landscapes, traditional farming practices and quiet rural hamlets (Briguglio, 2009). By embracing these global trends, Malta can position itself as a destination that offers more than just sun and sea, providing visitors with authentic, sustainable and meaningful travel experiences.

## **2.5. Economic Impact of Rural Tourism**

Rural tourism emerges as a pivotal driver of economic development, especially in regions reliant on agriculture or struggling with depopulation (Sharpley, 2002). By creating a balance between the inherent attraction and uniqueness of rural landscapes, communities can diversify their economies, stimulate local businesses and eventually generate alternative sources of income (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). Therefore, the influx of tourists relates directly to increased revenue streams, employment opportunities and the fostering of entrepreneurial ventures within these often marginalised or underdeveloped areas (Gagić, 2013).

## **2.6. Contribution to Gross Domestic Product (GDP)**

Numerous studies and empirical evidence point out that rural tourism offers a substantial contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002). By balancing the inherent appeal of pristine landscapes with cultural authenticity, rural tourism serves as a strong economic motivator, it fuelling revenue into local economies (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). These contributions extend beyond direct expenditures by tourists, knowing that tourism brings with it a chain effect. In fact, such tourism would generate secondary and tertiary economic

activities which amplify its impact on the GDP (Richards, 2016). Tourism is a significant contributor to Malta's economy. In recent years, it has accounted for approximately 27% of the country's GDP when considering both direct and indirect effects (Visitmalta, 2022).

## **2.7. Local Business Development**

One of the hallmark benefits of rural tourism lies in its capacity to create employment opportunities, particularly in regions where alternative livelihoods are limited (Hall, 2008). The tourism sector, including accommodations, food services, transportation and various ancillary services, becomes a significant source of jobs for local residents (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). Furthermore, the engagement of communities in offering authentic experiences and locally curated activities fosters a sense of ownership and pride, amplifying their role as active contributors to the tourism value chain (Richards & Wilson, 2007).

Beyond creating jobs, rural tourism nurtures and sustains local businesses, fostering entrepreneurship, and stimulating the growth of micro and small enterprises (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). The demand for locally sourced products, artisanal crafts, traditional cuisines, and unique experiences fuels the development of a vibrant ecosystem of businesses (Hall, 2015). These enterprises not only cater for tourists but also serve the local population, creating a symbiotic relationship between tourism and the broader community (Sharpley, 2002).

Research and case studies across various geographies affirm the economic vitality of rural tourism (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). Agritourism initiatives have invigorated agricultural economies and ecotourism ventures have revived declining rural areas (Hall & Boyd, 2005). The infusion of tourism revenue into rural communities drives infrastructural improvements, enhances local amenities, and diversifies economic activities, building resilience against economic downturns (Hall, 2015). The benefits derived from rural tourism extend beyond superficial economic gains, contributing to sustainable development, community empowerment, and inclusive growth strategies (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015).

Recognising and taking on board these economic advantages become pivotal for policymakers, stakeholders and communities. This is because they seek to balance rural tourism's potential within the economic landscape of the Maltese Islands.

## **2.8. Stimulating Local Economies Through Infrastructure Development**

Beyond direct revenue generation, the economic impact of rural tourism often leads to infrastructure development (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015). Upgrades to transportation networks, enhancement of amenities and investments in cultural preservation increase the attractiveness of rural destinations (Hall, 2015). Case studies from regions like Slovenia demonstrate how such investments not only enhance tourist experiences but also generate job creation and local business development. Resultantly this provides long-term economic benefits (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

These examples illustrate how rural tourism, when strategically developed and nurtured, becomes a great source for economic diversification, community empowerment and sustainable growth (Richards, 2016). The adaptability of rural destinations in balancing their unique offerings unfold the immense potential for the Maltese Islands to appreciate rural tourism and see it as a driver of economic vitality and a source of inclusive development (Tiziana, 2014).

## **2.9. Case Studies Demonstrating Economic Growth through Rural Tourism**

Rural tourism has been experienced through different adaptations. Indeed, agritourism is one approach which aims to bring agricultural economies to life. This is done by integrating tourism with traditional farming practices. One case in point is Tuscany, in Italy, where agritourism ventures on vineyards and olive groves attract tourists while supporting local economies (Hall, 2007). Visitors are offered farm stays, wine tastings and culinary experiences, allowing revenue to flow directly into agricultural communities. Indeed, these initiatives not only sustain farming traditions but also provide a means for income diversification, contributing to economic stability (Richards, 2016).

Ecotourism also illustrates the economic potential of rural tourism by combining conservation with revenue generation. In Costa Rica, ecotourism centred around protected areas and wildlife reserves draws tourists interested in sustainable and nature-based experiences (Hall, 2008). This model fosters biodiversity conservation while simultaneously generating income to fund these efforts (Grech, 2014). Local communities benefit from job creation in eco-lodges, guided tours, and handicraft production, creating a sustainable economic cycle tied to environmental preservation (Richards & Wilson, 2007).

Similarly, community-based tourism in rural areas has empowered local populations by directly involving them in the tourism value chain (Briguglio, 2009). In Thailand, rural villages offer homestays, guided tours and cultural exchanges that provide authentic experiences for tourists, while ensuring that economic benefits are distributed directly to the local communities (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). These initiatives have proven effective in fostering inclusive economic growth, particularly for marginalised populations (Sharpley, 2002).

Moreover, rural tourism often stimulates the development of micro-entrepreneurship, driving local business ventures (Grech, 2014). Considering the Scottish Highlands, small-scale businesses like craft breweries, artisanal cheese producers and boutique accommodations have flourished by offering catering services to tourists who would be looking for memorable and authentic experiences (Butler, 2019). Indeed, these ventures not only increase the local economic status but also bring about a different approach to rural destinations. This attracts niche tourists who are fond of locally sourced products and personalised experiences (Hall & Boyd, 2005).

By linking rural tourism to agriculture, conservation and community engagement, these models illustrate the great economic benefits that rural tourism has to offer. Through agritourism, ecotourism, community-based tourism and micro-entrepreneurship, rural areas can definitely achieve sustainable growth and as a result contribute to the preservation of local traditions and environments.

Having said this, there are various examples which illustrate how well-planned rural tourism initiatives can drive economic growth, employment and local business development. These do in fact offer a framework for regions like Malta, which are still to advance in this area.

## **2.10. Local Examples**

- i. **Gozo Rural Eco-Trail Initiative:** Promotes sustainable travel through eco-friendly trails that highlight Gozo's rural landscapes. It connects tourists with local farmers and artisans, where eventually this would create direct economic benefits.

- ii. **Buskett Gardens Restoration Project:** Focuses on restoring Malta's woodlands, enhancing Buskett as an eco-tourism destination through reforestation, guided nature walks, and educational programs.
- iii. **Eco Gozo Initiative:** Aims to transform Gozo into an eco-island, integrating eco-tourism with sustainable practices like organic farming and promoting eco-friendly activities for tourists.
- iv. **Heritage Trails in Mdina and Rabat:** Pedestrian-friendly trails offering cultural insights into Malta's historic cities while promoting low-impact tourism, helping preserve heritage sites.
- v. **Il-Majjistral Nature and History Park:** Combines nature conservation and heritage preservation with guided eco-tours. Sustainable practices, such as limiting visitor numbers, are implemented to reduce environmental pressure.

## 2.11. International Examples

- i. **Alentejo Region, Portugal:** Rural tourism in Alentejo, focusing on agrotourism and cultural heritage, has boosted local economies through wine tours, farm stays, and heritage trails (Delgado et al., 2020)
- ii. **Appalachia, United States:** Ecotourism and cultural heritage initiatives, like the Appalachian Trail, have revitalised the region by creating jobs and fostering local entrepreneurship (Llantuy & Chen, 2023).
- iii. **Otago Region, New Zealand:** Adventure and nature-based tourism, such as cycling and wine tours, have diversified Otago's economy, boosting local businesses and enhancing economic prosperity (Keen, 2013).
- iv. **The Cotswolds, United Kingdom:** Heritage tourism in the Cotswolds has stimulated the local economy by promoting historical sites and local crafts, attracting international and domestic tourists (Cotswold District Local Plan, 2012).

- v. **Kerala, India:** Responsible rural tourism in Kerala, including eco-friendly houseboat tours and cultural experiences, has created jobs and preserved traditional practices, balancing economic growth with heritage conservation (George et al., 2020).

## **2.12. Social and Cultural Implications of Rural Tourism**

### **2.12.1. Community Cohesion, Cultural Preservation and Heritage Conservation**

Rural tourism significantly contributes to strengthening community cohesion and preserving cultural heritage in rural areas (Smith, 2018). By actively involving local populations in tourism activities, residents become ambassadors of their culture, fostering a sense of pride and unity within their communities (Grech, 2014). Initiatives such as community-led tours, cultural performances and homestays create opportunities for direct interactions between visitors and locals. Such an approach develops understanding, mutual respect and in many cases, relationships which last forever (Robinson et al., 2020).

In addition to fostering social cohesion, rural tourism plays an important role in cultural preservation and the conservation of one's heritage (Zadel & Bogdan, 2013). Rural areas often promote ancient customs, artisanal crafts, folklore and indigenous knowledge that have been passed down through generations (Roberts & Hall, 2001). Tourism initiatives that showcase traditional arts, culinary practices and historical sites create interest among tourists while also guarantee the preservation of these cultural treasures. Such initiatives do indeed allow local communities to share their heritage with the world, with the result of contributing to both its preservation and also its continued relevance (Adams & Green, 2018).

### **2.12.2. Cultural Exchange and Mutual Enrichment**

The interaction between tourists and local communities within rural settings enables cultural exchange to take place (Williams et al., 2017). Visitors gain knowledge on local traditions, lifestyles and beliefs. Moreover, locals learn about diverse perspectives and customs (Sutresna et al., 2019). This exchange enables mutual enrichment and tolerance for a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity (Lee & White, 2019).

### **2.12.3. Sustainable Practices and Respect for Culture**

Responsible rural tourism practices prioritise the preservation of cultural integrity and respect for local customs (Adams & Green, 2018). Indeed, initiatives that engage tourists in responsible and ethical travel behaviours show a commitment to preserving culture while fostering a close relationship between tourists and communities (Robinson et al., 2020).

Rural tourism, when thoughtfully developed and embraced, becomes a source for social harmony, cultural vibrancy and the empowerment of rural communities (Smith, 2018). By valuing and celebrating local heritage, traditions and customs, rural destinations create unique experiences that not only attract tourists but also preserve and enrich the social and cultural fabric of these localities (Gagić, 2013).

### **2.12.4. Sustainable Ecotourism and Promotion**

Sustainable rural tourism is intrinsically linked with the preservation of natural environments and with fragile ecosystems (Swarbrooke, 2018). Indeed, rural destinations often bring to the core pristine landscapes, biodiversity hotspots and also unique habitats (Grech, 2014). This makes them excellent locations for conservation to take place (Sharpley, 2019). Consequently, by promoting responsible tourism management, it is possible to minimise the ecological footprint of tourist activities, whilst also ensuring the protection of natural resources and sensitive ecosystems (Grech, 2014 & Hall, 2015).

A key component of sustainable rural tourism is biodiversity protection (Grech, 2014). Rural areas frequently host diverse flora and fauna, making it critical to safeguard endemic species, protect wildlife habitats and also prevent habitat fragmentation. This is caused by unrestricted tourism (Gössling et al., 2016). Conservation initiatives aim to limit disturbances to wildlife and also educate visitors on the importance of biodiversity preservation (Briguglio, 2009). This ensures that tourism contributes positively to the protection of natural habitats (Sharpley, 2009).

Responsible tourism management puts together a holistic approach which integrates environmental, social and economic considerations (Dredge, 2006). This includes efforts to reduce carbon footprints, minimise waste and adopt renewable energy sources (Dwyer et al., 2018). Engaging local communities in decision-making processes is also essential. This is

because it fosters stewardship of natural resources and also ensures that economic benefits are distributed in an equitable manner (Andereck et al., 2019).

Rural tourism plays a very important role in advertising ecotourism and sustainable practices, often by empowering local communities and fostering conservation efforts (Grech, 2014). One important approach is through community-managed ecotourism projects, where local residents actively participate in managing eco-lodges, nature trails and wildlife conservation programmes (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2012). Globally, such initiatives allow communities to take ownership of tourism activities, whilst also safeguarding the environment (Schott, 2010). These models promote the preservation of local traditions and environmental integrity, whilst also offering visitors unique experiences (Sharpley, 2009).

In Malta, though still in the process of development, community-managed ecotourism projects are gaining traction (Times of Malta, 2023). Local communities are increasingly involved in promoting eco-friendly accommodations and nature-based activities. Examples would include hiking and cultural tours (Briguglio, 2009). Although smaller in scale compared to other regions, these initiatives represent significant steps towards fostering community-managed tourism into Malta's rural tourism framework (Grech, 2014).

Collaborative partnerships between tourism operators, conservation organisations, and local communities further support conservation-based tourism (ibid, 2014). Globally, these partnerships work to preserve natural habitats and endangered species by establishing protected areas, wildlife sanctuaries and responsible tourism practices (Honey, 2008). In Malta, similar conservation efforts, such as those seen at 'Il-Majjistral Nature and History Park', combine tourism with environmental preservation. By working with local authorities, NGOs, and the tourism sector, the park protects coastal ecosystems and wildlife habitats, offering guided eco-tours and educational activities that highlight Malta's commitment to conservation-based tourism.

Another critical element of sustainable rural tourism is the promotion of sustainable agriculture and agrotourism. Farms adopting organic practices, agroforestry and farm-to-table experiences serve as educational platforms for visitors. These offer insights into sustainable food production (Richards & Hall, 2018). In Malta, despite its limited land size, agritourism is growing, with initiatives like 'Ta' Mena Estate' in Gozo leading the way. 'Ta' Mena' integrates organic farming with tourism, offering farm tours, wine tastings and traditional Maltese cuisine (Ta' Mena, 2024).

While large-scale agricultural initiatives face challenges due to land constraints, smaller agrotourism projects continue to promote sustainability and also educate visitors about the local agricultural heritage.

Educational and interpretation centres also enable environmental awareness in rural tourism. These centres offer tourists valuable insights into local ecosystems, wildlife and conservation (Newsome et al., 2013). Through workshops, guided tours and interactive exhibits, visitors gain a deeper appreciation of the natural environment and are also encouraged to adopt responsible behaviours (Ballantyne et al., 2011). Definitely, by promoting ecological education alongside rural tourism activities, destinations can enhance the connection between conservation and tourism.

Overall, these initiatives show how rural tourism can align with environmental conservation and sustainable development (Sharpley, 2009). By embracing responsible tourism management, promoting conservation-based partnerships and educating visitors about sustainability, rural destinations can surely offer enriching experiences whilst also preserving their ecological and cultural heritage (Grech, 2014).

## **2.13. Existing National Policies and Strategies for Rural Tourism Development**

### **2.13.1. EU's Policy for Rural Areas**

The 2040 vision for rural areas emphasises their role in shaping European identity and their potential to offer distinctive natural and cultural experiences. However, they face challenges like limited transport and digital connectivity, seasonal tourism fluctuations, and vulnerability to disruptions. Remote regions, such as the EU's outermost areas, are highly reliant on tourism, comprising up to 35% of their GDP, and were severely impacted by the pandemic. Enhancing resilience requires smart, sustainable tourism strategies, market diversification, and integrating local wellbeing with tourism services.

In December 2022, the European Council adopted conclusions on the European Agenda for Tourism 2030, highlighting the need for sustainable tourism in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. The Council calls for collaboration among the Commission, Member States, and stakeholders to promote sustainable travel habits, exchange best practices, and enhance the tourism ecosystem's resilience. This includes supporting the green transition through sustainable

transport, circular operations, and resource efficiency, as well as leveraging EU funding to achieve these objectives (Council of The European Union, 2022).

### **2.13.2. Malta's Rural Tourism Framework**

In Malta, the Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection has initiated efforts to promote rural tourism (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023). The Rural Tourism Strategy aims to diversify tourism offerings beyond traditional coastal attractions, highlighting the island's rural landscapes, cultural heritage, and authentic experiences (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023). Initiatives include the development of agrotourism, heritage trails, and support for rural accommodations, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals to foster economic growth while preserving cultural and natural heritage (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023).

### **2.13.3. Malta Rural Development Strategy 2014-2020**

The RDP strategy highlights rural tourism business ventures as key to helping farmers diversify and fostering small-scale rural entrepreneurship. Additionally, landscape restoration projects under Malta's "landscape and environment" priority could inspire new business initiatives in landscape management. These ventures, supported by Rural Development Measures under the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development, would qualify for start-up assistance, creating a mutually beneficial outcome for environmental goals and rural economic development. This approach combines ecological preservation with opportunities for rural communities to thrive economically (European Commission, 2022).

### **2.13.4. National Agriculture Policy for the Maltese Islands 2018 - 2028**

Malta's NAP calls for a clear policy framework for rural tourism in Malta, blending agritourism investments with broader rural tourism experiences. Due to the islands' small size, accommodations in nearby villages could reduce the need for dedicated agritourism facilities. Priority should be given to restoring culturally valuable buildings in traditional rural areas for tourism use. However, the intensive nature of livestock farming limits tourism potential on most farms. Farmers would need to collaborate to balance tourism services with farm work, ensuring

sustainable returns and aligning with funding policies (Parliamentary Secretary for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights, 2018)

### **2.13.5. Rural Policy and Design Guidance 2014**

Malta's Rural Policy and Design Guidance of 2014 provides a framework for sustainable development in rural areas, aiming to balance agricultural needs with environmental protection and cultural preservation. It supports small-scale rural development projects, restoration of traditional buildings, and limited construction for tourism and agriculture. The policy also emphasizes safeguarding natural landscapes and heritage while promoting rural entrepreneurship and diversification, particularly in agritourism and conservation-focused activities. It seeks to integrate rural areas into broader economic and community development efforts in a sustainable manner (Rural Policy and Design Guidance, 2014).

The Malta Rural Policy and Design Guidance 2014 includes several tourism-related policies aimed at promoting sustainable rural tourism. Key policies focus on:

1. Encouraging agritourism and eco-tourism by supporting small-scale tourism businesses in rural areas.
2. Prioritising the restoration of traditional buildings and farmhouses for tourism accommodations.
3. Allowing tourism development that maintains the rural character and respects environmental and cultural heritage.
4. Balancing tourism activities with agricultural practices, ensuring that tourism supports rather than disrupts rural livelihoods.

### **2.14. Evaluation of Effectiveness and Proposed Improvements**

While Malta's efforts in rural tourism are promising, there are opportunities for betterment (World Tourism Organisation, 2023). The existing framework could benefit from more initiatives that integrate local communities into decision-making processes and emphasise sustainable practices (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023). Indeed, greater collaboration between stakeholders, including government bodies, local communities and tourism operators, could

strengthen the implementation and impact of rural tourism policies (World Tourism Organisation, 2023).

- i. **Community Engagement Programmes:** These enable active involvement of local communities in rural tourism planning and in implementation (World Tourism Organisation, 2023). Moreover, these establish platforms for community input and participation in decision-making processes (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023).
- ii. **Sustainable Development Focus:** The aim is to strengthen policies promoting sustainability by giving the incentive to eco-friendly practices, supporting renewable energy initiatives and enforcing responsible tourism guidelines (Hall, 2015).
- iii. **Capacity Building and Training:** The focus is on investing in training programmes for local resident and providing skills development and entrepreneurship opportunities to improve their engagement in the tourism sector (World Tourism Organization, 2023).
- iv. **Preservation of Cultural Heritage:** It is important to develop policies that prioritise the preservation of cultural heritage, traditions and craftsmanship. This ensures authenticity and uniqueness in tourism offerings (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023).
- v. **Promotion and Marketing Strategies:** These enhance marketing campaigns which target rural tourism experiences, appealing to niche segments interested in nature, culture, and authenticity (Hall, 2015).

Learning from successful models in regions like Tuscany and Provence, Malta could adopt elements of their policies (World Tourism Organisation, 2023). Emphasis on sustainable practices, community involvement, preservation of heritage and targeted marketing strategies tailored to rural experiences could serve as valuable benchmarks for Malta's rural tourism development (Ministry for Tourism and Consumer Protection, 2023).

## 2.15. Challenges and Opportunities of Rural Tourism

Rural tourism has become a vital sector within the travel industry, providing distinctive experiences in tranquil, less-developed regions. However, rural tourism is not without its difficulties. These often arise from the limitations of rural areas, including inadequate infrastructure, environmental issues and potential impacts on local cultures and economies. To this end, it is important to find the right balance between the challenges and opportunities for creating effective strategies that improve the advantages of rural tourism whilst also addressing its possible shortcomings. This balanced approach is key to ensuring that rural tourism positively impacts local communities and the broader travel sector (Haldar, 2018).

**Infrastructure:** Rural areas often struggle with inadequate infrastructure. This includes transportation networks, accommodation options and basic amenities (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). Moreover, limited connectivity and lack of modern facilities can deter tourists and impede the growth of rural tourism (Sharpley, 2002). Opportunities exist for public-private partnerships and investment in infrastructure (Sharpley, 2002). Definitely, improving transportation networks, upgrading accommodations, and enhancing basic amenities in rural areas would attract more tourists and ensure a more enjoyable visitor experience (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

**Seasonality:** Rural destinations are susceptible to seasonality, experiencing peaks and troughs in tourist arrivals (Haldar, 2018). Reliance on specific seasons for revenue generation leads to economic uncertainty and challenges in sustaining local businesses and employment throughout the year (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). Indeed, creating innovative strategies to diversify tourism offerings and promoting off-season activities can mitigate the impact of seasonality (Sharpley, 2002). Events, cultural festivals, adventure sports, or themed tours tailored to different seasons can attract visitors year-round, fostering sustainable economic growth (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

**Socio-Cultural Impacts and Community Acceptance:** The influx of tourists can bring socio-cultural changes, affecting local traditions, lifestyles, and community dynamics (Sharpley, 2002). Balancing tourism growth with preserving local heritage while ensuring community acceptance of tourism developments remains a significant challenge (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). Moreover, engaging local communities in tourism planning and implementation fosters a sense of ownership and ensures cultural authenticity (Sharpley, 2002). Collaborative initiatives that showcase local

traditions, crafts and heritage allow communities to benefit economically while preserving their cultural identity (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

**Environmental Concerns and Conservation:** Environmental degradation due to unregulated tourism activities poses a threat to fragile rural ecosystems (Hall & Jenkins, 2004). Biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, and increased waste generation are pressing concerns that demand attention in sustainable rural tourism development (Haldar, 2016). Being innovative in adopting sustainable practices is an important element (Haldar, 2016). Encouraging responsible tourism behaviour, promoting eco-friendly accommodations and implementing conservation programmes can eventually decrease environmental impacts and also safeguard rural landscapes (Hall & Jenkins, 2004).

## **2.16. Role of Technology in Enhancing Rural Tourism**

Technology does indeed open up pathways to rural tourism. Overall, it enhances accessibility to rural destinations by providing comprehensive information and enabling easy bookings (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). Indeed, this convenience encourages more tourists to explore off-the-beaten-path locations (Xiang et al., 2015).

Utilising technology for marketing, online booking platforms and improving digital connectivity in rural areas can bridge information gaps, promote rural destinations and also provide tourists with easier access to information and services (Haldar, 2016). This said, technology enables targeted digital marketing campaigns that showcase the unique offerings of rural destinations (Gretzel et al., 2015). Indeed, social media, websites, and digital content platforms serve as powerful tools to highlight scenic landscapes, cultural experiences, and local attractions, reaching a global audience and piquing interest in rural tourism (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Definitely, digital platforms facilitate easy access to information and booking services for tourists interested in rural experiences (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). User-friendly websites, mobile apps, and online booking systems streamline the reservation process for accommodations, tours, and activities, making it convenient for visitors to plan their rural tourism experiences (Xiang et al., 2015).

Technology aids in implementing sustainable practices within rural tourism (Gretzel et al., 2015). Innovations like smart energy management systems, waste reduction apps and digital monitoring tools promote the adoption of eco-friendly measures (Tussyadiah & Sigala, 2017). Additionally, digital platforms can educate tourists about responsible behaviours, conservation efforts and also eco-friendly initiatives in rural environments (Gretzel et al., 2015).

Furthermore, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies offer experiences for potential tourists where one would immerse oneself to the venture (Xiang et al., 2015). Virtual tours showcasing rural landscapes, historical sites or cultural experiences provide a preview of what rural destinations have to offer. This motivates visitors and enhances their anticipation of the actual experience (Buhalis & Law, 2008).

Having said this, improving digital connectivity in rural areas ascertains access to information and services for both tourists and local communities (Gretzel et al., 2015). High-speed internet, Wi-Fi availability and digital communication platforms enable seamless interactions. This aids tourists in navigation, something which enriches their experience (ibid., 2015). By balancing technology for sustainable practices, rural destinations can minimise environmental impact and promote responsible tourism behaviour among visitors (Gretzel et al., 2015). This ensures the preservation of natural landscapes and cultural heritage (Grech, 2014).

## **2.17. Conclusion**

As has been seen rural tourism on the Maltese Islands presents an opportunity for inclusive growth, economic prosperity and cultural preservation. Research has shown that addressing infrastructure gaps and seasonality challenges, fostering community engagement, adopting sustainable practices and incorporating technology are pivotal approaches for sustainable rural tourism development. Considering this, Chapter 3 shall consider the methodology used in extracting information from interviews held with learned persons in this area and also through the distribution of an online questionnaire to the general public.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter presents the methodology used in conducting a study on rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. The study aims to analyse the development, impact and potential of rural tourism as a sustainable economic driver in the region. This introduction outlines the research design, data collection methods, sampling strategy and data analysis techniques used in this study.

#### **3.2. Philosophical Assumptions**

Recognising the complexity of rural tourism and the diverse perspectives of stakeholders involved, a pragmatic philosophical approach was conducted. Indeed, pragmatism places emphasis on real-world applications and practical outcomes (Dewey, 1907). This aligns well with the focus of this research, which is on tangible results in rural tourism development on the Maltese Islands. This approach joins together the perspectives of local communities, policymakers and tourism operators, with the aim of understanding the practical implications of rural tourism.

The belief that rural tourism can contribute to sustainable growth, cultural preservation and community development supports this pragmatic approach (Sharpley, 2002; Hall, 2008). By focusing on actionable insights this research focuses on informing policy decisions and guiding sustainable rural tourism development on the Maltese Islands.

#### **3.3. Research Design**

This research adopts a pragmatic mixed-method approach, with there being a predominant focus on qualitative research. The aim is to explore rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. Indeed, research design serves as a roadmap for conducting scientific inquiries, guiding data collection and analysis to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Scholars like Creswell and Creswell (2018), in their work on 'Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches', showcase valuable insights into the different approaches, these being secondary data analysis, qualitative and quantitative. In line with the need for comprehensive data, this study adopts the mixed-method design to capture the

multifaceted nature of rural tourism. In this way the study would reach triangulation and would be more reliable.

The minimal quantitative component involves collecting and analysing numerical questionnaire data to quantify basic aspects of rural tourism. Examples would be the frequency and scale of activities. However, this study primarily falls within the qualitative sphere, it focusing on indepth semi-structured interviews, leading to thematic analysis. The latter aims to explore motivations, perceptions and experiences. The qualitative approach, grounded in the interpretivist paradigm, seeks to understand the complexities of rural tourism from the viewpoint of different stakeholders.

This mixed-method approach joins together both measurable and experiential insights. By using this design, the research ensures a robust examination of the core objectives, offering a holistic view of rural tourism in the Maltese Islands.

### **3.4. Data Collection Methods**

The study has made use of a combination of secondary data analysis, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and a questionnaire survey. The aim is to gather comprehensive insights into rural tourism on the Maltese Islands.

### **3.5. Defining the Research Population**

Indeed, understanding the concept of a research population is fundamental in research methodology. This is because it defines the scope and generalisability of the study findings. The research population encompasses the entire group of individuals or entities sharing common characteristics which are important to this study (Babbie, 2019). This concept serves as the footprint for sampling and allows researchers to draw valid conclusions from the data collected.

**Target Population:** The target population for this study includes all Maltese citizens aged sixteen and above. This demography is selected to provide a comprehensive view of perspectives on rural tourism across the Maltese Islands. The inclusion of a broad age range ensures the identification of diverse experiences and opinions. These are essential for an indepth understanding of the subject matter.

**Characteristics of the Target Population:** The target population included individuals from various backgrounds and demographic groups. This diversity in age, gender and socio-economic status provides a comprehensive understanding of the public's attitudes and experiences related to rural tourism. The inclusion criteria are Maltese citizens aged sixteen or over and the willingness to provide informed consent for participation.

### 3.6. Sampling Methods and Sample Size

To ensure a comprehensive and representative dataset, the study employed a two-stage sampling strategy combining stratified and convenience sampling methods.

**Selection of Sampling Methods:** In the first stage, stratified sampling categorised the population based on key demographic variables (e.g., age, gender, region). This ensures the representation across various segments. This approach also ascertains that the sample reflects the diversity of the Maltese population, particularly in relation to rural tourism. In the second stage, convenience sampling was used, with the aim of recruiting participants based on their availability and willingness to participate. This method did in fact facilitate practical data collection since it focused on participants who are easily reachable and willing to contribute.

**Sample Size Determination:** The study surveyed 137 participants. This sample size strikes a balance between the need for meaningful insights and practical limitations. While a larger sample could enhance generalisability, the chosen size is deemed sufficient for exploring public perceptions of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands.

**Rationale and Ethical Considerations:** The rationale in mind aims at using stratified and convenience sampling to achieve a balance between scientific rigour and practical feasibility. Stratified sampling ensures that key demographic groups are adequately represented, while convenience sampling offers a pragmatic means of participant recruitment. This said, ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality and also adhering to data protection standards. The consent form can be viewed in Appendix 1.

In conclusion, this sampling strategy aimed to capture diverse perspectives on rural tourism, ensuring the study's findings as being fruitful, reliable and important.

### 3.7. Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process for this study involved three primary methods to capture insights into the dynamics of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. These methods included surveys, interviews and secondary data analysis, each tailored to gather relevant quantitative and qualitative data.

**Type of Data:** This study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of rural tourism in Malta. Quantitative data, such as visitor profiles, satisfaction levels and tourism statistics, allows for the assessment of trends and patterns. This provides a broad overview of rural tourism's impact. In contrast, qualitative data gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended survey questions investigates stakeholder perceptions, experiences and attitudes, offering richer perspectives that cannot be captured by numbers alone.

**Administration Procedures - Surveys and Interviews:** Surveys and semi-structured interviews are the primary methods for collecting data from key stakeholders. An online survey, created using Microsoft Forms. These target a broad range of respondents including tourists, residents and businesses involved in rural tourism. The survey gathered data on travel preferences, satisfaction and perceptions of rural tourism benefits and challenges.

In-depth semi-structured interviews complemented the surveys by providing qualitative insights from key stakeholders such as representatives from local tourism boards, tour operators, accommodation providers and government agencies. These semi-structured interviews explored themes such as the unique attributes of rural areas, challenges faced and community involvement in tourism development.

**Secondary Data Analysis:** Secondary data was used to supplement primary data collection. This involves analysing existing data sources, such as official tourism statistics, government reports and academic studies. These provide additional context and validate findings.

**Research Instruments - Stakeholder Survey Questionnaire:** The survey questionnaire included close-ended questions to gather quantitative data. The questions covered areas such as visitor demographics, travel patterns, satisfaction with services and the perceptions of the rural tourism experience.

**Stakeholder Interview Guide:** The interview guide featured semi-structured questions, allowing for a flexible yet focused exploration of key topics. These topics included the strengths and challenges of rural tourism, stakeholder perspectives on sustainable development and also the potential strategies for this sector to further improve. The semi-structured format showed consistency across the semi-structured interviews while also allowing for indepth exploration based on individual responses.

Through the use of these data collection methods, the study aimed to deliver a well-rounded analysis of rural tourism on Malta, identifying both opportunities and challenges to inform future development strategies.

### **3.8. Method of Data Analysis**

The study analysed data from surveys and semi-structured interviews to understand the impact of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. The analysis unveiled patterns, relations and trends that provide insights into this topic.

#### **3.8.1. Analytical Approach for Studying the Economic Impact of Rural Tourism**

To assess the economic implications of rural tourism, the study adopted a comprehensive analytical framework. This includes examining both direct and indirect economic contributions, these being revenue generation, employment creation and infrastructure costs. A bottom-up approach was addressed, where individual-level expenses and the outcome of experiencing a broader economic impact, were explored.

#### **3.8.2. Data Analysis Procedures and Techniques**

Statistical methods such as descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to identify and quantify relationships between variables. Indeed, correlation coefficients will measure the degree of association between these variables. Thematic analysis were applied to interview data to extract key themes. This approach provided deeper insights into stakeholders' perspectives

and the qualitative dimensions of rural tourism's impact. Moreover, the results were presented using charts and graphs to show the results.

Overall, the data analysis methods were designed to be rigorous and systematic, providing a comprehensive understanding of the economic and qualitative impacts of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. This approach is targeted at offering valuable insights for policymakers, stakeholders in the sphere of rural tourism and the broader community.

### **3.9. Ethical Considerations**

The researcher obtained all necessary authorisations from relevant institutions and individuals involved in the study. Appendix 2 portrays the consent achieved from the institution. This said, stringent measures were implemented to ensure compliance with privacy and confidentiality regulations throughout the research process. Additionally, prior to participation, all interviewees were provided with a detailed guideline outlining the following:

- i. **Voluntary Participation:** Participation in the study is entirely voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any stage.
- ii. **Informed Consent:** Participants will be fully informed about the purpose, procedures and potential risks of the study before consenting to participate.
- iii. **Provision of Information:** All participants will receive comprehensive information about the research objectives, methods and anticipated outcomes.
- iv. **Respect and Non-Discrimination:** Respect for the dignity and rights of all participants will be maintained throughout the research process, with strict adherence to principles of non-discrimination.
- v. **Privacy and Confidentiality:** Measures will be taken to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants' responses and personal information.
- vi. **Impartiality and Objectivity:** The researcher will maintain impartiality and objectivity in data collection, analysis and interpretation, without bias or influence from external factors.

These ethical considerations have been essential to safeguarding the rights and well-being of participants and upholding the integrity of the research process. This said, the data collected is aimed at being destroyed six months after the publishing of the study.

### **3.10. Reliability and Validity of the Study: Ensuring Methodological Rigor**

Ensuring the reliability and validity of the research findings is crucial for establishing the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. This section discusses the strategies employed to enhance both the validity and reliability of the research.

#### **3.10.1. Validity**

To ensure validity, the study employs several strategies:

- i. **Theoretical Framework and Operational Definitions:** The study was grounded in a well-established theoretical framework, with clear operational definitions for all key variables. This approach aids in ensuring that the research accurately reflects the approach being taken.
- ii. **Triangulation and Representative Sampling:** The use of multiple data collection methods, including surveys, interviews and secondary data analysis, along with a representative sampling approach, enhanced the study's validity.
- iii. **Control of Confounding Variables:** Variables were identified and controlled for using appropriate statistical techniques. This helped isolate the specific effects, thereby strengthening internal validity.

#### **3.10.2. Reliability**

Reliability concerns the consistency and stability of the research findings. The study implemented the following strategies to enhance reliability:

- i. **Standardised Procedures:** The data collection and analysis processes followed standardised procedures. This was done to minimise measurement errors and ensure consistent application across all phases of the study.
- ii. **Test-Retest Methodology:** To verify the consistency of the findings, a test-retest methodology was adopted. A subset of data was reanalysed, allowing the researcher to check the stability of the responses over time and to refine data collection instruments if necessary. Moreover, the semi-structured interview approach was piloted beforehand.

By carefully addressing both validity and reliability, the study aimed to produce credible and trustworthy findings. Indeed, these measures ensured that the research accurately reflects the dynamics of rural tourism on the Maltese Islands.

### 3.11. Control Variables

In this study, key control variables include demographic factors such as age, gender and income level, as well as participants' prior experience with rural tourism. Definitely, in paying attention to controlling these variables the accuracy and reliability of the study's conclusions are improved.

### 3.12. Research Plan and Timelines

This section outlines the plan and timeline for conducting the research study, including details on the research team, timeline, resources, limitations, data management and analysis, reporting, and dissemination.

- i. **Research Timeline:** A detailed research timeline was established to guide the progression of the study from its initial stages to its completion. This timeline included key milestones such as literature review, survey administration, data analysis and report writing.
- ii. **Resources:** The resources required for the research study were identified and allocated accordingly. This included data collection tools, technology needed and equipment used, together with institutional support from respective authorities.

- iii. **Research Limitations:** Potential limitations of the study will be outlined. By recognising limitations, the study aims to provide an unbiased assessment of its outcomes.
- iv. **Data Management and Analysis:** Data management and analysis procedures were adhered to established best practices. This ensures accuracy, reliability and confidentiality. Quantitative data was analysed using appropriate statistical techniques, while qualitative data used a thematic approach. Moreover, data was securely stored and organised to facilitate efficient analysis.
- v. **Reporting and Dissemination:** The research outcomes are aimed to reach the appropriate audience and to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field, whilst also bringing about a positive change in the evolving industry on Malta and Gozo.

### **3.13. Conclusion**

In conclusion, this methodology chapter has presented a detailed plan for conducting the research study. By applying this framework, the study aims to generate credible and valuable insights that address the research questions and contribute effectively to the field. The following chapter addresses the results obtained and an analysis of these results, including a discussion.

## 4. Results, Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from both the survey responses and indepth semi-structured interviews conducted with key stakeholders associated with rural tourism on the Maltese Islands. The survey targeted a broad audience, gathering insights into the general public's perceptions of rural tourism, its benefits, and the importance of environmental sustainability. Complementing this, interviews with stakeholders, including representatives from the Planning Authority, Malta Tourism Authority, investors and developers, provide a more detailed understanding of both the opportunities and the challenges that the development of rural tourism as a niche market encounters. The interview transcripts can be views in Appendix 3.

The findings are organised into thematic sections based on the research questions, highlighting the current state of rural tourism, socio-economic impacts and potential strategies for sustainable development in Malta and Gozo.

### 4.2. Demographic Profile of Respondents

#### 4.2.1. Question 1: Age

*Table 1: Age*

| Age Group    | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|--------------|----------------------|------------|
| 25-34        | 39                   | 28%        |
| 35-44        | 23                   | 17%        |
| 45-54        | 41                   | 30%        |
| 55 and above | 18                   | 13%        |
| Under 25     | 16                   | 12%        |

Most respondents fall within the 45-54 age group, representing nearly 30% of the total sample. The second-largest age group is 25-34, making up 28%, while the 35-44 and under 25 groups account for smaller shares. The 55 and over group also holds a notable portion, with 13% (table 1). Considering the respondents' percentage it is evident that there is a certain age gap in those interested in rural tourism. Those between 45-54 are the generation in Malta who used to play and work in fields at a young age, these fostering a deep connection with the rural environment. Such an approach to tourism would definitely interest them and bring about nostalgic feelings. This said, regarding the second group aged 25-34, one can note that this is the age group who lack the experience with nature and therefore lurk for this new adventure. Indeed, Malta has seen a great shift in how teenagers spend their time in the last 15 to 20 years, with the hype being that the teenagers would spend more time following a career in sixth forms, colleges, ITS, university and/or MCAST. This came to the detriment of them being closer to nature. Hence, at this age, they would want to experience this new approach to holidaying.

#### 4.2.2. Question 2: Gender

*Table 2: Gender*

| Gender | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|--------|----------------------|------------|
| Female | 71                   | 52%        |
| Male   | 66                   | 48%        |

The gender distribution of the respondents is relatively balanced, with females slightly outnumbering males. Females account for 52% of the respondents, while males represent 48% as per table 2 above. In the past, males used to work in fields and the fact that there are more females' respondents could mean that females would like to experience more this kind of lifestyle, it being a novel approach to holidaying, allowing them to be closer with nature and also indulge in its delights.

#### 4.2.3. Question 3: Location

*Table 3: Location*

| Location | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|----------|----------------------|------------|
|----------|----------------------|------------|

|       |    |     |
|-------|----|-----|
| Gozo  | 55 | 40% |
| Malta | 82 | 60% |

Most respondents are from Malta, representing nearly 60% of the total sample. Respondents from Gozo make up 40%, highlighting a significant portion of the population surveyed from rural areas (table 3). Indeed, the survey was random and anyone in Malta and Gozo could participate. The discrepancy in percentage could relate to the number of inhabitants on each island, where on Gozo less people reside.

### 4.3. Presentation of Results

#### 4.3.1. Question 4: How familiar are you with the concept of rural tourism?

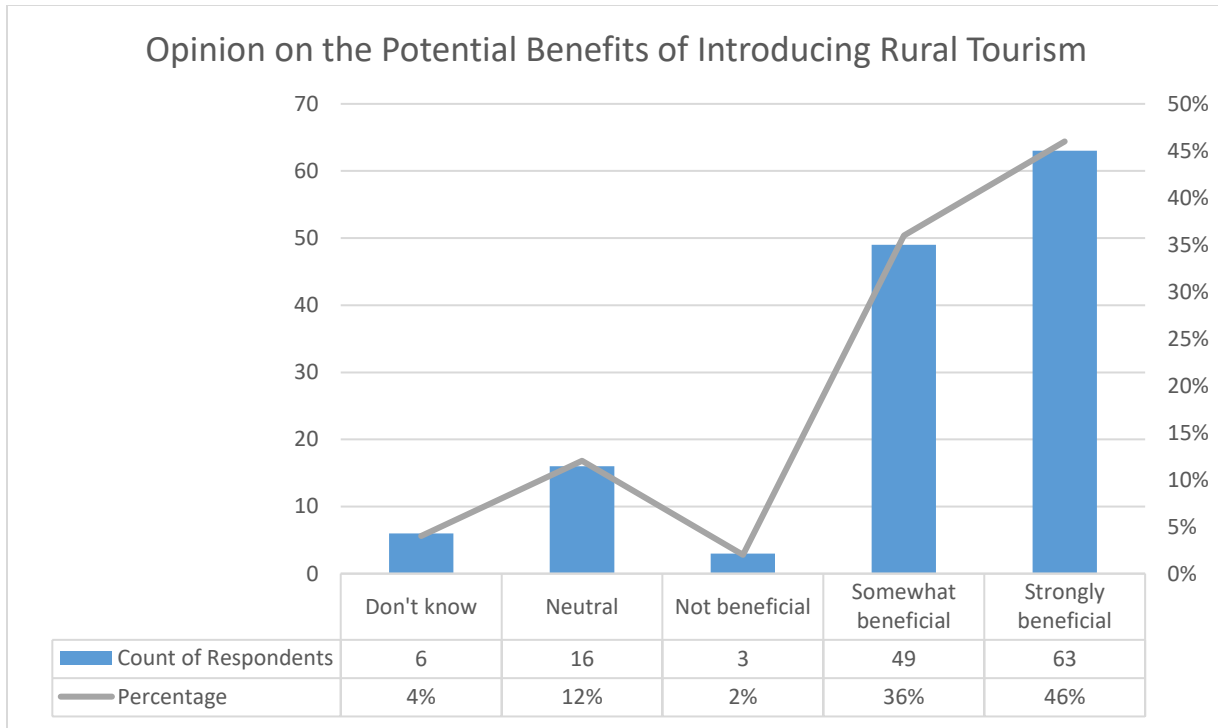
*Table 4: Familiarity with Rural Tourism*

| <b>Familiarity Level</b> | <b>Count of Respondents</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Not familiar             | 31                          | 23%               |
| Somewhat familiar        | 74                          | 54%               |
| Very familiar            | 32                          | 23%               |

Considering table 4, one can see that 54% are somewhat familiar with the concept of rural tourism. Both the "Not familiar" and "Very familiar" categories are evenly split, each representing 23% of the respondents. This indicates that while there is a general awareness of rural tourism, there is still room to enhance in-depth understanding among the population. Indeed, it becomes evident that more awareness and also better marketing efforts are needed. It being a new concept to holidaying, one could easily relate this to one's everyday lifestyle on the island, when in reality this is not the case. Rural tourism brings with it different strategies and different experiences where one would surely enjoy a holiday keeping the rural concept in mind. To this end, it would be ideal that the awareness and learning start from the beginning, hence addressing children in schools and even promoting such holidays in the local community. In this way there would be better community engagement and resultantly the inhabitants would be inclined to embark on such holidays themselves.

**4.3.2. Question 5: What is your opinion on the potential benefits of introducing rural tourism in Malta and Gozo?**

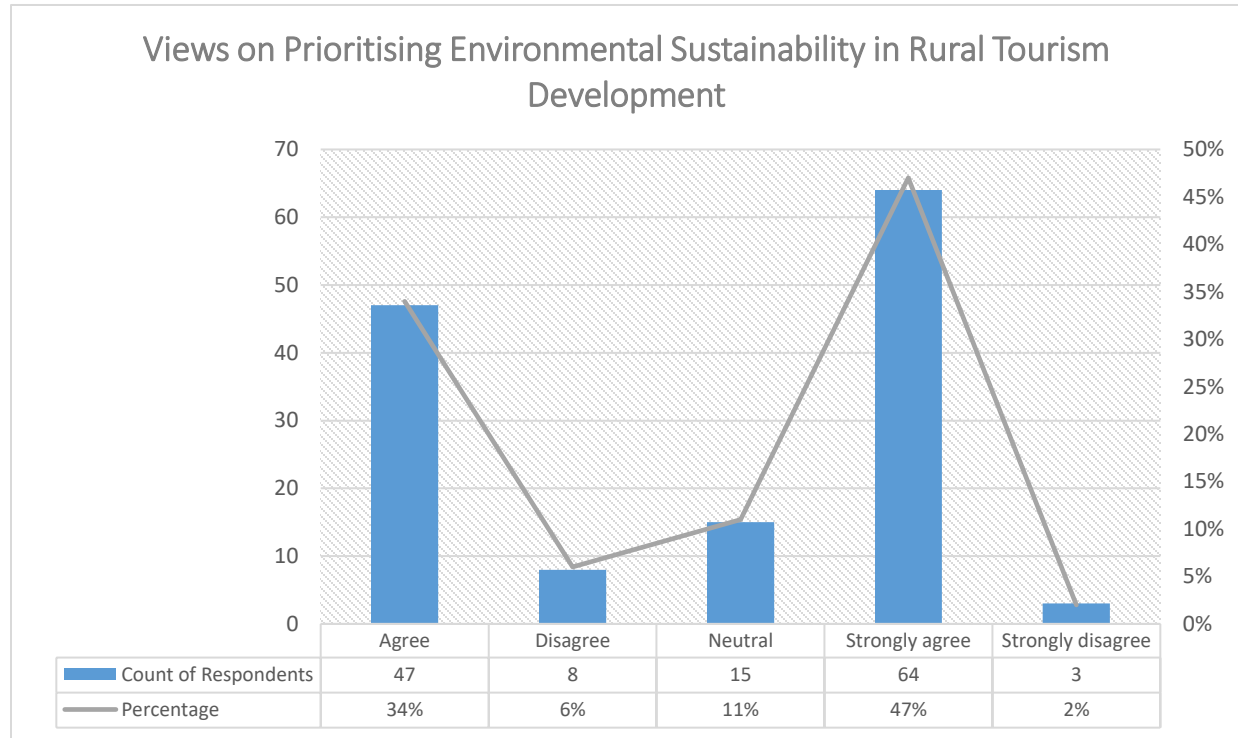
*Figure 1: Opinion on the Potential Benefits of Introducing Rural Tourism*



Most respondents, 46%, perceive rural tourism as strongly beneficial, while 36% believe it to be somewhat beneficial. A small percentage, 4%, are unsure of the potential benefits, and an even smaller group, 2%, consider rural tourism as not beneficial. This data indicates a generally positive outlook on the potential benefits of rural tourism among the respondents as per figure 1 above.

**4.3.3. Question 6: In your view, should the development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo prioritise environmental sustainability?**

*Figure 2: Views on Prioritising Environmental Sustainability in Rural Tourism Development*



A significant majority of respondents, 47%, strongly agree that the development of rural tourism should prioritise environmental sustainability, while an additional 34% agree with this view. A small minority, 6%, disagree, and an even smaller group, 2%, strongly disagree (figure 2). This indicates that environmental sustainability is a key concern for most respondents in the development of rural tourism as illustrated in figure 2 above.

#### 4.3.4. Question 7: What do you associate with Rural Tourism?

Table 5: Associations with Rural Tourism

| Association                                       | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|----------------------|------------|
| A working farm setting with animals (Agritourism) | 20                   | 15%        |
| Accommodation in a rural setting                  | 35                   | 26%        |
| All of the above                                  | 50                   | 36%        |
| Traditional food and gastronomy experience        | 18                   | 13%        |
| Walking trails in the countryside                 | 14                   | 10%        |

The majority of the respondents (table 5), this being 36%, associate rural tourism with a combination of agritourism, accommodation, gastronomic experiences and outdoor activities. Accommodation in a rural setting is also a significant association, with 26% of respondents selecting this option. Other associations, such as agritourism, traditional food experiences, and walking trails, are less commonly mentioned but still represent notable aspects of rural tourism. This could possibly show that the locals are not well aware of what rural tourism entails in full. Hence, the need for more awareness and better marketing strategies is necessary.

#### 4.3.5. Question 8: Have you ever engaged in any rural tourism experience?

Table 6: Engagement in Rural Tourism Experience

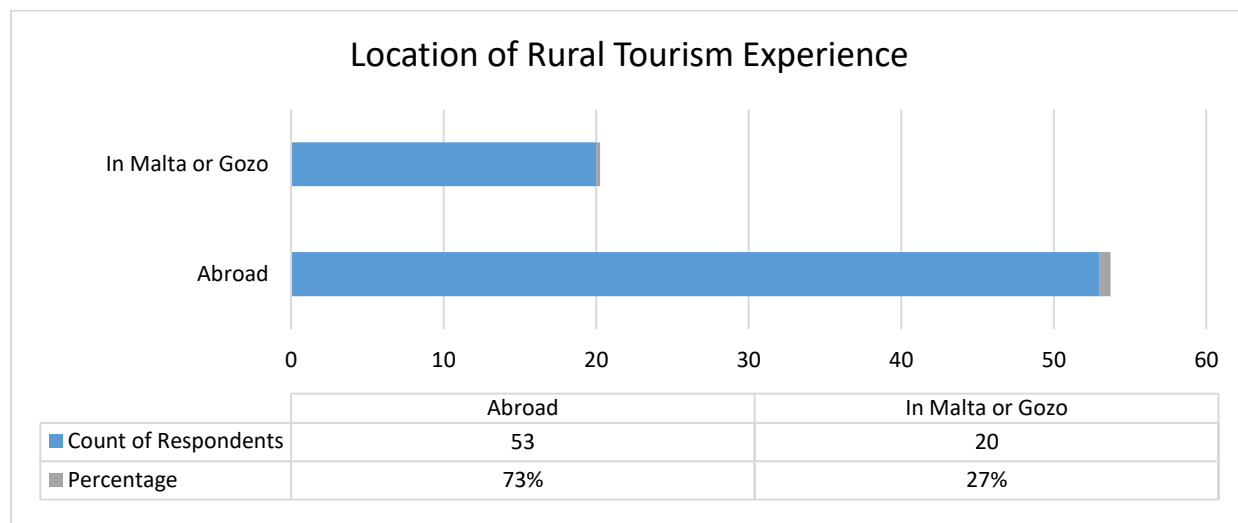
| Response | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|----------|----------------------|------------|
| No       | 64                   | 47%        |
| Yes      | 73                   | 53%        |

A slight majority of respondents, 53%, have engaged in rural tourism experiences, while 47% have not. This indicates a relatively balanced distribution of past participation in rural tourism, with

a significant portion of the population already having some level of engagement as per table 6. Again, lack of awareness and marketing strategies could definitely prove why there is such a high rate of persons who have not experienced rural tourism. This said, it could also be that prices for such holidays are high when compared to other kinds of holidays advertised by travelling agencies in Malta. In fact, usually tours would be organised, with the scope being to visit places and shop. However, only recently has the idea of engaging in the luscious experience of rural tourism increased. The scope would be to immerse oneself in a community to live life to the full, in terms of gastronomic experiences, relaxation and being at one with nature for intrinsic rejuvenation.

**4.3.6. Question 9: Kindly provide the location of rural tourism experience.**

*Figure 3: Location of Rural Tourism Experience*



The majority of the respondents who experienced rural tourism, these being 73%, have engaged in rural tourism experiences abroad, while only 27% have done so within Malta or Gozo. This suggests that rural tourism in Malta and Gozo has significant room for growth and promotion, as most participants tend to seek such experiences outside the islands as per figure 3. Definitely, few local people know the delicacy of experiencing a rural holiday on Malta or Gozo itself. Many might tend to view such an experience as being 'normal' to one's lifestyle. In reality, this is not the case, knowing that in one's fast-paced life, detaching oneself for some time on Malta or Gozo itself, would surely offer the benefits that a rural holiday abroad could offer. In fact, in the past years, both in Malta and in Gozo, there have been more venues created, promoting such rural experiences. Since the interest is growing, it is ideal that more venues would be created.

#### 4.3.7. Question 10: Please specify what type of experience

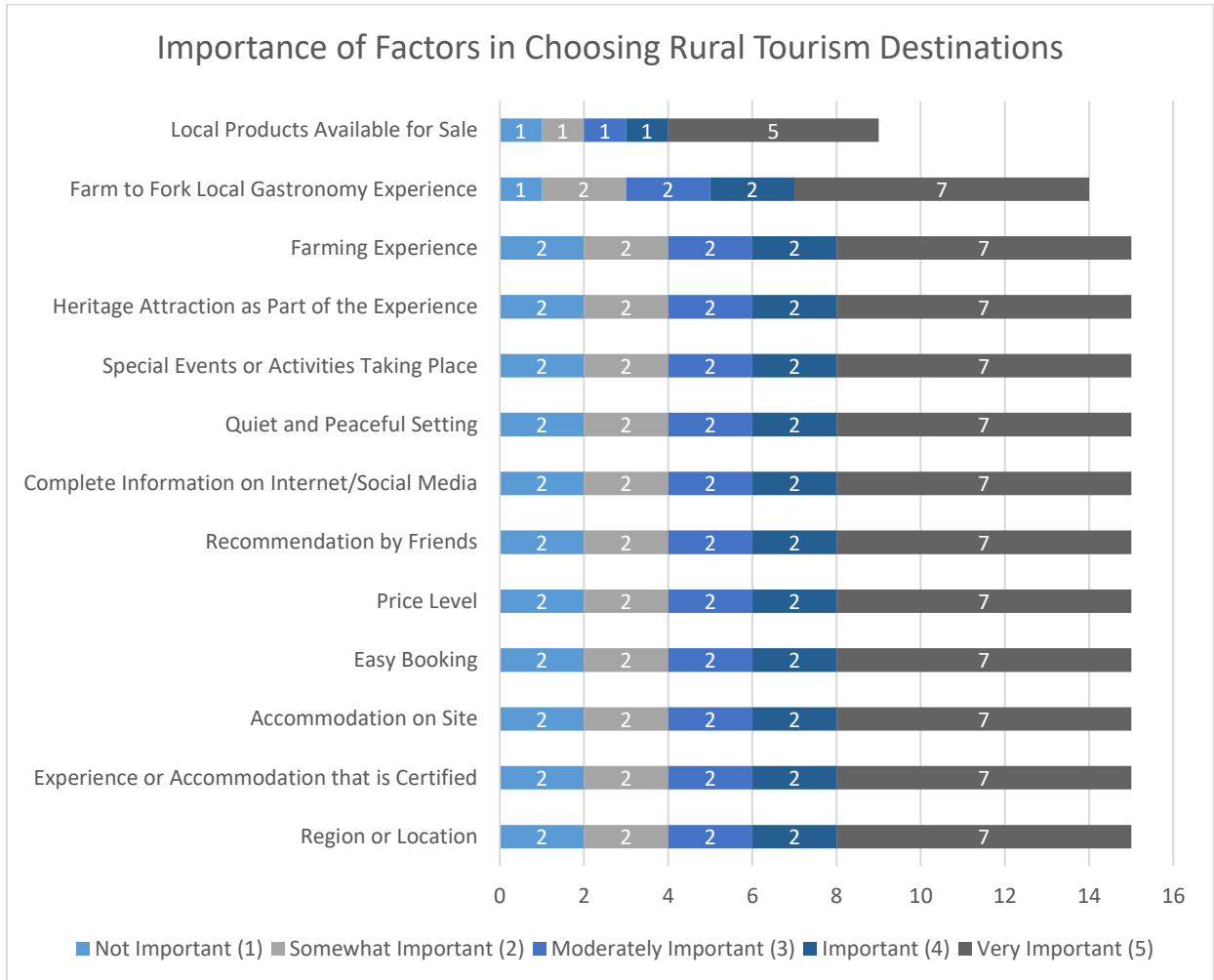
Table 7: Types of Rural Tourism Experiences

| Experience Type                                   | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|----------------------|------------|
| A working farm setting with animals (Agritourism) | 19                   | 26%        |
| Accommodation in a rural setting                  | 21                   | 29%        |
| Accommodation with horse riding experience        | 1                    | 1%         |
| All of the above                                  | 5                    | 7%         |
| Traditional food and gastronomy experience        | 18                   | 25%        |
| Walking trails in the countryside                 | 8                    | 11%        |
| Working farm, accommodation, and food             | 1                    | 1%         |

Table 7 shows the most common rural tourism experiences reported by respondents include accommodation in a rural setting (29%) and agritourism activities such as working farm visits (26%). Traditional food and gastronomy experiences are also popular, accounting for 25% of responses. Other types of experiences, such as walking trails, horse riding and combinations of farm, accommodation, and food experiences, represent smaller portions of respondents' activities. In other words, there seems to be the tendency of one taking a holiday and attributing parts of what entails a rural holiday. Indeed, promoting a full package of a rural holiday would enable the people to experience a full immersion into this concept of rural holidaying.

**4.3.8. Question 11: When you plan your rural experience, how important are the following in helping you choose your destination?**

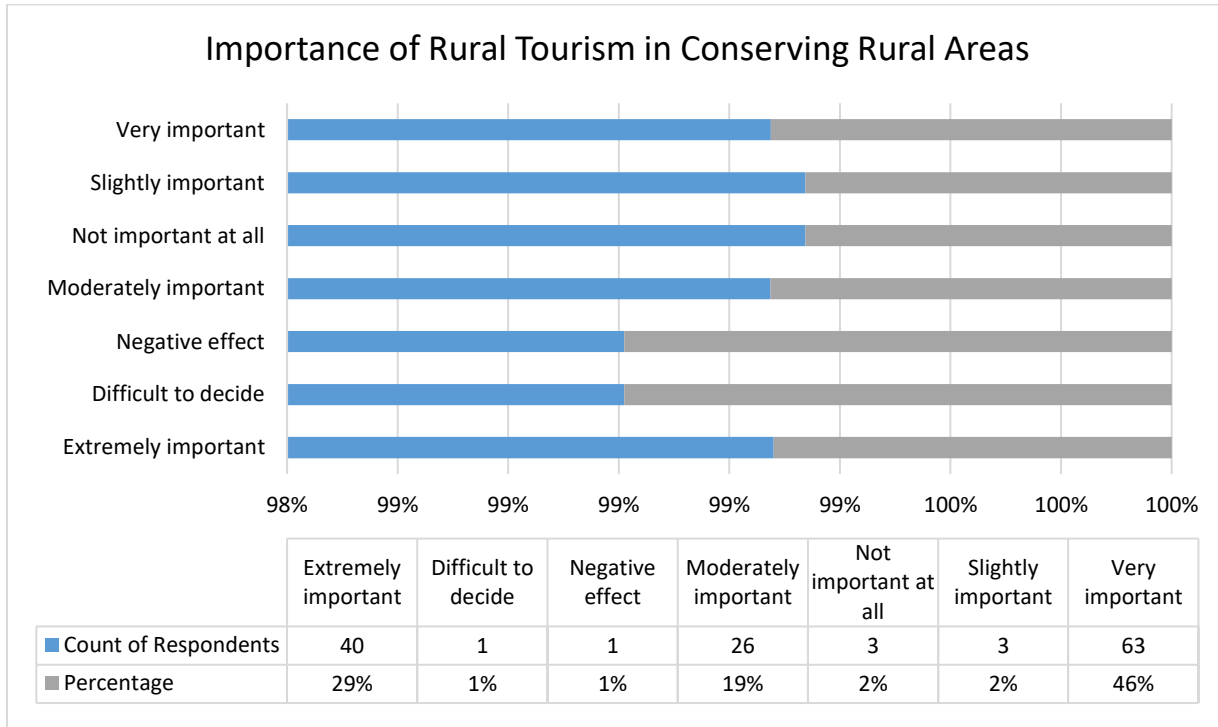
*Figure 4: Importance of Factors in Choosing Rural Tourism Destinations*



The results in figure 4 indicate that the most highly-rated factor across respondents is the "Very Important" category for almost all factors, particularly "Region or Location" and "Accommodation on Site." Other factors, such as price level, recommendations from friends, and the availability of certified experiences, are also considered crucial by respondents. Quiet settings, availability of local products and farming experiences were slightly less important, though they still garnered notable "Very Important" ratings. The low ratings could also be indicative to Maltese and Gozitans not being accustomed to such holidays. Hence, the more awareness and opportunity for one to experience such approaches, would surely result in a higher response.

**4.3.9. Question 12: How important do you think rural tourism could be in contributing to the Maltese economy?**

*Figure 5: Importance of Rural Tourism in Conserving Rural Areas*



Most respondents (46%) believe that rural tourism is very important for the conservation of rural areas, with an additional 29% rating it as extremely important. A smaller group (19%) considers it moderately important, while very few respondents (2% each) believe that rural tourism is either not important at all or slightly important. Only 1% expressed concerns about a potential negative effect from rural tourism, suggesting that the overall perception is positive (figure 5).

#### 4.3.10. Question 13: What potential economic benefits do you foresee from the development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo?

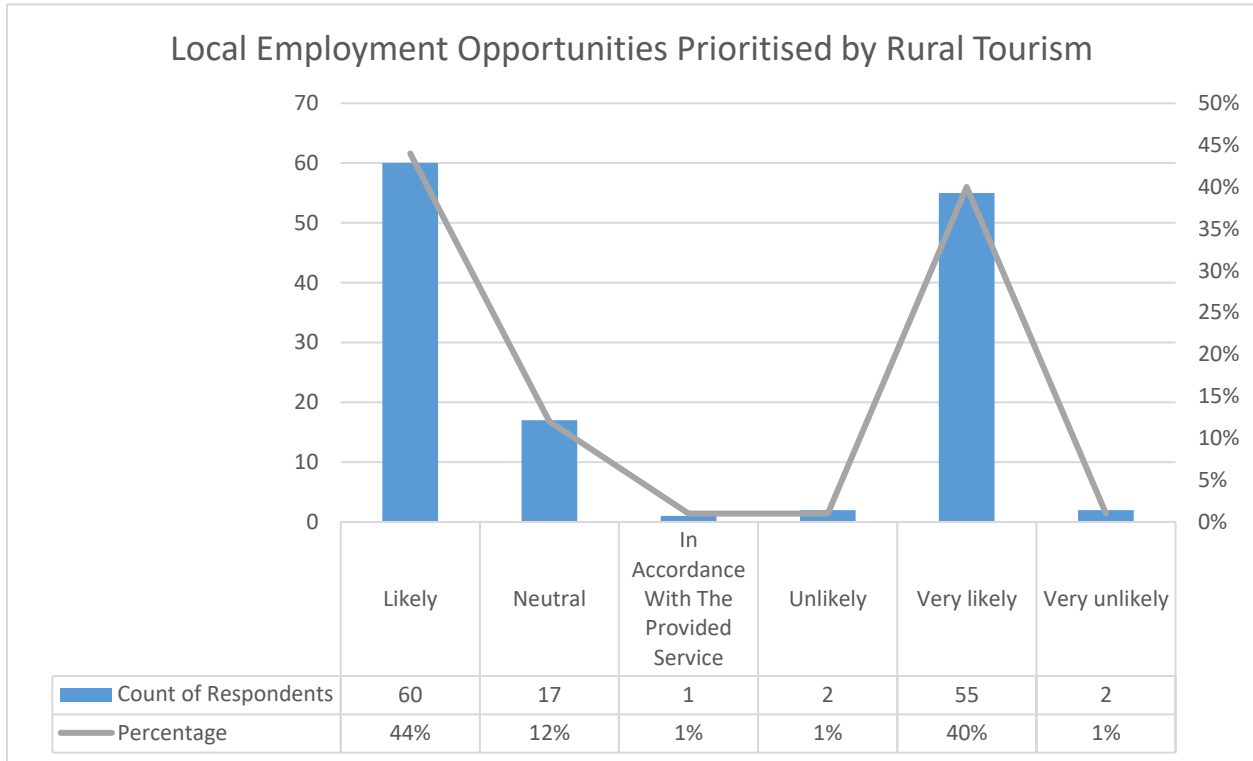
Table 8: Potential Economic Benefits of Rural Tourism

| Response   | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|--|----------------------|------------|
| Job creation   | 14                   | 10%        |
| Increased local business opportunities                   | 29                   | 21%        |
| Boost in tourism revenue                                 | 15                   | 11%        |
| Diversification of economy                               | 13                   | 9%         |
| All of the above   | 57                   | 42%        |
| Other:   |                      |            |
| A few people make money to the detriment of rural places | 1                    | 1%         |
| Alternative tourism niche                                | 1                    | 1%         |
| Diversification of income for farms                      | 1                    | 1%         |
| Giving importance to the rural environment               | 1                    | 1%         |
| Preserving fields and water sources                      | 1                    | 1%         |
| Preserving the rural environment                         | 1                    | 1%         |
| Malta would care more for our environment and fields     | 1                    | 1%         |
| Quality in type of tourists                              | 1                    | 1%         |
| Rural areas will be kept, not destroyed                  | 1                    | 1%         |

Table 8 shows that a significant proportion of respondents (42%) selected "All of the above," indicating a broad recognition of the various economic benefits that rural tourism can offer, including revenue growth, diversification of the economy, and local business opportunities. Boosting tourism revenue (11%) and increasing local business opportunities (21%) are seen as major benefits. Job creation (10%) also holds importance, while concerns about rural areas being negatively impacted remain minimal, with only 1% expressing this view.

**4.3.11. Question 14: If local employment opportunities are prioritised by rural tourism initiatives, how likely would you be to support them?**

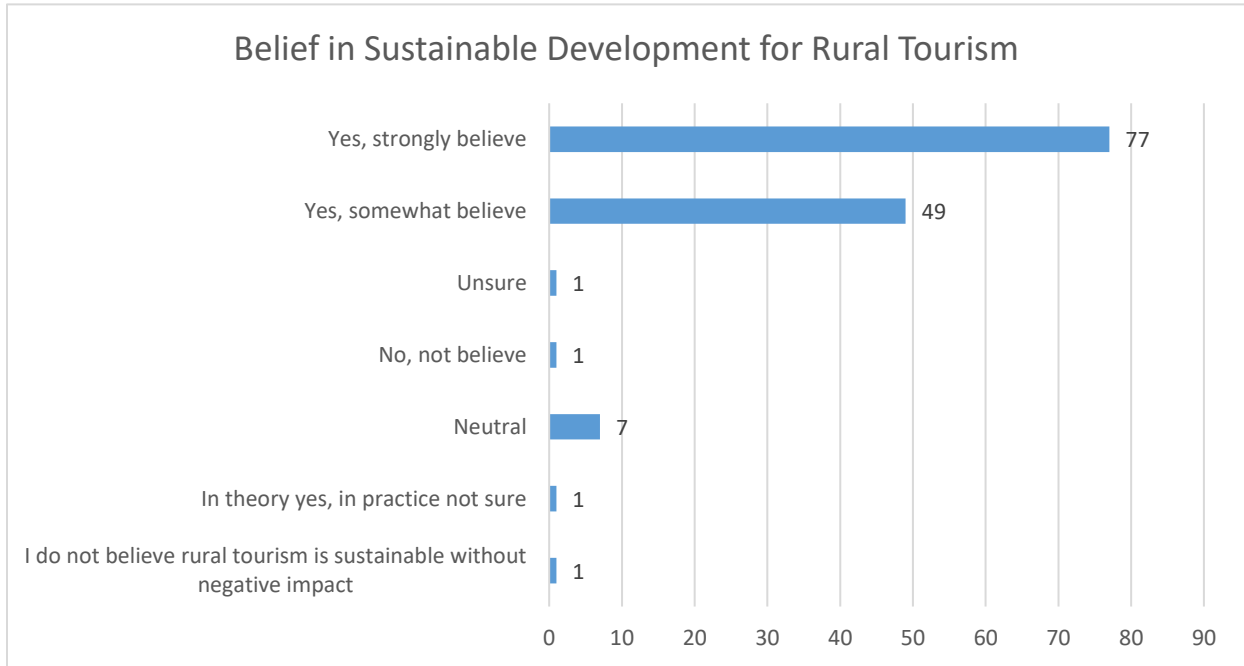
*Figure 6: Local Employment Opportunities Prioritised by Rural Tourism*



The majority of respondents believe that rural tourism is likely (44%) or very likely (40%) to prioritise local employment opportunities. A smaller group of respondents remain neutral (12%) on this matter, and only 1% consider it unlikely or very unlikely. The general sentiment indicates optimism regarding rural tourism's potential to boost local employment (figure 6).

**4.3.12. Question 15: Do you believe that sustainable development is crucial for the long-term success of rural tourism initiatives?**

*Figure 7: Belief in Sustainable Development for Rural Tourism*



The vast majority of the respondents strongly believe (55%) or somewhat believe (35%) that sustainable development is crucial for rural tourism. A small number of respondents remain neutral (5%) or express doubt about the sustainability of rural tourism. However, overall, there is significant support for the importance of sustainable practices in rural tourism as illustrated in figure 7 above.

**4.3.13. Question 16: Do you know what eco-friendly practices are?**

*Table 9: Knowledge of Eco-Friendly Practices*

| Response | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|----------|----------------------|------------|
| No       | 8                    | 6%         |
| Yes      | 129                  | 94%        |

An overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) are aware of eco-friendly practices, indicating strong familiarity with sustainable practices that could be integrated into rural tourism. Only 6% of respondents indicated that they do not know what eco-friendly practices are as per table 9.

#### 4.3.14. Question 17: How important is it for rural tourism businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices?

Table 10: Importance of Eco-Friendly Practices for Rural Tourism Businesses

| Response                            | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Extremely important                 | 69                   | 50%        |
| In theory yes, in practice not sure | 1                    | 1%         |
| Moderately important                | 11                   | 8%         |
| Slightly important                  | 2                    | 1%         |
| Very important                      | 54                   | 39%        |

Half of the respondents (50%) consider it extremely important for rural tourism businesses to adopt eco-friendly practices, while an additional 39% believe it to be very important. A small portion of respondents (8%) view it as moderately important, with minimal responses indicating lower importance or uncertainty (table 10). Considering the rise in popularity of rural tourism, it is essential to be as eco-friendly as possible. Hence, any initiatives, subsidies or grants that could be made available, would be ideal so that rural tourism would be sustained.

#### 4.3.15. Question 18: Are you aware of EU funding opportunities available for rural development projects in Malta and Gozo?

Table 11: Awareness of EU Funding Opportunities for Rural Tourism

| Response            | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------|----------------------|------------|
| No, not aware       | 31                   | 23%        |
| Yes, somewhat aware | 68                   | 50%        |
| Yes, very aware     | 38                   | 28%        |

As can be noticed in table 11 half of the respondents (50%) are somewhat aware of EU funding opportunities for rural tourism, while 28% are very aware. However, 23% of respondents indicated they are not aware of these opportunities, suggesting room for improvement in disseminating information about available EU funding for rural tourism development. This can be done through various means, especially promoting on social media.

**4.3.16. Question 19: Do you think it is important to integrate cultural heritage preservation into rural tourism development plans?**

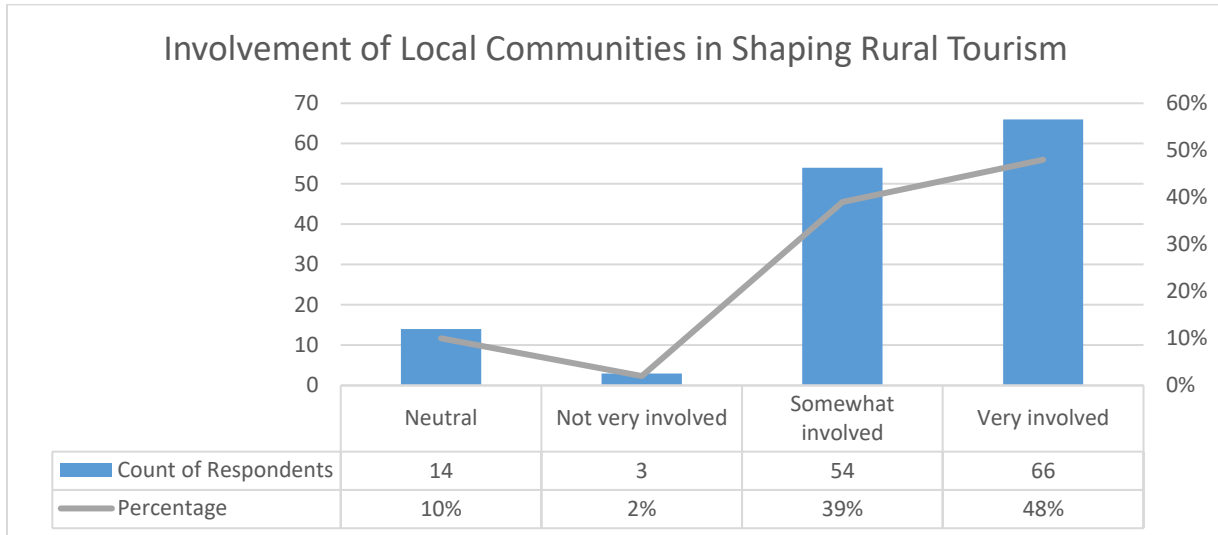
*Table 12: Importance of Integrating Cultural Heritage into Rural Tourism*

| Response                  | Count of Respondents | Percentage |
|---------------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Yes, extremely important  | 71                   | 52%        |
| Yes, moderately important | 58                   | 42%        |
| Neutral                   | 7                    | 5%         |
| No, Not important         | 1                    | 1%         |

Most respondents (52%) consider it extremely important to integrate cultural heritage into rural tourism, with an additional 42% viewing it as moderately important. Only 5% remained neutral on this issue, and 1% indicated it as not important, highlighting a strong consensus on the significance of cultural heritage and preservation through rural tourism as per table 12 above. It could be that one is not that much aware of what cultural heritage preservation truly entails. Through rural tourism, one has the opportunity to preserve the cultural and historical heritage that the islands uphold. In this way, tourists and locals will be given the opportunity to familiarise themselves with what identifies the Maltese and the Gozitans. Definitely, this approach will not offer new venues solely for the tourists but also for the locals themselves. Keeping this in mind, cultural preservation itself could be enough to serve as a selling point for rural holidaying to take place.

**4.3.17. Question 20: How involved should local communities be in shaping and supporting rural tourism projects?**

*Figure 8: Involvement of Local Communities in Shaping Rural Tourism*



Almost half of the respondents (48%) believe local communities should be very involved in shaping and developing rural tourism, with an additional 39% supporting somewhat involved. Only 2% felt local communities should be not very involved, while 10% were neutral on the matter (figure 8). This highlights a strong consensus in favour of community involvement in rural tourism planning.

**4.3.18. Question 21: Would you participate in rural tourism experiences that promote local traditions and cultural heritage?**

*Figure 9: Participation in Rural Tourism Experiences*

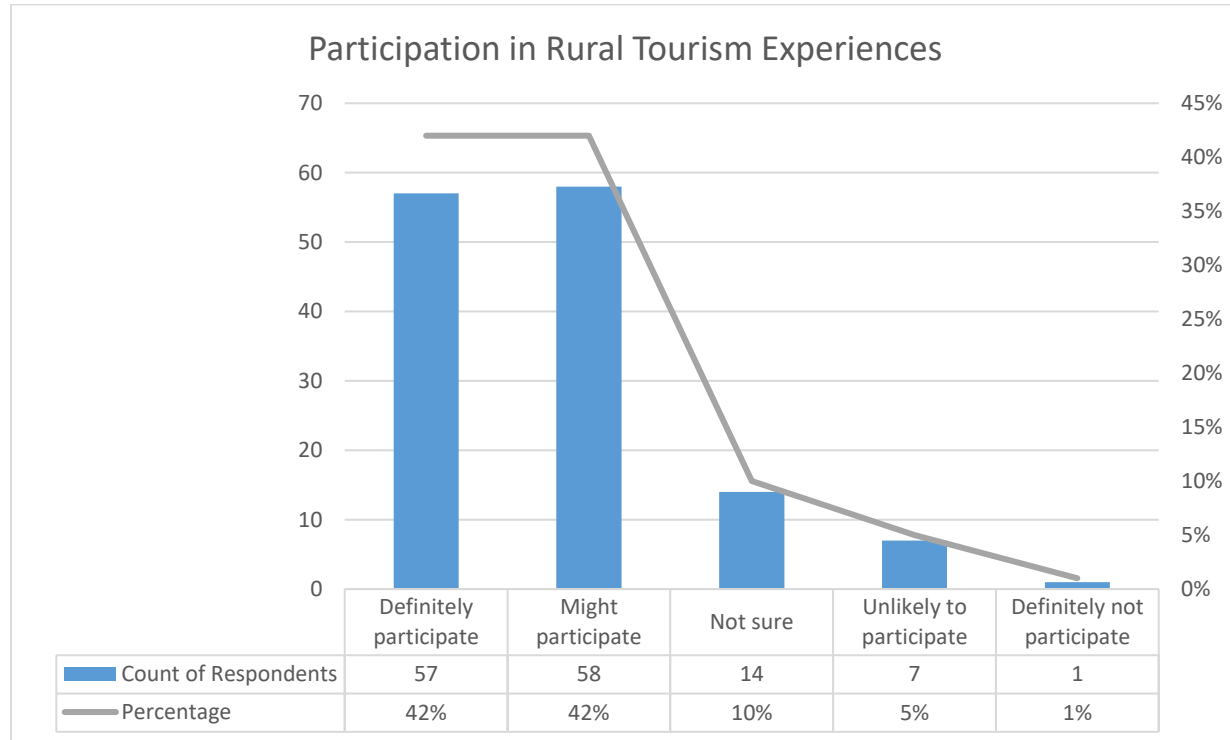


Figure 9 above shows that a majority of the respondents expressed a willingness to participate in rural tourism experiences, with 42% saying they would definitely participate and another 42% indicating they might participate. Only a small portion were unsure (10%) or unlikely to participate (5%), with minimal resistance to the idea of rural tourism.

**4.4. Semi Structured Interviews Analysis**

This analysis presents a summary of the responses from four different interviewees involved in Malta's tourism industry, focusing on rural tourism. The interviewees include an Officer of the Gozo Tourism Association (GTA), an investor in the hospitality industry, a building contractor, and an officer from the Planning Authority (PA). Each interview provides insights into the current state, challenges, opportunities and prospects of rural tourism in Malta, with particular attention to how it impacts the environment, local communities, and economic growth.

#### 4.4.1. Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry

*Table 13: Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry*

| <b>Topic</b>   | <b>Response Summary / Analysis</b>   |
|--|--|
| Interviewee 1:<br>Officer Gozo Tourism Association (GTA) | Strong recovery post-COVID, driven by increased connectivity, especially from Eastern Europe. However, concerns about declining tourist spending per capita, shorter stays, and overdevelopment of bed-stock affecting visitor satisfaction. |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry      | Malta's rich cultural heritage and location are key attractions. Growth in high-end tourism is promising, but regulatory challenges and maintaining quality remain important for sustainable success.  |
| Interviewee 3: Building Contractor                       | Focuses on the importance of tourism infrastructure to Malta's economy. Expresses concerns over the sustainability of rapid development and its impact on the environment.   |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of the Planning Authority (PA)    | Rural tourism is influenced by high population density and construction. Farmhouse rentals and eco-tourism are growing, but Malta still lacks immersive rural experiences compared to competitors.   |

All interviewees agree on the steady growth of tourism in Malta. The officers of the GTA and Planning Authority raise concerns about overdevelopment and infrastructure strain, while the investor and contractor focus more on the lucrative potential of the market. The challenge remains to ensure that growth is sustainable and aligned with the long-term needs of the islands (table 13).

#### 4.4.2. Main Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector

*Table 14: Main Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector*

| <b>Topic</b>                   | <b>Response Summary / Analysis</b>  |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Interviewee 1:<br>Officer Gozo | The officer identifies overdevelopment, lack of infrastructure, reliance on foreign labour, and declining visitor satisfaction as key challenges. |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| Tourism Association (GTA)                             | Additionally, the strain on natural resources and the authenticity of Malta's tourism product is a growing concern.  |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry   | The investor mentions regulatory issues and the need for better infrastructure. He highlights that navigating the local bureaucracy remains a significant hurdle and suggests improvements to support tourism growth.                            |
| Interviewee 3: Building Contractor                    | The contractor points out that the current infrastructure is insufficient to support ongoing developments. Obtaining permits is increasingly difficult and this could limit future growth in tourism.  |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of the Planning Authority (PA) | The officer highlights the ongoing challenge of balancing construction activities with rural tourism development. Rapid urbanisation and unregulated development threaten Malta's rural landscape, which is critical for tourism sustainability. |

The main challenges noted by the interviewees include overdevelopment, regulatory constraints, and insufficient infrastructure. The GTA and Planning Authority officers stress the need for long-term planning to manage these challenges, while the investor and contractor focus on regulatory and infrastructure improvements as per table 14. This said, it became also evident in the survey conducted that the locals also put forward such challenges. This shows the need for more strategic planning to take place.

#### 4.4.3. Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape

Table 15: Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape

| Topic   | Response Summary / Analysis  |
|---|--|
| Interviewee 1: Officer Gozo Tourism Association (GTA) | Developers are seen as key players in shaping Malta’s tourism landscape, as they take the financial risks in projects. However, the officer stresses that their actions should align with MTA's goals for sustainable tourism.         |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry   | The investor highlights that developers are critical to meeting the evolving demands of tourists. He values partnerships with visionary developers who are committed to sustainability.  |
| Interviewee 3: Building Contractor                    | The contractor views developers as central to the tourism sector, often leading to hotel and infrastructure development. His company focuses on both property development and long-term hotel investments, aligning with market needs. |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of the Planning Authority (PA) | The officer suggests that developers should collaborate more closely with local authorities to ensure their projects meet sustainability and rural tourism guidelines.   |

As noted in table 15 all interviewees acknowledge the pivotal role of developers in Malta’s tourism industry. The officers of the GTA and Planning Authority emphasise the need for responsible development aligned with sustainability, while the investor and contractor focus on the practicalities of meeting market demands. Hence, sustainability is a prominent factor which has to be endorsed by the state and eventually the investors and anyone concerned would be given opportunities, grants and initiatives to develop the rural holidaying experience in line with sustainable practices.

#### 4.4.4. Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta

Table 16: Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta

| Topic  | Response Summary / Analysis  |
|--|--|
| Interviewee 1:<br>Officer Gozo<br>Tourism Association<br>(GTA) | The officer sees great potential in rural tourism, particularly in Gozo, as a destination for wellness, gastronomy, and nature-based experiences. He argues that rural tourism should be positioned as a distinct, high-quality offering.                  |
| Interviewee 2:<br>Investor in the<br>Hospitality Industry      | The investor sees rural tourism as an untapped market with opportunities to develop eco-friendly resorts and cultural tourism projects. He believes rural tourism can attract a different segment of tourists.   |
| Interviewee 3:<br>Building Contractor                          | The contractor is less optimistic about rural tourism, citing restrictive policies on agritourism projects, particularly the limit on room numbers. He argues that the current regulatory environment discourages large-scale investment in rural tourism. |
| Interviewee 4:<br>Officer of the<br>Planning Authority<br>(PA) | The officer sees rural tourism as an important growth area but stresses the need for genuine projects that do not exploit policies for recreational development. He also advocates for policies that ensure rural landscapes are preserved.                |

The officer of the GTA and investor view rural tourism as a key growth area, particularly in Gozo. However, the contractor is pessimistic due to restrictive policies, while the Planning Authority officer calls for stronger regulation to ensure genuine rural tourism projects (table 16). As already mentioned, providing an in-depth but workable framework is needed for rural tourism to flourish.

#### 4.4.5. Strategies for Promoting Sustainable and Rural Tourism

Table 17: Strategies for Promoting Sustainable and Rural Tourism

| Topic  | Response Summary / Analysis   |
|--|---|
| Interviewee 1:<br>Officer Gozo<br>Tourism<br>Association (GTA) | The officer highlights MTA's long-term strategies focused on sustainability, quality, and diversification. Projects like the Gozo Museum and Gozo Natatorium are examples of how rural tourism can be promoted sustainably.         |
| Interviewee 2:<br>Investor in the<br>Hospitality Industry      | The investor emphasizes eco-friendly practices in his projects, such as boutique hotels that incorporate local culture and sustainability. He believes this will attract high-end tourists and help rural tourism grow sustainably. |
| Interviewee 3:<br>Building Contractor                          | The contractor stresses the importance of energy-efficient infrastructure in his projects. For example, the use of solar panels and energy-saving cladding in developments ensures sustainability in hotel construction.            |
| Interviewee 4:<br>Officer of the<br>Planning Authority<br>(PA) | The officer believes that policy enforcement is crucial to promoting sustainable rural tourism. He advocates for policies that protect rural landscapes while promoting responsible tourism growth.                                 |

Sustainability is a common theme among all interviewees as noted in table 17. The GTA officer and investor focus on broader strategies for sustainable tourism, while the contractor and Planning Authority officer highlight the importance of responsible development and policy enforcement. In this light, it is evident that such stakeholders would be a prominent asset in providing a framework which would definitely be respectful towards both the rural environment and the local heritage.

#### 4.4.6. Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas

Table 18: Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas

| Topic   | Response Summary / Analysis  |
|---|--|
| Interviewee 1:<br>Officer Gozo<br>Tourism Association     | The officer believes tourism can bring economic benefits to rural areas, but also stresses the importance of managing growth to prevent environmental degradation and maintain local authenticity.                 |
| Interviewee 2:<br>Investor in the<br>Hospitality Industry | The investor sees both positive and negative impacts of tourism on rural areas. While it can generate income for local communities, there is a risk of environmental harm if not managed sustainably.              |
| Interviewee 3:<br>Building Contractor                     | The contractor is concerned about the pressure tourism places on rural infrastructure, particularly in terms of water and energy resources. He highlights the need for careful planning to mitigate these impacts. |
| Interviewee 4:<br>Officer of the<br>Planning Authority    | The officer highlights that rural tourism can restore dilapidated buildings and agricultural land but warns of the increased demand on electricity, water, and drainage systems.                                   |

While tourism can drive economic benefits in rural areas, all interviewees agree on the need for careful management to avoid environmental degradation (table 18). The Planning Authority officer and contractor focus on infrastructure challenges, while the GTA officer and investor emphasise the economic and social potential of rural tourism. What becomes prominent is the need for proper merging of these ideas so that the outcome would be beneficial for all.

#### 4.4.7. Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism

Table 19: Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism

| Topic  | Response Summary / Analysis   |
|--|---|
| Interviewee 1: Officer<br>Gozo Tourism Association     | The officer believes that local farmers play a key role in rural tourism by providing authentic experiences. He suggests collaboration between farmers and tourism operators to create hands-on experiences for tourists.     |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in<br>the Hospitality Industry | The investor sees agritourism as a way for farmers to diversify their income while enhancing the tourism experience. He suggests farm stays and local food tastings as potential offerings.                                   |
| Interviewee 3: Building<br>Contractor                  | The contractor views farmers as essential to rural tourism, particularly through providing produce to local hotels. He suggests that more partnerships between farmers and tourism operators could create unique experiences. |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of<br>the Planning Authority    | The officer agrees that farmers are vital for rural tourism. He stresses that agritourism can provide additional income for farmers while preserving local traditions and landscapes.   |

All interviewees agree on the importance of engaging farmers in rural tourism. Agritourism is seen as a key avenue for income diversification and enhancing the authenticity of the tourism experience as per table 19.

#### 4.4.8. Adequacy of Current Development Policies

Table 20: Adequacy of Current Development Policies

| Topic   | Response Summary / Analysis   |
|---|---|
| Interviewee 1: Officer Gozo Tourism Association     | The GTA officer believes that current policies are insufficient and need revision to better support rural tourism. He calls for policies that align with MTA's sustainability goals.                                    |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry | The investor believes current policies are a good start but sees room for improvement, particularly in offering incentives for sustainable tourism development.   |
| Interviewee 3: Building Contractor                  | The contractor is critical of current policies, particularly the restrictive laws governing rural and agritourism developments. He argues that larger developments should be allowed to make rural tourism more viable. |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of the Planning Authority    | The officer agrees that while current policies are supportive, enforcement needs to be improved. He advocates for stricter regulation to ensure projects are genuinely aligned with rural tourism goals.                |

All interviewees agree that current policies need revision or better enforcement as noted in table 20. The contractor and Planning Authority officer focus on regulatory challenges, while the GTA officer and investor highlight the need for more comprehensive policies that align with sustainability and support rural tourism growth.

#### 4.4.9. Opportunities for Future Investment and Development in Rural Tourism

Table 21: Opportunities for Future Investment and Development in Rural Tourism

| Topic   | Response Summary / Analysis   |
|---|---|
| Interviewee 1: Officer Gozo Tourism Association     | The GTA officer identifies Gozo as a key area for future rural tourism development, focusing on wellness, gastronomy, and nature-based activities. He believes that Gozo should be positioned as a distinct, high-end rural tourism destination.  |
| Interviewee 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry | The investor sees significant opportunities in eco-friendly resorts and cultural tourism projects in rural areas. He suggests developing unique, immersive experiences that cater to high-end tourists seeking authentic rural and cultural engagement.   |
| Interviewee 3: Building Contractor                  | The contractor is less optimistic about rural tourism investments due to the current restrictive policies limiting agritourism projects. He believes that until these policies change, rural tourism development is not financially viable.   |
| Interviewee 4: Officer of the Planning Authority    | The officer supports future rural tourism development but stresses that genuine, sustainable projects should be prioritised. He believes there is potential for growth, but developers and policymakers must collaborate closely to ensure projects benefit both the local economy and the environment. |

The GTA officer and investor see rural tourism as a promising area for future investment, with a focus on sustainable and high-quality experiences. However, the contractor is less optimistic due to current regulatory barriers. The Planning Authority officer supports growth but insists on stricter regulation and genuine rural tourism initiatives as per table 21.

#### **4.4.10. Conclusion of Semi-Structured Interviews Analysis**

The semi structured interviews provide a comprehensive view of the various perspectives on tourism and rural tourism development in Malta. While all interviewees agree on the growth potential of the tourism industry, particularly in the rural sector, there is consensus on the need for careful management of development to avoid overburdening Malta's infrastructure and environment.

Challenges such as overdevelopment, regulatory constraints, and insufficient infrastructure were highlighted by all interviewees. Despite this, there is optimism about the future of rural tourism, especially in Gozo, with opportunities for high-end, sustainable, and culturally immersive experiences.

The role of developers is crucial in shaping Malta's tourism landscape, though more collaboration with public authorities and stricter policies are needed to ensure sustainable practices. Farmers are also seen as essential partners in rural tourism. This is because agritourism offers potential income diversification and authentic experiences for tourists.

Finally, while current development policies offer some support, there is broad agreement that these policies need updating and better enforcement. In this way the full potential of rural tourism in Malta can be exploited. Indeed, future investment should focus on sustainability, infrastructure improvement and regulatory reform to create a thriving rural tourism sector that benefits both the local population and the environment.

#### **4.4.11. Cross Analysis**

This table provides a cross-analysis of key topics related to Malta's tourism industry based on interview data and insights gathered from various stakeholders. These include the CEO of the Gozo Tourism Association, an investor in the hospitality industry, a building contractor and an officer from the Planning Authority. Each topic highlights critical viewpoints on the current state of the tourism industry, the challenges it faces and the potential for future growth.

The analysis in table 22 brings out the diverse viewpoints of the questionnaire respondents and interviewees. It focuses on the role of developers, the importance of sustainable tourism practices,

the impact of tourism on rural areas and the involvement of local farmers. The analysis also addresses the extent at which current policies are adequate and the future opportunities for investment and development. Moreover, a comprehensive overview of the opportunities and challenges Malta faces in balancing growth with sustainability, is presented. This cross-analysis offers valuable insights for policymakers, developers and stakeholders looking to enhance Malta's rural tourism sector.

*Table 22: Cross Analysis*

| Topic  | Analysis   |
|--|--|
| 1. Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry | The consensus is that Malta's tourism industry is recovering strongly post-COVID, with a notable increase in arrivals, particularly from Eastern Europe. However, concerns are raised about a decline in the quality of tourists, as well as infrastructural strain due to high bed-stock. There is a need to balance tourist numbers with quality to ensure sustainable growth.               |
| 2. Main Challenges Facing the Tourism Sector             | The primary challenges identified include overdevelopment, infrastructure strain, a drop in tourist spending per capita, and reliance on foreign labour. All interviewees highlight the tension between the construction industry and sustainable tourism, emphasising that without proper planning, the quality of the tourism product will be undermined.                                    |
| 3. Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape   | Developers play a crucial role in shaping Malta's tourism landscape through infrastructure development. However, the lack of clear guidelines, especially in boutique hotels, is a challenge. While developers are essential for economic growth, there is a need for better collaboration between them and authorities to ensure that developments align with sustainable tourism objectives. |
| 4. Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta                   | All interviewees recognize the potential of rural tourism, particularly in Gozo. However, concerns about overdevelopment, regulatory constraints (such as the 20-room limit on rural accommodations), and infrastructure limitations are recurrent themes. Stakeholders  |

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | agree that with the right policies and investment, rural tourism could significantly contribute to Malta's tourism offering.  |
| 5. Strategies for Promoting Sustainable and Rural Tourism | There is broad agreement that sustainability must be at the core of tourism strategies. Suggestions include promoting eco-friendly practices, adopting renewable energy, reducing waste and making sure that tourism growth is in line with environmental preservation. Local communities and farmers should be at the forefront to these strategies, where more emphasis on sustainable agriculture and agritourism is placed.                               |
| 6. Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas                       | Rural tourism can provide economic benefits, such as job creation and local business development. However, without proper controls, it can put local resources at a disadvantage. This leads to negative environmental impacts such as overconsumption of water, electricity and also waste management. Both positive and negative impacts must be balanced and this can be done through responsible tourism management and proper infrastructure investment. |
| 7. Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism                       | Farmers are seen as key players in rural tourism, particularly in agritourism and farm-based activities. Through initiatives such as "farm-to-table" experiences and agritourism farmers will diversify their income and enhance the authenticity of the rural tourism product. However, more policies and incentives are needed to encourage farmer participation.   |
| 8. Adequacy of Current Development Policies               | There is a consensus that current policies need to be updated to support rural tourism better. The Planning Authority and MTA policies are sometimes misaligned, causing confusion for investors and developers. Clearer guidelines, especially regarding rural tourism projects, are necessary to encourage more genuine, sustainable developments.  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>9. Opportunities for Future Investment and Development in Rural Tourism</p> | <p>The opportunities for rural tourism in Malta, particularly in Gozo, are significant. Future investment in eco-tourism, agritourism, wellness, and cultural experiences could provide sustainable growth. However, these opportunities will only be realised if regulatory frameworks are reformed to make rural tourism more viable and attractive to investors. Better infrastructure and flexible policies are essential for success.</p> |
|--|--|

The cross-analysis of interviewee responses and questionnaire data highlights a shared optimism for the future of rural tourism in Malta. However, it also underscores the significant challenges that need to be addressed. All stakeholders do indeed recognise the economic potential of rural tourism, particularly in areas like eco-tourism, wellness and gastronomy. Indeed, Gozo is considered a prime location for growth. However, overdevelopment, regulatory challenges and infrastructure limitations are recurring themes that slow down the realisation of this potential.

While there is agreement on the need for sustainable practices, the approaches to achieving them vary. Consequently, policymakers and developers need to align their objectives better, particularly by revising regulations to facilitate investment in rural tourism without compromising environmental integrity. Farmers are seen as essential contributors to rural tourism, but their full engagement requires clearer policies and stronger incentives.

In summary, rural tourism in Malta and Gozo has the potential to enable economic growth and cultural preservation. However, it requires a concerted effort from public authorities, private investors, developers and local communities to ensure its sustainable development. Future policy reforms, infrastructure investments and community engagement will definitely be critical in allowing the full benefits of rural tourism to flourish while safeguarding Malta’s natural and cultural heritage, as well.

**4.5. Discussion**

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the results derived from both the semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and the responses to the questionnaire. The discussion is structured to interpret these findings, linking them to the research questions that guide this study. It shall explore the current state of rural tourism in Malta, its socio-economic

contributions, the challenges it faces and the strategies that can enhance its growth and its sustainability.

#### **4.5.1. Interpretation of Results**

The semi-structured interviews with stakeholders such as an officer of the Gozo Tourism Association, an investor in the hospitality industry, a building contractor and an officer from the Planning Authority, combined with the questionnaire data, reveal critical insights into the rural tourism landscape in Malta.

The questionnaire responses indicate a growing familiarity with rural tourism among Maltese residents, with most respondents recognising its benefits. Most see rural tourism as beneficial to the socio-economic development of rural areas, providing local employment opportunities and supporting sustainable development practices. However, both the semi-structured interviews and the questionnaire results highlight significant barriers to its growth, including policy restrictions, lack of infrastructure and environmental concerns.

The semi-structured interviews further confirm that while there is a growing interest in rural tourism, particularly in Gozo, the potential of this sector remains underdeveloped due to restrictive policies and the high cost of investment. Stakeholders agree that more needs to be done to promote rural tourism as a sustainable alternative to mainstream tourism, and the data supports the need for stronger government incentives, improved infrastructure, and better alignment between policy and practice.

#### **4.5.2. Results Organised by Research Questions**

Research Question 1: What is the current state of rural tourism in Malta, and how does it compare with other forms of tourism on the islands?

According to the questionnaire results, most respondents are familiar with the concept of rural tourism, but many have yet to engage with it directly. Most tourism activity remains concentrated in mainstream urban settings. Stakeholders from the semi-structured interviews echoed this, stating that while rural tourism has potential, it is currently overshadowed by urban development

and large-scale tourism projects. Rural tourism activities, such as staying in farmhouses, local food experiences, and eco-friendly accommodations, are growing but still lack the volume of other tourism sectors.

Research Question 2: How does rural tourism contribute to the socio-economic development of rural communities in Malta?

Questionnaire responses suggest that rural tourism is viewed positively for its potential to boost local economies and create employment. Most respondents believe that prioritising rural tourism can generate job opportunities and support local businesses, especially in agricultural and gastronomy-based tourism. The officer of the Gozo Tourism Association and the Planning Authority officer also stressed that rural tourism helps preserve rural traditions, engage local farmers, and reinstate agricultural land, all of which contribute to the socio-economic well-being of rural communities.

Research Question 3: What are the main challenges and barriers to the development of rural tourism in Malta?

The primary challenges identified in the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews include regulatory restrictions, limited room capacity, and infrastructure deficits. Respondents to the questionnaire highlighted a lack of awareness of funding opportunities and insufficient infrastructure in rural areas, such as transportation and accommodation. The Planning Authority officer and the building contractor noted that current policies are too restrictive, particularly for agritourism, where development is capped at 20 rooms. Environmental sustainability is another concern, with stakeholders emphasising the need to balance tourism development with environmental preservation.

Research Question 4: What strategies can be implemented to enhance the sustainability and growth of rural tourism in Malta, while preserving the cultural and natural heritage of the islands?

Both the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire results suggest that the key strategies for improving rural tourism include improving infrastructure, increasing government funding and incentives and promoting sustainable practices. The officer of the Gozo Tourism Association pointed out the importance of focusing on quality rather than quantity, particularly in Gozo. This

is because rural tourism has the potential to cater for high-end tourists. Additionally, the need for clearer policies that align with the goals of rural tourism, such as better guidelines for boutique hotels and more flexible development regulations, was repeatedly mentioned. Respondents also emphasised the role of local communities and farmers in shaping rural tourism, suggesting that agritourism and gastronomy experiences could be the significant selling points for tourists.

#### **4.5.3. Implications for Practice**

For rural tourism to unlock its full potential in Malta, a more detailed strategy is needed. Based on the findings from both the questionnaire and interviews, several practical implications arise:

- i. **Policy Revisions:** Current regulations should be revised to allow for larger rural tourism developments while ensuring environmental sustainability. Clearer guidelines for boutique hotels and other small-scale accommodations would also benefit the sector.
- ii. **Infrastructure Development:** Significant improvements are needed in rural infrastructure. These include better transportation and accommodation options. This would make rural areas more accessible and attractive to both local and international tourists.
- iii. **Community and Farmer Engagement:** Local communities, especially farmers, should be more actively involved in rural tourism initiatives. By offering authentic agricultural experiences and local food production tours, these can provide a unique opportunity for tourists whilst in turn also benefitting the rural economies.
- iv. **Sustainability Practices:** A focus on eco-friendly and sustainable tourism practices is imperative. Promoting rural tourism as a green alternative to mass tourism could attract environmentally conscious tourists and help preserve Malta's cultural and natural heritage.

#### **4.6. Conclusion of the Chapter**

The findings from both the semi-structured interviews and the questionnaire indicate that rural tourism in Malta holds great potential but is currently underdeveloped due to regulatory, financial, and infrastructural challenges. However, with the right strategies such as policy reform, infrastructure investment, and a focus on sustainability, rural tourism can become a key contributor to the socio-economic development of Malta's rural communities. In particular, Gozo has the opportunity to position itself as a premier rural tourism destination, offering high-quality, low-density tourism experiences that align with global trends toward sustainable travel. The following chapter moves on to bringing about a synthesis to the outcomes and the way forward, projecting recommendations and also further areas of study.

## 5. Final Arguments

This chapter moves on to summarising the key findings of the research and attributing them to the aims and objectives established in this research. The chapter evaluates whether the aims have been met, examines the implications of the findings and presents evidence-based recommendations. Moreover, it assesses the reliability and validity of the research, providing also a foundation for future research directions.

### 5.1. Key Findings

The review of literature on rural tourism development reveals several significant aspects, though it must be noted that much of the available literature pertains to global examples, with limited peer-reviewed articles specifically focused on the Maltese Islands. This highlighted a research gap that future studies should aim to address. Considering the research conducted, the outcome brought forward linked with what the research itself outlined. Key findings which emerge include:

- i. **Economic Significance:** Rural tourism has the potential to foster economic growth, create jobs, and diversify the tourism sector. While global examples demonstrate its contribution to GDP, there is a need for more specific data on the economic impact of rural tourism in Malta. Indeed, as Malta is reaching an ageing population, tourism in Malta is moving away from advertising only the sun and sea. People are now being offered yet more to their experience in Malta and Gozo. They can indulge in the rural atmospheric experiences and enjoy the tranquillity of rural life, the gastronomic experiences and cultural and religious traditions which leave a mark on their holiday.
- ii. **Cultural Preservation:** Rural tourism plays a crucial role in preserving cultural heritage and traditions. However, limited literature exists on how effectively this is applied within Malta, indicating a need for further exploration of local community engagement and cultural conservation strategies. Definitely, Malta and Gozo have so much to offer to the locals, let alone to tourists. There is a vast history pertaining to these islands and it is worth exposing to the experiences that tourists enjoy on our islands. Subsidising cultural and historical preservation will definitely bring about more positive outcomes to rural tourism, just as the stakeholders interviewed made explicitly clear.

- iii. **Sustainability Concerns:** Across global examples, challenges such as infrastructural limitations, seasonality and environmental conservation concerns are common. Malta faces similar issues, but the absence of comprehensive studies on these aspects in the local context presents an opportunity for future research. In fact, the stakeholders interviewed raised this situation as well, pointing out that sustainability is a must and the more work invested in this area, the more rural tourism can flourish. Consequently, this would enable more work opportunities and create better venues for locals and tourists. Moreover, seasonality would be reduced. This said, one needs to keep in mind that holidaying has taken a different turn, in that tourists like to take short holidays all year round. Promoting Malta and Gozo as a possible venue, not just for the sea and sun, would bring about more tourists in other seasons.
  
- iv. **Technological Integration:** Technology is recognised as a key tool for marketing, online bookings and enhancing visitor experiences in rural tourism. While international studies show its impact, more research is needed on the integration of technology in Malta's rural tourism offerings. By keeping oneself updated continuously, Malta and Gozo would remain in the market for holidaying all year round. Surely, a lot can be done so that both Malta and Gozo would be properly advertised, allowing for the cultural and historical experiences to be enjoyed all year round. One has to keep in mind that tourism trends are constantly changing and therefore it is important that, through technological integration, one would remain abreast of the current trends.

## 5.2. Limitations

The lack of peer-reviewed articles focusing on Malta's rural tourism represents a significant limitation in the current literature. This gap presents opportunities for future research to explore rural tourism's specific economic, cultural and environmental impacts within the Maltese context. Addressing these gaps would provide policymakers and stakeholders with critical insights to develop tailored strategies for sustainable rural tourism growth in Malta.

### 5.3. Framework for Future Research

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Addressing Infrastructural Limitations               | <b>Infrastructure Development:</b> Research on infrastructural improvements in rural areas, focusing on enhancing connectivity, accommodations and basic amenities to attract and accommodate tourists year-round. |
| Mitigating Seasonality Challenges                    | <b>Diversification Strategies:</b> Investigate strategies to diversify tourism offerings and promote off-season activities to sustain economic viability throughout the year.                                      |
| Community Involvement and Cultural Preservation      | <b>Community Engagement Models:</b> Research on effective community engagement models in rural tourism planning and implementation to preserve cultural heritage while ensuring community acceptance.              |
| Sustainable Practices and Environmental Conservation | <b>Sustainable Tourism Practices:</b> Explore innovative sustainable practices and technologies to mitigate environmental impacts while promoting responsible tourism behaviour.                                   |
| Technological Integration for Enhanced Experiences   | <b>Technology and Visitor Experience:</b> Study the role of technology in providing immersive experiences, virtual tours, and augmented reality to enhance rural tourism offerings.                                |

### 5.4. Recommendations for Implementation

**Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration:** Foster collaboration between academia, government bodies, tourism operators and local communities for comprehensive and sustainable rural tourism strategies.

**Policy Integration:** Integrate findings into policy frameworks to support rural tourism development, focusing on sustainability, community engagement and infrastructure enhancement. One of the key insights from the semi-structured interviews with stakeholders in the tourism and construction sectors, particularly with the building contractor, was that the current rural tourism policy, which restricts agritourism developments to a maximum of 20 rooms, is a major barrier to investment. The contractor emphasised that this limitation significantly reduces the financial viability of rural tourism projects. Expanding the permissible room capacity would attract more investment by making such developments economically feasible. This conclusion is based on the practical challenges raised by industry stakeholders and is aligned with the broader need to balance tourism growth with sustainable development in rural areas. Moreover, it is important to align policies between the Planning Authority and Malta Tourism Authority to create a cohesive strategy that supports rural tourism development while preserving natural landscapes.

**State of Rural Tourism:** The research indicates that rural tourism in Malta is in its developmental stages, with growing interest but significant barriers to its full potential. While urban tourism remains dominant, rural tourism, especially in Gozo, has untapped potential. The findings confirm that Malta's rural tourism sector is still overshadowed by mainstream tourism but offers unique opportunities for sustainable and cultural tourism, particularly through the means of agritourism, local gastronomy and eco-friendly experiences.

**Contribution to Socio-Economic Development:** Rural tourism has the potential to support local economies by creating jobs, preserving agricultural land and diversifying income sources for farmers. It is seen as a valuable tool for socio-economic development in rural communities. However, its full contribution remains limited due to policy and infrastructure challenges. Overcoming these challenges would enable more work opportunities, which are not related to tourism only. In fact, by sustaining, renovating and upholding cultural and historical events and venues, thus promoting a shift from seasonality, work opportunities would become available all year round. Moreover, it will also offer more venues and experiences for locals, who in return would be spending money and generating an economic uplift as well.

**Strategies for Sustainability:** Stakeholders agreed that improving infrastructure, aligning policy with rural tourism goals, and increasing government support are necessary for the sector to grow. The need for sustainable practices, such as integrating eco-friendly initiatives and engaging local farmers was also emphasised. Farmers need to be given more incentives and opportunities,

allowing them to expand in their area. Moreover, initiatives must be taken to motivate locals back into this business, since in the past years there has been a decline in interest from the young generation to work in this sector. This gives rise for further studies on how to reduce this decline. This said, one needs to improve transportation, accommodation and amenities, to make rural areas more accessible and attractive to both tourists and investors.

**Promote Eco-Friendly Practices:** Encourage rural tourism businesses to adopt green initiatives, such as the use of renewable energy sources (e.g., solar panels), water conservation systems, and waste reduction strategies like composting and recycling. These practices should not only be implemented but also marketed as part of the brand identity of rural tourism establishments. This is because eco-conscious travellers are more likely to seek out sustainable destinations.

**Certification Programmes:** Introduce or promote certification programmes that recognise sustainable tourism practices. Examples would include Green Key or Eco-Certification. The aim is to provide incentives for businesses to adopt environmentally friendly measures. This can also serve as a marketing tool to attract eco-conscious tourists.

**Collaborative Partnerships:** Foster partnerships between rural tourism operators and local environmental organisations to support biodiversity conservation and eco-system protection. This could include supporting the management of protected areas, offering eco-tours that raise awareness about conservation or even funding local sustainability projects.

**Community and Farmer Engagement:** These ascertain that sustainability practices involve local communities and farmers, providing them with economic opportunities through employment or sourcing local products and incorporating traditional sustainable practices into tourism offerings. Engaging communities strengthens local buy-in and helps maintain a sustainable relationship between tourism and the local environment. Moreover, it is important to develop programmes that enable tourists to experience local agriculture, food production and rural lifestyles. This creates new income streams for farmers and also enriches the overall tourist experience.

**Incentives to Business and Government Support:** Offer incentives for businesses that prioritise sustainability, such as tax benefits or grants for eco-friendly developments. Furthermore, it is important that there would be an increase in government funding and EU grants specifically

for rural tourism projects. Provide financial incentives for small businesses and local entrepreneurs to invest in rural tourism, especially in underdeveloped areas like Gozo.

**Capacity Building:** Invest in training programmes to empower local communities with skills and knowledge to actively participate in and benefit from rural tourism initiatives.

**Rural Policy Alignment:** The rural policy, while providing a framework for development, limits growth in areas like agritourism due to its stringent room capacity limits. There is also a lack of government incentives to encourage investment in rural areas. This said, investment could also take place on buildings and places which already exist, allowing for refurbishing and revitalising. Using such existing places would allow for sustainability. Such places would be preserved and in turn less green spaces would be taken over.

**Promote Rural Tourism Internationally:** Develop targeted marketing campaigns that promote Malta and Gozo as rural tourism destinations, focusing on their unique cultural heritage, natural beauty, and eco-friendly options. Positioning rural tourism as an exclusive, high-quality experience will attract a different tourist demographic and reduce pressure on urban areas.

In conclusion, this research shows that, rural tourism in Malta requires more targeted development to reach its full potential. Future policies should focus on easing restrictions, supporting sustainable practices, and promoting rural tourism as a high-quality alternative to mass tourism. In this way, Malta and Gozo would benefit from work opportunities, increased income and better venues made available for tourists and locals, to enjoy all year round.

## **5.5. Evaluation, Reliability, and Validity**

The reliability and validity of this research were ensured through multiple methods. First, the use of both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) data provided a comprehensive understanding of the subject. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from different sectors, adding depth and multiple perspectives to the findings.

The questionnaire reached a diverse group of respondents, and the analysis of both interview and questionnaire data was consistent with existing literature on rural tourism challenges and opportunities.

However, some limitations should be acknowledged. The research relied heavily on stakeholder opinions, which, while valuable, may not represent the full spectrum of views within the tourism industry. Additionally, the sample size for the questionnaire could have been expanded to include more stakeholders from different areas of rural tourism. Despite these limitations, the findings are valid and provide a clear direction for future policy and development.

## **5.6. Chapter Conclusion**

The research aimed to explore the current state of rural tourism in Malta, its contribution to socio-economic development, the challenges it faces and potential strategies to enhance its sustainability. Through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and analysis of questionnaire responses, the study has largely met these objectives. The study confirms that, rural tourism in Malta still faces significant challenges, and the recommendations make it clear that a lot still needs to be done for rural tourism to be fully integrated in Malta and Gozo.

However, rural tourism is a vast and multifaceted subject that encompasses various dimensions, including economic development, sustainability, cultural preservation, and community engagement. Due to the broad nature of the topic, this study was unable to delve deeply into each individual aspect. Instead, it focused on providing a holistic overview of the implementation of rural tourism in the Maltese Islands, identifying key areas of opportunity and concern. As a result, it has managed to bring out a lot that can be done, allowing for rural tourism to flourish even further and bring about advantages not just for the tourists but also to the locals.

Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impact of rural tourism policies, the role of sustainable practices in tourism development, and the socio-economic benefits of engaging local communities and farmers in tourism. Additionally, deeper studies focusing on specific aspects such as sustainable tourism practices or community engagement could provide further insights. Expanding the study to include comparative analysis with other Mediterranean rural tourism destinations, such as Sicily, could also provide valuable strategies and best practices for Malta's rural tourism growth.

Definitely, this framework offers a roadmap to bridge existing gaps and propel rural tourism in the Maltese Islands towards a more sustainable, inclusive, and vibrant future. It is through the effort of everyone that rural tourism can grow and bring about the advantages outlined in this research. Therefore, it would be an incredible journey if the outcomes and recommendations of this research were to be taken on board by the concerned stakeholders so that change can take place and Malta and Gozo can open up new pathways of indelible experiences both to the tourists and to the locals.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Information Note and Consent for Online Questionnaire

Section 1 of 3

## Rural Tourism Development : A Case Study of the Maltese Islands Survey

**B** *I* U ↻ ✕

This questionnaire aims to gather valuable insights and perspectives on the potential development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo. Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated as it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the feasibility and impact of rural tourism initiatives on the Maltese Islands. The questionnaire is designed to explore key aspects including sustainable development, economic contributions, cultural preservation and community engagement within the context of rural tourism. Your participation is on a voluntary basis and you will remain anonymous.

Appendix 2 – Information Sheet and Consent for Interviews

**Title: Rural Tourism Development: A Case Study of the Maltese Islands.**

Institute of Tourism Studies

**TEMPLATE**

Name of Researcher: .....

Name of Principal Supervisor: .....

.....

Information Letter for Semi-structured Interviews

March 2024

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Andre Refalo and I am currently reading for a Bachelor in International Hospitality Management (B.I.H.M). As part of my research study entitled 'Rural Tourism Development : A Case Study of the Maltese Islands', I aim to conduct interviews with a number of stakeholders linked with this topic. The study aims to gather valuable insights and perspectives on the potential development of rural tourism in Malta and Gozo.

Indeed, your participation in this study is greatly appreciated as it will contribute to a deeper understanding of the feasibility and impact of rural tourism initiatives in the Maltese Islands. The interview is designed to explore key aspects including sustainable development, economic contributions, cultural preservation, and community engagement within the context of rural tourism.

## **Type of Research Intervention and Participant Selection**

The research undertaken shall adopt a mixed method approach where interviews will be conducted, whilst a questionnaire survey will be distributed amongst the community. As for the interviews, four stakeholders closely linked with rural tourism shall be interviewed. In fact, you are kindly being asked to be one of such persons.

## **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and at any time throughout the research, you can decide to opt out. Therefore, it is your choice whether to participate or not, since the choice that you make will have no bearing on your job or on any work-related evaluations or reports.

## **Procedures and Duration**

An appointment will be set, at your discretion and the researcher can meet with you at any day and time you deem appropriate. The interview is aimed at lasting not more than 45 minutes.

## **Risks**

In conducting this research, there might be the risk where research content may influence the image of the person. However, in order to overcome this, the people involved will remain anonymous. Also, attention will be paid to seeing that no information which might enable anyone to decipher any persons or institution involved in the study will be passed over.

## **Confidentiality**

As already outlined in the 'risks' section, I will do my utmost to see that with the information handed over, no one and/or no school will be identified in the research.

## **Sharing the Results**

If you feel that you would like to see the results before they are published you can e-mail me in a month's time.

## **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

Indeed, as outlined before, you do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so. Moreover, if you accept, at any time you can still decide to opt out freely. This said, I feel that your contribution is essential to this study and hence I urge you to participate.

## **Who to Contact**

Researcher: Andre Refalo

Mob: 79565313

E-mail: [andrerefalo99@gmail.com](mailto:andrerefalo99@gmail.com)

Indeed, a study of this sort has rarely taken place in Malta and Gozo, and I feel that the results will be very fruitful from different perspectives. Hence, I kindly ask you to accept my request for your participation, as I feel that your contribution can be highly beneficial to this study. All this said, if you feel that there are any questions that you would like to ask, please feel free to do so.

Whilst thanking you for taking the time to read this letter, I remain,

Yours faithfully,

---

Andre Refalo

## Consent from Semi-Structured Interviewer

I have been invited to participate in the outlined study. This will take place throughout the year 2024 and my role will involve participating in an interview. I have read the *Information Letter* and I understand that my participation is voluntary, allowing me to withdraw at any time without suffering any negative consequence. Moreover, I am aware that all the data will be destroyed six months after the study would have been published. Finally, I have also had the opportunity to ask questions about this study and I was answered to my satisfaction. Therefore, I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

**Print Name of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Statement by the researcher/person taking consent

I have accurately went over the *Information Letter* with the potential participant and to the best of my ability made sure that the participant understands its content. I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. The *Information Letter* has been given to the participant.

**Name of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Researcher:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 3 – Transcripts of the interviews conducted

### Interview 1: Officer Gozo Tourism Association

*Table 23: Officer Gozo Tourism Association*

| Question   | Response Summary / Analysis  |
|--|--|
| 1. Overview of the Current State of the Tourism Industry | The tourism industry is recovering after COVID-19. Increased connectivity, especially from the Eastern Bloc (e.g., Poland), is driving growth. Challenges include a decrease in the average length of stay and a drop in tourist spending per capita, signalling a shift toward quantity over quality. |
|  | Key challenges include overdevelopment, strain on infrastructure, and reliance on foreign labour, affecting service quality. Retaining local talent in the tourism sector is problematic due to competition from other industries.   |
| 3. Collaboration with Key Stakeholders                   | MTA collaborates with airlines, Malta International Airport, and stakeholders to promote the islands, enhance connectivity, and improve the tourism product through fairs, media trips, and tour operator engagements.   |
| 4. Strategies for Promoting Sustainable Tourism          | MTA has long-term initiatives focusing on economic, environmental, and social sustainability. These include improving product quality and balancing tourist quantity with quality.   |
| 5. Future of Malta's Tourism Industry                    | The GTA officer emphasizes the need to shift focus from increasing tourist arrivals to improving quality. Malta, due to its size, should prioritize high-quality tourism, particularly in Gozo, which should target high-economic-standard tourists.   |

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| <p>6. Ongoing or Planned Initiatives</p>                      | <p>Initiatives include the Gozo Natatorium and the Gozo Museum, aimed at enhancing cultural heritage and expanding the sports tourism niche.</p>   |
| <p>7. Measuring Success and Impact of Initiatives</p>         | <p>Success is measured through increases in arrivals and repeat visits, especially from newly connected markets. Niche tourism performance and visitor satisfaction are also key indicators.</p>                   |
| <p>8. Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape</p> | <p>Developers are crucial in shaping tourism by taking investment risks. MTA provides regulatory and advisory support to ensure new projects align with tourism policies and standards.</p>                        |
| <p>9. Specific Projects or Collaborations</p>                 | <p>MTA collaborates with developers on accommodation projects and local councils on tourism infrastructure improvements, such as beach enhancements and park development.</p>                                      |
| <p>10. Future Relationship Between MTA and Developers</p>     | <p>The GTA officer advocates closer collaboration between MTA and building developers to mitigate the negative impact of construction on tourism, especially during peak seasons.</p>                              |
| <p>11. Potential of Rural Tourism in Malta</p>                | <p>MTA's 2021-2030 strategy prioritizes rural tourism, especially in Gozo, focusing on nature, wellness, and low-density tourism. Gozo's tranquil environment positions it well for rural tourism development.</p> |
| <p>12. Market Segments for Rural Tourism</p>                  | <p>Rural tourism in Malta caters to segments like gastronomy, hiking, cycling, and agri-tourism activities such as farm visits and fruit picking.</p>  |
| <p>13. Key Challenges in Developing Rural Tourism</p>         | <p>Overdevelopment is a significant challenge. Preserving Malta's natural landscape and implementing policies that protect rural areas from excessive construction is essential.</p>                               |
| <p>14. Policy Support for Rural Tourism</p>                   | <p>Current policies must be aligned and improved to support rural tourism. Coherence is needed between authorities, particularly MTA and the Planning Authority.</p>   |

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| 15. Farmers' Engagement in Rural Tourism                     | Collaboration between farmers and the tourism sector can diversify incomes and enhance the tourism experience through agricultural-based activities.  |
| 16. Adequacy of Funding for Rural Tourism                    | More funding opportunities are needed to support rural tourism, particularly in niche markets that require significant investment.  |
| 17. Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas                         | Tourism drives economic and social change in rural areas by promoting cultural and natural heritage conservation. It stimulates local businesses and job creation, contributing to rural development.   |
| 18. Control Measures to Protect the Environment              | Policies designed specifically for rural tourism are essential for sustainable growth. Renovating derelict farmhouses for tourist accommodations is an example of sustainable development.  |
| 19. Motivating Factors for Visitors to Choose Rural Tourism  | Visitors are drawn to Malta's natural, relaxing atmosphere and the opportunity to engage in rural activities. Rural tourism enhances the tourist experience by connecting them with nature and local culture.   |
| 20. Prioritizing a Niche Area in Rural Tourism               | The officer identifies gastronomy as a niche area with significant potential, as Malta's local cuisine is underutilized as a tourism draw.  |
| 21. Future of Rural Tourism in the Context of Climate Change | Rural tourism has the potential to stimulate local economies while promoting sustainability. It plays a crucial role in preserving cultural and natural landscapes, particularly post-COVID-19, where safety and environmental sustainability are priorities. |

The officer of the Gozo Tourism Association highlights Malta's recovery in tourism post-COVID-19, driven by increased connectivity but challenged by overdevelopment and declining tourist quality. Rural tourism, especially in Gozo, holds significant potential, with a focus on sustainability, gastronomy, and nature-based experiences. Developers play a key role, and policies need better

alignment to protect rural areas from overdevelopment. Funding and collaboration between stakeholders, including farmers, are crucial for future rural tourism growth. The officer advocates for sustainable practices and prioritizing quality over quantity in Malta's tourism strategy (table 13).

## Interview 2: Investor in the Hospitality Industry

*Table 24: Investor in the Hospitality Industry*

| <b>Question</b>  | <b>Response Summary / Analysis</b>   |
|--|--|
| 1. Initial Attraction to Malta's Tourism Sector        | Attracted by Malta's cultural heritage and strategic Mediterranean location, focusing on boutique hotels and luxury resorts for high-end tourists. |
| 2. Experiences in Tourism Investment                   | Success due to identifying niche markets and collaborating with local partners.  |
| 3. Factors Considered in Investment Opportunities      | Key factors: market growth, economic stability, regulations, infrastructure, and risk assessment.  |
| 4. Risk and Reward Assessment                          | Rewards include growth in tourist arrivals; risks like economic shifts are mitigated through diversification.                                      |
| 5. Challenges Faced in Investments                     | Navigating regulations was challenging, but mitigated through legal experts and communication with authorities.                                    |
| 6. Support from Public Authorities                     | Received regulatory support and benefited from EU funding for project expansion.   |
| 7. Opportunities for Further Investment                | Potential in eco-friendly resorts, sustainable tourism, and rural tourism.   |
| 8. Role of Developers in Shaping the Tourism Landscape | Developers create crucial infrastructure; their vision influences investment decisions.  |
| 9. Interest in Specific Projects                       | Focus on sustainable, eco-friendly tourism projects and boutique hotels.   |
| 10. Collaboration with Stakeholders                    | Collaborates with MTA and developers, aligning projects with sustainable tourism and cultural preservation.  |

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| 11. Advice for Other Investors                      | Research market, understand local culture, regulations, and build local relationships; long-term perspective essential. |
| 12. Opportunities in Rural Tourism                  | Untapped potential to showcase natural beauty and cultural heritage for authentic experiences.                          |
| 13. Willingness to Invest in Rural Tourism          | Strong interest in sustainable, eco-friendly rural tourism projects.  |
| 14. Attractions in Rural Areas                      | Popular for hiking, cultural tours, local food, and historical sites, offering connection to nature and traditions.     |
| 15. Need for Better Infrastructure in Rural Tourism | Infrastructure improvements needed, especially in transportation, accommodation, and amenities.                         |
| 16. Farmers' Role in Rural Tourism                  | Farmers can offer agritourism (farm stays, local food), providing additional income and enhancing tourist experiences.  |
| 17. Adequacy of Current Development Policies        | Policies are a good start, but more incentives for sustainability and cultural preservation needed.                     |
| 18. Adequacy of Funding for Rural Tourism           | More funding required for rural tourism to reach its full potential.  |
| 19. Impact of Tourism on Rural Areas                | Positive for local economies but can harm the environment if not managed sustainably.                                   |
| 20. Motivating Factors for Choosing Rural Tourism   | Tranquility, connection with nature, and cultural experiences motivate tourists.  |
| 21. Promotion of Specific Rural Areas               | Gozo is ideal for rural tourism due to its landscapes, history, and culture.  |
| 22. Potential Risks of Growth in Rural Tourism      | Environmental harm and community conflicts are possible but can be mitigated with planning and sustainable practices.   |

The investor sees significant potential in Malta's tourism sector, especially in niche and rural markets. Challenges include regulatory navigation and infrastructure needs, but these are mitigated through collaboration with stakeholders and long-term planning. Rural tourism, especially in Gozo, offers untapped opportunities, and sustainable development is key to its success (table 14).

### Interview 3: Building Contractor in Malta

Table 25: Building Contractor in Malta

| Question  | Response Summary   |
|---|--|
| 1. Role in Tourism Infrastructure Development                         | Primarily focused on property development but retains some hotel projects for long-term investment.  |
| 2. Investments in Tourism-Related Projects                            | Owns ME Hotel (5-star) within Mercury Towers, Quaint Hotels in Gozo, and has stakes in other 3- to 5-star hotels.  |
| 3. Decision-Making Process for Tourism Projects                       | Location, EBITDA, and return on investment are primary factors.  |
| 4. Balancing Economic Development with Sustainability                 | Invests heavily in environmental sustainability, such as €42 million in energy-efficient infrastructure and plans for solar-powered systems in new projects. |
| 5. Challenges in Tourism Property Development                         | Infrastructure limitations and difficulties obtaining permits are key challenges.  |
| 6. Collaboration with Stakeholders                                    | Treats stakeholders as partners, involving them early in design. Criticism of unclear guidelines for boutique hotel grading.                                 |
| 7. Recent and Upcoming Projects                                       | ME Hotel and Jerma Development (600-room 5-star hotel with a year-round heated pool) are major upcoming projects.  |
| 8. Role of Building Contractors in Malta's Tourism Industry           | Contractors play a significant role but note that investment in Gozo is less attractive due to lower occupancy, suggesting government incentives could help. |
| 9. Opportunities and Challenges in Tourism Infrastructure Development | Malta is nearing saturation for hotel beds, and future development should focus on creating better investment opportunities.                                 |

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| 10. Opportunities in Rural Tourism                        | Current regulations limit development to 20 rooms, making rural tourism financially unviable under current conditions. |
| 11. Willingness to Invest in Rural Tourism                | Not interested unless regulations allow larger developments.   |
| 12. Development Needed to Attract Tourists to Rural Areas | No interest in rural tourism development without regulatory changes.   |
| 13. Infrastructure Needs for Rural Tourism                | Better infrastructure is necessary for rural tourism development.  |
| 14. Farmers' Role in Rural Tourism                        | Farmers should supply locally grown food to hotels, creating a "grow your own food" experience.                        |
| 15. Adequacy of Development Policies                      | Current policies do not adequately support rural tourism.  |
| 16. Adequacy of Funding for Rural Tourism                 | Funding for rural tourism is insufficient.   |
| 17. Perception of Rural Tourism in Local Communities      | No comment provided.   |
| 18. Motivating Factors for Rural Area Development         | Investment in rural areas is not feasible without policy changes.  |
| 19. Ideal Rural Tourism Investment Location               | Would invest in a location with large land areas and proximity to the sea.   |

Interview 4: Officer of the Planning Authority

Table 26: Officer of the Planning Authority

| Question  | Response Summary / Analysis  |
|---|--|
| 1. Current State of Rural Tourism                   | Malta's high population density and construction activity affect rural tourism. Key elements include agricultural landscapes, small hamlets, and ecological areas. Growth has been driven by farmhouses and eco-tourism, but rural immersion opportunities are limited compared to places like Sicily. |
| 2. Developments Since the 2014 Rural Tourism Policy | Achievements include the redevelopment of dilapidated buildings, reinstatement of agricultural land, clearer guidelines for farmers, and the rise of Agri-tourism projects.  |
| 3. Measuring Success of the Rural Tourism Policy    | The policy has been successful in guiding genuine rural tourism development but has been misused by some for recreational, non-tourism purposes.   |
| 4. Challenges Facing Rural Tourism                  | The construction industry poses the biggest challenge to preserving rural areas for tourism, similar to Sicily's experience.   |
| 5. Collaboration with the MTA                       | Collaborations include the "Malta Goes Rural" project and local embellishment efforts. Local councils and the ERA are also important stakeholders in these projects.   |
| 6. Future of Rural Tourism                          | Rural tourism is expected to grow despite challenges from climate change. EU regulations on pesticides and vineyards may impact future developments.   |
| 7. Ongoing Initiatives                              | The PA is reviewing rural tourism policies and guidelines, with consultations held for all rural building project applications.  |
| 8. Development Applications for Rural Tourism       | Projects that align with policy guidelines receive approval, but non-genuine applications may cause delays and bureaucratic issues.  |

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| 9. Opportunities for Rural Tourism                | There is optimism for rural tourism growth due to strong private sector commitment and favourable policies.   |
| 10. Key Concerns for Development                  | Ensuring that projects are genuine and not recreational is a major concern to prevent bureaucratic slowdowns.   |
| 11. Role of Farmers in Rural Tourism              | Farmers play a critical role in providing authentic experiences, with rural tourism offering income diversification.  |
| 12. Impacts of Visitors on the Environment        | Positive impacts include restored buildings and increased agricultural activity. Negative impacts include heightened demand for utilities like electricity and water.                                       |
| 13. Eco-Gozo Aspirations                          | Current construction in Gozo is hindering eco-tourism goals, but partial progress may be achieved by 2027.  |
| 14. Gozo's Bio-Reserve Status                     | The officer does not support Gozo applying for Bio-Reserve status and instead advocates for tailored strategic plans.   |
| 15. Control Measures for Rural Tourism Growth     | Suggested capacity control measures, like the Dwejra Action Plan, could help manage tourism without harming the environment.  |
| 16. Conflicting Uses of Rural Areas               | The officer sees no risk of local residents becoming less tolerant of tourists in rural areas, as residents will contribute to the industry's growth.   |
| 17. Motivating Factors for Rural Tourism in Malta | The Mediterranean Sea, favourable climate, and traditional Maltese culture and food are key motivators for tourists.  |
| 18. Need for Policy Updates                       | The officer agrees that the rural tourism policy needs updates, including stricter regulations on stables, agricultural stores, agri-tourism projects, and the incorporation of renewable energy solutions. |