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# ECONOMIC CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL AREAS OF SERBIA

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## ABSTRACT

Rural areas of Serbia face serious economic challenges, including depopulation, low levels of investment, and limited access to infrastructure. Nevertheless, these areas also possess significant potential for sustainable development, particularly in agriculture, renewable energy, rural tourism, and digital transformation. The key to improving the economic position of these regions lies in the integration of sustainable development policies that promote local entrepreneurship, preserve natural resources, and enhance the quality of life for the population. This paper analyzes the existing problems, identifies key potentials, and proposes development directions that could contribute to the long-term economic and social recovery of rural communities in Serbia.

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## Introduction

Rural areas of Serbia face complex challenges stemming from economic, demographic, and infrastructural factors. Depopulation, population aging, declining agricultural productivity, and a lack of investment in infrastructure contribute to the marginalization of these regions. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, in 2021, Serbia recorded a markedly negative natural population growth. The number of live births was 62,180, while the number of deaths reached 136,622, resulting in a natural population decline of -74,442 (RZS, 2022). This demographic profile points to deeply rooted challenges concerning sustainable demographic development, especially

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in rural areas, where negative trends are further exacerbated by the migration of young people to urban centers and abroad.

According to the research of Joksimović (2025), certain regions in Serbia have been almost entirely abandoned, with fewer than 20 inhabitants per settlement, indicating a severe demographic crisis and an urgent need for intervention.

Economic inequality between urban and rural areas is further deepened by limited access to markets, capital, and modern technologies. This spatial disparity is not unique to Serbia; global trends show similar patterns where rural communities often lag in economic development compared to urban centers. A study by Radosavljević, Kočović, and De Santo (2024) highlights that climate change, including increasingly frequent heatwaves, has further endangered agricultural production, necessitating the introduction of mechanisms such as agricultural insurance to mitigate risks and promote sustainable development.

Demographic challenges, such as the migration of young people from rural to urban areas, further complicate the situation. The phenomenon of rural exodus—where young people leave villages in search of better economic opportunities—is present both in Serbia and globally. This migration leads to a shrinking labor force in rural areas and hampers their development. One of the key factors for the successful sustainable development of rural areas is the strengthening of human capital and entrepreneurship. Radosavljević et al. (2022) emphasize that developing entrepreneurial skills and education in rural regions can significantly contribute to the economic revitalization of these areas.

Furthermore, introducing the concept of a circular economy into agricultural practices can enhance the sustainability of rural areas. Vukelić et al. (2023) propose the development of a model for assessing the capacity of rural regions to transition to a circular economy, which would allow for more efficient resource use and a reduction in negative environmental impacts.

Despite these challenges, rural areas in Serbia possess significant potential for sustainable development (Dašić et al., 2020; Dabetić et al., 2024; Pantović et al., 2023). According to the study by Martinović and Ratkaja (2015), identifying different types of rural areas enables the adaptation of development strategies to the specific needs of each region, thus fostering economic growth and improving the quality of life for the population.

### **Literature review**

Rural communities often rely on agriculture, making them vulnerable to economic and climate changes. The diversification of economic activities can enhance the resilience of these communities (Castellano-Álvarez et al., 2024; Lazović et al., 2024). Rural tourism is increasingly recognized as an important instrument for the sustainable development of rural areas, particularly in transitional countries such as Serbia (Lane & Kastenholtz, 2015; Sznajder et al., 2009). The introduction of tourism activities into

rural areas contributes to economic diversification, increases the income of farming households, helps preserve cultural heritage, and strengthens local identity. Dašić and colleagues (2020) examine the role of rural tourism as a driver of rural development in Serbia. It is argued that rural tourism can contribute to the economic empowerment of villages, the preservation of tradition, and the reduction of migration. Based on the analysis of statistical data and existing strategies, both potentials and numerous obstacles are highlighted, such as poor infrastructure and lack of institutional support. The lack of adequate infrastructure, such as roads and electricity, limits the economic development of rural areas (Li et al., 2023). Some studies emphasize the need for more systematic institutional support and the education of local populations (Ivanović et al., 2020; Milačić, 2024).

Contemporary scientific insights also point to the importance of cultural and historical heritage as a key element in shaping the tourist attractiveness of destinations and strengthening their competitive position within cultural tourism. Heritage, as a carrier of collective memory and national identity, is increasingly recognized as a strategic resource in economic development and territorial branding processes. There is a growing emphasis on the need for a responsible approach to the valorization and preservation of cultural assets to ensure long-term sustainability and increase the visibility of destinations in the tourism market. At the same time, current literature highlights the importance of applying dynamic models in the analysis of rural development, especially in the context of tourism growth as an economic activity. Increasing attention is being paid to the risks associated with the process of ‘touristification’—a concept describing the over-reliance of rural areas on tourism (Cvijanović et al., 2023; Ignjatijević et al., 2024; Đukić & Kojić, 2023), which often leads to the degradation of local resources, environmental burdens, and the erosion of cultural authenticity (Salazar, 2012). These challenges require a balanced approach that enables economic growth, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the responsible management of spatial and sociocultural resources (Durkalić et al., 2019; Dašić & Savić, 2020).

Thus, while tourism carries significant economic potential, including the creation of new jobs, an increase in gross domestic product, and the diversification of economic activities in rural areas, the necessity of clear regulatory mechanisms and measures for protecting local resources is emphasized. Research recommends the development of balanced models that will allow for long-term and sustainable economic progress, while preserving cultural and natural heritage as the foundation of local identity (Iannucci et al., 2022).

In the context of contemporary approaches to rural development, the importance of systematic communication management is increasingly emphasized as a means of improving the economic and social aspects of local communities. Effective planning of communication activities and the implementation of tailored strategies can contribute to increased public participation, better information dissemination, and greater transparency in decision-making processes. Communication management is recognized as a key factor in connecting various local actors, building trust, and

encouraging intersectoral cooperation, thereby enhancing the impact and effectiveness of development initiatives (Zolak, 2024).

At the same time, current scientific trends highlight the growing role of digital marketing and the evolving position of consumers in the digital environment, which influences a shift in the communication paradigm in rural development (Dašić et al., 2024). Special attention is given to the opportunities provided by digital communication channels, such as personalized messages, interactive content, and rapid feedback, which allow for more effective connection between brands and target groups. In this new marketing reality, consumers are becoming active participants in the communication process—not only message recipients but also influencers through social media, reviews, and recommendations (Dašić, 2024). Virtual consumers increasingly shape market offerings, as their experiences and opinions directly affect the positioning of products and services. In this context, digital strategies represent a key tool for adapting to rapid market changes and building long-term relationships with modern, digitally literate consumers (Dašić et al., 2023).

Numerous studies seek to examine the link between economic conditions and the sustainability of rural tourism. Findings indicate that the improvement of key economic indicators—such as developed infrastructure, increased employment, and investment growth—significantly contributes to the successful development of rural tourism as an important economic activity. However, research also warns that unplanned or insufficiently controlled development may lead to negative consequences such as overcrowding, overexploitation of natural resources, and increased social inequality. It is concluded that economic sustainability cannot be viewed in isolation but must be considered within a broader concept that integrates economic, social, and environmental aspects, requiring an integrated approach to development management (Chen et al., 2023).

Recent research increasingly recognizes the significance of green finance as a tool for promoting sustainable development in rural areas. Based on panel data collected from 283 cities in China, it is shown that financial mechanisms directed toward environmentally responsible practices—such as subsidies for sustainable agriculture, investments in renewable energy, and the development of green infrastructure—can have a strong positive impact on poverty reduction, increased employment, and mitigation of ecological risks. The results of such studies suggest that green financing needs to be institutionalized and integrated as an essential and mandatory part of rural development policies, with the aim of building sustainable, economically stable, and ecologically preserved communities (Yi et al., 2025).

Studies focused on sustainable rural development in Serbia point to numerous economic and social challenges, especially in the regions of Southern and Eastern Serbia, as well as Šumadija and Western Serbia. Key issues include negative demographic trends, underdeveloped infrastructure, low productivity in the agricultural sector, and limited investment volume. Literature increasingly recommends an approach that includes all three dimensions of sustainable development—economic, social, and environmental.

In particular, the introduction of circular economy models and the active involvement of local communities in planning and decision-making processes are emphasized as essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and resilience of rural areas (Vučić, 2024).

Over the past decade, scientific and professional literature has increasingly focused on rural development through multidisciplinary approaches. Particular emphasis has been placed on the economic dimension of sustainability, with numerous challenges identified, such as lack of financial resources, underdeveloped institutions, limited market access, and insufficient infrastructure. Analyses show that in practice—especially in some international contexts—the most successful strategies have been those that integrate various sectors, primarily agricultural production, rural tourism, and support for local entrepreneurship. Within the framework of recommendations for rural area improvement, the need to create policies that take into account the specificities of rural environments and encourage the development of local initiatives and partnerships as drivers of positive change is emphasized (Suárez Roldan et al., 2023).

Research aimed at assessing the level of sustainable rural development in Serbia indicates the presence of significant development potentials, as well as numerous structural and institutional obstacles. In the context of ongoing integration processes and aspirations to align with European Union standards, there is an increasing need to modernize rural development policies, which must fully recognize the specific characteristics of Serbian rural communities. A comprehensive approach is recommended, involving substantial financial investment, systematic education of both the population and institutions, and active involvement of all relevant stakeholders—from the national to the local level. Such a holistic approach is considered crucial for long-term, sustainable, and evenly distributed development of rural areas (Ristić, 2013).

Research focused on the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlights the complexity of balancing different priorities in the areas of economic, social, and environmental development. Global-level analyses reveal that many countries struggle to overcome conflicts between specific goals and to establish synergistic relationships among them. While some goals reinforce one another—such as improving education and reducing poverty—others may be in conflict, such as when economic growth leads to increased pressure on the environment. Contemporary scientific literature increasingly emphasizes the need for political coherence and the application of integrated approaches in planning and implementing public policies, particularly in the context of achieving the SDGs. Instead of fragmented and sectorally limited interventions, a systemic approach is recommended—one that recognizes the complex and interdependent nature of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability.

Special emphasis is placed on the importance of intersectoral cooperation—both at the horizontal level between various institutions, and at the vertical level among national, regional, and local actors. Such cooperation enables not only the alignment of priorities but also the resolution of potential conflicts (trade-offs) through the creation of synergies

that can lead to mutually reinforcing effects. Understanding the interlinkages among sustainable development goals is key to formulating strategies that contribute to the long-term resilience and sustainability of public policies (Nilsson et al., 2018; Sachs et al., 2022; Kroll et al., 2019).

### **Research Methodology:**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the economic and demographic factors influencing the sustainable development of rural areas in Serbia. Particular focus will be placed on identifying strategies that can contribute to the revitalization of these regions, including infrastructure improvement, support for family farming, and the development of local communities. Various methodological techniques were applied in the research to provide a comprehensive overview of rural development in Serbia and the surrounding region. Primarily, content analysis was used to systematically review relevant literature, statistical data, and strategic documents, enabling the identification of key theoretical and practical frameworks.

In addition, desk research based on secondary data included the analysis of official information from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, as well as data from scientific journals and reports from relevant institutions. This multi-method approach contributed to the validity and relevance of the obtained results.

*H1: Insufficient infrastructure connectivity, weak institutional support, and depopulation represent the main obstacles to rural development in Serbia; however, with adequate investment and the activation of local resources, there is significant potential for sustainable growth.*

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Economic and Demographic Challenges of Rural Development in Serbia**

Rural areas in Serbia face profound economic and demographic issues that severely hinder their development potential. One of the key challenges is economic underdevelopment and a high unemployment rate. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the unemployment rate in rural areas is approximately 5% higher than in urban areas, and employment is predominantly concentrated in primary sectors such as agriculture and forestry, which lack sufficient technological modernization and added value (RZS, 2022).

At the same time, rural areas are experiencing a dramatic demographic decline—more than 1,200 villages in Serbia have fewer than 100 inhabitants, and as many as 200 villages have no residents at all. Population aging and the migration of young people to cities are contributing to increasing social and economic depopulation, which limits the potential for revitalizing local communities.



One of the most serious demographic challenges in Serbia's rural areas is the ongoing aging of the population and the intensive migration of youth toward urban centers. The average age of residents in rural regions exceeds 45 years, while in some parts, such as eastern Serbia, this average is even higher. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, over the past decade, more than 400,000 young people have left rural areas, mostly in search of better employment and educational opportunities (RZS, 2021). Nikitović (2022) emphasizes that the natural population decline, first recorded in 1992, has continued to worsen, reaching -8.0% in 2020. This demographic downturn has far-reaching consequences for rural areas, including the shrinking of the labor force, closure of schools, and reduced availability of public services.

Another key factor hindering the sustainable development of rural areas in Serbia is underdeveloped infrastructure and limited access to basic public services such as healthcare, education, and internet connectivity (Ahmić et al., 2016; Stanojević, 2019). Research shows that as many as 20% of villages in Serbia do not have adequate access to paved roads, and more than 1,000 villages lack a permanent health clinic. In addition, many primary schools in rural areas operate with a minimal number of students or have been completely closed due to declining numbers of children.

Kvrgić and Ristić (2018) emphasize that internal challenges—such as sustainable resource management, technological progress, and strengthening the social fabric—are crucial for the development of rural areas. A lack of infrastructure, limited access to financial resources, and low competitiveness of agricultural products further hinder economic development.

In the area of digital connectivity, there is a pronounced digital divide—fewer than 60% of households in rural areas have access to high-speed internet, compared to more than 85% in urban areas (Ministry of Telecommunications, 2022). This significantly limits opportunities for distance education, digital agriculture, and entrepreneurial development (Petrović, 2017).

The structure of agricultural production in Serbia's rural areas is still dominated by small-scale farms, with an average landholding size of just 5.4 hectares per household, which significantly limits economies of scale and production efficiency (RZS, 2022). More than 75% of agricultural households produce exclusively for their own needs or for local markets, without integration into broader processing or export chains. At the same time, the level of processing of agricultural products in rural areas is low, as small and medium-sized processing enterprises that could add value to raw materials (e.g., cheese, cured meat, processed fruits) are rare. The lack of cold storage, warehouses, certification systems, and marketing support further weakens the market position of small producers.

One of the main reasons for the economic stagnation of rural areas in Serbia is the insufficient volume of investment in the local economy and the chronic lack of support for entrepreneurship and innovation. According to data from the National Agency for Regional Development, less than 10% of total investments in small and medium-sized

enterprises in Serbia are directed toward rural areas, with most investments excluding innovation, start-ups, and processing capacities (NARR, 2021).

The Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development of the Republic of Serbia for the period 2014–2024 recognizes the need for an integrated approach to rural development. However, a lack of coordination among various levels of government and limited capacity for policy implementation remain significant obstacles (SPRR, 2014).

Despite the availability of certain programs, such as EU IPARD support, a large number of farmers and rural entrepreneurs lack the administrative capacity or knowledge to apply for these funds. In addition, agricultural and rural business loans often come with unfavorable conditions, which further discourages private initiative globally (Smit et al., 2024).

Neighboring countries face similar challenges. Rural areas in Croatia are confronted with issues such as depopulation, population aging, and economic inactivity. According to OECD data, although the country's macroeconomic situation has improved following EU accession, regional disparities remain a significant problem, particularly in rural areas (OECD, 2024). Research by Rogelj and colleagues (2024) shows that young farmers in Croatia have limited access to financial resources and infrastructure, which hampers generational renewal and the sustainable development of rural regions.

Rural areas in Bosnia and Herzegovina also face high levels of poverty and unemployment. According to research by Tandir et al. (2016), there are significant socio-economic disparities between rural municipalities, even among those with similar population density.

North Macedonia is likewise facing major demographic challenges, including a declining natural birth rate, aging population, and intensive emigration, particularly of young and educated individuals (Petkovski et al., 2024).

### **Potentials for Sustainable Economic Development of Rural Areas in Serbia**

One of the most promising directions for the sustainable economic development of rural areas in Serbia is the advancement of organic and sustainable agriculture, which is gaining increasing importance both in domestic and international markets. Organic production in Serbia covers over 21,000 hectares of land, with a continuous rise in the number of certified producers—more than 7,000 were registered in 2022, representing a 20% increase compared to the previous year (eKapija, 2021).

Organic agriculture contributes to the preservation of natural resources, healthier nutrition, and long-term economic sustainability. At the same time, it creates opportunities for premium market placement and higher added value. In rural areas, where small farms dominate, this model of production represents a viable alternative to conventional agriculture, especially when combined with local branding and rural tourism.



Strengthening the agri-processing sector is a key lever for increasing added value in agricultural production and retaining income within rural communities. In Serbia, raw material exports still dominate, while only about 30% of domestic agricultural products are processed within the country. This limits the potential for job creation and the growth of the local economy.

In this context, the development of short supply chains—direct sales from producers to consumers without intermediaries—offers added value for small farmers. These models allow for better prices, transparency of origin, and greater consumer trust. In Serbia, there are an increasing number of examples where cooperatives, farmers' markets, and online platforms connect producers and consumers, thereby strengthening the local economy and reducing dependency on large market systems.

Rural tourism represents one of the most promising forms of economic diversification in rural areas, as it provides local residents with additional income through accommodation services, gastronomy, homemade products, and cultural activities. Serbia has rich natural and cultural resources—from mountains and spas to traditional architecture and culinary heritage—which provide a strong foundation for the development of ethno-villages and agrotourism (Đorđević-Milošević & Milovanović, 2012).

According to available data, the number of registered rural tourism households in Serbia has significantly increased in recent years. For example, as of June 2023, there were 758 rural tourism households registered in the e-Tourist system. By February 2024, that number had risen to 798, with an additional eight *salaš*-style estates and seven ethno houses, marking an increase of about 32% compared to the previous two years. In July 2024, the Ministry of Tourism and Youth announced that the number of registered rural tourism households had increased by nearly 300, surpassing 1,000 (Seoski turizam, 2023). This growth indicates a rising interest in rural tourism as a sustainable source of income and a way to improve quality of life in rural communities. Rural tourism not only contributes to the economic strengthening of rural areas but also supports the preservation of cultural heritage, traditions, and environmental awareness.

Renewable energy sources represent a significant potential for the sustainable development of rural areas, as they enable energy independence, cost savings, and new opportunities for local economies. Serbia possesses rich biomass resources (agricultural and forestry waste), as well as a high number of sunny days, making biomass and solar energy the most promising options for rural households and public facilities in villages.

Information technologies and digitalization are playing an increasingly important role in the transformation of rural areas, enabling access to new markets, education, e-governance, and innovation in agriculture and entrepreneurship. Digital connectivity is a prerequisite for introducing precision agriculture, online sales, digital training, and linking local producers with consumers and partners across the country and globally.

According to the most recent available data, in 2021, 75% of households in rural areas of Serbia had internet access, compared to 86% in urban areas. These figures indicate

the existence of a digital divide between rural and urban regions, which can affect economic development and access to information in rural communities (International Telecommunication Union, 2023).

European Union funds—especially the IPARD program (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development)—represent one of the most significant sources of financing for the modernization of agriculture and the development of rural infrastructure in Serbia. Since the start of the IPARD II program (2014–2020), Serbia has had access to over €175 million in non-refundable funds intended for investments in physical assets, processing, marketing, and rural tourism (Delegation of the EU to Serbia, 2021).

In addition to IPARD, the government has provided incentives through the National Investment Plan and the Rural Development Program, supporting the purchase of village houses, acquisition of machinery, and the launching of small agricultural businesses. However, the utilization of these funds remains limited due to administrative barriers, a lack of information, and complex documentation procedures—factors that especially affect small farms in less developed municipalities.

According to Kvrđić (2018), territorial capital, which includes natural resources, cultural heritage, and human capacities, forms the foundation for the sustainable development of rural areas. Creative entrepreneurship, based on local specificities and innovations, can contribute to the economic revitalization of villages and the reduction of social inequalities.

### **Conclusion**

The sustainable development of rural areas in Serbia represents one of the key challenges of contemporary economic policy, but also an important opportunity for regional cohesion, demographic stabilization, and the overall economic progress of the country. An analysis of economic and demographic challenges shows that rural areas are characterized by low levels of economic activity, high rates of youth migration, insufficient infrastructural connectivity, and underdeveloped support sectors such as services, education, and healthcare. In addition, a large number of rural households rely on primary agriculture with low levels of technological innovation and added value.

On the other hand, Serbia possesses significant potential for the development of the rural economy. Modern trends in sustainable agriculture, rural tourism, and the use of renewable energy sources open up new opportunities for income diversification and population retention in villages. The improvement of the agri-processing industry and the incentives provided by EU funds—such as the IPARD program—can greatly contribute to the social and economic revitalization of rural communities.

To scale such examples, it is necessary to develop integrated public policies that include support for small farmers, incentives for rural tourism, investments in infrastructure and digital connectivity, as well as educational programs that promote entrepreneurship

in rural areas. Research shows that the key to improving rural communities lies in the implementation of integrated strategies that combine economic, demographic, institutional, and environmental aspects. The role of government institutions, local communities, and the academic sector is crucial in creating policies that will enable more balanced development and reduce regional disparities. Only through such coordinated efforts can long-term sustainability and improved quality of life in rural areas be ensured.

### Conflict of interests

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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