

Opportunities for the Sustainable Development of Rural Areas in Serbia

Wprowadzanie rozwoju zrównoważonego na terenach wiejskich w Serbii

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Abstract

This article discusses current problems in rural Serbia and investigates development opportunities. The intention is to indicate strengths and weaknesses of the present situation and to highlight possible solutions for sustainable development. The results were presented in the form of potential methods for future development and are discussed through several issues: sustainable regional development and sustainable rural development as an alternative to excessive urbanization; cultivating the tradition of the village and development of rural tourism; cultural heritage in the service of sustainable development; building the ecological image of the village through promotion of the local economy and organic farming; and social capital and infrastructure development as factors of sustainable development. The conclusion is that in planning the development of rural areas, villages should be seen as a value and their potentials and regional characteristics should be promoted and used in order to contribute to sustainable development.

Key words: rural development, sustainability, localization, tourism, heritage, agriculture, tradition

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia problemy występujące na obszarach rolniczych w Serbii. Celem jest określenie silnych i słabych stron takich obszarów i wskazanie możliwych rozwiązań, zgodnych ze zrównoważonym rozwojem. Przeprowadzone badania umożliwiły na wskazanie najlepszych metod postępowania odnoszących się do przyszłego rozwoju, a związanych z zagadnieniami takimi jak: zrównoważony rozwój regionalny, zrównoważony rozwój obszarów wiejskich jako alternatywa dla nadmiernej urbanizacji, kultywowanie tradycji i rozwój agroturystyki, dziedzictwo kulturowe, budowa wizerunku ekologicznego wsi poprzez wspieranie lokalnej gospodarki i rolnictwa ekologicznego, kapitał społeczny i rozwój infrastruktury jako czynniki rozwoju zrównoważonego. Otrzymane rezultaty wskazują, że planując rozwój obszarów wiejskich należy dostrzegać ich wartość, wspierać ich potencjał, a poprzez to wprowadzać rozwój zrównoważony.

Słowa kluczowe:

Rozwój obszarów wiejskich, zrównoważoność, lokalizacja, turystyka, dziedzictwo, rolnictwo, tradycja

1. Introduction: Problems of rural Serbia

Development problems and the stagnation of villages were recorded in most European countries in the 20th century. As a consequence of economic growth and urbanization rural areas suffer negative social, economic and environmental impacts. Strong pressure on unbuilt areas near cities to meet

the growing demand for housing and recreational activities and the negative impact of mass tourism and intensive agriculture lead to pollution and destruction of cultural and natural landscapes as well as rural areas. According to Brown and Kulcsar, economic distress tends to be disproportionately located in Central and Eastern Europe and is concentrated in rural areas. They identify four

factors that explain this: 1) many redundant workers who lost their jobs in urban industrial complexes were village residents, 2) foreign investment and new jobs usually target urban enterprises; 3) states reduce their role in the provision of rural health and other essential services; and 4) employment in agriculture has declined and has not been replaced by other jobs (Brown, Kulcsar, 2000).

The importance of questions concerning the status of rural areas in Serbia is particularly important if we bear in mind that Serbia is a predominantly rural country. Rural areas make up about 85 % of the total territory, and the rural population makes up about 55 % of the total population (Milić, 2011). At the same time, demographic crisis and the depopulation of villages are present and are followed with disparities between regions that are believed to be among the largest in Europe. According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Development Program, as much as 50 % of village residents in Serbia are not satisfied with the quality of life (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2008). Rural areas in Serbia, and particularly those in mountains, are uninhabited and marginalized with poor transportation links and an undeveloped community infrastructure. One of the reasons for this is the migration to cities caused by the need for employment. In search of existential safety, villagers often become daily migrants using time-consuming transport. Employment of male residents outside the village leads to the transfer of agricultural activities to women, whose overload even encourage further emigration. Migrations to cities can also be caused by the inaccessibility of health services, social infrastructure and the poor conditions of schooling¹. A long distance to the nearest high school results in the lower school attendance of rural children: 79.5 %, compared to 87.3 % in urban areas (Government of..., 2008). The shrinkage of the population in villages results in a small number of children living in villages, and therefore the organization of pre-school institutions and specialized pupil buses is considered too expensive or unnecessary. Similarly, the rural population is disadvantaged when it comes to the provision of roads and social infrastructure because the cost of establishing the infrastructure is significantly higher in areas with lower population density. Deagrarianization of Serbian villages is affected by the social and economic insecurity of agricultural households (e.g. selective health insurance for farmers) and neglecting the peasantry as a socio-professional category. Inequalities in the development of urban and rural

areas are only enhanced by the affirmation of economic activity and infrastructure around the rivers Danube, Sava and Morava, and especially in the cities Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš.

The deterioration of the age structure of the population in villages: the average age of the rural population in Serbia in 1953 was 32 years, and in 1991 it was over 50 years (Government of..., 1996) is one of the consequences. The number of villages in Serbia was reduced in the second half of the 20th century through the merging of neighboring villages, attachment to towns or through losing inhabitants. The bad state of villages affects cities negatively as they fail to integrate the population that comes from rural areas.

Sustainable regional and rural development as an alternative to excessive urbanization

Sustainable development is today accepted as a guiding principle in plans, projects and policies in the private and public sector. The term was introduced in the 1987 Brundtland report as *development that meets the needs of the present generations without compromising the ability of future ones to meet their own needs* (Brundtland Commission, 1987). Sustainable development implies the integration of economic, environmental and social issues. The guiding objectives are social progress that recognizes the needs of all people, environmental protection, the wise use of natural resources and maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth. In particular, sustainable development means improving the quality of life, environmental protection and pollution prevention, reduction of waste production, recycling, the development of local resources and the local economy, respecting diversity, the development of a democratic society, preserving the heritage and the use of renewable energy resources. In the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (Government of..., 2008), the following principles are mentioned as leading in achieving sustainable development: solidarity, open and democratic society, citizens' participation in decision making, integration of environmental issues into other policies, the polluter pays principle, and sustainable production and consumption.

Rural development deals with everything that has happened, is happening or should happen in rural areas, with the aim to improve the lives of the rural population and preserve the rural landscape. The following aims are mentioned in the Sustainable Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia regarding rural development: stopping the trend of depopulation of rural areas; decentralization and regionalization; the reduction of disparities in regional development, within regions and between cities and villages; the development and improvement of infrastructure; the protection of natural

¹ According to the 1994 census, 50 % of elementary and secondary schools in Serbia at that time did not have a phone line (Petovar, 2003). These were mainly schools in villages. 45.3 % of schools had only one or two classrooms, and in 28 % of schools there were no toilets in the building.

resources, and the promotion of public involvement in planning (Government of..., 2008). Similar and complementary to the mentioned above are the objectives of rural development itself: to keep the population in rural areas, equal the quality of life in rural and urban areas, provide the conditions for the return of the population in villages, increase income and support the economic activities of the rural population.

These issues are also closely linked with regional policy since the appropriate regional planning can remove negative impacts on rural areas and contribute to sustainable development. Mihaljević (2006) discussed sustainable regional development and had the idea of a radical approach to economic policy. As the development axis of Novi Sad-Belgrade-Niš attracts people in Serbia, the proposal is that benefits and stimulative measures for housing and employment should increase in order to help unemployed people to settle in areas with depopulation problems by moving away from this axis state aid. As one of the principles of the regionalization of Serbia, Mihaljević further mentions the demetropolization of Belgrade through the relocation of functions and institutions of national importance which would help develop other parts of the country.

It is essential that development strategies (e.g. Spatial Development Strategy and the Sustainable Development Strategy) are compatible with each other, and establishing an interministerial and intersectoral collaboration is a necessity. In the planning of rural development, this would mean setting rural issues as cross-cutting issues in the development policies of the country. One option that would contribute to the better position of the village is the creation of an authority responsible for the issues of rural development that would contribute to the consolidation of responsibility and an integral approach to rural development.

Potentials and possible development model for villages in Serbia

In the planning of the development of rural areas, villages should be seen as a potential, not as a problem, and in accordance with that their values should be promoted and used for achieving people's benefit. Urban and rural areas are closely linked – the villages benefit from the cultural and social activities of cities, and cities benefit from the recreational value of rural areas that contribute to the cultural and natural diversity. Therefore, cities and villages should be partners, not competitors. The planning of rural development should focus on the specific characteristics of regions and the use of potentials already present in Serbia – agricultural resources, favorable climate, numerous water courses, possibilities for the production of healthy food and the use of alternative energy sources. The natural and

cultural heritage of rural areas can form the basis of social and economic regeneration. Mountain landscapes rich in national parks, forests, rivers and lakes provide suitable locations for active recreation in nature and extreme sports. Cultural, sports and traditional events can serve as a basis for rural tourism development and the improvement of the economic situation of villages. The rich cultural and historical heritage of Serbia (archaeological sites, ancient and medieval churches and monasteries etc.) can have the same purpose.

Cultivating the tradition of the village – development of rural tourism as a factor of sustainable development

Tourism has an increasingly important role in the economy of many countries, and it can contribute significantly to employment and improving the social, cultural and natural environment. *Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry* was adopted in 1995 by the World Tourism Organization – UNWTO, World Travel and Tourism Council – WTCC and the Earth Council. It suggests the development of tourism on the principle of sustainable development (UNWTO, WTCC, Earth Council, 1995).

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as *tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities'* (UNWTO website). At the same time, tourism is one of the most dominant economies in villages and it could be a basis for rural development. Aside from the natural environment, villages are characterized by the presence of traditional architecture, crafts and services, and they have a rich cultural and historical background. Rural tourism includes a variety of tourist activities such as agro-tourism (farms where tourists have an opportunity to work as farmers), ecotourism, gastronomic tourism, visiting cultural, historical and natural attractions, outdoor activities and excursions, walking, hiking, hunting, fishing, and horseback riding, etc. Ecotourism, or ecological tourism, is a subset of sustainable tourism, which focuses on the ecology and environmentally responsible visits to protected natural areas for the enjoyment of nature and accompanying cultural features.

Serbia has potentials for developing rural tourism. One of these potentials are *Ethno houses* – homes and additional objects around them built in the traditional style of folk architecture that contain elements of folklore, tradition, heritage and traditional agricultural activities. *Salaš* is a previously isolated farm typical for 19th century northern Serbia, surrounded by fields and vineyards, made of mud and organic materials and covered with adobe. *Ethno villages* provide insight into the methods of making old houses. Ethno parks represent reconstructed village ambiances made of wood or stone.

In order to develop sustainable tourism, it is necessary to improve the transport and tourism infrastructure, restore important sites and promote the potentials of the village. The development of rural tourism in Serbia would contribute to the employment of local people and thus increase the opportunities for the young and educated people to stay in villages.

Cultural Heritage in the service of sustainable development of rural areas

The cultural heritage of Europe, including the cultural landscapes of rural areas, is the expression of its identity² and has global significance. It is the everyday environment of a large number of people and it enriches their quality of life. In order to stop it being neglected and damaged it is necessary to build awareness about the role of cultural development in the realization of social and spatial balance. The value of cultural heritage and the concept of cultural diversity have been recognized in international documents and strategies, and the presence of culture in development policies grows. *Agenda 21 for Culture* mentions commitment to the preservation and the development of authentic local cultures that have a historical connection and interactive relationship with the territory as one of the objectives (United Cities and Local Governments, 2004). This agenda was adopted by local governments around the World and by three cities in Serbia – Novi Sad, Subotica and Zrenjanin. In 2005, UNESCO adopted the *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, in which the objectives are: the affirmation of the link between the culture and development of the country (especially in developing countries) and the recognition of the specific nature of cultural activities as holders of the identity (UNESCO, 2005). The concept of sustainable development has also evolved according to changes in understanding the importance of culture. Australian researcher John Hawkes (2001) proposed culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability.

There are many examples of how cultural heritage can be used in the regeneration of the region and especially in small settlements. Former mining settlements have a diverse and rich collection of industrial heritage³ that can be used for the economic development of the area and help turn what was

considered a handicap into an advantage. This helps creating a new image for the area, the development of tourism and preventing emigration. Former industrial settlements in Serbia represent an opportunity for future sustainable development (Cizler, 2011). An actual current example is the regeneration of the Senj mine. Founded 1853, it is the oldest Serbian coal mine, with preserved mines, workshops, administrative buildings and residential areas. The legacy of mining is a part of the local identity and a development potential. Senj mine was supported by the European Union to become the first ecomuseum in Serbia, where cultural heritage will be used as a resource for local development, economic restructuring and the conservation of the environment.

In addition to industrial heritage, a considerable part of the cultural heritage of Serbia represents its traditional architecture, based on traditional craft skills and the use of natural materials. These are mainly buildings built at the turn of the 19th/20th century and can be found in Tršić and Sirogojno (where a museum of folk architecture with 40 wooden buildings is located). *Pimnica* is a temporary settlement at a vineyard made for storing wine and built of hewn stone and wood. Today it offers the tasting and selling of wine for tourists.

Building ecological image of the village – promotion of local economy and organic farming

Today's rising inequalities and future threats such as the over-exploitation of natural resources and the degradation of the environment indicate that modern civilization is developing in an unsustainable way (Pawlowski, 2010, 2012), and this is often regarded as a consequence of capitalism (Ikerd, 2008). In a time of capitalism, the emphasis is too often put on narrow self-interests and economic value. It weakens interpersonal relationships and cooperation. *When people buy things taking only into consideration price rather than buy from people they know and trust, personal relationships within communities suffer from neglect and their social capital is depleted* (Ikerd, 2008). Farming communities lose their economic, social, and cultural identities, and communities lose their ability to protect themselves from outside exploitation (Ikerd, 2008).

Until recently, a significant part of humanity depended only on the local economy, local production and the use of local resources. It was led and controlled by local communities and constituted a reflection of local culture. However, the prevailing centralized global model is based on the continuous expansion of production and consumption. In such a system goods are being transported over long distances which leads to the destruction of nature, homogenization of culture and the damaging of communities (Mander, Goldsmith, 2003). The processes of globalization transfer responsibilities from

² Lynch identity equates with the term *sense of place* understood as *identity is the extent to which a person can recognise or recall a place as being distinct from other places – as having a vivid, or unique, or at least a particular, character of its own* (Lynch, 1981).

³ Industrial heritage consists of the remains of industrial culture which have historical, social, architectural or scientific value. These remains can be industrial buildings, but also machinery, mines, infrastructure, housing and other buildings made for workers (TICCIH, 2003).

the individual and local to the global level, therefore often depersonalizing individuals and groups. In such a situation residents can feel powerless as they can no longer influence their own and their communities' lives as they used to. They lose self-confidence, which results in them feeling insecure, losing responsibility for their own territory and often poisoning the soil without being aware that they also endanger themselves by doing this (Barbič, 1997: 42).

Urbanization and centralization of the population are often recognized as a solution to overpopulation, for being more efficient and using less resources. Still, as Norberg-Hodge noticed (2003), when the costs of urbanization are considered more closely it becomes evident that big centralized systems use resources more intensively and are more harmful to the environment than smaller systems. Norberg-Hodge states that it is necessary to support development models based on the understanding of the diversity of environments and their unique conditions. It is necessary to support the remaining rural communities and farmers in order to rebuild and keep a strong economy. She believes that the long-term solution for today's social and environmental problems requires a large number of small and diverse local initiatives. Measures for the protection of rural households and small local businesses will be considered in the following section of the article.

Meyer and Burayidi (1991) argue that more services have to be available to local consumers within the rural community in order to retain more money within the community. Reliance on the local economy creates stable communities and protects nature. This was a critique of mainstream consumption patterns, and the alternative is a sustainable consumption. This model could be attained through so-called *simple living*, defined by Kronenberg and Iida (2011) as life-style choice that involves more thoughtful consumption complemented with spiritual development. Many organizations and individuals already work on strengthening communities and local economies, and in order to succeed in that policy changes at national and international levels are needed. More money could be invested in the construction of bicycle and walking paths which are ecological options and contribute to local development and the development of recreational activities. Also, using renewable energy would reduce pollution, ease the pressure of large-scale energy installations and reduce the dependence on oil. Subsidies and financing of large enterprises could be replaced by encouraging small-scale production that would help small producers in the villages. Similarly, the movement of ecological villages connects communities from around the world in order to create a more sustainable way of life. In all of these ways people are more able to stay in villages, to preserve

their cultural and personal identity and to contribute to the preservation of cultural diversity.

Initiatives such as *Buy local campaign*, *Community-supported agriculture - CSA*, *Subscription farming*, *Linking farmers with consumers*, *farmers markets and community gardens* help save the sense of community and preserve small economies through the prevention of the money outflow from local businesses. These innovations in agriculture link consumers with farmers to their mutual benefit. To understand this concept, it is necessary to explain that modern, industrial agriculture is based on the significant consumption of material and energy. It produces harmful substances and causes ecological problems. In the conventional food system in industrialized countries food is being transported over long distances before being used (for example, in the USA food travels 2,000 km on average before it becomes part of a meal). During this process, food goes through various procedures that affect its quality, and a lot of energy is spent on transport and waste is produced. Apart from that 25 % of food never reaches the table because it spoils during transport or in a store. Consumers therefore not only get food of lower quality but they also lose touch with the source of food and its producer. In the CSA system farmers and consumers are associated and the consumer pays a share in order to cover the farmers' costs for the upcoming season. By doing so, higher quality and pesticide-free seasonal organic food is produced at prices lower than market prices. This allows farmers to collect the working capital without paying interest, and it also serves as protection for them.

These kinds of new approaches to farming are called organic, biodynamic, holistic, bio-intensive, biological, ecological or permaculture (Ikerd, 2008). Sustainable agriculture is defined as the *successful management of resources for agriculture to satisfy changing human needs while maintaining or enhancing the quality of the environment and conserving natural resources* (FAO, 1989). *With sustainable agriculture being a form of sustainable development, it must be capable of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the future (...). Sustainable systems of farming must be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable* (Ikerd, 2008). In Western Europe, modern organic agriculture has been spreading gradually since the 1970s but early versions of it started to emerge in the 1920s. It is now accepted by society, governments, the European Union and numerous state and scientific institutions around the world as the most sustainable method of food production.

With good climate and soil conditions as a potential, Serbia can build an environmentally friendly image. East European farmers are able to participate in organic food production because it requires fewer financial investments than conventional pro-

duction (Oesterdiekhoff, 2003). Organic and ecological farming would pull the development of agro-eco-tourism and enable the revitalization of villages. As a result, supporting programs of organic agriculture would appear such as the production of organic seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, etc., and this will further affect the attraction of foreign capital and contribute to solving the unemployment problem. However, the undertaking of stimulative measures is needed by the Government along with the improvement of village infrastructure, the education of farmers and the establishing of farmers' associations, and basing agriculture on competitiveness.

Social Capital of rural areas and infrastructure development as factors of sustainable development

An important factor of rural development is the development of infrastructure. This would contribute to the improvement of economic conditions in villages, elimination of inequalities, improved access to the market and an increase in investments in villages. Infrastructure development is associated with the social aspect of life as it increases mobility and access to health care and schools. Infrastructure development involves greater access to knowledge, education, and information resources and can have a positive impact on gender equality, youth activities and civil initiatives. A bottom-up approach to rural development would mean involving the entire community in local development. The transfer of power from central to local levels enables civil society to participate more deeply in the decision making process and could contribute to greater efficiency in public management and the creation of better conditions for economic development (Milić, 2011). Construction of transport networks and the organization of public transport between villages and towns enables rural people to access the social infrastructure of cities, and this influences their choice to stay in villages. Community development, the development of educational institutions and volunteering in the village can have a similar function.

Conclusions

The paper considers the possibilities for the sustainable development of villages in Serbia. Suggestions are divided into several main topics that should illustrate possible directions for improving the status of the countryside. The importance of questions concerning the status of rural areas in Serbia is particularly important if we bear in mind that it is a predominantly rural country. It is shown that urbanization is not the best answer to rural issues and that economic development should involve the regeneration of villages based on the promotion and use of its potentials. This kind of development would not stop the depopulation of

rural areas but it would be an answer for it through the development of villages which are complementary to cities.

Policies of regional and rural development are linked and their objectives should be complementary and compatible. It is essential to establish interministerial and intersectoral collaboration. Sustainable regional development means focusing on areas outside the currently dominant vertical of Novi Sad-Belgrade-Niš.

In planning the development of rural areas, villages should be viewed as a potential, not as a problem, and in accordance with that their potentials should be used. Planning of rural development should focus on regional characteristics and values such as cultivating the tradition of the village and the development of rural tourism, the use of cultural heritage, creating the eco image of villages, the promotion of the local economy and sustainable forms of agriculture, and finally the use of the social capital of villages and infrastructure development. Implementation of these measures would contribute to the sustainability of the countryside in Serbia and countryside generally and to stopping the current negative trends associated with rural areas.

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