

## **PILGRIMAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF ESTABLISHING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES**

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### **Summary**

*In a world of continuously changing environmental, social, economic and cultural circumstances where national or transnational communities are seeking different opportunities for sustainable development, pilgrimage has many roles and meanings. In one of the roles, pilgrimage could be a source for alleviating contemporary environmental and social problems, especially social poverty and pollution, assuring gender and social equality, enabling social inclusion of immigrants and persons with special needs, constructing creative living areas and healthier societies, and contributing to the well-being of local residents. Furthermore, group pilgrimage as a social activity can also foster cohesiveness and reciprocity among local residents and potentially stimulate different kinds of private-public partnerships or networks. As non-cooperation and incomprehension among the main actors of development (political decision-makers, experts, entrepreneurs, and local residents) are the main problems in establishing sustainable communities and resolving contemporary social and economic problems, we urgently need many formal and informal occasions for meetings, conversations, new acquaintances, exchange of ideas, needs and compromises. Pilgrimage as a social activity can provide opportunities to renew basic social values, like empathetic attitude towards other people, reciprocal trust and networking, and respect for ethics, and surpass individualism, competitiveness and pursuit of one's own interests.*

*There are two aspects how pilgrimage can ensure better living conditions. Firstly it is beneficial to pilgrims who take an active part in pilgrimage routes and make friends and compromises with other participants. Secondly it connects residents from a local community where pilgrimage is organised, because the process of preparation of events or routes does not activate only members of parishes or dioceses, but also practitioners from other sectors, such as handicrafts, arts, restaurants, tourist farms, youth organisations, producing industries and other small and medium entrepreneurs. In the past, pilgrimage was popular, among other reasons because it was the only opportunity for some people from rural communities to leave their farms and go on a trip. Continuation of such a long pilgrimage tradition in a village or a town can therefore enable preservation, presentation and use of local cultural heritage for contemporary needs and preservation of local diversity, which is of great importance in strengthening of local identity. Indeed, pilgrimage as a sacral activity can also represent a common identification element to construct and fortify transnational European identity and European heritage, as all European nations and religions visit sacral sites, albeit with different customs, habits and contexts. Besides, non-polluting alternatives of pilgrimage by bicycle or on foot stimulate preservation of nature and give important added value to sports activities, which contributes to healthier communities and the well-being of residents.*

*This paper explores different added values of pilgrimage in the context of fostering sustainable development and constructing sustainable communities. In particular through the*

*presentation of the theoretical background of sustainable development, analyses of different pilgrimage literature and the presentation of the contemporary role of the newly constructed church route in the THETRIS project, pilgrimage is presented in the context of using its benefits to empower people and ensure social innovation in order to create new social relationships or collaborations.*

*Keywords: Pilgrimage, sustainable development, cultural networks, European heritage, identity*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

European communities today are facing many challenges: technological change, globalization, climate change, transformation of gender roles, migrations, economic and social exclusion, and the ageing of the population. Contemporary global crises, especially social problems, make these challenges even more pressing. For this reason, the European Commission and national governments expend considerable effort towards successful realization of different programs, transnational projects and foundations to solve contemporary problems. However, despite all these efforts, European citizens are increasingly passive, uninterested and dissatisfied with their quality of life. The question that arises is why results, solutions and ideas are not bearing fruit. Experts and researchers have found different reasons for this situation, but the main problems are non-cooperation and incomprehension among the main actors of development – political decision-makers, experts, entrepreneurs and local residents. In theory, each European or national strategy emphasizes the need for different kinds of network or partnership, but in reality, it is very difficult to achieve reciprocal collaboration and coordinate the needs of all the actors. A collaborative approach requires a healthy and coherent society with values, such as an empathetic attitude towards other people and the natural environment, mutual trust and respect for ethics, but the prevailing conditions marked by individualism, competitiveness, pursuit of one's own economic interests and corruption create a problem. It is very hard to ensure sustainable development under such conditions, but it is the basic political strategy for future progress.

These problems, which almost all European countries are faced with, require new, innovative ways and tools to achieve better quality of life and a consensus to meet the challenges. There are many opportunities and possibilities for stakeholders to start working together; different cultural activities can be informal occasions for first meetings, presentations, communication and recognition. The main purpose of this paper is to outline possible ways, conditions and tools of how pilgrimage practices can be used as cultural and social activities for the formation of new networks which will stimulate a synergistic connection and, in the long run, also alleviate contemporary social and economic problems. While evolving in the light of contemporary social, cultural and economic situations around the world, pilgrimage is in its core still connected with spiritual dimensions, which are of crucial importance in contemporary life. With this in mind, the paper explains how to use spiritual, social and economic characteristics and other added values of pilgrimage to improve social, economic and cultural ways of life of today's population. Furthermore, we believe that pilgrimage, which involves different stakeholders (religious authorities, pilgrims, communities, tourism sector, youth, the elderly, small and medium entrepreneurship, etc.),

can provide informal opportunities for fostering principles of sustainable development, which strives to protect the environment, develop sustainable, innovative economy, build a compassionate and coherent society, preserve and develop cultural diversity, local values, meanings and regional identities, and establish intercultural and interreligious dialogues.

In the following chapters, a methodological background and purposes of different projects, where the contemporary role of pilgrimage is reflected, are presented first. Then, there is a brief review of theoretical issues of sustainable development and the meaning of cultural practices as an important element in achieving sustainable principles in local areas. As pilgrimage is discussed in terms of cultural practice, which is considered the fourth pillar in sustainable discourse, added values of different pilgrimage activities are presented further on. The last chapter describes the Slovenian regional pilgrimage route constructed during the *THETRIS* project and highlights some suggestions how to manage and use it in the future so that it will become a powerful medium for dialogue, express a regional identity, foster tourist destinations and provide a soft way for collaboration among different practitioners.

## **2. METHODOLOGY BACKGROUND**

The findings presented in this article are drawn from two projects: the transnational project *THETRIS – Thematic Transnational church Route development with the Involvement of local Society*, financed by Central Europe funds, and the postdoctoral project *Cultural heritage – a medium for the introduction of sustainable development*, financed by the Slovenian Research Agency. Both projects are dedicated to sustainable preservation, management and use of tangible and intangible heritage in order to support sustainable development of rural areas. The *THETRIS* project mostly deals with sacral heritage in Central European regions; results, which focus more or less on different strategic documents, are prepared by different partners. Whereas the postdoctoral project outlines meanings and significance of heritage in establishing sustainable communities; it is a research project whose purpose is also theoretical development of the concept of heritage and culture.

In the context of understanding and using pilgrimage as a source for establishing sustainable development, it is necessary to point out three main results of the *THETRIS* project. Between 1 July 2012 and 31 December 2014, the project has been developing different regional and joint strategies, constructing and testing innovative solutions to preserve sacral tangible and intangible heritage, promoting cross-border cooperation in rural regions and sharing common European knowledge; besides, it has also prepared regional and transnational church routes, which are the first main results of the project. Each partner constructed new regional church routes or re-constructed old ones, which should be the basis for different ways of preserving, managing and using of church heritage for fortifying and expressing a regional identity, developing sustainable tourism, and achieving healthy and coherent rural communities and the well-being of local residents. The regional routes were prepared in collaboration with local communities, especially local parishes and dioceses, taking into consideration the tradition of a community. In the Goriška region, which is situated in the western part of Slovenia, the church route is composed of fourteen pilgrimage churches from Gothic, baroque and Renaissance period, which are all dedicated to Virgin Mary. The most picturesque churches of important historical, art-historical and ethnographic value have been incorporated in the *THETRIS* virtual transnational church route, “which boasts a remarkable variety as a result of the rich history of Central Europe” (Makuc 2014: 1).

Some churches, included in the THETRIS route, were built at important roads which pilgrims, merchants and other people travelled (e.g. Via Francigena in the Susa Valley in the Province of Turin in Italy, Via Sacra in Czech Republic). This transnational church route can also be viewed as an element of strengthening and expressing of a transnational European identity and European cultural diversity. The second added value of the project is collaboration of eleven partners from different European countries (Hungary, Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia, Italy, Austria, Poland and Slovenia) and sectors (municipalities, associations of municipalities, provinces, development agencies, dioceses and research institutions), which has provided opportunities to point out different development problems of the regions and look for possible ways how to use cultural activities to alleviate contemporary problems. The third main result of the project was a training conducted by the Scientific research institution of Nova Gorica, where we discussed ways, methods, tools, and approaches for establishing local/regional/transnational networks among local authorities, scientists, economists and local associations/individuals to achieve better uses of culture and cultural heritage for advanced and successful cultural management and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, based on principles of sustainable development and uses of cultural heritage for fostering qualitative national progress, added values of different project activities were identified in order to make partners more aware of the potentials of culture. Special attention was given to the importance of intangible cultural heritage in development objectives, because preservation, restoration and renovation of cultural monuments (cathedrals, churches, castles and vernacular architecture) will have no effect if we do not consider the new, contemporary content of these monuments. We also observed and considered pilgrimage as cultural heritage activity, since pilgrimage has a long tradition all over the world, and as a cultural phenomenon, since it is continuously changing and it takes on many meanings and forms due to contemporary social, cultural and economic circumstances around the world. A new concept of heritage places special attention on the understanding that cultural heritage refers not only to material remnants, but also to intangible elements (the character of a place, customs, dialects, music, legends, poems, traditional skills and knowledge). Local communities, groups and in some cases individuals who live with heritage elements and potentially change them play an important role in the evaluation process of cultural heritage. The heritage of pilgrimage was discussed from the point of view of material heritage, focussing on history, art history of churches, pictures and old routes, and from the point of view of intangible practices, where legends, poems, meanings and memories of pilgrims were at the forefront. As the new concept of understanding heritage emphasizes that tangible and intangible heritage elements are indispensable symbols of personal or collective identification and evidence of social and economic improvement, it can and should also be incorporated into processes of advancing sustainable development; the question now is how we can link pilgrimage and sustainable development.

### **3. PILGRIMAGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Many discussions on development, conservation and management of cultural and natural landscape take place in the context of observing the principles of sustainable development, which ought to be a key regulator of economic progress in the society. Although the concept of sustainable development has become a politically abused word, its definition, emphasizing a careful balance between environmental, social and economic

development in order to meet the needs of current and future generations (The World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), assures a welfare development policy. New skills and knowledge have to be developed in such a way that the environment is not threatened and natural resources are used wisely. Since the environment is inextricably linked to the society and economy, because both become poorer if the environment is degraded, the philosophy of sustainable development formally consists of three inseparably bound pillars (environment, society, economy).

At first, culture was rarely mentioned in discourses on new principles of development; ecologists and political decision-makers did not recognize that culture could contribute directly to wider sustainable development goals, especially as a powerful driver of social sustainability. However, UNESCO, the Council of Europe and many experts from different cultural institutions have made a great effort to highlight the important contribution of culture to development initiatives and achievement of national development objectives. In 2002, *Agenda 21 for Culture* was adopted, which is intended for local governments and focuses on the significance of culture for sustainable development of a local region, based on respect for cultural diversity, human rights, intercultural dialogue, participatory democracy, sustainability and peace. Culture was designated as the fourth pillar of sustainable development ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agenda\\_21\\_for\\_culture](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agenda_21_for_culture)). The 2011 United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/65/166 highlights similar aspects, which “recognize that culture is an essential component of human development, represents a source of identity, innovation and creativity for the individual and the community and is an important factor in the fight against poverty, providing for economic growth and ownership of development processes” (Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 2011: 1).

In all these documents as well as in this paper, culture is understood in a broader context, as a whole way of life, or more specifically as “shared meanings”, where different thoughts, ideas, feelings, memories and experiences are shared among participants, who are the main builders, bearers and mediators of meanings that cultural elements embody. According to Stuart Hall, culture “is not so much a set of things /.../ as processes, a set of practices” (Hall 2003: 2), in which, through production and exchange of meanings of things, people and events, the world is interpreted by citizens in roughly the same ways. If we concentrate on pilgrimage as a cultural process and on its role in building sustainable development, it is not pilgrimage as a thing (e.g. pilgrimage churches, books, routes, etc.) that is important, but rather different pilgrimage practices (e.g. creating pilgrimage routes, preparation of pilgrimage gathering, physical preparation for long pilgrimage, reading pilgrimage literature etc.) that give pilgrimage and the whole life a meaning. In order to use and upgrade pilgrimage for today's purposes of sustainable development and find efficient approaches for management of pilgrimage centres, the key is to know the meanings that have been ascribed to pilgrimage in a particular society in different periods and find out how and why these meanings of pilgrimage have changed over time and who has influenced these changes. Meanings, embodied by cultural elements, are expressed in different ways. A meaning is what gives us a feeling of identity (who we are and where we belong). It is connected with the way we use cultural elements (e.g. pilgrimage churches) to identify and maintain collective identity within a particular community and to distinguish it from other groups. Meanings of cultural elements are produced and exchanged through every interaction, like a conversation among pilgrims from different countries, whereas possession or embodiment of meanings occurs through processes of claim, use or inclusion of these elements in everyday rituals and habits. After all, it is meanings that regulate and organize practices and habits in people's lives and help set rules, norms and conventions which govern

the life of a society (Hall 2003: 3).

We give pilgrimage meaning depending on how we represent it in books, diaries, forums and other internet sides, where we share our experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings. It would be worth researching the words we use to express pilgrimage experience, the stories we tell about it, the images we produce, the emotions we associate with it, the way we classify and conceptualize it, and the values we place on it.

In one of numerous books about the Camino pilgrimage route, the authors – a couple Saša Djura Jelenko and Vinko Jelenko - expressed their motives for publishing a book as follows:

“Experiences and feelings on this long journey, new discoveries on the path of self-awareness and searching for deeper meaning of a human life influenced us during the journey and also later on. /.../ We were becoming more and more aware of the fact that this journey was yet another trial that led to certain changes in the understanding of ourselves and the world and life around us. We both thought that this experience was worth describing and sharing. The book is /.../ to a great extent written as a travel diary of adventures, enriched with photos, some historical and statistical data, and even some recipes; nevertheless, the writing of this book was for us both a process of self-awareness.” (Djura Jelenko, Jelenko 2010: 9)

Culture is involved in all human practices and permeates through the whole society; the study and understanding of culture underline different dimensions of development, where the processes of how the meaning of pilgrimage was constructed during different periods, the conditions of its changing, wider consequences of its alteration and ways of how to use it in contemporary society are of crucial importance. Many historical books on pilgrimage point out that “pilgrimage to holy places is an ancient form of devotion, which is very popular also in modern times, although reasons for such journeys nowadays differ from religious to touristic and recreational” (Knez 2010: 6). In order to perceive pilgrimage as a means to achieve sustainable development, we first need to understand and study why the tradition of pilgrimage is preserved and developed, how this tradition has changed over time, which values have been preserved, who has influenced the preservation of these values, what meaning pilgrimage has for development of an individual and the society, and what has marked the tradition of pilgrimage on a broader world level and on a narrower local level. Only after we have obtained answers to these questions, will we be able to realize how to adapt and use pilgrimage for modern development.

Culture has an unavoidable role in reflecting past and present experiences, needs, desires and expectations of the local population and broader socio-political and economic flows. If political authorities, experts or economists impose development practices which local residents value negatively or which have no tradition in a given environment, the local population will have more difficulty in adapting them and may in some cases even resist. Furthermore, Keith Nurse highlights the importance of how development is understood in a specific society or a local community, because “when it comes to sustainable development, not all cultures are equal, some cultures are more equal than others, depending on the political and historical context” (Nurse 2006: 36). As culture represents the meanings and practices of development at its epistemic core, it should be viewed not just as an additional pillar of sustainable development along with environmental, economic and social objectives, but as the central pillar, “because peoples’ identities, signifying systems, cosmologies and epistemic frameworks shape how the environment is viewed and lived in” (Nurse 2006: 36).

Based on the considerations outlined above, we realize that planning the development of

a particular community requires necessary knowledge of the social and historical reality or more specific knowledge of the way of life of the residents, which is also reflected in pilgrimage history and its heritage. Moreover, the history of the way of life of our ancestors and the history of pilgrimage clearly show us that people knew the principles of sustainable development already a long time ago. Our ancestors were forced to live in harmony with nature as their survival depended on natural resources, that is why they adjusted their lifestyle and exploitation of natural resources to preservation of the environment. Besides, they established good relations with fellow villagers because they needed help of neighbours, friends and other people (day labourers) with larger works at the farm. In the past, when technological changes occurred much slower than today and the world was not connected in a virtual way as today, cultural peculiarities that were shaped in harmony with nature were always adjusted to the knowledge, strength and courage of people. Similar happened also with the history of pilgrimage. The primary purpose of pilgrimage was devotion that people alone or in a group, at a church or a holy place, performed with special rituals as an expression of their faith. Pilgrimage, however, was not always associated with the Christian lifestyle only; it also aimed at forgetting about domestic trouble, leaving home for a short while and getting to know new places and cultures. The Slovene historian Olga Janša Zorn places pilgrimage among the first forms of unorganized tourism. Although motives for pilgrimage were primarily of religious nature (penance for a sinful life, prayer for salvation, supplication in times of difficult life trials, thanksgiving), a decision to go on pilgrimage to a near or a more distant place was also influenced by a wish to travel, relax, experience new, unknown places and enjoy with friends. For Slovene peasants who spent weeks and months working hard on their land, going on pilgrimage was the only way to relax and travel. Pilgrims, organized in bigger or smaller groups, went on a pilgrimage in a procession, led by a guide - a role that is nowadays often performed by local priests. Guides usually also knew everything about the holy place they visited, they knew pilgrimage legends and miracles, they maintained order and discipline, and functioned as mediators between priests and the people in cases of disputes. Historical data on visits to pilgrim places show that pilgrimage has always been a popular form of socializing and travelling. It is therefore worth preserving, together with the values and meanings ascribed to it by our ancestors; however, it should also be upgraded according to the needs, technological know-how, possibilities and demands of the modern life. From the point of view of achieving sustainable development and solving contemporary social, environmental and economic problems, pilgrimage can be considered in several aspects.

In order to ensure ecological balance, alleviate climate changes and achieve a low-carbon society, old forms of pilgrimage on foot or by bicycle should be encouraged, especially on pilgrimage routes with long tradition and history, like the ones to St. Jacob in Santiago de Compostela, the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, the Shrine of the Three Kings in Cologne, Aachen (also known as German Rome) and, of course, Rome, at first to the grave of the apostle Peter, and later to the grave of the Pope. Many pilgrimage churches are situated on hills, so that people have to make an extra effort to reach them, thus doing their penance or prayers of intercession. Furthermore, tradition of preserving important European pilgrimage centres enables preservation of cultural and local diversity, which is of great importance in strengthening of local identity. Pilgrimage on foot or by bicycle also fosters sustainable tourism and provides opportunities to resolve contemporary social problems that are connected with individualism. Pilgrimage is usually a group activity that gives an opportunity to make friends with pilgrims from other regions, countries or nations. This approach leads to another added value of pilgrimage in the social dimension, which is seen in the processes of

empowering people and achieving social innovations. According to the EU document *Empowering people, driving change: Social innovation in the European Union*, prepared by the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA), social innovations are “new ideas (products, services and models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. As these innovations are not only good for society, but also enhance society’s capacity to act” (BEPA 2011: 9), pilgrimage can help with social needs that many development strategies mention, like promoting well-being among citizens, bringing generations together, stimulating lifelong learning (teaching new languages, histories of pilgrimage centres, cultures) and a knowledge-based society, mobilizing people’s creativity in a non-usual way of life, which pilgrimage demands, and ensuring cultural diversity. Because pilgrimage practices are usually social activities which involve different participants, they can potentially activate many people who are otherwise excluded from the society, lack self-confidence, are tired of inhumane political decisions or grapple with unemployment, etc. For communities with pilgrimage sights preparation of pilgrimage events can foster new economic opportunities, which can contribute to creativity and realization of new ideas, products or services (new hotels, crafts). People can also meet needs for personal development, such as gaining new skills, experience, confidence and self-esteem, as well as needs for changed attitudes, cultural awareness, communication and memory. Inclusion of young people in preparation of pilgrimage context leads to intergenerational ties; besides, their youthful creativity improves pilgrimage practices fundamentally. Preparation of pilgrimage meetings or routes can also enable opportunities for informal connections and interactions, which can potentially grow into other forms of economic cooperation. The process of preparing such activities does not involve only people from sacral institutions (such as parishes, dioceses) and members of local associations, but also practitioners in handicrafts and arts, owners of restaurants or tourist farms, youth organizations, and production industries, who present their products and enrich the content of these activities. This leads to many possibilities for networking among different sectors and residents, especially if the preparation of events includes local authorities, cultural institutions, development agencies, small and medium entrepreneurs, and (young) volunteers from local associations. Furthermore, such events can continue the tradition of a village/town, which is of crucial importance for the strengthening of local/regional identities and bringing together of inhabitants, who are the main builders of healthier, sustainable communities and a creative environment.

#### **4. REGIONAL CHURCH ROUTE IN THE GORIŠKA REGION IN SLOVENIA IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

Pilgrimage has a long tradition in Slovenia, which can be demonstrated by many pilgrimage routes and churches. Almost 400 of them are dedicated to Virgin Mary. Mary worship increased in Slovenia in the 12th century, when numerous spiritual songs and legends were produced. The number of churches dedicated to Virgin Mary grew during Turkish invasion and, even more so, in the 16th and 17th centuries, in the periods of Counter-Reformation and baroque. The pilgrims have appealed to Virgin Mary with many requests, thanks and promises, which are not expressed only in prayers, but also in songs and legends. The regional church route, which was established during the THETRIS project, includes 14 pilgrim churches dedicated to Virgin Mary in the Goriška region, from the Julian Alps in the north-western part of Slovenia to the Karst region close to the Italian border.



The pilgrimage route is named after a well-known Slovene religious song 'Marija, skoz življenje voditi srečno znaš' (Mary, you know how to lead us happily through life), which gave our ancestors courage to cope with turbulent personal and social problems. We can thus link past times and cultural heritage with today's insecure social and economic situation. Also today, the life of Virgin Mary and this song, which praises her gracefulness and helpfulness, can encourage us to have more compassion for other people. Besides its tangible and intangible sacral heritage, the route is enriched with various natural values and historical curiosities, which present interesting history and culture of the Goriška region. The geographical position of the region at the crossroads of the Mediterranean, the Alps and Central Europe, and of Roman, Slavic and Germanic linguistic groups has influenced the landscape and the history and left a number of cultural heritage objects and intangible elements, which nowadays present important symbols for social identities and potentials for good-quality sustainable development.

The content for the regional church route was developed in three regional working meetings with different stakeholders: director of the Goriška Regional Museum, president of the non-governmental organization Forum za Goriško, local priests, Association of Friends of Routes dedicated to St. Jacob in Slovenia, head of Department of the Institute for the Protection of Cultural Heritage from Nova Gorica and representatives of tourist offices. First, we wanted to develop a route which would connect to the already existent paths, like the Route of St. Jacob, the Route of Priest Otmar, and the Route of Three Pilgrim Churches at the border between Slovenia and Italy, but in the end we decided to construct an independent church route which would connect sub-regions of the Goriška region, make the region more recognizable and possibly become a symbol of the regional identity.

Although the Goriška region is famous for its beautiful environment with a specific way of life of its residents, it is also confronted with lots of social and economic problems which have worsened development potentials for improvement of people's everyday lives. The main challenge of economic and social development is how to beat the recession, which has been influencing greatly the lives of its inhabitants from the end of 2008. The main problems of the economy are a small number of innovations, unsuccessful cooperation and interaction between public and private sectors, in particular among research institutions and economy, and slow development of touristic sector (touristic offers, offices). One of the consequences of this situation is brain drain from the region. As the region is composed of 13 municipalities, which are organised within four sub-regions (the Upper Soča Valley, the territory of Idrijsko and Cerkljansko, the sub-region of Nova Gorica and the Upper Vipava Valley), the problem is also that the local identities of sub-regions are in fact strengthened, but the sense of belonging to the Goriška region among residents is very weak. There are no common elements for collective identification processes. However, the regional SWOT analysis, performed in the THETRIS project, has shown strengths and opportunities which could ensure progresses for a better quality of living environment. Moreover, important historical and sacral pilgrimage centres with enriched contemporary contents can become an important generator for social and economic development, as pilgrimage has always presented an opportunity for different kinds of connections and collaborations among private and public institutions. We wish that the church route would make a step forward in resolving some development problems, like cooperation among tourist information centres (TICs), parishes, cloisters and local communities, development of local communities, encouragement of the spiritual aspect of church heritage, awareness of the importance of church heritage among specific social groups. For dissemination of information on the regional church route, a special booklet was prepared, which residents gladly accepted. Besides a detailed

description of historical, art-historical and ethnological characteristics of the churches, it also explains the role of pilgrimage in contemporary times.



Fig. 1. " Map of the regional church route dedicated to Virgin Mary pilgrimage churches in the Goriška region"

In the framework of the THETRIS project we also prepared a regional strategy with the involvement of the regional church route. The vision of the strategy emphasises the importance of “connected, united and understanding residents in the sustainably developed and creative communities of the Goriška region who are deeply aware that cultural heritage, just like sacral heritage, enables innovative social and economic potentials”. The strategic approach will strive to achieve innovative development of economic, social, environmental and cultural activities and the establishment of public-private networks among local residents with the consciousness that also community’s tradition and tangible and intangible cultural heritage can be used as a mechanism to achieve a better quality of life in the future.

According to this vision we prepared three concrete actions, which can raise awareness among local residents of the connected Goriška region in “soft” way with the help of common cultural treasures. According to the main sustainable principles and appropriate development approaches, which demand knowledge of history of the life of our ancestors as well as knowledge of contemporary needs of residents, the first action is dedicated to basic research of historical, ethnological, art-historical, sociological and geographical study of historical pilgrimage routes and church cultural heritage. Knowledge of historical processes, facts, old crafts etc. that have characterised our region can contribute to a successful valorisation of church cultural heritage through development of innovative products (touristic, agricultural, hand-made, etc.). Innovative touristic and other products can stimulate touristic and general development of the Goriška region. For example, discovery of ancient recipes can give

entrepreneurs an opportunity to develop interesting new products that link tradition and innovation. On the basis of research, analysis and synthesis of important historical data, training activities and dissemination materials for the Goriška region will be prepared. The aim of this second action is to prompt collaboration among different groups involved in sacral heritage preservation and give our Scientific Research Center (ZRC SAZU Nova Gorica) an opportunity to be a mediator between different actors who are involved in development activities. The role of scientists and experts is not just to research, observe or evaluate cultural practices, but also to help, encourage and stimulate people on the field to become more active, and improve awareness of local and regional stakeholders of social and economic potentials of sacral objects in the region. The last action, which could continue working sustainably on the results achieved in the project, is to develop and implement a new mobile application dedicated to the Holy Virgin Mary pilgrimage churches of the Goriška region with the title Searching for Holy Virgin Mary. Users of the application will be taken on a quest where they will have to answer questions and solve riddles, so presumably they will also visit the churches in question. After having finished the quest in the fields of local history and history of art and folclore, the users will be rewarded with a virtual apparition of Holy Virgin Mary. From our point of view, this mobile application will be an innovative solution for preservation of intangible cultural heritage of the involved churches and sustainability of the regional church route, because it could motivate people, especially the young, to visit churches and inform them about their rich cultural heritage through an attractive tool.

All three actions, which were developed in the regional sustainability plan for the Goriška region, were prepared according to the guidelines of sustainable development and took into consideration the importance of collaboration between different stakeholders. The actions involve scientists, who will prepare the content, touristic workers, who will develop and apply the content according to demands of tourists, and locals, who will take an active part in the research process, training activities and the use of new tehnological tools.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

In a world of continuously changing environmental, social and economic circumstances, conditions and products, pilgrimage too has many faces, as it can be perceived as a cultural, social and/or spiritual activity and as a source for making collaboration approaches easier and more effective. Futhermore, the role of pilgrimage culture is inevitably connected with processes of alleviating contemporary problems, especially overcoming passiveness of local residents, social poverty and pollution, generating ideas for innovative economic products, enabling social inclusion of immigrants and persons with special needs, and constructing creative living areas, healthier societies and the well-being of local residents. Of course, many obstacles have to be overcome to see pilgrimage as an important source of achieving sustainable development, especially sustainable communities with connected and coherent residents. The first step to be taken could be the understanding that culture and its practices are an important pillar of sustainable development. Pilgrimage heritage is not here for its own sake, it is rather something that fills our hearts, it is here to empower us to solve contemporary social and economic problems and achieve our potential for better and healthier lives, work and collaboration. We simply need many formal and informal occasions, opportunities and conditions to demonstrate and use important development potential.

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