

Green Economy Transition through Rural Entrepreneurship and Rural Tourism: Qualitative Findings from the Perspective of Rural Entrepreneurs *

ABSTRACT

Mounting environmental pressures, depletion of natural resources, and socio-economic vulnerabilities compel the tourism sector to adopt new approaches centered on resource efficiency. In this context, the green economy a holistic framework that seeks to minimize environmental impacts while safeguarding economic and social benefits-offers a critical reference point for realizing sustainability goals in tourism. Rural tourism and rural entrepreneurship, by preserving local natural and cultural assets, constitute a strategic intersection that provides an effective leverage for economic transformation. Building on the significance of this intersection, this study aims to elucidate the roles of rural entrepreneurship and rural tourism in the transition to a green economy from the perspective of rural entrepreneurs. To address this aim and gain in-depth insights, a qualitative research design was adopted. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 rural entrepreneurs, and the data were analyzed using MAXQDA. The analysis indicates that rural entrepreneurship plays a supportive and developmental role in advancing rural tourism and the green transition. Conversely, in the Marmaris destination, infrastructure deficits and quality deterioration coincide with a marked scarcity of sustainable practices. Findings show that rural entrepreneurs reduce operating costs and environmental footprints noticeably through small-scale yet effective micro-practices (e.g., LED/sensor-based lighting, rooftop PV, drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting, source separation and composting, licensed disposal of waste oil). Short value chains and local sourcing increase the retention of tourist expenditure in the locality, generating measurable multiplier effects in employment and related sectors. The ethical and locally grounded integration of cultural heritage strengthens destination appeal, while flexible employment models that support the participation of women and youth enhance social inclusion. By contrast, seasonality, infrastructure gaps (especially wastewater and energy), limited access to finance, and regulatory uncertainty constrain the scaling of green investments. Entrepreneurs underscore the need for performance-based incentives, clear place-based planning, and cooperative/cluster-based joint infrastructure and pooled-procurement mechanisms as critical levers for consolidating this transition.

Keywords: Rural entrepreneurship, Rural tourism, Sustainability, Green economy.

INTRODUCTION

At the global scale, the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and socio-economic vulnerabilities compel the tourism sector to pursue a transition toward producing more value with fewer resources. In this context, rural areas have become strategic foci of sustainable tourism, as they both host rich natural and cultural capital and are conducive to small, locally embedded business models. Positioned precisely at this intersection, rural entrepreneurship emerges as a key actor that enables the sustainability of rural tourism by simultaneously converting local resources into economic value and safeguarding those very resources.

The literature indicates that rural entrepreneurs are not merely economic agents but also engines of local development and co-architects of sustainable tourism. Rural entrepreneurship fosters local employment and living standards while facilitating the recovery of regional traditions and tourism potential (Sharif & Lonik, 2017). Accordingly, rural entrepreneurial activity should be promoted in line with the priorities of regional human capital development (Lordkipanidze et al., 2005). Kallmuenzer et al. (2019) further emphasize that rural entrepreneurship, by rendering local identity and culture visible, can generate simultaneous economic, social, and environmental benefits and, by helping retain rural populations in place, can mitigate adverse environmental pressures. Given the place-based character of rural tourism, rural entrepreneurs are frequently cited as pivotal to sustainability outcomes (Wilson et al., 2001). A growing body of research examines the intersection of rural tourism and rural entrepreneurship (Koutsou et al., 2009; Kline et al., 2011; Aydemir et al., 2013; Carmichael & Ainley, 2014; Dai et al., 2016; Ahmad & Awais, 2016; Lai et al., 2017; Kızılcık & Akyürek, 2018; Abbas et al., 2020; Naghizadeh, 2021; Utami et al., 2023; Anzules-Falcones et al., 2024; Ma et al., 2025).

On the other hand, rural entrepreneurship functions as an interface that links the place-based value logic of rural tourism with the principles of the green economy. Through embedded business models, entrepreneurs integrate renewable energy and energy-efficiency practices, water-saving measures (e.g., drip irrigation, rainwater harvesting), and waste circularity into routine operations, thereby reducing their environmental footprint while improving cost

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structures (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Gössling et al., 2015). Recent empirical evidence further suggests that rural entrepreneurs are particularly inclined to adopt clean Technologies-notably solar power-and that environmental awareness catalyzes a shift from fossil-based resources to greener alternatives (Vlasov et al., 2022; Roomi et al., 2021; Kim & Jin, 2022; Ma et al., 2017; Triguero et al., 2013). In sum, rural entrepreneurship entails new combinations of local or regional rural resources that create value not only for entrepreneurs but also for rural territories (Korsgaard et al., 2015). In this regard, it can serve as an effective strategy within the sustainability agenda of rural tourism and the green-economy paradigm (Hu et al., 2023). Accordingly, this study aims to identify the role of rural entrepreneurship in (1) sustaining rural tourism and (2) advancing the transition to a green economy. The contribution is twofold: first, it examines the role of rural entrepreneurship in the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability of rural tourism in light of the extant literature; second, it probes the direct role of rural entrepreneurship in the green economy.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The Concept and Importance of Rural Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is the scholarly examination of how opportunities for creating future goods and services are discovered, evaluated, and exploited-by whom, under what conditions, and with what effects (Sharma et al., 2013). A review of entrepreneurship definitions suggests that entrepreneurial activity clusters around six core themes: Innovation, opportunity recognition, risk management, action/implementation, efficient resource deployment, and value creation (Konaklıoğlu, 2022). While the field is rooted in economics, entrepreneurship is broadly examined across the social sciences, as well as in geographic and spatial governance studies. Within this scope, rural entrepreneurship emerges as a distinct yet integral component of the broader entrepreneurship domain.

Although research on entrepreneurship has a long history, rural entrepreneurship began to feature prominently in the literature only in the 1980s (Wortman, 1990). Rising awareness of entrepreneurship's potential contribution to rural development helps explain this growing interest. Rural entrepreneurship aims to address the social challenges of rural areas. Today, there is a mounting need for rural entrepreneurs capable of establishing industrial units and enterprises that generate diverse employment opportunities. Consequently, development practitioners increasingly view rural entrepreneurship as a strategic intervention to promote and accelerate rural development (Saxena, 2012).

A review of the relevant literature reveals two distinct concepts that help clarify the role of the local environment in entrepreneurial processes and the importance of endogenous factors in the socio-economic development of rural areas: "entrepreneurship in rural areas" and "rural entrepreneurship." Entrepreneurship in rural areas denotes activity types tied to spatial location as a profit domain; here, the entrepreneur is primarily guided by locational advantages, while the welfare and development of the rural locality itself are not central considerations. In other words, local embeddedness is minimal in entrepreneurship in rural areas. By contrast, rural entrepreneurship carries a broader semantic scope and refers to firms/ventures that not only operate in rural space but also embody a "pure" rural entrepreneurial form (Müller & Korsgaard, 2014; Kulawiak et al., 2022). Rural entrepreneurship is linked less to location as a profit site than to place as a locus of meaning and social life: entrepreneurs draw on the resources of the rural (local) environment when creating products and services, and their activities become sources of multiple benefits for that environment (Pato, 2020).

According to Müller and Korsgaard (2014; 15), rural entrepreneurship offers two salient advantages. First, rural areas afford the potential for optimized use of natural resources. Rural entrepreneurship prioritizes the utilization of locally available resources-even when their acquisition and use may be costlier than inputs accessed through global markets. Second, genuine rural entrepreneurship has the potential to render localities more resilient. This stems from two factors: its capacity to alleviate extreme poverty (Sutter et al., 2019) and to reduce inequalities in rural spaces where institutions are weak (Díaz et al., 2019). Particularly in developing economies, rural entrepreneurship contributes to building a more inclusive and sustainable future. It equips rural entrepreneurs/firms with the ability to create value for society while cultivating more resilient places. Consequently, rural entrepreneurship provides self-employment opportunities that enrich and improve community livelihoods and steer them toward sustainable means of living (Tabares et al., 2022).

Rural Entrepreneurship and the Sustainability of Rural Tourism

Rural entrepreneurs-who often initiate tourism ventures and act as engines of local development-play a pivotal role in sustaining rural tourism and crafting sustainable strategies. Accordingly, to unlock rural tourism potential, revitalize regional traditions, maintain gains in local employment, and raise living standards, the development of entrepreneurial activity should be encouraged in line with the identified needs and priorities of regional human capital development. As a development strategy that supports and advances tourism, strengthening the rural tourism sector by linking it with entrepreneurship is crucial (Sharif & Lonik, 2017).

Rural tourism is a small but rapidly growing sector. Effective management of rural tourism can positively influence communities, local economies, and the trajectory of regional development. In recent years, interest in rural tourism has increased as a consequence of agricultural decline and out-migration. For this reason, governments increasingly promote rural entrepreneurial activity as a core target of rural development policy (Kuratko et al., 2015). Because rural tourism is largely community-based, it implies the involvement of local residents in entrepreneurial endeavors, enabling the creation of business opportunities, employment, and localized value. In a similar vein, Harpa (2017) argues that community participation can foster long-term regional growth by enhancing sustainability and offering advantages such as new jobs, emergent industries, and diversification of business activity.

Rural entrepreneurship is a place-based development approach that converts the natural, cultural, and social capitals of the countryside into economic value while seeking to preserve the integrity of those assets. The sustainability of rural tourism, in turn, requires a lasting balance among economic vitality, socio-cultural integrity, and environmental protection. Entrepreneurial practices at the intersection of these two domains nourish sustainable tourism through enterprises that use local resources efficiently, build short value chains, and learn collaboratively with the community (Korsgaard et al., 2015; Bosworth & Turner, 2018; Lane & Kastenholz, 2015). Rural entrepreneurs strengthen the economic sustainability of rural tourism via small-scale accommodation, food and beverage, and experiential services. Sourcing from local producers-particularly improving market access and employment opportunities for women-generates multiplier effects in rural economies (Ibanescu et al., 2018). Nevertheless, seasonality and financing constraints complicate returns on investment and render sustainability fragile (Sharpley, 2009). On the socio-cultural front, rural entrepreneurs contribute to identity preservation by reflecting vernacular architecture and cultural heritage in their businesses, while also encouraging local participation in tourism and facilitating the inclusion of women and youth in employment (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). That said, the commercialization of cultural values and the risk of “loss of authenticity” remain recurrent concerns in the literature. On the environmental side, eco-oriented rural entrepreneurial practices-such as drip irrigation, waste separation, solar energy, and the use of natural materials-directly support the environmental sustainability of rural tourism (Gössling et al., 2015). Yet infrastructure deficits (wastewater, water, energy) restrict small firms’ environmental investments; hence public incentives and regulatory mechanisms are of critical importance (OECD, 2020).

Green Economy Transition through Rural Entrepreneurship

Within a green-economy context, rural entrepreneurship has emerged as a pathway to mitigate market failures and enhance social welfare by mobilizing environmentally responsible opportunities. The emphasis in the literature is shifting from a legal-institutional focus on corporate ventures to the small-scale, survival and opportunity activities characteristic of rural entrepreneurship (Mbebeb, 2012). A transition to the green economy via rural entrepreneurship constitutes a place-based development approach that converts the countryside’s natural, cultural, and social capitals into economic value while preserving their integrity. The green economy provides a framework for generating economic growth and social well-being without eroding natural capital (UNEP, 2011). Rural entrepreneurship advances this goal through strong place attachments and embedded local relations. By creatively recombining rural capitals-natural, social, cultural, and human-entrepreneurs generate both quality of life and economic vitality (Bosworth & Turner, 2018).

The first mechanism enabling transformation at this intersection is resource efficiency and the adoption of clean technologies. Solar and small-scale wind systems; LED and automation-based energy-efficiency measures; water-management solutions such as drip irrigation and rainwater harvesting; and waste separation/composting can simultaneously reduce both costs and environmental footprints in rural enterprises (Gössling et al., 2015). Compared to large-scale investments, these technical solutions can be implemented with lower threshold costs; when tailored to local contexts, they enhance firm competitiveness while directly lowering emissions and pollution pressures. In this way, the rural enterprise becomes a bottom-up driver of green transition.

Second, local sourcing and short value chains strengthen the articulation between rural tourism and the green economy. Integrating regional foods and products into business operations reduces “food miles” and carbon intensity, while increasing the income of local producers and amplifying within-region multipliers (Ibanescu et al., 2018). This economic linkage contributes not only to environmental gains but also to social sustainability by fostering the participation of women and youth in production and service processes (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Consequently, the green economy diffuses through a kind of “short circuit” that aligns the rural entrepreneur’s market strategy with community benefit.

The third critical process is the mobilization of social and cultural capital coupled with the diffusion of innovation. Practices adopted by early movers-such as deploying solar energy, recycling wastewater, or offering experiential tourism products-tend to spill over rapidly to neighboring firms; this “leap effect” raises the regional standard and normalizes green practices (Hjalager, 2010). Local networks, cooperatives, and clusters accelerate this diffusion by creating economies of scale through joint procurement (e.g., solar panels, composting equipment), shared

treatment/energy investments, and joint marketing. In this way, isolated best practices can evolve into a regional green-transformation ecosystem. That said, green transition driven by rural entrepreneurship faces structural constraints. Seasonality and narrow markets prolong payback periods; infrastructure deficits (wastewater, water, energy, digital) may force enterprises into costly “autarkic solutions”; and limited access to finance together with regulatory uncertainty (zoning, enforcement, certification) dampens investment appetite (North & Smallbone, 2006).

Rural entrepreneurship can enhance quality of life for individuals, families, and communities while underpinning a healthy economy and environmental stewardship. Rural entrepreneurs’ propensity to adopt green innovation is a pivotal driver of SME development. Recent scholarship notes that rural entrepreneurs’ uptake of solar energy ranks among the most compelling forms of clean-energy adoption (Hu et al., 2023; Vlasov et al., 2022; Roomi et al., 2021). Empirical studies further show that environmental awareness motivates rural entrepreneurs to curb energy use and shift from conventional, fossil-based sources to greener alternatives (Kim & Jin, 2022; Roomi et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2017; Triguero et al., 2013). In sum, rural entrepreneurship is both a catalyst and a consolidator of the green-economy transition. Through resource efficiency, short value chains, and community-based diffusion of innovation, it reduces environmental pressures while boosting rural welfare via employment and diversification of local income. Yet the durability and scalability of these positive effects depend on the activation of public policies that share the risk of green investment and on local cooperation mechanisms that institutionalize joint action (Lane & Kastenholz, 2015; North & Smallbone, 2006).

METHOD

Research Design

To explore the role of rural entrepreneurship in the sustainability of rural tourism and the transition to a green economy, this study employed a qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry enables researchers to obtain rich, in-depth information and to analyze events and processes from a broad perspective (Creswell, 2020). Central to qualitative studies is the choice of an appropriate research design that structures the entire process. In this study, a phenomenological design was adopted, focusing on the participants’ perceptions, perspectives, lived experiences, and the ways they describe these experiences in relation to a particular phenomenon (Tekindal & Uğuz Arsu, 2020).

Setting and Sample

The study area comprises 14 rural neighborhoods affiliated with the district of Marmaris in southwestern Turkey. These neighborhoods were identified within the project “*Marmaris Tourism Union Villages Rural Tourism Inventory*,” prepared by the Marmaris Tourism Union and supported by the South Aegean Development Agency, and were included in the sampling frame. The sample consists of rural entrepreneurs selected through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling was chosen because it generates context-specific, in-depth insight, and is widely recommended when working with diverse stakeholder groups (Palinkas et al., 2015). Inclusion criteria were: (i) Being an owner or co-managing partner of a business operating in a rural area; (ii) having at least one tourism season of operational experience; and (iii) possessing knowledge of, or practical engagement with, economic, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions of sustainability and/or green-economy practices. Diversity was sought in terms of sector (accommodation, food and beverage, experience/activity), firm size (micro-small), years in operation, and geographical location. Descriptive information on participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Information on Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Education Level	Place of Activity	Field of Activity	Duration of Activity (years)	Number of Employees
RE1	Male	52	Primary Sch.	Orhaniye	Accommodation	35	12
RE2	Female	25	University	Turgut	Restaurant / Accommodation / Yachting	40	30
RE3	Male	45	High School	Adaköy	Accommodation	10	75
RE4	Male	43	High School	Selimiye	Accommodation	5	8
RE5	Male	37	University	Selimiye	Restaurant / Accommodation	2	28
RE6	Female	41	Secondary Sch.	Söğüt	Restaurant / Accommodation	6	3
RE7	Male	43	Primary Sch.	Taşlıca	Accommodation	5	5
RE8	Male	65	University	Gökçe	Accommodation	18	4
RE9	Female	49	University	Çetibeli	Restaurant	3	2
RE10	Male	51	University	Çamlı	Restaurant / Accommodation	2	12
RE11	Female	46	University	Karacasöğüt	Restaurant / Accommodation / Marina/	21	80
RE12	Male	28	University	Bayır	Restaurant / Accommodation	5	6
RE13	Male	40	High School	Osmaniye	Restaurant	5	4
RE14	Male	32	University	Hisarönü	Restaurant / Accommodation / Beach	36	20

RE15	Male	42	University	Akçapınar	Restaurant / Accommodation	5	17
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Data Collection Procedure and Technique

In qualitative research, the choice to use interviews depends on the nature of the information sought and whether interviewing is the most suitable means of obtaining it (Merriam, 2018). In this study, interviews were deemed the most appropriate method. To obtain in-depth information on the topic, mitigate potential drawbacks of interviewing, and retain flexibility, we employed semi-structured interviews. Prior to constructing the semi-structured interview guide, a literature review was conducted and an initial item pool was generated by the researchers. The draft guide was then reviewed by two field experts, and revised based on their feedback to produce the final version. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. Analysis proceeded concurrently with data collection. Beginning with the 14th interview, no new codes/themes emerged; the 15th interview was conducted to confirm saturation, after which data collection ceased, following the stopping criterion of no new theme generation across ≥ 2 consecutive interviews. This approach aligns with the logic of purposeful sampling in phenomenological qualitative studies aimed at generating deep insight, and is consistent with methodological findings indicating that core themes may reach saturation within 6-12 interviews (Palinkas et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2010; Guest et al., 2006). Participants were asked for permission to audio-record their interviews for subsequent transcription; interviews were recorded where consent was granted. During the process, field notes were also taken on the interview guide to capture salient verbatim expressions. Interviews lasted 30-70 minutes. To ensure confidentiality, participants were coded as RE1, RE2, ..., and direct quotations are presented verbatim.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were first transcribed verbatim to render the data ready for analysis, after which the transcripts were imported into the qualitative analysis software MAXQDA 24. In the second stage, the data were read repeatedly and coded in an iterative manner, a process that requires the researcher to engage in multiple close readings and to work back and forth across the emergent codes. While there is no fixed target regarding the number of codes, this typically varies with the depth and scope of the material (Neuman, 2012). Throughout these stages, the analysis relied on content analysis, a core technique in qualitative research that entails constructing categories and examining the occurrence of text elements in relation to those categories (Silverman, 2018). To present the findings in an organized and interpretive form within the content-analytic framework, the following steps were undertaken: a conceptual framework was established and the data were summarized in a coherent and comprehensible manner (descriptive analysis); these descriptions were further examined and interpreted (categorical-systematic analysis); codes were synthesized into higher-order themes and analyzed (thematic analysis); and, finally, cause-effect relations were probed, implicit meanings were explored, and interpretive conclusions were drawn (discourse-oriented analysis and interpretation). Accordingly, while content analysis formed the basis of the approach, descriptive, categorical-systematic, thematic, and discourse-oriented analyses were also employed to deepen and substantiate the interpretation.

FINDINGS

Data obtained from the interviews with rural entrepreneurs were organized under six themes. Theme 1 covers information on the entrepreneurial process of rural entrepreneurs; Theme 2 presents views on the economic sustainability of rural tourism; Theme 3 addresses the socio-cultural sustainability of rural tourism; Theme 4 focuses on the environmental sustainability of rural tourism; Theme 5 examines the effects of rural entrepreneurship on rural tourism; and Theme 6 explores rural entrepreneurship in the green-economy transition. Each theme is detailed below together with its categories, sub-codes, and code statistics.

Theme 1: Rural Entrepreneurship Process

Under this theme, four categories emerged: (1) Motivations for rural entrepreneurship, (2) Access to incentives and support, (3) Barriers and challenges encountered, and (4) Recommendations for developing rural entrepreneurship. The codes associated with these categories and their frequencies are presented in Figure 1.

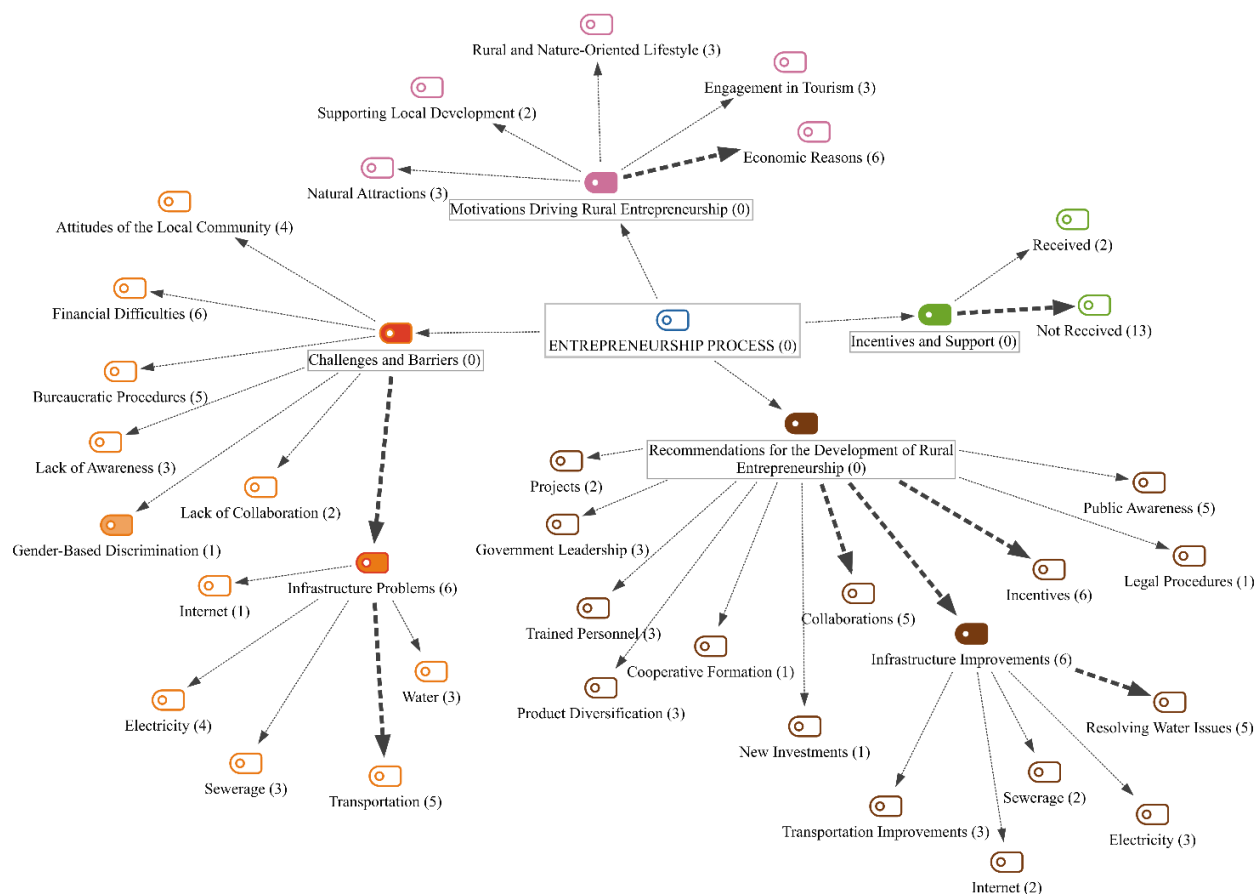


Figure 1: Hierarchical Code and Sub-code Statistics for the Theme Rural Entrepreneurship Process

The most salient motivation driving participants toward rural entrepreneurship is *economic reasons*. Following this code, “*supporting the local*”, “*natural attractions*”, “*being a tourism destination*”, and “*rural/nature-oriented lifestyle*” also appear among the key motivators. As one participant stated, “We wanted to have our own business, to generate income-so I started this venture to secure my livelihood” (RE15). Another participant noted, “Because qualified tourism has higher added value and because it is a job one can do with enjoyment” (RE10), indicating that entrepreneurship is shaped not only by economic concerns but also by moral, social, and professional motivations. On the other hand, most participants (13) reported that they had not benefited from any *incentive or support* and were, in fact, unaware of available programs-suggesting that current support mechanisms do not sufficiently reach entrepreneurs.

Regarding barriers and challenges, participants highlighted “*infrastructure problems*”, “*lack of awareness*”, “*insufficient cooperation*”, “*legal/administrative procedures*”, and “*financial constraints*”. Among these sub-codes, reports clustered most densely around *infrastructure problems*, within which *electricity*, *water*, *internet*, *sewerage*, and *transportation* emerged as specific issues. One participant described the situation as follows: “There is no infrastructure-no electricity, no water, traffic and parking are a mess... God forbid there’s a fire; there’s no water” (RE5). Following infrastructure, *financial barriers* and slow *bureaucratic procedures* were also prominent. Emphasizing financial limitations, one entrepreneur remarked, “Because of financial constraints, we couldn’t install solar energy... I couldn’t get support from banks; no flexibility in terms” (RE15). Another underscored the difficulty of licensing: “Does it make sense to go back and forth for six months just to get a license? The bureaucracy is heavy” (RE4). Taken together, these findings indicate that the sustainability of rural entrepreneurship is linked not only to the entrepreneurs’ own efforts but also directly to public infrastructure and administrative facilitation. Unless infrastructure and bureaucratic barriers are addressed, entrepreneurial potential is likely to remain constrained.

The final category under this theme comprises recommendations for developing rural entrepreneurship. Based on participant responses, the following codes emerged within this category: “*product diversification*”, “*collaboration*”, “*project development*”, “*raising local awareness*”, “*new investments*”, “*infrastructure*”, “*legal procedures*”, and “*incentives and provision of trained staff*”. In the preceding category, infrastructure problems stood out among the barriers to rural entrepreneurship; accordingly, the most prominent recommendations again concern infrastructure upgrades. As one participant emphasized, “In my view, the state must first solve the water problem here. Bayır has had a water problem for years. We haul water in-trying to keep the mill turning with carried water.” (RE3). Beyond water issues, insufficient electricity-especially during peak season, when demand exceeds capacity and outages occur-puts rural entrepreneurs in a difficult position. Poor or inadequate road conditions in some neighborhoods and

the absence of sewerage infrastructure were also among the salient recommendations. For example, one participant stressed the need for reliable public services: “Public authorities need to provide infrastructure services such as water and electricity and ensure their continuity.” (RE7). Another major lever highlighted for advancing rural entrepreneurship was incentives. When discussing incentives, participants pointed not only to financial support but also to measures encouraging local product development, strengthening agriculture, and fostering collaboration. In addition, several participants converged on the importance of joint action among stakeholders: “Businesses need to develop joint projects, and this requires inter-institutional cooperation.” (RE3, RE6, RE10, RE12).

Theme 2: Views on the Economic Sustainability of Rural Tourism

This theme comprises three sub-categories: (1) the economic impacts of rural tourism on the locality, (2) the extent to which consumption-based products are sourced locally, and (3) the types of activities carried out in the rural area. The sub-codes associated with these categories and their frequencies are presented in Figure 2.

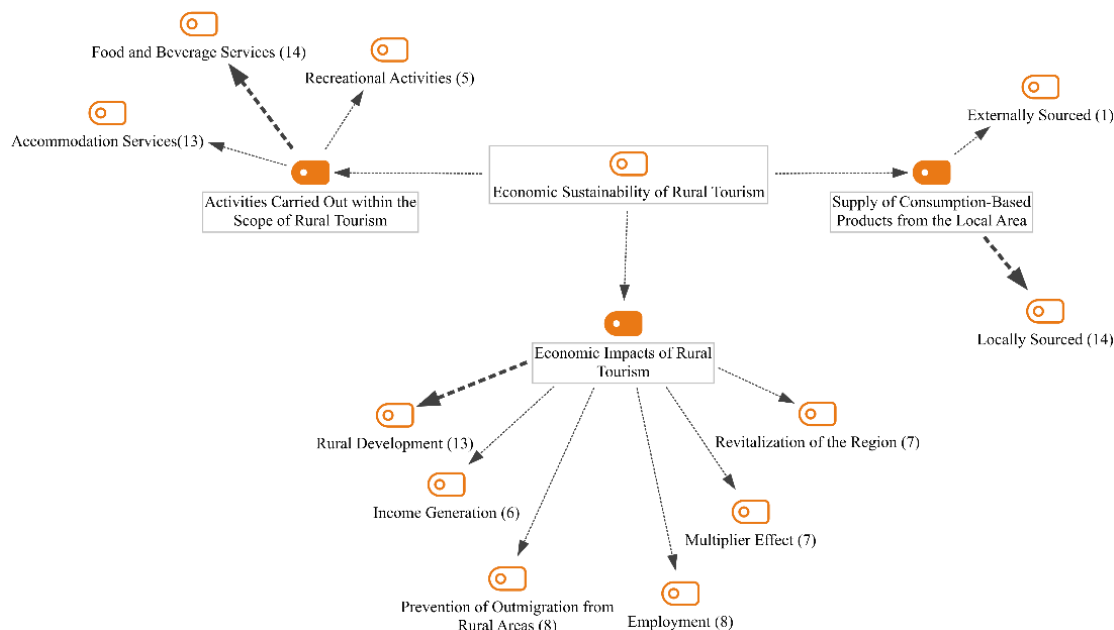


Figure 2: Hierarchical Code and Sub-code Statistics for Theme Economic Sustainability of Rural Tourism

Within the category of the economic impacts of rural tourism on the locality, the following codes emerged: “*rural development*”, “*preventing out-migration*”, “*employment*”, “*multiplier effects*”, “*revitalizing the locality*”, and “*income generation*”. The highest participation clustered around *rural development* (13 participants). Participants argued that entrepreneurial activity operates not only at the firm level but also at the territorial scale: “*Because the enterprise purchases the village’s products, the marketing of local food and traditional items contributes to rural development*” (RE5); “*Entrepreneurs like us support rural development*” (RE12). Rural entrepreneurs emphasized their businesses’ direct contribution to regional development. One interviewee stated, “*I provide accommodation services. It benefits the area greatly. First, it creates employment opportunities. Second, I shop from nearby local markets and other businesses. I also offer and sell traditional foods produced by women to my customers*” (RE15), highlighting contributions to local employment and supply chains. Similarly, another entrepreneur underscored the multiplier effect: “*We offer accommodation, restaurant, beach, and bar services... when customers arrive, I direct them to villagers who produce honey and thyme; they use the villagers’ taxis and minibuses*” (RE10). Participants also pointed to contributions to reducing out-migration. As one noted, “*Our employees used to go elsewhere for work. For the past 12 years, because they have been employed with us, they no longer need to leave*” (RE8), indicating that rural tourism helps retain the local population.

When examining the extent to which consumption-based products are sourced locally, nearly all participants (14) emphasized that procuring consumption items from the locality is fundamental to economic sustainability. For example, one entrepreneur stated, “*I source from producers here*” (RE7), indicating a preference for local suppliers for food and basic goods. Another participant remarked, “*We don’t have a greengrocer here... I go to the village market on weekends to buy*” (RE2), illustrating how regional markets are incorporated into the tourism supply chain. This pattern suggests that channeling tourism demand toward rural production strengthens the rural economy and supports the continuity of agricultural activities in the area.

Finally, the range of activities undertaken by rural entrepreneurs in the locality appears diverse. In addition to food and beverage (14) and accommodation (13), respondents reported a variety of recreational offerings such as canoeing, yoga, marina services, trekking, and training. As one participant emphasized, “*As a Sailing Club, we also conduct sports and educational activities. We provide free sailing training for children*” (RE14), underscoring that

these activities generate not only economic but also social and cultural impacts. Another participant noted, “We diversified with activities like yoga, meditation, and live music” (RE10), indicating that innovative tourism offerings broaden regional competition and encourage new investment.

Theme 3: Views on the Socio-Cultural Sustainability of Rural Tourism

The third theme captures rural entrepreneurs’ perspectives on the socio-cultural sustainability of rural tourism. Within this theme, three categories emerged: (1) cultural heritage, (2) sourcing employees locally, and (3) changes in living standards. The hierarchical code and sub-code statistics associated with these categories are presented in Figure 3.

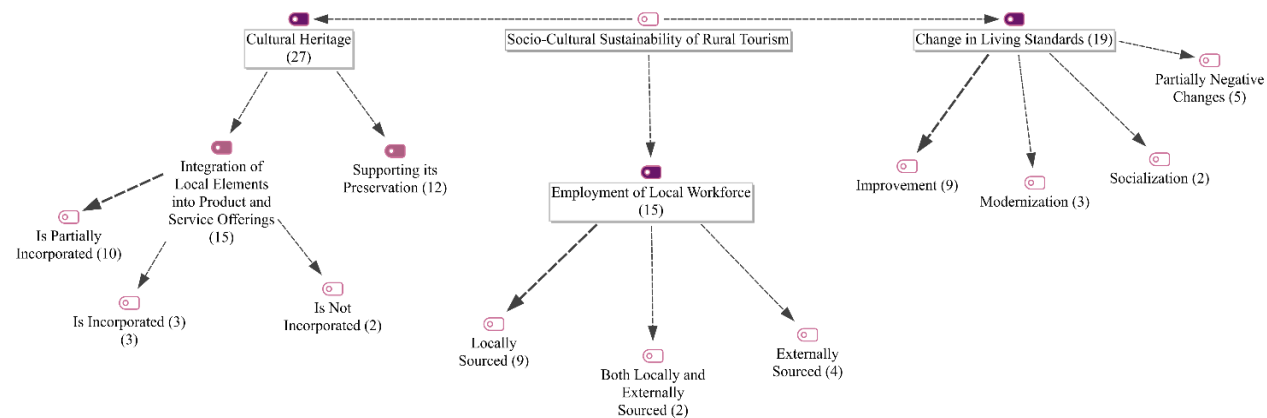


Figure 3: Hierarchical Code and Sub-code Statistics for Theme Socio-Cultural Sustainability of Rural Tourism

Under the cultural heritage category, there are two sub-codes, each comprising several related codes. The first sub-code concerns support for preserving cultural heritage. Most participants stated that they endorse preservation, though they have few concrete practices in place. Pointing to a tangible practice, one participant noted, “I named the rooms after the ancient cities of the region. This way, guests also learn about the area’s history” (RE10), indicating a direct integration of cultural heritage into the business concept. Another participant remarked, “We designed decorations that reflect local history. We used natural materials such as straw and wood” (RE3), suggesting that cultural elements are partially reflected in interior design. At the same time, some entrepreneurs emphasized cultural erosion due to a lack of awareness and waning interest among younger generations. For example, one rural entrepreneur stated, “Cultural heritage values are undergoing erosion. The younger generation is not conscious of this, so they cannot be fully protected” (RE15), drawing attention to the risk of cultural attrition even as rural tourism develops.

The second sub-code concerns whether cultural heritage elements are incorporated into service delivery. Responses indicate that cultural heritage is no longer sustained as it once was, and that many values have been lost—often attributed to limited enthusiasm among younger generations to keep traditions alive. Among entrepreneurs who do attempt to integrate heritage—albeit partially—the most prominent practice is the provision of local foods. In this regard, region-specific products such as honey, almonds, and peanuts are incorporated into menus or offered at dedicated stands. Beyond local food, other elements include the use of copper plates, tables with local hand-embroidery details, and naming guest rooms after the area’s ancient cities.

The second category under this theme concerns where rural entrepreneurs source the personnel needed for their businesses. Across responses, three patterns emerged: entrepreneurs who recruit entirely from the locality, those who hire entirely from outside, and those who rely on a mixed arrangement. Code frequencies indicate that a majority (n=9) meet their staffing needs locally. As one participant emphasized, “Our employees used to go elsewhere for work. For the past 12 years, because they have been employed with us, they no longer need to leave.” (RE8), underscoring both local retention and longer-term employment effects within the enterprise. Entrepreneurs who hire from outside reported doing so because they cannot find suitable staff locally, because work motivation is perceived to be low among some residents, or because younger workers prefer larger firms. Regarding women’s employment, interviewees conveyed a broadly positive stance toward women’s participation; however, the scale remains limited. Overall, local—and particularly women’s—employment contributes to socio-economic inclusion, forming a core of social sustainability. Yet given the small scale of most businesses, seasonality and capacity constraints noticeably temper aggregate impacts.

The final category in this theme concerns changes in living standards. Four sub-codes were identified: “improvement”, “modernization”, “socialization”, and “partial change”. Responses clustered around improvement. Participants’ statements—such as “Things are changing. As production increases, living conditions ease somewhat—there’s a kind of reform in daily life” (RE14) and “There is positive interaction. At the very least, people have learned how to eat, drink, and live. Lifestyles have changed and improved” (RE6) indicate that rural tourism

enterprises have the potential to directly enhance living standards in the locality. At the same time, RE15 noted limits to impact: *“There has been a small change in living standards... what we do is on a small scale,”* pointing out that while change occurs, it can remain modest when enterprise scale and capacity are limited. In short, tourism activity influences living standards, but the magnitude of change is constrained by the size and capacity of local businesses.

Theme 4: Views on the Environmental Sustainability of Rural Tourism

This theme comprises two sub-categories: (1) the importance rural entrepreneurs attach to the environment, and (2) environmental management practices implemented by rural enterprises. The hierarchical code and sub-code statistics for this theme are presented in Figure 4.

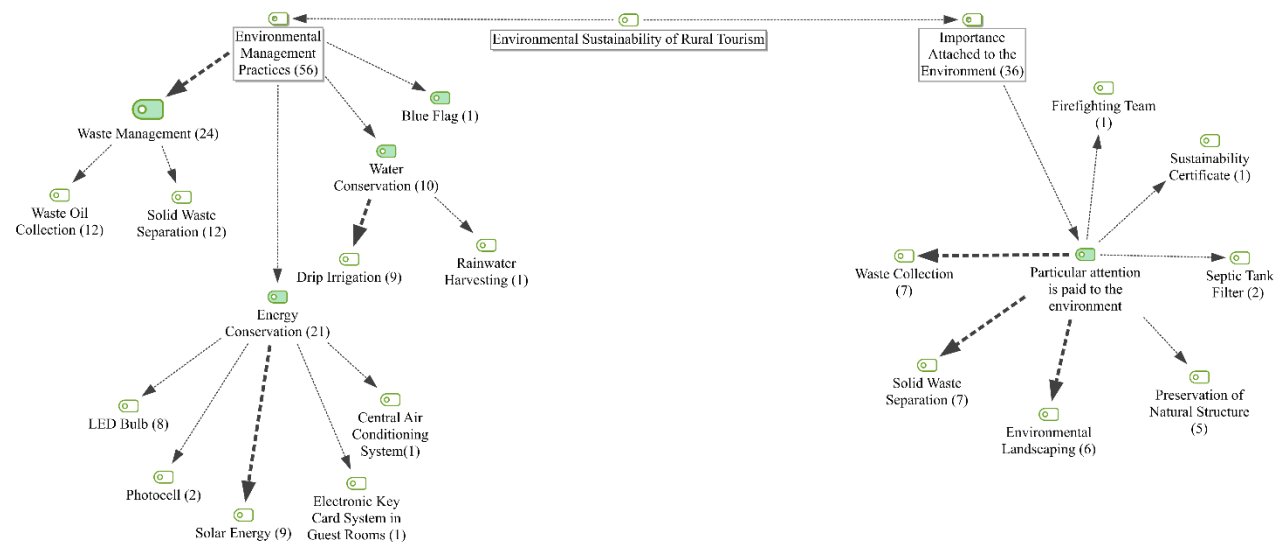


Figure 4: Hierarchical Code and Sub-code Statistics for Theme Environmental Sustainability of Rural Tourism

In the first category, rural entrepreneurs articulated seven sub-codes that substantiate the importance they attach to the environment: *“waste collection,” “solid-waste separation,” “environmental landscaping,” “preserving the structure of nature,” “use of septic filters,” “sustainability certification,”* and *“maintaining a fire-response team.”* The most frequent sub-codes were *waste collection (7)* and *solid-waste separation (7)*. All participants stated that they care about the environment and avoid actions that could cause harm. Reported measures and points of attention include: periodic waste-collection activities; tree planting and green-space creation as part of environmental landscaping; segregation of various wastes (solid waste, batteries, liquid wastes, etc.); establishment of in-house fire teams; obtaining sustainability certificates; using septic filters; and preserving the natural structure of the area. Taken together, these accounts indicate that each entrepreneur undertakes different actions and precautions, demonstrating a high level of awareness about preventing the degradation of rural nature and ensuring the continuity of local resources. Moreover, they recognize that their livelihoods depend on nature and the rural environment-and that the loss of environmental assets would jeopardize their businesses. For example, one participant emphasized this point: *“I care about the environment because I make my living from it. Look, there’s a marina here, but we’re conducting an environmental study. All the sailors are extra careful, and so are the mariners. I earn my income from here, so I need to take care of the sea-there is that consciousness”* (RE12). Another participant noted: *“Especially regarding waste-plastics in particular-I burn them; I dispose of them myself. We use products entirely in ways that are compatible with nature”* (RE14), underscoring personal sensitivity to environmental issues. Thus, the emphasis on environmental protection is not limited to technical investments. In this respect, rural tourism entrepreneurs emerge not only as economic actors but also as local environmental stewardship partners.

The second category encompasses rural entrepreneurs’ concrete environmental management practices. Four core codes and their sub-codes emerged, with participation intensity as follows: *“waste management,” “energy conservation,” “water conservation,”* and *“Blue Flag.”* Regarding waste management (solid waste and used cooking oil), entrepreneurs reported substantial effort and clear operational routines. As one participant explained, *“We collect waste oils in drums. A company comes from Muğla to pick them up”* (RE1). Similarly, another noted, *“We have solid-waste separation, we use composting, and oils are stored separately and handed over to a licensed firm”* (RE10), underscoring systematic segregation practices.

For energy conservation, the reported sub-codes were *“use of solar energy,” “LED lighting,” “motion sensors,”* and *“central HVAC systems.”* Many rural entrepreneurs have turned to small but effective solutions to curb resource use, integrating renewable and efficient technologies into daily operations. One participant stated, *“We largely use solar energy as the primary source”* (RE14), indicating a shift toward renewables. In the same vein, *“We use a solar-powered heating system”* (RE2) shows that heating processes are supported by PV/solar systems. Another

entrepreneur highlighted demand-side efficiency: “By using centralized air-conditioning systems, we achieve energy savings” (RE10). That said, some firms must defer investments for financial reasons: “Because of financial constraints, we couldn’t install solar energy... I couldn’t get bank support, and there was no flexibility in terms” (RE15), illustrating how funding gaps hinder implementation.

Rural entrepreneurs incorporate drip irrigation, treatment/filtration, and timer-based systems into their routines to use water efficiently. As one participant noted, “We use tap water for irrigating plants. I try to use it economically with the drip method” (RE4), while another stated, “We have filtration; we irrigate the garden with drip water” (RE9), indicating the combined use of purification and drip systems. Overall, participant accounts suggest that environmental sustainability in rural tourism is upheld by local entrepreneurs’ awareness and efforts, yet infrastructure deficits and financial constraints remain the chief obstacles to progress. The findings also show that environmental practices are not implemented to the same extent across all enterprises: some have transitioned to renewable energy, whereas others are unable to invest due to limited finance and insufficient incentives. Similarly, the lack of sewerage infrastructure compels businesses to devise self-funded workarounds, thereby raising the costs of sustainability.

Theme 5: The Impact of Rural Entrepreneurship on Rural Tourism

The final category under this theme captures statements regarding the effects of rural entrepreneurship on rural tourism. Participants described rural entrepreneurship as “supportive,” “diversifying,” “encouraging,” “guiding,” “strengthening social relations,” “revitalizing,” “developmental,” and “enhancing tourism potential.” These attributions indicate that rural entrepreneurship not only broadens the range of tourism offerings and stimulates demand, but also mobilizes community ties and raises the overall capacity of the destination. The code-theory model for this theme is presented in Figure 5.

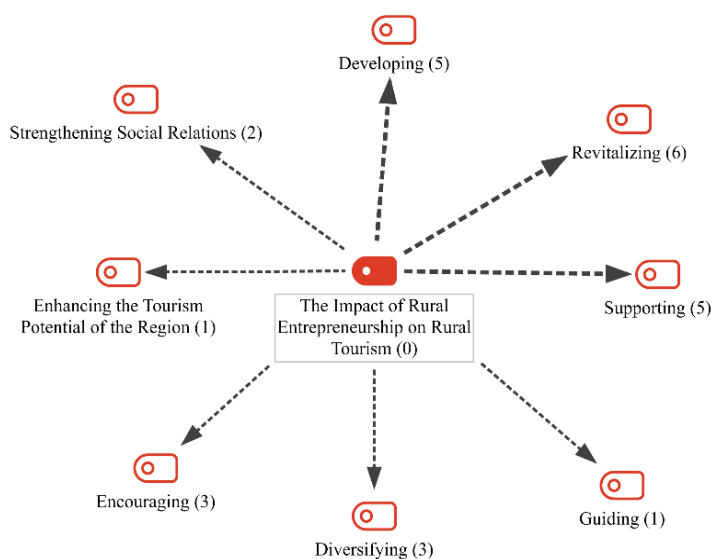


Figure 5: Code-Theory Model on the Impact of Rural Entrepreneurship on Rural Tourism

Participation clustered most strongly around the codes *revitalizing* (6), *supportive* (5), and *developmental* (5). One participant emphasized the stimulation of touristic activity and economic dynamism: “After us, other places opened as well. I think we encouraged people. By directing customers to local shopkeepers, we also help them generate income.” (RE12). Another highlighted the sector-wide effects and continuity: “I think it would be more accurate to call it revitalizing for the sector. Every year new people come, and there are also customers who have been coming for 20 years. As long as these businesses continue, rural tourism will develop.” (RE1), underscoring strengthened social ties with the local community. Similarly, RE8 noted spillovers to new entrants: “Rural entrepreneurship has developmental and guiding effects on rural tourism. Many people turned to this field after us. We help steer new entrepreneurs.” (RE8). Taken together, these accounts show that rural entrepreneurship exerts a multi-dimensional influence on rural tourism-economic (employment, multiplier effects, new investments), social (stronger social relations, local participation in tourism), and entrepreneurial/managerial (encouraging new entrants, increasing diversity). In particular, the *revitalizing* and *supportive* effects indicate that rural entrepreneurship advances not only individual firm performance but also the development of the broader regional tourism ecosystem.

Theme 6: Rural Entrepreneurship in the Green-Economy Transition

This theme comprises two categories. The first examines practices undertaken by rural entrepreneurs that can be evaluated within the scope of the green economy and explores what kinds of measures should be implemented to

further develop the green economy. The hierarchical code and sub-code model for this category is presented in Figure 6.

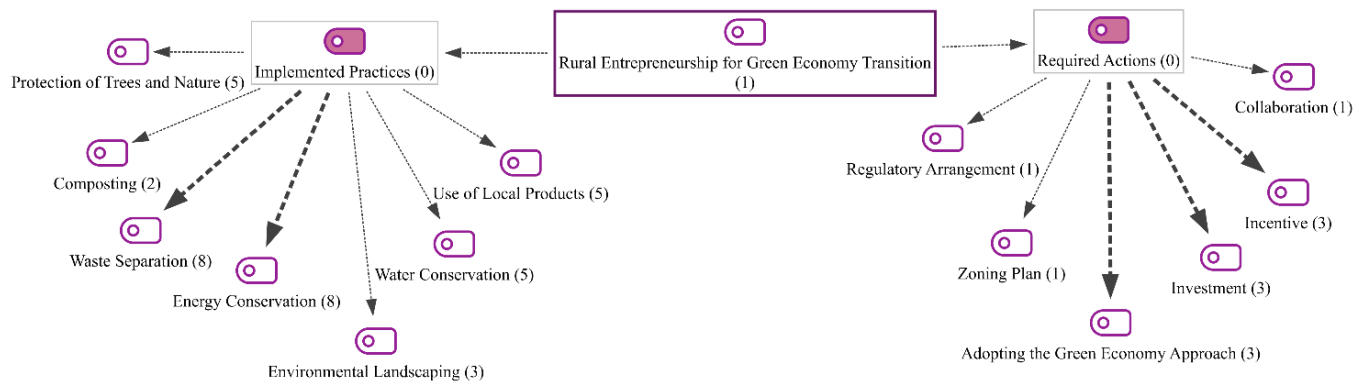


Figure 6: Hierarchical Code and Sub-code Statistics for Theme Rural Entrepreneurship in the Green-Economy Transition

When asked about practices that could be evaluated within the green economy, participants identified the following codes: “waste separation,” “energy conservation,” “water conservation,” “protection of trees and nature,” “composting,” “environmental landscaping,” and “use of local products.” Regarding waste management, one entrepreneur stated, “We have solid-waste separation; we use composting... oils are stored separately and handed over to a company” (RE4), indicating the use of environmentally sensitive waste systems. Similarly, another participant noted, “We collect waste oils in drums. A company from Muğla comes to take them” (RE14), highlighting regular disposal. On energy conservation, a participant emphasized the shift to renewables: “Solar energy is used largely as the primary source” (RE7). By contrast, another remarked on funding barriers: “Due to financial constraints, we couldn’t install solar energy... I couldn’t get support from banks” (RE3). Concerning water conservation, one participant explained, “We have filtration; we irrigate the garden with drip water” (RE10), while another pointed to the importance of rainwater harvesting: “I want to install a rainwater storage system; when everyone else runs out of water, we won’t” (RE9). With respect to the use of local products, an entrepreneur said, “We procure most breakfast items from villagers; I also buy olives and honey from them” (RE6), thereby both supporting the local economy and contributing to the green economy with natural products.

In the second category, participants were asked what is needed for rural entrepreneurship to contribute to the green-economy transition. The following codes emerged: “investment,” “incentives,” “collaboration,” “regulatory reform,” “zoning/planning adjustments,” and “embracing the green-economy logic.” As one participant stated, “Zoning should be tailored to regions. Permits must be granted with nature in mind. Licenses should certainly not be issued without environmental landscaping and afforestation” (RE13). This indicates that rural entrepreneurs require both regulatory adjustments and incentive mechanisms to undertake environmental investments. Another participant underscored financing barriers: “It won’t happen without incentives. I have many ideas-rather than paying for a cesspit truck, we could build a treatment facility and use the water for irrigation-but incentives are needed; the cost is substantial” (RE12), clearly identifying finance as the principal obstacle to adopting green-economy practices. Likewise, RE2 emphasized state-entrepreneur coordination: “Work needs to be done not on what already exists but in line with the green-economy mindset. For example, draw well water; manage waste oil and wastewater in coordination with the state. I think our rural area is among those with the most sun and the most water” (RE2). Overall, these views suggest that green transition cannot rest solely on individual initiative; supportive regulatory frameworks that back investors are required. In short, rural entrepreneurship needs to be addressed explicitly through the principles of the green economy.

The final category captures views on whether rural entrepreneurship can be effective in driving the green-economy transition. In this regard, a majority of participants ($n=13$) stated that it can be effective. The hierarchical code and sub-code statistics for this category are presented in Figure 7.

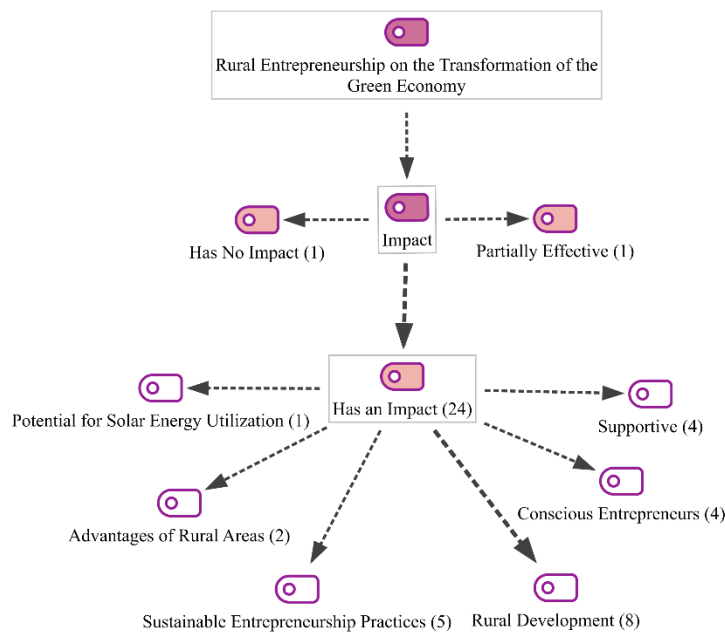


Figure 7: The Effect of Rural Entrepreneurship on the Green-Economy Transition

Participants who believed it can be effective emphasized that rural entrepreneurship would chiefly contribute to rural development ($n=8$) and thereby facilitate the green transition. For example, the statements “*A thousand percent, it ensures rural development*” (RE15) and “*All our staff are locals from the village*” (RE14) indicate that green transition supports not only the environment but also local development and employment. Another participant noted the concreteness of investment: “*We have a 200-amp battery and three solar panels... we use solar both for water and for electricity*” (RE9), suggesting that rural entrepreneurs can initiate the green transition with tangible measures and sustain it through practical, entrepreneurial actions. These accounts illustrate the applicability of renewable technologies in rural tourism. Participants also highlighted the supporting role of rural entrepreneurship for the green economy: “*It has a supportive effect. Even at our limited scale, sensor lighting, card systems, drip irrigation, and LED bulbs provide at least small-scale support to the green economy*” (RE12). By contrast, a few participants ($n=2$) underscored constraints to the transition: “*Partially... zoning, incentives, and investments are needed*” (RE7) and “*No... you need to use a lot of water and electricity... for it to happen you must receive incentives*” (RE9). These views point to the conclusion that without state support and infrastructure investment, the green-economy transition remains costly and risky for individual entrepreneurs.

Participant accounts indicate that rural entrepreneurs assume a pioneering role in the green-economy transition, initiating and diffusing change through practices such as renewable energy adoption, water conservation, and diversification of activities. Yet this transition largely remains confined to individual efforts and struggles to scale due to financing constraints, infrastructural deficits, and regulatory uncertainty. In sum, while rural entrepreneurs integrate environmental sensitivity into their business models, these efforts must be supported by incentive mechanisms, training programs, and an enabling regulatory framework to generate lasting and widespread impact. Only then can the green transition move beyond the efforts of individual firms to become an integral component of rural development and sustainable tourism policy.

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 15 rural entrepreneurs operating across 14 rural neighborhoods of Marmaris, this study qualitatively delineates the position of rural entrepreneurship in sustaining rural tourism and advancing the transition to a green economy. The findings indicate that rural tourism delivers multi-dimensional contributions to economic sustainability. In particular, the prominence of the “*rural development*” code shows that entrepreneurial activity contributes to economic dynamism not only at the firm level but also at the regional scale. Participants reported that they reinforce core building blocks of rural development-job creation, local sourcing, support for women producers, and reduction of out-migration-through their practices. These accounts suggest that rural tourism can function as a locomotive sector for rural development. The results are consistent with prior literature (Akıncı-Ekiztepe, 2020; Lin et al., 2017; Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Chuang, 2010; Sharpley, 2002). Among these codes, the benefits to rural development received the strongest emphasis. For instance, Mair et al. (2005), in a study conducted in rural Ontario, concluded that rural tourism improves rural development. Likewise, other research has found positive effects of rural tourism on local village communities and identified it as a driver of local development (Wijijayanti et al., 2020). There is also broad agreement that rural tourism enterprises adopting sustainable practices effectively support the sustainable development of rural areas (Coros et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Akıncı-Ekiztepe, 2020; Ristić et al., 2019; Ibanescu et al., 2018; Ongun & Gövdere, 2015; Nair et al., 2015). In a study

conducted in Balıkesir (Türkiye), it was determined that eco-agro tourism would strongly support tourism development in the destination and could serve as a locomotive for strengthening the existing economic environment and making the green economy operational (Özgürel et al., 2023).

Rural tourism is reported to improve local residents' living standards, with changes predominantly in a positive direction-namely improvement and modernization. This finding accords with prior research (Akıncı-Ekiztepe, 2020; Latham et al., 2017; Mureşan et al., 2016; Abdollahzadeh & Sharifzaden, 2014). Within our sample, no negative views were expressed by rural entrepreneurs. Contrary to this general trend in the literature, however, a study on rural destinations in Portugal found that tourism did not significantly contribute to the creation of new or well-paid jobs nor to improvements in community quality of life (Eusébio et al., 2014). In conducting their activities, rural entrepreneurs state that they prioritize environmental protection and avoid harmful practices, adopting a variety of measures: periodic waste-collection events; tree planting and green-space creation; separation of wastes (solid, battery, liquid, etc.); noise control; organizing in-house fire-response teams; obtaining sustainability certifications; ensuring water cleanliness; using septic filters; preserving natural structures; and constructing stone houses compatible with the vernacular landscape. While individual practices vary, entrepreneurs demonstrate high awareness of preventing degradation of rural nature and ensuring continuity of local resources. Moreover, they recognize their livelihoods depend on these environmental assets-and that losing them would jeopardize their businesses. In parallel, many enterprises implement environmental management practices (e.g., waste and wastewater handling, energy and water efficiency measures), further institutionalizing everyday stewardship in the rural tourism context.

It was found that rural entrepreneurship exerts supportive, diversifying, guiding, revitalizing, and developmental effects on rural tourism, with the strongest participation clustered around its revitalizing influence. In line with this, Lordkipanidze et al. (2005) show-via a detailed SWOT analysis-that entrepreneurship creates substantial opportunities for sustainable rural tourism. Other studies concur that rural entrepreneurship constitutes a core component of the local economy and makes a significant contribution to employment (Sharif & Lonik, 2017; Albert et al., 2018; Akrivos et al., 2014). Expectations voiced by participants center on investment, incentives, collaboration (Premović & Pejanović, 2016), regulatory reforms, zoning adjustments, mandates to produce local goods, and embracing a green-economy mindset. According to the majority, rural entrepreneurship can be effective in the green transition. The literature likewise underscores that rural entrepreneurship involves new combinations of local and regional rural resources that create value for rural areas (Korsgaard et al., 2015) and thus can serve as an effective strategy for both the sustainability of rural tourism and the green economy (Hu et al., 2023). Similarly, Mukhambetova et al. (2019) argue that by establishing tourism-based activities in rural areas, entrepreneurs can help create a green-economy model.

In light of these findings, the study offers a set of recommendations directed at public bodies, entrepreneurs, and future research.

Recommendations for Public Institutions and Authorities

- ✓ Address critical infrastructure gaps without delay. The most salient barrier to the sustainable development of rural tourism in the study area is infrastructure. Relevant public bodies should urgently implement upgrades-particularly transportation, water, and electricity-across the rural neighborhoods to support rural tourism.
- ✓ Develop long-term master plans for controlled growth. Strategic plans should guide the phased development of destinations, diversify services in line with carrying capacities, and embed environmental protection measures throughout implementation.
- ✓ Institutionalize collaboration and stakeholder participation. A recurrent challenge is the lack of cooperation and stakeholder engagement. Public agencies and local governments should co-design joint projects with local businesses and civil society organizations that advance tourism infrastructure, socio-cultural sustainability, promotion of local products, and environmental and economic sustainability-ensuring full participation in decision-making processes affecting the locality.
- ✓ Expand access to finance and targeted incentives. Many rural entrepreneurs are unable to access supports and incentives, facing financial barriers during business start-up and growth. Given their strategic importance for rural areas and rural tourism, authorities should provide affordable finance (e.g., low-interest loans, grant schemes, tax incentives) to enable firm establishment, green upgrades, and scaling.
- ✓ Provide training and advisory services. Public programs should offer capacity-building in business management, marketing, and financial management (among others). Such services will enhance entrepreneurs' abilities to manage and grow their ventures effectively while aligning with sustainability objectives.

Recommendations for Entrepreneurs

- ✓ Prioritize water and energy efficiency. Reduce environmental impacts and support green-economy goals by installing *water-saving fixtures*, *rainwater storage*, and *drip irrigation*; reusing *treated greywater*; adopting *energy-efficient lighting*; improving *building insulation*; and, where feasible, investing in *solar energy* for heating/electricity.
- ✓ Institutionalize waste management and recycling. Design and implement *waste-separation* routines (organics, recyclables, hazardous/used oils), establish channels to *licensed recyclers/disposal firms*, and convert *organic waste to compost* to minimize environmental externalities and support circular practices.
- ✓ Localize supply chains and employment. Strengthen the local economy-and the socio-cultural and economic pillars of sustainability-by *sourcing local products*, partnering with *local suppliers/producers*, and *hiring locally*, with particular attention to *women and youth*.
- ✓ Form cooperative structures for coordinated action. Establish a *producer-entrepreneur cooperative* that includes entrepreneurs and residents to coordinate *joint marketing and sales* of local goods (e.g., crafts, souvenirs, specialty foods), negotiate *pooled procurement* (e.g., solar/compost equipment), and pursue *shared infrastructure* projects.

Recommendations for Researchers

- ✓ As the present study was confined to rural neighborhoods delineated by the project, future research should collect data from additional localities with rural-tourism potential to enable comparative, cross-site analyses.
- ✓ Given the paucity of scholarship on green economy in the tourism field-and the inevitability of tourism's continued expansion-there is a need for comprehensive, sustainability-oriented investigations. Accordingly, tourism forms aligned with sustainable tourism (e.g., agri-/farm tourism, eco-tourism) should be examined explicitly through a green-economy lens.
- ✓ More studies are required to underpin rural development; we therefore recommend expanding research on rural entrepreneurship from both rural tourism and green-economy perspectives.
- ✓ Beyond rural tourism per se, rural entrepreneurship should be analyzed within eco-tourism, agro-tourism, and farm-tourism contexts and other tourism modalities operating in rural areas.

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