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Ethnological Research as a Source of Data for Designing Strategies of Sustainable Development of Rural Regions

Case study: Žumberak

This article questions the developmental role of ethnology as a science and suggests a method by which the data obtained through ethnological research could be used with the purpose of creating a strategy for the development of rural regions. As a case study for the proposed ideas, I have used the example of Žumberak which, during the last century, has been experiencing rapid devastation of rural regions due to historical, geographical and socioeconomic regions. The author adapted the method of SWOT-analysis, which he borrowed from the language of economy, and used it to make an overview of the current social conditions in Žumberak and wider circumstances influencing it. He used the results obtained by the suggested method of SWOT relational diagrams for the creation of the experimental strategy of sustainable development of Žumberak region.

Key words: Žumberak, rural devastation, sustainable development, SWOT-analysis, rural tourism, traditional economy

Ethnology is a science which has been seldom asked to contribute to the development of the society. There is even an opinion that the development and the preservation of traditional culture, which is the object of ethnology's interest, are two opposite agendas. Partly this is the result of the attitudes, some of them advocated by the discipline itself, which treat traditional culture as a collection of phenomena frozen in one point in time, and that its

only contribution to the development could be found in its usage in tourism as part of the souvenir offer. And taking into account the wider societal development from ethnological and anthropological point of view, I am certain that its sustainability requires a firm basis in the form of a healthy and authentic culture and identity.

This is especially true when talking about secluded regions prone to the devastation of rural areas. In their developmental issues we are dealing with complex interrelationships functioning as a feedback. Dying out of a certain area can be the consequence of a number of changing circumstances: economic, ecological and cultural. However, the final result of all these influences is the disappearance of traditional system of values on which the community was based. To reverse this negative trend it is necessary to analyze this system of values and enable it to adapt to the new situation – to help local population restore the sense of purpose and aim in their lives.

I think that this belongs under the framework of our discipline and that the role of ethnologists is to point to this perspective of the developmental issues and find the means which could aid in finding the solution. This article is a small overview of the related issues.

To illustrate my ideas I have chosen the example of Žumberak, partly because of my personal familiarity with the region and partly due to my opinion that out of many regions of Croatia, Žumberak is best suited to profit from the application of new developmental strategies.

I. Žumberak – a short history

During just an occasional visit, a visitor can readily observe that this regions is very appealing as a human habitat. The relief is broken by numerous waterways abundant in fish and freshwater crabs which rises up into the forested hills roofed by mild slopes of rich pasture or by valleys of cultivated soil. Mountainous climate, with cold, but not too long winters, mild summers and plenty of rain, is favorable for the growth of pastures full of herbs and flowers, which is good for cattle breeding and bee farming, while southern slopes are suitable for orchards and vineyards.

First human settlers of this region did not see it as we see it today. Thirty percent of the territory of Žumberak is today covered by meadows and agricultural land, as a consequence of human cultivation, and originally it was covered with forests. During thousands of years a stabile eco-system was formed here in which the local human population prevented the return of the forested land by land clearing and thus created a living space for numerous plant and animal species. To this biological variety, we have to add geological: dolomite and other limestone rocks, which are characteristic for this area, have proven to be a valuable source of high-quality building material, and the presence of copper and iron ore contributed to the fact that the in-

habitants of these regions were among the first in these regions to master the skill of metal processing.

Different peoples passed through the region of Žumberak in the long course of history: Celts, Illyrian tribes, Roman settlements, and, finally, the Slavs. After depopulation of these regions which started roughly five hundred years ago due to the constant Turk raids, the Royal government decided to solve the problem of the lack of settlers by directing here the exodus from the regions occupied by the Turks. This last migration wave to Žumberak has set the basis of today's population and local culture. These were the cattle breeders from the Dinaric regions, accustomed to the similar natural surroundings. They brought with themselves characteristic ways of building, techniques of textile manufacture and decoration, as well as many other economic and cultural characteristics. As part of the Croatian Military Border (Vojna Krajina), Žumberak was assigned by the Royal government a defensive role and was bypassed in the projects of investment in education and modernization of economy, which were quite common in the rest of the Austro-Hungarian Empire during Enlightenment. Hence, when the Military Border was abolished in the second half of the 19th century and the military salaries gone, Žumberak found itself in the position of economically underdeveloped region.¹

In the period after the Second World War, during which the rural population was additionally pauperized, Žumberak has suffered mass depopulation. Since younger generations are also migrating, the reproductive potential of the local population has fallen. The number of children is declining, local schools are being closed because of that and this, in a vicious circle, is just an additional motif for younger people to emigrate.

Žumberak is today an underpopulated region with mostly elderly people who are not capable of using and caring for the agricultural land and pastures. The lack of agricultural and cattle-breeding activities causes the meadows and pastures to turn into underbrush and hornbeam bushes. Today on Žumberak we are not witnessing only the disappearance of people, but also of the characteristic landscape which depended on the symbiosis with the inhabitants.

II. Analysis of the current situation

My analysis of the current situation, of problems and perspectives of Žumberak I have based on different sources: personal field notes, data from literature, documentation and my interviews with the staff of the Public Institution 'Nature Park Žumberak and Samobor Mountains'. The most relevant source of data were structured interviews I conducted with the members of the local population during my ten-day fieldwork in May 2005.

¹ Štambuk, M. (1996) Introduction; 7-9

Ethnology in its arsenal of analytic methods does not possess a single one which would be directly concerned with active analysis of developmental strategies. Therefore for the purpose of this research I have borrowed from the world of business management the SWOT-analysis. SWOT is an acronym of English words: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.² This method is used for evaluation of current state of affairs in strategic planning. After setting the final aim we wish to achieve, in our case the sustainable development of Žumberak region, the factors influencing the fulfillment of this aim are divided according to their origin (internal and external) and according to the impact they have on this achievement (positive or negative).

Sine the acronym SWOT does not oblige me to analyze these categories in the same sequence, I have decided, in accordance with the Žumberak situation, to start with the weaknesses.

II.1 Weaknesses

II.1.a) Sparse and elderly population

According to the last census from 2001, the county of Žumberak was inhabited by 1185 inhabitants, out of which 533 people were older than 60.³ If the tendency of depopulation continued in this way, this county could remain completely desolated in the next few decades.

The painful human dimension of these numbers is revealed in conversations with local population. An old man from the village of Kekić, who remained as a keeper - the last inhabitant of his village - described his life: *'It is sad over here. I never married so I stayed as the only one here. My family went to Canada, and the rest every which way. Sometimes they sent me dollars, but that also happens rarely. [...] When I get a dime, I usually go four kilometers to Sošice for a drink, just to talk to someone'*.

If I managed to find a younger informant, very often I would reveal right after meeting them the primary reason for their stay in the village: deaf-muteness, physical deformity, alcoholism, etc.

Once beautiful, now deserted, houses are eerily standing as mute witnesses of this demographic catastrophe, and meadows and fields are turning into wild underbrush.

II.1.b) The end of community – defeatist attitudes and division

'And why should anyone return? Run while you can!'

An old man from Cernik

² T. Šola, 2001:229

³ <http://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/Popis%202001/popis2001.htm>.

Probably the most difficult task in my talks with people of Žumberak was the attempt to get from them some ideas on benefits and opportunities of life in Žumberak. The majority of my informants, based on their past experience, were skeptical towards any kind of possibility of a better life.

This low esteem of their own possibilities and perspectives is a key factor of Žumberak ruin. Part of the problem definitely lies in the disappearance of the traditional system of values. Rural population here was never very rich, but in the earlier times the economic aspiration to feed your family and put a roof over their heads was considered adequate and socially appreciated. Other life demands, such as entertainment and spirituality were satisfied under the frameworks of the local culture and community. However, the time has come when money has become the primary economic standard, entertainment is what you see on TV and cultural creativity is something, according to the dominant attitude, rural population knows nothing about. According to Marijan, the owner of the shop in the village of Kali: *'We were poor, but life was beautiful nevertheless. How we socialized and helped each other... Everything went to hell when people started returning from Germany with cars, TV sets... Suddenly old stuff wasn't good for anyone anymore.'*

The culture, which once set a framework for a hard, but still fulfilled life was suddenly interpreted as backwards, without prospects and sentenced to slow death – many of its heirs, just like the old man from Cernik I quoted, would gladly put it out of misery. From all of this stems the current prevailing attitude of 'anyone on his/her own' – when the sense of community has disappeared, people have mostly caved in to life in which they are trying to make ends meet in their personal hard existence and do not see how they can help each other or organize themselves to fight for their interests.

II.1.c) Lack of education and low standards of living and production

When I was visiting Žumberak households which were still economically active, the conversation would often turn to the perspectives of local dairies or rural tourism and other possibilities for obtaining additional income. However, I have frequently found myself, already at the interview, in a situation where I have seen large obstacles to the realization of these plans, which, at that moment, I could not tactfully mention to my informants. The problem was the hygiene – how can I help someone to offer their home-made cheese at the market if they never wash cow's udders and do not even realize their own responsibility for the potential consequences? How can you send guests to a household where the basic hygienic criteria are not met? Far from that that this situation is typical for all of Žumberak. Most of the houses I have visited were considerably clean and neat, but I have noticed this situation a bit too often not to treat it as a problem.

There are reasons behind this, of course, and when we are attempting to find a solution for this situation we have to show a high amount of understanding for the conditions in which these people live – have they ever been presented with a model of better living standards and working habits and given a reason and means to adopt them?

II.1.d) Landscape not suitable for building or roads and infrastructure

To gain practical experience of this problem often emphasized by the local inhabitants, it is enough to sit in a car and drive from Zagreb to Budinjak. The first thirty kilometers of the road from Zagreb to Bregana will be passed on a modern highway for some fifteen minutes. Next thirty kilometers of a curved hilly road to Budinjak will take approximately an hour. If you attempt to pass this way by means of public transportation, you will see that in everyday conditions, this is an impossible endeavor. While some regions which are further away from Zagreb still benefit from the vicinity of the capital, in Žumberak the bad road link to Zagreb is just another reason for emigration.

II.1.e) Region not suitable for the development of modern industry

Due to the specific landscape, lack of roads and depopulation, Žumberak is not a region which attracts typical investments. Most of today's industries would conduct their businesses more easily and effectively in regions with better road connections and with a greater pool of young and educated labor force. The same goes for the modern industrialized agriculture which in Žumberak simply cannot amass land lots large enough for cost-effective production.

Since these facts are usually perceived as weaknesses and another contributing factor for the pessimist predictions for the future of Žumberak, it would be more constructive to perceive them as local specificities which demand different developmental approaches. After all, it was the lack of modern industry that enabled Žumberak to remain ecologically and culturally uncontaminated region.

II.1.f) Small land lots and undefined ownership

'And you want to buy that? From whom? Half of them went to Canada, and half of them who knows where'.

An old man from Cernik commenting my passing interest for a nice country house

The problem of too small land lots has now become so serious that it is questioning the normal, everyday existence in the region. Division of land into lots has resulted in the situation where the majority of the people of Žumberak have a few small, scattered lots⁴ which cannot be adequately used. And if someone decided to buy or exchange land, in order to increase their agricultural production, they would encounter the problem of undefined ownership over land lots.

This problem is also a big obstacle for the development of rural tourism. For many old village sites, the minimal investment is necessary to turn them into first class tourist attractions, for which there is even the good will of the local population. However, the element of insecurity in these projects is the fact that the potential owners of

⁴ Magdalenić, I., Župančić, M. (1996)

these lots are scattered all over the world, from Zagreb, through Germany and as far as Canada and Australia.

II.1.g) Administrative divisions

In 1995, Žumberak was divided into three separate administrative areas – the Town of Samobor, the County of Žumberak and the Town of Ozalj. Since Žumberak is undoubtedly culturally and geographically integral region demanding a unitary developmental approach, this does not seem to be the best solution. The villagers of Gornja Vas and Novo Selo Petričko live similar lives, they work on the same land and they even buy their groceries in the same local shop. However, they are separated by an administrative border, so the former have to solve their problems in Samobor, whilst the latter have to go to Sošice, with their separate ensembles of local bureaucrats who do not have too many formal channels of communication between themselves.

There is also the question of the state (and currently also Schöngen) border which separates Žumberak from the Slovenian region of Gorjanci which is geographically, culturally and in terms of tourism development related to Žumberak. Stojdraga and Kamence are neighboring villages, each on its side of the border, connected by a country road 500 meters long, which have been traditionally linked by good neighborly relations and economic cooperation. However, in order to visit their neighbors legally, the villagers of Stojdraga would now have to make a circular trip, around 80 kilometers long, over the nearest border crossing.

II.2. Strengths

II.2.a) Attractive and preserved landscape

When a person visits Žumberak for the first time, the person is usually completely astonished how just 40 kilometers away from Zagreb, there exists such an untouched landscape where you can drink the fresh water from the brook, take a shower under the waterfall, walk for hours without any signs of civilization and meet wild boars, does, falcons and even bears. Žumberak's natural heritage is an enormous ecological and social capital, of this region and of Croatia, waiting to be adequately and sensibly used.

II.2.b) Enthusiasm of individuals and pride of the local people in their region

'We returned contrary to all those who left. They considered us lunatics and laughed behind our backs'

Mr. Subić from Stojdraga

Contrary to the prevailing defeatism, in Žumberak you can sometimes find, even though rarely, individuals displaying immense faith in the bright future of the re-

gion. Among the people I met during my Žumberak wonders, was the family Subić from Stojdraga. They put their children through school in Bregana and decided to return to Stojdraga, the birthplace of Mrs. Subić, and to start a business. The future of this beautiful region, of rich cultural and natural heritage, which is so close to the capital, is for these people guaranteed – it is just a matter of time when this potential will be recognized and their ideas start making sense.

These sentiments about the future of Žumberak are also present with the individuals who are at the first instance complete pessimists. You only have to scratch this pessimist surface, present a few ideas, encourage them to think for themselves about the advantages and possibilities of Žumberak and you will find hope and love for their own region. However, many of them will at the end, warned by their past disappointments, conclude such a conversation, just like, for example, Mr. Marijan, the owner of the shop in Kali, by saying: *‘I hope so much that this what you are saying is possible, but I’m afraid that you have come too late.’*

Similar sentiments of the local inhabitants, so much love and enthusiasm, are an immense creative energy which should be channeled in the right direction, before it would really be too late.

II.2.c) Specific local culture with a strange history

The history of the human settlement of Žumberak is multilayered and dramatic, and many archeological finds confirm the fact. Today’s inhabitants of Žumberak, as the heirs of that history, have preserved their specificities which distinguish them from the surrounding population – Greek Catholicism and an interesting mixture of Dinaric and pre-Alpine cultural traits and economic practices. This unique and endemic local culture can serve as an excellent basis for the building of specific Žumberak tourist identity and as an inspiration for business and sustainable development of the region.

II.2.d) Region preserved for traditional and ecological production and rural tourism

Developmental backwardness of Žumberak had one somewhat positive effect – it isolated it from the rapid change of the way of life and modern economic practices the sustainability of which can potentially prove to be very dubious. In Žumberak there are no bankrupt industrial giants from the era of socialist progress. The fields and waterways of Žumberak are not soaked in insecticides and artificial fertilizers, which provides them with the basic prerequisite for the development of ecological agriculture. Old houses, mills and hay storages in Žumberak are shabby, but at least every trace of them has not been erased as it has happened in other regions.

II.2.e) Joint initiatives and institutions

Despite of the administrative division of Žumberak, in many aspects it was impossible to ignore the self-evident unity of this region. Hence, on May 28, 1999, the Public Institution ‘Nature Park Žumberak – Samobor Mountains’ was officially founded with the purpose to protect the natural heritage of Žumberak and Samobor Moun-

tains. The Nature Park does not belong under the jurisdiction of the local government and, besides its primary function, the protection of the Žumberak landscape, it does not have any other authority or jurisdiction, but it can serve as an institution for coordination of different projects of sustainable development which would include the whole region of Žumberak. This institution is already playing a key role in the establishment of tourist and recreational infrastructure by marking and sustaining hiking and biking tracks, places of heritage, by printing tourist maps, opening of information centers, exhibitions and souvenir shops in its branches and through other activities. Nature Park is also potentially the key factor in presenting Žumberak to a wider public – through media presentation of the region, organizing of public recreational and cultural activities and promotion of local products and services.

The second initiative worth mentioning is the establishment of the Tourist Zone on the River of Kupa - Žumberak (Gorjanci) and the Tourist Zone on the River of Sutla – Žumberak (Gorjanci). The aim of this initiative, developed by the Croatian Chamber of Economy Zagreb, Chamber of Economy of Slovenia and local hiking organizations, is to link tourism in Žumberak on Croatian side with the tourism in Gorjanci from the Slovenian side of the border. Part of this initiative would be a joint effort at the improvement and promotion of tourist offer of this region, and the visitors and local people would be able to cross the border freely. This could also be considered as a preparation of the local tourism for the expected liberalization of the border regime which will be enforced after Croatia's entry to the EU.

II.3. Threats

II.3.a) Culture of mass production and consumption

The development of consumerism in Croatia has started relatively recently, but it has shown a remarkably rapid development. Many forms of traditional economy are still present in Croatia and they still manage to find buyers, which we can see if we visit one of the Zagreb open markets and there (today with some difficulty) we can still buy, directly from the peasants, home-grown vegetables, honey, dairies, etc. However, this market niche is receiving daily blows from the industrial products with their aggressive marketing or, simply, with lower prices. An increasing number of producers, from sheer laziness, rather buy the products which could be traditionally obtained at a market, in large shopping malls, and even the markets today are dominated by middlemen.

Croatian society is today on a crossroad where it chooses whether it will once for all discard all these traditional forms of economy or whether it will, like some other European countries, exploit them as a unique cultural, health and ecological value. This question is extremely important for the future of Žumberak. Such a major change of our buying habits is also a complete change of our way of life, and if this trend con-

tinued to develop towards its hypothetical extreme, the discussions on the future of Žumberak such as this one would be completely pointless.

II.3.b) Pollution of environment and culture by uncontrolled tourism

It is nice to see how once popular 'socialist' ideal of spending time outdoors with the family, in one's own car, a few beers and a barbecue, nicely co-exists with the modern trends of the consumer society. After all, there are more cars than ever which we can park on the green meadows, as well as the plastic bottles and other garbage which we can throw in the near-by bush.

Natural surrounding is not the only thing which is in danger from the uncontrolled and unplanned tourism. As we can see on the example of our coast, too much concrete in the places where there were once beautiful villages and pushing away of the local culture by instant tourist offer are also some of the side effects. That Žumberak is not immune to these phenomena, we can observe in the localities such as the Gabrovica 'Eco Park Divlje vode', basically a large, concrete fish pond which has a questionable influence on the purity of the river of Bregana and a playground which looks like a miniature Disneyland.

II.3.c) The vicinity of the large city as the emigrational pull-factor

One important factor in depopulation of Žumberak is, ironically, the vicinity of the large urban center – Zagreb. Even though this fact could be seen as an advantage, the contrast in the living standard and economical development of Žumberak and other regions around Zagreb, together with the already mentioned bad road connection, has proven to be too big. Zagreb and smaller urban centers in its vicinity have become the economically attractive pull-factor with which the local perspectives could not compete.

II.3.d) Real estate prices rising due to the increased interest in vacation houses

One of the visions of the future of Žumberak is to let the process of emigration and depopulation continue, but to encourage the people from the city to buy off land and real estate with the purpose of turning them into vacation houses. Motivations for owning such a peaceful retreat in the country are basically positive. The problem is that this trend, if it is not controlled and contrasted by positive perspectives for the local inhabitants, tends to suppress the authentic rural life – prices the people from the city are prepared to pay for rural real estates are growing to the level unacceptable to the local population and are thus becoming another incentive for selling one's own land and emigrating. The result of this process are beautiful but deserted villages standing like movie sets of the past life and waiting for the temporary visitors.

II.4. Threats

II.4.a) Demand for the products of traditional culture and ecological products

Most of the producers would agree, at least in words, that in our everyday life we need healthy products produced through sustainable modes of production. Products of traditional culture also have their market niche, partly due to their specific qualities and partly to their sentimental and cultural value. Ecological and traditional production are categories which ideally complement and supplement each other: traditional economy relied on plant and animal species which were suitable for being grown in the immediate vicinity and on raw materials which could be found there. This approach is found in the majority of the projects of ecological production to which the market credibility gives a certain traditional marker. And on the other hand, sustainable and ecological approach to the economy usually proves to be more compatible with the local culture and the way of life in a certain region than industrial production.

II.4.b) Demand for rural tourism

Even though the majority of the city inhabitants is not ready to replace their urban existence by rural, it seems that a lot of them are still yearning for the occasional experience of the 'real' rural life. The neighboring Slovenia has masterly capitalized its traditional culture and natural surroundings: villages in the mountains are offering the acceptable accommodation, excellent traditional cuisine and a lot of cultural, recreational and natural attractions.

II.4.c) Social demand for natural recreation

With today's physically inactive way of life typical for the city inhabitants, the need for additional physical exercise and recreation is undisputable. For many people the physical exercise in natural surroundings – hiking, biking, free climbing, etc, is the most natural and the most complete form of recreation.

The infrastructure for this type of recreation is in the same time the appropriate infrastructure for the development of rural tourism and placing local products on the market. The point is, if you had already climbed to Budinjak by bicycle, you probably did not come there to eat a hamburger, but you would rather prefer traditional food and drinks of the region.

Generally, in the societies of good living standards and quality of life, this trend of enjoying one's natural surrounding is increasing, and this is becoming more popular in Croatia, too.

II.4.d) The vicinity of the large city as the economic and social initiator and a potential market

Technological development which has up to now directed the society towards an increased populational, economic and cultural centralization, has lately become a valuable tool for the distribution of information, creativity and social participation. Through

the modern communication channels, such as internet, and a large number of private cars, Žumberak is today, maybe for the first time, in the situation to profit from the relative vicinity of the large city.

Even though the fact remains that it is easier and more effective to organize a large number of human activities closer to large highways and population centers, Žumberak is today, through these new forms of connections, given the opportunity to become a place of emphasized social importance. The already mentioned ecological and traditional production and rural tourism play here the major role, but the potentials of the sustainable development are much bigger than that. With minimal investment in infrastructure, Žumberak could today become the setting for numerous activities and ways of life which were up to now perceived as exclusively urban.

As shown by many foreign and certain Croatian experiences, with the newly established connectivity, these rural regions could serve as a uniquely suitable and stimulative setting for the establishment of numerous forms of creative small enterprises, which could find their markets in the near-by large cities, but also potentially throughout the world.

II.4.e) Possible arrival of young and educated people looking for alternative lifestyles

Today there exists a whole subculture of people who are for various reasons dissatisfied with the urban existence and have aspirations towards rural life. Ivan and Cvijeta are young highly educated experts who have decided a few years ago to fulfill their dreams of living in the country, in creative peace and with their own kitchen garden. Here is their story as told by Ivan:

'We were looking for a cheap house in the country, primarily somewhere in the mountains... We liked the local variant of the traditional wooden houses, with spacious rooms and a stone cellar. A positive thing was also that the region was proclaimed a Nature Park. At the end we chose a 130-years old house in the remotest part of Žumberak, in the village of Dučići in Radatović region.

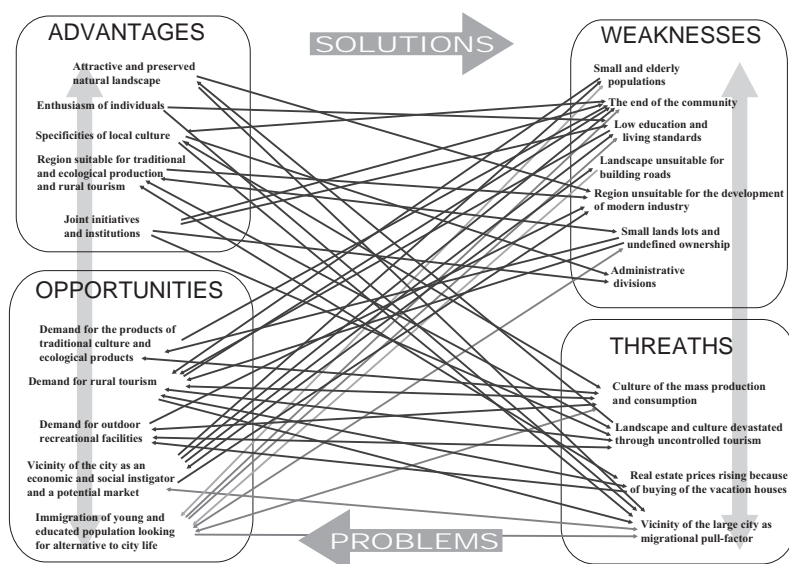
...Žumberak seems as an ideal place for living. The advantages are the low cost of living, as compared with the cities, low overheads, a lot of wood which has to be cleared which saves a lot of money for heating, complete peace and quiet, ideal place for recreation, pure and high-quality land for agriculture, a lot of rain during the whole year, hospitable mentality of the local people, low real estate prices...'

III. Summary of the strategy

The results of the SWOT-analysis provide us with a list of problems which we are trying to overcome and a list of resources which we can use to find the solutions. It is difficult to formalize the creation of the strategy for finding their solutions any further.

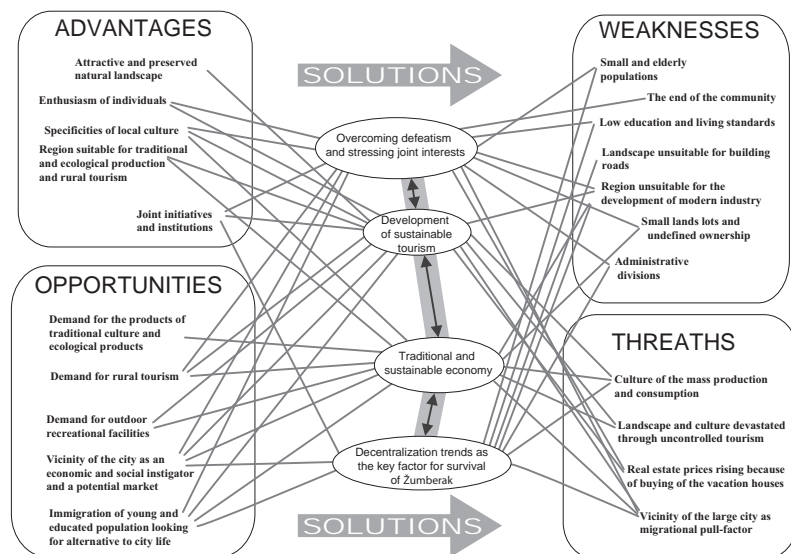
Since the factors appearing in different situation are various, this is the process which mostly relies on creative thinking – you have to create hypotheses from the available data and test them logically. However, there are methodological tools which facilitate this process. In the typical business analysis the results of the SWOT analysis are entered into a matrix which is used to establish relations between the given problems and the available resources. Taking into account the complexity of the social development of a region and a large number of interrelations, I have created my own way of visualization of the results which can simply be created using a pen and paper and I called it a SWOT-relational diagram.

Diagram 1. SWOT-relational diagram, phase 1.



In the first phase the items in the diagram are put in relations depending on the ways they influence each other. The categories in the same column are trying to be in a positive interrelationship. Therefore, an attractive and preserved natural landscape will have a positive impact on the arrival of young and educated city dwellers to Žumberak, and the destruction of the community will increase the influence of the large city as the emigrational pull-factor. The items in the opposite columns are in negative interrelationship which can be reversible (specific local culture ↔ the destruction of the community) or irreversible (arrival of young, educated people ← landscape not suitable for building better roads). When we fill in these relations into the diagram, we get an overview of the relationships between the resources we have and the problems which we can solve by using them.

Diagram 2. SWOT-relational diagram, phase 2.



In the second phase we only have to rationalize the resulting interrelationships and use them to design proactive approaches through which we would strengthen the positive influence of the resources we have for finding the solutions to the problems, and neutralize the negative influence on our resources. In creating new approaches, we have to set ourselves the goal to place them in positive interrelationship.

IV. Results

As one of the first items in a developmental strategy, we have to determine its executives. Not undermining the role of other institutions (local government, county, state, etc.), as the coordinator of the implementation of the developmental frame obtained through this analysis I see 'Nature Park Žumberak and Samobor Mountain. There are several reasons for my choice:

Nature Park is given jurisdiction over the whole region of Žumberak and the neighboring Samobor Mountain – unlike the institutions of the local government and their three separate units, or states and counties having jurisdiction over much wider regions. Nature Park can use its conservational expertise and professional authority to create and implement joint initiatives between these institutions and local authorities.

Nature Park already employs experts qualified to take care of the Žumberak landscape, cultural heritage and to develop local recreational and tourist potentials. For

further expansion of its mission to the field of preservation and revitalization of local culture and sustainable development, only a minimal improvement of the staff is necessary.

Nature Park is an institution whose main goal is the protection of the natural heritage, however, on the places where people have been living for centuries, natural and cultural heritage are not aspects which can be preserved separately. If the Nature Park accepts its conservational role in its entirety, it will not be able to escape the developmental one: in order to truly preserve this unity of cultural-natural heritage, we have to create frameworks for sustainable development.

IV.1. Overcoming defeatism and raising awareness of joint interests

Taking into account the already mentioned defeatism how can we motivate the remaining local population to start with their own action of salvation of their own region and culture? To answer that question we have to realize that this feeling of defeat is not something the people of Žumberak are to be blamed for, but that it was enforced through the changes of wider social circumstances and the lack of understanding and support from the institutions of economic and political government. The people of Žumberak are generally very nostalgic towards their own region and culture, but the circumstances have convinced them that there is nothing more to save. The key solution is hidden in the words of Zvonko Šiljak, the newly elected president of the Žumberak County: *'For fifty years we have heard promises and promises, but nothing was ever done (...) you have to go and talk to the people yourself, see where the problems are, how we can solve them together (...) and up to now nobody has done that here in Žumberak'*.

And really, judging from my conversations with the people of Žumberak it seems that it does not take much to incite their enthusiasm – if you present them through arguments that their region has a lot to offer to the world and propose certain possible forms of cooperation in which they could participate, they will usually, even though with a certain amount of skepticism and caution, take interest in such proposals.

Among the local population there are also enthusiasts. The good will of these people should be adequately exploited – they can do a lot to gain the trust of the community and ensure cooperation of other members of the community. With their help, we could organize a network of the interested members of the local community who would cooperate with the Park on developmental and conservational projects. Hence we would obtain not only valuable assistants and the major instrument for the revitalization of Žumberak, but we would also probably make a big step in regaining the feelings of sense, unity and emancipation of the local community, which would be given a chance to participate in the creation of its own future.

IV.2. Development of sustainable tourism

Nature Park has already done a lot in creating the recreational and tourist infrastructure and local population recognizes this fact as a step forward. However, we should

attempt at creating an approach to the development of tourism in coordination with local population, so that they could benefit from it to the greatest extent. As a modest beginning, we could organize fairs and recreational activities, such as biking and hiking events, which the local population could use to sell their own food and other products and for the tourist promotion of their own village.

Together with the local population we have to create a coordinated marketing image of Žumberak, determine what kind of identity and what types of tourist products they would like to present to the world and give them support in spreading the message – through Nature Park and its communication materials and through media. We could, for example, list the households interested in accommodating tourists and jointly establish the basic outlines of such an activity for their target audience. After completing the necessary preparations, Nature Park can serve as a link between these people and their ‘audience’, by promoting their activities through their own web-page and other communication materials, and acting as mediator in their contacts with other media.

Under the necessary preparation, I would definitely include the raising of the hosting culture of the local population. I have already mentioned the need to increase hygienic and accommodation standards. However, the question of the hosting culture is not only about hygiene. Members of the local population should be encouraged to become the major interpreters of their own culture and their landscape. Of course, they should be provided with the correct and complete information which were unavailable to them before, for example, on the prehistory of their region, ecological values and problems, etc. But we should leave it to the locals to interpret them and intertwine them with their own personal stories and their own living experience – this type of narration seems the most interesting and most authentic to the visitors.

Tourism should be linked to the sustainable forms of the local economy to the greatest extent, not only because of the marketing of the products, but also because of the creation of a wholesome tourist product. Households which would engage in rural tourism should be linked with local producers for obtaining foodstuffs and house inventories. As it was mentioned before, people will visit Žumberak with the desire to taste homemade cheese and vegetables, and not the ones bought in the large shopping malls. If served in traditional pottery or wooden plates, the atmosphere would be complete, and local economy and culture enriched.

IV.3. Traditional and sustainable economy

The development of tourism should be used for raising awareness of the local inhabitants on the market opportunities arising from their traditional culture and landscape, wider than the tourist offer itself. If, through tourism, the locals recognized the market demand for their products, this would be the best incentive for starting small entrepreneurship which Žumberak could obtain.

Nature Park could in this extent provide the local population with the valuable support and expert help in finding sustainable and, to the modern market, applicable ideas and products, creating a kind of referential center for sustainable development. I think that here we should be careful not to repeat our mistakes from the past – different governments would traditionally impose new economic practices to the peasants through different decrees, with the explanation that their old ways were stupid and backwards, and such a relationship only deepened the spirit of defeatism and passivity. Therefore the new ideas should not be presented to the local population in the form of dull, incomprehensible and patronizing lectures, but in the spirit of interactive communication – starting from the premise that while the experts know their field, the locals have been living here for centuries and they know, very intimately, their culture and their region.

With interested members of the local population we could organize a series of meetings where they could talk with the experts and the practitioners in the field about creating conditions for starting ecological agriculture, with the emphasis placed on the adaptability of these methods to their own region and their own agricultural heritage. Instead of being offered a uniform recipe where they would have to simply follow the instructions of the experts, the local people should be encouraged to recognize and use the good and valuable ideas in their heritage which were created during several centuries long experience of living in this region and combine them with sustainable aspects of modern agricultural progress.

Trades and crafts could be encouraged to become more than just the production of souvenirs, so that the people engaging in them could be given an idea on how their traditional products could be adapted to the demands of modern life. If performed in good taste and with respect towards the original materials and forms, such innovations still preserve the elements of the local culture and, in a way, ‘defrost’ it, open up its developmental continuity and introduce it to the modern times.

It would be useful to work with the local population to restore the system of local exchange and provision of the raw materials. Hence we would link primary, secondary and tertiary activities and renew the fragmented economy of the region, and a large number of their needs people could satisfy in their own community and to their mutual benefit. In the world there are many successful examples of creation of the so-called ‘local currencies’ which are used in order to rise the local economy to a higher level than can be achieved through direct exchange. Behind this concept there is a very serious economic theory and many success stories which are worth studying.

We should also think about the creation of a controlled Žumberak ‘brand’, at the level of the Nature Park. Such a brand should embody the identities and the qualities by which Žumberak is introducing itself to the world: as a place of preserved nature, authentic tradition, hospitable people, health food... As such it would be a means of control and of encouragement for the high quality of the local products and services and a valuable tool for their promotion. While it is important to ensure objectivity and expert criteria, it is also important to include the local community in creation of

such a brand: it is the real carrier and the owner of the identity represented by this brand. The brand should not be reserved only for the products of Žumberak tradition, but it should be used as a means to encourage sustainable innovations which are in accordance with the identity it represents.

IV.4. Decentralization processes as the key for the survival of Žumberak

If we want the truly sustainable future of this region, it is necessary to ensure infrastructure which will satisfy all the demands and open up the possibilities for a modern living. From basic needs which should be satisfied there is the possibility of regular education, energy and water supply, appropriate road connectivity and modern means of telecommunication.

Here we are coming to another Žumberak dead end. As a prerequisite for the real development and demographic revitalization of Žumberak it is necessary to satisfy all these demands, but why should the state open up schools for which there are no pupils and build roads for such a small number of users? Why would commercial telecommunication companies bring their mass infrastructure to Žumberak when they could not profit from it here? The moral answer to this question is simple: because every citizen of this country and every region have the right to equal participation in the achievements of the modern times and equal possibilities for development. But the moral basis of such demands would hardly suffice to see them become true in the nearby future.

Even though it seems that it does not have too much in common with the recent situation in Žumberak, internet is very important for the Žumberak future. It is true that we have very little chance to encourage some older farmers to use it, but the internet is crucial prerequisite for arrival and permanent stay of younger people. Besides opening an interactive channel of communication with the whole world which enables people to complete a lot of activities for which they would have to go to the town in the past, internet has an enormous educational potential on formal and informal level. On informal level, it is a source of a vast array of ideas, widening human horizons and interests. On the formal level, many countries which have had, due to the geographical and demographic reasons, the need for distance education, have found the internet to be the ideal medium for that purpose. Internet is not a supplement for the direct pedagogical contact, but the fate of the children who would have to travel 60 kilometer every day to school, would be significantly improved if they had a tool which would enable them to do that only twice a week. There are examples of such practice already in Croatia, and CARNET's educational center EduPoint is actively working on the spreading of the usage of this technology.

However, even though it is unlikely that outside of the generally slow and inefficient political channels we can do a lot on the question of building roads and adequate plumbing systems, as far as the modern telecommunications and the internet are concerned, today there are technologies which are insuring that some of these problems, with the help of some finances and expertise, are being finally resolved on the

level of the Nature Park and the local community. If we truly question the future of this region, we have to be aware that nobody would return to it or stay in it in order to lead a medieval life based on the 'survival' agriculture – internet is the key infra-structural prerequisite of modern existence.

IV. Conclusion

If the possibilities presented in this article would be realized, Žumberak could in many ways return this 'investment' to the society. Such a sustainable development of Žumberak would be a kind of precedent for the sustainable development of many other Croatian regions. Since the majority of Croatian territory are the rural regions, to a lesser or a greater extent endangered by the rapid changes surrounding us, the successful development of Žumberak would create a positive example how to return the lost purpose to the rural life, give it an economic incentive and a chance to contribute to the benefit of the wider society. However, and maybe the most importantly, by raising Žumberak back to its feet, the society would obtain a unique space for healthy, creative and fulfilled life of its members.

Our science should recognize a segment of its societal purpose in this and the similar developmental projects, encourage their implementation and provide them with the 'building material' from their own local culture and heritage. A prerequisite for something like this is the continued development of the methods through which the findings obtained through ethnological research could be transformed into developmental strategies.

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