



FUSING GASTRONOMY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

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Abstract:

The concept of food systems has a significant role in achieving sustainable development goals, particularly in rural areas. Some of the challenges faced by rural areas include population decline, educational issues, unemployment, and infrastructure deficiencies. The role of gastronomy and innovative approaches in addressing these challenges is emphasized. Innovative gastronomy, which combines tradition and modernity, is seen to promote sustainable rural development. It involves promoting local cuisine, organic farming, and indigenous breeds of animals and plants. The text also discusses the use of modern food technology, such as cold pressing and lyophilization, to enhance product quality and sustainability. Education and training are identified as crucial factors in achieving sustainable rural development, with an emphasis on educating rural inhabitants about responsible behaviour and practices. Rural tourism is seen as a way of actively involving tourists in agricultural activities, providing opportunities for them to preserve seasonal produce and strengthen the connection between tourists and local agriculture. In conclusion, the text underscores the significance of sustainable rural development for overall societal sustainability in the Balkan countries and emphasizes the need for collaboration between various sectors to achieve this goal.

Keywords:

innovative gastronomy, tourism, sustainability, rural development.

INTRODUCTION

The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) defines food systems as comprehensive networks of interconnected actors engaged in various value-adding activities across the entire lifecycle of food products, spanning production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal. These activities are rooted in agriculture, forestry, or fisheries and are embedded in broader economic, societal, and natural contexts. The food system comprises sub-systems (e.g. farming system, waste management system, input supply system) and interacts with key systems such as energy, trade, and health. FAO characterizes a sustainable food system as one that ensures food security and nutrition for all, without compromising the economic, social, and environmental foundations essential for future generations (Nguyen, 2018). Food systems worldwide are confronted with a triple challenge: ensuring food security and nutrition for a growing population, supporting the

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livelihoods of millions of individuals within the food chain, and accomplishing this in an environmentally sustainable manner (International Fund for Agricultural Development, IFAD, 2021). At the core of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) lies the pursuit of a sustainable food system. These SDGs demand substantial transformations in agriculture and food systems to eradicate hunger, achieve food security, and enhance nutrition by 2030. To accomplish these goals, the global food system must undergo significant changes to become more productive, inclusive of disadvantaged communities, environmentally sustainable, resilient, and capable of providing nutritious diets to everyone (FAO, 2017).

The progress in food systems has brought many positive outcomes, particularly in developing nations. Nonetheless, the global food system has become less effective in its primary mission - providing sustainable and nutritious food. A strong emphasis on producing high-calorie grains has boosted yields and lowered prices of staple foods. But the cost has been substantial: increased food waste, malnutrition, obesity, and environmental degradation (FAO, 2017).

Several global trends are impacting food security, poverty, and the overall sustainability of food and agricultural systems. These trends include population growth (the growth in both population and economic activity is driving fundamental changes in economies); climate change (climate change disproportionately affects regions already grappling with food insecurity, posing threats to crop and livestock production, fish stocks, and fisheries); loss of biodiversity (critical components of food systems are becoming more capital-intensive, vertically integrated, and concentrated in fewer hands); conflicts, crises, and natural disasters: health concerns - a significant issue is the lack of dietary diversity, with a limited number of foods dominating people's diets (FAO, 2017). For instance, 75% of the world's food production comes from just 12 plants and 5 animal species (FAO, 1999). Nearly 60% of calorie intake from plants is derived from three key crops: rice, corn, and wheat (Rouhani *et al.*, 2016). This dietary monotony negatively impacts health. While the middle- and upper class may consume enough calories, energy-dense diets often lead to obesity, and monotonous diets fail to provide adequate vitamins and minerals (Romieu *et al.*, 2017). One way to address this issue and offer dietary diversity is by increasing the consumption of plant-based proteins and other food sources. This dietary shift could be a pathway to achieving the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for food systems, with positive outcomes for both health and the environment (FAO, 2017). For undernourished populations, it would entail diversifying the range of foods consumed, alongside a moderate increase in the consumption of animal-source foods, especially for children. Meanwhile, in developed countries, it would involve reducing energy intake and transitioning towards a more plant-centric diet (Dengerink *et al.*, 2022).

GASTRONOMY AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Innovation is the introduction of new ideas, methods, or technologies that lead to significant improvements or advancements in a specific field (OECD/Eurostat, 2005). Gastronomy, traditionally defined as "the art of preparing and eating good food" (Rojas-Rivas *et al.*, 2020) is a reflection of culture, heritage, traditions, and community identity among different peoples (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018). Innovative gastronomy represents a fusion of tradition and modernity. This fusion of tradition and innovation can have a profound impact on the sustainable development of rural areas.

Rural areas are primarily dedicated to food production and, from a sociological perspective, often lag behind urban areas in terms of technological and cultural development (Gebre & Gebremedhin, 2019). Sustainable rural development encompasses three key dimensions: economic, social, and ecological. Its main objective is to achieve stable and long-term improvements in the socio-economic conditions of rural areas while effectively utilizing local resources. This objective includes the preservation and enhancement of cultural heritage, which extends to gastronomy (IFAD, 2021).



However, several factors negatively impact sustainable rural development in Serbia:

- **Population Decline:** There is a reduction in the rural population, particularly among young people, as they migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities.
- **Educational Challenges:** The educational structure of the rural population is unfavourable, making it reluctant to accept new technological solutions.
- **Unemployment and Poverty:** Rural areas in the Republic of Serbia face high unemployment rates and poverty levels. Many households must combine farming with other income sources to make ends meet.
- **Infrastructure and Investment:** Rural areas often suffer from underdeveloped infrastructure and inadequate investment.
- **Market Orientation:** Small agricultural farms may lack a market-oriented approach.
- **Limited Visibility:** Small producers often struggle to make their products part of the tourist market of a destination (Veličković & Jovanović, 2021).

CAN INNOVATIVE GASTRONOMY CONTRIBUTE TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABLE GOALS IN RURAL AREAS?

The development of tourism, including gastronomy, in rural areas plays a crucial role in achieving sustainable rural development objectives (Pato & Duque, 2023; Ristić, 2013). As tourism development is a part of rural development, gastronomy serves as a vital link between tourism and agriculture, particularly in Serbia, where rural tourism has gained recognition in Europe (Bugarčić *et al.*, 2023).

Local cuisine is an integral part of the tourist experience, leading to increased efforts to enhance local gastronomy. The gastronomic offerings serve as a cornerstone for attracting tourists while catering to their preferences, aligning with contemporary trends, and preserving authenticity and uniqueness. Tourists are increasingly drawn to local, traditional, and minimally processed foods because they prioritize safety and quality over heavily processed and industrialized options (Bugarčić *et al.*, 2023; Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018a).

Research indicates that agriculture rooted in knowledge, the production of high-quality foods, organic farming practices, products with protected geographical indications, traditional dishes, and functional foods can stimulate the growth of various industry sectors in rural areas. This growth extends to industry, transportation, storage, trade, services, and other segments of the economy (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018a; FAO, 2017). In essence, rural gastronomy, coupled with sustainable tourism practices, not only enriches the tourist experience but also fosters economic development, preserves cultural heritage, and contributes to the overall sustainability of rural regions (IFAD, 2021).

Supporting and encouraging local farmers to produce organic food and products with protected geographical indications while promoting the cultivation of indigenous plant varieties and native animal breeds is of paramount importance. This approach ensures that tourists are offered local, seasonal food of exceptional quality.

Organic agriculture is a key driver of sustainable rural development, as it has demonstrated economic, social, and ecological viability. Organic farming methods prioritize natural substances and processes, resulting in minimal environmental impact. Key benefits of organic farming include responsible energy and resource use, biodiversity conservation, regional ecological balance preservation, enhanced soil fertility, and maintenance of water quality. Additionally, organic farming adheres to high standards of animal welfare (Kilibarda, 2019). To fully harness the potential of organic agriculture, local populations must be educated and provided with expert support. The rising demand for organic food in recent years underscores the importance of emphasizing organic food production (FAO, 2017).

In Serbia, gastronomy, including traditional dishes and preparation techniques, is an integral part of intangible cultural heritage. The rich culinary diversity in the Western Balkans, stemming from its multiethnic population and complex history, contributes to its vibrant cultural identity, enhancing its appeal as a tourism destination (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018a). Food often serves as a symbol of the region where it is produced, reflecting the authenticity of a destination. This association between food and place is commonly expressed through geographical indications, which signify high-quality products. As consumers increasingly seek value for their money and higher quality, geographical indications become valuable tools for promoting tourism in specific destinations (Kilibarda *et al.*, 2018b).



Small-scale food producers in rural areas face significant challenges in marketing their products (FAO, 2017). To address this issue, Geographic Information (GI) systems can be employed as the best practice in achieving sustainable rural development (Kurowska *et al.*, 2020). GI systems can create digital maps highlighting the locations of organic farms, farmers' markets, organic food stores, and restaurants offering organic dishes within rural tourism destinations (Kurowska *et al.*, 2020). These maps can be accessible to tourists through websites, mobile apps, or physical brochures, facilitating their ability to find and support local organic producers and businesses (Muca *et al.*, 2021). Effective networking and collaboration at the local community level, along with cooperation between relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Agriculture, are vital components of this effort.

Offering autochthonous (indigenous or native) dishes in a rural setting is an exemplary form of innovative gastronomy that aligns with the goals of sustainable rural development and caters to tourists' preferences (Vukolić *et al.*, 2023). These dishes utilize native varieties or breeds of plants and animals, emphasizing quality over intensive production (Ovaska *et al.*, 2021). As a result, such dishes offered in rural households are something that tourists prefer and recognize as a special quality when they decide to go to rural tourism destinations (Obradović *et al.*, 2023).

Indigenous breeds of domesticated animals, while potentially less productive in terms of quantity, offer higher-quality products and greater resilience to local environmental conditions. For instance, cows of indigenous breeds like Buša may yield smaller quantities of milk, but it is notably rich in milk fat (Popović *et al.*, 2023). An illustrative example of this concept can be found at the Ivanov agricultural farm in Stara Planina, where Balkan donkeys, an indigenous breed, are raised using organic farming practices. Donkey milk is renowned for its positive health effects, and there has been an increasing demand for it in response to dietary trends. Visitors to the farm can witness the milking process, ensure milk quality, and immerse themselves in a unique atmosphere (Ivanov, 2016). In recent years, there has been a growing demand for meat from the indigenous Mangulica pig breed, known for its meat positive influence on human body cholesterol and its LDL: HDL ratio (Nikolić *et al.*, 2018). This increased demand has led to the establishment of more farms and tourism destinations, particularly in Vojvodina, offering dishes prepared from Mangulica meat and related products.

Indigenous varieties of fruits, vegetables, and grains are also pivotal in the human food chain due to their role as energy sources and sources of protective factors. Indigenous varieties of fruits contain significantly higher nutrient levels, including various vitamins, antioxidants, and minerals. Their tolerance to adverse conditions, such as low winter temperatures and drought, often means they require fewer pesticide treatments (Bvenura *et al.*, 2017; Keserović *et al.*, 2017).

A noteworthy example is the old Herzegovinian bean variety known as "poljak," which thrives in regions with limited, rocky, and barren land. "Poljak" beans are both highly nutritious, containing 28% protein and an abundance of minerals, and medicinal, with potential benefits for regulating blood sugar levels. Traditionally, they were used as a coffee substitute, and their unique characteristics, including a lack of bloating after consumption and a neutral taste, make them versatile for various culinary applications, including desserts (Milić *et al.*, 2022; Crnobarac, 2021).

Leveraging modern food technology can significantly enhance product quality and innovation in gastronomy. One such example is the application of cold processing technology, which involves using a hydraulic press to extract juice or oil from fruits, vegetables, seeds, or nuts without the use of heat (Čavić *et al.*, 2020). Cold press processing minimizes exposure to heat and oxygen during production, resulting in high retention of taste and nutrients, including enzymes, fatty acids, and antioxidants like vitamins A, C, and E. Combining cold pressing techniques with fruits of protected geographical origin, such as Arilje raspberries in Serbia, can add value and enhance product quality by creating cold-pressed juices that preserve the integrity of these fruits.

Lyophilization, or freeze-drying, is another advanced drying process conducted in a vacuum that removes water from materials while preserving their nutritional value, taste, and texture. In rural settings, lyophilization offers several advantages. It allows the preservation of perishable foods like fruits, vegetables, and herbs, enabling them to be stored for extended periods without quality loss. This is particularly beneficial in regions with seasonal or surplus harvests, ensuring that tourists have access to a broader range of authentic, high-quality, and locally sourced products with longer shelf lives (Čavić *et al.*, 2020; Kilibarda, 2019).



Moreover, lyophilization reduces the risk of food spoilage and waste, contributing to improved food security and sustainability in rural areas. The production and offering of functional foods, such as traditional fermented sausages with added fibers, represent innovative gastronomy that combines tradition with scientific advancements to meet the expectations of tourists.

To fully capitalize on these opportunities, education, and training play a crucial role. Training local producers and culinary experts in these advanced food technologies can enable them to create unique and high-quality gastronomic experiences that attract tourists while supporting sustainable rural development.

Education is a pivotal factor in achieving sustainable rural development. As rural development involves a wide range of skills and disciplines, providing education is essential for spreading awareness about responsible behavior and practices that ensure the long-term development of rural areas. It is crucial to educate rural inhabitants about the consequences of irresponsible actions that could jeopardize future development (IFAD, 2021).

One emerging area of concern in the context of changing diets is the growing interest in the environmental, ethical, and health impacts of food choices. There is a slight global increase in the number of vegetarians and vegans, driven by various factors such as health concerns, climate change, and animal welfare considerations. (Dorgbetor *et al.*, 2022). However, traditional rural diets often rely heavily on animal products, which may not align with the dietary preferences of tourists who follow vegan or vegetarian diets.

To address this challenge, initiatives like the project in western Serbia, supported by the U.S. Embassy, are working to educate rural housewives about adapting their cuisine to cater to the needs of tourists, particularly those with vegan and vegetarian dietary preferences. This type of education is vital, especially considering the prevalence of food allergies and intolerances in today's population (Pejović, 2017).

Furthermore, in many developing rural areas, women play a central role in managing households and contribute significantly to agricultural production (Davis *et al.*, 2022). However, gender inequalities often hinder women from realizing their full potential. Education and training initiatives, such as the one mentioned, offer a pathway to create a more equal and empowering position for women in rural areas, ultimately contributing to sustainable rural development (IFAD, 2021).

Active holidays and rural tourism have become increasingly popular, offering unique experiences for visitors. To further enhance these experiences, it's beneficial to provide options that allow tourists to actively participate in agricultural activities. For example, tourists can engage in activities like preserving seasonal produce, which they can later purchase at a reduced price. This type of tourism product not only adds value to the visitor's experience but also strengthens the connection between tourists and local agriculture (Susila *et al.*, 2023).

Rural tourism households play a pivotal role in providing such experiences. These facilities, which offer accommodation, food, and beverage services in a rural setting, often reflect the local characteristics and heritage of the area. Serbia has a significant number of registered rural households, indicating the potential for tourists to enjoy a holistic experience that includes accommodation, local cuisine, and rural hospitality. Engaging in rural tourism also benefits local hosts by providing a direct channel to sell agricultural products to visitors. This eliminates the need to travel to urban markets, rent stalls, or incur transportation costs. Producing and selling goods on-site while guests are present is more convenient and profitable. However, there may be a lack of data on how many hosts produce their food versus buying it from nearby sources, which underscores the importance of collaboration between relevant authorities, institutions, and the local community (Chroneos Krasavac *et al.*, 2018).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sustainable rural development is a crucial component of overall societal sustainability in the Balkan countries. To achieve this, it's essential to slow down or halt the process of intensive migration from rural to urban areas. This migration disrupts the rational utilization of resources and comparative advantages in both urban and rural environments. Initiating economic activities in rural areas that leverage local resources, both human and material, is vital for the sustainable development of these regions and society as a whole. While gastronomic innovations may not be a priority for major food industry players, smaller economic entities, such as family-owned businesses and cooperatives prevalent in rural areas, can benefit from innovative technologies to foster their development. Institutional support and collaboration across sectors, including government, business, civil society, rural organizations, and the scientific community, are essential to promote sustainable rural development effectively.



Sustainable rural development can only be fully realized when residents are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in innovative economic activities. It includes, among other things, new insights and skills about current trends and requirements for gastronomic offerings, but also all the possibilities to find new market channels for their agricultural products through rural tourism. Investing in education and vocational training programs tailored to the specific needs of rural communities can empower individuals and enhance their capacity to contribute to the local economy. Moreover, these initiatives can help bridge the urban-rural development gap by creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and innovation within rural areas. By promoting practices that emphasize local, organic, and environmentally friendly food production, rural areas can not only meet their own nutritional needs but also tap into the growing global demand for sustainably sourced products. This approach not only supports economic growth but also ensures the long-term viability of rural ecosystems.

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