

MANAGEMENT OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS - CASE STUDY: DONJA KUPČINA, CROATIA

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Abstract

Donja Kupčina, the largest settlement in the Municipality of Pisarovina, has been losing its importance in recent years, suffering the negative consequences of demographic collapse caused by the aging population and emigration, as well as unfavorable economic conditions, especially as a result of the war events at the end of the last century. Tourism and family farms, of which there are 109 in the settlement of Donja Kupčina, can be determined as the backbone of future economic development, and which, by enriching their offer with catering and tourist programs, can significantly contribute to the preservation of heritage and identity, as well as the economic prosperity of the settlement and sociodemographic renewal.

Results have shown that residents of the settlement of Donja Kupčina expressed a low level of satisfaction with local infrastructure and economic development, in contrast to a high level of satisfaction with the rich and preserved resource base. Residents are not satisfied with the inclusion of the settlement in the tourism product of the Municipality of Pisarovina and believe that they do not have enough information about it. Based on the conducted research, the paper presents a proposal for the development of rural tourism in the settlement of Donja Kupčina, a CroRural model, which aims to improve the general economic, social and demographic picture of the settlement while ensuring the preservation of resources and the growth of the living standard of the population. The above model is applicable, with certain modifications, to all rural areas in the Republic of Croatia.

Keywords: rural tourism; management, Donja Kupčina

1. INTRODUCTION

Managing the development of a certain area is a very demanding and challenging process. If we start from the very core of the concept of management, the previously stated points us to the fact that it must be based on reliable and easily verifiable indicators, guided by clearly defined goals, and monitored in a timely manner in order to prevent possible anomalies in the application of this process.

The aforementioned management process is particularly challenging when designing programs that can be applied in sensitive areas such as the rural areas of a country. Rural areas face the problems of high unemployment rates, which increases the population's need for social programs at the level of European countries compared to residents of urban areas, which, along with depopulation and population aging, an average lower level of education, and often underdeveloped infrastructure, and especially in countries like the Republic of Croatia, underdeveloped non-agricultural activities in rural areas (Mesić et al, 2021, European Commission, 2008). The decline of the area in economic and demographic terms has also been contributed to by changes in habits, needs, occupations and population structure, war events, as well as inadequate development policies at the state level over the past decades.

All of the above problems also cause stagnation and degradation of the quality of life in rural areas of the Republic of Croatia (Miljenović et al., 2016, Grgić et al., 2010). The development of rural tourism and the involvement of the local community in rural tourism, especially family farms, provides an opportunity for

successful economic and demographic-social renewal of the above areas. (Očić et al. 2019; Mesić et al., 2021). The paper will examine the development of the settlement of Donja Kupčina, highlighting the disproportionate development of the Pokuplje area, once a very rich agricultural region. This disproportionate development is particularly evident when considering its favorable geographical location – close to the two centers of Zagreb and Karlovac.

The following problems affecting the development of the mentioned area have been identified: depopulation, population aging, insufficient economic activity, insufficient focus and readiness to acquire new knowledge and skills. Since the Republic of Croatia is a country that is strongly oriented towards tourism, the lack of interest of the local community (population, but also local government) in tourism, and in all possible positive impacts of its development on the general level of quality of life and revitalization of the mentioned area, has been particularly noted. Through the development of several forms of selective tourist offer, especially rural tourism, and new sustainable practices, and the restoration and preservation of traditional crafts, traditional lifestyle, customs and rich natural and cultural heritage, in which Donja Kupčina as the largest settlement in the Municipality of Pisarovina has the most significant role due to the oldest open-air local museum (Petrović, 2008) and the preservation of traditional construction (Getvaj, 1987) as a symbol of the identity of the local community, a new and arguably sustainable economic and

socio-demographic development of the settlement of Donja Kupčina will be enabled.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The improvement of the existing economic environment, which is mainly based on agriculture, must continue to be based on the local community. The author Yachin (2025) explores the possibilities of developing entrepreneurial ventures in rural areas and ways in which the engagement of the local community in entrepreneurial activities can be encouraged. In his research, he presents strategies and practices that help transform entrepreneurial initiatives into sustainable business models in rural communities, which is possible through the development of tourism. Yanan et al. (2024) point to the positive impact of rural tourism on preserving traditional ways of life and ensuring sustainable development of rural areas and settlements. The authors analyze the positive and negative effects of tourism development, focusing their attention on the preservation of cultural heritage and the socio-economic development of local communities. As tourism development is expected to contribute to the sustainable development of rural destinations (Nemes and Tomay, 2025) through the design of thoughtful policies aimed at determining the impact of environmental and social factors on sustainable development (Permana et al. 2024), it is necessary to conduct an analysis of the value chain within the local community and include their experiences in the creation of a unique tourism offer.

Soleymani et al. (2025) emphasize that by creating unforgettable tourist experiences, destination management contributes to the recognition of the destination, and by promoting sustainable development policies, to the very sustainability of rural areas, tourism, and agriculture.

They also emphasize the role of emotional and experiential elements in stimulating long-term interest and engagement of tourists, and thus the local community, in tourism activities. Cordova-Buiza et al. (2025) share a similar view, pointing out the importance of involving local communities in tourism planning and management, as this contributes to sustainability and community strengthening in rural areas.

In order to fully understand the management of tourism development in rural areas, it is necessary, after researching the views of the local community, to also research the views of potential tourists who will visit the destination with the aim of achieving sustainable development and creating a quality and competitive product in the tourism market. Li et al. (2025) indicated in their research that different physical and spatial characteristics of destinations influence the choice of destination and the behavior of tourists in the destination, which has implications for planning and management of rural tourism and should be taken into consideration. The successful development of rural areas is only possible through the cooperation of all stakeholders through partnerships between local communities, tourism workers and other stakeholders in order to improve the offer and achieve joint economic and social benefits. (Leite et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the successful development of a tourist destination in a rural area is possible only by applying a holistic approach (Chen et al., 2023) and by harmonizing the needs of the local community with the needs of modern tourists.

3. FAMILY FARMING IS THE BACKBONE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURISM IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

In order to properly assess the development possibilities of rural tourism in the settlement of Donja Kupčina, it is necessary to determine the state of development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia. The author has identified family farms as the carriers of the future

sustainable development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia, because they represent a combination of tradition and experience of the hosts and offer the possibility for sustainable development, growth and survival of local rural communities.

Table 1: Family farms in the Republic of Croatia by organizational structure 2016 – 2024

YEAR	FM	SSFM	CR	TC	CO	REST	TOTAL
2016	165.176	-	2.201	2.566	385	196	170.524
2017	159.191	-	2.174	2.554	347	192	164.458
2018	162.248	-	2.187	2.690	355	196	167.676
2019	162.966	2.032	2.251	2.846	362	205	170.662
2020	154.679	10.250	2.299	3.039	355	215	170.837
2021	141.351	22.842	2.416	3.287	359	219	170.474
2022	128.290	31.696	2.466	3.400	357	221	166.430
2023	122.879	35.267	2.464	3.442	355	222	164.629
2024	118.861	35.872	2.472	3.460	352	222	161.239

Notes: FM-family farm; SSFM-self-sufficient family farm; CR-craft; TC-Treding Company ; CO-Cooperative

Source: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom razvoju /APPRRR/)- Access from: <https://agronet.apprrr.hr/v1/Forms/PublicForms/PublicData.aspx> (14.08.2025)

In the Republic of Croatia, the number of family farms in the period from 2016 to 2024 is in a slight decline. This indicates the need to implement urgent measures that are necessary to ensure the survival and development of family farms, and thus agricultural production in the Republic of Croatia. (See Table 1.)

Tourism can be developed on a family farm in the Republic of Croatia by registering an additional activity.

According to the Hospitality Act (Government of the Republic of Croatia, Hospitality+ Act, 2014-2024), a family farm is an agricultural holding registered in the Register of Farmers as a family farm in accordance with special regulations and which provides hospitality services in accordance with the provisions of the Hospitality Act.

Table 2: Provision of catering services on family farms 2022 – 2024

TYPE OF FACILITY	2024	2023	2022	2024/23 INDEX	2023/22 INDEX
Winery	70	60	54	116,67	111,11
Tasting rooms	134	116	98	115,52	118,37
Picnic area	240	199	156	120,60	127,56
Rooms	132	119	98	110,92	121,43
Apartments	158	141	118	112,06	119,49

Source: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom razvoju /APPRRR/). Access from: <https://agronet.apprrr.hr/v1/Forms/PublicForms/PublicData.aspx> (14.08.2025)

From the previously mentioned data in Table 2, it is evident that growth in the previous three years was achieved in all forms of hospitality facilities. In relation to 2023, in 2024 an increase was registered in the number of camping and Robinson accommodation spaces (21.43%), picnic areas (20.60%) and wineries (16.67%). In 2023, compared to 2022, the most new

excursion sites (27.56%), rural holiday homes (26.34%) and rooms (21.43%) were opened.

In addition to catering services and catering facilities in rural tourism, it is also possible to offer various tourist services on family farms. The services offered according to the Register (Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, 2025) are listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Provision of tourism services on family farms 2022 – 2024

SERVICE	2024	2023	2022	2023/22 INDEX	2024/23 INDEX
enabling participation in agricultural activities (fruit/vegetable picking, harvest, etc.)	143	138	110	103,62	125,45
enabling participation in aquaculture activities (feeding aquatic organisms, cleaning breeding installations, catching aquatic organisms, presentation of aquatic organism breeding, etc.)	49	13	12	376,92	108,33
hunting and fishing and presentation of hunting and fishing methods	46	42	37	109,52	113,51
carriage rides, boat rides, cycling, horseback riding, hiking and similar activities	172	145	116	118,62	125,00
active and adventure tourism activities	97	85	64	114,12	132,81
rental of space, resources, equipment and supplies for a particular activity	121	109	89	111,01	122,47
rental of picnic and picnic areas	132	122	91	108,20	134,07
implementing a program of creative and educational workshops related to agriculture, aquaculture, traditional crafts and the like	87	78	63	111,54	123,81
presentation of the agricultural economy, hunting grounds and forests and the natural and cultural values within them	112	99	86	113,13	115,12
visits to ethno collections and the like	39	34	27	114,71	125,93
provision of excursion and tourist transfer services to OPG for guests using accommodation services	70	65	52	107,69	125,00

Source: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom razvoju /APPRRR/). Access from: <https://agronet.apprrr.hr/v1/Forms/PublicForms/PublicData.aspx> (14.08.2025.)

From Table 3 it is visible that numerous tourist services are provided on family farms in the Republic of Croatia. The largest number of services in 2024 relates to the service of carriage rides (172), enabling visitors to participate in fruit picking on the family farm (143), and renting out areas for excursions and picnics (132), while only 39 households offer the service of visiting ethnographic collections and similar (39). Compared to 2023, the offer that has improved the most is the provision of participation in aquaculture activities, which has increased by 276.92% due to the low offer in previous years, and carriage rides, boats, bicycles, horse riding, hiking and similar activities with an increase of 18.62%. In 2023, compared to 2022, the largest increase in offer

was recorded in renting out areas for excursions and picnics (34.07%) and active and adventure tourism 32.81%.

As shown in the table, the number of additional tourist services is constantly increasing, but this growth does not reflect the possibilities that rural areas have as a possible tourist destination. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage the population of rural areas, especially those who have their own agricultural production, to improve it by including it in the tourist product through the creation of additional value and income, through development programs, financial models and educational activities.

4. DONJA KUPČINA – TRADITION AND HISTORY GUARANTEE OF RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

The settlement of Donja Kupčina is the largest settlement in the municipality of Pisarovina, which is the largest (145 km²) and the most sparsely populated (25 inhabitants/km² = 3,689 inhabitants) municipality in Zagreb County, located in its southern part and dominated by the Vukomeričke gorice hills and the Kupa River. Donja Kupčina is the first settlement in Zagreb County, bordered on one side by the settlements of the city of Karlovac, and the municipal center of Pisarovina (Municipality of Pisarovina, 2025) - If we look at the geographical position of the municipality, and the

settlement of Donja Kupčina itself, we can think that this rural area along the Kupa River, and along the very border of urban Zagreb and near Karlovac has significant development opportunities, which have not been used. The settlement of Donja Kupčina, although spatially the largest settlement in the Municipality (Municipality of Pisarovina, 2025) with the largest number of inhabitants, is actually an area without significant economic activities and business entities, marked by significant depopulation, which was particularly pronounced after the Homeland War. (See Table 4.)

Table 4: Population of the settlement of Donja Kupčina according to official censuses in the 20th and 21st centuries

CENSUS YEAR	NUMBER OF POPULATIONS	(%) CHANGE INDEX (FALL)
1931	2.066	--
1948	1.843	-10,79
1953	1.853	0,50
1961	1.697	-8,42
1971	1.552	-8,55
1981	1.381	-11,02
1991	1.314	-4,85
2001	1.087	-17,28
2011	974	-10,40
2021	881	-9,55

Source: Croatian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011,2013,2025. Access from: <https://web.dzs.hr/Hrv/DBHomepages/Naselja%20i%20stanovnistvo%20Republike%20Hrvatske/Naselja%20i%20stanovnistvo%20Republike%20Hrvatske.htm> , <https://web.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/censuslogo.htm>, https://podaci.dzs.hr/media/rqybclnx/popis_2021-stanovnistvo_po_naseljima.xlsx (15.07.2025.)

According to data from the Central Bureau of Statistics (2025), it can be seen that the decrease in the population has been constant in the observed ninety-year period, and compared to 1931, when the settlement had 2,066 inhabitants, in 2021, according to the last census, there were 881 inhabitants, which is a decrease of 57.36%., and the observed decrease between censuses is on average 8-10%.

Until the Homeland War, the settlement housed several shops, bakeries, milk purchasing points, local taverns and veterinary stations. Today, the settlement has two taverns, a betting shop and a general store, and an

agricultural pharmacy as a reminder of the once economically much stronger settlement. In the settlement, the population has no ideas about the development of tourism, despite the fact that the settlement is home to the first open-air museum in the Republic of Croatia. Donja Kupčina is also known as the stork village, but this has only been partially used in the promotional materials of the Tourist Board of the Municipality of Pisarovina (Tourist Board of the Municipality of Pisarovina, 2025). Unfortunately, the local community, as well as the local government, and the tourist board do not have well-designed tourism development programs (or they

are at a low level), and do not recognize tourism as an important element that can revive and revitalize the aforementioned rural area, even though it is the first site where an open-air ethno museum was built in Croatia. Faced with global changes in economic development and demographic stagnation, and one could even say decline, it is necessary to adopt a new and sustainable model of economic and socio-demographic growth for the settlement of Donja Kupčina, which is possible through the development of rural tourism.

The problems of development of this area can be determined in:

- insufficient level of knowledge and motivation for tourism development
- poor demographic indicators – population decline, population aging
- insufficiently developed infrastructure – transport connections, wastewater drainage

- numerous cultural resources that are not valorized for tourism – neglected and unmaintained churches, elements of traditional construction.

In order to determine the desired development direction of a certain rural area, including the settlement of Donja Kupčina, it is necessary to first of all understand the views of the local community on the direction of the desired development. Since Donja Kupčina is a very rural area, this research is based on determining the possibilities for the development of tourism, as a complementary product to agriculture. In the following, an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the rural destination of Donja Kupčina was made and development threats and opportunities were determined, with the aim of designing a rural tourism development program for the settlement. (See Table 5)

Table 5: S.W.O.T. analysis of the situation (tourism) in rural areas of the Republic of Croatia

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preserved resource base • clean nature • unpolluted water • unpolluted air • Rich cultural and historical heritage • churches, traditional houses • language/dialect, folk dances, customs • crafts and trades • gastronomic specialties of the area • Proximity to large cities (Zagreb and Karlovac) • Safety • Proximity to emitting tourist markets • Kindness of the hosts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient involvement of the area in economic developments • Tourism is not recognized as a significant economic sector for development • Neglected agricultural areas • Lack of local development plans • Lack of understanding of the needs of the local community by authorities at all levels • Lack of quality transport infrastructure • Lack of interest in tourism by the local community • Lack of trust in new ideas by the local community • Unmaintained material heritage
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of cultural tourism • Development of rural tourist offer • Development of agriculture • Consolidation of land • Creation of new and recognizable ecological products • Improvement of railway and road connectivity of rural areas • Programs to encourage the development of rural areas • Use of EU funds and encouragement of cross-border cooperation where possible • Adoption of good practices by neighboring countries/destinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Further depopulation of the area • Lack of labor force • Fragmentation of agricultural areas • Death of currently preserved crafts and trades • Disappearance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage caused by depopulation • Lack of jobs • Abandonment of traditional products and production • Pollution • Loss of resources due to inadequate development policies • Competition

Source: Author's analysis

Although the rural areas of Donja Kupčina possess significant and very important elements for the development of a modern and innovative tourist offer, this has not been recognized at the local level. Despite development programs and development strategies at the level of the Republic of Croatia, they have not taken root in local and smaller communities. The rural tourism product in the entire Republic of Croatia is, one could say, in the making. The connection between production in the fields and restaurants and hotels is almost non-existent, and the level of information among tourists, as well

as the local population in rural areas, about the advantages of developing the tourist offer is low. All of the above highlights negative threats such as further depopulation, abandonment of traditional production, loss of the uniqueness of the area, disappearance of intangible and tangible heritage due to population extinction or insufficient maintenance. The development of tourism in rural areas should be characterized by sustainability and aimed at strengthening development potential and preserving the rich resource base and reducing depopulation.

The vision for the development of rural tourism in Croatia by 2020, commissioned by the then Ministry of Tourism and prepared by the Institute of Tourism in Zagreb, stated that rural tourism would be a competitive and increasingly sought-after export product of Croatia. Rural areas would attract tourists with their ecological preservation, authentic atmosphere and distinctive offer that would be intended for different consumer segments. (Ministry of Tourism, Institute of Tourism, 2015). Unfortunately, even today, the assumptions written in this Action Plan have not been realized at the level of the entire Republic of Croatia, including in the settlement of Donja Kupčina.

From the above, it is evident that rural tourism provides an opportunity for the demographic and economic and social revitalization of rural areas, including the settlement of Donja Kupčina. Tourism, as the most important element of economic development and social well-being, provides a unique opportunity for the development of rural areas through:

- preservation of the identity of the local community
- demographic recovery of rural areas
- economic recovery of rural areas
- strengthening the general level of competitiveness of the economy
- creation of new jobs
- strengthening interculturality
- acquisition of new knowledge and skills

Rural tourism is a factor of sustainable development that, through its development programs, enables the preservation of the natural, cultural, agrarian resource base, tradition, customs, gastro-enological peculiarities of the area, etc. (Adapted from Bartoluci, 2013:190). In order for the development of rural tourism to be successful, according to the authors Pröbstl-Haider et al. (2014), it is necessary to include as many stakeholders as possible in its development, which will achieve better effects of this development, and the growth of this form

of tourism is encouraged by tourism policy measures from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Croatian Chamber of Commerce, as well as through programs of the Croatian Tourist Board, the Klub selo Association and other specialized associations.

Further development of rural areas will be achieved through the revitalization and restoration of numerous currently uncultivated and neglected agricultural areas, which can be achieved through the design of incentive measures in the form of financial and tax incentives, assistance in applying for projects for financing from European Union funds, or through support intended for small private investors. (Grgić et al. 2010.)

By creating brands of regional indigenous products, the prerequisites for creating a regionally recognizable tourist destination are created (Deže et al. 2018), and this can be achieved by including the existing family farms in the settlement of Donja Kupčina in tourist flows. The most important role in education and launching the tourist offer must be initiated by the Tourist Board of the Municipality of Pisarovina and the Municipality of Pisarovina itself. The development of rural tourism can offer an innovative tourist product with an indigenous traditional element that will ensure its regional recognition on the global tourist market. One of the most important carriers of the possible tourist development of rural areas is the family farm, and the local community itself.

4.1. Characteristics of the economy of the settlement of Donja Kupčina

Agriculture and related activities are the backbone of the economy of this settlement, as well as the surrounding area. According to data from the ARKOD system¹, in the settlement of Donja Kupčina there are land types: arable land, meadow, pasture, orchard, other types of land and temporarily unmaintained land.

Table 6: Land in the settlement of Donja Kupčina by type

Year	Arable land	Meadow	Pasture	Orchard	OTLU	Temporarily unmaintained plot						
	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P	A	P
2022	412,56	900	376,64	969	1,55	3	3,31	20	0,85	2	6,28	19
2023	391,45	851	383,04	968	1,27	2	3,16	20	0,85	2	5,66	18
2024	309,18	686	409,93	1022	3,01	4	3,16	20	0,85	2	20,04	39

Note: column A (area, Ha), column P (number of plots), column OTLU (other types of land use)

Source: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom razvoju /APPRRR/). Access from: [Prikaz-broja-i-povrsina-ARKODa-po-naseljima-i-vrsti-uporabe-poljoprivrednog-zemljista 31 12 2024.xlsx](#) (14.08.2025).

From table no. 6. it can be seen that the number of arable plots is constantly decreasing, while the number of

meadows is slightly increasing, which indicates an unsatisfactory trend of declining food production, where

¹ARKOD is the Croatian acronym for the Integrated Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS), a digital record of agricultural land use maintained by the Agency for Payments in Agriculture, Fisheries, and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom

razvoju). It serves to clearly identify and track agricultural land parcels within Croatia, which is a prerequisite for farmers to receive EU subsidies and support.

this area could find its market niche, especially if it is designed as part of the development of rural tourism in this area.

According to the register of farmers and family farms, there are 124 family farms operating in the area of the settlement of Donja Kupčina. If we exclude self-sufficient family farms, which cannot, in accordance with legal provisions, record additional services, 109 family farms, of which two are trading companies, have the possibility of recording tourism and catering activities as additional. Of the listed family farms, only forty-one

are recorded as active. Of the active agricultural farms in the settlement of Donja Kupčina, none have catering or tourist services registered as additional activities. The above points to the fact that tourism and catering have not yet been recognized as a possible source of further development of agriculture in a rural environment like the settlement of Donja Kupčina, especially if we take into account the possibility of preparing and directly offering high-quality food of plant and animal origin in an untouched landscape (Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, 2025)

Table 7: Family farms in the settlement of Donja Kupčina

TYPE OF FAMILY FARM	NUMBER
Family Farm	107
Self-Sufficient Family Farm	15
Trading Company	2
Total	124

Source: Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development (Agencija za plaćanja u poljoprivredi, ribarstvu i ruralnom razvoju /APPRRR/), Access from: [Prikaz-broja-i-povrsina-ARKODa-po-naseljima-i-vrsti-uporabe-poljoprivrednog-zemljista_31_12_2024.xlsx](#) (14.08.2025)

According to gender, the responsible person on family farms in the settlement of Donja Kupčina is 80 men and 44 women. The average age of the head of a family farm is 11 people in the group up to 41 years of age, 8 people in the group from 41 to 45 years of age, 12 people from 46 to 50 years of age, 11 people in the group from 51 to 55 years of age, 17 people from 56 to 60 years of age, 8 people from 61 to 65 years of age, and 57 heads of family farms are over 65 years of age. The above demographic structure can be considered partially responsible for the lack of additional services in tourism and catering in this settlement. In addition to the owners, 100 members of the family farm are registered within the family farms (Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, 2025). According to the professional qualifications of the responsible person on the OPGs in the settlement of Donja Kupčina, there are 124 of them in total, the structure is arranged in such a way that for 47 people the educational qualifications are unknown, 5 people have not completed primary school, 42 people have completed primary school, 31 people have completed secondary school, and only 1 person has registered a completed higher education. (Paying Agency for Agriculture, Fisheries and Rural Development, 2025)

The above data, in the author's opinion, indicate a certain possibility that through the development of rural tourism, it will be possible to:

- retain young people in rural areas
- retain highly educated people in rural areas
- increase the interest of family farm owners in registering additional activities such as tourism
- connect production (especially organic production) and the tourist market through the offer of family farm products directly at the "doorstep" without intermediaries and additional costs

- strengthen the authenticity, recognizability of the tourist offer and the settlement itself in rural areas.

A special challenge for tourism workers in rural areas is to create awareness that the development of rural tourism offers significant development opportunities, especially in the form of permanent revitalization of rural areas. The above should be significant not only for tourism workers but also for government officials. With the development of tourism, the weakest links in the economy of the Republic of Croatia today could become its carriers in the future.

4.2. Level of satisfaction of the population with life in rural areas

Although it could represent an area connecting two counties, with a special and unique cultural and tourist offer, Donja Kupčina has become an undeveloped and increasingly sparsely populated area. Once large cultivated fields have become areas overgrown with bushes and maquis, which represents an additional development and safety problem due to the possibility of fires and similar disasters, especially during summer heat or thunderstorms. A particular problem for further development, especially tourism, is also the poor transport connections, especially by public transport, which is especially pronounced during the summer months. Although it is located only 36 kilometers from Zagreb and 23 kilometers from Karlovac, public transport connects the settlement only with the city of Zagreb, while since the beginning of this century there has been no public transport network that would connect the settlement with nearby Karlovac or Jastrebarsko.

In order to initiate some economic activity, according to the author's opinion and previous similar research on the topic (i.e. Grgić et al. 2010, Gelo & Akrap, 2003), it is first of all necessary to ensure quality municipal and transport infrastructure and well-designed development programs, which must be directed towards sustainable

development and the development of selective forms of tourism. This area, due to its natural beauty and characteristics, rich flora and fauna, represents an ideal opportunity for the development of ecological, cultural, educational, hunting and rural tourism. Through tourism, the opportunity is opened for the presentation, and thus the preservation of traditional crafts, traditional lifestyles, local folklore, dialects, food, drinks, clothing, footwear and the like. By creating a new tourist product based on sustainability and rural tourism, space is also created for the revitalization of the Donja Kupčina local museum as a basis for promoting the values of this area. Without the active role of the local tourist board, education of locals, especially the younger generation, about the importance of preserving heritage and developing complementary activities to agriculture, such as tourism, depopulation will become even more pronounced. This will be particularly exacerbated by the lack of economic entities in the area and their lack of interest in "new" forms of economic activities, such as tourism, which is unknown to this once predominantly agricultural region.

According to the study Quality in Rural Areas of the Republic of Croatia - Stay or Go (Grgić et al. 2010), conducted in 2009 and involving 941 respondents, the main difficulties of rural life are related to economic

problems (employment opportunities, limited career choices, and lower incomes compared to urban areas) and the poor economic position of agriculture, which is clearly reflected in the strong pessimism of active farmers. According to the aforementioned study, the perception of quality of life in rural areas is significantly influenced by the respondents' dissatisfaction with social and health services and poorly developed infrastructure. Respondents are aware of the advantages of rural life compared to urban life. Rural life is life in a natural environment, with less pollution, better social ties, and less crime. One fifth of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with living conditions in rural areas and intend to migrate. This is an alarming indicator, since the respondents belong to the age group between 25 and 45, a population that has, as a rule, completed education and started a family. The largest number of potential migrants come from economically underdeveloped counties of Croatia, and most of them are unemployed or farmers. Potential migrants consider the lack of job opportunities as the main disadvantage of living in a rural area. The main advantages of living in the city, according to the respondents, are better opportunities for employment and additional income, as well as better opportunities for education and professional development.

5. METHODOLOGY

In order to start designing the development of the rural area of Donja Kupčina and the wider area of Pokuplje, it is necessary to research the needs and wishes of the local community. Only a satisfied local community is the guarantor of the achievement of permanent sustainable development of an area. For the stated reason, for the purposes of this paper, the author created and conducted a short initial survey of the inhabitants of this settlement. 103 respondents voluntarily agreed to take part in the research. Primary data was gathered for the purpose of our research with the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed based on the literature

the context of present research. . The Likert Scale was used for determining the level of satisfaction. Items were measured with scale ranging from "very poor" (as 1) to "excellent" (as 5).

The questionnaire consisted of four groups of questions, each with five possible statements. The groups of questions related to the quality of the settlement's infrastructure, economic characteristics of the settlement, resource base, and heritage and tourism. The survey results were analyzed using the SPSS package (IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Version 25, 2017 IBMSPSS, USA).

1. Is the local community satisfied with the level of inclusion of the Donja Kupčina destination in the tourism product?
2. Does the level of development of rural areas affect satisfaction with the quality of life of the local community?
3. What is the importance of preserving tangible and intangible heritage for the local community?
4. Are the residents satisfied with the quality of the transport infrastructure?
5. Are the residents satisfied with the economic indicators in the destination?
6. Are the residents satisfied with life in the rural area?
7. Do residents recognize tourism as a potential opportunity for economic development?
8. Do residents think it is important to preserve the identity of the local community?

review (Bitner 1992; Baker & Crompton 2000; Xie 2004; Lee et al. 2008; Grgić et al. 2010; Marković et al. 2018; Cudny et al. 2021, Drpić et al., 2022, Milohnić, Drpić, 2022). Measures were modified in order to meet

The author presents the results of the pilot study in this paper, and based on them sets the following research questions:

The limitations of the research conducted are primarily determined by the smaller sample of respondents, the

short time for conducting the research, as well as the lack of funds for more thorough research. The

aforementioned research should be repeated in full after informing the public about the potential of sustainable tourism development for the general economic development of the settlement of Donja Kupčina. The idea is to stimulate the local community to participate more

willingly in the research with the aim of obtaining more complete results, and thus designing the final development guidelines that will be implemented through the The CroRural project.

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

Based on a preliminary survey conducted on a sample of 103 respondents, the data presented below were obtained. Table 9 shows the groups of questions asked in

the questionnaire, and the degree of satisfaction of the respondents with them. The structure of the respondents is shown below. (See Table 8)

Table 8: Structure of respondents who participated in the study N = 103

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	40	38,83
Female	63	61,17
Age group		
0 – 18	7	6,80
19-25	13	12,62
26-39	23	22,33
40-64	39	37,86
65+	21	20,39
Education		
Elementary	18	17,48
High school	73	70,87
University	12	11,65

Source: Author's research

A total of 103 respondents participated in the preliminary research, of which 40 respondents (37.63%) were male and 63 respondents (62.37%) were female. The largest number of respondents, 39 of them, belong to the

age group of 40-64 years (37,86%), and have a secondary level of education, 73 of them or (70.87%) of the respondents.

Table 9: Level of satisfaction with the quality of life of the local community, N = 103

GROUP OF QUESTIONS	SATISFACTION INDICATORS	ARITHMETIC MEAN (N=103)
INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRAFFIC	Quality of transport infrastructure	3,1
	Quality of municipal infrastructure (drainage, water supply, waste management)	2,6
	Transport connections between the settlement of Donja Kupčina and surrounding settlements	1,9
	Quality of public transport	0,1
AM	INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRAFFIC	1,9
ECONOMIC FACTORS	Number, variety and quality of economic entities in the environment	2,8
	Employment opportunities in the immediate area	1,9
	Tourism is recognized as an opportunity to revitalize settlements	1,2
AM	ECONOMIC FACTORS	1,96
RESOURCES - PRESERVATION OF THE RESOURCE BASE	Awareness of the importance of preserving rural space among residents of the settlement	4,5
	The need to preserve and revitalize crafts and old crafts	3,9
	The need to preserve intangible heritage (language, folklore, costumes)	4,6

AM	RESOURCES - PRESERVATION OF THE RESOURCE BASE	4,33
	The pleasure of running the Donja Kupčina ethno museum	2,1
HERITAGE AND TOURISM	Inclusion of the ethno museum in the tourist product of the Pisarovina destination	1,2
	The initiative of Tourist Board Pisarovina in the inclusion of ethno museum Donja Kupčina in the tourism product of the destination	0,6
	Local government support for heritage preservation programs	1,9
AM	HERITAGE AND TOURISM	1,45
TOTAL	SATISFACTION WITH THE QUALITY OF OBSERVED ELEMENTS IN THE SETTLEMENT OF DONJA KUPČINA	2,41

Source: Author's research

The local population is partially satisfied with the quality of individual elements reported in the conducted research, and according to the author, the quality of life in the settlement of Donja Kupčina can be determined as such (2.41). They express the highest level of satisfaction with the quality of transport infrastructure (3.1), communal infrastructure (2.6), while they are most dissatisfied with the quality of public transport (0.1).

The local population is extremely dissatisfied with the initiatives coming from the Pisarovina Tourist Board (0.6) and the level of inclusion of the Donja Kupčina ethno museum in the tourism product of the Pisarovina Municipality (1.2). According to the respondents, tourism is not recognized as a significant form of revitalization of the Donja Kupčina settlement (1.2).

The local community believes that the preservation of intangible and tangible heritage is of high importance for the destination of Donja Kupčina, so the need for spatial preservation was rated the highest (4.5), the need for the preservation and revitalization of crafts and old trades (3.9), and the preservation of intangible heritage (4.6), which confirms the high level of awareness of the

population about the need to preserve heritage as the basis for preserving local identity.

In order to improve the quality of life, the activities that should be implemented by the local community and local administration are:

- demographic and economic measures for the revitalization of settlements and heritage
- creating a new offer based on sustainable rural tourism
- encouraging (self)employment, especially of young people
- stronger inclusion of the Donja Kupčina ethno museum in the tourism product
- better and more adequate management of the Donja Kupčina ethno museum
- creating a strong and recognizable brand of real value in the tourism market

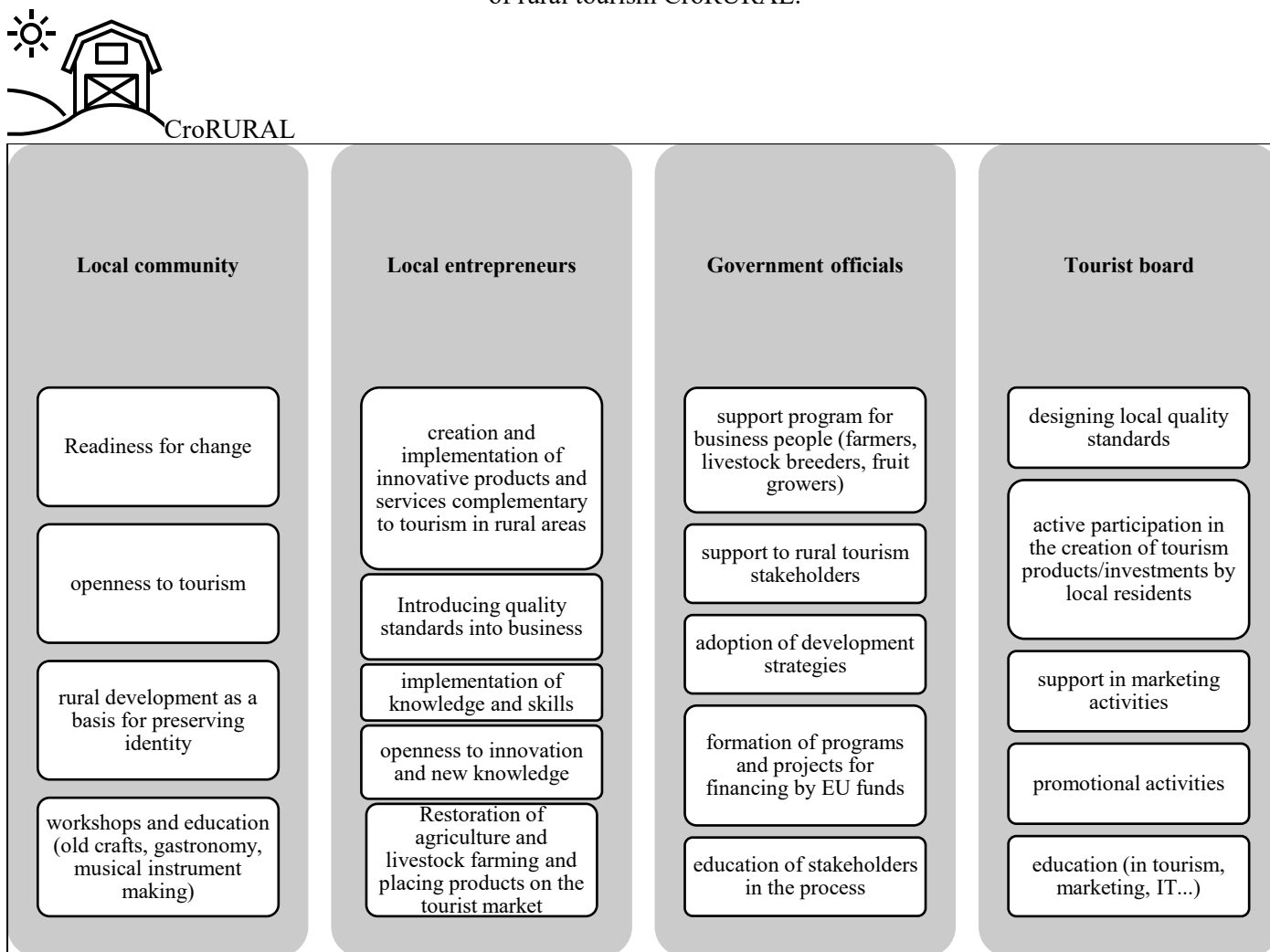
Following author will present the CroRural model, which was designed with the aim of directing the activities of all stakeholders in rural areas with the aim of creating a new tourism product and, therefore, a new direction of economic and social activities in rural areas.

7. PROPOSAL FOR A RURAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL CRO-RURAL

In order to ensure a long-term sustainable and at the same time economically successful model of development of rural areas and rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia, it is necessary to apply a development model that will enable the creation of development and interest synergy of the local community. The author proposes the CroRural model presented in the paper. The mentioned model can be applied in all destinations, including the destination Donja Kupčina, with possible adjustments to their specificities.

The CroRural model brings together the most important factors that directly influence the success of all development policies and programs in rural areas. The program focuses on four components: the local community (as primary), local business people (who are most often also stakeholders in the local community), government officials at the local, regional and even national levels, and the tourist board, which, as a non-profit organization, is closely linked, due to its specificity, to local administration and self-government, on whose financing its work depends.

Figure 1: Model for encouraging cooperation between all stakeholders in rural areas for the successful development of rural tourism CroRURAL.



Source: Author's research

The local community should, through various programs (workshops, playrooms, certification programs, education, financial support, etc.), create a strong sense of the importance of revitalizing life, heritage, and crafts through a tourism product. In addition to containing sustainability as a fundamental postulate, this product must also connect the revitalization of agriculture and its complementary activities and connect it with tourism. Such a tourism product will guarantee the survival of local producers, but also new businessmen who will certainly appear with the development of tourism. In the example of the Donja Kupčina, education can take place at the ethno museum site and be organized by the locals themselves, who will transmit the specificities of the tradition and customs of Donja Kupčina to new generations through word of mouth and by demonstrating skills in preparing food, drinks, winter food, traditional items, clothing, and footwear. The above will strengthen the awareness of belonging to the community and strengthen the local identity and uniqueness of the area, thereby achieving important prerequisites for the development of tourism. Local businessmen should design

such products and services that will be based to a greater extent on the preservation and cultivation of tradition. First of all, they should be focused on revitalizing neglected agriculture and, through association in interest groups (clusters), create traceability, through which their products will reach end users directly, without intermediaries, which will ultimately result in a product that will be cheaper and more accessible to the entire local community, and therefore it is possible to place it more easily on the tourist market. Businessmen, with the help of local government and self-government, must acquire additional knowledge from modern business, especially that related to financing options from the European Structural Funds, favorable lines for businessmen from HBOR⁶ and commercial banks, support of smaller values from local government and others. On the other hand, local government must develop, based on the agreement of all stakeholders, a new development strategy that will be focused on sustainable development and rural tourism. To achieve this, it is necessary to approve significant funds for education, for the operation of the tourist community, promotion, and

⁶ HBOR – Croatian Bank for Reconstruction and Development (Hrvatska banka za obnovu i razvoj)

other things, so that the adoption of tourism as a new driver of sustainable community development becomes an imperative for all stakeholders in the destination. In order for the tourism development of rural areas to be successful, it must first and foremost be based on ensuring sustainable development and preserving the natural resources of the destination as the basis for its protection. The development of tourism in rural areas is not possible without the direct and strong involvement of the local community in adopting development programs and determining tourism development policies. Businessmen certainly play a significant role, especially those who are themselves connected to the rural area (especially owners of family farms).

The further development of rural areas and the revitalization of areas that have been demographically devastated will be contributed to by the implementation of the following development guidelines:

- creation of a new National Catalogue of Rural Tourism of the Republic of Croatia (parts of which can be found on the portal idemonaselo.hr)
- permanent, timely and continuous monitoring of indicators of rural tourism development (night stays, number of tourists)
- creation of an overall development strategy for rural areas and rural tourism of the Republic of Croatia
- encouragement of investments in rural areas and rural tourism while respecting the postulates of sustainable development
- creation of a clear and implementable promotion strategy for rural tourism of the Republic of Croatia
- strengthening capacities for training personnel in rural tourism
- reintroduction of training that should be conducted before submitting an application for approval to engage in rural tourism
- Value for money

The importance of the proposed programme is also reflected in the application of EU rural tourism development policies in rural areas. These policies support local initiatives that make tourism sustainable and beneficial for the local community. In the new development period, they are aimed at diversifying income and

8. CONCLUSION

The development of rural tourism in the Republic of Croatia plays a very important role in repositioning the existing tourist offer in the direction of sustainable development and revitalization of rural areas. According to the data obtained in the paper, presented as a result of a survey on the example of the destination Donja Kupčina, residents of rural areas are less satisfied with the general level of quality of life, which, the author believes, is one of the fundamental reasons for depopulation and economic impoverishment and thus the disappearance of settlements. A special problem is the lack of common elements in developed areas that enable a high quality of life and satisfaction of the population, such as well-maintained road infrastructure, drainage,

- quality over quantity
- education for tourism, education for sustainable development

The above guidelines will contribute to the creation of a new and successful tourist offer in rural tourism, as a generator of development of rural areas. New tourist products of rural tourism will contribute to new economic benefits for all stakeholders, but also for the social community. Economic development will contribute to the demographic renewal of rural areas, and it can be assumed that new and innovative changes will develop in the general economic and social condition of rural areas.

The CroRural project was designed in accordance with the similar projects implemented in coastal destinations in the Republic of Croatia (such as "New Generation for a New Development Concept of Rural Tourism" (Agroturizam Konavle, 2024), while taking into account the specificities of the rural areas of continental Croatia with regard to the general state of the economy, demography, expertise and knowledge of the local community. Likewise, the aforementioned plan contains the most important elements of the Strategy for the Development of Sustainable Tourism of the Republic of Croatia until 2030, which clearly determines the direction and policies of the Government of the Republic of Croatia towards sustainable tourism development, according to which in 2030 Croatia will be a competitive, innovative and safe country with a recognizable identity and culture, a country of preserved resources, quality living conditions and equal opportunities for all. The strategic goals are tourism that is year-round, more regionally balanced, with preserved environment, space and climate, competitive and innovative, and resilient (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2022). These goals are also promoted through the The Cro rural program.

strengthening rural areas through sustainable tourism, using funds from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy. The aim of these policies, and thus of the presented programme, is to stimulate agriculture, create new jobs and encourage sustainable tourism (European Parliament, 2025).

tourist events, quality public transport and others. Solving the basic living needs of the population of rural areas must be a necessity for all stakeholders of the government and the economy in rural areas, with special emphasis on the active inclusion of the local community, especially local family farms, in the tourism product, and thus in the economic development of the area.

The CroRural development model proposed in the paper is a guideline that can be used for the development of all types of selective tourism offer in any area and destination in the Republic of Croatia, but also in the world, because it represents the basis for actions that need to be taken within the destination in order to achieve economic and social growth in the area.

The model is suitable for creating cooperation between different stakeholders in the tourism market, as well as for creating cooperation between different tourist destinations, especially in those border areas where rural tourism can serve as a unique model for sustainable development and increased understanding among the population. By preserving one's own identity and uniqueness, through cooperation and better understanding of others, which is possible through rural tourism, long-

term well-being and prosperity of all rural areas is achieved, both in Croatia and in neighboring countries. In order to obtain clearer and better guidelines for the further development of rural areas, especially in the observed settlement of Donja Kupčina, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive study on a larger sample and a wider regional area, the pilot results of which are presented in this paper.

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