

The Contribution of Agritourism to Social Innovation and Sustainable Development in the Rural Areas of the Portuguese Beja Region

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Abstract: **Background:** Nowadays, agritourism constitutes an alternative activity to traditional agriculture, fostering socioeconomic dynamics and promoting social innovation in rural territories.

Research objectives: This study aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in rural areas of the Beja region (Portugal).

Research design and methods: Methodology followed a qualitative case study approach, involving eight microenterprises. The study involved the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with the companies' managers to validate a theoretical model based on two key propositions. These premises assume that agritourism businesses contribute to social innovation and the region's sustainable development.

Results: The results show a consensus on the environmental, economic, and social contributions of agritourism, while perceptions regarding social innovation revealed some variability. Nevertheless, the analysis validated the defined propositions.

Conclusions: Findings suggest an overall positive effect of agritourism on the region, supporting its relevance as a driver of sustainable development and social innovation.

Keywords: agritourism, social innovation, sustainable development, Beja region

JEL Codes: Q01, Q13, Q56, O35, Z32

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1. Introduction

In Portugal, agritourism has grown significantly, especially in the last twenty years, with the Alentejo region having a major impact on this increase (Turismo de Portugal, 2025; EY-Parthenon, 2020). Agritourism development resulted from the diversification of agricultural activities following changes in the E.U. Agricultural Policy, which changed from a model that encouraged production to a model focused on the multifunctionality of agriculture, sustainable agricultural practices, and support for rural development (European Council, 2025). In the Beja region, wine tourism, gastronomic routes, and later olive tourism and other activities in rural areas boosted agritourism. Additionally, the region offers a rich, diverse, and tranquil land-

scape that offers a vast historical and cultural heritage with authentic and sustainable experiences that are attractive to tourists (Fáisco et al., 2021). In recent decades, we have witnessed an increase in national and European rural development policies that have favored tourism and, in particular, agritourism (Gôja et al., 2021). Notably, this growth results also from an increase in demand for sustainable tourism and financing lines that supported the modernization of infrastructures adapted to demand (Turismo de Portugal, 2025). In Baixo Alentejo, this type of tourism has grown in response to the need to revitalize rural areas, offering a business model that contrasts with mass tourism. This approach aims to protect rural spaces, enhance cultural and natural heritage, and address the growing demand for authentic and sustainable experiences.

In this context, social innovation is a differential that ensures that agritourism not only brings economic income to the activity but also brings concrete benefits to local communities (Partanen, 2024; Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2020). Several studies demonstrate that social innovation has a significant and multidimensional impact on agritourism. It allows for potentializing synergies in rural areas, thus fostering cooperation within the territory, environmental and heritage preservation, cultural and local identity, territorial cohesion, social responsibility, sustainable transformation, and rural development. Consequently, agritourism contributes to regions' economic development. Studies show evidence of these contributions in several countries around the world and across different geographic areas (Ćirić et al., 2021; Chiodo et al., 2019; Ciolac et al., 2019; Dickes et al., 2020; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Sangnak et al., 2025; Triani & Bangun, 2025; Partanen, 2024; Pitarch-Garrido, 2022). An agritourism project with social innovation should actively engage communities in activities that promote local culture, heritage, and identity. It should offer events and activities for tourists focused on traditions and traditional activities that allow for experimentation or active participation, such as gastronomic experiences and flavor tastings. The project should also enhance the visibility of these activities by actively showcasing them through its digital promotion of agritourism.

The development of agritourism in the Beja region shows how local companies find innovative solutions in the process of the region's economic renewal. However, the tourism's rapid growth raises concerns about its sustainable development and contributes to integrating local communities through social innovation projects and programs. Thus, we aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in the rural areas of Beja region, Portugal.

This research involved a qualitative analysis based on eight case studies. Their selection resulted in a sample with a non-statistical typological representation of agritourism companies in this region. Moreover, the literature review allowed us to define two key propositions that assume that agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainable development in the rural areas of the Beja region. We collected interviews with people responsible for the companies, and we transcribed the most relevant aspects of the interviewees' responses to confirm the established assumptions.

The study is structured into five sections. The second section presents the literature review, the third section presents the research method and material, the fourth section presents the results and discussion, and the fifth section presents the main conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Agritourism and Social Innovation

Social innovation has multiple definitions, but in general, scholars define it as a transformative process that contributes to social change based on community involvement as well as to improving social cohesion through collaborative efforts of multiple actors (Mosedale & Voll, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2013, 2005; Fontan et al., 2005). Within the scope of agritourism, this concept must integrate all actors participating in the creation of social innovations and should not focus only on some perspectives of social innovation (Wirth et al., 2022). According to Trunfio and Campana (2019), only with the inclusion of different actors, such as local companies, local communities, political or institutional actors, and tourist destination management organizations, is it possible to identify the resources and opportunities for social innovation in each tourist location. On the other hand, Moulaert et al. (2013) state that studies in tourism primarily examine social innovation as a way of contributing to economic value. Although economic aspects are significant, this focus narrows the perspective on the broader potential of social innovations. Social innovation in tourism should involve new forms of cooperation between individuals or organizations, generating and implementing new ideas that advance the development of tourist destinations and regions. These innovations should also positively impact society, improve the quality of life, and/or change social or power relations (Ayob et al., 2016). Social innovations can be decisive in contributing to improving and transforming the organizational structure of tourist destinations (Trunfio & Campana, 2019).

Moreover, the concept of social innovation in tourism should also include other perspectives. It should not focus solely on an organizational change in tourism companies (Alkier et al., 2017); or only business models that create social value rather than economic value, which some studies call social entrepreneurship in tourism (Sheldon & Daniele, 2017); or different ways of thinking and leading to institutional change, or new value propositions, new rules, and informal cultures (Alegre & Berbegal-Mirabet, 2016; Polese et al., 2018); or only on satisfying social needs that the Government or the market have not yet satisfied (Batle et al., 2018). It should include all these different perspectives and satisfy the needs of the tourism segment, while considering and involving the community.

Generally, scholars consider agritourism a particular form of social innovation in agriculture and rural development, aiming to recombine the natural and human dimensions within the framework of a new sustainable way of doing agriculture (Chiodo et al., 2019). On the other hand, Malek and Costa (2015) argue that we may also understand social innovations in tourism as a strategy for local communities to be integrated into the planning and decision-making process within tourist destinations. Agritourism is a means for social innovation by promoting local entrepreneurship and community projects, which can lead to rural development and social change (Partanen, 2024; Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2020).

According to Pitarch-Garrido (2022), social innovation in tourism is characterized by the mobilization of local and external resources to change the logic of collective action and provide new responses to common problems. Dicks et al. (2020) conclude that the role of agritourism in rural revitalization contributes to economic diversification, community engagement, and environmental conservation, which together contribute to social innovation by promoting local economic development and increasing public awareness of agricultural practices.

Agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainability by promoting community involvement in the promotion of culture and natural resources, promoting tradition as

a resource for innovation, enhancing local identity, and creating value. On the other hand, agritourism promotes job creation and income diversification while empowering local communities in rural development (Sangnak et al., 2025; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Sekar et al., 2023; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020) and is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Sangnak et al., 2025). Hassan et al. (2023) argue that promoting local cultures and economies through social innovation encourages residents to engage in sustainable practices, thus preserving natural resources and cultural identities. Furthermore, it promotes community bonding and interconnection, enhancing social cohesion and cultural identity among residents.

By including specific programs in agricultural activities and also aspects related to social innovation in the communities (local traditional markets, traditional music and dances, uses and customs, gastronomic traditions, cultural traditions, artisans, local culture), agritourism increases income from agricultural activities and strengthens relationships with the various elements of the community, such as institutions, associative groups, among others. These tourism programs advance sustainable agritourism by prioritizing environmental and cultural preservation while simultaneously supporting the sociocultural and economic development of the locations, thereby being an attraction for tourists (Triani & Bangun, 2025; Roman et al., 2024; Gajić et al., 2024; Muwani et al., 2024).

Some authors argue that implementing educational programs for agritourists that involve the entire community and local leaders creates synergies that strengthen the implementation process and promotes cultural education in terms of good sustainable practices in agricultural crops and agritourism activities (Triani & Bangun, 2025). The inclusion of local communities in social innovation processes in the tourism area can enable tourists to experience the local traditions by learning from people who are knowledgeable about them, i.e., older residents known as experts in local customs, who, under the guidance of agritourism companies and local associations, promote and transmit the identity and authenticity of rural communities. This could be a differentiation strategy in the business models of agritourism companies and an attracting factor for tourists (Chiodo et al., 2019; Mulyani et al., 2022; Ruengdet et al., 2023; Roman et al., 2024; Gajić et al., 2024).

In Portugal, agritourism managers can develop innovative strategies and implement social innovation projects based on the Portugal Social Innovation 2030 support line (Portugal Inovação Social, 2025). The line enables doing it individually or in partnership with various entities inserted in local communities and thus creates a differentiating strategy in their companies that can attract tourist segments that also value companies' social responsibility.

As literature indicates a positive contribution of agritourism to social innovation and the need to deepen studies on this relationship in the Beja region, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition A: Agritourism practices positively impact social innovation in the rural areas of the Beja region.

Agritourism and Sustainable Development

Tourism sustainability refers to the environmental, economic, and sociocultural aspects of tourism development (UNEP/WTO, 2005). As various studies evidence (Ciolac et al., 2019; Cheteni & Umejese, 2022; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Dionizi & Kërçini, 2025), agritourism has been playing an increasingly significant role in promoting sustainability in rural areas, offering notable benefits while also facing environmental challenges.

In the United States, where agritourism has developed more intensively since the beginning of the century, farm owners have shown a greater commitment to sustainability compared to other types of agricultural activities. According to Barbieri (2012), this orientation has generated environmental, sociocultural, and economic benefits for local communities.

Although the economic dimension still prevails, authors such as Ndhlovu and Dube (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating environmental sustainability into agritourism enterprises to ensure their long-term viability. This aspect is particularly relevant in developing countries, where agritourism, although less widespread, presents a promising and profitable potential within the tourism sector.

Environmental sustainability in agritourism strengthens with the conservation of natural resources, the continuity of agricultural activity, and the growing environmental awareness among stakeholders (Abadi & Khakzand, 2022). In this regard, several authors such as Alves-Pinto et al. (2017), Songkhla and Somboonsuke (2013), and Sayadi et al. (2009) highlight the role of agritourism in the protection of biodiversity and natural resources.

Paniccia and Baiocco's study (2021) further supports the potential of agritourism in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations (SDGs), particularly through the integration of sustainable practices into tourism activities. This approach not only enhances the economic viability of farming operations (Tseng et al., 2019) but also supports environmental sustainability and the preservation of biodiversity and rural landscapes (Ciolac et al., 2019). Similarly, Cheteni and Umejesi (2022) identify agritourism as a viable strategy for sustainable rural development, grounded in local resources and strengths.

Agritourism contributes to significant environmental improvements, including the aesthetic enhancement of rural areas, the preservation of natural environments, and the increase in environmental awareness among residents and local authorities (Ćirić et al., 2021). Moreover, it helps safeguard traditional crafts, cultural practices, and agricultural landscapes, elements that are crucial for maintaining the cultural identity and ecological integrity of rural communities (Ciolac et al., 2022).

Self-sufficient and sustainable agriculture often drive the success of agritourism in rural communities, where the integration of local traditions and conservation practices attracts environmentally conscious tourists (Khamung, 2015). By emphasizing sustainability, organic farming complements agritourism, with studies showing a positive relationship between tourists' pro-environmental behavior and their loyalty to organic agricultural tourism (Xue et al., 2020). In this context, Shen et al. (2020) propose a model to evaluate the potential of organic agritourism, focusing on resources, market demand, community capacity, and value creation. Their model underscores how the integration of organic farming fosters sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and local communities.

However, some authors, such as Tiraieyar and Hamzah (2012), have identified negative impacts associated with agritourism, including environmental overload from noise, landscape disruption, and increased waste generation. While much of the literature highlights agritourism as a promising path toward environmental sustainability in rural areas, policymakers must address the challenge of balancing economic growth with environmental protection to ensure truly sustainable development (Wang & Liu, 2024).

According to Ndhlovu and Dube (2024), agritourism encourages a balanced approach to development by boosting local communities and ensuring sustainable practices in agritourism businesses, particularly in developed countries. And they conclude that in the various studies

on agritourism, the economic dimension is more accentuated than the social and environmental dimensions.

Dionizi and Kërçini (2025) emphasize that agritourism aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12, by promoting responsible consumption and production. This model of sustainable tourism not only drives local economic growth but also enhances the financial viability of small agricultural enterprises. However, the authors highlight structural challenges, such as infrastructure limitations, which require mitigation through tax incentives, integration of local food systems, and targeted policy support.

The study by Oropeza-Tosca et al. (2024) reinforces the importance of collaborative networks between local cooperatives, academic institutions, and government bodies in ensuring the economic viability of agritourism. In the context of environmental conservation and sustainable economic development, the research shows that valuing local products, such as tropical gar in Tabasco, can be a competitive advantage. Beyond stimulating the local economy, this approach diversifies income sources and enhances market access, aligning with SDGs 12 and 13.

In the Ukrainian context, Ohorodnyk and Finger (2024) highlight that, despite its secondary role in the country's agricultural economy, agritourism is essential for diversifying farm activities. This diversification is crucial for economic recovery and long-term sustainability, particularly in the post-war period, demonstrating that agritourism can be a strategic tool for strengthening the financial resilience of rural communities.

Lak and Khairabadi (2022) discuss the economic and cultural consequences of agritourism in rural areas, identifying both challenges and opportunities. They argue that agritourism can promote local investment, generate employment, and create new revenue streams, all while preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge through tourism activities.

Nasution et al. (2023) analyzed the role of government in fostering regional economic growth through the development of agritourism clusters. Their findings suggest that strategic government intervention through infrastructure development, financial incentives, and favorable regulations plays a critical role in optimizing the economic benefits of agritourism. Saepudin et al. (2022) highlight the direct financial benefits of community-based agritourism for local stakeholders. In addition, their study emphasizes that this model encourages sustainable land use, fosters small business development, and strengthens community engagement in economic activities.

Grillini et al. (2025) analyzed the impact of agritourism on social interactions in the mountainous region of Tirol-Trentino. Their study revealed that while agritourism can catalyze sustainable agricultural transitions, such as organic farming, it may also reduce engagement between farms and the local community. The high workload associated with tourist accommodations limits farmers' participation in social activities outside their properties, potentially leading to social detachment. This challenges previous assumptions that agritourism inherently strengthens community ties and instead suggests that it might resemble isolated tourism resorts if not properly integrated with local networks. The authors call for further qualitative research to assess community perceptions and strategies to foster social capital in agritourism settings.

Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of strong links between agriculture and tourism for fostering sustainable social development. Their research suggests that agritourism accommodations incorporating agricultural activities perform better in sustainability indicators compared to those solely focused on lodging. This highlights the role of agritourism in preserving traditional knowledge and maintaining community engagement, which are essential for long-term sustainability and cultural identity. Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023)

further support the argument that agritourism contributes to local sustainability by valorizing traditional products and rural values. They argue that agritourism enhances social cohesion by reinforcing local identity and encouraging interactions between visitors and rural populations. The integration of agriculture into tourism activities helps sustain socioeconomic structures while promoting community pride and cultural continuity.

Given this evidence, agritourism presents both opportunities and challenges for social development. While it has the potential to preserve cultural heritage, foster local identity, and maintain traditional knowledge, it also requires careful management to avoid social isolation and ensure continuous community engagement. The involvement of local stakeholders in agritourism planning is essential to maximize its social benefits and promote inclusive, community-centered rural development.

Considering that most literature focuses on the positive influence of agritourism practices on sustainable development, mainly on environmental, economic, and social development dimensions, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition B: Agritourism practices positively impact sustainable development (environmental, economic, and social development) in rural areas of the Beja region.

3. Research Method and Materials

We adopted a qualitative research strategy, grounded in a multiple-case study methodology, following the principles proposed by Yin (2018) and Easton (2000) that allow for comparative analysis across several units. We chose cases using a theoretical sampling method, designed to support analytical generalization as opposed to a statistical one.

We identified companies through the SABI (Iberian Balance Sheet Analysis System) database, which provides financial and structural information on all Portuguese firms. The research started with five companies and evolved until reaching eight cases in a continuous process of sample creation. From the database, we randomly selected the micro-enterprises, each constituting an individual case in the multiple-case design. The selection criteria included location in the Beja region, classification under CAE 55202 (rural tourism), the Code of Economic Activities, Rev.3 in Portugal, and with a CAE of at least one agricultural activity, family-run businesses known for their agritourism activity in the region. The sample was developed from the various contacts with whom it was possible to carry out complete interviews. Eisenhardt (1989) recommends using between four and ten cases in studies of this nature. Thus, the adopted sample adhered to this guideline.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews with the managers of the selected companies. We designed the interview guide based on both the literature and the Sustainable Tourism Indicator System by Turismo de Portugal, which assesses sustainability in economic, social, and environmental aspects. We based our questions on the social innovation category, mainly on the literature. We conducted the interviews took place between January and March 2025.

We transcribed the interview data and analyzed them through a cross-case comparative approach, identifying patterns and contrasts across the eight cases. This analysis served to validate the initial theoretical propositions regarding the role of agritourism in promoting social innovation and sustainable development in the Beja region. To ensure confidentiality, we decided to present only aggregate responses, grouped into the categories: "aspect present,"

“aspect somehow present,” and “aspect not present.” To validate propositions, we counted the aggregated responses to the items in each dimension, focusing on the “present” aspect category following the methodology proposed by Gomes and Madeira (2017), where authors validated a premise validated when the majority of interviewees’ answers ($\geq 50\%$) were included on “present” aspect category for all items within the dimension analyzed. Authors also considered a premise partially validated when responses concentrated mostly on the “somewhat present” category, and not validated when responses concentrated mostly on the “not present” category.

4. Results and Discussion

This section outlines the research findings. We transcribed key elements from the interviews and analyzed them to validate the theoretical propositions identified in the literature, assessing their relevance and applicability to the business reality of the Beja region. Table 1 presents the aggregate data from the interviews with company managers.

Table 1. Results of interviews

Specification	Aspect present	Aspect somewhat present	Aspect not present
A – Social Innovation			
1 – The company promotes social innovation in the region	7	0	1
2 – The company launched a socially innovative project in the last 12 months	5	0	3
3 – The company has introduced an organizational culture that encourages social innovation	5	1	2
4 – The company evaluates the impact of its actions and participation in social innovation projects	5	1	2
B – Sustainable Development			
Environmental development			
5 – The company sorts waste for recycling purposes	6	2	0
6 – The company manages optimized consumption of energy	8	0	0
7 – The company manages optimized consumption of water	7	0	1
8 – The company defines a plan for environmental management	7	1	0
Economic development			
9 – Consumes regional products	8	0	0
10 – Touristic activities available incentivize the growth of stays	7	1	0
11 – Services run throughout the year	8	0	0
12 – Provide economic benefits to the region	7	1	0
Social development			
13 – Are concerned about employing people from the region	8	0	0
14 – Activities available promote resident satisfaction with tourism evolution	7	1	0
15 – Among women employed, some have positions of management	6	1	1
16 – Facilities adapted for guests with disabilities and reduced mobility	6	1	1

Source: Own elaboration.

The rows contain the interview items associated with the two defined propositions, organized by four categories, and the columns contain the aggregate number of interviewed responses. We disaggregated the proposition associated with sustainable development into the three dimensions that compose it (environmental, economic, and social).

Analyzing the questions on the social innovation category, the responses demonstrated some variability. Almost all respondents stated that their companies promoted social innovation in the region (item 1 = 88%), and some of them (item 2 = 63%) launched a socially innovative project in the last 12 months. Most managers affirmed that their company has introduced an organizational culture that encourages social innovation (item 3 = 63%), but 25% admitted the opposite and affirmed that they evaluate the impact of their actions and participation in social innovation projects (item 4 = 63%). Despite that, in the case of every question, some managers (in certain items, one, two, or three) manifested disapproval. The responses concentrated in the “present” category (more than 50% in each item); thus, we validated the proposition of social innovation.

Considering the environmental development category, interviewees responded unanimously to question six (item 6 = 100%), that is, the companies had an optimized energy consumption. Concerning the sort of waste, despite the efforts they make to separate the garbage (item 5 = 75%), respondents considered that there was not always selective waste collection in areas far from urban areas, and are not supported in this task. Almost all respondents managed optimized consumption of water (item 7 = 88%) and defined a plan of environmental management (item 8 = 88%).

Concerning the economic development category, questions 9 and 11 present responses unanimous (items 9, 11 = 100%), that is, interviewees affirmed that the company consumed regional products, and services ran throughout the year. Almost all respondents considered that touristic activities available incentivized the growth of stays and affirmed that the company provides economic benefits to the region (items 10, 12 = 88%).

Analyzing the questions on the social development category, all respondents were concerned about employing people from the region (items 13=100%). Most respondents stated that activities available promoted resident satisfaction with tourism sector evolution (item 14 = 88%). They also considered that among women employed, some had positions of management (item 15 = 75%) and had their facilities adapted for guests with disabilities and reduced mobility (item 16 = 75%). The agreement with most of the aspects analyzed related to environmental, economic, and social development dimensions allowed for validating the proposition of sustainable development. In summary, we confirmed the propositions defined in the literature review.

We used the most relevant transcriptions of the interviews with business managers to create a graphical representation with the NVivo 15 tool (Figure 1).

As it is visible on figure 1, the most frequently used words were: social, innovation, environmental, management, and also, regional, activities, efficient, and employees. Therefore, we could conclude that there was consensus among the interviewees from the companies analyzed regarding the purpose of this study. Figure 1 shows words associated with both propositions, showing the importance of all these aspects to the agritourism companies.

The results are in line with those obtained in studies by Partanen (2024), Yüzbaşıoğlu et al. (2020), Pitarch-Garrido (2022), Dickes et al. (2020), Sangnak et al. (2025), Sekar et al. (2023), Hassan et al. (2023), and Triani and Bangun (2025). These authors analyzed how agritourism pro-

Voll (2017), Moulaert et al. (2013). Ayob et al. (2016) highlight that agritourism can improve the quality of life and change social or power relations. Moreover, interviewees mentioned that by promoting local entrepreneurship and community projects, agritourism serves as a means of generating social innovation and territorial cohesion, as also referred to by Partanen (2024) and Yüzbaşıoğlu et al. (2020).

The study verified that, despite the existence of social innovation support programs for 10 years, none of the companies interviewed used them. The companies implement social innovation initiatives as part of their business strategies, guided by their social responsibility policies and aligned with the interests of their tourism segments. They develop partnerships with residents in nearby communities and local institutions and without relying on any financial support. Some companies within the scope of their partnerships have developed some cultural activities with tourists and the local community (such as, the Alentejo singing (Cante Alentejano), traditional customs and costumes, and activities related to wine, olive, agricultural, and pastoral), where they finance the local institutions, especially in the area of social solidarity, among others. The increase in social innovation projects in the field of sustainable agritourism depends on the creative and innovative capacity of entrepreneurs to develop these projects.

Results also corroborate the conclusions of Ndhlovu and Dube (2024), Gôja et al. (2021), Palmi and Lezzi (2020), Ciolac et al. (2022), and Faísco et al. (2021). In fact, these several authors recognize that agritourism contributes to the economic, social, and environmental development, that is, the sustainable development of regions.

Interviewees valued the economic aspect of sustainability more than the social and environmental aspects, which aligns with the conclusions of Ndhlovu and Dube (2024). Managers valued aspects such as the consumption of regional products, little effect of seasonality, diversification of tourist activities offered, and economic benefits for the region, aspects also present in the studies by Gajić et al. (2024), Broccardo et al. (2017), Cheteni and Umejesi (2022), Faisco et al. (2021), and Chiodo et al (2019).

Managers also valued social dimension of sustainability as corroborated by the research of Grillini et al. (2025), Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023), Sheldon and Daniele (2017), Tiraieyar and Hamzah (2012), which highlighted the role of agritourism to increase employment of people from the region, promoting activities that involve people from the community and contributing to tourist and residents satisfaction.

Considering the environmental category, it was possible to confirm through managers' responses that this dimension contributes significantly to sustainability. Most respondents reported that they have an environmental plan, optimize the consumption of water and energy, and recycle waste, aspects also valuable in most literature (Abadi & Khakzand, 2022; Alves-Pinto et al., 2017; Songkhla & Somboonsuke, 2013; Sayadi et al., 2009; Cheteni & Umejesi, 2022; Panicia & Baiocco, 2021; Ciolac et al., 2019; Ćirić et al., 2021; Gajić et al., 2024). In particular, Panicia and Baiocco (2021) also highlighted the relevance of efficient management of water, energy, and waste, and Gajić et al. (2024) – the carbon footprint. Ciolac et al. (2019) emphasized the ecologic identity in rural communities, and Ćirić et al. (2021) – the preservation of the natural environment and environmental awareness in communities and among tourists.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in rural areas of the Beja region. Research on this contribution in Por-

tugal, and particularly in this region, remains scarce and limited. Understanding this reality in the Beja region becomes necessary and imperative, given the growth of this sector in recent years. Therefore, we analyzed the perceptions of eight microenterprises in the Beja region on this topic and verified that, despite the existence of a social innovation incubator in Beja that has some projects in the region, the companies have not adhered to the incubator's proposals, despite carrying out activities in this area. Three of them conduct several social innovation activities throughout the year with their own funding, significantly impacting their market segment, involving several local stakeholders, and with managers considering these activities as part of their core values and the company's identity.

Literature on agritourism has addressed the effect of this activity on social innovation and sustainable development of the regions where it has developed. Several authors conclude that agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainability by promoting economic and income diversification, rural revitalization, job creation, environmental conservation, local economic development, promotion of culture, tradition, and natural resources, enhancing local identity, creating value and empowering local communities in rural development (Dickes et al., 2020; Sangnak et al., 2025; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Sekar et al., 2023; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Lak & Khairabadi, 2022; Dionizi & Kërçini, 2025; Ciolac et al., 2022; Grillini et al., 2025; Rodrigues Ferreira et al., 2023). In any case, in the literature, these aspects have not been sufficiently studied in the Beja region, and this research attempted to approach and validate some theoretical propositions that future research can follow.

The interviews' showed a high consensus among the aspects of sustainability and social innovation. Thus, we could validate both theoretical propositions defined. The interviewees consider the social innovation an important dimension to differentiate touristic strategies from others and allow them to show the region's authenticity and respond to the interests of demand in the tourism segment.

Social innovation in the Beja region represents a new way of thinking about agritourism, focused on sustainability, active participation of local communities, appreciation of natural and cultural resources, preservation of heritage, and revitalization of rural areas, generating new jobs and opportunities, promoting social inclusion, and involving local communities and small rural producers. By integrating sustainability and collaborative models, agritourism can become a development factor for rural regions, providing genuine and transformative experiences for tourists. Given this evidence, we concluded that agritourism significantly impacts economic development by integrating financial, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. To fully harness these benefits, the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, including governments, local communities, and academic institutions, is crucial. Only through a comprehensive and strategic approach can agritourism ensure long-term economic sustainability and contribute to the balanced growth of rural economies.

We aimed to provide relevant contributions, particularly to key stakeholders in the agritourism sector, public decision-makers, and researchers, and to examine how managers participate in social innovation projects and perceive these projects as contributing to the development of rural communities. We also aimed to understand how managers of agritourism enterprises are aware of and follow sustainability practices in their various dimensions. Because these dimensions are complex, additional research is needed to deeply analyze the specific aspects of each for future studies. The respondents' perceptions are relevant, but they may underestimate or overestimate sustainability practices, and therefore, quantitative research or other methodologies should be necessary to further explore these issues.

Considering this is a case study, we recognize the inherent limitations of this type of approach, especially regarding the impossibility of generalizing the results. This research provides only a preliminary assessment of how the analyzed variables impact sustainability in the context of agritourism. To ensure greater robustness and statistical significance, we recommend future quantitative studies with larger and more representative samples. Nevertheless, the case study presented plays a fundamental role in validating initial propositions, which scholars can later test as hypotheses in a more comprehensive quantitative investigation. We encourage future research to expand the sample to include a wider range of companies and geographic areas and examine the perception of other local actors, such as municipal governments, cultural associations, charitable organizations, among others, to further analyze their roles in social innovation and sustainability.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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