
STRATEGIC ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN DINARIC ALPS / CASE TROPOLJE

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ABSTRACT

The improvement of life quality in rural areas is an overall goal of all development strategies in the Western Balkans countries. Rural tourism represents the quality option for diversification of income and employment opportunities in Tropolje region (Canton 10 in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Therefore, the goal of this study is to identify strategic advantages and disadvantages for tourism development in Tropolje region of Dinaric Alps and provide guidelines for its development. The SWOT analysis combined with AHP method was used. In seven domains, 29 strengths, 31 weakness, 25 opportunities and 24 threats were determined, with total intensity 154, 202, 140 and 144 and average rating of influence intensity 5.3, 6.5, 5.6, 5.8, respectively. A significant advantage for tourism development were linked to short supply chains based on natural and cultural heritage of the region.

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Introduction

Around the globe, rural areas face similar problems - depopulation, poverty and the economy based largely on agriculture (Wookhyun & Alarcón 2020). Their development strategies recognize tourism as the promising economic activity (Radović et al., 2018), able to diversify incomes and valorize natural and created values these territories

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abound in (Mikulec & Antouskova, 2011; Podovac et al., 2018). Each of them has aligned more or less tourism development plans with their specific characteristics, which is the basic prerequisite for success (Ibanescu et al., 2018; Roman et al., 2020; Gajić et al., 2020). For economically underdeveloped areas, designing strategies for tourism sustainable development could appear exceptionally complicated (Bjeljac & Brankov 2009; Radović et al., 2020).

Rural tourism is supported in all EU countries due to its socio-cultural, economic, spatial and environmental functions (Aytuğ & Mikaeili 2017). The improvement of quality of life in rural areas is declared as the overall goal of all development strategies in the Western Balkans countries (Petrović et al., 2018, Krasavac et al., 2018). Rural economy development is the proclaimed priority for reaching this goal. Being largely funded in primary industries, its rural economy is far from being a socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable, so its diversification is an obvious goal. This means that its simple, farming and forestry based rural economies should be replaced by more complex, or at least more efficient/profitable one, while primary and further secondary industries should get better valorization (Chen et al., 2019). Diversification should create employment opportunities in services valorizing local natural and cultural resources, while providing better life to those dealing with the primary and secondary productions (Dašić et al., 2020). Tourism has been identified as one of its key sectors, to drive sustainable diversification of the rural economy in Balkans (Cvijanović et al., 2018). The one should provide a hub for existing local food and innovative services supply chains (Đorđević-Milošević & Hyvaerinen, 2020). Strengthening and greening of food supply chains and territory related activities in rural space are must, and is a first step towards establishing firm rural tourism (Cvijanović & Mihailović 2016).

Targeted wider area of Tropolje, with its specific Dinaric Alps karst backbone, is an exceptional challenge when it comes to further rural economy development. This territory, according to the research of, seems to be suitable for rural tourism development. Tourism attractors identified by Đorđević & Hyvaerinen, (2020) proofed good prospective for rural tourism but its value chain is weak and full of gaps. However, being laggard in tourism development while rooted in the extreme fragile environment and socio-economically lapsed rural communities, Tropolje rural space requires more complex, layered assessment of its potentials to get quality development strategy. Rural tourism is recognized as a powerful tool for adding value to food products, while in opposite direction supply with attractive foods increases its attractiveness, so we should know more about the products of local agriculture, forest non-wood, as much as artisan food to adjust suitable interactions (Mandarić et al., 2017). The goal of this research is to identify strategic advantages and disadvantages for tourism development in Tropolje and provide guidelines for its holistic planning.

Materials and methods

This study explores in detail both internal and external factors of rural tourism development. It's based on a review of secondary data (statistics, reports, development

strategies and LRDPs – Local Rural Development Plans, and other literature) and primary data collected through field work, workshops, consultations with stakeholders and interviews with local farmers and other interested parties) in wider Tropolje historical Region of Mid Dinaric Alps belonging (overlapping) to Canton 10 of Bosnia and Hercegovina. Regional specific feature are big karst fields.

The data collected were analyzed by Delphy method (Konu, 2015) and SWOT analysis integrated with AHP method (A'WOT) AHP method was applied to obtain numerical determinants of the examined characters that indicate the intensity of the influence of factors, determined by the SWOT analysis matrix. This method was often used to develop strategies for tourism. Examples for rural tourism also exist (Fabac et al., 2011; Duglio et al., 2019; Ilić et al 2020). This method was selected as a suitable tool for multi-criterion decision making. Numerical values for factors were provided to weight their importance or likelihood of their occurrence. The weightings for strengths and weaknesses (the internal factors) are calculated by assigning a value for importance and for internal rating (Kisi, 2019). The weightings for opportunities and threats (the external factors) are calculated by assigning a value for importance and likelihood. Pair wise comparison of criteria was completed after implementing numeric expression for each of them. The expanded Saaty's scale of relative importance was used (1-10 instead of 1-9; since 1-10 scale/decimal system is more applicable for working with locals) while definitions in the scale intensities are equivalent. Further the TOWS matrix (Wehrich, 1982) was applied to identify four alternative strategy groups: Strength-Opportunity (SO or Maxi-Maxi), Strength-Threats (ST or Maxi-Mini), Weaknesses-Opportunities (WO of Mini-Maxi), and Weaknesses-Threats (WT or Mini-Mini).

Results and Discussions

Research area: The total explored area is approximately 4,934 square kilometers - a tenth of the surface of Bosnia and Herzegovina which include six municipalities: Bosansko Grahovo, Drvar, Glamoč, Kupres, Livno and Tomislavgrad. Following data on the population density (*Table 1.*), all six municipalities are classified as rural.

Table 1. Population density by the Canton 10 (2015)

| Municipality | Area km ² | Population | Population density per capita/ km ¹ |
|------------------|----------------------|------------|--|
| Bosansko Grahovo | 780.0 | 1,950 | 3 |
| Drvar | 589.3 | 10,409 | 18 |
| Glamoč | 1,033.6 | 4,355 | 4 |
| Kupres | 569.8 | 3,243 | 6 |
| Livno | 994.0 | 31,422 | 32 |
| Tomislavgrad | 967.4 | 26,378 | 27 |
| Canton 10 | 4,934.1 | 77,757 | 16 |

Source: FBiH Statistics Office: Bosnia & Herzegovina in Figures - Canton 10.

According to the analysis of the total population movement in the Canton 10 from 2007

to 2015, there was a marked negative trend and depopulation in this area. Almost 80% of the total population of this territory lives in only two municipalities - Livno and Tomislavgrad, meaning that the rest of the territory is almost empty.

Agricultural resources in the function of tourism development: Apart from urban centers, the rural economy is still dependent of primary sector with considerable contribution of subsistence farming. Agriculture sector accounts for 9-10% of the total employment, while primary sector employ more than a half inhabitants (FB&H Statistics Office 2020).

Due to favorable geographical characteristics, climate conditions and natural resources, livestock production and production of forages, some small grains and potato are relatively competitive economic branches. In the Canton 10, 55,050 ha of arable land are available (14.706 ha are farmed, cultivating grains on 10.443 ha, vegetables on 1.160 ha and forage on 5.723 ha and industrial plants on 202 ha). The most important type of vegetable production is the production of potatoes on 83.43% (2016). Of the fruit plantations, plums are dominant and less so pear and nuts. The area of Drvar is known for production of dogwood berry (cornelian cherry) and associated products. In the Canton 10, there are 97 medicinal and aromatic plant species of economic importance. Collection of wild herbs and forest fruits is a traditional additional source of income for the local population.

In livestock production most represented are cattle and sheep production, while goat, pig, while horse breeding and poultry growing are less represented. Beekeeping is also well developed. The Canton 10, with the dominant share of natural grass areas, natural meadows, and pastures, has prerequisites for cattle breeding and meat production. Milk production is traditionally the key cattle product. The total cow milk production shows a trend of growth and from 27.12 10⁶ l in 2008, it increased by 10 10⁶ l in 2016 and amounted to 37.54 10⁶ l. In 2015, the value of cow's milk production amounted to slightly more than 12 million USD and accounted for almost one third of the total agricultural gross output (FB&H Statistics Office 2020).

Traditional dairy products, especially cheeses, are important attractor of the Tropolje. These are produced in a traditional manner, from raw milk on small family farms. Although represented by a small share in the total milk processing, this production has a wider significance, especially in terms of the development of rural areas. The use of sheep and goat milk is especially important, as it is underused in the industry. This authentic production is under threat because of introduction of high food safety standards which prevent producers to use original recipe for making cheese of raw milk, which means their product should be produced in a same way as an industrial one and being in that case less competitive and of lower quality, small artisan producers are losing ground. So far, they can sell their products just on farm hopping that some other short value chain can be developed through increasing local consumption (agrotourism).

The dairy industry cooperates with about 1.500 farms. The production programs of the two most important dairies (Livno Dairy - purchases about 12 10⁶ l of milk and Ekosir

Puđa Livno - purchases about 3 10⁶ l of milk annually and produces about 300 t of cheese) contain primarily high-processing products, that is, the main revenues realized by selling hard and semi-hard cheeses. Thanks to the established quality and safety systems, both dairies have access to the EU market, and above all to the market in Croatia.

SWOT analysis of the rural tourism business environment was applied at 7 domains (Table 2).

Table 2. Summary of the SWOT analysis for seven domains

| | |
|---|---|
| Elements in the STRENGTH set | Elements in the WEAKNESSES set |
| 5 of infrastructure and traffic | 5 of infrastructure and traffic |
| 3 of human resources and labour market | 4 of human resources and labour market |
| 5 of relations and networking with other commercial and public entities | 5 of relations and networking with other commercial and public entities |
| 3 of tourist marketing systems | 5 of tourist marketing systems |
| 3 of organization, management and | 3 of organization, management |
| 3 Support to tourism development | 3 Support to tourism development |
| 7 of tourism products | 6 of tourism products |
| TOTAL STRENGTH: 29 | TOTAL WEAKNESSES: 31 |
| Elements in the OPPORTUNITIES set | Elements in the THREATS set |
| 4 of infrastructure and traffic | 3 of infrastructure and traffic |
| 3 of human resources and labour market | 3 of human resources and labour market |
| 4 of relations and networking with other commercial and public entities | 8 of relations and networking with other commercial and public entities |
| 5 of tourist marketing systems | 3 of tourist marketing systems |
| 3 of organization, management | 2 of organization, management |
| 2 Support to tourism development | 2 Support to tourism development |
| 4 of tourism products | 3 of tourism products |
| TOTAL OPPORTUNITIES: 25 | TOTAL THREATS: 24 |

Source: Developed by the authors

In the domain “*Traffic and infrastructure*” main strengths were strategic geo-traffic position of Tropolje in the hinterland of the Adriatic coast vicinity of European road corridors (A1 “*Dalmatina*”, X and V); and solid telecommunications & informatic infrastructure. Main weaknesses were lack of modern road infrastructure; incomplete waste management system; lack of destination management organization and receptive agencies. Opportunities included interest of the government & international community for the highway construction to connect Pannonian lowland with the Adriatic coast; interest of international capital for infrastructural investments; interest of «low-cost» air companies for flights to Mostar and existence of relatively large number of small sport airports and appropriate sites for them. Assessed threats were lack of domestic resources for financing infrastructure; reduced long-term, loyalty of guests because of risks in traffic, mines and war ruins and loss of potential market due to lagging the competition.

In the domain “*Human resources and labor market*” a strength is presence of quality staff, trained in the country and abroad; natural talent for service activities and secondary schools with all necessary profiles were pronounced. Quality professionals

not always employed in their sector of competence; undeveloped partnerships in the whole; lack of qualified hotels and tourist managers and lack of professional staff in new tourism positions were recognized as weaknesses. From external factors, availability of European funds, special for cross-border cooperation with Croatia, oriented into development of human resources, partnership etc.; application of European solutions and law regulations about labor and employment and quality and talented individuals and civil society organizations (CSOs) were recognized as main Opportunities. Main threats include permanent migration of manpower from the region; depopulation of rural settlements and „*brain-drain*“.

Assessment of the domain “*Relations & networking with other commercial & public entities*” pointed following strengths: availability of quality local products and artisan food; well-known cultural and traditional events; initiatives of cantonal administration in support to local food producers; capacity and initiatives in public enterprises (especially “HBŽ forests”) and quality cantonal mountain rescue service. Weaknesses were: poor connection of the service providers with the local food producers; development of “agritourism”; insufficient cooperation; non-organized protection of heritage and poor inclusion into tourism offer. Opportunities were interest of rural households for developing tourism; CSOs have a capacity to fill gaps in supporting tourist activities; and better use of various market niches. Threats were absence of integrated, well-promoted tourist offer; slow development of complementary activities; insufficient investment in capacity building; premature introduction of higher food standards; impossibility of final solution of mines contamination and uncertainty about functioning of tourist communities and legal solutions that do not guarantee the efficient organization of tourism destination management.

In the domain “*Tourism Marketing System*”, determined quality local initiatives of some entrepreneurs; good initial coverage promoting cultural and natural heritage, sports and adventure activities etc. which have importance for developing rural tourism and solid media coverage of rural events are identified as strengths. Weaknesses were poor coverage by the system of local tourist organizations & reception agencies promoting destination; insufficient support to CSO sector heritage conservation; lack of support to networking the quality persons; auricularis and absence of continuous support to local initiatives for creation of good cantonal tourist image and bad positioning of the tourist destination of Tropolje in promotion at national level. Main opportunities were growth of world tourists interests for destinations in nature and destination good for active holiday; easy access to quality marketing tools and technology; using lessons learned; interest of international community and funds for capacity building projects in tourism marketing and UNESCO world list inscription of local cultural heritage. Accelerated tourism development and innovations in the surroundings; diversified global offer of tourist products and possible political tensions and purchasing power weakening of customers were recognized as threats.

Assessment of the domain “*Organization and management*” showed the following strengths: awareness that tourism require wide partnerships to be properly organized

and managed; experience in tourism sector (Kupres primarily) and presence of few entrepreneurs running successfully own businesses in rural tourism. There are weaknesses: no institution for implementation of development activities & tourism destination management; lack of concrete coordinated actions on the cantonal level and poor intersectoral cooperation for running joint actions for rural tourism development. Determined opportunities are quality pool of stakeholders in different fields and activities and ongoing European integration, while threats are further extension of the period without functional law on tourism and random organization of partnerships between certain municipalities, without having one to cover whole territory in Tropolje.

In the domain “*Support to the tourism development*”, main strengths were enhanced interest of the cantonal government and local administrations for tourism development; interest of all stakeholders for establishing public-private partnerships for tourism development and strengthening civil and government sector capacities for guiding the development processes. Weaknesses were determined as: low investment potential for improving general infrastructure; non-existence of serious and steady financial support and programs for tourism development in Tropolje; and financially weak civil sector surviving on enthusiasm. Opportunities were financial support through IPA, Cross-Border Cooperation (CBC) and IPARD. Threats are marginalization of tourism development support due to political tensions at all levels as well as in surroundings, and lack of financing for investment in tourism and tourism management, marketing, and promotion.

Assessment of the domain “*Position of the tourist production*” determined the following strengths: people are hospitable and opened; well-known rural events with the long tradition; the rich nature of karstic areas; valuable cultural historic heritage; attractivity of local gastronomy; part of Dinaric arch and its mountain trails and active religious centers with rich programs. Insufficient protection and maintenance of main natural and cultural resources and attractions; lack of accommodation capacities on farms, newly created tourist attractions, services at the attractive locations, professionally designed tourist products and incomplete short tourist value chains was determined as weaknesses. There are opportunities such as: positive change of costumers toward tourism offer; usual positive reaction of the world market to the new destinations; diversification of tourism offer because of technological and changes in lifestyle; strengthening the megatrends (adventurism, ecotourism, rural and wellness tourism) and threats: devastation of swamps, risk of losing of some other spaces for tourism development; accelerated activities of competitors on the development of tourist products and absence of interests of investors.

Numerical determinants of the examined characters that indicate the intensity of the influence of factors, obtained through AHP method are shown in *Table 3*.

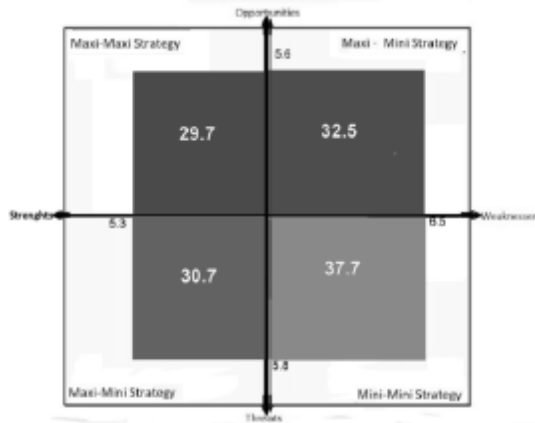
Table 3. Intensity of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. 1 = the best rating, 10 = the worst rating

| Domain | S | W | O | T |
|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Human resources and labour market | 38 | 44 | 26 | 19 |
| Relations & networking with other commercial & public entities | 27 | 28 | 15 | 30 |
| Tourist marketing systems | 22 | 45 | 40 | 26 |
| Organization and management | 10 | 14 | 12 | 10 |
| Support to tourism development | 9 | 11 | 11 | 10 |
| Tourism product | 48 | 60 | 36 | 24 |
| Number of elements | 29 | 31 | 25 | 25 |
| Total intensity | 154 | 202 | 140 | 144 |
| Average rating of intensity of influence | 5,3 | 6,5 | 5,6 | 5,8 |

Source: Developed by the authors

Despite to differences in particular items, the average rating of intensity of influence were close (5.3 – 5.8) except for weaknesses (6.5) and indicate that weaknesses have worst rating, as in all domains too (Table 3.). Identified alternative strategy groups are presented in the TOWS matrix Figure 1.

The obtained results are in line with other investigators, reporting advantages for sustainable tourism development in rural areas of Serbia (Terzić et al., 2020; Đorđević et al 2019) in Europe (Tanasa, 2014; Argyropoulou, 2019; Prinar et al., 2019) and worldwide (Anderson, 2018; Yamagishi et al., 2021; Jeyacheya & Hampton 2020). Figure 1. SWOT polygon strategy analysis



Some common limitations for development of rural tourism (low developed infrastructure due to low financing resources, absence well-promoted tourist offer, depopulation of rural areas, insufficient political support) were reported (Bošković et al., 2013; Gavrilā-Paven et al., 2015; Castellano-Álvarez et al., 2019; Polukhina et al. 2021).

Although there are several strategic documents related to agriculture and / or tourism (Strategic Plan for Rural Development of B&H, 2018; Mid-term Strategy of Agricultural Sector Development in the FB&H for the period 2015 – 2019, The FB&H Rural Development Program 2018-2021; Tourism Strategy for FB&H 2011-2020), the solutions offered are not always completely in line with the situation on the field, so it is necessary to consider the results of this research when improving strategic documents. A lesson learned on the development of Istrian gastronomic offer in agritourism based on old livestock (Pivčević & Lesić, 2020) could be applied in the Tropolje. The starting positions of this example are very similar, except for the state border between and the territory from which tourists should come (CRO-BIH).

Conclusions

Geographical position and the nature of Tropolje is unambiguously strategic advantage for its tourism development (hinterland of the Adriatic coast in the middle of the internationally recognized Via Dinarica mountain trail). Multilayer cultural coating of its fabulous karst nature, starting with the abundant tangible witnesses of the history to live traditions – authentic mountain gastronomy and artisan food, events and rural livelihoods, represent huge resource for it. Region is rapidly depopulated, while majority of inhabitants live in only two urban settlements, yet presence of the exceptionally talented and well trained HORECA workforce, along with the proactive CSO sector is making rural tourism development feasible. Heavily dependent on primary sector, rural economy provides lots of space for diversification. The most appropriate seems to be introduction of agro/rural tourism which is able to combine identified strategic advantages over strengthening short local supply of food and services.

Some institutional shortages, such as lack of destination management organization and receptive agencies are feeding-up the poor tourist offers status-quo, but improved inter-sectoral cooperation, capacity building for missing tourism managers and support to public-private partnerships can help prevailing it, especially if consistent support for heritage conservation and the attached tourism is provided to valuable local CSOs capable of increasing diversity and quality of tourist products and their promotion. Weak local short supply chains, along with the problem with food safety standards will continue representing serious disadvantage for tourism development if financial and technical support remains unavailable to operators along the tourism value chain. Shortage of capital still hinders also investments in modern infrastructure, however availability of funds from international sources is promising.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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