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RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF BRDA, SLOVENIA*AUTHORS****Iris Skubin***

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*ABSTRACT****Residents' perceptions of sustainable tourism development in the municipality of Brda, Slovenia***

The concept of sustainable tourism development presupposes constant endeavour, ongoing monitoring, and improvement of all stakeholders involved in order to minimize the negative and maximize the positive effects of tourism. The authors of the paper examine a case study of the area of Goriška Brda (municipality of Brda), located in the western part of Slovenia along the border with Italy, where the predominant (traditional) economic activity is agriculture, and more recently tourism as well. The question is whether the development of tourism in Brda has been sustainable, and how it has affected the life of the local population. What are the perceptions of the local residents of the various effects of tourism in their municipality? Analysis of the state of tourism and a survey research on a representative sample of the local population highlighted predominantly positive influences and consequently positive perceptions. Many inhabitants of the Brda municipality are directly or indirectly dependent on tourism, so they are willing to overlook or minimize the existing negative effects.

KEY WORDS

sustainable tourism, local population, analysis of tourism effects, municipality of Brda, Slovenia

1. Introduction

When reviewing the concept of sustainability, we can fully agree with Coghlan (2019) that “it is important to understand sustainability as a dynamic process, one which requires ongoing engagement, practice, skill, and focus.” In fact, there is an instant need to view sustainability as a form of relationship-building, with a diversity of stakeholders (human and non-human). Anything that contributes to resilient, positive, and trusting relationships is likely to be moving in the direction of sustainability, any actions that don’t are likely to be moving in the opposite direction (Coghlan, 2019). The official and most widely accepted definition of sustainable development, expressed in the Brundtland report of the World Commission of Environment and Development, addresses the needs of present and future generations (Brundtland, 1987). The definition itself raised several questions and certain arguments that there is an inherent tension between the idea of development and the growth associated with it, and the idea of sustainability, which lends itself to a more status quo orientation (Weaver, 2006; Coghlan, 2019).

The concept of sustainable tourism is based on a similar definition, namely: “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (UNWTO, 2020). The definition itself was developed in 2005 by UNEP and UNWTO, and immediately afterward expanded by stating that sustainable tourism must “maintain ecological processes and conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the authenticity, traditional values and cultural heritage of host communities and contribute to cross-cultural understanding; and, ensure viable businesses, and distribute economic benefits to all stakeholders equitably” (UNEP and WTO, 2005). It is a continuous process of monitoring the state of tourism in order to minimize the negative and maximize the positive effects. This applies to all forms of tourism – including mass tourism. In doing so, we must certainly take into account the aspect of responsibility, which in the context of tourism development emphasizes the responsibility of all stakeholders involved.

In 2017, the UNWTO’s global efforts to promote sustainable tourism culminated in the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. In the same year, the Republic of Slovenia also adopted the Strategy for Sustainable Growth of Slovenian Tourism for 2017–2021 (MEDT, 2017), which had been to some extent already implemented before. Moreover, in 2015 the Slovenian Tourist Board introduced The Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism (GSST), which is a tool developed at the national level and a certification programme that carries out different tasks under the Slovenia Green umbrella brand (Internet 1). It brings together all efforts directed towards the sustainable development of tourism in Slovenia, offers tools to destinations and service providers that enable them to

evaluate and improve their sustainability endeavours, and promotes these green endeavours through the Slovenia Green brand. The GSST is based on the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) and on the global criteria of the Green Destinations Standard (GDS), awarded by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC), which therefore also applies to Slovenia Green. The label can only be used by operators (Accommodation/Travel Agency/Attraction), parks, and/or destinations. To obtain the Slovenia Green Destination label (Bronze/Silver/Gold/Platinum), the destinations must meet the Green Destinations Standard criteria (<https://www.slovenia.info/en/business/green-scheme-of-slovenian-tourism>).

For the purpose of this article, we have chosen one of the smaller but propulsive tourist destinations in Slovenia, the municipality of Brda, which according to the criteria of GSST more than satisfy the standards of sustainable tourism development. The destination of Brda joined the GSST in 2015, and in autumn 2016 it met the conditions for the silver label Slovenia Green Destination. In the last years, the Brda has invested a lot of effort in the sustainable development of the destination, especially in expanding the offer throughout the year, reducing tourist pressure on the most visited tourist attractions, promoting soft mobility and waste separation, and encouraging providers to join international sustainability schemes. Activities on all fronts of sustainable development helped the destination reach higher and improve before and during the re-evaluation, which resulted in the gold label Slovenia Green Destination (https://www.obcina-brda.si/obcina_brda/novice/2019111921193107/).

It is evident that the responsible planners of tourism development in the municipality of Brda have excelled at their task. However, what does the local population get out of it – is the quality of life better because of tourism? Moreover, are the residents properly involved in decision-making processes? The aim of the paper was therefore to get an insight into the perceptions of the inhabitants of the municipality of Brda regarding the process of transformation from a predominantly agricultural area into a modern rural tourist destination.

1.1. Methodology

The methodological framework includes a review of relevant literature and sources in the field of sustainable tourism (i.e., Coghlan, 2019; Mihalič, 2006; UNEP and WTO, 2005; Weaver, 2006 etc.), as well as strategic documents related to the development of tourism in Slovenia and the selected tourist destination – the municipality of Brda. For Brda, we also analyzed the available statistical data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia (SORS) for the field of tourism. The central part of the paper is an empirical research among the residents of the municipality in question. We were interested in their perception of the sustainable development of tourism in Brda.

In his literature review, Ogorelc (2009) refers to a significant number of studies on residents' perceptions of tourism impacts and their attitudes towards tourism development. He notes that tourism and its impacts may be viewed differently by different host community members; the residents' perceptions of tourism impacts are influenced by (1) resident's demographics, (2) economic reliance on tourism, (3) socio-cultural factors, and (4) residents' level of awareness on the tourism development plan in the area (Ogorelc, 2009). In conclusion, the author emphasizes that "local residents' opinions and perceptions of tourism impacts, as well as their attitudes toward tourists and tourism are perceived as an important aspect of sustainable tourism development. There is a need to study residents' perceptions of tourism because local residents are the ones who are most directly affected by tourism" (Ogorelc, 2009).

Despite the above suggestion, there are very few studies of the attitudes or perceptions of the local population regarding the development of tourism and its effects in Slovenia (e.g., Cigale, 2009; Jurinčič, 2009; Medarić, 2011; Nemec Rudež, 2008; Vodeb and Medarić, 2013). For the purpose of this research, we designed a customized questionnaire, based on the previously cited studies and an extensive research conducted in Croatia (Marković and Klarić, 2015). The perceptions of the local population related to economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development in the Brda municipality were researched through a number of positive and negative statements on a five-point Likert-type scale, where (1) stands for strongly disagree and (5) for strongly agree.

The survey was conducted online from November 2018 to May 2019, 259 respondents participated. Their responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

2. Geographical and tourism characteristics of the Municipality of Brda

The municipality of Brda is one of the westernmost areas of Slovenia, located in the central part of the border between Italy and Slovenia (Figure 1). The municipality covers an area of 72 km² and is part of the Gorica statistical region. In terms of size, it ranks 97th among all Slovenian municipalities and can be therefore considered as one of the smaller municipalities. The region of Brda stretches across the state border (in Italy this area is known as Collio) in the direction of the southeast from the Soča River to the Idrijca River in the northwest, and is bounded by Sabotin Hill to the east and Korada Hill to the west. The municipality is characterized by a dense concentration of ridges and hills. In its geographical and geological composition, the area is a homogenous unit, while some demographic and economic differences can be seen between the Lower Brda (Spodnja Brda) and the Upper Brda (Gornja Brda) areas.

The Lower Brda area is agriculturally more developed, while the area of the Upper Brda is more sparsely populated and demographically endangered due to poorer farming conditions and transport connections. In general, the municipality is characterized by the agricultural rural landscape, where agriculture is the primary activity (https://www.obcina-brda.si/obcina_brda/zelena_shema_slovenskega_turizma/2019053011184503/; <https://www.obcina-brda.si/>; Peršolja, 1995; SORS, 2020a).

In geological terms, a large part of the Brda region is built by alternating layers of marls and sandstones or flysch, which were formed by submarine sedimentation. The flysch base results in a landscape of many hills, valleys, and ridges. According to Pavlovec (1999), the geological basis is of fundamental importance for the development of the region, as it affects economic and agricultural development. The rocks of Brda disintegrate quickly and form a base that retains moisture and enables the cultivation of vines and fruit. The sub-Mediterranean climate enables the production of grapes, cherries, peaches, apricots, olives, figs, persimmons, strawberries, asparagus, plums, pears, mandarins, kiwis, and chestnuts (Pavlovec, 1999; https://www.obcina-brda.si/obcina_brda/zelena_shema_slovenskega_turizma/2019053011184503/).

The municipality of Brda was formally established in October 1994 and consists of 14 village communities, 1 urban community, and a total of 45 settlements. The largest settlement is the town of Dobrovo, where the seat of the municipality is located. Until 1994, the area was part of the municipality of Nova Gorica. In 1995, 5,535 local residents were registered in the municipality. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 5,602 inhabitants were recorded here in 2019. With 79 inhabitants per km², the municipality is one of the sparsely populated municipalities in Slovenia (the average density in Slovenia is 98 in./km²) (https://www.obcinabrda.si/obcina_brda/zelena_shema_slovenskega_turizma/2019053011184503/; Peršolja, 1995; SORS, 2020a).

Until 1991, the municipality of Brda was mostly an agricultural region, where, as at present, the cultivation of the vine was the predominated economic activity. Tourism as an economic sector did not exist at that time. In 1995, the first guided tasting tours and visits to wine cellars took place, which can be considered as the beginning of the development of tourism. In 1998, the brand "Brda, land of invigorating moments" was defined, with the logo of green, sunny and hilly landscape. In 2000, the municipality opened a Tourist Information Office, and in 2011 the Brda Centre for Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports was established. The destination developed rapidly and reached an important milestone when it becomes the European DEstination of ExcelleNce 2015 in Slovenia (Novak Samec, 2019; EDEN, 2015).

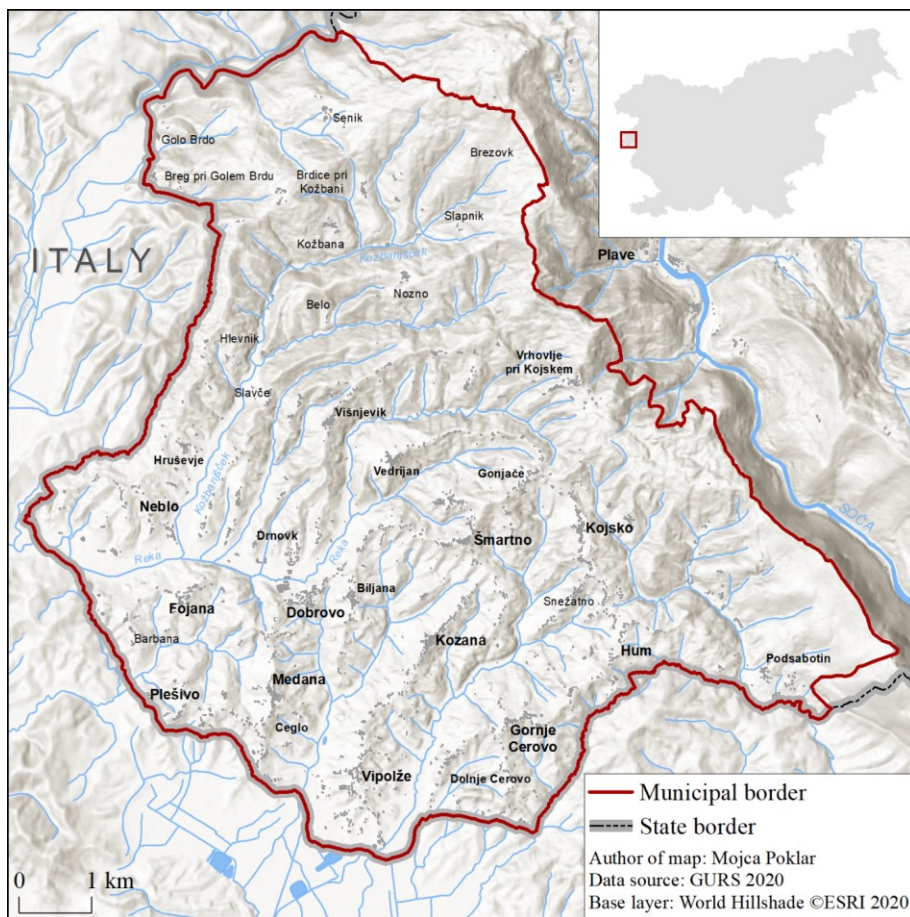


Figure 1: Map of the Municipality of Brda, with the shown location of the area in Slovenia.

In addition to agriculture, tourism is currently the most important industry, while both sectors are interconnected and cooperate. With the development of tourism, many other activities (apitherapy, wine, and olive oil tasting) have emerged, which are now included in the tourism offer. Tourist farms are the most developed tourist segment in terms of accommodation, while the potential of natural and cultural heritage is still underdeveloped (https://www.obcina-brda.si/obcina_brda/zelena_shema_slovenskega_turizma/2019053011184503/). Figure 2 shows an intensive growth in the number of tourists, both domestic and foreign, in the period from 2010 to 2019. For domestic tourists, the growth in the number of arrivals in the period is steady, except for the year 2017. In 2010, there were 2,945 domestic tourists registered in the municipality, while in 2019, their number increased to 9,311. It is interesting to note that the number of foreign tourists increased by over 260% in the period 2010-2019. In 2010, 6,894 foreign tourists were registered, and in 2019 their numbers increased to 18,157. In the

period 2010–2019, the number of foreign tourists was constantly increasing. According to the analysed statistical data, the increasing trend can also be observed in several other tourism indicators, which are not discussed in this paper due to the limited space.

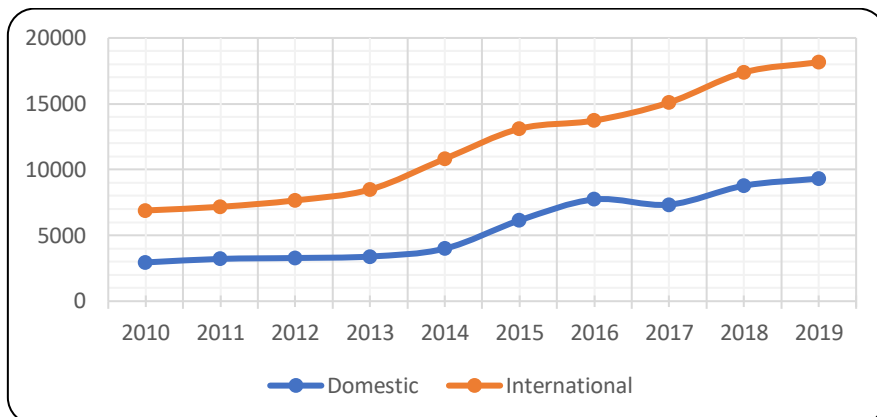


Figure 2: The municipality of Brda has experienced remarkable growth in the number of tourist arrivals (especially of foreign tourists) in the last decade. Source: SORS 2020b.

3. Results and discussion

Tourism is one of the most important economic activities in the municipality of Brda, which attracts more and more tourists every year. The development of local crafts and the sale of local products are actively promoted by the local Brda Center for Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports, which tries to involve local providers in the tourism offer through various events and activities.

Our research focused on the perceptions of the local population towards the development of sustainable tourism and studied the positive and negative effects of tourism development in the economic, social, and environmental fields. The survey consisted of three parts: in the first phase, we obtained general information about the respondents’ background, in the second phase, a series of closed-ended questions were presented, while in the third phase, additional three open-ended questions concluded the survey. The sample consists of 259 respondents, 62% of them are women and 38% men. The largest share of respondents is in the age group of 30 to 39 years (32%), which together with the youngest age group of 18 to 29 years (18% of respondents) comprise half of all respondents. They are followed by the group of 40 to 49-year-olds (22%), 50 to 59-year-olds (16%), the age group of 60 to 69 years (10%), while the smallest share falls on the age category of 70 or more years (2%). Regarding education, 60% of respondents completed secondary vocational school, grammar school, or

higher vocational education, while 31% of them got a university degree; 5% of respondents have a postgraduate degree, while the smallest share (3%) falls on those who completed primary school or school leavers. The vast majority of respondents (72%) are employees or self-employed, the rest are pensioners (11%), students (8%), and farmers or housewives (7%), while 3% of all respondents are unemployed.

3.1. Positive and negative economic effects of tourism development

Regarding the positive economic effects of tourism, the respondents expressed a high level of agreement with the statements that tourism brings economic benefits to the municipality (44% of respondents strongly agreed), as well as encourages the development of local crafts and sales of local products (30% of respondents strongly agreed). The respondents showed a high level of agreement also with the statements that tourism enables the acquisition of new jobs and that it is associated with the growing number of catering and accommodation providers. The respondents also agreed with the statement that tourism has had a positive impact on the improvement of road and municipal infrastructure, namely on the reconstruction of roads in certain sections and on building the roundabouts. On the other hand, 34% of respondents disagreed with the statement that tourism is a more important sector than agriculture. The levels of agreement with the individual claims are shown in more detail in Figure 3.

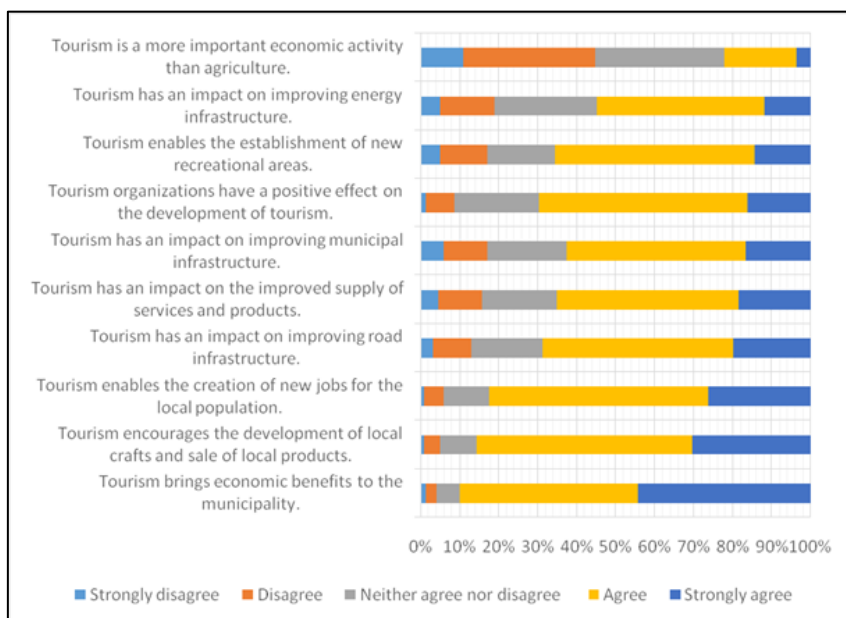


Figure 3: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with the positive economic effects of tourism.

Regarding the negative economic effects of tourism development in the municipality, most respondents agreed with the statements that tourism had an impact on rising real estate and land prices (52%) and that only a certain proportion of the population benefited from tourism development(43%), as well as the statement that financial resources, devoted for tourism development, are not evenly distributed among the settlements of the municipality (40%). This can be related to the differences between the Upper and Lower Brda areas. The Lower Brda area is much more economically developed compared with the Upper Brda. The tourist visibility of Brda in brochures and accommodation reservation systems has increased significantly over the last decade, which resulted in a substantial increase in real estate and land prices. It has to be stressed that there is a large number of old buildings and houses for sale in the municipality, however, due to relatively high prices, they remain on the market and often decay. Similar is true for land. The local population thus notices the negative economic impacts that have affected their communities. For the most part, respondents disagree with the statement that the costs of living in their municipality are higher due to tourism development. The distribution of the levels of agreement is shown in Figure 4.

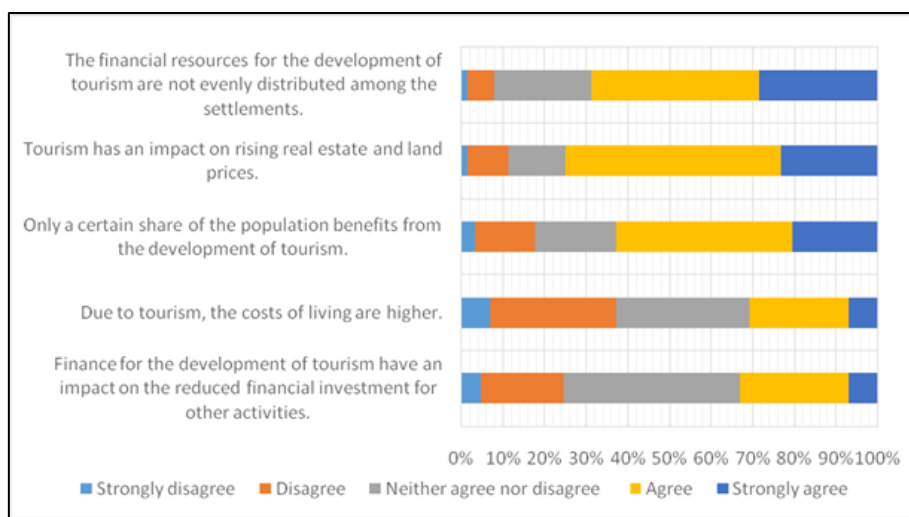


Figure 4: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with the negative economic effects of tourism.

3.2. Positive and negative social effects of tourism development

Among the statements that refer to the positive social effects of tourism in the municipality of Brda, 35% of respondents stated that they fully support further development of tourism. It seems that the local population is satisfied with the development of tourism and they are still willing to share their environment with tourists.

Respondents expressed strong agreement with the following statements: a total of 62% of respondents agreed with the statement that tourism has had a positive effect on intercultural contacts between locals and tourists, further 54% of respondents believed that tourism has had an impact on improving the quality of life of local people and that tourism development has had a positive impact on the preservation of local culture. A total of 46% of respondents stated that they were satisfied with the development of tourism so far, 39% that they were well informed on the development of tourism, while 30% that they felt proud to be the residents of the municipality due to the development of tourism.

A high level of agreement with the statement that tourism has had an impact on improving the quality of life of the local population can be linked to the fact that there were several investments made in the municipality as a result of the development of tourism over the last decade, resulting, most noticeably, in the increased availability of cultural and sports activities and the improvement of other parameters (such as broadband internet connection). Respondents also believe that tourism has had a positive impact on the preservation of local cultural holidays, especially the “Cherry Festival” (in Slovene: Praznik češenj), which is mostly connected with the display of old traditional customs.

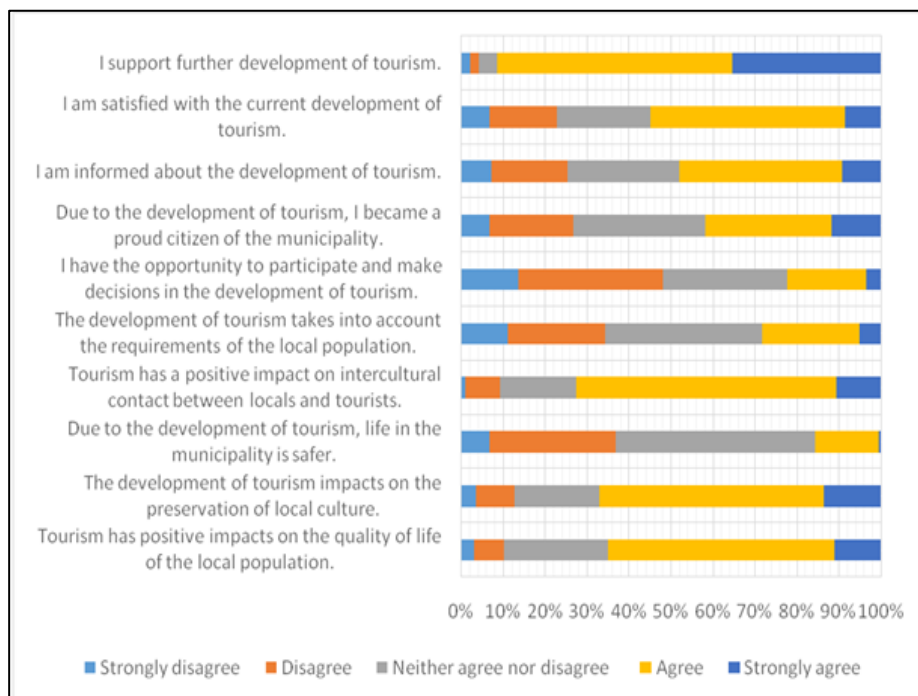


Figure 5: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with the positive social effects of tourism.

The highest levels of disagreement among the respondents were recorded with the statements that tourism development takes into account their requirements and needs (11%) and that they have the opportunity to co-decide and cooperate in the development (14%), as well as that the development of tourism makes life in the municipality safer (7%). The latter can be associated with heavy traffic and traffic jams during the high tourist season when traffic accidents occur more frequently, as well as the condition of some roads in the municipality and some dangerous road sections that are not properly marked. The distribution of the levels of agreement with the statements connected with the positive social effects of tourism is shown in Figure 5.

Based on the levels of agreement with the statements connected with the negative social effects of tourism (shown in Figure 6), we can conclude that for the time being the local population does not feel the negative social consequences in general. Although the area of Brda is becoming a recognizable tourist destination, with a considerable increase in the number of visitors, it still does not suffer from the excessive number of tourists. Excessive development of mass tourism would probably increase the crime rate as well as disagreements between locals and tourists.

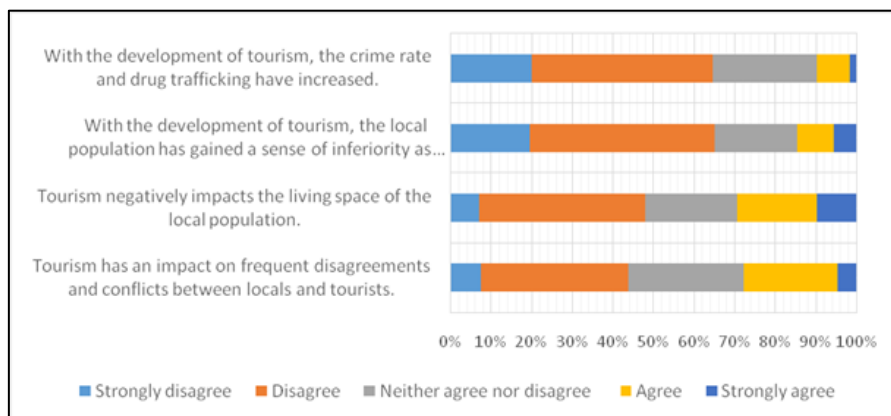


Figure 6: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with the negative social effects of tourism.

3.3. Positive and negative environmental effects of tourism development

When defining the positive environmental effects of tourism, the respondents had to express their agreement with the statements that referred to the general appearance of the environment and the level of environmental protection, as well as positive impacts on the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. In general, a high degree of agreement with the above-mentioned statements was evident, as shown in Figure 7.

In total, 60% of respondents agreed with the statement that tourism has a positive impact on the preservation of cultural heritage (together with those who expressed the highest level of agreement, this share reached 86%). A high level of agreement was also recorded regarding the statement that tourism has positive impacts on the preservation of natural heritage (54% of responses in the "Agree" category and an additional 28% in the "Strongly agree" category). Renovation of the Renaissance castle Vipolže, which was transformed into a cultural, business, and catering Villa Vipolže, is a prominent example of positive influences of tourism. It has to be mentioned that several other cultural and historical buildings in the municipality, such as Dobrovo Castle, still await restoration. As for natural heritage, the Kotline gorge in the Upper Brda area should be mentioned. The Kotline gorge is protected as a natural monument, however, it can only be reached by an unprotected path, which also needs reconstruction. Additionally, an information board showing the path to this natural landmark should be installed, together with waste bins for separate waste collection.

The level of agreement with the statement that tourism positively contributes to the general appearance of the environment and the level of environmental protection was slightly lower compared to other statements, but still received 44% of responses in the "Agree" category and an additional 16% in the "Strongly agree" category. The communal infrastructure is more equally balanced in the settlements of the Lower Brda area, where the number of containers for separate waste collection is higher, while it appears to be less developed in the Upper Brda area. In the municipality of Brda, there are two places where bulky waste can be collected, moreover, there is also a container for disposing of used kitchen appliances and a container for used clothes, which also contribute to pollution prevention.

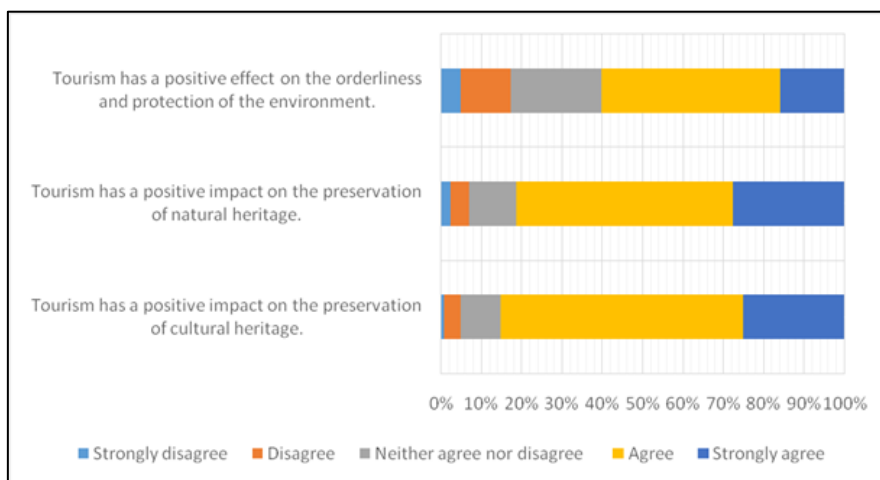


Figure 7: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with positive environmental effects of tourism.

In general, respondents seem to think that tourism does not cause excessive negative environmental consequences in the area (Figure 8). Among the selected statements relating to the negative environmental effects of tourism, the highest level of consensus was recorded for the statement that tourism causes road congestion and related problems with the lack of parking spaces, which received a total of 33% of responses in the "Agree" (25%) and "Strongly agree" (9%) categories. A similar level of agreement was recorded with the statement that tourism contributes to environmental pollution (water, land, air) and causes damage to the environment (a total of 29% of responses in the "Agree" (24%) and "Strongly agree" (5%) categories).

According to the respondents, tourists do not cause too much noise in the environment or cause harm to farmers, since these statements received only about 10 percent of answers in the "Agree" and "Strongly agree" categories. It can be concluded that some of the negative environmental consequences of tourism are present in the municipality, but not to the extent that the local population would label them as problematic. Negative environmental effects are especially noticeable at the time of major local events when traffic jams and a shortage of parking spaces in several areas (especially in the village of Šmartno, where a larger parking lot or garage is planned) are common.

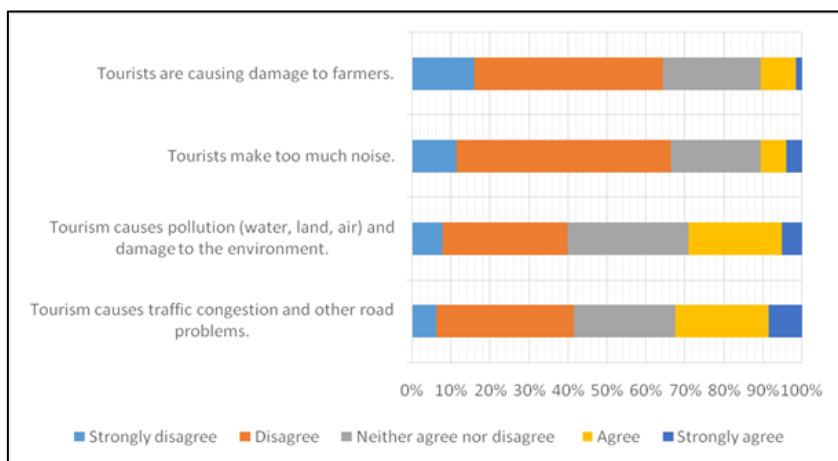


Figure 8: The levels of agreement with the given statements, connected with the negative environmental effects of tourism.

4. Conclusion

The paper focuses on the area of Brda (municipality of Brda), located in the western part of Slovenia along the border with Italy. It is a relatively small but very pulsive rural municipality with around 6,000 inhabitants.

The predominant (traditional) economic activity in the area is agriculture (fruit growing and viticulture or winemaking), which has been increasingly complemented by tourism over the last decade. This is confirmed by the constant growth of tourist arrivals and overnight stays, especially of foreign tourists.

Literature review and the results of the survey conducted with the residents of Brda showed that the current development of tourism in the municipality has brought mainly positive effects, in the economic, social as well as environmental field. With the development of tourism, the inhabitants gained numerous, mostly economic benefits, predominantly due to the sale of (their) homemade products. We can conclude that their quality of life has generally improved, also due to the improved infrastructure. Since many locals make a living from tourism that is not yet massive and thus disturbing (except for major events like the Cherry Festival), they are willing to overlook and do not even point out the negative effects of tourism. It is thus essential that the municipality of Brda strive to develop quality and boutique tourist offer, which would then result in the continuing support of the locals. However, given the growing trend of the total number of domestic and foreign tourist arrivals in the decade before the recent corona crisis, it would certainly be wise to systematically monitor the response of locals or monitor the satisfaction of local people with the state and development of tourism. It is crucial in this regard that the local authorities respond to the perceived problems with appropriate measures.

Tourism development in different regions can differ significantly, therefore the opinion of the local population can vary considerably from place to place as well. Namely, the residents' perception is typically influenced by the level of development of their hometown, as the result of different economic, social, and environmental effects of tourism. In Brda, this is most noticeable if we compare its northern and southern parts, as seen also in the responses of the participants. They reported that the financial resources invested in the development of tourism were not evenly distributed across the region, which consequently means that they benefit only a limited part of the population. It would therefore be necessary to disperse the tourist offer to different parts of Brda (e.g., by building a spa and renovating the abandoned village of Slapnik).

The perception of the impacts of tourism development certainly depends on the involvement of the local population. It should be emphasized that simply informing the local population about the course of tourism development is not enough. Even if they support the development of tourism, the residents need to be more actively involved in this development. As the results of the research show, they do not have enough opportunities for cooperation and decision-making, and their wishes and requirements are not taken into account as much as they could be. It is necessary to carefully set the course of tourism development and to involve all stakeholders in the process as much as possible.

It is necessary to be aware that it can quickly happen that the attitude of apathy turns into excitement, which can lead to uncertainty and the emergence of problems in tourism. The Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic came as a completely unexpected blow. The consequences will undoubtedly be severe, not only for tourism in Brda but globally. However, despite initial estimates that the loss of tourist income could not be compensated by domestic tourists and daily visitors, we can conclude that tourism remained an important industry even during the crisis, despite the fact that in 2020 domestic tourists predominated (again). At the same time, this could be an opportunity to reconsider the types of tourism that should be developed and promoted in Brda. Slovenian tourism is focused on green boutique destinations, where active experiences and peace are the main priorities. Based on the present research, we can conclude that the municipality of Brda certainly has ideal conditions to (continue) develop(ing) into a green, boutique, and sustainable destination.

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