

METHODOLOGY OF PLANNING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL: THEORY AND PRACTICE

**Morena Mičetić Fabić
Dora Smolčić Jurdana**

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to establish how and to what extent local self-governments (towns) in tourism destinations are involved in sustainable development. The aim is to identify the types of activities undertaken by local self-government units to promote sustainable development and the main problems they are faced with in undertaking and implementing these activities. The paper also investigates whether the towns possess plans containing activities for promoting sustainable development, whether they have defined indicators to measure progress in sustainable growth and whether they use them, whether they have made the necessary organisational adjustments to planning and promoting sustainable development and whether they are equally concerned with ecological, economic and socio-cultural sustainability. Two primary studies were conducted, one on a sample of experts on sustainable development and/or tourism and the other on a sample of towns in Croatian coastal counties.

The study shows that local self-governments fail to fully recognise their role in planning and promoting sustainable development in destinations. Research results were used to draw conclusions and put forward proposals to improve sustainable development planning and promotion in destinations.

Considering that no similar studies of the role of local self-government in planning and promoting sustainable development (in regions that are also tourist destinations) have been conducted, this paper aims to contribute to practical application in destinations and open up the way for future research on a topic that combines local self-government, tourism and sustainable development, about which there are still too few papers in the recent literature.

Keywords sustainable development, tourism, tourist destination, local self-government, planning

INTRODUCTION

In addition to beneficial effects, tourism also has adverse effects which are foremost manifested in the degradation of the environment and cultural and historical heritage. At the same time, tourism development depends on the quality of a tourist destination's environment and the level of conservation of its cultural and historical heritage. This makes it all the more important to plan and manage tourism development according to the principles of sustainable development.

At the destination level in Croatia there are examples of inadequate tourism development planning, the execution of *ad hoc* measures, and poor cooperation among major stakeholders in planning and managing tourism development at the local level. The main role of driver and coordinator of sustainable development planning and promotion at the destination level should be the local self-government, whose primary task is to protect

the interests of the local community and foster economic and social development in its territory.

This paper aims to identify the types of activities undertaken by local self-governments (towns) to promote sustainable development in tourist destinations and the main obstacles/problems encountered by towns in carrying out these activities. The paper further explores whether towns possess plans into which activities to promote sustainable development have been incorporated, whether they have defined indicators to measure progress towards sustainability and whether these indicators are monitored, whether they have made organisational adjustments to activities in planning and promoting sustainable development, and whether they show a balanced concern for ecological, economic and socio-cultural sustainability.

1. LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT AND ITS ROLE IN PLANNING AND MANAGING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT ON THE LOCAL LEVEL

Tourism has significant economic, social and ecological impacts, which can lead to certain changes within tourist destinations (Bob, Ghita and Saseanu 2010, 33-34). Tourism may pose a threat to the local ecosystems of vulnerable and pristine areas as well as to the overall appeal of such areas (Brščić 2016, 86). Very rarely, or practically never, are these impacts in a one-way relationship. Instead, tourism affects people and things and is, at the same time, subjected to their influence. Furthermore, the effects of tourism are rarely or never just a question of social, economic, political or environmental influences (Hall and Lew 2009, 2). So, in addition to the many positive effects, tourism also has significant adverse effects, resulting in a kind of paradox. Namely, a well-preserved and clean environment is needed for successful tourism development but every day the quality of that same environment is being threatened by tourism development (Črnjar 2002, 326). The results of numerous studies point to the hazardous effects of tourism but also to the fact that it is possible to counter those harmful effects by implementing appropriate preventive measures in natural resource management through the concept of sustainable tourism so as not to put at risk the natural resources without which tourism could not develop successfully in the future (Geić 2011, 113).

Tourism planning involves a variety of stakeholders. Each stakeholder has a partial approach to tourism planning, focusing on the particular aspects of their own development or the development of the system in which they operate. This makes integrated tourism planning as a comprehensive system all the more important. Tourism planning should integrate all forms of partial planning as well as all stakeholders who are in any way involved in tourism (a holistic approach) (Petrić 2011, 40). In tourism development management, there are four interest groups: the public sector, the private sector, residents and tourists. Together they form a destination management organisation, which some authors call destination management (Magaš 2008; in Bartoluci 2013, 164). In destination management it is important to define clear tasks and procedures among the stakeholders of tourism development in the destination and to encourage cooperation and consistency in carrying out activities agreed upon (Čorak and Trezner 2014, 10). To a large extent, the success of a destination product depends on the quality and execution

of the many functions of destination management, primarily in bringing together and ensuring the joint action of different interest groups in the destination, that is, stakeholders in the public and private sectors and residents. The local self-government also has a very important role in planning at the destination level. In accomplishing their sustainable development goals, local self-governments may encounter huge difficulties at the local level, one of them being the mindset of key tourism stakeholders. Namely, “most of the initiatives associated with sustainable practices in tourism fail to have proper effect because they operate within the same mindset that is responsible for ongoing generation of the adverse impacts in the first place” (Dywer 2018, 30-31).

The primary task of local authorities is to formulate a destination policy that will represent a process of aligning and coordinating the interests of all stakeholders in tourism supply (Lickorish and Jenkins 2006, 259). In many countries, however, “tourism does not have a priority position in the public sector and there is a lack of political will to contribute to sustainable tourism development in a destination” (Swarbrooke 1999; in Boranić Živoder 2010, 119). In addition, public organisations often do not have the financial means required to take on a more powerful role in tourism planning and development. Apart from funding, other drawbacks in the public sector include insufficient professional knowledge in organising tourism and slow responses and inability to adjust to a highly dynamic tourism setting. Distrust, sometimes as a result of the corruption (or perceived corruption) of local authorities, often exists between the private and public sectors and can greatly constrain effective action towards sustainable tourism development (Boranić Živoder 2010, 119).

Many issues of sustainable development are best addressed at the local level, with local authorities being primarily responsible for sustainable development at that level. This is the level of government closest to the people, and local self-governments are legally responsible for environmental issues in land use planning, waste management and pollution control. The responsibilities of local authorities for other issues, such as economic development and leisure, also affect the process of sustainable development (Cartwright 1997, 337).

In the past two decades or so, since the adoption of the so-called Agenda 21¹, an action plan to resolve issues of development and the environment, at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, growing attention has been focused on local self-governments and their efforts in fostering sustainable development. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 underlined the crucial role of local authorities in achieving sustainable development. Local authorities were required to develop their own documents – Local Agenda 21, action plans for the implementation of sustainable development at the local level (Karoglan Todorović, Skala 2000, 4). Agenda 21 underscores that local authorities are the closest to the people and are therefore responsible for planning and promoting sustainable development at the local level.

¹ Agenda 21, United Nations Conference on Environment & Development, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992, viewed 20 January 2018, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>.

Numerous authors around the world have studied the progress of Local Agenda 21 implementations in local self-government units. For example, through the comparative analysis of plans and strategies, Mercer and Jotkowitz (2000) monitored the progress made by ten “leading” local self-governments in Victoria (Australia) with regard to their engagement in promoting sustainable development. Jorby (2002) conducted a five-year study of the implementation of Local Agenda 21 in four small and middle-sized local self-governments in the southeast of Sweden. The progress of European local self-governments in implementing Local Agenda 21 were also explored by Garcia-Sanchez and Prado-Lorenzo (2008) and Fidelis and Pires (2009) in the case of local self-governments in Portugal, as well as by Mazzara, Sangiorgi and Siboni (2010), who analysed the strategic plans of sustainable development in local self-government units in Italy. Kelly and Moles (2002) described and provided a critique of a case study of the Centre for Environmental Research of the University of Limerick that in collaboration with four main local authorities in the mid-west region of Ireland launched a project to promote sustainable development in the region. Luhde-Thompson (2004) presented the project DISCUS (Developing Institutional and Social Capacities for Urban Sustainability) to study the experiences, factors and conditions that can support good management for sustainable development in local self-governments in Europe. Despite numerous studies, there is no precise information as to the extent to which the Local Agenda 21 process has been applied in tourism at the destination level.

In Croatia, the Act on Tourist Boards and Promotion of Croatian Tourism², the Environmental Protection Act³, the Strategy of Tourism Development of the Republic of Croatia by 2020⁴ and other documents pertaining to tourism development and sustainable development, prescribe that economic and social development shall be based on the principals of sustainable development, with local self-government units playing the key role at the local level.

Despite this, it seems that some tourist destinations in Croatia have failed to understand the role of local self-government in tourism planning and development. Expectations are focused mostly on tourist boards and tourist offices. In some cases, the success of destinations depends on the involvement and actions of tourist boards, while the local self-government is only passively involved through financial or technical support to specific projects or events. Another issue is territorial fragmentation, that is, overly small municipalities and towns, in which the involvement of the local self-government in tourism development often depends on the personal preferences of one or more leading people (for example, the mayor of the municipality) or the capacities of the municipality/town are so limited that they have an adverse effect on the development of competencies in creating a destination’s tourism offering. When it comes to sustainable development, local authorities tend to often use this term in a variety of documents and

² Act on Tourist Boards and Promotion of Croatian Tourism, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia no. 152/08, viewed 15 January 2018, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/342/Zakon-o-turisti%C4%8Dkim-zajednicama-i-promicanju-hrvatskog-turizma>.

³ Act on Environmental Protection, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia no. 80/13, 153/13, 78/15 and 12/18 viewed 21 February 2018, <https://www.zakon.hr/z/194/Zakon-o-za%C5%A1titi-okoli%C5%A1a>.

⁴ Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia by 2020, Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia no. 55/13, viewed 15 January 2018, https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2013_05_55_1119.html.

public statements, even though, at the same time, they have no concrete intentions or measures to plan and promote sustainable development. There is also some doubt whether there is always a clear understanding of sustainable development and its basic components when the term is used in local self-government documents or in statements by the representatives of local authorities. Even when sustainable development is being promoted, it is disputable whether equal attention is paid to all categories of sustainable development (ecological, economic and socio-cultural) and whether indicators have been established to measure progress towards sustainability.

Some towns believe the planning and management of tourism development, together with the planning and promotion of sustainable development, is the responsibility of tourist boards. They consider the local self-government is not able to exert any significant influence on the actions of the private sector and they see no vital need to either actively involve residents and associations in the decision-making process and in drawing up strategic development documents or to take their opinions and suggestions into consideration.

Nonetheless, the monitoring of the work of local self-governments and the activities of the Association of Towns in the Republic of Croatia suggests that in the course of the past year, the need for planning and promoting sustainable development in towns has been recognised. For example, in 2016 several lectures and gatherings were organised on the topic of sustainable development at the local level, and in early 2017 the Platform for the Sustainable Development of Towns⁵ was jointly launched by the Association of Towns of the Republic of Croatia, the Association ODRAZ – Sustainable Community Development and Tetida d.o.o.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Two primary studies were carried out. The first was conducted on a sample of experts in Croatia engaged in sustainable development and/or tourism. Forty-four respondents, experts at Croatian faculties and universities, ministries, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Croatian Chamber of Economy, counties, the Croatian Business Council for Sustainable Development, the Association for the Sustainable Development of Croatia, etc., were selected. The survey was conducted in December 2015. Thirty-three responses were collected, representing a 75% response rate. The results of this survey were used to design a questionnaire for towns in the second phase of research.

The second survey focused on the implementation of sustainable development in towns (tourist destinations) on a sample of 60 towns in seven coastal Croatian counties: the counties of Istria, Primorje-Gorski Kotar, Lika-Senj, Zadar, Šibenik-Knin, Split-Dalmatia and Dubrovnik-Neretva. The survey was carried out in February and March 2016, and 38 responses were collected (a 63% response rate).

⁵ Association of Towns of the Republic of Croatia, viewed 19 January 2018, <http://www.udruga-gradova.hr/platforma-za-odrzivi-razvoj-gradova-pocela-s-radom/>.

Research methods were selected following the lead of Saha and Paterson (2008) who studied the role of local self-government in promoting sustainable development (on the example of cities in the U.S.A.). Their study sought to identify different types of activities carried out by local authorities to accomplish the broader goals of social sustainability (environmental protection, economic development and social equity). Although sustainable development implies a number of categories of sustainability, in accordance with conclusions from the world literature and following the lead of the aforementioned authors, three categories of sustainability were used in this paper: ecological, economic and socio-cultural.

A detailed list was compiled of possible activities aimed at promoting sustainable development in tourist destinations. To do so, scientific and research papers were used, which deal with the execution of different initiatives and actions in local self-governments around the world. The list contains a total of 100 initiatives divided into three categories: 43 ecological, 32 economic and 25 socio-cultural sustainability initiatives (some initiatives and activities overlap or are repeated). Then, based on her experience and taking into consideration the conditions in the local self-governments of Croatia, the author selected 30 of the most important activities, ten in each category.

In selecting the activities to study in Croatian local self-governments, use was made of the earlier mentioned research by experts in the field of sustainable development and tourism. The respondents were asked to choose, according to their expert opinions, five of the most important activities out of the ten offered in each category. In this way, 15 initiatives for promoting the sustainable development of tourist destinations were identified and later used in the list of activities in the survey of towns in the second phase of research.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Table 1 presents the list of 15 types of activities undertaken by towns in tourist destinations (and used in this study) to promote sustainable development.

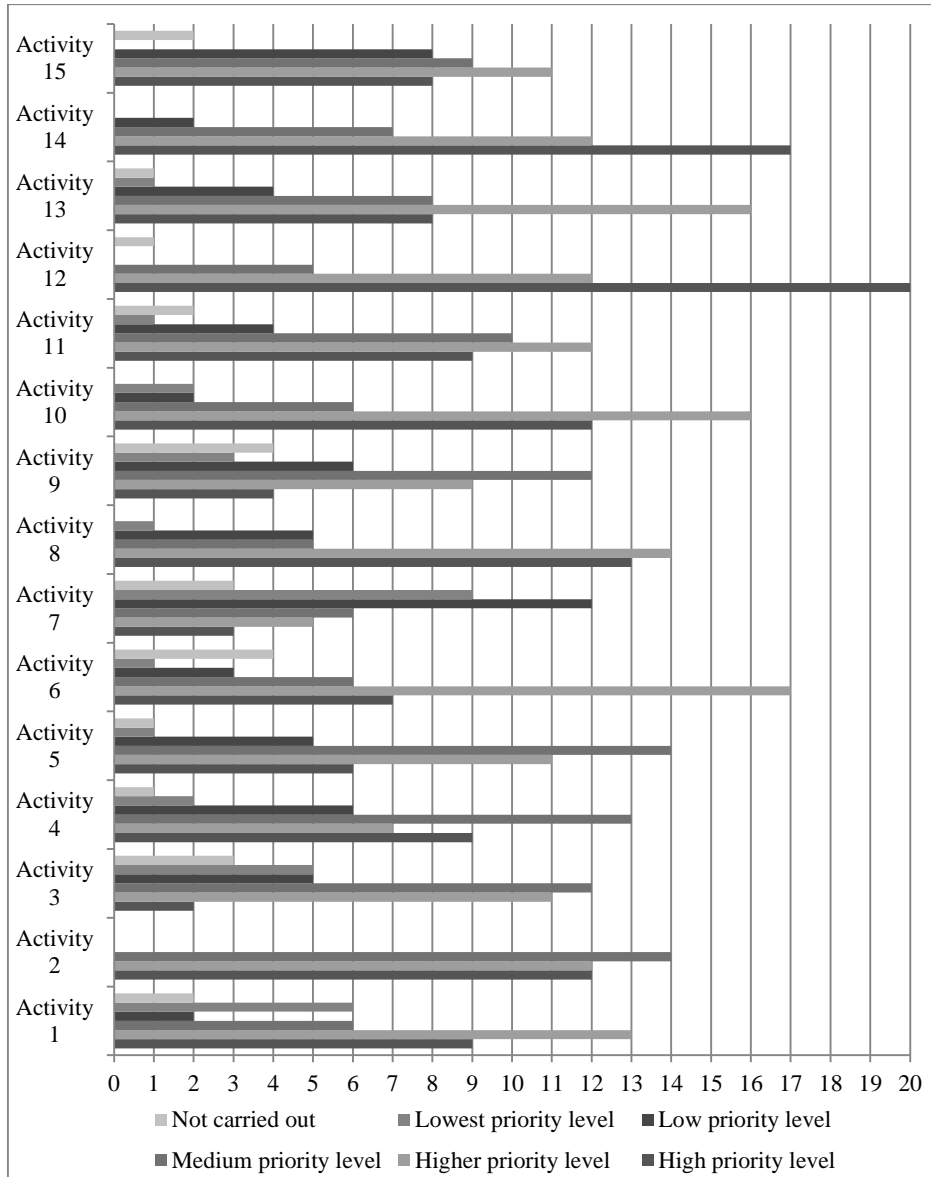
Table 1: Activities to promote sustainable development in towns

1. Promoting alternatives to the intensive use of automobiles during holidays (for example, by providing information on bike routes, hiking trails and public transport, as well as ensuring integrated public transport services along the coast through the use of small autogas-fueled trains, mini-buses, cable cars, etc.)
2. Introducing sustainability management in key environmental protection sectors: water consumption, energy consumption and waste management.
3. Encouraging the program “Enterprises – Friends of the Environment” and fostering the ecologically oriented development of activities in tourism (for example, co-financing the introduction of renewable energy sources in tourism facilities; organising and/or co-financing education about environmental protection for employees; networking with local organic food producers, etc.).
4. Promoting the use of renewable energy sources (biomass, wind energy, solar energy, energy from waste, etc.).
5. Adding ecological objectives to the existing objectives of economic development in economic growth plans.
6. Devising policies to reduce seasonality in tourism through targeted marketing initiatives and by developing forms of special-interest tourism.
7. Applying tax incentives for environmentally – friendly development – Using local tax incentives and other financial incentives to guide development towards less environmentally – vulnerable areas.
8. Encouraging the employment of local residents.
9. Promoting the discovery of new business opportunities through environmental protection and improvement.
10. Fostering the agricultural market and producers of local indigenous and organic food.
11. Encouraging and nurturing the integration of local residents, coexistence and quality of life.
12. Reconstructing historical monuments and cultural heritage, nature trails and stops, and other natural resources.
13. Creating opportunities for local residents, consumers and stakeholders to take part in formulating tourism policies.
14. Raising awareness of local cultural and entertainment opportunities among visitors and residents; staging special events linked to local heritage; building tourism promotion on local heritage and history, etc.
15. Implementing programmes to improve the opportunities of citizens to acquire the skills, knowledge and information needed for an active role in society.

Source: Research by the author (2017)

The surveyed towns were asked to identify the activities they carry out and the level of priority given to individual activities (this refers to the amount of budgetary funds allocated for a specific activity, the number of persons involved in carrying out the activity, etc.). Results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Activities performed in promoting sustainable development in the observed towns (N=38)



Source: Research by the author (2017)

Average scores differ with regard to the activity involved. Activity 12 - *Reconstructing historical monuments and cultural heritage, nature trails and stops, and other natural resources* – has the highest average score (4.41), while Activity 7 - *Applying tax incentives for environmentally – friendly development – Using local tax incentives and other financial incentives to guide development towards less environmentally – vulnerable areas* – has the lowest average score (2.46).

The main obstacles and/or problems encountered by 37 towns in taking over and conducting activities for sustainable development were also explored (multiple responses were allowed). Only one of the 38 towns surveyed stated it had no obstacles/problems. Most of the towns (28) reported a lack of funding as the major problem in carrying out sustainable development plans. Another key problem, experienced by 22 towns, is change to legislative regulations. Less than half of the observed towns encounter problems with regard to a lack of human resources in the town administration (12), inadequate educational levels of the human resources available (11), poor cooperation with the main stakeholders in the destination (11) and non-cooperation with the business sector (11). It can be concluded that respondents consider that obstacles or problems are present in taking over and conducting activities for sustainable development in towns, the most common being a lack of funding and changes to legislative regulations.

When asked whether the towns have formal strategies and strategic and action plans containing sustainability objectives, fully 84.2% of surveyed towns gave a positive response, and the remaining 15.8%, a negative response. These are mostly development strategies, economic growth strategies, overall development programmes, tourism development programmes and sustainable energy plans. To a certain extent, all these documents contain sustainability objectives.

Table 2 presents the results of research regarding the existence of strategic plans with defined sustainability objectives, defined sustainability indicators, and indicator monitoring, and the existence of actions plans linked to the defined indicators.

Table 2: **Planning and measuring progress towards sustainable development in towns**

	Strategic plan with defined sustainability objectives	Defined indicators	Indicator monitoring	Action plan tied to indicators
Yes	32 (84.2%)	17 (44.7%)	13 (34.2 %)	12 (31.6 %)
No	6 (15.8 %)	21 (55.3%)	25 (65.8%)	26 (68.4%)
N	38 (100%)	38 (100%)	38 (100%)	38 (100%)

Source: Research by the author (2017)

Less than half of the surveyed towns (44.7%) have defined indicators used to measure progress towards sustainability. Only 34.2% of the towns monitor the indicators, indicating that 10.5% of towns surveyed have defined indicators but do not use them. An even smaller share of towns (31.6%) has adopted action plans tied to the defined indicators. Despite these results, all the towns surveyed stated that it is important for towns to define indicators of sustainable tourism development.

The study also examined the extent to which the three major principles of sustainable development are present in the strategic planning documents of the 32 towns possessing such documents. Most of the towns surveyed consider that all three components of sustainability are either present to a very great extent or fully present in their documents. Only one town reported that the economic component of sustainability is poorly present in its documents. These results also indicate a balanced presence of all three components of sustainability in development documents.

The below table presents indicators of descriptive statistics and shows that all three principles of sustainable development have a high average score.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the level of representation of sustainable development principles in strategic planning documents of towns

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Ecological sustainability	32	3	5	4.38	.609
Economic sustainability	32	2	5	4.19	.780
Socio-cultural sustainability	32	3	5	4.28	.634

Source: Research by the author (2017)

With regard to internal organisational adjustment to planning and promoting sustainable development, 42.1% of surveyed towns have carried out some form of adjustment and 26.3% have appointed special officials or organisational units formally in charge of planning and promoting sustainable development. However, when asked to state the title of the job or organisational unit, the towns gave a variety of responses, suggesting that most of the jobs or organisational units were regular jobs and units and not special ones dedicated to sustainable development (as, for example, Administrative Department for Economic Affairs and EU Projects, Senior Expert Advisor for economic affairs, development, project preparation, etc.). Only in some towns does the job title or title of the organisational unit indicate a commitment to sustainable development (for example, Administrative Department for Sustainable Development). Some towns stated that in the near future they would employ a person whose job would be to plan and promote sustainable development, while other towns were of the opinion that most or all of their administrative departments were engaged in sustainable development.

In addition, the study also focused on the existence of officials or organisational units formally in charge of planning and promoting sustainable development with regard to tourism. A total of 21 towns (55.3%) stated that there is a special official or organisational unit responsible for such activities but only in four towns does the title of the job or organisational unit actually include the term *tourism*. In other towns, these activities are carried out by officials and organisational units engaged in economic affairs or are exclusively or largely in the hands of the town's tourist board.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that local self-governments conduct a variety of activities to promote a destination's sustainable tourism development. They mostly give such activities a higher or high priority level relative to other activities. Given the great importance of the observed activities for the sustainable development of tourist destinations, however, it is a disturbing fact that results also indicate that in many towns the analysed activities that are carried out have a low or the lowest priority level and as many as four towns do not even conduct some of the activities. Although the towns do carry out a variety of activities to promote sustainable development, such activities are not always aligned with activities foreseen in development plans.

With regard to obstacles and problems encountered by towns in conducting activities for sustainable development, the greatest problems singled out are a lack of funding and changes to legislative regulation, followed by a lack of human resources in the town administration, inadequate educational levels of the human resources available, poor cooperation with the main stakeholders in the destination and non-cooperation with the business sector. Most of these problems are present across all levels of public administration in Croatia and can only be resolved in a gradual and systematic way.

The upside is that the towns have adopted development plans that incorporate the objectives of sustainability to a lesser or greater extent. In these documents, sustainable development as a concept appears in the formulation of visions, strategic objectives and priority measures. In most of the studied towns, all three components of sustainability are equally represented in their strategic documents.

Although measuring progress towards sustainability is important for successful management, some local self-governments do not use indicators to measure their progress in sustainable development because they have failed to define them in their strategic development documents. Others still, who have defined sustainability indicators, fail to monitor them.

Towns that are also tourist destinations are expected to carry out organisational adjustments to activities relating to tourism planning and development. Although the towns have made the necessary adjustments to activities relating to tourism and sustainable development, the extent of the adjustments is still not enough to ensure the well thought-out planning and management of sustainable tourism development on the local level.

The study suggests that local self-governments in Croatia fail to fully recognise their role in planning and promoting the sustainable development of tourist destinations. To bring about the necessary changes, specific steps must be taken at the local level. Preparing and adopting strategic development plans, executing targeted measures, programmes and projects, defining and monitoring progress indicators are only some of the vital activities that need to be undertaken through joint cooperation with other stakeholders, if the desired vision of the sustainable development of a tourist destination is to be realised. There are, however, misgivings as to how long a time it will take to change deep-seated mentalities and ways of doing things and for local self-governments to take on the active

role of coordinators in planning and promoting the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

The scientific contribution of this paper is that it reveals the state of planning and promoting sustainable development in tourist destinations. Considering that up to date no similar study of the role of local self-government units in planning and promoting sustainable development (in regions that are also tourist destinations) has been conducted, this paper is expected to contribute to practical application in destinations. It is also expected to open up the path for future research on a topic that combines local self-government, tourism and sustainable development, about which there are still too few papers in the recent literature.

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Morena Mičetić Fabić, PhD, Acting Head of the Poreč City Office
City of Poreč-Parenzo
Obala m. Tita 4, 52440 Poreč-Parenzo, Croatia
Phone: +385-98-629068
E-mail: morena.micetic-fabic@porec.hr

Dora Smolčić Jurdana, PhD, Full Professor
University of Rijeka
Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Primorska 42, 51410 Opatija, Croatia
Phone: +385-51-294706
E-mail: doras@fthm.hr