

INTEGRATING LOCAL AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS INTO TOURISM VALUE CHAINS: IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Sead Baraku¹, Alkida Hasaj²

¹University of Shkodra "Luigj Guraku", Albania, seadbaraku@unishk.edu.al

²Lecturer at the Faculty of Economy, Department of Tourism, at the University of Shkoder, Albania, alkida.hasaj@unishk.edu.al

Abstract

The study explores how local agri-food products are incorporated into tourism value chains and what this means for sustainable rural development. Combining a systematic literature review with bibliometric analysis, this study examines 100 peer-reviewed studies to identify key patterns, challenges, and opportunities. The research highlights five vital areas influencing integration: socio-economic impacts, supply chain governance, environmental sustainability, cultural experiences, and policy coordination. Results show that successful integration can diversify rural incomes, enhance destination authenticity, and boost environmental resilience, especially in remote and resource-sensitive areas. Nonetheless, barriers such as fragmented supply chains, seasonal fluctuations, and limited institutional coordination continue to limit these benefits. The study provides practical insights for policymakers, tourism operators, and local producers, emphasizing the importance of collaborative governance, local branding, and value chain coordination. These insights aim to support strategies that leverage agri-food tourism as a catalyst for sustainable rural development.

Keywords: *Agri-food integration; Tourism value chains; Sustainable rural development; Local food systems; Supply chain coordination; Destination authenticity*

JEL Classification: Q01; Q13; Z32

INTRODUCTION

Growing demand for sustainability and authenticity in tourism has enhanced the importance of local agri-food products as key to destination value creation. Incorporating these products into tourism value chains strengthens the connection between agriculture and tourism, promoting income diversification, cultural heritage, and environmentally friendly practices in rural areas (Everett, 2016; Sims, 2009). However, this integration faces structural barriers, including fragmented supply chains, seasonal limitations, inadequate infrastructure, and poor stakeholder coordination (Hall & Gössling, 2013; Zhllima et al., 2022). These issues are especially acute in emerging and peripheral regions, where institutional capacity and market linkages are still developing. This study reviews existing research to offer practical insights on how agri-food product integration can foster sustainable rural development.

Drawing from the reviewed literature and the identified research gap, this study presents the following research propositions:

H1. The literature on agri-food integration within tourism value chains is organized around distinct yet interrelated conceptual dimensions.

H2. Economic outcomes from agri-food integration are strongly dependent on value chain coordination and supply chain performance.

H3. Integrating local agri-food products into tourism generates multidimensional value, including economic, environmental, and cultural benefits.

H4. The existing literature is geographically imbalanced, with limited representation of transition and mountainous regions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integrating local agri-food products into tourism value chains is widely seen as a strategic way to promote rural development and boost destination competitiveness. Early research established a connection between agriculture and tourism, showing how local food systems contribute to economic diversification and enhance the link between production and consumption in rural areas (Telfer & Wall, 1996; Hall & Mitchell, 2001; Torres, 2002). Building on this, later studies highlighted gastronomy's role in distinguishing destinations, indicating that local cuisine enhances authenticity, regional identity, and overall tourism appeal (Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Sims, 2009; Kim & Eves, 2012). From a value chain perspective, literature underscores the importance of coordination mechanisms that connect small-scale producers with tourism markets. Structural challenges such as fragmented production, seasonal fluctuations, and logistical limitations continue to hinder effective integration (Ilbery & Kneafsey, 2000; Marsden et al., 2000; Hall & Gössling, 2013). To overcome these issues, research stresses the importance of short food supply chains, cooperatives, and local aggregation systems in enhancing supply stability and market access (Kneafsey et al., 2008; Phillip et al., 2010). Overall, the success of agri-food integration relies not only on product availability but also on effective governance and coordination capabilities. Recent research has expanded the analysis by connecting agri-food integration with sustainability and rural resilience. Empirical evidence indicates that local food systems promote environmental sustainability by reducing food miles and supporting biodiversity-friendly farming, while also boosting cultural value and destination branding (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). Simultaneously, newer studies underscore the importance of digitalization, innovation, and policy frameworks in enhancing value chain integration and fostering sustainable rural development (Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Anwar et al., 2025; Guandalini, I., 2022; Marković et al., 2024; López-Guzmán et al., 2023; UNWTO, 2023). These findings reflect a transition toward more system-based, integrated approaches in which economic, environmental, and socio-cultural aspects are becoming increasingly interconnected. Despite notable progress, the research still tends to focus on specific regions, mainly in developed tourism areas. Transition zones and mountainous areas, especially in the Western Balkans, are understudied despite their high potential for agri-food tourism. Findings from the Albanian Alps show that, while local resources and cultural assets are valuable, structural challenges such as governance issues, infrastructure gaps, and market coordination problems hinder progress (Zhllima et al., 2022). This highlights the need for tailored frameworks that connect local production systems with tourism development plans in emerging rural regions.

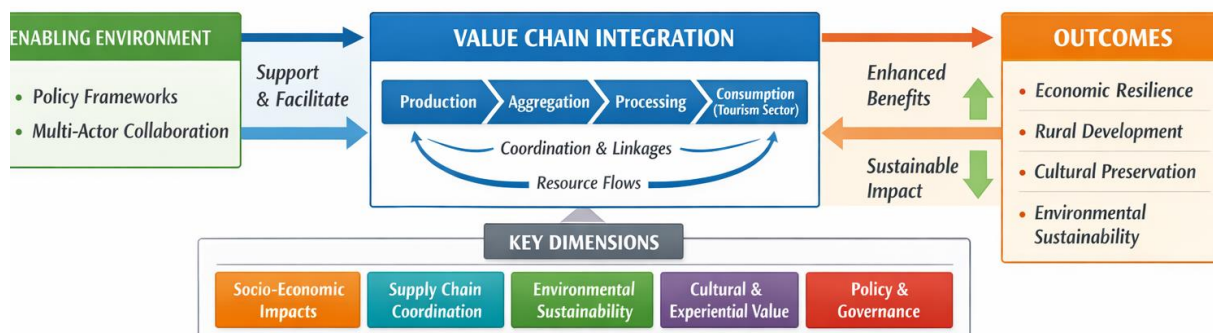
Building on established research, incorporating local agri-food products into tourism value chains is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by supply chain dynamics, experiential value creation, and institutional frameworks. Studies show that local food systems serve not just as economic tools but also as channels for cultural expression and sustainability (Sims, 2009; Everett & Aitchison, 2008). Concurrently, supply chain research underscores the role of coordination, aggregation, and governance mechanisms in creating effective links between producers and tourism markets (Marsden et al., 2000; Hall & Gössling, 2013). The study introduces a conceptual framework that categorizes the literature into three linked areas.

The first area focuses on value chain integration, covering production, aggregation, processing, and consumption. The second area concerns value-creation mechanisms, such as economic gains, environmental sustainability, and cultural authenticity. The third area encompasses the enabling environment, characterized by policy frameworks, institutional support, and collaboration among multiple actors. The framework indicates that sustainable rural development results from aligning these domains.

Effective coordination in the value chain enhances market access and efficiency, while experiential and cultural aspects boost destination competitiveness. Nonetheless, these benefits rely on supportive governance and policy measures that promote collaboration and remove structural barriers.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model, in which value chain integration serves as the core link connecting local agri-food production to tourism consumption. Value creation and institutional support are shown as reinforcing elements. This holistic view forms the theoretical foundation for the research propositions discussed later.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Agri-Food Integration in Tourism Value Chains



Source: Author's elaboration based on literature synthesis.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

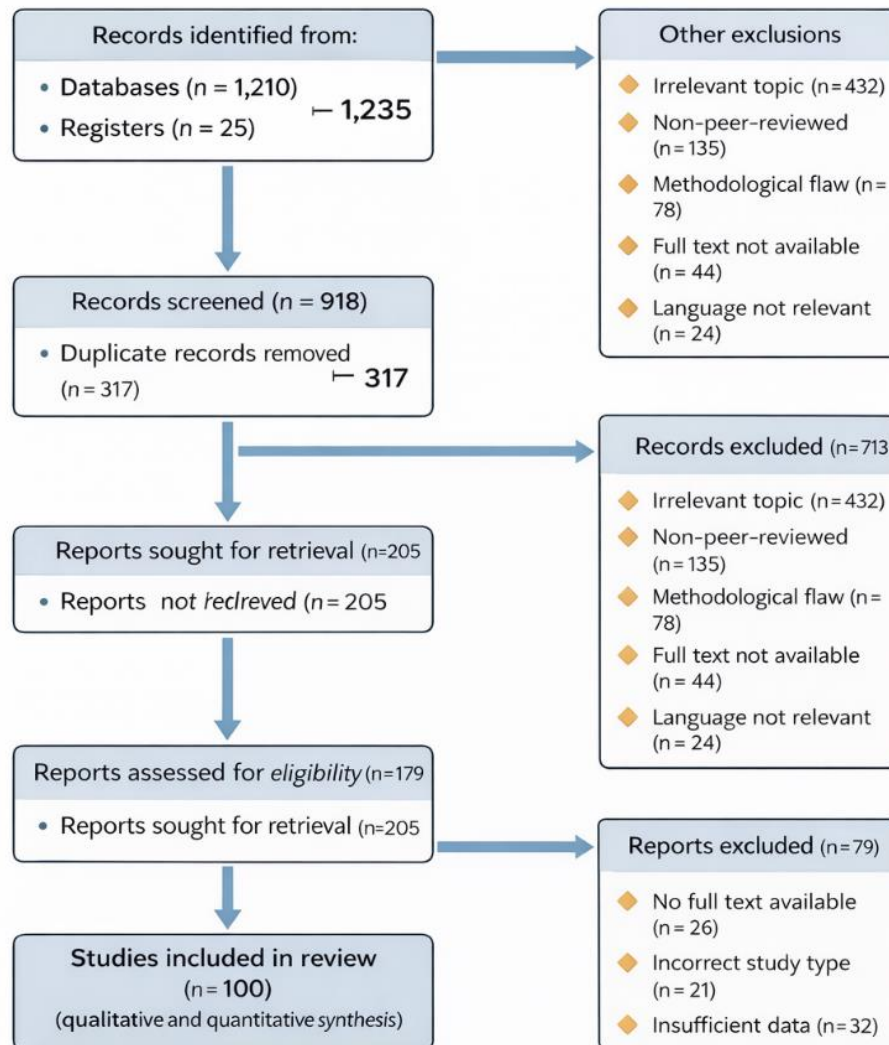
The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining a systematic literature review (SLR) with bibliometric analysis to explore how local agri-food products are integrated into tourism value chains. Following the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework ensures transparency, replicability, and rigor in the study selection process (Page et al., 2021). Data were gathered from the Scopus and Web of Science databases using a structured keyword strategy centered on agri-food systems, tourism, and value chain integration. The initial search identified 1,235 records, which underwent a multi-stage filtering process. Duplicate records were eliminated, followed by screening titles and abstracts, and then conducting full-text eligibility assessments based on predefined inclusion criteria. This process yielded a final sample of 100 peer-reviewed articles suitable for both qualitative and bibliometric analyses.

Figure 2 presents the PRISMA flow diagram, which illustrates the study selection process by showing how the number of records decreases at each stage, from initial identification to final inclusion. It offers a clear overview of the screening, exclusion, and eligibility steps used in the review.

Following the selection process, the final dataset was analyzed using a two-stage approach. Initially, bibliometric techniques were used to explore keyword co-occurrence and delineate the field's conceptual structure. Subsequently, thematic analysis was performed to identify key research themes and examine the interconnections among economic,

environmental, cultural, and governance aspects (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This combined methodology offers a thorough understanding of the existing literature, mitigates fragmentation, and fosters the development of an integrated view of the relationships between agri-food and tourism.

Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection Process



Source: Author's elaboration based on PRISMA 2020.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study selection process reveals a rigorous and highly selective evidence base. The initial database search yielded 1,235 records—780 from Scopus and 455 from Web of Science. After removing duplicates, 918 records remained for title and abstract screening. This deduplication step eliminated 317 records, accounting for 25.7% of the original search results. Of these, 205 articles were selected for full-text review, indicating that only 22.3% of the screened studies advanced to eligibility assessment. Ultimately, 100 peer-reviewed articles were included in the qualitative and bibliometric analysis, representing 48.8% of the full texts and 8.1% of the initial search pool. These numbers underscore both the extensive initial search and the stringent inclusion criteria. The final corpus represents a consolidated

yet selective knowledge base. It includes literature from tourism studies, rural development, agricultural economics, supply chain management, and sustainability science, highlighting the field's interdisciplinary nature. However, the relatively low inclusion rate indicates that the literature remains fragmented and not fully aligned with the specific focus on integrating local agri-food products into tourism value chains. This evidence supports the view that the field is growing but still lacks clear conceptual and methodological unity.

Table 1. PRISMA Selection Statistics and Sample Reduction

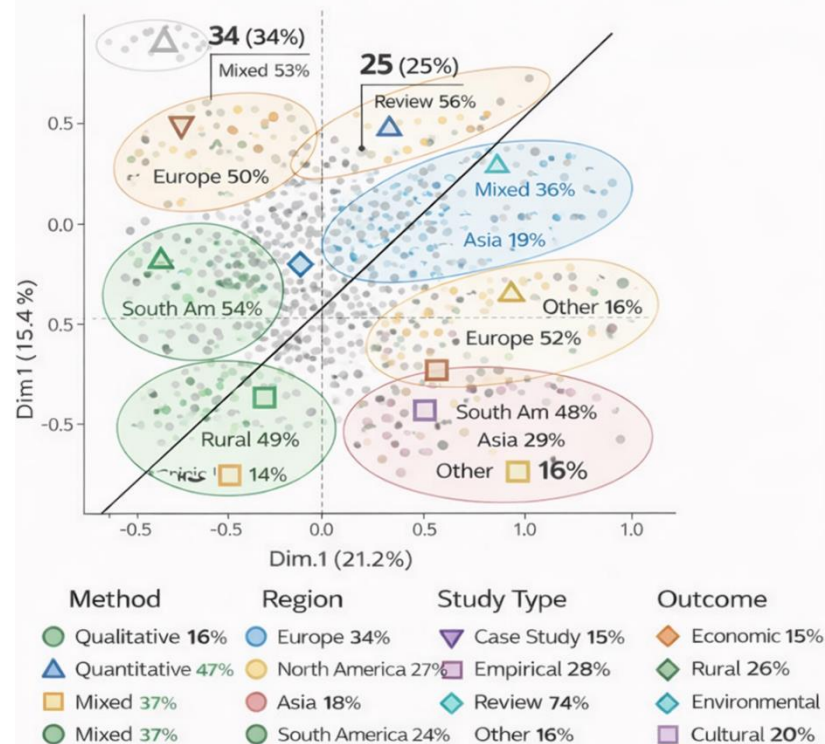
Stage of Selection	Description	Number of Records (n)	% of Previous Stage	% of Initial Sample
Identification	Records identified (Scopus + WoS)	1,235	–	100.0
Deduplication	Duplicates removed	317	25.7	25.7
Screening	Records screened (title/abstract)	918	74.3	74.3
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed	205	22.3	16.6
Inclusion	Studies included in synthesis	100	48.8	8.1

Note: Percentages are calculated relative to the previous stage and the initial sample. The final inclusion rate (8.1%) reflects a highly selective evidence base.

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords identified a network of 52 key terms organized into three main conceptual clusters, depicting a structured yet diverse research landscape. The first cluster, titled Local Food Systems and Economic Viability, emphasizes economic and logistical factors central to the field, with dominant terms such as local food (28 mentions), value chain (25), supply chain (18), rural development (17), short food supply chain (12), and economic impact (10). The high occurrence of these terms indicates that the literature mainly focuses on market linkages, commercialization, and local economic effects. The second cluster, Sustainable Experience and Destination Branding, centers on experiential and demand-driven aspects, featuring key terms like sustainable tourism (22), experience (15), authenticity (14), destination (13), culture (12), and quality (11). These terms suggest that integrating local agri-food is regarded not only as a supply-side tactic but also as a means of differentiating destinations and boosting their symbolic value. The third cluster, called Community, Policy and Rural Resilience, underscores institutional and governance themes with key terms such as rural development (17), community (14), governance (9), policy (8), livelihoods (7), and participation (6). Although these terms appear less frequently than the core economic ones, their consistent co-occurrence indicates a gradual shift in the field from purely market-oriented studies towards more community-focused and policy-oriented approaches.

Bibliometric evidence indicates that the literature is structured around three main pillars: economic-logistical integration, experiential-destination value, and governance-resilience capacity. This suggests that agri-food integration in tourism is understood not merely as a single transaction but as a multi-layered system that incorporates production, market coordination, visitor experience, and institutional support.

Figure 3. Multidimensional Mapping of Agri-Food Integration Research



Source: Author's elaboration based on bibliometric and thematic analysis.

The multidimensional analysis uncovers clear clustering trends within key areas of agri-food integration research. The study distribution shows that mixed and quantitative methods are prevalent in European and Asian regions, while qualitative research is more spread out across rural and environmental sectors. Additionally, the clustering suggests that economic and sustainability-focused results often appear together, indicating a close link between value chain efficiency and sustainable growth goals. These insights emphasize the systemic nature of agri-food integration, in which methodological choices, regional focus, and outcome types collectively shape the research landscape. Citation analysis further affirms the field's maturity and highlights its key intellectual anchors. The top publication sources include the Journal of Sustainable Tourism (14 articles), followed by Tourism Management (9), British Food Journal (7), Journal of Rural Studies (6), and Agriculture and Human Values (5). This pattern suggests that the field is interdisciplinary, influenced by tourism, rural studies, and agri-food scholarship rather than being siloed within a single discipline. The most influential foundational references include Sims (2009, 88 citations), Everett and Aitchison (2008, 76), Hall and Gössling (2013, 65), Bessi re (1998, 58), and Phillip et al. (2010, 52). These highly cited works collectively establish the main interpretive framework in the literature: viewing local food as a symbol of authenticity, regional identity, rural diversification, and sustainability. Furthermore, the leading countries in knowledge production are Italy (18 documents), the United Kingdom (15), Spain (12), the United States (11), and Australia (8). These countries are central to the field, suggesting that empirical research primarily focuses on developed

tourism systems and institutional settings, while mountain regions and transition economies remain relatively underrepresented.

The thematic analysis identified five interconnected themes that together explain how agri-food integration functions within tourism value chains.

Socio-Economic Impacts and Rural Livelihoods was the dominant theme, focusing on income diversification, job creation, and local multiplier effects. Supply Chain Governance and Logistics was identified as the main operational challenge, particularly where small-scale production, seasonality, fragmentation, and quality standardization issues hinder consistent market linkages. Sustainability and Environmental Resilience found that local sourcing is consistently viewed as both a means to reduce carbon emissions and a way to support biodiversity-friendly traditional farming practices. Cultural Heritage and Tourist Experience emphasized the importance of local cuisine in fostering authenticity, symbolic place attachment, and destination differentiation. Policy Frameworks and Multi-Actor Collaboration showed that successful integration relies on supportive institutions, intersectoral coordination, and governance tailored to local contexts.

These five themes show that the field is not driven by just one explanation. Instead, the evidence points to a layered system in which economic outcomes depend on supply chain performance, which in turn depends on the quality of governance. The creation of cultural and environmental value further supports all three. This finding firmly endorses the integrated framework introduced later in the paper.

Table 2. Hypothesis (Proposition) Evaluation Based on Bibliometric and Thematic Evidence

Hypothesis / Proposition	Theoretical Expectation	Empirical Evidence (from SLR & Bibliometrics)	Key Indicators	Result
H1. Multidimensional structure	Literature is organized in distinct but interrelated dimensions	52 keywords grouped into 3 clusters (economic–logistical; experiential; governance)	Cluster count = 3; Keywords = 52	Supported
H2. Economic outcomes depend on value chain coordination	Economic benefits require supply chain integration	High frequency of “local food” (28), “value chain” (25), “supply chain” (18); themes show logistics constraints	Top keywords: Theme 2 (Supply Chain)	Supported
H3. Integration creates multidimensional value (economic + environmental + cultural)	Outcomes extend beyond income effects.	Strong presence of “sustainable tourism” (22), “authenticity” (14), “culture” (12), alongside economic terms	Cluster 2 & 3 indicators	Supported
H4. Geographical imbalance in literature	Evidence is concentrated in developed countries.	Italy (18), UK (15), Spain (12), USA (11); limited	Country distribution	Supported

		coverage of transition regions		
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Note: Hypotheses are evaluated through systematic synthesis (SLR + bibliometric co-occurrence), not inferential statistics. Indicators represent frequency, clustering, and thematic convergence.

The results in Table 2 strongly support all four research propositions. The bibliometric and thematic evidence shows that the literature is organized around interconnected conceptual areas, with economic-logistical, experiential, and governance-related aspects forming a unified analytical framework. The findings also confirm that economic outcomes are strongly linked to value chain coordination, as evidenced by frequent terms such as “local food,” “value chain,” and “supply chain.” Additionally, the analysis reveals that agri-food integration creates multidimensional value, extending beyond economic gains to include sustainability and cultural identity. Lastly, the results reveal a clear geographical imbalance, with most studies concentrated in developed countries and a limited focus on transition and mountain regions. This underscores the importance of context-specific research in underserved areas like the Western Balkans.

The review’s empirical synthesis highlights three main conclusions. First, the literature is well organized both statistically and conceptually, as evidenced by the PRISMA selection profile, the 52-term co-occurrence network, and the three-cluster pattern. Second, the key explanation in the field is not just the existence of local food products but the ability to integrate them within coordinated value chain systems. Third, the strongest contribution of the literature is showing that agri-food integration leads to economic, environmental, cultural, and governance benefits simultaneously. However, this evidence is mostly from developed-country contexts. These findings provide a solid empirical basis for the discussion and the proposed framework for sustainable rural development, especially in under-researched mountain regions.

Discussion

The study confirms that incorporating local agri-food products into tourism value chains involves multiple interconnected factors, including economic, experiential, and institutional elements. These dimensions function as a unified system where value is created through the alignment of production, coordination, and consumption. This aligns with earlier research highlighting that local food initiatives enhance economic benefits while also strengthening destination identity and differentiation (Sims, 2009; Everett & Aitchison, 2008; Du Rand et al, 2026; Cohen et al., 2006).

From a value chain standpoint, the results highlight the importance of coordination and governance in addressing structural inefficiencies. As noted in the literature on short food supply chains, issues like fragmented production and seasonality continue to pose significant challenges to scalability and dependability (Marsden et al., 2000; Hall & Gössling, 2013). The results imply that integration obstacles stem more from the absence of effective coordination mechanisms, such as cooperative arrangements and institutional support, than from product quality. This shifts the focus from resource availability to organizational capacity, aligning with broader views in rural development and supply chain integration.

The study contributes to the growing body of research linking tourism and sustainability by demonstrating that integrating agri-food systems enhances economic, environmental, and socio-cultural outcomes. Supporting traditional farming methods and reducing food miles promotes environmental sustainability, while incorporating local food into tourism experiences enhances authenticity and cultural richness (Hjalager & Johansen, 2013; Björk & Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2016). These results align with the experience economy model, in which value is

created through meaningful exchanges between tourists and local communities. The analysis highlights a notable gap in existing research. Most models originate from developed countries with robust institutions, making them less effective for transition economies. Areas like the Western Balkans, with weaker governance, informal markets, and fragmented land ownership, need tailored approaches.

The study fills that gap by consolidating fragmented insights and proposing a structured framework that focuses on multi-actor collaboration and aligning policies as essential steps for successful integration.

The study advances existing research by moving beyond simple descriptive analyses and offering a comprehensive view that links value chain processes to sustainable rural development outcomes. The results emphasize that effective agri-food integration depends not only on local resources but also on well-coordinated systems that synchronize economic incentives, institutional structures, and experiential value creation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This research offers a detailed overview of how local agri-food products are incorporated into tourism value chains. It employs both a systematic review and a bibliometric analysis to uncover key patterns, structures, and areas requiring further investigation. Results indicate that integrating agri-food is a complex, multidimensional system influenced by economic, experiential, and institutional factors. Notably, the study highlights that successful value chain coordination facilitated by governance and policy support is crucial for transforming local resources into sustainable development benefits. The findings emphasize that the benefits of integration extend beyond income, encompassing environmental sustainability and cultural conservation. Simultaneously, the analysis shows that most research is focused on developed regions, with transition and mountain areas receiving less attention. This disparity highlights the importance of tailored approaches that account for institutional capacity, market dynamics, and local development contexts. The study advances an integrated theoretical framework that connects value chain dynamics to dimensions of sustainability and the tourism experience. In practice, it provides actionable insights for policymakers, tourism operators, and local producers, highlighting the importance of collaboration among multiple actors, supply chain coordination, and destination-based branding strategies. While recognizing its contributions, the study faces certain limitations, including reliance on the Scopus and Web of Science databases and the omission of non-English publications. Future research ought to aim to validate the proposed framework, especially in understudied regions empirically. It should consider adopting quantitative methods to assess the impact of agri-food integration on rural development outcomes.

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