



SUMMARY

FACES OF NEVERLAND

The Social and Territorial Framework of Croatian Rural Development

Slowness is the fundamental characteristic of rural change. The life of rural environments, which is at times closer and at other times more removed from global processes, and therefore more or less under their direct influence, has contributed to the creation of mutually diverse social communities. These differences and relative autonomies in the organization of social life have persevered to the present. Therefore even the more recent approaches to rural development, and we primarily have in mind rural Croatia which has not reached its objectively feasible level, have to consider our rural development from the neo-rural perspective of the social, economic and cultural community by way of accommodated concepts geared at reaching development goals. This implies above all working toward changes that are necessarily taking place under the influence of modernization processes but at the same time preserve rural specificities generated within the framework of local and national traditions. Within this concept an important role is also played by thoughtful consideration in respect to all development projects and procedures. The fragility of its essential characteristics makes the rural world particularly vulnerable, especially to »forceful« and inappropriate actions. It should, in the first place, be supported, promoted, counselled, strengthened, and above all, provided with such a social framework that will enable its active and certainly more equitable participation in rural-urban exchanges. The process of the transposing the traditional rural world into a modern rural world evolves gradually and in phases which are, according to their dominant characteristics, relatively easily depicted. B. Bayser' Scheme B is used in the identification of rural changes, according to which the development of rural societies is analysed through three phases: composition, decomposition and re-composition. In that process the predominantly »communal« features of traditional rural settlements will gradually be substituted by societal characteristics.

A positive shift in the social and economic transformation of rural regions in Croatia is not possible without systematic support. If truth be told, some peripheral environments have begun discovering their own possibilities and are becoming aware of developmental needs and possibilities. But these are isolated cases. It is important to become aware of the fact that high quality, appropriate long-term development incentives should come from the state level, among other, through the more appropriate distribution of institutional and financial power among va-

rious levels of authority that would enhance the position of local self-government and thus increase their influence and responsibility for the direction and intensity of developmental processes. The path to progress of the rural areas leads through the promotion of social and economic heterogeneity which will above all be based on research, assessment and use of indigenous sources, including the know-how and experiences of the local population, and of course, their adequate education for development.

In order to gain insight into some of the building blocks of the European Union's rural policy, its developmental component which is primarily directed at improving the social and economic status in rural regions is analyzed. Awareness of the importance of rural regions as factors of overall development has initiated numerous analyses of the status of European rural areas and on the basis of which actions have to be put into motion with a view to integrating rural regions into national territories and through it into the EU. In the EU Member States agrarian policy, as the most important element of rural policy, is based on the adoption of joint measures and their concurrent harmonization with specific, national economies. In spite of the longstanding practice of the »old« EU Member States to strictly regulate and direct the agricultural products market, depending on the interests of specific states or regional groups of states, aspirations are nevertheless constantly present to create a common policy geared at achieving the three most important goals: 1. enable greater market influence in order to lower production and consumption rates; 2. »facilitate« the lowering of production by measures of social policy and assist in the accommodation of economic structures; 3. enhance agriculture in »particularly sensitive areas« where other solutions are inappropriate. A special contribution to rural development is the LEADER programme which integrates developmental actions in the entire rural area of the EU and is permanently supplemented and streamlined. Research in the European countries shows that in order to revive rural regions it is necessary to socially and economically diversify them, meaning that development should not be dependent only on agriculture (particularly in countries with high agricultural population ratios, high share of agriculture in the economy, fragmented farms, an insufficiently modernized agriculture and low gross product).

The text is based on the research on the population and settlements in Lonjsko polje conducted for the purpose of drawing up a development plan for the nature park. It presents the developmental problems linked to social and economic changes that are common to the entire rural environment in Croatia as well as the predominantly negative trends in the transformation of the Croatian village. The example of Lonjsko polje perhaps is not typical but is, in any case, an appropriate indicator of the situation in Croatia. Endogenous developmental cornerstones in this rural environment, before all, the preserved natural heritage, has emerged as a sound basis for progress. Lonjsko polje is attempting to live and revive its traditional world and find in it the framework for its future. Being impregnated with tradition, it can become, in terms of development, the foundation for shaping a mobilizing socio-cultural and economic identity, an excellent reason for enhancing awareness on the values the domestic populations has succeeded in preserving to the present day and upon which they can plan their future. At

one time Lonjsko polje lived an intensive economic and social life. The population was much more numerous a hundred or so years ago. The socialist type of industrial and urban development, which did not take into account the specific traits of the rural social environment or agricultural family estates or the family as such without which successful family farms cannot exist, resulted in degrading processes that were not stopped and which are manifesting themselves today in the demographic and economic regression of settlements in Lonjsko polje. In respect to this region some other reasons contributed to this process as well. On the other hand, the possibilities of development provided by this area are undisputable and are of interest and feasible not only locally but on a much wider plane, including the manifested international interest in the implementation of the project. This area with its low population density, long-standing exodus trends and all the consequences created by this process (at the individual, family group and rural community levels) including traffic and social isolation as well as decreasing agricultural activity has preserved a top grade and recognizable landscape that is healthy and mostly unpolluted; some of the economic activities and experiences have been preserved, particularly some agricultural techniques and cultures specific for wetland regions. Due to natural conditions in the region – meaning a marshy area – uncertainty which always accompanies agricultural production is much more prominent here.

One of the reasons for the existing adverse state of agriculture and rural areas generally in Croatia is among other things the result of historical circumstances in the last few decades. It is therefore necessary to call to mind that Croatia, although it had the most developed industry in former Yugoslavia, entered World War II as a purely agricultural country, lagging behind developed Western countries. The industry was not so strong and developed as to enable even »the normal transition of the population from the agricultural into other sectors« so agrarian overpopulation existed in almost all regions. The country came of the war with a predominantly agricultural population. In line with socialist ideology, state plans envisaged industrial development, especially the development of heavy industry and collectivization (or, somewhat later, the socialization) of absolutely everything. In agriculture it meant the implementation of set ideological goal through the nationalization of the private sector, and that meant the – »abolition of differences between village and city«, which also implied the transformation of the farmer into an agricultural worker in the social sector. How did they plan to achieve this? In two basic ways: 1. by pooling all benefits to one side, the workers' side, and by opening opportunities for the employing the unqualified, until recently, rural population to work places in non-agricultural sectors (particularly in the paleo-industry) and 2. by persistently placing various barriers before family farming and their protagonists – farmers. In addition to the stigma of being »enemies of society« for resisting the politically imposed economic and social framework farmers also earned the stigma of being backward, narrow-minded social actors which would never be capable of taking care of themselves. They need, in order to survive, a tutor. And there is no more »efficient« tutor than a disinclined state! Decreasing the agricultural population was extremely radical. Nevertheless, in spite of such set goals both the farmers and the village succeeded in surviving. It was only natural to believe that precisely because of the fragility of the rural and

farmers' world, inherited from disinclined times, the new Croatian state would embark on the road of their development. Unfortunately that did not happen.

Part two of the books contains works which attempt to answer the question: how to revitalize Croatian rural regions? The aim of the question is to raise awareness of the strategic necessity of reviving the periphery, since it makes up the bulk of the national territory, which differs in many characteristics but is quite similar in its deficiencies: demographic, infrastructural, communicational... All the local examples which make up, among other things, the content of this part of the book, warn of the mostly dramatic situation in the greater part of that most valuable Croatian development resource.

It is also a consequence of the indisputable fact that the rural world is viewed, in economic terms, solely as the world of agriculture, although agriculture as a source of revenue and as a profession has stopped being dominant in the village a long time ago. The purpose of the area is of course dominantly agricultural, although its cultivable surfaces are decreasing. However, apart from the function of habitation, the rural environment has numerous other purposes which will continue to expand. It is therefore necessary to approach such a complex issue in a complex manner, respecting different interests at different levels, from national to private; various activities, from traditional to technologically sophisticated ones; from the landscape in which large technical infrastructural systems are located to the protected areas. Rural environments contain and preserve history, the present and future. From there arise the efforts to use and develop it thoughtfully, to respect basic developmental principles which are always the result of interdisciplinary insights and attempts to prevent the development of one region to the detriment of the other. In the process, specialized knowledge is required for planning rural development, particularly when underdeveloped parts of the area are at stake and especially when decades of the inadequate treatment of this space have to be overcome. The specific traits of rural development require specialized experts.

A modernizing approach to the village excludes the exclusivity of any one segment within a development project. Social, political and environmental problems which are unstopably flooding Croatian villages and agriculture as a traditional activity that is the foundation of rural sociability are being neglected in relation to economic problems as well as problems for which it is believed that can be solved only with the aid of plentiful and as cheap as possible funds. This approach brings to the forefront agricultural, veterinary and technical disciplines whilst excluding all others. The resulting consequence is that rural issues are to the main part spoken and written of as well as decided upon precisely by experts from the above mentioned fields. It is generally considered that social and other problems will be resolved by solving economic ones. Agricultural policy is actually isolated by such an approach from the very rural environment it is intended for.

The disconcerting trend of reducing the number of schools, outpatient clinics, dental offices and doctors in rural Croatia cannot be denied. Generally speaking the level and quality of social and technical infrastructural equipment in rural areas are far from adequate. And precisely equitably distributed and well organized infrastructure should be the precondition of rural development and thereby of the enhanced regional and social integration of the whole of Croatian territory.

While neighbouring Europe is moving forward in long strides and reaping the fruits of the rural renaissance project, we are still struggling with the absence of development principles and concepts, unclear developmental objectives, impatient politicians. Rural development is based on the specificities of the rural world. Above all, it is based on the fact that the countryside is closely and indivisibly connected to nature and regional factors. Therefore it cannot be approached in the same way as general or urban development. The relationship between rural and urban environments is still viewed in our midst in a classical pattern as a relationship between the modern and traditional. In this model the countryside is everything the city is not, it is assessed by urban criteria and its development is modelled (if modelled at all) according to city requirements and needs. In that concept the countryside is a complement, a supplement to the city and deprived of the opportunity to survive as an authentic »diverse« unit of settlement.

The following few examples of the research on rural regions will illustrate the problems these areas are faced with.

Žumberak is an example of an underdeveloped rural area in the immediate vicinity of the capital. This area did not develop by diversifying its economic structure: it remained connected to agriculture and to the concept of immigration as the socio-economic model of survival. The model worked for a period of time until the Žumberak demographic potential exhausted itself. In other words, small towns did not develop in Žumberak but rather the villages kept their exceptionally traditional, homogenous social structure. Due to the continual decrease in the number of inhabitants and increase in their average age the uncultivated areas grew; forests and abandoned land areas spread. Accordingly the already small Žumberak holdings grew even smaller and the economic impact of agricultural grew ever more insignificant. The revitalization of Žumberak agricultural family holdings is an indispensable prerequisite of village and rural tourism which is frequently mentioned and uncritically spoken of as a solution for development problems. In any case, the continued neglect of agricultural production directly threatens the possibilities of developing tourist activities, not only due to smaller quantities of healthy local food products but also because of the increasingly run-down state of the landscape, fields and forests paths, etc. which are in themselves a developmental resource. The revalorization of the Žumberak area, for that matter just like other depressed and underdeveloped rural regions, is possible only with the support of the state and on the basis of expert development plans.

Lika is a unique example of Croatia's hinterland: it is a rather homogenous region, consisting to the most part of highlands with dispersed small rural settlements, the legacy of a once predominantly herd breeding economy. The research covered and analyzed structural determinants (demographic, social and economic conditions) and dynamic determinants of development (interests of the state, county, large urban centres, local population, local actors, local development assets and ideas and social integration of all the components in social revitalization actions).

The Lika region in terms of settlements is characterized by two relatively underdeveloped cities and numerous small rural settlements dispersed in a large underused area that has not been adequately assessed. Such a social environment

requires a thoughtful and interdisciplinary approach to problems and development strategy. The hitherto longstanding negative demographic and economic tendencies have completely diminished the developmental potential of most of the region. The long lasting degradation processes have additionally been aggravated by the consequences of the Homeland War, when most of Lika was destroyed and looted and the population exiled.

Lika's developmental possibilities belong to the type of resources that require systematic efforts in terms of expertise and finances. Lika is well positioned as far as transport facilities are concerned with exceptional natural resources that have barely begun to be exploited. The existing county organizational setup and municipality network are favourable territorial-administrative starting points for the organization of activities that will result in the more uniform development of the entire territory, better and more successful valuation of natural resources. The development of the rural segment in Lika is perhaps more than anywhere else in Croatia the precondition of sustainability. According to research findings, the local community is quite weak and therefore insufficiently included in the development plans and projects. The question is to what degree has it generally been taken into account as a protagonist of development. The approach to the development of any developmentally neglected periphery should by necessity be based on developmental principles that are sensitive in sociological, anthropological and environmental terms. This, first of all, means that development projects should have the support of the population, namely, that their interests have to be taken into account, their knowledge and experience respected and they themselves included in institutions in the local environments. This way the rural area and rural local community would become a respected factor in the process of putting into effect and implementing the development strategy. We consider that local interests should not be bypassed in favour of general ones. Such an approach necessarily changes the existing relationship city – countryside, centre and periphery.

The Lonjsko polje villages with their fragile demographic and thereby economic potentials need by necessity assistance in the revitalization of their fundamental social strongholds. These are in the first place, according to the results of research and to the established protected natural heritage, the inhabitants, the family and the rural community. In short: to begin with, the number of inhabitants has to be stabilized. In other words, young people have to be encouraged to remain in the area and possibly those that have left simulated to return; the family is indispensable when basic activities in the area of Lonjsko polje are at stake: agriculture which, partly due to the protected marshes, has to apply traditional methods and procedures as well as specific cultures. The other planned activity is rural tourism which is also work intensive in nature and cannot be successful without the engagement of family work force. The third development foothold, the village, the only known social living and working framework for the population, is in a phase of decomposition: the number of inhabitants is dropping, young people are leaving in increasing numbers and there are fewer and fewer farmers cultivating the land. Fields, forests, pastures are falling into neglect and houses and gardens into ruin. Old crafts are forgotten and valuable knowledge and experience of the domestic population are lost. Such villages are less and less attractive

to their hosts, guests or occasional inhabitants. A low level of social dynamics in such communities impedes any development project.

The thermo-electric power plant Plomin is a good example for examining the consequences of implanting a large system into a small rural environment which has its developmental needs and aspirations, more or less common to all the inhabitants since they stem from identical cultural, economic and social roots and reality. A powerful development participant coming from elsewhere is the bearer of national interests (and international ones in the case of Plomin II) with enormous capital which imposes its own rules. Two systems meet that differ in every possible respect, of which one is embedded in cooperativeness while conflict is immanent to the other. Is it possible to reconcile them and if it is, how? As a rule such a quick transition or abrupt local modernization does not always correspond to expected social, economic and environmental effects. This is what happened in the case of Plomin. By analyzing the interviews we had with the representatives of local and county self-government units, the public sector and representatives of the electric-power distribution system we gained a good insight into this very complex and inadequately balanced relationship. It goes without saying that space exists on both sides for the improvement of this relationship. The conducted research shed light on the positions of: local self-government units, public health services and professional public within the energy supply system on the developmental and safety aspects of the operation of the critical infrastructure in local communities.

Croatia has to decide on and opt for a contemporary and appropriate development strategy, to present it in a transparent way and to decisively act on it. Most of Croatia's territory is underdeveloped (which in addition to negative has some positive effects as well) so when choosing the development model it should take this factor into consideration. This is particularly true in regard to rural and peripheral areas which are the strongholds of the economic and social integration of the state. The decisions on the choice of models and development projects are strategically decisive and for that very reason require expert and scientifically grounded preparation and implementation.