

# Toward “good” islands: rethinking the means and goals for island development from a female perspective

Sara Ursić, Jelena Zlatar Gamberožić and Andrija Mišetić

## Abstract

**Purpose** – By merging good countryside and rural capitals frameworks, a model for reimagining the island’s development is formulated, which is then applied to the female perspective to provide valuable insights from a group that is often marginalized in rural areas. As Croatian islands are highly tourism-oriented, this study finds it important to explore possibilities for future island development that can provide balanced and vibrant settlements on the islands.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The present paper synthesizes Shucksmith’s (2018) model of a good countryside, which serves as a goal, with Gkartzios et al.’s (2022) capitals framework, which is viewed as a means of attaining a good countryside, specifically a good island. The research is delimited to the island of Brač, Croatia. By conducting interviews with female respondents, this study aims to capture the female perspective on envisioning potential futures of “good” island living, a perspective that is frequently underestimated despite its significant contributions to the creation of an ideal locale.

**Findings** – The results demonstrate that there is a substantial amount of socio-cultural rural capital that is leveraged to strengthen relatedness and rights as development objectives. However, low levels of economic, built and land-based rural capital pose challenges to achieving repair and re-enchantment, which are crucial for settlements that rely on tourism.

**Originality/value** – These findings bear immense implications for policymakers and planners, underscoring the imperative to account for the perspectives and needs of diverse social groups, including women, in the design and implementation of development strategies for islands. By doing so, a sustainable and equitable future, rich in tourism potential, can be cultivated on the island.

**Keywords** Women, Brač, Good countryside, Island development, Rural capitals

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Toward “good” islands: rethinking the means and goals for island development

Living on the Croatian islands has its advantages, especially in environmental and cultural contexts, such as the accessibility of nature, a peaceful environment and a less stressful way of life. It also has some specific disadvantages, including fragility, dislocation, peripheralization and isolation. In recent decades, the ever-changing dynamics of globalization have transformed the Croatian islands through mobility, accessibility and information technologies, bringing new opportunities—and challenges—to their small, fragile island communities. The uncontrolled use of resources and lack of planning strategies, as well as the seasonality of prevailing lifestyles, are often present and predominantly connected to tourism, the leading economic activity. In past decades, Croatia’s islands have followed a tourism-oriented development, leading to neglect of traditional activities such as agriculture and fishing (Deflippis, 2001; Grković, 2005; Radinović et al., 2004; Stiperski et al., 2001). However, the focus on mass and uncontrolled tourism or “free tourism” (Milijan, 2019), particularly evident on larger islands and coastal settlements such as the town of Hvar on the island

of Hvar (Zlatař Gamberožić, 2021) or Bol on the island of Brač (Zlatař Gamberožić and Tonković, 2015), has led to the neglect of sustainable development and undermined resilience. In the face of the consequences of such development, new ways of island development are being sought.

Contemporary islands settlements and landscapes are unique in their existence, spanning both urban and rural spaces, socially and spatially. Islandness, the concept that attempts to encompass all aspects of island living, is a term that remains contested, much like many other concepts (Foley *et al.*, 2023). Various attempts have been made to define and understand islandness. Vannini and Taggart (2013, p. 225) define it as a “corporeal, affectual, practical and intimate visceral experience,” emphasizing the personal and sensory dimensions. Additionally, Foley *et al.* (2023) present more pragmatic notions of islandness, explaining it through concepts such as smallness, culture and others. Caught between the ideals of rural idyll, islandness and smart island paradigms, they face environmental threats and negative processes such as depopulation and an aging population. Many islands are also heavily reliant on (mass) tourism. Therefore, it is crucial to develop strategies that reimagine islands according to the specific needs and demands of their local context. In this research, we focus on women’s narratives of everyday life on islands and the potential for island development, starting with the assumption that living on an island means constant adaptation to challenging natural conditions and a social environment that lacks the conveniences of living on the mainland. To better envision possibilities for island development through a female perspective of island life, we utilize Gkartzios *et al.*’s (2022) capitals framework and Shucksmith’s (2018) “good countryside” framework as both a means and a goal for creating “good” islands. In this paper, we focus on the island of Brač, one of the largest, most populated and diverse islands in the Adriatic Sea. Brač, with its few small towns and many rural settlements that share similar yet specific challenges, provides an excellent example of the different developmental paths. The present paper synthesizes Shucksmith’s (2018) model of a good countryside, which serves as a goal, with Gkartzios *et al.*’s (2022) capitals framework, which is viewed as a means of attaining a good countryside, specifically a “good island”. By conducting interviews with female respondents, this study aims to capture the female perspective on envisioning potential futures of “good island” living, a perspective that is frequently underestimated despite its significant contributions to the creation of an ideal locale. By merging these two approaches, a model for reimagining the island’s development is formulated, which is then applied to the female perspective to provide valuable insights from a group that is often marginalized in rural areas. As Croatian islands are highly tourism-oriented, we find it important to explore possibilities for future island development that can provide balanced and vibrant settlements on the islands.

### Rural capitals and “good countryside” as frameworks for island development

In the scientific literature, rural development is commonly associated with striving toward concepts of sustainability and resilience (Heijman *et al.*, 2007; Robinson, 2019). Although these concepts have merit and represent a useful paradigm for the further development of rural places, they have perhaps become overused to the point where only a few doubt the primacy they hold over the process of thinking about the rural future in the rural idyll context. Some authors have already thought outside the sustainability framework (Haartsen *et al.*, 2000; McDonagh, 2022; Pospěch *et al.*, 2015; Shucksmith, 2018). Scholars understand that the construction of the concept of rurality is complex and reimagining rural futures in contemporary research is based on layers of previous theoretical concepts and empirical data (Cloke, 2003; Halfacree, 2006; Hoggart, 1990). Cloke (2006) summarized theoretical frames of rurality through three constructs: functional, political-economic and social. The concept of a social construct is part of the “cultural turn” in social science, which emphasizes “the role of culture in socio-spatial distinctiveness” (Cloke, 2006, p. 21). This concept, among other meanings and practices, questions the origin, meanings and construct of the rural idyll, which is one of the mainstream understandings of rurality (Bell, 2006; Ilbery and Bowler, 1998).

In his search for definitions of “rural,” Cloke (2003) called for rethinking rurality beyond constructs of idyll because of rural attributes such as heterogeneous, dynamic and dystopic, which highlight

local differences, commodification, hybridity and inequalities and a range of social issues. This is supported by the fact that rural areas, mostly because of the decline in agriculture, are in a so-called postproductive period (Galani-Moutafi, 2013; Ilbery and Bowler, 1998). The consequences of “cultural turn” in grasping rurality are visible through sociospatial aspects because rurality does not imply rural society and rural space as “welded together.” Instead, according to Cloke (2006), rurality includes many social spaces that use the same geographic area, and it is precisely “[in the] social distinction of rurality where significant differences between rural and urban remain” (p. 19).

Furthermore, Galani-Moutafi (2013) underlined the shift from productive activities toward the commodification processes that rely on the consumption of material and immaterial culture. These transform rural spaces and society into a revitalized, hybrid rurality that promotes postmodern values (Lukić, 2010). Nevertheless, rurality is diverse and local, and potential development depends on “understanding specificities of resources in terms of people, social capital, networks of relationships (power), institutions, actors, policies, the mixture of endogenous and exogenous influences on development” (Janković, 2020, p. 193). However, Woods (2005) emphasized the importance of not overlooking the fundamental cultural tradition of defining rurality: its distinction from urban areas.

Štambuk (1993) explained the connection between rurality perceived through academic discourse and the rurality perceived through cultural tradition. She defined rurality as a “sense of belonging to the countryside, village, rural community, and rural space.” Although rurality is a general and stable social phenomenon, its manifestations are prone to change, depending on the broader social changes. This makes each expression of rurality new and distinct from other rural contexts (Štambuk, 1993).

Similarly, we can discuss islandness at least when we localize it in Croatia, where islands are mostly rural. Apart from the mentioned characteristics of rurality, it is possible to identify islands by additional features such as isolation, diversity, otherness and separateness, which makes rural islandness specifically complex to define. As with rurality, islandness is subjective and, as Hay (2006) argued, arises “from a deeply visceral experience” (p. 34) while being shaped by a range of sociospatial changes resulting from global processes, such as globalization and technological advancement. Although mobility and information technology have transformed the attribute of isolation to connectivity, linking islands to the global village, developmental plans often neglect these islands, leaving them on the periphery. As Štambuk (2014, p. 124) noted, “economic heterogenization is uncertain due to the high cost and questionable effectiveness of investing in basic infrastructure.” In contrast, Baldacchino (2005a, b) highlighted the advantages of islands, such as their unique sense of place that encourages unity, trans-territoriality that fosters dialectics like the tension between “root and routes,” and a culture of adaptation that surpasses the limitations of a particular physical environment. Consequently, islands may be viewed as pioneers of resilience and sustainability. With that in mind, we base our understanding of rural islandness on the fact that islands are hybrid, dynamic and resourceful places, whose futures are intricately linked to social practices. Therefore, it is essential to analyze what constitutes rural islandness to comprehend their future.

To grasp a possible future for rural islands, we follow one of the concepts for rethinking the countryside that reuses Bourdieu’s well-known capitals framework and is based on Gkartzios *et al.*’s (2022) allocation of different capitals and their connection to planning practice. Although many authors have focused on social capital as an important aspect of rural development and fewer on capital in general, Gkartzios *et al.* (2022) built their framework on the importance of place (and multiscalar planning) for achieving better rural futures. Bourdieu’s conceptualization of capitals is intricate and interlinked with other theoretical concepts, such as habitus and field, which he developed to explain social realities and transcend the one-dimensional image of social space that solely focuses on economic capitalism (Kalanj, 2002). He also highlighted the asymmetric nature of social relations among different actors, groups and individuals who have varying amounts of available resources, which he identified as four types of capital: economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Bourdieu (1986) claimed the following:

The structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the immanent structure of the social world, i.e. the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices (p. 241).

Different mechanisms of capitalization depend on the field in which the different forms of capital functions. According to Bourdieu, economic capital is directly convertible into money or property, social capital is made of social connections and memberships in groups and cultural capital implies the assembly of symbolic (embodied, objectified and institutionalized) goods. An important feature of capitals is their convertibility (mainly to economic capital) which is, according to Bourdieu, the “basis of the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital” (p.25). Furthermore, he stressed two more features: reproducibility and incommensurability. Bearing in mind Bourdieu’s capitals framework and the main attributes of capitals, such as overlapping and merging, [Gkartzios et al. \(2022\)](#) were eager to provide a conceptualization of rural planning that would result in good places, or in the case of this paper, “good” islands.

The premise of this framework is to provide tools for planning and developing good places and a “good countryside.” We identify four forms of capital in rural areas—built rural, economic rural, land-based rural and sociocultural rural—each with subcapitals that overlap ([Gkartzios et al., 2022](#)).

Built rural capital, which encompasses three subcapitals—economic infrastructure, environmental or nature-based infrastructure and sociocultural infrastructure—embodies physical infrastructure in the rural environment. From workspaces to natural resources to housing and other social spaces, built rural capital “frames rural life” and makes it possible for the countryside to develop by growing sociocultural and economic capital ([Gkartzios et al., 2022](#), p. 5).

Economic rural capital also consists of three subcapitals: physical productive infrastructure, enterprise infrastructure and community wealth-building capacity. All three refer to material resources, including direct resources such as money or indirect resources such as property or land. Economic rural capital also encompasses the way communities use and manage these resources, generating wealth that remains in the countryside and supporting community well-being.

Land-based rural capital, with its three subcapitals of land as a socially productive asset, landscape and nature-based infrastructure, refers to natural and environmental resources and their connection to human activities. According to [Gkartzios et al. \(2022\)](#), land-based rural capital is crucial for place identity, as well as for the growth of other forms of capital in the countryside.

Sociocultural rural capital is unique in that it has four subcapitals: social networks, community capacity and active citizenship, inclusive places and creativity and cultural practices. It may be the most challenging rural capital to understand because it connects networks, capacities and practices that should catalyze inclusivity through active citizenship.

In this paper, we understand these capitals as means for achieving the goals that [Shucksmith \(2018\)](#) identified. He took inspiration from the “good city” concept and adapted it to create a proposition for a “good countryside” through four registers: repair, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment.

Repair is viewed mostly in the technological context of sustaining the modern infrastructure within cities. In rural areas, it is also a mix of maintaining ecosystems and ensuring the population can utilize the technological capabilities of the modern world without issues. It really is a matter of equal opportunities for the rural population in the age of technology. However, it is not only a question of modern infrastructure but also of repair of the civil or public spheres. How do we maintain and repair the social aspect of rural life and sustain the community?

The question of relatedness has a simple goal: achieving a rural place in which people care for one another. To make that possible, it is necessary to create a framework of social norms that gives the

people a context in which they can act in real-time and in real-life situations. They can achieve this with a top-down or bottom-up approach based on ethics and mutual caring, as well as on the context of the culture in which the specific place of study is located.

Regarding rights, we must answer several questions. Who has the right to act and make decisions in the rural utopia? How does a person achieve the right to be politically involved and what are the criteria? Is it a basic human right? Do you have to be a member of the community? Do you have to own property? Do you have to be born there? What criteria do you have to fulfill for your voice to be heard? Is the centralized approach better than the community approach? Who should have more power?

Re-enchantment is a question of giving value to the rural place. From where does the rural place draw its position within our hierarchy of values? [Shucksmith \(2018\)](#) stated enchantment by rural is mostly managed by the landscape and the physical environment, but there is not enough research or exploration of the social and cultural values of the rural place. If that were to change, alongside taking proper action, it could lead to the betterment of the countryside experience, which would likely result in attaching greater value to rural places within our society.

The connection between rural capital as a means to achieve the developmental goal of a “good countryside” links to the issue of islands, which hold a distinct place within both rural and urban spaces. Island problems, such as insularity, cost of transportation, more vulnerable systems and less capacity for spatial pressure, should be considered when thinking about development.

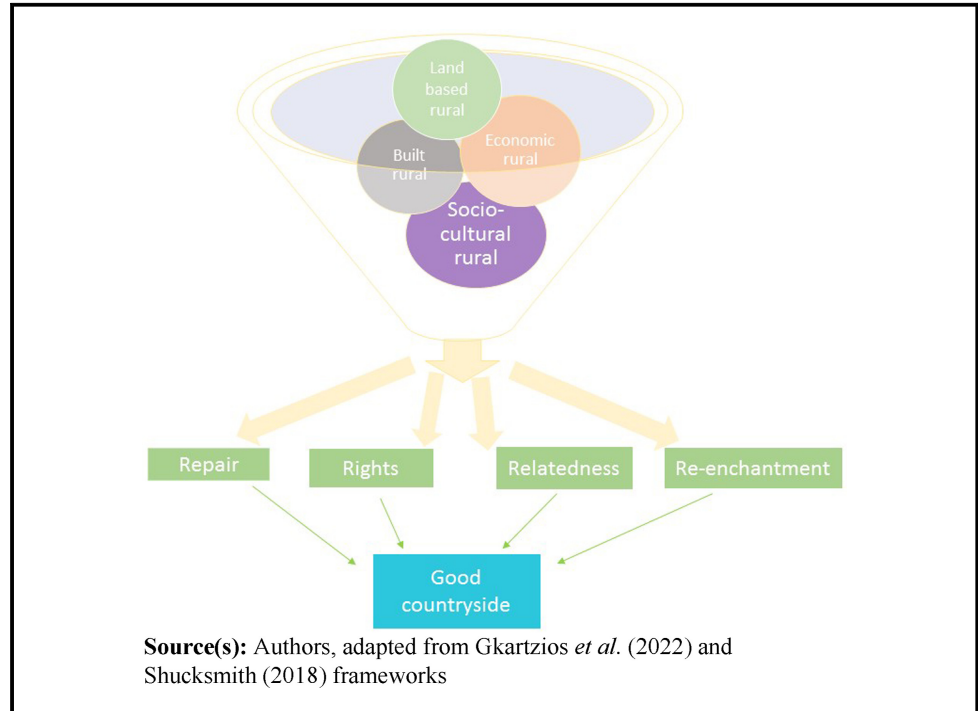
These theoretical approaches address key issues, identify key questions and sketch a framework that enables a deeper understanding of sustainability and resilience practices. We find these frameworks especially useful in island research because the complexity of islands implies sociospatial uniqueness that must be carefully reimagined to provide or sustain the local community’s overall well-being ([Gkartzios et al., 2022](#); [Shucksmith, 2018](#)).

### Short review of previous research on Brač Island

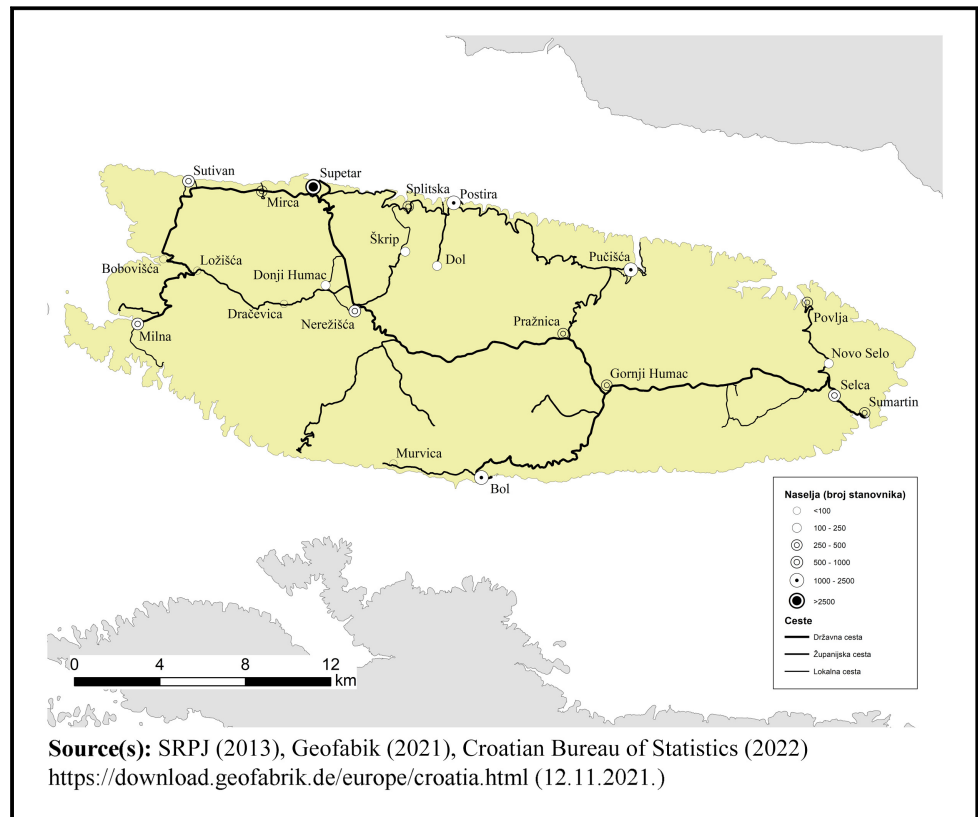
The island of Brač ([Figures 1 and 2](#)) is the largest island in central Dalmatia, Croatia. It is 40 km long and 12 km wide, with a total area of 395 km<sup>2</sup> ([Geofabik, 2021](#); [SRPJ, 2013](#)). It is also the third largest island in the Adriatic Sea. The population of Brač is 13,931, of which the largest number live in the municipality of Supetar and the smallest in Nerežišća, according to the [Croatian Bureau of Statistics \(2022\)](#). Also according to the bureau, Supetar, the largest town on the island, has 4,341 inhabitants. Other towns and villages include Sutivan (population 963), Bol (1,694), Nerežišća (877), Pučišća (1,934), Selca (1,618), Milna (948) and Postira (1,556).

Along with a decrease in agriculture, there was an increase in tourism on the island. The number of arrivals to Brač was 124,198 in 2010 and 258,345 in 2018, of which over 90% were foreign tourists ([Selca Municipality Tourist, 2022](#)). Today, tourism clearly plays a crucial role in the economy of Brač ([Zlatar, 2010](#); [Zlatar Gamberožić and Svirčić Gotovac, 2021](#)). The touristic development of the island of Brač started gradually during the mid-twentieth century, experiencing accelerated growth in the 1960 and 1970s, reaching its zenith in the 1980s with a surge in the establishment of second homes, constituting 40% of the island’s housing stock. A portion of these secondary homes was utilized for private tourist accommodations ([Kuvadžić, 1999](#)). The ramifications of these new constructions during this period induced a transformation in the spatial attributes of the traditional Adriatic villages. This influx of tourists not only reshaped the architectural and cultural landscapes but also engendered heightened employment opportunities within sectors beyond the purview of agriculture, fisheries and stone craftsmanship, which had hitherto served as the principal economic activities. Throughout the 1980s, the burgeoning momentum in touristic expansion precipitated discernible shifts in immigration patterns, thus underscoring its considerable influence on the island’s demographic dynamics. During this period, discernible disparities in development emerged, with certain locales, such as Supetar and Bol, gaining prominence due to distinctive attributes. Supetar’s

**Figure 1** Schematic visual of the capitals and “good countryside” frameworks



**Figure 2** Island of Brač



strategic ferry connection to Split, the second-largest city in Croatia, bestowed it with heightened popularity. Additionally, Bol's appeal was underscored by the presence of one of Europe's most distinctive beaches, Zlatni rat. These towns, Supetar and Bol, saw the establishment of expansive hotel complexes and resorts situated on the fringes of settlements. In contrast, other settlements featured an array of smaller hotels, workers' resorts and a burgeoning proliferation of private accommodations but simultaneously preserving the rural character of the settlements with agriculture, fishery and some levels of industrial activity. The early 1990s witnessed a brief hiatus in tourism development due to the Serbo-Croatian war, prompting the utilization of many hotels and resorts as shelters for refugees. With the onset of the new millennium, the momentum of tourism development persisted, trending toward mass tourism. The absence of comprehensive planning laws facilitated unchecked urban expansion across the entire island of Brač, notably concentrated in Sutivan, as well as the aforementioned Supetar and Bol. This rapid urbanization swiftly overwhelmed outdated and underdeveloped communal and social infrastructures. Moreover, it caused a significant shift in economic activity, predominantly toward the tertiary sector, effectively relegating traditional pursuits that had evolved into tourist attractions over the past decade. However, the dependence on tourism also poses challenges, such as the potential negative impact on the environment and the local community and the risk of economic instability in case of a sudden decrease in tourism. Therefore, it is important for the island to promote sustainable tourism practices and diversify its economy to ensure long-term economic growth and stability.

Current theoretical and research analyses of Brač, that is, of the dimensions of sustainable development of certain towns on the island, have included Povlja, Postira and Bol, which are examples of three types or directions of touristic development based on [Miljan's \(2019\)](#) touristic development typology. Povlja is an example of stagnation in terms of tourism and of economic, ecological and social development. Although the local community is active, and there is a well-developed bottom-up approach to the town's various problems, there is no top-down approach—that is, a well-developed and well-designed system and strategy for developing the town. According to previous research, the main cause for the stagnation of tourism in Povlja appears to be connected to closed hotels and the dependency on limited private accommodation ([Zlatař Gamberožić and Svirčić Gotovac, 2021](#)). Postira has so far been an example of balanced development that included attention to all aspects of development, which resulted in positive perceptions of settlement for both local residents and visitors ([Tonković and Zlatař, 2014](#)). However, the construction of a new hotel has changed the dynamics of the settlement, with the previous balanced, sustainable development heading toward mass tourism. According to available data, the hotel has 220 rooms for 490 guests, thus doubling Postira's current capacity ([Zlatař Gamberožić and Ursić, 2023](#)). Lastly, Bol is an example of uneven development. It has been eroded by mass tourism and does not have sufficient opportunity for sustainable development unless it starts to see a decrease in visitors during the tourist season and resulting preservation of natural resources and the environment ([Zlatař Gamberožić and Tonković, 2015](#)).

## Methodology

Our goal was to identify the connections between women's perceptions of different types of capital and the registers of "good countryside" identified on Brač. The ultimate objective of this analysis, which is part of a broader research project called "Socio-Ecological Challenges to Rural Development: Objective and Subjective Indicators of Resilience Of Croatian Rural Social-Ecological Systems—SECRURAL," is to establish guidelines and opportunities for future development on Brač, with a focus on creating a strong local community.

The initial step in the research involved conducting a desk analysis of available documentation, which primarily consisted of statistical data and various development strategies such as Croatian Island Act (2018), Spatial plan of the City of Supetar (2022), Strategic development program for Selca municipality (2021), Development plan for Bol municipality 2021–2027 and Local development strategy of [Brač \(2016\)](#). Following that, we developed an interview protocol based

on the findings of the desk analysis, as well as previous research referenced in previous chapter and the research questions at hand. Subsequently, we conducted 14 interviews with female participants from Povlja, Selca, Postira and Supetar. Most (13) were employed, and one was a student. We selected the participants using the snowball method, followed by convenience sampling. By definition, the snowball sampling method creates a chain pattern of referrals through a series of referrals in a circle of people who know each other (Weiss, 1994, pp. 25–26), whereas convenience sampling involves identifying and selecting individuals or a group of people who have specific knowledge of or experience with the subject of interest (Cresswell and Plano Clark, 2011). Furthermore, the effectiveness of the snowball method is especially useful in “hidden” populations, as it uses previously established social networks to reach specific participants, in this case, women who live permanently on the island (Valerio *et al.*, 2016).

We recorded the interviews on a voice recorder, focused ethical considerations on informing participants about the research and the ways in which we would use it and ensured the confidentiality of data. We will use the data exclusively for scientific purposes and as a basis for further policies related to Brač’s development.

We divided the questions into seven major categories: (a) sociodemographic characteristics of the participants, such as education, marital status, financial status and health; (b) their daily lives and leisure activities; (c) personal satisfaction with life in the settlement; (d) the current position of women on the island and their future expectations, including age differences; (e) the ecological and economic dimensions of sustainability, covering topics such as nature, infrastructure, employment and the environment; (f) topics related to the sociocultural aspects of the settlements; and (g) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and their relationship with the community, focusing on the quality of their social interactions with friends, neighbors and others. The identified categories encompassed various topics concerning the economic, ecological and sociocultural dimensions of the settlements, which participants discussed in relation to their daily lives and experiences. We employed a thematic analysis and based the initial coding on concept-driven, deductive methods derived from theoretical frameworks. In later stages of the analysis, we complemented it with inductive coding. As Byrne (2022, p. 1397) suggested, in this research coding was produced relative to a pre-specified conceptual framework which is “employed to ensure that the open-coding contributed to producing themes that were meaningful to the research questions and to ensure that the respondent/data-based meanings that were emphasized were relevant to the research questions”. We are aware that inductive analysis provides more in-depth themes but as this research is based on exploring women’s perceptions of different types of capital and the registers of “good countryside” which are already established frameworks, deductive analysis was necessary.

The aim of this research was to explore the role of rural capitals in achieving “good” islands from a female perspective in the context of island life. Research conducted in 2009 that focused on the potential disadvantages experienced by island residents in Europe identified several particular areas of life where women on the islands face challenges (Ward and Brown, 2009). First, limited employment opportunities make it difficult for women to reconcile their working life with family responsibilities. Second, a lack of educational and vocational training as well as health-care services has led to further accumulation of disadvantages throughout women’s lifespans and affected their everyday lives. As previously mentioned, the female perspective in rural Croatia, especially on the islands, is often overlooked. The starting point was the premise that unequal access to various types of capital have hindered the contributions of island women to island development (Šikić-Mičanović, 2012). Third, several studies dealing with rural and island women and their perspective and experience of island life emphasized women as an unused resource in rural development because their role in the community is often significant, especially in their ability to find different ways to mobilize resources, primarily when it comes to social needs (Šikić-Mičanović, 2012; Tomić-Koludrović and Leburlić, 2001).



## Findings and discussion

### *Sociocultural rural capital*

When the participants spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic, we identified a high level of sociocultural capital and subcapitals that [Gkartziou et al. \(2022\)](#) mentioned, such as social networks, community capacity and active citizenship. The pandemic affected residents, the environment and economic activities, particularly tourism, as some authors have already explored ([Bakar and Rosbi, 2020](#); [Cheablam et al., 2021](#); [Zhu and Deng, 2020](#)). Although unexpected events such as pandemics or natural disasters greatly affect social life and diminish economic and land capital, as well as overall well-being, especially in vulnerable places, people exercise community resilience through sociocultural capital. The participants expressed a high level of awareness of the importance of community and its spirit because of the pandemic. A 21-year-old participant from Povelja highlighted community capacity and informal social networks during the pandemic: “When you need something, everyone jumps in to help, especially at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. . . even if you call at 5 in the morning, someone will help you.” However, because of the island’s limited space, many participants expressed fear of a rapid and large contagion spreading to the entire island, which fortunately did not occur. A participant from Supetar explained this situation by connecting island specificities to the unclear communication from the state, which led to fear: “In a small town it’s a big deal because we wonder what if more people got infected. Especially because of politicians and their statements. We thought we would all get infected.” In contrast, several participants did not think the pandemic had a strong impact on island life in general, primarily because of Brač’s isolation and the fact there was no branched social life on the islands that the pandemic could have affected, especially in winter. The social group most affected by the pandemic in the context of everyday life was young people, according to a 34-year-old participant from Povelja: “I wouldn’t say that the COVID-19 has had a big impact. . . maybe a little on youth, going out and to cafes.”

As previously stated, we consider islands to be pioneers of resilience because of the environmental, social and economic challenges that arise from their geographic location, peripheralization and isolation. A resilient community is, *inter alia*, a product of the powerful sociocultural capital that is common in island communities ([Baldacchino, 2005a](#); [Petzold, 2017](#)). Functioning social networks and trust are necessary elements for both rights and relatedness in the concept of a “good countryside.” Participants identified different actors and the roles they play in local development, which mainly relate to their answers concerning interpersonal relationships, socializing, sense of community, joint activities and communication with other members of the community. Our analysis showed younger participants tend to socialize and entertain more but “have nowhere to go,” as a young participant from Povelja told us. Nevertheless, young participants emphasized they “always find something to do.” Older participants’ narratives connected to seasonal activities such as swimming, sports or periodic spontaneous meetings in coffee shops. Although creativity and cultural practices are considered innate features of rural areas and subcategories of sociocultural capital, they seem to fail to establish a functional level in the researched settlements.

Shucksmith rightly pointed out the importance of social justice and respect for the rights of all members of the community when it comes to rights and relatedness in the concept of a “good countryside.” Moreover, he emphasized that the rural community carries the burden of the ideology of rural idyll, where potential new residents are not welcomed with understanding. Although rural values are “inclusive and neighborly,” previous research has shown rural communities are often traditional, more patriarchal and closed, which affects social and cultural capital ([Fox-Rogers, 2019](#); [Shucksmith, 2018](#)). The female narratives on Brač indicate an increasing awareness in the community regarding the relationships between men and women, specifically a decrease in patriarchal patterns. This progress extends to other levels of the community because people now have access to various information and news that were not available to previous generations. The availability of information and connections with other parts of the world contribute to increasing awareness and knowledge on various topics, such as local

community, everyday life, ecology, economy, culture and island life. Participants from Povlja explained the importance of the new availability of information:

The awareness of people in general is increasing and I think we're moving forward together with the big cities, especially with the internet and the media. I mean, we women have rights, we will not allow ourselves to be mistreated. And somehow, that support and availability of information from the outside world gives us hope that, in fact, it will also apply more to us, that we are no longer as isolated as we were before, when we had no idea what was happening in the world, what changes, and what people wanted, that is, what women wanted, and we have somehow become more aware of ourselves.

This transformation has a positive influence on social and cultural capital, building up the capacity for creative and active communities.

### *Economic rural capital*

When it comes to economic rural capital, the focus is on the subcapital of economic infrastructure, particularly in relation to opportunities for town development. This primarily includes topics related to significant economic opportunities for tourism development, such as hotels and apartments for rent, and those related to employment and education. Previous research has shown tourism development and the service sector are particularly important for the employment of rural women (Štambuk, 2014). Although there are attempts at alternative tourism through agritourism, participants pointed out their disinterest in those types of activities that provide jobs and build cultural entrepreneurialism by reimagining local material and immaterial heritage. "No one is interested in that kind of job; you can see so many neglected fields," said a participant from Povlja. "There are people who have houses with pools in the olive fields; maybe they can organize olive picking to attract visitors in autumn. But no one is interested." At the same time, younger participants pointed out the insufficient number of available activities and the need to build new facilities to provide more space for socializing and spending time together. Creating new jobs and motivating residents to stay on the island is as important as creating various types of recreational and other activities for both younger and older residents, including nursing homes for the elderly. In any case, as a 40-year-old participant from Pučišća emphasized, the island needs different social facilities to contribute to and develop its economic capital:

Look, first you need to do something for the children, like some sports activities, or a gym, something. Then people will be getting jobs, then something will draw you to stay there. And if it keeps being like it is, then everyone will move out.

One participant also mentioned a lack of educational and business facilities (not necessarily in tourism), which would, if present, increase the number of jobs on the island and reduce its depopulation: "And, I don't know, a hair salon, a beauty salon, anything, just to create some new jobs." Access to a preschool system seemed particularly important because kindergartens are small: "we also have a kindergarten here, but it's too small already; there are a lot of children." A participant from small and isolated Povlja advocated for a school so that children do not have to travel far: "A larger kindergarten could be opened here. Maybe even a school, up until the 4th grade."

The relationship between economic and sociocultural rural capital and the overlapping or perhaps interdependence, has proven to be the most challenging aspect for the local community. However, all narrative analyses detected the importance and spirit of community, as well as the various community initiatives, such as constructing playgrounds, sports halls and kindergartens. The community takes on these initiatives through a bottom-up approach, seeking to improve the settlements and create new opportunities for residents:

Just a little while ago [a] neighbor told me that if I meet the people from the municipal works, to tell them to sort out those trees in front. People get involved in all activities related to the progress of the place.

Nonetheless, we must bear in mind that participation in social life in smaller communities is a two-sided phenomenon. On the one hand, smaller communities are seen through the rural idyll lens,

where rural communities have spontaneously high levels of community capacity. On the other hand, recent research warned about uneven power dynamics that influence planning and development through bottom-up approaches, acquaintances, friendships or family relations (Fox-Rogers, 2019). One participant commented,

I recycle, I do my compost, I give it to my friend that has a garden and grows all sort[s] of things. . . People do their share in keeping the place clean but what happens once the utility company takes over, I don't know. I have seen them collecting everything in the same truck. Who is in charge for that, is anyone, I don't know. But I think some inspection should be brought in the Municipality to see what is happening.

### ***Built rural and land-based rural capitals***

When Schucksmith discussed the concept of repair, he emphasized the importance of infrastructure, noting the conceptualization of rural areas often focuses solely on ecosystems and ignores social and physical infrastructure. This narrow focus fails to recognize the interconnectedness between these different types of infrastructure. In the Croatian islands, even the focus on ecosystems and environmental issues appears to be purely normative, which led to a neglect of planning for social and physical infrastructure, resulting in arbitrary and uncontrolled development, especially in terms of physical infrastructure. Meanwhile, social infrastructure was under the influence of specific social groups and actors who had the means and capacity to impose and enforce their visions.

In this regard, the participants pointed out the negative aspects of the excessive construction of new tourist facilities present in larger settlements on Brač, most often the coastal ones (Bol or Postira). In Postira, one participant pointed to the construction of the new hotel: "Something is always being built, something is always changing. . . Yes, this is the hotel, this one, right in front of my house. It's good, but now I've lost my view."

There is a lack of vision and urban planning on other islands, such as Hvar, where there has been excessive construction of apartments and hotels. Large-scale projects that lose touch with the environment and the island lifestyle have a negative impact on the vitality of settlements, their visual identity and the overall quality of accommodation, which can lead to significant financial losses (Zlatar Gamberožić, 2021). These examples illustrate the consequences of diminishing land as a socially productive asset. This could have been avoided by converting the land into social or cultural capital through three enabling factors: diverse patterns of land ownership, a land taxation system or a legal framework that guarantees access to land (Gkartzios *et al.*, 2022, p. 7).

Participants in the study highlighted the positive aspects of large-scale apartment buildings, such as the potential for increased income from renting out apartments and the rapid revenue that most residents of the island approve. However, this short-term boost in economic capital through housing comes with negative implications for community infrastructure, which are sacrificed for the benefit of private investments. The discrepancy between participants' perceptions, where they criticize overconstruction but support rapid revenue from economic activity connected to construction, appears in the neoliberal paradigm, where the accumulation of wealth through real estate often happens without local reinvestment (Gallent and Scott, 2019). Moreover, island settlements have insufficient carrying capacity for construction on that scale because overconstruction diminishes the value of the landscape, which is the decisive factor when choosing a place to live or vacation (Marinović-Golubić *et al.*, 2020; Zlatar Gamberožić, 2021; Zlatar Gamberožić and Tonković, 2015). Too many visitors can also be problematic for many towns and villages on the islands, a problem that must be taken into account when assessing and planning the further development of a location to avoid irreversible damage to the environment and the visual identity. In the framework of capitals that Gkartzios *et al.* (2022) proposed, land-based capital "embodies the relationship between human activities on land, socio-economic conditions, and the natural environment" (p. 7). The three subcapitals that follow are land as a socially productive asset, landscape and nature-based infrastructure. According to the participants, although Brač has an abundance of all these types of capital, an issue arises when human activities

take place in uncontrolled conditions, such as illegal construction, privatization of beaches and other public spaces and commercialization of public spaces and natural resources.

Additionally, the lack of communication and coordination between municipalities on Brač in terms of development and other important matters, such as product branding or tourism, is another issue related to land-based capital. Currently, there is no common development plan for the island as a whole, despite there being seven spatial plans for different parts of the island. This lack of a cohesive plan can lead to uncoordinated development and a lack of consideration for the island's natural and cultural resources.

In Povelja, the smallest and least developed settlement on Brač, the lack of tourist facilities is a persistent issue that prevents the possibility of a thoughtful approach to development. Currently, the privately owned Galeb Hotel is closed and not for sale. The participants had varying ideas about how to address this problem, with some suggesting the Punta apartment complex as an alternative solution:

Well, you know what, there was talk about that, not about opening a hotel, but there is the possibility to increase the apartment capacity, to open, for example, a kind of, as they say, dislocated hotel, so for the apartments to unite as an accommodation offer, to make some structure that will provide, like, breakfast.

There are also opportunities for financing from European Union (EU) funds, which individuals with specific ideas mostly use. According to one participant, another issue that hinders development in Povelja and other towns on the island is the virtually nonexistent marketing structure:

In order to somehow advertise this place a little better, a lot of work is needed and unfortunately the finances are not really there, people do not really tend to go for the European funds. . . For example, one lady got some money, she did a project and she got total funding, she built a big vacation home by the coast. She got a grant from the European Union.

Improving communication between administrative areas is crucial for creating a coherent and effective development plan for the whole island. This can help to avoid competition between municipalities and ensure development is sustainable and benefits the whole community. EU funds can also provide an important source of financing for infrastructure projects and initiatives that promote sustainable tourism and entrepreneurship. However, it is important to ensure the projects funded through these channels align with the overall development goals of the island and are implemented in a transparent and accountable manner.

### ***Connecting rural capitals and registers of good countryside***

Broadly speaking, relatedness implies achieving a rural community in which people care for one another. Participants in the research emphasized that, in various contexts, the relationships among different social actors, municipalities or the state do not provide a comprehensive approach to shared challenges across the island. Instead, according to the participants, the systems are “maintained” by the residents themselves through community actions and initiatives, indicating a strong community capacity that was proven during the pandemic.

Previous research has emphasized the capability of island and rural women to find alternative, less formal ways to meet social needs. Here the results confirm that, in everyday life and in times of disruption, women's contributions to the local community are drivers of well-being. Preparedness to act and adapt to unexpected events is at the core of resilience and has a strong connection to the levels of sociocultural capital, especially community capacity and active citizenship. If islands are perceived as pioneers of resilience, which is an innate characteristic of life on islands, these findings support the previous thesis of connected communities that reach out when in need. However, this does not necessarily imply a lack of issues connected to social capital, especially social networks based on informal relationships. This leads to Shucksmith's next register, rights, which broadly tackles the right to participate in public life and decision-making. It is not often that one can find criticism of the participation process, yet we warn of the complexity of participation

processes that can actually create more inequalities if left only to informal relations among different social actors. When it comes to rights, participants mostly expressed satisfaction with the current trends, including the decrease in patriarchal patterns and increase in the availability of information that, according to participants, played an important role in raising awareness of women’s positions in the community. To visually represent the research findings within the theoretical framework, [Figure 3](#) illustrates the interlinks between each objective and the associated presence and levels of the four rural capitals, presented in a straightforward high/low format.

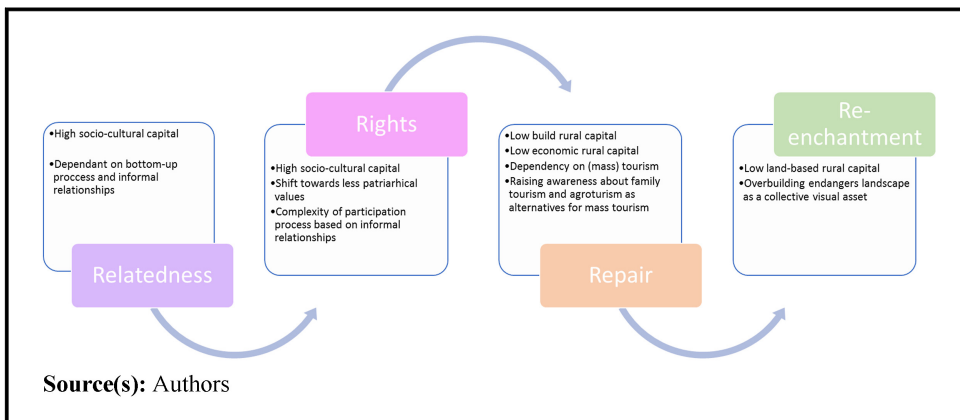
Repair, roughly defined as the continuous maintenance of systems, is heavily dependent on all four capitals to function properly, but built rural and economic rural capitals appear to be crucial for future development. The lack of educational and business opportunities results in low levels of both forms of capital necessary for effecting repair. The Local Development Strategy of the Local Action Group (2014–2020) also warned of the need to expand and adapt all forms of education, primarily formal but also lifelong education:

“The adaptation of all forms of education from preschool to secondary school, but also lifelong education, including non-formal education in line with the specific needs of the labour market, especially those that will enable good activation of economic and social potential of an area, is one of the development priorities, and this certainly includes further modernization and/or revitalization of old crafts but also modernization of, for example, stonecraft”.

The local economy relies heavily on tourism, which the participants considered an acceptable development strategy. However, they emphasized the need to raise awareness about various types of tourism, with a greater focus on family tourism or agritourism. These alternatives to mass tourism could also lead to more employment opportunities for women of all ages and foster collaboration between generations, ensuring the successful transfer of knowledge. Although mass tourism provides quick revenue, it is problematic when it comes to re-enchantment or value of the place. Landscape, as a subcapital of land-based rural capital, is crucial for communities dependent on tourism. Our research confirms previous findings on the Adriatic islands that the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the negative consequences that focusing on mass tourism and seasonal lifestyle has had on the land-based rural capital, particularly subcapitals such as land as a socially productive asset and landscape ([Zlatař Gamberožić, 2021](#)). One might expect care and preservation for that “collective visual asset,” as defined by [Gkartzios et al. \(2022\)](#), goes without saying, but the participants pointed out the landscape is threatened, and overconstruction is the main culprit.

The visual identities of settlements play a significant role in place attachment and attraction, but they are changing because of the demands of (mass) tourism. Reenchantment is based on the duality of rural attractiveness, the public space rural that enables gatherings, encourages the

**Figure 3** Schematic presentation of results – simplified presentation of connections between rural capitals as means and registers of good countryside as goals



exchange of ideas and fosters creativity. The solitude of rural provides vast space for individual needs, which translates to the importance of overlapping sociocultural and land-based capital. According to the results of this research, both forms of capital are declining on Brač, which serves as a warning for future development. Because of mass tourism, overbuilding, outdated infrastructure and diminishing value of cultural heritage and practices, the possibility for re-enchantment is decreasing.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we based our analysis on overlapping and connecting two different frameworks as potential means and goals for development paths. Both of those concepts emphasized the need for reimagining island's development in a way that would upgrade the sustainability framework while simultaneously creating a narrative that rethinks priorities that should be sustained. Bearing this in mind, we used [Shucksmith \(2018\)](#) "good countryside" registers as goals and [Gkartzios et al.'s \(2022\)](#) capitals framework as a means for creating "good" islands. The "good countryside" framework is generated through four registers (rights, relatedness, repair and re-enchantment) that prioritize social justice, equality and mutuality. [Gkartzios et al.'s \(2022\)](#) rural capitals framework is based on Bourdieu's division of capitals but adapted (built rural, economic rural, land-based rural and sociocultural rural) for rural contexts, and it serves as a planning tool. The connection between these frameworks, besides the escape from the traditional sustainability concept, lies in acknowledging the importance of having a good place to ensure a functional and vital countryside or in this case good island. We argue that [Shucksmith \(2018\)](#) call for reflection on the sustainability of rural areas should be applied in island research to rethink the island idyll narrative.

In our research, we analyzed the female perspective on (and possibilities for) each of four registers of "good countryside" through four rural capitals as a means to achieve "good" islands. The objective of this research was to investigate the role of rural capitals in promoting the development of "good" islands from a female perspective within the context of island life. The findings suggest that among the female population, high socio-cultural capital serves as a catalyst for achieving goals such as relatedness and rights, which are perceived as already established. However, informal social networks are viewed as a potential drawback, particularly, in relation to the registration of rights, as they exacerbate inequalities among different social groups. The participants demonstrated an awareness of various factors that hinder the progress of the repair and re-enchantment registers, stemming from insufficient levels of rural infrastructure and economic resources. Nonetheless, there appears to be a shared vision regarding the future direction of island life, emphasizing the integration of traditional and contemporary economies such as agriculture and tourism. Additionally, education and digitalization must evolve to attract and retain more young individuals on the islands, either by encouraging them to stay, return or relocate to these areas.

While this research is confined to a single island, its findings offer insights that may be applicable to other Croatian islands. These emerging patterns are evident in the imperative for modernizing infrastructure and economic resources, alongside a concerted focus on education and digitalization, all geared toward enhancing the quality of life. This trajectory implies forthcoming shifts in the management of settlements and the evolution of participatory processes, fostering enhanced communication among stakeholders. Within the tourism context, the implications are notably clear, and the trajectory for the future of tourism on Brač Island aligns with eco and agro-tourism. This pivot is poised to yield a positive impact on nurturing year-round tourism, thereby fostering greater employment stability and a more permanent resident base.

Building upon these implications, in the realm of future research, connecting rural capitals and the four registers to achieve "good countryside" could be especially useful in island research because the complexity of islands implies a sociospatial uniqueness that must be carefully reimagined to provide or sustain overall well-being for the local community. Taking into consideration all of the above, our

research represents an attempt to shed light on contemporary island life from the female perspective by shifting from the regular sustainability and resilience narrative to a more contextualized framework through a set of capitals important for creating “good” islands. We hope this framework will be of use in the future, larger studies that are necessary for planning the future of “good” islands.

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