

## **Bridging the Divide: Empowering Croatian Communities through Bottom-up Sustainable Development**

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**Abstract** In the face of escalating and interconnected social and ecological crises, there is an urgent need to reimagine development strategies toward more just, inclusive, and regenerative human–ecosystem relationships. This paper presents the case study of the “Community Potentials” Program, a novel initiative launched in 2023 by the National Foundation for Civil Society Development in Croatia. The program seeks to empower Croatian local communities through sustainable, community-led development, with a strong focus on building human capacities and fostering local innovation.

Croatia currently faces territorial imbalance: coastal regions are increasingly shaped by resource-intensive tourism and infrastructure development, resulting in environmental and socio-cultural impacts (e.g., biodiversity loss, GHG emissions, gentrification, overtourism). In contrast, many rural inland areas suffer from depopulation, economic stagnation, and a lack of public services. Both types of regions experience marginalization in top-down governance structures, limiting community agency and creating socio-economic disparities.

To address this divide, the “Community Potentials” Program introduces a bottom-up development model under the i3.0 Strategic Partnerships for Community Innovation framework. Its core objective is to transform passive communities into proactive agents of change by identifying and activating their unique local resources. The program promotes human capacity-building for sustainability, supports locally driven initiatives, and aims to create inclusive socio-economic environments.

In its first phase, the program is being led in eight Croatian cities. This contribution outlines the design and methodology of the research, and the preliminary results of its first phase which combines online questionnaires and on-site visits to gather baseline data on sustainability conditions in participating cities. Conducted in partnership with Eurac Research and Relatomics, this exploratory phase provides a snapshot of territorial challenges and potentials, offering a foundation for tailored community action and laying the groundwork for the co-creation of a targeted educational program to support long-term local development.

Preliminary findings highlight the importance of participatory approaches, education, local knowledge integration, and context-sensitive development pathways. The authors discuss emerging strengths and limitations of the research and offer insights

into fostering resilient and equitable communities in Croatia and across the Mediterranean region. The study contributes to the broader discussion on territorial justice, community empowerment, and sustainable local development.