

## **THE EIBENTHAL INITIATIVE: AN INFORMAL MODEL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In recent years, the issue of sustainable development through responsible tourism has been at the forefront of global trends, with both theoreticians and practitioners looking for solutions to integrate the opportunities offered by tourism development in a sustainable way – so that the economic impact does not affect the social and environmental balance. Looking for examples of good practice, one seeks to identify models of intervention, in terms of both specific means of implementation, as well as regulations or possible directions for development. One such example is the Czech village of Eibenthal, a small settlement in the Almăj Mountains (a mountainous area of Banat, Romania) which has become in recent years a reference for sustainable development through responsible tourism. Established during the 19th century by Czech settlers, as part of a network of Czech villages in the Banat Mountains, Eibenthal and its people were deeply affected by the closure of the nearby coal mine in 2006. However, in recent years, Eibenthal is going through a revival phase, with a number of projects currently developed by the local community in order to attract tourists, enhance a resilient economy and promote the local values and heritage. The informal and organically developed individual projects showcase the commitment of the local community to preserve the specific character of the settlement. As such, the Eibenthal community manages a private structure that coordinates tourists - offering information, selling local products and promoting accommodation in the village, which aims to involve the community in all types of activities carried out. The Eibenthal Initiative seeks to reach economic, social and environmental sustainability. By adhering to the principles of the New European Bauhaus in all its activities, the community revitalization project is generating more and more interest – regarding both its unexpected results, as well as its functioning mechanisms.

**KEYWORDS** \_ *responsible tourism, community involvement, heritage valorisation*

## **INTRODUCTION. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF PERIPHERAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH RESPONSIBLE TOURISM**

Peripheral communities, (Gato et al. 2022; Wanhill 1997) understood as communities residing urban or rural areas affected by phenomena such as isolation, economic decline, depopulation and subsequent loss of relevance, represent one of the most fragile environments in the present-day context of territorial development.

At the same time, peripheral situations often occur in areas rich in valuable heritage elements – be it natural or cultural. (Mayer and Baumgartner 2014) As such:

- the isolation from main mobility and economic development corridors usually indicates an area of natural beauty (be it up in the mountains, along water courses or in protected areas for biodiversity);
- the economic decline usually leaves behind traces of an industrial past, manifested in the form of a network of industrial heritage (with both architectural and symbolical value);
- the depopulation of a settlement sometimes allows for the involuntary preservation of domestic architecture (which is no longer transformed to fit the changing needs of the inhabitants).

Peripheral communities therefore usually benefit from a wide patrimonial infrastructure that can - and should - be valorized in order to help these communities regain a certain degree of economic resilience and thus ensure the sustainable development of the territory. (Dinis 2006; 2004) As such, the practice of responsible tourism often constitutes a suitable solution for the revitalization of peripheral communities (Munoz 2003; Virkkala 2007), building on the local values and valorizing both the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

The sustainable development of a territory through responsible tourism, in order to attract visitors, strengthen the local economy and promote local values and heritage, is a significant driver for both urban and rural growth. As such, it has the potential to:

- prevent residents from leaving the area;
- promote everyday economic activities, customs and products as essential components for tourism and sustainable development in the area;
- preserve site-specific building techniques as mediators between the built and natural environment in a cultural landscape rich in potential.

In order to facilitate the sustainable development of responsible tourism, communities and authorities alike (Gato et al. 2022; HOSPERS 2003) need to work together to better understand and strengthen the following issues: promotion and conservation of natural and cultural resources, economic, social and environmental sustainability, tourism development through value chain integration, good governance for the promotion of tourism, good infrastructure and connectivity, and safety and security.

However, tourism development can only provide sustainability if the services and products delivered meet certain quality standards. (Pezzi, Faggian, and Reid 2020) This applies to accommodation, catering and tourist orientation services, as well as tangible and intangible products specific to the area. This criterion can be objectively measured on three distinct levels of assessment. Firstly - the existence of the necessary approvals, which guarantee a minimum of quality for each service and product; secondly - increased visibility (such as participation in fairs, online presence) and subsequently sales; and finally – the award of quality labels (such as designation of controlled origin / organic products / local origin seals / other quality seals).

### **THE EIBENTHAL INITIATIVE**

Established during the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Czech settlers, as part of a network of seven Czech settlements developed in the Almăj Mountains (present-day Romania) under Austro-Hungarian rule, the village of

Eibenthal and its people suffered immensely following the closure of the nearby coal mine in 2006. However, in recent years, Eibenthal is leading a revival process impacting the entire region (Figure 1), with a number of projects currently developed in order to attract tourists, enhance the local economy and promote the local values and heritage. The main objectives of Eibenthal's tourism development, as a driver for the growth of the wider rural area, comprise:

- Preventing inhabitants from leaving the area and thus limiting the negative impact of depopulation and shrinkage - two phenomena that usually affect rural areas, but can prove particularly challenging for communities such as the one in Eibenthal, which is undergoing a recovery process following the 2006 disaster that led to the closure of Baia Nouă coal mine;
- Promoting every day manufacture activities, customs and products as essential components for sustainable tourism and development in the area;
- Preserving site-specific building techniques as mediators between built and natural environment, in a cultural landscape rich in potential.



**Figure 1:** The network of Czech settlements in the Almăj Mountains. Territorial chorema

The main challenges of the village of Eibenthal, as well as of the other Czech settlements in the Almăj Mountains, generally refer to:

- Low accessibility, caused by the limited quality of access roads; however, this situation prevents the development of mass tourism - which can actually be considered an opportunity;
- The massive depopulation of recent years, coupled with the ageing of the local residents - resulting in the loss of valuable members of the community (through migration or by natural means);
- The low impact of economic activities, other than tourism, on the well-being of the inhabitants.

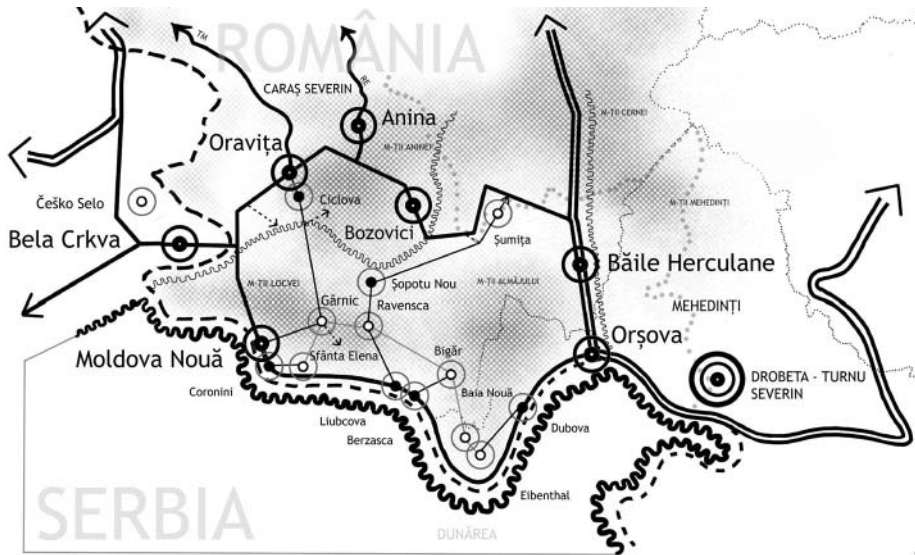


Figure 2: The village of Eibenthal. View from above

Although the village of Eibenthal does not contain officially recognized cultural heritage objectives, considered valuable at national or international level, it does preserve a number of cultural resources, such as:

- Tangible heritage: The Catholic Church “St. Joan Nepomuk” in Eibenthal, built in 1912, as part of a program of ecclesiastical architecture, implemented within the Czech communities between 1858-1923;
- Tangible heritage: remnants of built heritage assets, reminiscent of mining activity, especially in Baia Nouă: dwellings for miners, managers of mining units or industrial heritage sites;
- Tangible heritage: traditional residential architecture, in the form of entire households or individual buildings that preserve valuable characteristics regarding the physical organisation of the household, the spatial and functional configuration of the buildings themselves, as well as the general aesthetics of the facades and of the property limits; such examples (most of which are relatively well preserved) can be seen all throughout the Czech settlements in the Almăj Mountains, contributing to a coherent ambiance within the rural environment;
- Tangible heritage: traditional functional architecture, in the form of isolated households for agricultural activities, situated outside the villages - some of which still preserve their original form and function;
- Intangible heritage: traditional Czech dishes, served in the Eibenthal Restaurant (such as garlic soup – “Česneková polevka”), traditional Czech beer (the “Eibenthal” beer, produced in the Czech Republic, but using a local recipe);
- Intangible heritage: traditional Czech folk performers, traditional Czech folk costumes.

At the same time, the village of Eibenthal is part of the Iron Gates Natural Park - a protected area established by Law no. 5 / 2000 on the approval of the National Spatial Planning Plan - Section III - Protected Areas. This is a territory in which the remarkable landscapes and biological diversity can be capitalized in the conditions of preserving unaltered traditions, where the quality of life of communities is to be the result of economic activities of the inhabitants, carried out in harmony with nature. Holder of many recognized natural resources, the protected area corresponds to IUCN category V: “Protected landscape: protected area managed mainly for landscape conservation and recreation”

The commitment of the local community, a recurring theme of local rural entrepreneurship (Kneafsey 2000; North and Smallbone 2006), in the village of Eibenthal to preserve the specific character of the settlement can be seen in all the new tourist developments that have appeared here in the last 15 years (such as the bar “U medvěda”, the Eibenthal guesthouse, the Eibenthal restaurant or the “Manufaktura” Production cooperative). Moreover, nowadays similar initiatives appear in the village, following the good example of the former.

The Eibenthal community thus manages a private structure that coordinates tourists, called “U Medvěda”. It is a multifunctional space that has the role of informing tourists, offering local products and promoting accommodation in various structures in the village. More than a tourist information center, it aims to involve the community in all types of activities carried out. In the village of Eibenthal, one can find several accommodation options that reflect rural and local values. Adhering to the principle of using site-specific construction techniques and local materials, accommodation spaces such as the Eibenthal Pension, as well as other private dwellings open for tourism, promote the specifics of the area and thus provide authentic experiences to tourists, while preserving the character of the settlement itself. Eibenthal Restaurant is another family business in the village of Eibenthal, which offers tourists authentic experiences inspired by traditional cuisine. As such, the menu comprises local dishes (such as garlic soup or slow-cooked pork chops), which are still prepared according to traditional recipes and procedures. In addition, the Eibenthal community has also established a cooperative for the production of culinary goods (such as sausages, cheese, canned food, syrups and herbal teas), which continues the generational practices and produces enough to cover the daily needs of the restaurant (selling the surplus to tourists). Finally, in order to promote tourism in the village of Eibenthal, as well as in the neighboring area, local entrepreneurs work closely with communities in the Czech Republic and organize, mainly for them, an annual festival: the Banat Festival. The relation between small-scale, bottom-up initiatives such as festivals organized by rural communities and their revitalization strategies is well documented. (Anwar McHenry 2011; Black 2016; Borrup 2016; Cwiertka and Machotka 2018; Qu and Cheer 2021; Richards 2011) This event also offers dedicated transport (from Prague to Orsova and, further, to Eibenthal), which allows Czech tourists to take part in this festival. Of course, the event is open to all, but the connection with the country of origin helps to preserve the specifics of the place. Moreover, the Festival creates the premises for local producers to promote their services, while receiving an informal confirmation of the quality of their products from foreign customers (Borrup 2016). Thus, the village of Eibenthal contributes to the promotion of local values and practices in the area, through the sale (and production) of specific Czech food and beverages, household goods and other products.

By adhering to the principles of the New European Bauhaus in all its activities, the Eibenthal Initiative thus seeks to reach economic, social and environmental sustainability.

## **THE ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY**

The local community from the village of Eibenthal is working towards obtaining financing at different levels, in order to improve the existing tourism infrastructure. As such, the village recently developed a new access road, a new lightning system and promotes financing opportunities to the locals in areas such as education, accessibility and tourism.

At the same time, the economic activities that have already succeeded here (the “U medvěda” bar, the Eibenthal Restaurant, the Eibenthal Pension accommodation or the “Manufaktura” production cooperative) are the living proof of a business development conducive environment within the village of Eibenthal. Moreover, their success encourages others to follow the same pattern and thus contribute to a growth in tourism capacity of the settlement as a whole (through accommodation, services, products and so on).

## THE SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Although there are no official policies that foster employment in the tourism sector within the village of Eibenthal, the examples of good practice already implemented here represent informal models for growth. Usually developed as family endeavors, the local tourism businesses employ all the members of the family unit, thus ensuring a uniform distribution of efforts and resources alike.

Eibenthal village seeks to promote informal policies of integration and education, regardless of gender or age. Thus, the village of Eibenthal promotes education on two levels:

- Formal education - in the local school, where, with the help of the teachers, the curricula is updated as to reflect the contemporary realities and thus provide the relevant skills.
- Non-formal and informal education - within families / in the work environment, where the passing of knowledge and skills regarding traditional crafts and customs happens naturally and the educational activities are based on transversal principles, such as respect towards the environment, social equity and gender equality.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Through the projects it implements, the Eibenthal community puts into practice the policy of using local resources. The education programs carried out at the village school focus on respect and protection for the environment, the subject of climate change being at the core of the educational activities.

The Banat Festival is also centered around activities that raise awareness regarding the quality of the natural environment, which are dedicated to both Romanian participants, as well as to those who come from the Czech Republic. At the same time, the transport made available to the participants is a sustainable one: the access from the Czech Republic is facilitated through a long-distance charter train, entitled „Banat Express”.

Last but not least, the location of the village, in the Iron Gates Natural Park, allows for the implementation of joint projects, to inform the local community and tourists about the environmental values that need protection. The tourist activities in the village of Eibenthal are therefore built around the motto „without plastic”, with the products and drinks being served directly on the spot, in reusable glass or ceramic containers.

## A COMMUNITY-BASED MODEL

The approach promoted by the Eibenthal Initiative was that of creating a community-based model for sustainable growth through responsible tourism (Gato et al. 2022). This refers to a gradual process, which develops organically, building upon previous experiences in order to constantly improve the existing situation, as well as to adapt to new stimuli.

At the same time, the entire process is built around the community’s needs and rhythms; as such, the desirable end result is not that of achieving unconditional economic growth, but rather that of creating a safe and inclusive environment, in which people can live their lives freely. Eibenthal village thus seeks to promote informal policies of integration and education, regardless of gender or age. As family businesses, the economic activities developed by the inhabitants include all the members of a household (including women), while also having a significant impact on the children.

Eibenthal also stands out through its informal processes of management in tourism, specific to small communities, in which the institutionalization and implementation of rigid policies could affect the existing relationships in the local community and the specifics of a place that is attractive precisely because of its naturalness. The mechanisms developed by the Eibenthal community can be

recognized as exceptional precisely because of their bottom-up, informal character. Therefore, the development of tourism in the village of Eibenthal is, in fact, the result of entrepreneurial initiatives developed around community involvement regarding the common interest, in which the support of local authorities is limited to infrastructure.

## CONCLUSIONS

Part of a network of seven Czech settlements developed in the Almăj Mountains (present-day Romania) under Austro-Hungarian rule, the village of Eibenthal is currently leading a revival process impacting the entire region. By adhering to the principles of the New European Bauhaus in all its activities, the Eibenthal Initiative stands out through both its informal management processes, as well as through its determination to influence for the better the entire network of Czech settlements in the Almăj Mountains.

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