

# Post-pandemic Dubrovnik – Degrowth Scenario

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## Abstract

*The City of Dubrovnik, one of Europe's most famous capitals of tourism was strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Phenomenon of overtourism is considered as a key development problem of the City of Dubrovnik which consequently causes dramatic socioeconomic changes and environmental issues. Pandemic offered a chance to rethink current urban models and re-invent urban models into more resilient and more sustainable forms. This article will explore the potential of transformation of Dubrovnik future development according to the degrowth principles with a goal to facilitate a truly sustainable tourism in the post-pandemic era. This article proposes guidelines for the future development of the City of Dubrovnik with the aim of transitioning toward urban degrowth scenario. This scenario focuses on sustainable forms of tourism, diversification of the economy, preserving the environment and encouraging active involvement of citizens in the development of the city. Methodology used in this paper is based on in-depth analysis of documents relevant to this topic.*

## Keywords

*Dubrovnik, overtourism, degrowth, sustainability, urban development*

## 1. Introduction

The City of Dubrovnik, one of Europe's most famous capitals of tourism was strongly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the pandemic, initiatives to address important development issues of the City of Dubrovnik such as overtourism have emerged.

The phenomenon of overtourism is considered as a key development problem of the City of Dubrovnik which consequently causes dramatic socioeconomic changes and environmental issues. The monoculture of tourism, as well as mass tourism characteristics, negatively affect the quality of life of the local population (KaturiĆ et al, 2020). However, tourism has a positive effect on the city's economic indicators. Due to its exceptional historical and cultural importance, the Old City of Dubrovnik was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, which is a strong attractive factor in tourism (Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik, 2021). As a result of travelling restrictions established due to COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020 an undeniable drop in number of tourists has been recorded. Pandemic offered a chance to rethink current urban models and re-invent new more resilient and more sustainable urban models (Facing and learning from COVID-19, 2021). The conflicts caused by overtourism could be seen as a 'wake-up call' for pursuing degrowth strategies to achieve a sustainable tourism (Higgins-Desbiolles et al, 2021). The concept of degrowth has emerged as an alternative solution to existing tourist development paradigm that has led to high level of socioeconomic conflicts and ecological degradation. This article will explore the potential of transformation of Dubrovnik future development according to the degrowth principles with a goal to facilitate a truly sustainable tourism in the post-pandemic era (Fletcher et al, 2019). Methodology used in this paper is based on in-depth analysis of documents (strategies, research papers, publications, etc.) relevant to this topic.

## 2. Degrowth in post-pandemic era

The term degrowth comes from the French term '*décroissance*', first used by André Gorz in 1972, wondering whether it is possible to combine the degrowth of material production as a necessary precondition for the balance of the use of spatial resources with the continuation of capitalism. The term denotes the concept frame, but also the social movement accompanied with social innovations. During the first phase of development of degrowth concept in the 1970s, focus was put on resource constraints, while in the second phase, which began in 2001, the main topic was criticism of the idea of 'sustainable development' (D'Alisa et al, 2014). Degrowth indicates an idea that critiques the global capitalist system with a goal of achieving growth at all costs. Activists and researchers who support degrowth idea prioritize social and ecological well-being instead of corporate profits, over-production and excess consumption (Degrowth, 2021). Degrowth can also be defined as a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory and ecologically sustainable society. Objectives of degrowth are to meet basic human needs and enable a high quality of life, while reducing the ecological impact of the global economy to a more sustainable level. Even though the ecological efficiency of the production and consumption of goods and services has been achieved, global economic growth resulted in increased extraction of natural resources and increased waste and emissions (Flipo and Schenider, 2008).

Degrowth Declaration of the Paris 2008 Conference defines typical characteristics of degrowth, which are:

- An emphasis on quality of life rather than quantity of consumption;
- The fulfilment of basic human needs for all;
- Societal change based on a range of diverse individual collective actions and policies;
- Substantially reduced dependence on economic activity and an increase in free time, unremunerated activity, conviviality, sense of community, and individual and collective health;
- Encouragement of self-reflection, balance, creativity, flexibility, diversity, good citizenship, generosity and non-materialism;
- Observation of the principles of equity, participatory democracy, respect for human rights, and respect for cultural differences (Research and Degrowth, 2010).

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the global tourism industry has experienced sustained yearly increase of 4% since at least 1950. Critique of overtourism calls into question this growth itself because this growth represents an essential obstacle in the face of sustainability (Fletcher et al, 2019). Hall was the first one to propose the concept of degrowth to move to more sustainable forms of tourism. Also, he defines a steady state tourism – system that encourages qualitative development but not accumulate quantitative growth that unsustainably reduces natural resources (Hall, 2009). Redefining tourism in the context of degrowth is of great importance for improving the quality of life of the local population of tourist destinations, as well as for reducing the negative environmental impacts of tourism. The conflicts caused by overtourism could be seen as a '*wake-up call*' and pursuing degrowth strategies is vital for tourism to have a more sustainable future based on the interests of local communities (Higgins-Desbiolles et al, 2019).

As underscored by EURO CITIES' investigation of cities' responses to the COVID-19 outbreak, terms of proximity, inclusion, participation, health and sustainability are becoming crucial in rethinking current unsustainable urban paradigms. Plans for recovery should be designed and implemented for and with the people (Facing and learning from COVID-19, 2021).

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has made it possible to draw several important conclusions regarding the current development of tourism. First, the crisis has proven the danger of the economy's dependence on tourism, both on local and global level. Second, the crisis has shown that it is possible for

government to influence the restrictions on mobility, although the opposite has often been defined in overtourism debates (Fletcher et al, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic provides us with an opportunity to reimagine the future of tourism that will create innovations for wellbeing and the environment, over economic growth. Slow tourism is one kind of tourism proposed as an alternative economic practice to the dominant paradigm of capitalism and mass consumerism (Everingham and Chassagne, 2020). The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to diversify the economy and to increase resilience of an economy which is dependent on one branch. This is particularly important in the context of tourism development. The new territorial development model should evaluate resources that are unused and can contribute to more sustainable spatial economic, social and environmental development. The future of the EU focuses on green and digital transition, and many documents point to the need to create a sustainable and circular economy, green infrastructure, organic agriculture and generally sustainable economic development (KaturiĆ et al, 2020).

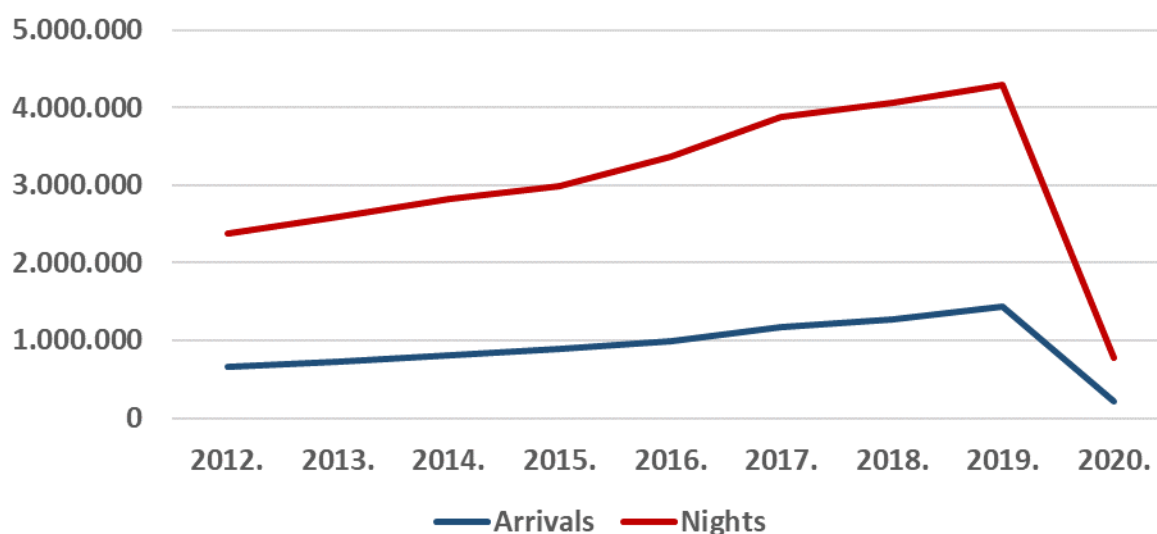
The European Green Deal is considered as essential to the EU's capacities to make EU climate impact neutral, while tackling the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic. Some of the key goals of European Green Deal are decarbonising the energy sector, reducing pollution, promoting resource-efficient building and renovation, creating environmentally friendly food system and preserving biodiversity. The Farm to Fork Strategy represent a vital part of the European Green Deal aiming to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly. COVID-19 pandemic underlined that existing unsustainable food systems aren't resilient to crisis and shift to a sustainable food system can bring environmental, health and social benefits. Sustainable food systems are an important element for achieving the climate and environmental objectives of Green Deal (European Green Deal, 2019).

### 3. Diagnosis of 'overtourism'

In the context of tourism development before the COVID-19 pandemic, the most prominent problem was the development of uncontrolled tourism with a high level of concentration of tourism turnover in a narrowed area and time based on maximization of profits without mutual synergy and overall optimisation which creates a feeling of uncoordinated development, improvisation and neglect of other elements of sustainable tourism development (society, culture, landscape and environment). Tourism represents the key economic sector of the city of Dubrovnik and as such influences the social, economic and spatial aspect of the City. According to the Tourism Development Strategy of the City of Dubrovnik, the total revenue of the tourism sector accounts for as much as 3/5 of the total revenue of the economy of the City of Dubrovnik. If the calculation is supplemented by indirect influences (services, shops, etc.), tourism generates slightly more than 4/5 of the revenue of the economy of the City of Dubrovnik. Consequently, the most important development problem of the City of Dubrovnik is the monoculture of tourism – the economic dependence on tourism that affects almost all socio-economic and ecological aspects of life in the city (KaturiĆ et al, 2020). The monoculture of tourism became an even more important problem during the pandemic because tourism and hospitality have experienced a significant decline due to restrictive measures (Facing and learning from COVID-19, 2021). Reducing the consumption and activities of enterprises as a consequence of the pandemic led to a sharp decline in GDP in the Republic of Croatia (National Recovery and Resilience Plan, 2021).

In 2019 the City of Dubrovnik recorded 1,439,531 arrivals and 4,295,071 overnight stays in 2019, accounting for 7,3% of total tourist arrivals and 4,7% of total tourist nights of the Republic of Croatia. Compared to 2012, there was an increase of as much as 119% of arrivals and 81% of overnight stays. After a record 2019, a global COVID-19 pandemic destabilised global tourism market. In 2020 the City of Dubrovnik recorded only 219,683 tourist arrivals and 775,954 tourist nights, which is only about 15% arrivals and 18% of overnight stays recorded in 2019. A drastic decline in the tourism sector has

negatively affected the general indicators of the economy of the City of Dubrovnik, affecting higher unemployment and lower revenues.



**Figure 1. Changes in the number of tourist arrivals and overnight stays in the City of Dubrovnik in the period 2012-2020. Source: Croatian Bureau of Statistics. (2021)**

The existing model for the development of Dubrovnik is a result of coordinated activities of the Spatial Plan of the City of Dubrovnik, The Strategic Plan of the City of Dubrovnik 2018-2020, The Dubrovnik Development Programme until 2020, Cultural Development Strategy of the City of Dubrovnik, Tourism Development Strategy of the City of Dubrovnik and other sectoral strategic documents. According to these documents, the overload of the historical city centre with tourists has been highlighted as a key development problem affecting other determinants of the quality of life in the city.

The City of Dubrovnik is under the influence of excessive number of tourists and daily visitors – which can be directly identified as ‘overtourism’. For this reason, the unplanned and uncontrolled mass tourism resulted in a series of negative changes in form of decreasing the number of inhabitants in Old City of Dubrovnik, gentrification of the area, tourism monoculture and degradation of authenticity. In 2015, the Reactive Monitoring Mission of UNESCO and ICOMOS highlighted problems caused by the excessive development of tourism and related services such as increased costs of living and gentrification, which ultimately reduces the quality of life of local population and endangers the status of the UNESCO World Heritage Property. Problems were also recorded in the manner and scope of construction in urbanized areas, narrowing public space, reducing public green areas and congestion of transport infrastructure. The necessity of problem solving resulted in the development of ‘Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik’ which aims to redirect the management of the site including remodelling of tourism development within its scope. In order to understand the needs for change, it is important to identify key problems in the tourist development of city. ‘Overtourism’ generally negatively affects the quality of life. Mayor disadvantages in the context of quality of life are overcrowded parts of the city especially during the summer months, as well as the noise, pollution and extremely high pressure on the existing structure of catering, accommodation and other facilities and services (Panayiotopoulos and Pisano, 2019). An uncontrolled increase in tourist activity in a certain area leads to the disappearance of spatial specificities. In order to preserve the specificities of the area and the long-term competitiveness of the destination, the definition of the carrying capacity is of great importance (Mrđa, 2014).

### 3.1. Socio-economic consequences of ‘overtourism’

‘Overtourism’ has a negative impact on the socio-economic character of the area and the consequences are demographic decline, traffic congestion, loss of cultural identity and lack of acceptable housing

solutions for local people. In Dubrovnik, gentrification is exceptionally noticeable because the city's offer is more adapted to tourists, who do not participate in the same measure nor with the same needs in everyday life in the city centre, and less to the local population and the fulfilment of their needs, which due to seasonality, additionally weakens the functionality of city centre (Kunst, 2017). Tourist development based primarily on the offer of tourist accommodation and the valorisation of basic natural and cultural elements results in an excessive concentration of tourist trends in a certain area, which consequently causes tourist polarization and a high rate of seasonality (GamberožiĆ and Tonković, 2015).

The uncontrolled development of tourism in Dubrovnik influenced changes in socio-economic characteristics in the city center, causing gentrification. According to Čaldarović and Šarinić (2008), gentrification is defined as the introduction of new specific and exclusive elements and not the rehabilitation of the deteriorated conditions of life for the existing inhabitants, in its physical and social meanings. Rapid gentrification mostly affected the decreasing quality of life of the local population and substantial reduction in the authenticity of the tourist experience (Kunst, 2017, Pine and Gilmore, 1999). Gentrification led to the marginalisation of the local population and especially of young population because overprices of renting apartments affected the local population to leave the old city (Panayiotopoulos and Pisano, 2019).

Another important problem is the lack of incentives for local population to participate in development planning, making decisions affecting the quality of life for inhabitants, planning sustainable development, as well as protecting and preserving the environment and heritage. The priorities for development are the preservation of 'living city' with a goal to retain the number of inhabitants in the old city centre and encouraging active participation in shaping the future development of the city (Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik, 2021).

Connecting agriculture and tourism could help to reduce the burden on the old city centre and reduce economic dependence on tourism. The rural area around the City of Dubrovnik has favourable climatic conditions for cultivation of many Mediterranean crops. The main limitations in the development of agriculture are fragmentation of agricultural land and lack of organized purchase of products. Great potential for this area represents the development of organic agriculture, as well as introduction of recognizability and quality labels for local products. Linking the urban and rural part of the city through co-existence of agriculture and tourism represent an important step toward realization of the sustainability of the city (Local Development Strategy LAG 5, 2020).

Most of inhabitants focused on tourism and the activities connected with the food production have almost disappeared. Tourism potentials of the region could be more connected with the health, sports, environmental, educational, cultural and rural offerings – forms of tourism that could be developed all year long providing more possibilities to promote traditional and local products (Corrà and Marangoni, 2019). According to the CE Slow Food Strategy (2020), promotion of organic and traditional production could be seen as way to bring a new, more creative and more sustainable type of tourism with the same or even better financial results. According to the main conclusions of the survey conducted in 2016 Socio-economic aspect of the farms of the Dubrovnik-Herzegovina region, the synergy of agriculture and tourism has been recognized as an important development potential. Linking the agriculture and tourism sectors could help reduce economic dependence on tourism and relieve the city centre of tourist visits during the season.

### 3.2. Environmental consequences of 'overtourism'

The uncontrolled development of tourism has negatively affected the environment, which has consequently influenced the deterioration of the quality of life for inhabitants. Some of the key negative consequences of the existing tourism development are increased waste, pollution of water, air and soil,

as well as noise pollution (Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik, 2021).

In the aspect of public area management, the biggest problem is the disappearance of green areas due to process of unstrategic urban sprawl. This can lead to the increase of floods as a consequence of deficiency of absorptive surfaces. Climate change represent an important challenge for the future of the city. Urban green areas can have a positive effect for climate change adaptation and lack of green areas could be a significant problem for the cities of Mediterranean climate (Hrdalo et al, 2015). According to the International Climate Modelling Results, the Mediterranean basin is considered as a climate hot spot with particularly pronounced effects of climate change. Also, Climate Risk Assessment Report (2019) stated that an increase in sea level by 1.8-2 m by the year 2100 would be sufficient to cause severe flooding of historical downtown of Dubrovnik.

In terms of traffic, the City of Dubrovnik is an overburdened city. Key traffic challenges are traffic jams and lack of parking spaces (Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik, 2021). Cruising tourism is also recognized as a challenge because the majority of tourists arrive to the city by cruise ships. Except traffic jams, cruise ships cause significant environmental issues such as enormous discharge of sewage and carbon emissions. Gruž harbour in Dubrovnik suffers severely from the fumes and the soot emitted by the cruise ships (Van den Dobbelen et al, 2018).

#### 4. Dubrovnik Degrowth Scenario

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of the economy of the city which revenue of the tourism sector accounts for as much as 3/5 of the total revenue of the economy. Apart from economic unsustainability, 'overtourism' influenced the degradation of the quality of life of local people, causing emigration from old city centre which is the most significantly influenced by tourism. Traffic pollution, excessive accumulation of waste during the tourist season and disappearance of green zones due to uncontrolled urban expansion represent a strong threat to the quality of the natural environment. Although the introduction of restrictive measures in response to the pandemic has a negative impact on the economic trends of the city of Dubrovnik, the pandemic provides an opportunity to reflect on the city's new development vision. A new development vision of the city could follow a degrowth concept that brings together ideas aimed at improving the quality of life, involving the local community in making important decisions and preserving the environment. Pandemic offered a chance to rethink current urban model and re-invent new more resilient and more sustainable urban model of the City of Dubrovnik. The new vision of the city should be in line with the European Green Deal – the key strategic development document for the European Union until 2030 aiming at climate neutrality, environment preservation and a more resilient economy. The four possible solutions for the development of Dubrovnik are the development of sustainable tourism, the synergy between tourism and agriculture, environmental protection and strengthening of local community involvement in topics important for the city's development.

As the first important step towards degrowth scenario for the City of Dubrovnik is to strategically turn towards sustainable forms of tourism such as slow tourism, low carbon tourism and agrotourism. The main tool for dealing with the phenomenon of 'overtourism' is defining of carrying capacity which is necessary for sustainable management of the tourism development. The tourism carrying capacity can be used as a method of controlling the tourism development – reducing and eliminating the negative consequences of tourism on the space for the purpose of planning long-term and sustainable tourism. Also, tourism carrying capacity can be the central concept in the process of searching for the selection of appropriate types of spatial development. Defining carrying capacity through Carrying Capacity Plan is crucial for the development of tourism which creates additional economic, ecological and heritage value for the local community with the aim of reducing the negative impact on the identity, society and environment.



Also, in order to achieve long-term sustainability, it is important to strive for the activation of other industries. The rural area of Dubrovnik represents an opportunity to establish coexistence between agriculture and tourism, which would lead to a more balanced development of rural and urban areas. Systematic association of farmer through setting up cooperatives of farmers represents the possibility of solving the challenge of fragmentation of agricultural land. The development of organic agriculture represents an important development opportunity for this area to achieve sustainability of the agricultural sector and to comply with the EU Strategic Document – European Green Deal. The development of agriculture, especially ecological agriculture in synergy with other forms of tourism that are less invasive for the area could influence the extension of the tourist season, reducing the burden on the old city centre of Dubrovnik and diversifying the economy. In this way, tourism could become an important driver for the sustainability of the city. The new financial instruments will soon be available for financing agriculture and connecting with tourism activities in rural areas, which must be implemented in the future territorial development of the City of Dubrovnik and its functional environment.

The third important step toward the implementation of the degrowth principle is the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the area, which is the basis for the high quality of life of the local community. Revitalisation of existing green areas, circular waste management and encouraging reduction of greenhouse gas emission can contribute to the preservation of the environment, which is one of the foundations of achieving sustainability.

Last but not least, involvement of the local community in making important decisions for the city represent one of the solutions for the development of the City. Large crowds due to ‘overtourism’ have also influenced the reduced quality of life for residents by making it difficult for them to carry out daily activities. The typical feature of the degrowth is to emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of local communities and encouraging active participation, which is an important component of the sustainability of the city. In the context of this topic, it is important to mention the local initiative ‘*Respect the City*’ whose main focus is on creating Dubrovnik as the leader in the sustainable and responsible tourism in the Mediterranean area. The key aim of the initiative is to reduce negative effect of ‘overtourism’ through continued cooperation of stakeholders and a combination of measures.

## 5. Conclusion

The territorial development of the city of Dubrovnik is under significant influence of the existing tourism development. Tourist trends supported by the increase in tourist arrivals by air, intense arrivals in the context of cruising tourism and continuation of mass tourism positively influence the wider economic picture of the city of Dubrovnik, but negatively affects the state of the environment and the quality of life of the local population. The development of tourism so far has caused significant socio-economic changes and a functional transformation of the historical core of Dubrovnik. This led to a significant increase in real estate prices, making them unavailable to residents. A significant decline in tourist trends in the city in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has initiated to consider a new development vision of the city.

One of the potential scenarios is a degrowth scenario which should try to focus on sustainable forms of tourism, diversification of the economy, preserving the environment and encouraging participatory or active involvement of citizens in the development of the city. A key method in achieving sustainable development in defining the carrying capacity in order to avoid potential negative effects of tourism. Synergy between agriculture and tourism could mitigate the dependence of economy on tourism, but also enable a more balanced development of rural and urban areas. The Management Plan for the UNESCO World Heritage Site - Old City of Dubrovnik represent a good base for the realization of the degrowth scenario. Finally, one of the most vital segments of the degrowth concept is involvement of the local community in the creation of the future development.

The proposed guidelines for the future development of the City of Dubrovnik with the aim of transitioning towards urban degrowth can serve as an example of the direction of other European cities facing the challenge of 'overtourism' and all its negative consequences. Despite the economic losses as a result of the pandemic, Dubrovnik could become a city oriented to the needs of its inhabitants, sustainability and preservation of its own values by implementing the proposed new model of development.



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