

## KEY PRINCIPLES OF RURAL TOURISM HOUSEHOLDS DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY - CASE STUDY OF VOJVODINA

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### Summary

*The subject of the paper is the analysis of the condition and perspectives of the development of rural tourism in households of Vojvodina. Vojvodina with its natural and social resources qualifies for a position within the developed rural tourism regions. However, rural tourism product in Vojvodina has not been holding an appropriate position at the market. For the aim of determining principles and factors for successful rural tourism, questionnaire has been formed, which has been conducted among 70 country households involved in tourism. In order to achieve the best possible position at the international market, Vojvodina needs to apply the model of development that would ensure competitive advantage regarding similar destinations. Essential activities for improving service quality in rural tourism are: to improve the quality of accommodation facilities, to educate population with the aim of achieving higher service quality, to establish and apply criteria for standardization and service quality in rural tourism in Vojvodina and to intensify promotion at domestic and international market.*

**Key words:** sustainability, rural tourism, households, development strategy, Vojvodina

**JEL:** Q01, D10

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## Introduction

The process of transition, the poor economic situation and series of circumstances in the last two decades have had a negative impact on the physical, social and economic development of rural areas of the Republic of Serbia, i.e. Vojvodina. Vojvodina is autonomous province in Serbia, which occupies the northernmost part of Serbia. Out of 465 inhabited places in the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in total, 415 are rural settlements. An average Vojvodina rural settlement has around 2,200 inhabitants and 22.94% of them are older than 60. A worrying fact is that 87% of 415 settlements in total record have a negative birth rate (it is negative in 38 out of 45 municipalities in total). There were almost 95,000 rural inhabitants fewer in the province in 2011 than in 2002 and more than 100,000 inhabitants fewer than two decades ago (Rodić et al., 2013). The functional focus of most rural areas indicates a significant orientation towards agricultural production.

In rural settlements, agriculture is still the basic economic activity and the main source of revenues. However, it is characterized by low productivity and competitiveness, a high level of extensive production with low revenues per household. In addition to low revenues of agricultural producers, foreign direct investments in agriculture make below 1% of the total (Andrić et al., 2010). The share of agricultural population in the total population of Vojvodina is below 11%. Per 1 inhabitant there is 0.88 ha of agricultural land. Having in mind that the average farm size is about 3.59 ha of used arable land and that each farm has about 3 separate parcels, it could be concluded that Vojvodina has a very unfavourable property structure (Novković et al., 2013). Significant characteristics of rural areas in Vojvodina also include a low level of diversification of economic activities and high unemployment rate (over 20%) (Pejanović, 2010; Rodić et al., 2013) so the rural population is facing the problem of poverty.

The least diversified revenues have households in Vojvodina, which are more than others dependant on agricultural income and therefore more dependent on the position of agriculture. These parameters indicate that depopulation of villages in these regions is a significant generator of their poverty (Cvejić et al., 2010). With about 12% of people aged 65 and older or about 20% of people older than 60, Vojvodina is in an advanced stage of demographic aging (Pejanović, 2010). In just ten years (2002 - 2011), the population in Vojvodina has become almost 2 years older (Rodić et al., 2013), but aging is a problem which exists also in many developed countries, especially the EU (Goll, 2010; Burholt, Dobbs, 2012).

Faster development of Vojvodina's agriculture lies in the multi-functional development. One part of the agricultural resources could be used in conventional manner and a part of the resources could be used for non-agricultural purposes (agro-eco tourism, hunting, fishing and sports tourism and catering and the production of renewable energy).

### **Theoretical framework: terms and concept of rural tourism**

There is no commonly accepted definition of rural tourism since different countries

have different criteria for defining rural area. Rural tourism has a plethora of definitions, from the very minimalist one: “any tourism activity that takes place in rural areas” (Commission of the European Communities, 1986), to more elaborate ones such as the definition by Lane (1994) who defined rural tourism as a discrete activity with distinct characteristics which may vary in intensity, and by area.

Tourism has long been considered as a potential means for socio-economic development and regeneration of rural areas, in particular those affected by the decline of traditional agrarian activities (Iorio, Corsal 2010). Concurrently, a number of factors has supported the generation of a demand for rural tourism. An increased longing for the countryside as a result of the pressures of modern urban life, a booming natural food market, and a desire to conserve traditional rural life are among the factors that supported the generation of this demand (Ertuna, Kirbas, 2012).

Numerous studies deal with the different benefits derived from rural tourism that can be used as potential solutions to many of the problems facing rural areas (Hegarty, Przezborska, 2005; Wilson et al, 2001; Nel, Binns, 2002). These benefits are:

1. economic growth: diversification and stabilization through employment creation, improvement of rural income and creating a flourishing rural economy which in turn intensify the competition between local industry players and their international rivals (Liu, 2002; Schubert et al., 2011);
2. socio-cultural development: the revitalization of local crafts, customs and cultural identities; to promote interactions among urban dwellers, rural villagers and the rural areas;
3. environmental function: to improve and upgrade the quality of the rural environment, as well as to protect its natural landscape and eco-systems (Liu, 2002).

### **Rural tourism in Vojvodina**

The development of tourism activities in the villages of Voivodina has a long tradition, as organized tourist traffic in this region began to take place from the late 70's of the last century. In the tourism development strategy of Serbia (for the period 2005-2015, adopted in 2006.) rural tourism is recognized as one of six key tourism products of Vojvodina. However, it was concluded that despite good resource potential of rural tourism is not adequately structured and organized, and it should take the necessary actions in order to create a rural development process.

Since 2006, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of Republic of Serbia have financially supported and encouraged the development of tourism and the diversification and expansion and improvement of economic activities in rural areas. As far as the purposes for which the Ministry granted funds are concerned, the majority of funds in Vojvodina have been invested in the restoration of traditional rural households in the function of rural tourism (renovation, construction, renovation, purchase, etc.) (Bošković et al., 2013).

Products in rural tourism in Vojvodina are represented by the offer of the farms, tourist villages, ethno-houses, rural architecture and rural manifestations, i.e. all services which are offered to tourists, such as room and board, sightseeing of the destination, participating in work of a country host, organizing creative workshops etc.

**1. Farms** are a specific form of traditional agricultural households, and it makes a particular segment of rural tourism. Although after the Second World War thousands of farms were demolished, several have been turned into tourist sites (Košić, 2012).

**2. Tourist villages.** The villages, in addition to their basic residential function with agricultural, they gain also recreational tourist function (Čomić, 2001). Rural tourism should contribute to the preservation of the rural environment and cultural heritage, but also to provide economic motivation for local population to stay there and to get engaged in traditional crafts among others.

**3. Country architecture.** Old farmhouses represent one of the most impressive forms of material folklore creativity of Vojvodina. The original houses were built of mud and covered with reeds, according to the colonial model. In time they gain a number of other details typical only for these parts of the Pannonian Plain. (Stojanović, 2000; Vasić, Turnšek, 2004).

**4. Ethno houses.** Ethno-house is the house with the overall economy, which is built in the traditional style of folk architecture of Serbian, Slovakian, Romanian, Croatian and other nationalities in Serbia. According to Deacon and others (2004), ethno-houses contribute to the preservation of material and non-material traces of local culture, but are also indicator of the struggle of the local community and culture with the accelerated process of globalization.

**5. Rural tourism events.** The event organizers have different professional staff, logistical support and financial opportunities. This influences the content, the amount and quality of events, regardless of their importance. On the other hand, the organizers insufficiently involved in the market research, or they are not involved at all in testing of desires and expectations of potential tourists, but they are more concerned with solving the problem of acquiring donors and sponsors for the events.

On one side, the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina can play an important role in increasing the variety of tourist offers in entire Serbia and formation of one richer and picturesque image of the country. On the other side, tourism in villages and on farms should not only be the goal, but also the means for inducing the economical growth, strengthening undeveloped regions and improving the life standards of local population. With the development of tourism in those regions there is the occurrence of multifunctional agriculture which gives to people on the farms and in villages additional possibilities for economical strengthening.

### Methodology framework

Research methods used in the work are the following:

1. *The method of analytical study* of all factors affecting the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina, in places that already have a pre-condition for the development of rural tourism, as well as identifying potential rural tourism units;
2. *In the field studies* have been applied methods of observation and survey of household owners. In the study of archives and other historical documents important for understanding of the development of rural tourism, statistics and research results of related topics abroad historical method was used;
3. The *synthesis reasoning* brought to the conclusion about the importance of certain rural units, assess of the current situation and pointing out the possibility of further development;
4. Conclusions about the collected material were presented through *descriptive methods*.

***Research of rural tourist households in Vojvodina was conducted in order to:***

1. identify services and products offered in rural tourism,
2. determine attitudes of their owners about the inclusion in the tourism offer,
3. consider tourist activities of every household,
4. identify the most common forms of promotion.

The instrument used for the study was a questionnaire that was formed by the authors. The questionnaire consisted of 45 questions, divided into three parts:

1. Basic information about the farm (name and surname of the owner, location of the household, categorization, the year of establishment, number of members of household engaged in rural tourism, membership in an association of rural households);
2. Tourist offer of the household (which products are offered to visitors, the structure of visitors to whom the tourist product is intended, signalization to the household, etc.).
3. Marketing (cooperation of rural household with travel agencies, the scope of promotion of rural households through travel organizations, types of promotion of rural tourism) and tourist traffic (number of visitors, the age structure of guests, structure of guests according to the place they come from, the average length of stay of guests).

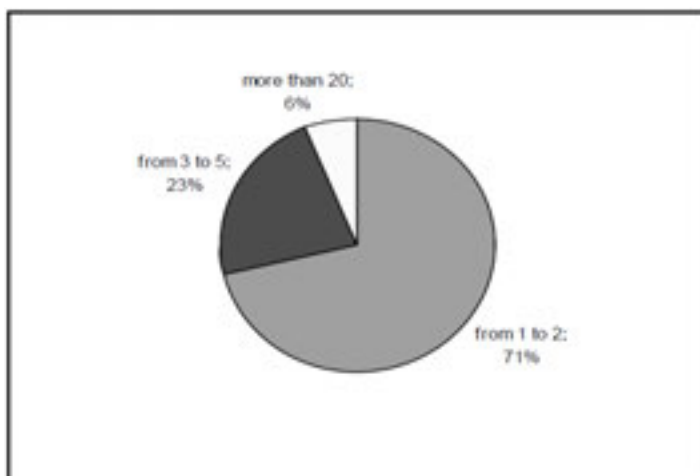
The research was performed individually. The authors conducted a survey of owners of 70 rural households, farms, ethno-houses in Vojvodina. Rural households that were included in the survey are located in Kovačica, Bački Petrovac, Skorenovac, Bački Monoštor and Jazak. Data were collected from March 2014 until October 2014.

## Findings and discussion

The survey of rural households, farms and ethno-houses showed that those are all small family properties, which mostly employ 1-2 members of households (Graph 1), while exceptions are large farms, which have a well-developed tourist offer, and consequently, the need for more labour (for example, Farm “137” which has 35 employees).

The primary activity in most of the households surveyed is agriculture (59%), and additional tourism, a small number of them are primarily engaged in tourism (41%). Research has shown that a large number of facilities in rural tourism started business between 2003, and 2008. (87%), while only 8 enterprises (13%) started with rural tourism between 1992. and 2003. The conclusion could be drawn from this, that the rural tourism in Vojvodina is in its infancy, but that every year there are more and more interested people to deal with this form of tourism.

**Graph 1.** Number of employees in rural households (in %)



*Source: Authors' calculation based on the survey data*

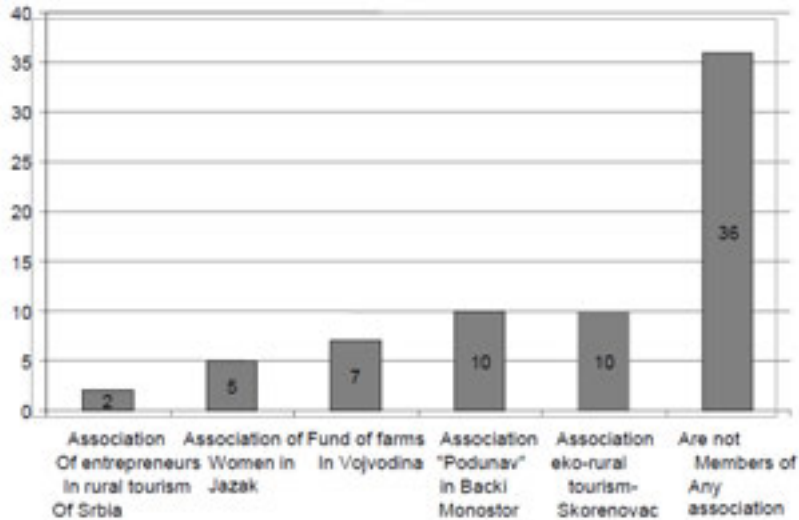
Most of the facilities are privately owned (97%). Regarding the work of the researched facilities, 54 facilities (77%) provide services throughout the entire year, while 16 facilities (23%) have either seasonal work, or by appointment.

A greater number of respondent hosts, 36 of them, are not members of any association of entrepreneurs in rural tourism (Graph 2). Others are members of one of the following associations: Association of Entrepreneurs in Rural Tourism in Serbia, Association of Women in Jazak, Fund of farms in Vojvodina, Association “Danube” in Bački Monoštor, and Association in eco-rural tourism (Skorenovac).

Regarding categorization, a large number of households do not have elaborated categorization. As many as 38 surveyed households were not categorized, 12 are in the process of categorizing, and 20 households received categorization. Most households have the 2<sup>nd</sup> category (3 stars). Many households have problems with categorization

because regulations on categorization are not adjusted for facilities of original architecture. Some households are waiting for the process of categorization, because at the municipal level there is no commission for categorization.

**Graph 2.** Are you a member of any association of rural households?



*Source: Authors' calculation based on the survey data*

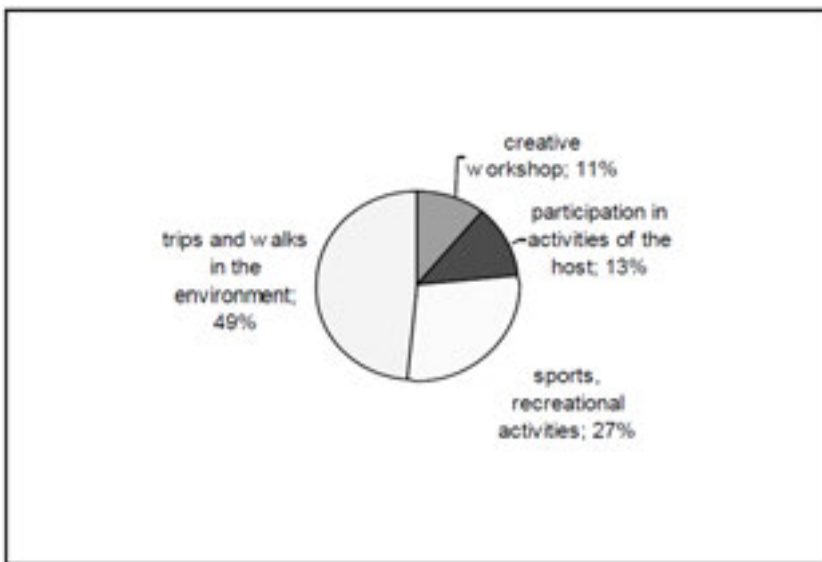
The second part of the questionnaire was aimed at determining the quality of tourist offer of the household. Concerning the type of tourist offer, room and board in its offer have 48 homesteads, while only food services have 22 homesteads. Except for the difference in the capacity of lodging, homesteads also differ in the quality of the offer. Concerning the capacity, affirmed farms and rural homesteads have large number of beds, compared to some rural homesteads, where only one or two rooms are in the offer. In some private rural farmsteads, in every room there is separated bathroom, while in some there two or three rooms share one bathroom. In 42 facilities homemade food produced in the homestead is on the menu, while in 28 facilities food and drink are purchased, mainly from individual domestic manufacturers. Bigger farms, which have already been commercialized, acquire homemade food and drink, but they do not produce them in the facility itself. In most households, the main local products are homemade juices, brandy and pickles. To the question: "Is it possible to buy food in the household, for tourists to take home?" 18 respondents said yes, while 52 households do not have that possibility to offer.

Concerning the structure of visitors, the largest number of respondents (68%) answered that tourist product of homestead is meant for all structures of visitors, 9% of facilities is firstly aimed for school children, while 23% are aimed for the others (youth, families, older people, business people). During the stay in rural homesteads, on the farms and in ethno-houses, there is a possibility to practice a wide range of activities. The question

was: “Which activities are offered to guests during their stay?” (Graph 3), the most often are present excursion trips and walks in the surrounding area. All rural homesteads usually offer walks and bicycle riding, and those homesteads which have aimed their services mainly at school children offer also seeing domestic animals.

As for the plans for the expansion or construction of new facilities in rural households, the households that currently do not have accommodation facilities are planning to build it in the next period. Many households plan to complete the sports and recreational facilities (construction of a golf course, tennis courts, buying a bike for rent, children’s playground, and swimming pool) and thereby enrich the tourist offer. About 20% of households do not plan to build anything in the future.

**Graph 3:** Representation of activities during the stay in the household



*Source: Authors' calculation based on the survey data*

In the third part of the questionnaire marketing was researched, in order to see what kind of cooperation is between rural households and travel agencies, the scope of promotion of rural households individually or through tourist organizations, types of promotion of rural tourism.

Many rural households have an information board just in front of the household, because they have not yet been categorized, so they do not want to be labelled until the categorization is done. Some households do not have any guideline to the facility because they do not receive visitors without notice, and are of opinion that their signalling is not required. Regarding the use of the Internet for promotion, only 23% of households have both web site and e-mail.

Most households have a cooperation with tourist organizations of municipality to which they belong and the Tourist Organization of Vojvodina, and the lowest with the Tourist



Organization of Serbia. Of all respondents, 17% have cooperation with the Tourist organization of their municipality and with the Tourist organization of Vojvodina, and the Tourist Organization of Serbia. Cooperation with the Tourist Organization of the Municipality and the Tourist Organization of Vojvodina has the largest percentage of respondents, 41%. Only cooperation with the Tourist Organization of their municipality has 15% of respondents, while the remaining 15% do not cooperate with any tourist organization.

Rural households sell their services either independently (34%), or through travel agencies (66%). One part of rural households cooperates with travel agencies in Serbia and abroad (Hungary and Croatia). In some tourist packages only 25% of rural households are included. Very few households have their own brochure (15%), and at fairs they rarely appear independently, but under the aegis of the Tourist organization of Vojvodina and Serbia. A small number of rural households are advertised through the media (radio, TV and newspapers).

The volume of tourist traffic is very different from household to household. Comparison is difficult to make, because many households do not keep records of transactions regularly, but on a quarter or annual basis. Some households keep record of the number of nights, and those that do not have accommodation track the number of visitors. Regarding the structure of guests according to the place they come from, the highest percentage of guests is of domestic origin, while on average 20% is of foreign origin. The average length of stay of guests is: in 41% of facilities visitors remain 1 day, in 42% of facilities the average length of stay is 2 days, while in only 10% of facilities tourists stay 3 days or more.

### **Key principles of the strategy of development of rural tourism households in Vojvodina**

To make the best use of the advantages of rural tourism in Vojvodina, and overcome lacks it is necessary to undertake a number of measures. The key principles of the strategy of tourism development of rural tourism households in Vojvodina, which have already confirmed as a factor of success in the case of similar tourist destinations in Europe include:

1. ***Tourist offer must be meaningful.*** Rural tourism offer of Vojvodina should be diverse, rich and adapted to different segments of tourists. Substantiality of the offer must be visible in space and time. For example, any time of year can have its offer, recognizable and characteristic by the way of life and rural work relating to that period.
2. ***Environmental sustainability.*** The pursuit of sustainable development of rural tourism means that visitors/tourists participate actively in the whole process, in order of conformity of their overall behaviour to the objectives of development, primarily for the protection and preservation of the natural environment and cultural and historical heritage.

3. ***Rural tourism must be based on the study and understanding of tourist needs.*** It is necessary for the development of tourist product to be driven by demand first, and not by the product itself. This means identifying different categories of potential visitors in key markets. Each of these categories of visitors has different motivations and therefore for each of these segments there will be a demand to determine different products of rural tourism and different experiences.
4. ***An effective marketing.*** In order to make the marketing performance of rural tourism destinations in Vojvodina better, except for private initiative, it is necessary to engage local communities and tourist organizations of municipalities. In order to achieve that, it is necessary to publish specialized brochures, make films, multimedia presentations, and make a unique web portal which would include data on all registered service providers in rural tourism of Vojvodina. Also, it is necessary to teach the hosts to use the Internet, so that they could promote the tourist product easier.
5. ***Providing financial assistance and giving incentives for the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina.*** Without financial support from the state the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina can not be successfully carried out. Support for rural tourism is manifested in the form of direct support (aid, grants, and loans) or in direct support of investment (share of equity). For the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina it is very important to include the Ministry of Agriculture and other organizations that would help financially the development of rural tourism. International agencies, including the European Union and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), can help in the development of rural tourism through a range of support, both technical and financial, that the agencies could give to governments and regional authorities.
6. ***Coordination and cooperation.*** It is necessary to coordinate activities between the various entities involved in tourism development. It is necessary to encourage the cooperation of rural households by strengthening existing and establishing new associations.
7. ***Education and training.*** A special aspect of the management of the development of rural tourism in Vojvodina is manifested in the need for education of staff. Training for work in rural tourism should apply to all persons who would be involved in the rural tourism, and in: program planning, service delivery, direct contact with tourists, as well to all persons and institutions that are generally concerned or should take care of tourist development of the area. The ultimate goal of all training (seminars, workshops, etc.) should be that all potential participants from local authorities to the village housewives, understand values which the development of rural tourism could have for their region. All that for the purpose of conscious development of rural tourism, which should not be uncontrolled, unplanned or sporadic, but planned, controlled and sustained.

8. ***Standardization and categorization.*** For further tourism development in the countryside it is necessary to apply the appropriate standardization and categorization of services, especially appropriate conditions for accommodation. Rural tourism products will need to be developed to the highest standard to meet the needs of the consumer and to encourage their next arrival, which is important for ensuring long-term sustainability. Labelling i.e. providing labels can be used as a guarantee of quality.

### **Conclusion**

Vojvodina with its natural and social resources qualifies for a position within the developed rural tourism regions. There are villages, farmhouses, ethno houses and events in Vojvodina that could offer authentic experience. However, rural tourism product in Vojvodina has not been holding an appropriate position at the market.

Certain measures have to be taken in order to exploit the advantages and potentials and at the same time overcome disadvantages and restrictions of rural tourism in Vojvodina. The essential activities for improving service quality in rural tourism are: to improve the quality of accommodation facilities; to educate population with the aim of achieving higher service quality; to categorize accommodation capacities in rural tourism in Vojvodina; to establish and apply criteria for standardization and service quality in rural tourism in Vojvodina and to intensify promotion at domestic and international market.

It is necessary to highlight that the development of rural tourism households in Vojvodina, which complies with reasonable possibilities, would approach certain obstacles and face difficulties. In order to achieve the best possible position at the international market, Vojvodina needs to apply the model of development that would ensure competitive advantage regarding similar destinations.

Indisputably, Vojvodina has a high potential in rural tourism that makes a fundamental component in the complex development of tourism in Serbia. However, the development is primarily dependent upon the tourism offer variety and the presentation in its widest sense.

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## KLJUČNI PRINCIPI STRATEGIJE RAZVOJA TURIZMA NA SEOSKIM GAZDINSTVIMA – STUDIJA SLUČAJA VOJVODINE

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### Rezime

*Predmet rada je analiza stanja i perspektiva razvoja ruralnog turizma na seoskim gazdinstvima u Vojvodini. Vojvodina sa svojim prirodnim i društvenim resursima ima osnovu za razvoj ruralnog turizma. Međutim, proizvod ruralnog turizma u Vojvodini nema odgovarajuću poziciju na tržištu. Sa ciljem utvrđivanja principa i faktora za uspešan razvoj ruralnog turizma, formiran je upitnik, a istraživanje je sprovedeno na 70 seoskih gazdinstava koja se bave turizmom. Da bi se postigla najbolja moguća pozicija na međunarodnom tržištu, Vojvodina mora da primeni model razvoja koji bi osigurao konkurentsku prednost, oslanjajući se na iskustva sličnih destinacija. Važne aktivnosti koje će doprineti poboljšanju kvaliteta usluga u ruralnom turizmu su: poboljšanje kvaliteta smeštajnih kapaciteta, edukacija stanovništva sa ciljem postizanja višeg kvaliteta usluga, uspostavljanje i primena kriterijuma za standardizaciju i kvalitet usluga u seoskom turizmu u Vojvodini i intenziviranje promocije na domaćem i međunarodnom tržištu.*

**Ključne reči:** održivi razvoj, ruralni turizam, seoska gazdinstva, strategija razvoja, Vojvodina

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