



ABSTRACT

FUTURE AT THE OUTSKIRTS OF A MARSHLAND: THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVES OF SETTLEMENTS IN LONJSKO POLJE

Lonjsko Polje strives to live and revive its traditional world and seeks to find a framework for the future within the context of social and economic changes in rural space as well as the profound, far-reaching transformations of the village. The impregnation of tradition, in a developmental sense, can be the basis for the formation of socio-cultural and economic identity. It can also be a splendid reason for an upsurge of self-confidence about values that the local people have managed to preserve until today, on which they can plan their future.

Lonjsko Polje once had a more intensive economic and social life. For instance, about a hundred years ago, the number of inhabitants was considerably higher. Croatian industrial and urban development, which was not concerned with the specific qualities of rural social space, nor agriculture on the family farm, nor about the family without which there is no successful farming, resulted in degrading processes. These have not been stopped and today can be read in the demographic and economic deterioration of settlements in Lonjsko Polje. With regard to this area, some other reasons have contributed to this regression (for example, the repositioning of some important traffic directions that played an important role in the life of the whole county).

On the other hand, the developmental possibilities that this space offers, which are interesting and achievable at both the local level and more widely are unquestionable. The exceptional natural wealth and special natural conditions suited to the free-range breeding of an autochthonous type of livestock as well as other forms of coexistence of the remaining population and nature, are important reasons for the protection and controlled development of the area along the Lonja river. In any case, the area was proclaimed a nature park because of all of these

assets. Among other things, the community abounds in valuable architectural heritage which is rapidly deteriorating and which also should be protected and renewed. Consequently, besides natural heritage, there is a need to protect social, cultural and economic heritage in Lonjsko Polje.

This area has a low density settlement, a long-term exodus trend and all the consequences that this process leaves behind (at the level of the individual, family group and rural community) as well as communication and social isolation and a decrease in agricultural activity. Despite all of these drawbacks, Lonjsko Polje has managed to preserve a high-quality and more recognizable landscape that is healthy and mainly unpolluted. Moreover, some economic activities and experiences have also been preserved, especially some agricultural techniques and culture that are typical for marshland areas. The uncertainty that usually accompanies agricultural production is more intensified in this area due to the natural conditions that dominate. Thus, an intensive agriculture was not developed in Lonjsko and Mokro Polje partly because of this, which has in turn contributed to the preservation of a natural and social environment.

Since Lonjsko Polje is exceptionally diversified in a biological sense and is an ambient that is more and more difficult to find in Europe, the possibility of it being presented as a specific tourist attraction has been recognized. By all means, in this way the area can be revived. For instance, young people may be encouraged to stay or return. This is especially appealing because family farming, in terms of its economic benefits and according to the work demands and social status of the peasant in Croatian society has been unattractive to young rural inhabitants for some time.

The protection of the natural environment and the raising of the quality of life for inhabitants in (settled) protected areas are inseparable and equally important components of development, that is of developmental projects. The inhabitants that live in the area of the nature park should be more familiar with the projects and aims of protection, and should be included as soon as possible in conservation work. At any rate, they, that is, their predecessors in that area, preserved the main natural and economic resources of the present-day park, and rightfully expect specific benefits from "their" natural heritage. The significance of the natural heritage of Lonjsko Polje in international and national frameworks can be an additional motive for "winning over" the local population for participation in activities which, at first sight, constrict the free-

dom of activity because they introduce rules of behaviour, required in a protected area. Experience from rural developmental projects indicate that the projects that included and informed the local population from the beginning, that is, made them disposed to actively participate in the development of the area were successfully realized.

Lonjsko settlements have developed according to an elongated “village street” pattern type, which as a rule is linked to two facts. First, they are relatively “young” settlements that established in the 17th and 18th centuries. Second, with regard to their form, much credit goes to external, immigrant groups. Both of these features contribute to a lack of “community spirit” which could be interpreted as differentiation/separateness from other, neighbouring settlements or settlements of a similar type. With regard to the appearance of the village, a river bank imagery dominates. Moreover, it is a fact that the marshland has not left significant traces on communities that are on/at the edges of it. Namely, it seems that in Lonjsko Polje (as is the experience of other “marshland communities” in Croatia) a network of identity features necessary for the shaping of a particular symbolic order is missing. Subsequently, the local population does not identify with this marshland community. However, this drawback is compensated in a symbolic union with nature, since the diversified communities in wildlife recognise this marshland area to be their natural habitat.

All Lonjskom settlements, as well as district-level centres, according to the scheme: centre-outskirts, belong to the outskirts areas. Moreover, in a characteristic way, all of them lack the social density sufficient for developmental mobilisation of the population. The division of activities among Lonjsko inhabitants suggests two support props of social integration: family and religious community (parish). However, the asymmetry in the division of activities came about as a consequence of the uncomplementary development of the rural world between the period 1950–1990 that transformed peasants into specific dependents on industry. The result is a hybrid group of peasant-workers. Still, the dominant activity – agriculture – in the consciousness of the population (especially among youth) is burdened by characteristics of the martyr (difficulty, insecurity, futility, deficiency of social recognition, shortage of life autonomy, etc.) Undoubtedly, a great number of these disadvantages gained a foothold in Lonjsko settlements. Most certainly, the demographic one is the most difficult, and the retreat of youth from Lonjsko Polje is the first developmental difficulty with which the present and future collide.

The area of Lonjsko Polje, according to research results, in a socio-economic sense is in a dying phase. Three negative social processes: depopulation, economic involution and acculturation are determining the rapid decay of a strong socio-cultural identity framework that still exists in this area. Development is limited to local (less than optimal) possibilities as well as the poor state of regional economics. More is expected from the state in the revitalization processes of this neglected rural area. In the area of Lonjsko Polje, the state participates actively through budget transfers to units of local government and, directly, in its support for the newly created nature park. Naturally, the local development bases can do more than all nature parks, which, besides protection, must include developmental functions in its "business mission" if it wants Lonjsko Polje to improve life conditions for its inhabitants. By doing this, the preservation of its biodiversified wealth is possible.

This entire natural and humane world came about and was sustained as a result of special water regulations. The relative low density of settlement facilitated the preservation of such an eco-system. Changes in the social and economic realities of a global society run the risk of an inadequate type of development in that area, the continuation of existing trends or the withering away of that region. Thus, it is worthwhile in certain cases, to preserve the traditional modes of agricultural production, which is one of the basis for maintaining the protected system. In this way, besides the valuable natural environment, developmental resources can be preserved for a few more activities. The foundations for a more prosperous future of this region is based on these developmental resources - agriculture as well as valuable natural and cultural heritage, which in an appropriate way needs to be presented to interested visitors. For the harmonious development of the chosen activities, it is necessary to fulfill many prerequisites. By all means, one is fundamental. This entails the preservation of the family farm. The preservation and revitalization of traditional Lonjsko Polje agricultural economics is an imperative prerequisite of an integral development project. This is especially the case if an objective is to preserve a quality landscape and the production of quality agricultural products. Furthermore, on this basis, peasant and rural tourism can be developed. Even though, to a lesser extent, farming is still an important source of income for many families, its further neglect would directly threaten the development of tourist activity since the landscape and the assortment of local products are indeed a developmental resource.

Since agriculture in Lonjsko Polje is predominantly extensive and in most parts it is planned that it will stay this way, the income that can be anticipated from this is expectedly small. With knowledge of this, every revival project concerning agricultural products in a traditional way must anticipate some of the possible forms of support for family farming.

Although we can sense a specific turning-point towards family farming and especially towards livestock breeding from the collected data, we are inclined to interpret these results in the following way. Namely, they can be read as a "return" of the local population to the family farm, that is, the farm holds a greater economic and work meaning for the family. Different causes contribute to this: from general social and economic opportunities in the country to specific perspectives that undoubtedly make them aware that they live in a nature park. Unquestionably, the turn towards livestock breeding has had a positive and stimulating effect upon the local type of breeding and pride that in spite of everything they have managed to preserve a few valuable autothonous animal breeds. This is especially relevant to horse breeding. An increase in the number of domestic animals would not threaten the protected area because in the old days there were many more. Moreover, an increase would essentially bring about the revitalization of the farm family, especially since the natural conditions are of high quality and abundant. Unfortunately, it is unknown as to who will inherit many of these properties. Where this is known, the inheritors are mostly within the household. There are twice as many non-farmers among them than farmers.

Since involvement and motivation of the local population with regard to the development of some area is of key importance, we analysed the inhabitants' attitudes about the present state and problems of Lonjsko Polje, as well as their evaluation with regard to the developmental possibilities of this protected area. Besides an evaluation of the state and perspectives, some general developmental aspirations of the population were also considered. The attitudes of the inhabitants of Lonjsko Polje were influenced by two factors: the first stems from the proclaimed obligation of the state that it takes care of this protected area and implies the promise of concrete subventions for the local inhabitants and the other is indicated through the increase in number of restrictions with regard to agricultural (and other) activities.

The investigation showed that there was a high degree of readiness for collaboration and sacrifice so as to pre-

serve this unique area, as well as the expectation of the population that eventual losses follow from developmental policies of compassion.

The inhabitants were particularly interested in the development of rural tourism and the promotion of traditional agriculture, acknowledging the following as the most important criteria: the preservation of nature, cultural quality and diversity of Lonjsko Polje as well as solving existential issues (special) related to the younger population such as employment possibilities and earnings.

Past oversights were most clearly shown in the poor communication between the Nature Park and the population, so it is to be expected that with more efficient information as well as education, the local community could be more actively engaged. The greatest obstacle, that is, the inadequate demographic composition of the population, further reinforces the respondents' evaluations that their children in most cases will abandon Lonjsko Polje. In any case, this would be the most unfavourable outcome, since the harmonious coexistence and interdependence between nature and humankind is of greatest worth in this area.

The basic natural values of this area can be interpreted in this study as first class developmental resources within a conceptual context of sustainable development, especially within the context of viable development of protected areas in Croatia. Within this framework, the actual relation of the local population towards nature and natural resources in Croatia as well as their attitudes is of special importance. The existing ways of using natural resources and problems of environment contamination as well as the inadequate and harmful "consumption" of nature in the protected area of Lonjsko Polje were researched.

Sociological research could help in finding answers related to the protection of nature in Lonjsko Polje and the necessity of development of small rural societies in this area. Clearly, a harmonious balanced development of the social and natural components is basically the revitalization of the entire area.

Social science researchers have not asked whether or not this can be successful but are interested in which and what sort of developmental foothold can be counted on and which developmental actors from the environment, that is, the present inhabitants of Lonjsko Polje can be relied upon.