

# FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

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In the last twenty years, local self-governments in rural areas have initiated a transformative process to create appealing living environments capable of satisfying modern human needs while ensuring a high quality of life. With this aim, they are constantly trying to create optimal conditions that would keep the current population, and also attract new people and capital. In order to succeed in this, it is crucial to enable the entire local community to participate in the process of sustainable development, and a community is made of all stakeholders operating in one area, including local self-government. Therefore, when designing a local community development strategy, it is very important to take into account the needs of all local stakeholders in the area.

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rural  
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local  
community,  
participation,  
revitalization,  
forestry

## **1 Introduction**

A long-term sustainable development of rural areas is a challenge faced by numerous local self-governments in rural areas across the European Union. These are areas that traditionally rely on the development of agriculture, with a gradual strengthening of other activities, especially sustainable rural tourism. A prerequisite for any concept of sustainable rural development is the involvement of relevant stakeholders, and one of the fundamental challenges lies in establishing effective connections and networks among all these stakeholders. A local government can encourage this through a variety of mechanisms, for example, through organizing public discussions or conducting opinion surveys where stakeholders can put forth their viewpoints. In such a complex approach, it is very important to inform the relevant stakeholders about the possibilities and ways of participation. According to Koprić (2014), self-governments must assume a long-term responsibility for local and regional development, in all its aspects. In order for this to be possible, it is necessary to formulate a long-term strategy towards developing a self-government system that relies on professional input, with participation of local and regional subjects.

## **2 Sustainable development of rural areas of the European Union**

The term “sustainable development” originated in forestry. It referred to the afforestation of areas and the logging of forests with an aim of balancing these two activities so as not to compromise the biological restoration of forests. The term itself was introduced in the 1970s, but elements of sustainable development policies could be found in the earlier works of Richard, Malthus and Mill. The concept of sustainable development entered the international politics in 1987 with the publication of the report “Our Common Future” by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development. The conclusion at the time was that the unreasonable use of numerous essential natural resources, along with release of pollutants from various sources, exceeds the threshold that is physically sustainable in nature, and that without significant reductions in exploitation of materials and energy, in the following decades may see an uncontrolled decline in the amount of food, energy consumption and industrial production per person. The term “sustainable development” has been increasingly present in scientific and professional terminology since the 1980s.

The management of sustainable development requires multidisciplinary collaboration among stakeholders in various scientific fields. Sustainability is a key component of the development process, as it creates balances the development of society, economy the environment. The ultimate goal is a clearly defined development trajectory that will lead to economic, social and political changes, thereby enhancing the overall quality of life for the entire rural population. Sustainable development, to put it simply, represents a pursuit of responsible business, which meets the needs of the present and future generations, and preserves and wisely uses natural resources. By applying the concept of sustainable development, rural areas can tackle developmental challenges, to the benefit of current and future generations.

An inadequate development of rural areas affects the entire country. The consequences are manifested in the form of underutilization of resource bases and poor valorization of existing strategic advantages, which is primarily attributed to unfavorable structural indicators in problematic areas. In addition, there is a weakening of both spatial and functional integration of the territory, arising from the depopulation of a substantial portion of the area.

## **2.1 The role of local self-governments in the development of rural areas**

Public affairs are activities that are carried out in the public interest, and are established by the legitimate political bodies of a country. In centralized countries, public affairs are exclusive responsibility of the central government. In decentralized countries, part of public affairs is the responsibility of self-governing units operating at lower levels of the territorial system. While local self-government systems in modern, interconnected Europe have undergone harmonization, there are still some variations in the definitions of local affairs, accompanied by legal and other distinctions among categories of local matters.

Local self-government entails the right and the capacity of local entities to regulate and manage a significant segment of public affairs, responsibly and in the best interests of the local population, within the framework specified by law. The responsibility of a local self-government involves the formulation of strategic planning documents. In their publication "Strategic local development programs - Croatian experiences" (2010), Đokić, Rašić Bakarić, Šišinački presented the

experiences of applying a participatory approach in the creation of strategic development documents at the local level.

The 2008 European Charter of Local Self-Government contains the basic principles of local self-government. Citizens can directly participate in the management of local affairs through various forms of direct decision-making, and the Charter outlines the procedures for obtaining opinions in all matters directly related to local units.

A rural area encompasses different regions with various activities and landscapes, and it also includes the natural environment, agricultural areas and arable land, villages, small towns, regional centers and industrialized rural areas. In this regard, its role as a “buffer zone” is also important, as it provides a regenerative environment which is crucial for ecological balance. Finally, the significance of rural regions as places for rest and leisure is also steadily increasing.

## **2.2. Development of rural areas in the Republic of Croatia**

An analysis of Croatia's economic development pointed to significant inequalities among its counties in terms of basic indicators of social and economic development (educational status of the population, unemployment rate, employment rate, wages, development index, competitiveness, development of entrepreneurship, foreign currency savings of households). As for social and economic development, the best results are recorded by the City of Zagreb and the counties of Primorje-Gorski Kotar and Istria, while the counties of Vukovar-Srijem, Virovitica-Podravina and Brod-Posavina typically show unfavorable results.

Speaking of the basic indicators of demographic, social and economic development (population density, educational structure of the population, unemployment and employment rates), Croatia falls significantly behind the EU average.

The ranking of counties by competitiveness aligns with the ranking based on the GDP per capita and development index; seven least competitive Croatian counties are also the counties with the lowest development index (below 75% of the Croatian average). The business environment in the most competitive counties (the City of Zagreb, Varaždin, Istria, Međimurje and Primorje-Gorski Kotar) is marked by a positive migration balance, a more prominent role of entrepreneurial zones (except

the City of Zagreb) and a more favorable educational structure of the population. Additionally, a negative correlation was found between the counties' competitiveness, the emigration of the population and small numbers of entrepreneurial zones (Požega-Slavonija, Vukovar-Srijem, Sisak-Moslavina, Virovitica-Podravina and Lika-Senj). Entrepreneurial activity is somewhat more pronounced in the counties of the Adriatic Croatia, which has been recording an above-average number of companies per 1,000 inhabitants (35 in comparison with the state average of 31 companies per 1,000 inhabitants). Entrepreneurial infrastructure is more developed in the counties of the Continental Croatia, where there are more business zones as compared to the Adriatic Croatia.

Taking a look from a regional perspective, we may ascertain that the development of Croatian counties is uneven. The negative effects of insufficient development of certain regions are emigration and a decline in entrepreneurial activity. This has been more pronounced over the past few years, especially since the accession of the Republic of Croatia to the European Union. A good regional development policy would effectively stop this phenomenon and pave the way for a better future in these regions. After Croatia joined the EU, greater opportunities for independent development management at the regional and local levels have emerged. This is evident in the changes in the legislative framework, better opportunities for the local governments to stimulate their own development, and a stronger encouragement participatory processes, for example, in the creation of strategic documents.

### **3 The possibility of sustainable development and revitalization through participatory involvement of stakeholders**

The research was conducted in the area of Vodnjan. Considering that the topic of this paper focuses on public participation and involvement in the processes of proposing and making decisions, it was essential to predefine the target group as accurately as possible. In other words, it was necessary to identify the significant stakeholders who could influence the direction of future development. The research was conducted among stakeholders engaged in agriculture, gathered in the Vodnjan-based Association "Agroturist" and the Agricultural Cooperative Vodnjan – Cooperativa agricola Dignano. The purpose of the empirical research, carried out in Vodnjan, was to show that the process of revitalization and sustainable development

in rural areas can significantly benefit from the synergy between local self-governments and stakeholders. A questionnaire was used as the research instrument.

Table 1 shows the structure of the sample by gender and age.

**Table 1: Sample structure**

Group		Age groups					Total:
		18-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60 +	
Agriculture	Women	2	0	0	0	0	2
	Men	4	4	2	4	2	16
	Total:	6	4	2	4	2	18

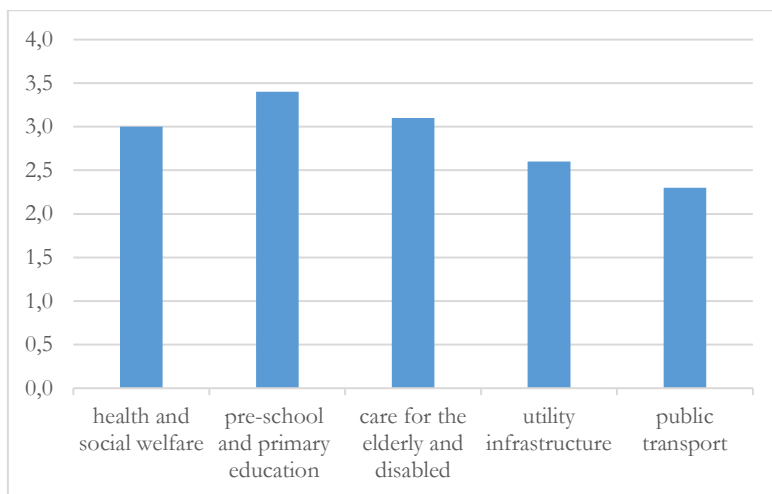
Source: author's work

### 3.1 Analysis of research results

After the characteristics of the sample were determined, the next question focused on measuring the level of satisfaction with the quality of the town's public services. The respondents were offered a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent). They rated the following public services: health and social welfare, pre-school and primary education, care for the elderly and disabled, utility infrastructure and public transport.

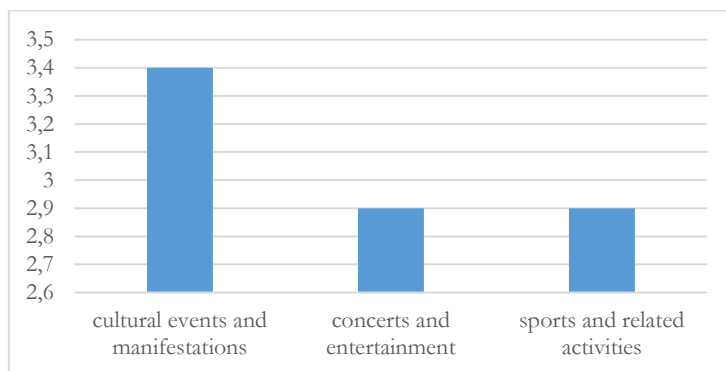
As shown in Chart 1, the public service of pre-primary and primary education was rated highest, with 3.4 points, followed by health and social care with 3.0 points, communal infrastructure with 3.1, care for the elderly and disabled with 2.6; and, finally, the public transport with 2.3 points.

The second question was related to the town's offer of activities. The respondents rated the following activities: cultural events and manifestations, concerts and entertainment, sports and related activities.

**Chart 1: Level of satisfaction with the quality of public services in the town of Vodnjan**

Source: Author's work

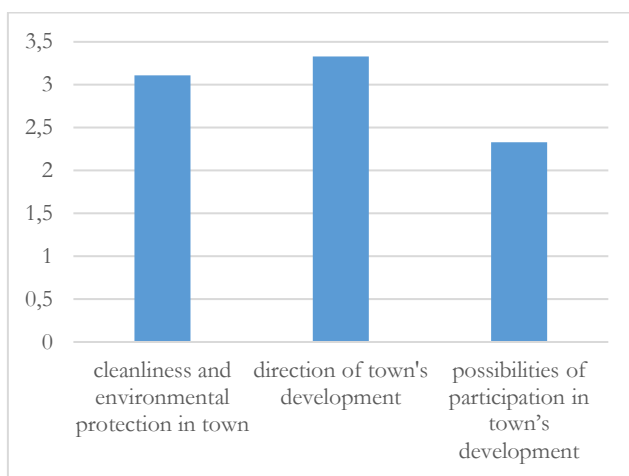
Chart 2 indicates that cultural events and manifestations hold the highest ranking with 3.4 points, followed by the offerings of concerts and entertainment with 2.9 points, and sports and related activities, also with 2.9 points.

**Chart 2: Offered activities**

Source: Author's work

The next question was related to the satisfaction with the level of cleanliness, maintenance and environmental protection in the town, where the average level of satisfaction was 3.11. As for the level of satisfaction with the development of Vodnjan in the past ten years, the average level of satisfaction was 3.33. When asked to assess the possibilities of stakeholder participation in the town's development, the respondents rated it as 2.33.

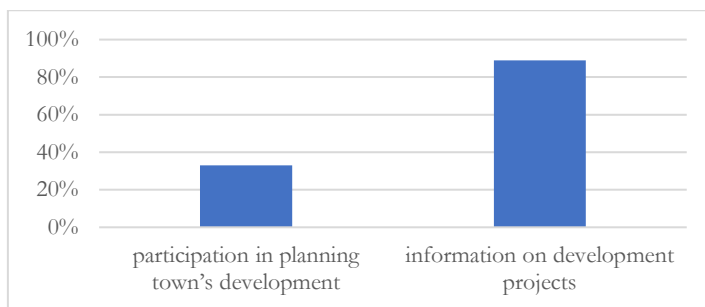
**Chart 3: Satisfaction with the city's development**



Source: Author's work

The following question addressed the opportunities and ways of participating in the planning of the town's development. Out of the total sample, 33% of the respondents participated in the planning of the town's development. The majority of respondents participated in planning the town's development through parent organizations, which enabled them to voice their proposals. When asked about stakeholder awareness regarding the activities, projects and opportunities for the development of agriculture, 88.89% of the respondents reported they were informed about it.

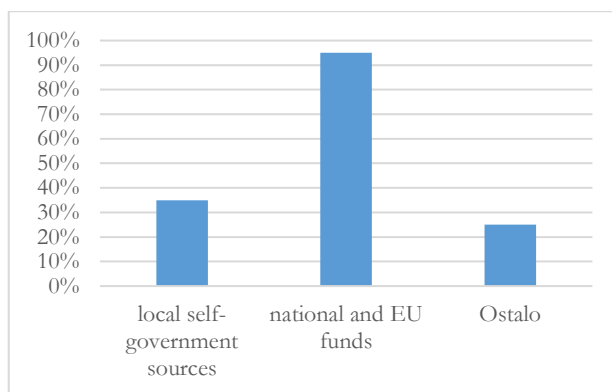


**Chart 4: Participation and information level in projects**

Source: Author's work

The next question concerned the respondents' knowledge about the options for funding the further development of their businesses. The respondents were offered three types of funding sources, and they had to say how much they were informed about each source.

It was established that more than 90% of the respondents were informed about the funding options available from the national and EU funds, while a smaller number of them also knew about the funding options offered by local self-government and some other sources.

**Chart 5: Understanding the options for funding further development of activities**

Source: Author's work

The objective of this research was to collect information and analyze the role that the observed self-government has in the development of its rural area, with an emphasis on the implementation of participatory decision-making models and information obtained through examination of public opinion. Using the collected data, it is possible to identify the development limitations, but also the development possibilities in the observed area.

Questions referring to the level of information and public participation in local development have shown that respondents from agricultural sector are very well informed about the funding opportunities. Moreover, they also constitute the largest group of users of the funds offered by the local self-government or other national or international institutions. This fact points to the great role of the local self-government in the development of agriculture, which aligns with the objectives stated in the Vodnjan Development Strategy.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Based on the conducted empirical research and drawing on the experiences of other local self-governments, it is possible to propose some guidelines for creating a model for the future sustainable development of the Vodnjan area. Experiences of local self-governments in rural areas of Italy and Slovenia show that a participatory process of involving stakeholders in the design and implementation of the development strategy, coupled with available sources of financing, can enhance the sustainable development of rural areas.

The model of sustainable revitalization that needs to be applied in the area of Vodnjan should include a combination of several successful models that are already applied in other regions such as Italy and Slovenia, with certain modifications tailored to address the unique needs of the town of Vodnjan.

In the last twenty years, local self-governments in rural areas have initiated a transformative process to create appealing living environments capable of satisfying contemporary human needs while ensuring a high quality of life. With this aim, they are constantly trying to create finest conditions that would retain the current population, and also attract new people and capital. In order to succeed in this, it is crucial to enable the entire local community to participate in the process of

sustainable development, bearing in mind that a community is made of all stakeholders operating in one area, including local self-government. Therefore, when designing a local community development strategy, it is very important to take into account the needs of all local stakeholders in the area. The findings from the conducted research provide the local self-government with valuable insights regarding the perspectives of local stakeholders on the current situation as well as their aspirations for the future. Additionally, these results can serve businesses and potential investors in planning their future investments. The obtained results can also serve as the foundation for further research within the framework of municipal, city, county and state institutions. Furthermore, a large number of statistical data gathered in this research may be used as sources for certain analyses. Educational institutions, universities and institutes may use the data to expand on their research, especially in the context of the community-led local development. Finally, in the context of contributing to the profession, this research points to the benefits of involving the local community in the participatory process of planning a sustainable rural development.

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