

BUILDING AN INCLUSIVE SHORT FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN THAT CAN MEET THE MARKET DEMAND OF THE GROWING TOURISM SECTOR IN ZAJEČAR DISTRICT



The University of Belgrade - Faculty of Agriculture, as the pilot region coordinator, and RARIS as the pilot region partner of Zaječar district Living Lab, are implementing the HORIZON-RIA project RUSTIK (project no. 101061051).

In cooperation with local stakeholders, through a series of meetings and extensive desk research, the project team identified the key challenges that the region face in terms of socio-economic, environmental and digital transition.

THE CHALLENGE

Main challenge for the region is demographic decline and its consequences for the local economy. Infrastructure problems and environmental concerns also rank high on the list of issues, although they lack substantial support from data and information. The economic structure is dominated by traditional, stagnant industries (including extractive). Available business services aimed at supporting local businesses are weak, reflecting an unsophisticated local demand. Some investments have been made in tourism, infrastructure and renewable energy sources over the past decade. Stakeholders anticipate that investments and the number of tourists will continue to rise in rural and mountain tourism segments. To maintain competitiveness, tourism sector requires enhanced support services, improved infrastructure, and a more diverse range of tourist offerings.

FOCUS

Focus is on the challenges associated with the development of tourism in order to increase economic benefits for all, through the development of short food supply chains.

In the focus groups and surveys, the supply chain problem and the inadequate representation of local/regional producers in meeting market needs in tourist centers was pointed out. However, knowledge gaps exist regarding local tourism demand, how food is supplied to restaurants and tourism service providers, what factors guide them, and what portion of demand is met by the local market. Because of this, large quantities of fruits, vegetables, and other products are purchased from other regions, and the production of dairy products and meat is declining due to the unorganized purchasing market. By building an inclusive short food supply chain that can meet the market demand of the growing tourism sector, local communities can integrate the agriculture sector into the tourism agenda and generate social and economic benefits that improve the livelihoods of small businesses prevalent in the region.



How to integrate the agriculture sector into the tourism agenda?

How to generate social and economic benefits that improve the livelihoods of small businesses prevalent in the region?



Key actors will have the opportunity to improve the decision-making process by data driven insights, and develop policy monitoring and evaluation systems that currently lack a quantitative basis.

Understanding the food supply chain, the strength of linkages between participants and the identification of critical points will help policy makers to deliver a more sustainable local food system while meeting tourists demand for local products.



First Steps in Data Experiment

In Sokobanja from 17th to 19th of April, a meeting of partners from Serbian and Bulgarian Living Labs (Local Action Group Trojan, Aprilci and Ugarčin and Zaječar district) was organized to exchange knowledge and approaches in data experiments within Living Labs.

As a part of Data Experiment an extensive data collection was held during the June and July 2024 by research team. Besides web scrapping, it included also field research in municipalities of Sokobanja and Boljevac. In a first phase total of 37 restaurants, hotels and rural tourist households (service providers in tourism) were interviewed to understand how they relate to local food producers, the factors that determines supplier selection, and to collect suggestions for improving the supply chain. In second phase research has covered 29 agricultural farms and 12 SME from agri-food sector to understand their perspective and challenges within the local market.



What will we do?

In the upcoming period, a series of intensive activities have been planned within the LL framework to execute a data experiment. The planned activities include a thorough and collaborative approach within the Living Lab. After the analyze of integrated live surveys already implemented, literature insights and geo-spatial data, the social network analysis techniques will be used to address challenges related to short food supply chains and tourism development.

The involvement of LL partners and the utilization of diverse data sources and methodologies will enrich the experiment's outcomes, fostering informed decision-making on issues related to sustainable community development.

