

Article

Features and Challenges of Agritourism: Evidence from Iran and Poland

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Abstract: In recent decades, agritourism has been suggested as one of the strategies for sustainable development of rural areas and diversification of the rural economy. The main purpose of this research was to review the situation, opportunities and challenges of agritourism in Iran and Poland to create an understanding of the agritourism situation in both countries. The systematic literature review (SLR) was used as the instrument in this study to access the number of possible papers and to understand the literature regarding the history, current states, support policies, developments and challenges of agritourism in Iran and Poland. Published research studies on entrepreneurship and agritourism in Iran and Poland between 2000 and 2022 were assessed. The results of this study showed that the development of agritourism in Poland has a longer history and is more developed compared to Iran and the Iranian authorities should take more measures in managing and developing agritourism. This study provides a major contribution to knowledge by being among the very first studies that examines and compares the situation of agritourism development in Iran and Poland. Practically, this research provides useful understanding of agritourism services and the areas need to be developed in the two countries for the development of agritourism. The article presents the index of positioning a competitive farm and gaining an advantage on the market of agritourism services.

Keywords: rural tourism; agritourism; entrepreneurship; challenges; Iran; Poland



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1. Introduction

Agritourism as a sector of the tourism industry refers to “tourism products which are directly connected with the agrarian environment, agrarian products or agrarian stays” [1,2]. Such a definition implies that this kind of tourism may provide a broad range of services, including hospitality services (such as bed and breakfasts, food services, farmers markets, hosting-related weddings and private parties, and overnight stays of farms), farm-based recreational activities (such as fishing, horse riding, recreational self-harvest, and u-pick fruits or vegetables), agricultural education and training workshops with an emphasis on personal field experiences, and a variety of extractive (e.g., hunting) and non-extractive (e.g., nature observation) farm recreation activities [3].

Agritourism development as an option for diversifying farming activities is known as a source of job creation and economic growth [4,5]. This kind of tourism supplies farmers with additional income by attracting tourists to agricultural territories. It also provides efficient use of available assets and helps preserve cultural heritage and traditions [6,7]. Along with growing urbanization and industrialization, this kind of tourism has also created a form of psychological and mental relaxation in rural areas that constitutes a growing trend of tourism, both recreational and getting experiences [8].

Considering the potential of rural areas for varieties of activities in the context of agritourism, this kind of tourism has the potential to improve farm productivity [9] as well as decreasing villagers' immigration [10], increasing social participation [11,12], creating new markets for selling agricultural products, developing regional economy, educating tourists about sustainable agriculture, and bringing numerous economic resources for the government, private sector, and local communities [13]. Figure 1 shows the benefits of agritourism development in rural areas.

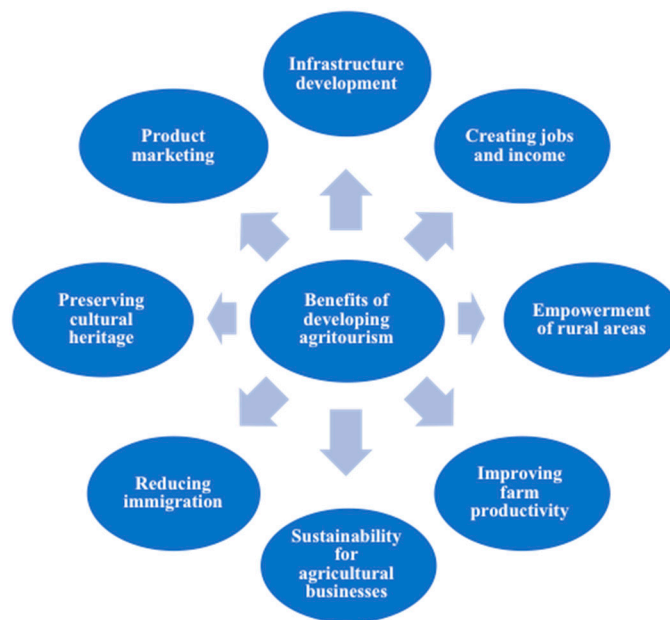


Figure 1. Benefits of agritourism development. Source: [14,15].

This study aims to provide an overview of the agritourism situation in Iran and Poland. Iran and Poland were selected due to the development of diplomatic relations between the two countries in recent years. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between Iranian and Polish Chambers of Commerce on November 2021 [16] to provide a framework of cooperation and facilitate in area of common interest including trade, science, tourism and cultural relations between the two countries [17]. Given that no study has comparatively examined the situation of agritourism in these two countries, this study, as a leading study has been tried to review the situation, opportunities and challenges of agritourism in Iran and Poland to create an understanding of the agritourism situation in both countries, and to identify areas for the development of this kind of tourism in the both countries. So, the specific questions addressed here are as follows:

1. What is the background and current situation of the agricultural sector in Iran and Poland?
2. How has agritourism been developed in Iran and Poland?
3. What opportunities are there for the development of agritourism in each country?
4. What are the challenges and limitations of agritourism development in each country?

This study has been organized in four main sections. In the first section, this study tries to provide an overview of agriculture in Iran and Poland. In the second section, the situation of agritourism and agritourism development policies and support mechanisms in the two countries, is briefly discussed. In the third section, agritourism development opportunities in Iran and Poland have been briefly discussed. The agritourism sector also has weaknesses which have led, among other factors, to improper and delayed development, especially in Iran. Therefore, the fourth section shows a brief introduction to the challenges and limitations of agritourism development in each country. Finally, an analysis of the situation of agritourism in the two countries is presented and suggestions are made to improve the situation of this subsector of rural tourism. The final part of the article presents

the index of positioning a competitive farm and gaining an advantage in the market of agritourism services.

2. Theoretical Background

Rural development as a multidisciplinary process unfolds into a wide range of inter-connected practices such as landscape management, conservation of new nature values, providing recreational opportunities to visitors, and production of high quality and region-specific products [18].

Agritourism as a strategy of creating new economic opportunities in rural development processes has been suggested in recent decades for the diversification of rural economy and sustainable rural development. This type of tourism provides an opportunity which perhaps could improve human and environmental health as well as sustainability of the rural areas [16]. Several definitions of agritourism have been proposed over the years. In each of these definitions, a specific feature of agritourism is mentioned:

Some scholars [1,19] consider farming as the main pillar of agritourism, while some other researchers define agritourism as a combination of agriculture and tourism [6,9,20]. Additionally, some researchers [21,22] believe that it is the farmers and their families who are the main managers of agritourism. Accordingly, agritourism establishes a direct [23,24] or indirect [25] relationship between the tourist and farm environment [26] for the purpose of achieving a revival of human values [27,28]. In order to provide a clearer overview, some definitions of agritourism adopted in the scientific literature are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Some definitions of agritourism provided in scientific literature.

Definition	Source
“Enterprises and activities of hospitality that are performed on farms or agricultural sites for the purpose of education and recreation of tourists”	[28]
“Any activity in which a visitor to the farm or other agricultural setting contemplates the farm landscape or participates in an agricultural process for recreation or leisure purposes”	[9]
“A form of leisure, realized in rural farming areas, based on accommodation and recreational activity, connected with a farmstead and its natural, productive and services-related environment”	[29]
“Complementary accommodation and hospitality activity carried out by farmers [...] through the utilization of their own farm in connection with the activities of cultivation of the land, of silviculture, and of the raising of animals”	[30]
“Tourism activities that are deeply connected to agriculture and focused on the working farm”	[31]

Source: [9,28–31].

This study accepts the definition outlined by Van Sandt [28] as “enterprises and activities of hospitality that are performed on farms or agricultural sites for the purpose of education and recreation of tourists”.

Agritourism development has economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits for rural areas, as follows:

- Prosperity of the local economy and creating additional income to farms by serving tourists.
- Preservation of the rural lifestyle, cultural identity, local traditions and customs.
- Learning about different lifestyles of local people, especially in multi-ethnic areas.
- Raising the standard of living of the local population through the infrastructure development in the local community.

- Preservation of ecosystems and raising the awareness of the local population of the need to protect the natural environment [27].

However, in order to achieve the benefits of agriculture, new entrepreneurial skills abilities should be assimilated into a village's diverse nonagricultural and agronomic aspects to achieve a lasting competitive and sustainable agriculture. Therefore, locals, have to learn entrepreneurial skills which all lead to higher levels of living standards and growth in their economy [31].

3. Research Method

In this paper, a systematic literature review was carried out to provide an exhaustive summary of current and relevant literature [32] addressing the evolution, features, development and challenges of agritourism in Iran and Poland. A search of the electronic databases Science Direct and Google Scholar, covering the period 2000 to March 2022, was performed using the keywords "agritourism", "agricultural-tourism", "Rural tourism" and "entrepreneurship". To manage the search to the scientific databases, a search string was structured [33]: The search must contain at least one keyword of the agritourism domain and also the keywords Iran/Poland or Iranian/Polish in the title of the article.

Through this procedure and after reviewing the two electronic databases, a total of 113 potentially relevant articles were identified as the initial sample of this study [34]. Reference lists of included articles were also reviewed for further articles, and 3 documents were found which met the search criteria. These initial articles were manually reviewed and irrelevant articles that did not directly address the concepts and topics covered in this study were excluded. Finally, a list of 56 scientific works was identified. Due to the limited number of articles in the final list, the articles were manually studied and analyzed. It is notable that in addition to the scientific works, it was necessary to use other sources such as books, documents (e.g., development plans), and government statistical publications in order to provide statistics and also to review the policies supporting agritourism in both countries.

4. Results

4.1. Agriculture in Iran and Poland

Developmental transformations in the economy should be treated integrally, taking into account all areas of economic and social activity, including relatively backward sectors, to which agriculture belongs. It is necessary to take into account such problems as: aging of the village, migration of the rural population and the growing tendency to decrease the resources of agricultural land.

With an area of 1,648,195 km² (636,372 sq), Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East after Saudi Arabia. Except for the northern coastal areas and parts of western Iran, the country's climate is primarily arid and semi-arid [35]. However, the climate varies considerably across the country. The northwestern areas are among the coldest parts of the country, with winter temperatures falling well below zero. In the southern areas, on the central plateau and the regions bordering the Persian Gulf, it is not unusual for summer temperature to reach 50 °C. The average annual rainfall of the country is about 240 mm [36]. The rainy period in most of the country is from November to May, followed by dry period between May and October with rare precipitation [37]. The majority of precipitation falls on the mountain areas in the north of Iran and along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea in the period between November to January, having an average annual precipitation of 877 mm.

Agriculture has a long history in Iran [38]. This country is recognized as one of the earliest agricultural areas in the world [39,40]. About 7000 years ago, the western part of the country turned to agriculture techniques and what today is called agricultural heritage began in Iran and Mesopotamia [7,26,27]. For example, constructing Qanat (elaborated tunnel systems [41] to extract groundwater for agriculture and domestic usage in arid and

semi-arid areas and dry deserts) [42] have been an ancient, sustainable system facilitating the harvesting of water for centuries in Iran, more than 3000 years ago [43].

Due to Iran's climate and topography, only around 12–15% of the country's land surface is cultivated. In 2020, the area of agricultural lands in Iran was about 15.5 million hectares; of which 58.8% of the land was irrigated and the rest was rainfed. The northeastern and western parts of Iran have a larger surface area of agricultural lands than the eastern and central regions [44].

About 58 percent of farms are family managed, with an important presence of seasonal workers, especially at harvest time. In 2019, there were nearly 2,300,000 agricultural holdings in Iran, with an average size of 6.5 ha of arable land and 78 percent less than 10 hectares in extent. The agricultural soils are intensively tilled, and the chemical fertilizers are used extensively to promote plant growth [45].

The climatological variety has created diverse ecological foundations for agriculture throughout the country, which has enabled the country to produce a diverse range of products. This includes wheat, barley, rice, maize, dates, figs, pomegranates, melons, grapes, vegetables, cotton, sugar beets, sugarcane, nuts, olives, spices, raisins, tea, berberis and medicine herbs. Furthermore, in 2019, Iran has been the world's largest producer of pistachio nuts and the third highest producer of dates [45].

Although agriculture contribution in GDP has declined during the last four decades (because of the economy transition into the industrial stage), it is still considered to be a key sector in the Iranian economy [46]. According to the Statistical Center of Iran [37], about 26 percent of the population lives in rural areas and they are mostly dependent on farming. In 2020, agriculture accounted for nearly 9 percent of GDP and has provided direct job opportunities for almost 17.4 percent of the population (Table 2). This would be higher if indirect employment created in agriculture-related industries is considered. Moreover, its share in non-oil export earnings is reported to be at 17.8 percent [47,48].

Table 2. Relative share (percentage) of macroeconomic indicators of Iran's agriculture.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
GDP (%)	10.8	10	9.8	8	8.5	8.7
Employment (%)	18.4	18.5	18.7	17.7	17.8	17.4

Source: [47].

The development of agriculture in Poland under the partitions was very diversified. At the beginning of the 20th century, a great deal of progress was made in mechanization, soil fertilization was introduced, and modern farming methods were used. As a result of war damage and permanent changes in land ownership, agricultural production in Poland was lower by about 15% at the end of the war. The development of the State Farms had a great impact on agriculture, and the conditions of individual farms deteriorated significantly. Taxes were introduced for large farms and compulsory deliveries of agricultural produce were required [49].

Polish agriculture is characterized by a large number of farms and a high number of employed people. In addition, agriculture is influenced by a large number of soils of medium and low usefulness and low consumption of industrial means of production. However, Poland is one of the major countries in the world producing agricultural, horticultural and animal products [50].

Poland is one of the leading producers of berries, i.e., strawberries, currants and raspberries. In addition, it has a large harvest of onions, cabbage, apples and cauliflower. Due to the diversity of habitats in Poland, a large number of farmers produce for the purpose of self-supply. Animal production in Poland is carried out with low intensity of rearing [50].

Polish agriculture is competitive in relation to agriculture in other European Union countries and the world. Agriculture and areas of Poland are a sphere with a high con-

centration of problems and barriers, often requiring system solutions that go beyond the financial capacity of the state budget [51].

In Polish agriculture, development can be noted thanks to the functioning of domestic agriculture under the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, including its subsidization and access, as part of the membership in the European Union, to a large and dynamically developing market for the supply and sale of agri-food products, tools, machines and devices used in agriculture, and the use of scientific and technical thought. This gives real opportunities to increase income from running a business in agriculture and beyond [52].

One of the possibilities of obtaining additional income in rural areas is agritourism. Many farmers in Poland diversify their activities and run agritourism farms. The Polish agritourism may include its various elements, e.g., a stay, weekend, excursion, health and other offer. They are implemented in rural areas on an active farm. These are elements related to agriculture, the natural and cultural environment, agricultural products, staying with farmers, local holidays, festivals, and open-air museums. A stay on a farm can also be organized for the disabled, the sick, the elderly, families or carers with young children, for lovers of horse riding, fishing, mushroom picking, interested in field work, hiking, and healthy food. It is important for the service provider to be able to prepare the specialization of his offers to a selected group of recipients. Families with children will have different requirements, older people will have different requirements, and disabled people will have different requirements [53].

4.2. The State and Directions of Agritourism Development in Iran and Poland

The emergence of entrepreneurship concept in Iran dates back to 2000, with the establishment of the KARAD Plan, an Academic Entrepreneurship (AE) program at twelve universities approved in the third five-year development plan (DP) (2000–2005) to promote entrepreneurship culture and spirit within an academic context [54]. At the end of this development plan (2005), in addition to establishing the first Faculty of Entrepreneurship in the Middle East by the University of Tehran [55], the first annual festival of excellent entrepreneurs was held by the Iranian Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare in 2006 [56].

In the same period, entrepreneurship was also supported by Expediency Discernment Council with the announcement that “Iran’s 20-year Vision Plan (The 20-year Vision Plan of Iran (2005–2025) is a document to explain the vision for Iran’s development in various cultural, scientific, economic, political and social fields, prepared by the Expediency Council at the suggestion of the Recognition Council. Implementation of this vision has been done since 2005 in the form of four 5-year development programs [57])” in 2004. The content of this document is to support the dimensions of human capital, social capital, financial capital, market and support, which is more emphasized after financial capital [58].

More attention was paid to entrepreneurship in the fourth five-year DP (2006–2010) by policymakers, especially by considering “Business Environment” importance for the first time [59]. In this plan, the government was obligated to allocate up to 50% the budget for innovative and entrepreneurial activities, support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for entrepreneurship development, and reform the mission and structure of universities for training creative and entrepreneurial individuals. The KARAD program received great impetus during the fourth DP [59] and the annual budget of academic entrepreneurship was increased. In 2007, a new department called “Entrepreneurship Office” was established in all the Ministries [60].

It was during this period that ecotourism development received legal and political attention for the first time. It is noteworthy that ecotourism was considered earlier than rural and agricultural tourism by policymakers in Iran. Although the development of this type of tourism was unofficially launched about a decade before its official adoption, the development of ecotourism has been considered in the laws and policies of the country since 2010. The establishment of eco-lodges in natural, cultural and historical places of rural areas that are less considered [61] was the most important measure taken to develop

ecotourism in Iran. According to the definition of the Iranian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts [62], “eco-lodges are resorts that are built in rural and natural environments in a sustainable manner compatible with local architecture of the region and high interaction with the local community”. Eco-lodges or ecotourism resorts have been established with the aim of creating employment, improving the provision of services to tourists, and increasing the number of domestic and foreign tourists to rural areas, especially in deprived areas. Most of these resorts are managed by local families who are mostly engaged in agriculture [63]. The physical site of eco-lodges is a kind of eco-museum given the architectural style, organic materials used in the buildings, native furniture, and interior design [48]. The most important functions of ecolodges are providing local foods and drinks, training and selling traditional handicrafts, performing traditional music, holding rural festivals, displaying local design and architecture, introduction to local rituals and ceremonies, helping the environment, implementing the style of hospitality and hospitality in the lodge and providing health and welfare services [64]. In April 2012, memorandums of understanding were signed between the Iranian Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism, the Housing Foundation of the Islamic Revolution and the Omid Entrepreneurship Fund to support financially and technically the development of eco-lodges. In general terms, the signatories are committed to financially support the establishment, renovation, and equipment of eco-lodges by rural community. According to this memorandum, travel service agents active in the field of nature tourism are also financially supported by public funds to provide equipment required for nature tours. In addition to this memorandum of understanding, the “General Directorate of Monitoring and Evaluation of Tourism Services” and the “Office of Cooperation and National Agreements for Tourism” issued regulations on the licensing and operation and grading of eco-tourism resorts [65]. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts (2021), more than 1200 eco-lodges were established in different parts of the country by the end of 2020. The results of analysis have shown that ecotourism development has created opportunities for small and family businesses [59–61], and to some extent has led to the empowerment of local communities [61,66,67]. It has also helped to preserve indigenous rituals and customs [15,60].

In the fifth DP (2011–2015), improving business environment and empowering SMEs and the private sector were specifically emphasized by allocating the annual budget to support entrepreneurs in marketing their brands, and in creating an “automated processing single window” for launching businesses. In this plan, entrepreneurship was considered as a job-creating tool, which helps government support networks and SMEs’ connections in home and local businesses. During this DP, financial support to start and develop businesses in rural areas was legally considered for the first time. Financial support for the home-based businesses under new regulations was also noticed in the fifth DP [68].

In the sixth DP (2016–2021), preparing the requirements for enhancing the security of business environment by the Organization of Plan and Budget in cooperation with all ministries and involved organizations and arranging the implementation of knowledge-based economy were considered.

Until 2020, despite the regulations issued by Document of Future Perspective on Tourism and Cultural Heritage Development that provide general policies and principles for tourism and cultural heritage development, no specific regulation or standard policy programs were formulated on agritourism development. However, agritourism as a diversification strategy was being adopted in some rural areas almost simultaneously with the development of ecotourism in the country [59,69]. Over the last 15 years, agritourism businesses have developed, especially in the northern regions of Iran and some farmers have diversified their operations for economic profitability. They have developed agritourism in their communities, through active participation in holding fruit and flower festivals, farm tours, fish-farming, and farm hospitality services [60,70].

In 2020, instructions for issuing licenses for agricultural tourism activities were developed and announced. With the approval of this instruction, the licensing process for the

applicant became completely transparent and clear, and after the approval and notification of this instruction, the government is compiling and announcing the rules and standards related to agricultural tourism centers and how to provide tourism services on farms. The adoption of these guidelines and standards will bring a promising future for the development of agricultural tourism. Figure 2 summarizes the policies and programs for the development of entrepreneurship and tourism in Iran.

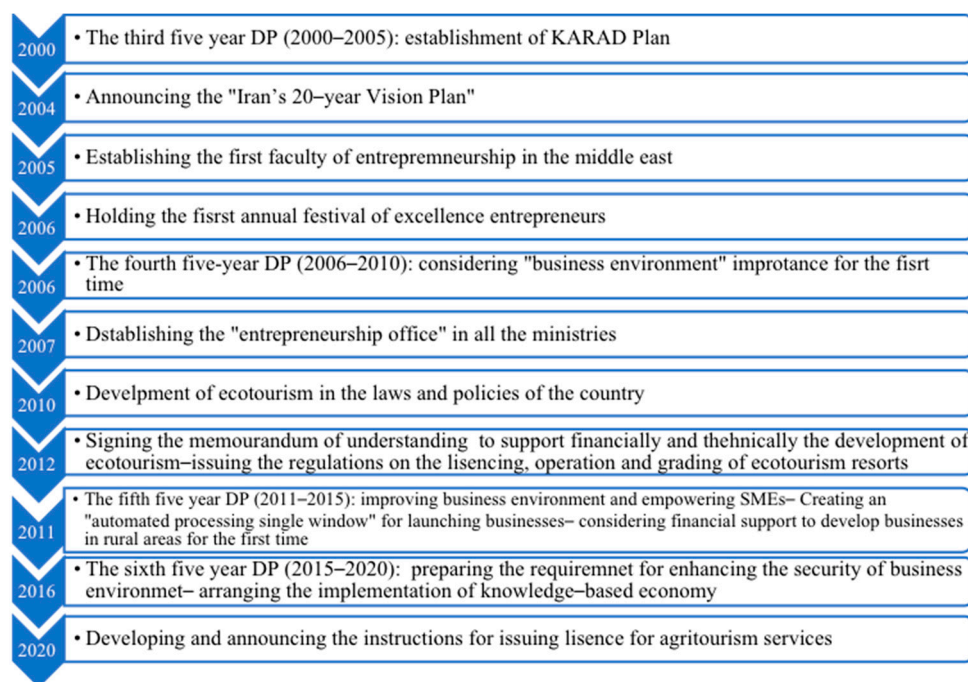


Figure 2. Entrepreneurship and tourism in official Iranian policies and programs. Source: own study.

The government policy support and financial incentives have facilitated rapid farm diversification into tourism [71]. Now, some of the agritourism farms, specially in the north of Iran, offer recreational activities including fishing, hospitality services (such as bed and breakfasts, food services, hosting-related weddings and private parties, and overnight stays of farms), recreational self-harvest, farmers markets, u-pick fruits or vegetables, and performing crop festivals (grapes, pomegranates, etc.). Hospitality services, eating at local restaurants, and shopping along the way are the most popular tourist activities at farms [60,72].

Although these areas have a great potential that can be used in agritourism, this type of activity has been considered only in recent years in these areas. A favorable climate and scenic amenities, across this famous northern tourism circuit, complete with vast natural landscapes, a diversity of agricultural operations, plus a number of intriguing ethnic groups in these areas, have opened many opportunities for agritourism in these regions. However, entry into agritourism is complicated by limited landowner experience, a complex regulatory system, and limited information about how to find and exploit local opportunities. Despite these issues, this kind of tourism—agritourism—has more developed in the Caspian Sea coastal provinces compared to other provinces of Iran, and the farms offering tourism services are further developed in these areas [72].

In Polish agritourism, tourists are focused on rest, regeneration of strength, improvement of self-healthiness, knowledge, impressions, emotions, entertainment and adventure. The necessary becomes to restructure the tourist product to allow the contact with people, nature and culture, increasing the human body healthiness. A tourist in the countryside should "go back in time" to the old rites, old rural huts. Therefore, he should receive an innovative offer from the owner of an agritourism farm [53].

In the rural areas running agritourism farms is the most profitable. In most cases, agritourism supplements the basic agricultural activity. As reported by Matlegiewicz [73] in 2015, for 40% of people offering agritourism services their profits make up from 30 to 80% of total income. The number of agritourism farms in the years 1996–2014 is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Number of agritourism farms in Poland in the years 1996–2014.

Year	1996	2000	2005	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Number of agritourism farms in Poland	3000	5789	6550	8790	9500	10,200	7692	7852	7930	7953	8200

Source: [73].

Table 3 shows that the number of agritourism farms has changed over the years. In 1996, the number of farms was 3000. In turn, in 2014 it increased to over 8000 [74].

In Poland, there were many agritourism development support programs, e.g., financed with funds from the European Union funds for the development of agritourism activities. These programs were as follows [75]:

- Program of Financial Support for Programs of Agricultural Adjustment to the Market Economy in the SAPARD Associated Countries 1999–2006;
- Sectoral Operational Program for Restructuring and Modernization of the Food Sector and Rural Development 2004–2006;
- Human Capital Operational Program, Measure 6.2. Support and promotion of entrepreneurship and self-employment;
- Rural Development Program for the years 2007–2013 of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Measure 3.1. Diversification into non-agricultural activities-Axis 1. Improving the competitiveness of the agricultural and forestry sector; Axis 2. Improvement of the natural environment and rural areas; Axis 3. Quality of life in rural areas and diversification of the rural economy; Axis 4. Leader;
- Rural Development Program for 2014–2020-Action 6 “Aid to start a business for non-agricultural activities in rural areas” (bonuses for starting non-agricultural activities, up to PLN 100 thousand) or for its development (subsidies up to PLN 100 thousand. PLN for 1 job, up to PLN 200,000/2 jobs, and for 3 jobs it is PLN 300,000);
- The LEADER program, which is one of the activities of the Rural Development Program 2014–2020 (support for starting a business, from PLN 50,000 to 100,000);
- Regional Programs of Voivodeships, e.g., the Regional Operational Program of the Podlaskie Voivodship for 2014–2020, Measure 1.5 Supporting entrepreneurship and employment in municipalities whose development depends on the Natura 2000 network; Measure 2.3. Supporting the creation and development of business entities (program for starting a business); Measure 7.3. Strengthening the role of the social economy in socio-economic development.

4.3. Agritourism Development Potential in Iran and Poland

There are outstanding features in Iran that create great opportunities for diversifying and generating more revenues through agritourism [76]. As mentioned earlier, it has been evidenced that Iran has been one of the centers of agriculture’s evolution. Rich historical and archeological records at the aceramic Neolithic site of Chogha Golan (Ilam province) reveal a sequence ranging over 2200 years of cultivation of wild plants and the first appearance of domesticated-type species [77,78]. Considering the significant natural and cultural heritage values created by agrarian activity throughout the history of the country [79,80], Iran has introduced three sites as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems Systems (The concept of Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) is distinct from, and more complex than, a conventional heritage site or protected area/landscape. A GIAHS is a living, evolving system of human communities in an intricate relationship with their territory, cultural or agricultural landscape or biophysical and wider social

environment [81]) (GIAHS) including: Qanat Irrigated Agricultural Heritage Systems in Kashan, Qanat-based Saffron Farming System in Gonabad, and Grape Production System in Jowzan Valley [81] initiated by FAO to identify and conserve globally important agricultural heritage systems [82]. The introduction of these places has provided appropriate opportunities to develop agritourism projects, because reviving the practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge, and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces recreated by communities in response to their environment, as part of an agricultural heritage system can make agritourism more appealing to tourists and more economically attractive in different parts of the country [83,84].

Furthermore, rural areas of Iran have a wide variety of climate, culture, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic conditions and these features provide the potential for performing a broad range of agritourism activities. Rosewater making and flower harvesting in Qamsar, Kashan; tea plantations, paddy fields, citrus and olive gardens in the north of Iran (Gilan, Mazandaran and Golestan), barberry farms in South Khorasan; Saffron harvesting in South Khorasan and Razavi Khorasan; Pistachio orchards in Yazd and Kerman; pomegranate cultivation in Yazd, Fars, Esfahan, and Kerman; Date palm groves in Kerman, Khuzestan, Bushehr and Hormozgan; the harvest festival in the northern parts of Iran, and the itinerant lifestyle of the nomad Kurds in North Khorasan are among the many activities that can become agritourism attractions [84].

Although in some areas such as Qamsar, rosewater making attracts many visitors every year, in most of the mentioned farms, agritourism practices have not been well developed. One of the most important reasons for this lack of development is related to the producers' concern about damaging the crops and infrastructures by visitors. Usually, tourists in some areas cause physical damage to the products and assets in the form of graffiti, carvings, damage to farm and garden crops, litter, pollution, damage to natural features, and abuse of tourist infrastructure and this factor has made some producers reluctant to develop tourism activities on farms [85].

The variety of traditional foods in different regions of Iran is another point which should not be overlooked. Various climate types in Iran have also led to diverse traditional nutritious foods. Each region has a culinary cultural identity, and this enables farm families to develop culinary tourism and attract tourists who are looking for authentic and novel food experiences. Although food has been considered in the rural and agricultural tourism industry in recent years and in some areas restaurants and local food are cooked for tourists, this industry has not developed in proportion to the diversity of traditional foods in different parts of Iran. Currently, the number of tourists who are motivated to get acquainted with the local gastronomy of a destination and experience and learn more about a certain area's cuisine is increasing in Iran and the importance of food in the unique cultural experience by the tourists should be considered by tourist destinations. Therefore, food tourism development would contribute to the authenticity of the destination [86,87].

During the last decade, the consumption of organic and healthy products has grown considerably in Iran. Although the development of organic agriculture is still limited in Iran, mainly because of the lack of economic incentives to farmers, traditional agriculture, especially in mountainous areas of Iran, is generally noncertified organic. Considering the increasing demand for organic foods by consumers, organic agriculture can become an attractive tourism resource and attract tourists to visit rural areas, and development of agritourism in these regions can create an additional value of organic agriculture (in particular, the recreational value). In addition, tourists can understand what organic agriculture is and their confidence and reliability inorganic products would increase. Local food supply can be connected with demands in the tourism industry as well [88].

In recent years, the Ministry of Iranian cultural heritage, tourism and handcrafts has focused more attention on rural/agritourism. In addition to introducing GIAHS, some villages have also been introduced as "target tourism villages". Model tourism villages or target tourism villages refer to a village in which there is one or more set of historical, natural and cultural attractions which stimulate tourists to come and visit them [89]. By

the end of 2019, more than 460 villages have been chosen as target tourism villages. The introduction of these villages has led to the quantitative and qualitative strengthening of communication (such as the internet) and service infrastructures (such as transport, energy, sewerage, health and social care services), and this has provided a special opportunity for the development of agritourism. It also would lead to more empowerment of the rural community based on the capabilities of the members of that community and acquire the necessary skills and tools that will ultimately improve the quality of rural and agritourism services [81].

4.4. Challenges of Agritourism Development in Iran and Poland

Although the Iranian government is in several ways supporting the growth of tourism in rural areas, agritourism in Iran has not yet become popular as a strategy for diversifying farm activities and increasing profitability [81]. Several studies have been conducted on the limitation and challenges of agritourism development in Iran. The most important known limitations are as follow:

Insufficient attention to economic diversification in national policies: Iran's political economy is highly influenced by the petroleum industry [88]. Katouziyan [89] argues that the oil-based economy has led to the establishment of a centralized governmental structure in Iran, since oil incomes are the tools for the control of political and social affairs. This dependence on the oil economy has led to insufficient attention to economic diversification and inadequate participation in other economic sectors like industry.

According to WTTC [87], within the political economy of Iran, tourism has contributed around 3.3% to total capital investment and represents 3.9% of exports, resulting in the country ranking 146 out of 185 countries on this measure in 2017. Future development may be expected if the challenges to Iran's political economy and Middle East instability are reduced [87].

Insufficient infrastructure and services: Some rural areas in Iran are now known as the most visited tourism destinations. Tourists mainly visit and re-visit these areas which are easily accessible, with appropriate utilities and well-maintained farms. While there are many more farms in Iran with a high potential to attract tourists, existing infrastructure, accommodation facilities and signalization are not appropriate for development of competitive tourism in these areas [84].

Socio-cultural challenges: Iran's socio-cultural context, such as religious inflexibility, should be considered as one of the most important barriers of tourism development in the country, especially international tourism. The cultural and religious contrasts have led to xenophobia and even to an anti-tourism view [86]. In other words, forcing tourists to obey Iran's social and religious norms and obligations have led to a loss of Iran's share of world tourism markets [86].

Poor awareness and education: Most Iranian farmers in areas with high potential for agritourism development do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to start such businesses. Most of the established agritourism businesses in some areas are unable to generate adequate economic returns and grow into viable agribusinesses. Therefore, the limited investment in awareness building and training farmers by governmental organizations, and technical assistance in farm diversification approaches has left rural areas with a significant number of farms with little capacity to obtain adequate economic returns [83].

Weak marketing strategies: The lack of good promotion and under-developed marketing strategies is another factor hindering the agritourism development in the country [88]. Most provinces of Iran are famous for producing a special agricultural product, in other words, each product in each province is a brand. However, policies and measures to brand agricultural products are often not taken. Farmers often lack the skills and resources needed for effective marketing; therefore, in order to create a new and efficient market, optimal management and joint efforts of all relevant organizations are required, as well as marketing through local and national structures [78,84].

An important factor determining the development of agritourism in Poland is the quality of the services provided. It becomes necessary to examine the state of customer satisfaction, their expectations and needs. Systematic collection and analysis of tourists' opinions may be an important component in improving the quality of services provided and improving market competitiveness [90]. In Poland, there is also the need to improve the offer in agritourism farms. Farmers can obtain help and support in this regard by cooperating with advisors of agricultural advisory centers and representatives of agritourism associations.

Both tourists and farmers running agritourism farms should be aware of the strengths and weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats, resulting from the development of agritourism. The strengths of the development of agritourism in Poland include: high quality of the natural environment, richness and diversity of natural and cultural values, and relatively reasonable prices for agritourism services. Difficult income situation of farms, a low level of knowledge of service providers regarding marketing, economy and natural and cultural resources of the region, and insufficient promotion of the agritourism product. The weaknesses of the development of agritourism in Poland include the ineffective system of professional development of service providers and insufficiently developed tourist infrastructure on the farm and its surroundings. Apart from internal barriers, external threats are also important: the lack of a precise definition of the role of agritourism in the development strategy of municipalities and the lack of a precise policy regarding the objectives and conditions for using structural funds for the development of agriculture and supporting various forms of entrepreneurship. Farmers should expect help from advisers from agricultural advisory centers in filling in applications for subsidies from European Union funds and support in expanding their knowledge about the natural and cultural values of the region.

The involvement of local governments in the development of agritourism should be based on creating conditions for its functioning, e.g., improvement of the technical and social infrastructure, especially the tourist infrastructure. It is also important to initiate and finance activities aimed at increasing the tourist attractiveness of the region (e.g., promoting the culture of the region by organizing festivals or fairs to present the artistic achievements of local artists) more than at present. As part of promotional activities, the local government should take steps to encourage potential customers to rest in this area.

For success in agritourism, knowledge is necessary in many economic fields, including organization, management and marketing, among others [33]. The participation of agritourism associations in the promotion of farms providing services should be considered a valuable help for farmers, but it is still insufficient in Poland. In this respect, promotional activities should be strengthened. Agritourism associations should create tourist products for clients with specialized interests, distinguished by analyzing market trends. In the construction of specialized products, the rich diversity of cultural and natural heritage must be emphasized. Associations should also participate more actively in educational activities aimed at improving the quality of the product (e.g., promoting such advantages of products as regional interior furnishings, ways of enriching the tourist infrastructure on the farm and diversifying the nutritional offer).

The involvement of agricultural advisory centers in the development of agritourism in Poland can be assessed as significant, but still insufficient. This can largely be seen when deciding to start an agritourism activity. It consists of providing farmers with basic knowledge on the preparation of the material base, as well as on formal and legal issues. During the development of this sphere of tourist services, there is a need for greater support from advisers in the field of improving the offer and its promotion. At this stage, direct individual and group assistance is necessary, for which, currently, financial resources are very limited.

The development of agritourism services in Poland requires systematic improvement of knowledge and skills by current and potential rural service providers. The topics of training and courses should focus on such issues as accommodation and feeding of

guests, legal aspects of running agritourism, marketing of agritourism services, greening of agritourism farms, social and property insurance, interpersonal communication, issues of using cultural heritage and the sources and possibilities of using national and aid funds for investment and training needs in agritourism.

It is important to discuss the limitations of the study that readers should consider when evaluating its results. The limitation of the research is the analysis itself, which focuses on the type of methods used, the scope of the research and research trends in general. Another limitation in conducting the research is the proper selection of respondents in the times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the limitations associated with the right choice of methods or respondents, it is argued that the presented topic deserves further empirical research by scientists studying the development of rural tourism and agritourism.

5. Farm's Competitive Positioning Index and Gaining an Advantage on the Agritourism Services Market

The agritourism farms operated by the service providers can increase their competitive positioning on the tourist services market in Iran and Poland. Index includes the internal and external factors which affect the development of the competitive positioning of the farm and in gaining an advantage on the agritourism services market. Tables 4 and 5 present the internal and external factors of the agritourism farm affecting the development of its competitive positioning and in gaining a competitive advantage on the agritourism services market. The index can be useful to the service providers to evaluate the positioning of the farm and to gain a competitive advantage in the agritourism services market.

Table 4. Assessment of internal factors of an agritourism farm which has an impact on building its competitive position and gaining an advantage on the agritourism services market.

Specification	Characteristic	Points	
Accommodation base	Residential building	Beds in a building other than the owner	4
		Bed places in the same house as the owner	1
	Number of rooms	Number of rooms is over 50	6
		Number of rooms from 40 to 50	5
		Number of rooms from 30 to 40	4
		Number of rooms from 20 to 30	3
		Number of rooms from 10 to 20	2
		Number of rooms up to 10	1
Catering base	Offering full board (breakfast, lunch, dinner), also from our own organic products (e.g., vegetables, fruit, cheese, honey, eggs, etc.)	4	
	Offering breakfast and dinner	3	
	The owner offers only breakfast, and in addition a kitchenette is available to guests	2	
	The owner does not offer catering, and a kitchenette is available	1	
	The owner does not offer the sale of meals and there is no kitchenette	0	
Tourist offer of an agritourism farm	Reactive	Only accommodation and meals	0
	Actice	Horse riding	1
		Workshops	1
		Educational shows for children and adolescents	1
		Fishing	1
		Mushrooming	1
		Guided tours of the area	1
		Organizing events (e.g., baptisms, communions, etc.)	1
	Swimming pool	1	

Table 4. *Cont.*

Specification	Characteristic	Points	
Facilities for tourists as part of the tourist offer	Place for a bonfire/grill	1	
	Garden/orchard (or show garden)	1	
	Additional farm traction	Play area for children	1
		Gaming field	1
		Parking on the property	1
	Sports or recreation equipment	Sunbeds	1
		Bikes	1
		Canoes, a boat or pedalo	1
		Nordic walking	1
Introduced innovations or imitations	I introduce my own (original) innovative ideas on the farm	3	
	I introduce ideas imitating other owners from Poland or abroad	1	
	I do not introduce innovations or imitations on an agritourism farm	0	

Source: [53].

Table 5. Assessment of external factors of an agritourism farm having an impact on building its competitive position and gaining an advantage in the agritourism services market.

Specification	Characteristic	Points	
Tourist potential of rural areas	In the vicinity of an agritourism farm up to 500 m	5	
	Woodiness of the area (occurrence of forests)	From 500 m to 2 km	4
		From 2 km to 5 km	3
		From 5 km to 10 km	2
		Above 10 km	1
		There are no forests in the area up to 10 km from the agritourism farm	0
	Water reservoirs (sea, lake, river, lagoon)	From 500 to 2 km	6
		From 2 km to 5 km	5
		From 5 km to 10 km	3
		Above 10 km	2
	Mountains (mountain peaks, mountain ranges)	Mountain trail (up to 10 km from the farm)	5
	Tourist routes (e.g., walking, cycling, canoeing, riding, skiing, nature, history)	Up to 20 km from the agritourism farm	5
	Educational (didactic) paths	Occurrence of the path (up to 10 km from the agritourism farm)	3
Location of the object	The facility is located over 60 km from a large urban agglomeration (a city of over 100,000 inhabitants or larger)	5	
Competition on the agritourism market	No competition, and the nearest agritourism farm is located up to 10 km	10	
Social capital	Starts cooperation with other entities (e.g., commune office, marshal office, local action groups, local and regional tourist organizations, agritourism associations, tourist clusters, theme villages)	3	
	I do not cooperate with other entities	0	

Source: [53].

The internal and external factors show that a given farm can be allocated a specific score according to various categories (the maximum total score is 75). The score must be counted and a specific positioning on the agritourism services market must be attributed:

- A very high competitive positioning of an agritourism farm (the score above 50);
- A high competitive positioning of the agritourism farm (the score from 40 to 50);

- An average competitive positioning of the agritourism farm (the score from 30 to 40);
- A low competitive positioning of the agritourism farm (the score from 20 to 30);
- A very low competitive positioning of the agritourism farm (the score below 20).

If the agritourism farm meets the specific criteria, it is more competitive than the other facility. In this way, it is also possible to compare whether further action is required, e.g., a greater farm promotion, introducing innovations or applying for the facility category to be awarded to make the offer more available on the market. The authors of the article are aware that not all of the elements of the attractiveness of the farm and its vicinity are considered in the index. The index is innovative and such a concept is missing in the applicable rural tourism and agritourism literature.

It is worth measuring the competitiveness of agritourism farms in Iran and Poland using a given index. Such a comparison can be very interesting, taking advantage of the accommodation and catering facilities as well as the attractiveness of the area of the agritourism farm.

6. Conclusions and Discussion

Given the competitive position of agriculture in Poland among EU countries, it seems that the agricultural situation in Iran is unfavorable compared to this country and this has also caused agritourism in Poland to have a stronger history and background than in Iran. Unlike Iran, where agritourism development has recently been considered by politicians and rural development planners, agritourism in Poland seems to have been considered in the policies and regulations of this country about five decades ago. Obviously, government financial and planning support is critical to entrepreneurship and agritourism success in Iran, with a centralized and state-owned economy. In Iran, policies to improve both the business environment and the entrepreneurship rate have been considered in the country over the past few years and some progress has been made. For instance, although developing entrepreneurship and a business environment has been considered in various frameworks in Development Plans, little support has been provided by the government in the development of agritourism, and support for agritourism has recently been considered in these programs and more serious measures should be taken to implement these policies. The main areas and opportunities for agritourism development in this country include fulfilling the financial needs of villagers and farmers, by granting long-term loans and banking facilities, cooperating with relevant agencies to issue permits for utilities and businesses and through providing training to farmers by business consultants in order to learn the basics of starting a tourism business. Providing business consultation to farmers is also essential for the success and further development of agritourism farms in Poland [91].

Along with some researches [92,93], this research emphasizes the importance of setting agritourism activities, both for farms and for the rural community, to revitalize the rural communities through a sustainable development strategy in both countries. Agritourism in Iran and Poland is creating a stronger economic position for farmers and rural communities and achieving the goals of sustainable rural development. This type of tourism contributes directly to achieving food security [94,95].

The development of agritourism in Poland and Iran is not possible without systematic scientific research. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly assess the level of equipment of rural accommodation facilities, their standard, and then periodic monitoring of changes in this respect. It is also important to diagnose the impact of agritourism on the socio-economic transformations of rural areas in Poland and Iran. The research should also concern the direction of change in the agritourism management system. It becomes purposeful to conduct extensive empirical research of an interdisciplinary nature.

According to the authors of the article, the presented issue is topical. There is no description and comparison of the development of agritourism in Iran and Poland in the literature on the subject. Therefore, the main goal was to use the current literature to write an article together. It was important to organize the concepts of agritourism in Iran and Poland. The article presents the opportunities and directions for the development of

agritourism in Iran and Poland. The discussed issue is very extensive, and the article does not exhaust it.

The finding of this research provides some theoretical and practical implications. This study provides a major contribution to knowledge by being among the very first studies to examine and compare the situation of agritourism development in Iran and Poland. The current study also added to the literature on a comparative review of agritourism in Iran and Poland. It provides an insight into the characteristics of agritourism and its development in the two countries. Practically, this research provides a useful understanding of agritourism services and the areas that need to be developed in the two countries for the development of agritourism. The results of this study could provide policymakers and governmental bodies with more information about the existing trends, conditions and challenges of developing agritourism entrepreneurship in both countries to create a more motivating work environment and to foster an entrepreneurial culture and environment.

Agritourism research in Iran has focused on a few thematic axes, so there is a need to emphasize other themes, such as the impact of public policies, competitiveness, and the formation of networks in agritourism development. A more detailed study of Polish agritourism development models, which has made it more successful in agritourism, is also recommended for Iranian researchers. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, agritourism observes dynamic changes, so following them and making similar comparisons, e.g., on the impact of COVID-19 on the profitability of agritourism farms, would be justified. Empirical research is also necessary as previous research has rarely focused on the impact of COVID-19 on agritourism in Iran and Poland. It is probably necessary to conduct qualitative research in order to answer the following questions:

- What is the impact of COVID-19 on the development of agritourism in Iran and Poland?
- Will COVID-19 lead to a radical transformation of agritourism in Iran and Poland?
- How can agritourism respond to such changes in the future?
- How can the consequences of similar public health crises be mitigated in the future?

Finally, some limitations may have affected the results of this research. The selection criteria of the articles for a detailed analysis applied in this research methodology could lead to the exclusion of some interesting works. Furthermore, inclusion criteria adopted for the human-based review of representative and relevant papers may have limited the number of selected papers by excluding some interesting articles.

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