

## DIFFUSION OF KNOWLEDGE AND RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT – EXAMPLE OF VOJVODINA<sup>1</sup>

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### Summary

*Changes in contemporary rural space have influenced new perception of rural way of life. This has affected changes in economic reproduction of rural communities towards diversification. Rural tourism is one of the possible directions in achieving it. As a form of innovative rural economic practice, rural tourism should be based on diffusion of knowledge and information (DKI). Therefore, extension service can be of a great assistance in rural tourism development.*

*The authors have pointed out characteristics of extension work in rural tourism in Vojvodina. The research results have showed that even though professional help has been identified as a main factor of rural tourism development, there are several obstacles in extension activities in rural tourism development (managerial, financial). In the conclusion, the authors have emphasized the necessity of strengthening visibility and recognition of extension service in rural tourism development.*

**Key words:** *diffusion of knowledge, extension service, rural tourism, Vojvodina.*

**JEL:** *D83, I25, Q16*

### Introduction

Travelling and tourism entails changes of physical space, but social relations, also. Both of them are essential in understanding tourist motivation, needs and expectations, but also in recognizing the hosts' ability to indulge them.

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For the last three decades, global (rural) sociology has been showing rising interest in rural tourism.<sup>5</sup> It arose from the analysis of needs and models of rural development and corresponded with the new theoretical paradigms in understanding contemporary rural way of life. In present-day Serbian science, rural tourism has mostly been the issue of agricultural economic analysis or analysis of tourism researchers, geographers, etc. Most of them dealt with the issues of rural tourism statistics, its natural and social development potentials (Bošković et al., 2013; Đukić Dojčinović, 1992; Košić, 2012; Stankov, 2007; Todorović, Bjeljac, 2007; Todorović, Štetić, 2009), destinations and offer in rural tourism<sup>6</sup>, benefits from rural tourism (Đurović, Cvejić, 2011; Đorđević Milošević, Milovanović, 2013; Muhi, 2010; Stankov, 2007; Radovanović, 2010), marketing in rural tourism (Muhi, 2009), public-private partnership in rural tourism (Bogdanov, Zečević, 2011), etc. There are few analyses in Serbian (rural) sociology dealing with the specified issue (Markov, 2006; Rajković, 2012; Šljukić, Šljukić, 2011). Therefore, by focusing on diffusion of knowledge and information (further: DKI), we tried to point out the significance and possible outcomes of a sociological perspective in researching rural tourism.

### **Rural tourism from the sociological perspective: basic concepts**

One of the key sociological subjects of interest is the relation between society and space. Space is one of the four dimensions of social structure, therefore, *conditio sine qua non* of societies. In sociology, space is understood as both physical and social (Tripković, 1998; Vujović, Petrović, 2005; Lefebvre, 1991). The type of social interaction influences the type of social space and *vice versa*. Sociologists often speak of differences between urban and rural space, but also the interactions. Contemporary rural space profoundly differs from a traditional one. Rural communities, especially in developed societies, are integrated within global society, mostly by exchange of various forms of capital. They depend on global societies, but also influence them. Therefore, contemporary transformation of rural space (Marsden, 1998) deeply transforms rural way of life.

How does it imply on rural tourism? Sociological analysis of rural tourism begins (and ends) with the analysis of rurality, as a specific type and structure of social relations. Opportunities for development of rural tourism, the way they are experienced, evaluated and, consequently, used are under direct influence of characteristics of rurality. Rurality also is influenced, among other, by characteristics of rural space. Nowadays, we emphasize transformation and multifunctionality of rural space. It is not only the place of production (of food and raw materials), especially in developed societies. As Bessière wrote (1998),

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5 Since 1980's, *Journal of Rural Studies*, currently the most respectable journal in Rural Sociology, has published almost 600 papers on tourism in rural areas. One of the most respectable European rural sociological journals, *Sociological Rurality*, in the same period, has published more than 250 articles relating to rural tourism. Since 1990, *Rural Sociology*, journal of the *Rural Sociology Section of The American Sociological Society*, has published more than 100 papers on rural tourism.

6 References on this subject are numerous. See: <http://libdgt.pmf.uns.ac.rs/>, <http://www.vbs.rs/scripts/cobiss?id=1009426014713288>, <http://scindeks.ceon.rs/SearchResults.aspx?query=ARTAK%26and%26ruralni%26turizam&page=0&sort=1&stype=0>

contemporary rural areas are “*places for entertainment, leisure activities, second homes and as an alternative to urban residential areas*”. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) called them locus of hedonistic consumption.

Structures of the contemporary rural communities change due to their specifics, which influence rural social vitality (Čikić, 2013). Changed dynamics of rural space enable rural communities to reproduce in a new manner. This implies the creation of new social roles and relations, new economic activities, new rural culture, etc. Reproduction of contemporary rural communities (especially, economic reproduction) enables, but also requires diversification, which originate from the characteristics of rural space and rurality. Rural tourism is one way in achieving it. It is not a brand new phenomenon. In the post-modern societies, it reaches new meaning and importance. Even in the era of globalization (or in spite of it), rural way of life remains specific which becomes appealing to tourists, foremost, the ones who have not experienced a rural way of life on a daily basis. Therefore, pull-push mechanisms create market niches for development of rural tourism (George et al., 2009). Derived from the specific potentials of rurality, rural tourism has a potential to contribute to rural economy renewal and rural community development.

### **Diffusion of knowledge and information and rural tourism development**

Sociological analysis of rural tourism has several focal points: a) social causes of rural tourism development, b) social repercussions of tourism development for the rural communities, but also society in general, c) stakeholders in rural tourism development, d) trends in rural tourism development, etc. Interpretation of rural development as result of interactions between endogenous potentials and support from the outside of the community enables contemporary sociology to point out innovations<sup>7</sup> as a driver for the rural modernization. This is particularly suitable for examining rural tourism.

Since it stands out from the typical/traditional rural economic activities, we hereby think of rural tourism as a form of innovative rural economic behaviour. As a form of experience economy (Pine, Gilmore, 1998), rural tourism development acquires continuous creation and diffusion of relevant knowledge and information (Rogers, 1995; Wejnert, 2002). This is where sociological perspective starts. First, DKI is crucial element in functioning of contemporary societies or cognitive capitalism, as Vercellone (2005) identified them. It gets more important when society has the interest in the subject/area. In addition, DKI is especially interesting under the conditions of heterogeneous knowledge sources and multiple communication channels. The researches of DKI in various areas of interest showed that in the early stages of development, DKI has one of the major roles as a driver of change (Rogers, 1995). Thirdly, DKI is not a linear process. It means interaction and networking, which implies the creation of multiple connections between stakeholders. Thus, DKI (potentially) benefits to all.

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7 By innovations, we do not think only of new technologies. Innovations imply thinking outside of the box. It is a new way of combining resources in order to enable flexibility of the system. It is a trigger for modernization (Čikić, 2013). Our concept of innovation is close to one given by Leeuwis (2004) or Schumpeter's (2004).

Why are we exploring DKI in rural tourism development? First, there are several studies emphasizing specifics and problems in (rural) tourism - innovation relation: lack of systematicity, lack of R&D-based innovations, etc. (Brandth et al., 2010; Hjalager, 2010, Miles, 2005, Najda Janoszka, Kopera, 2014; Rønningen, 2010; Williams, 2007). Second, (rural) tourism is a highly competitive sector, which requires innovation in order to survive and be profitable. Thus, DKI contributes to the improvement and variety of service quality in rural tourism. As a form of niche tourism (Novelli, 2005), the success of rural tourism “*rests upon a management perspective that focuses upon the dual innovative and entrepreneurial skills of the owner of the tourism organization and his/her ability to respond to the fast-changing sophisticated expectations of experienced tourists*” (Carlisle et al., 2013). Thirdly, characteristics of human resources heavily influenced outcomes of rural tourism, as an experience economy. DKI is focused on building it up. Furthermore, DKI enables exchanges of information and experiences. It facilitates dialogue in problem solving. Therefore, DKI assists in the formation, functioning and development of rural tourism stakeholders’ network (Caalders, 2002). On the other hand, networking facilitates creation of innovative milieu, necessary for development of rural tourism.

Societies with strong interest in rural tourism strategically guide its development by implementing adequate measures. This is why we speak of DKI in rural tourism through the experience of extension service. We should bear in mind that extension changes along with the changes in the rural way of life and rural economy. Jones and Garforth (1997) and Rivera (2001) argued that contemporary reforms of extension put focus on rural people in general, not only on those engaged in farming. Nowadays, extension is not only about raising yields, but, it “*seeks outcomes of capacity building and resilience in individuals and communities*” (SELN, 2006). Being focused on rural issues, contemporary extension service plays a major role as a broker within the rural tourism stakeholders’ network.

Therefore, the goal of this paper is to address some issues regarding the role of extension service in rural tourism development. We advocate that rural extension can be valuable for the rural tourism development, but its contribution depends on internal (staffing, management, motivation, finances, etc.) and external factors (governmental support, characteristics of the clients/rural hosts, characteristic of actors’ network in rural tourism, etc.). As a case study, we have chosen Agricultural Extension Service in Vojvodina (further: AESV<sup>8</sup>). Our basic hypothesis is that AESV has limited potentials for providing professional support to rural tourism development, due to the insufficiencies in both internal (managerial) and external (mostly, financial) factors.

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8 AESV is a public extension service, mostly engaged in providing professional support in farming. Nevertheless, for the last decade, a part of AESV agents has been engaged in rural extension, providing advices in rural tourism, empowerment of rural women and rural youth, etc.

## Method and data resources

We focused our analysis of the DKI in rural tourism development in Vojvodina because of: a) tradition in rural tourism<sup>9</sup>, b) tradition in extension practice and c) significant expectations from rural tourism regarding rural development in Vojvodina. The analysis is based on empirical data collected within the project *'The role and significance of Agricultural Extension Service of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina in development of rural tourism'*<sup>10</sup>. The research covered the total scope of all AESV agents (90). Data were collected based on the original questionnaire consisting of questions relating to the: a) general information about extension agent, b) development of rural tourism in Vojvodina and c) role of AESV in rural tourism development.

## Rural tourism in Vojvodina

In the last three decades, post-socialist transition of Vojvodina brought up significant changes in rural social structure. Nowadays, most of the rural communities are lacking social vitality and, therefore, losing social attractiveness. In order to improve rural quality of life, state/government recognized diversification as a model for rural economy revival (MAFWM, 2013). It entails both agricultural and non-agricultural activities. Hereby, we speak of diversification out of farming. Defined as *"all rural income generation other than food production"* (Davis, Bezemer, 2003), diversification entails various economic activities based on local potentials and advantages of family farms/rural communities. Rural tourism is only one of the possible directions in achieving it<sup>11</sup>.

According to census data (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2013), 93 farms in Vojvodina provide services in rural tourism<sup>12</sup>. Most of them are located in Srem (21%) and South Bačka area (20%). The most important are: *salaši*, rural households providing services of food, traditional rural manifestations, ethno-houses and rural/folk architecture. Even though emphasizing natural and social potentials for rural tourism development in Vojvodina, Košić (2012), Stankov (2007), Čurčić, Pavlović (2011), Đurović, Cvejić (2011) also wrote of underdeveloped and underused capacities in rural tourism. General conclusion is that additional services in rural tourism are underdeveloped which makes difficult to gain additional profit<sup>13</sup>.

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9 Even though rural tourism development in Vojvodina has been intensified in the last decade, according to Košić (2012), it has tradition over 35 years long.

10 Secretary for Agriculture, Water Management and Forestry of Autonomous Province of Vojvodina has financed the project (*Role and Significance of Agricultural Extension of Vojvodina in Development of Rural Tourism*, No. 104-401-2840/2013).

11 We can also speak of production and retail of local products, whether they are based on local, traditional crafts and arts or on adding value to agricultural products. Also, diversification of non-farming activities entails endeavours in renewable energy resources market (e.g. biomass), small, mostly family business in the industry or services, etc.

12 They make  $\frac{1}{5}$  of all farms engaged in rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia. In Vojvodina, there are also 73 registered farms involved in handicraft, activity complementary with tourism.

13 Nevertheless, Đurović and Cvejić (2011) argued that, even though underused, capacities in Vojvodinian rural tourism are more employed than ones in rural tourism in Central Serbia.

(Under)development of rural tourism derives from various social factors (Wilson et al., 2001). The intensity of their influence depends on the development and characteristics of rural tourism, but also general characteristics of (rural) social structure. In the case of rural tourism in Vojvodina, we can speak of insufficient: a) financial resources (lack of investments and lack of financial flow from rural tourist), b) institutional support and institutional/individual interest in rural tourism, c) promotion of rural tourism, d) education of rural hosts, e) tourist infrastructure and f) inadequate strategies and legal framework. Those factors significantly contributed to its non-recognition, lesser quality of services and, consequently, low income.

Even though people often think that providing services in (rural) tourism is a piece of cake, the practice often shows quite an opposite. Success in rural tourism requires complex knowledge and skills in many different aspects: “*marketing, hospitality, catering, heritage interpretation and guidance, visitor management, festival and event promotion, building conversion, in rural tourism strategy planning itself*” (OECD 1994, 44). Why are knowledge, skills and information vital for rural tourism development? First, knowledge and skills are not important only for providing a specific service in rural tourism. They are, together with the broader set of information, vital to advance in entrepreneurial behaviour in rural tourism. In order to understand the significance of knowledge, skills and information on rural tourism development, we must take a step back. Rural hosts provide and, more importantly, sell an experience. Whether tourist visits rural areas for relaxation and fun, to learn, to have an adventure or for personal growth and a sense of identification, they seek for an experience. Rural tourism provides both dimensions of experience: a) participation in the experience (e.g. cooking traditional dishes, participating in farm activities) and b) connection with the event and/or rural hosts. As a form of experience economy, rural tourism must provide memorable and completely personalized offer (Pine, Gilmore, 1998). Otherwise, business of rural tourism is no long-term sustainable. This leads us to the question: what makes the authenticity and experience in rural tourism? Is it “*landscape, wildlife, ..., air quality, ..., rural settlements* (in terms of rural architecture – N.A.), *..., historical features, ..., water quality..., distinctive local customs, languages, costumes, foods, crafts, festivals, traditions, ways of life* (Garrod et al., 2006)? Or, is it the knowledge and skills of rural hosts to manipulate with the countryside capital (Garrod et al., 2006) and create a preferable environment for the rural tourists? We argue for the second. According to Lyck (2010) “*human resources are of decisive influence for successful implementation of experience economy*”. Only qualified staff can have good consumer knowledge, which enables them to understand and fulfil, but also to assume the tourists` needs.

### **Extension service and rural tourism development in Vojvodina**

As we are aware of, there are no comprehensive studies dealing solely with the issue of knowledge and skills of rural hosts in Vojvodina/Serbia. Nevertheless, some authors, while analyzing other issues, wrote of insufficient professional knowledge and skills in providing services in rural tourism (Đurović, Cvejić, 2011; Stanojević, Manić, 2009, Đukić Dojčinović, 1992; Košić 2012). Also, in *Programme of development of sustainable rural tourism in the Republic of Serbia* (2011), development of human capital in rural tourism is pointed out as

one of the priorities<sup>14</sup>. Under such context, the role of professional help and support from extension service is of great assistance. Its role is getting more important when we take into account that in rural tourism, attempt to create and offer authenticity is in rural hosts', mostly unprofessional, hands. They design experience based mostly on indigenous knowledge of local specifics and skills in providing services. Under such context, systematic and organized DKI can be crucial in building human resources.

According to our research results, for the last several years,  $\frac{1}{5}$  of all AESV agents have provided professional help relating to rural tourism development in Vojvodina. Most of them (almost 60%) work in the areas with the most developed rural tourism offer in Vojvodina (north of Bačka, Srem, Fruška Gora, rural areas near Novi Sad). Data analyses showed that female agents are keener to be engaged in providing knowledge and information in rural tourism, as well as younger extension agents.

Development of rural tourism entails participation and cooperation of different stakeholders. They differ by internal characteristics and external relations with each other. As we have mentioned before, extension service plays the role of broker in the rural tourism development network by: a) providing professional help to all stakeholders, b) enabling communication within the network, c) strengthening stakeholders' social capital and d) facilitating diffusion of knowledge and information among them. Extension agents work with different clients providing professional support. So far, AESV agents have been providing advices relating to the rural tourism to farmers, farmers' associations, rural women, rural youth, wine makers, those with and without experience in rural tourism, etc. Different clients have had different requests for knowledge and information. Hence, AESV agents provided help regarding different aspects of rural tourism development (establishing business, tourism infrastructure, marketing and promotion, financial management, government incentives for the rural tourism development, farming as a complementary activity, creation of opportunities for the additional revenue from rural tourism, etc.).

The engagement of AESV in rural tourism development is generally determined by the level of its transformation from exclusively agricultural towards rural extension. By this, extension service traces changes of rurality. Internal and external factors influenced potential role of AESV in rural tourism development. By internal factors, we have understood general management issues in extension, such as management of human resources (staffing, motivation and education), finances, time management, task management, etc. External factors comprised characteristics of governmental support (to extension and rural tourism, as well), characteristics of the clients/rural hosts, characteristic of actors' network in rural tourism, etc.

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14 Within the goals projected for the development of human capital in rural tourism, *Programme* (2011) especially emphasizes raise of the awareness of (rural) population on the rural tourism significance, permanent education for providing services in rural tourism and strengthening of rural women and youth's capacities for rural tourism.

Even though AESV agents have marked professional assistance and help as factor with highest impact on improvement of quality, quantity and diversity of services in rural tourism<sup>15</sup>, only half of them think that they should provide such assistance<sup>16</sup>. The AESV agents gave clear arguments why they should not be involved professionally in rural tourism development. First, most of them do not have sufficient knowledge and information about rural tourism. By vocation, AESV agents are experts in farming (crops, animal production, plant protection, fruit and wine growing, agricultural machinery, etc.), not in tourism. AESV agents have emphasized that improvement of rural tourism in Vojvodina is a complex issue. Accordingly, they have pointed out that tourism experts and economists should be dealing with such an issue. In addition, extension agents highlighted that they already have too many professional responsibilities. Additional professional tasks would only have a negative impact on the scope and quality of current extension work<sup>17</sup>.

Among AESV agents there are three distinctive groups regarding the issue of future interest in extension work relating to the rural tourism development. Almost ½ of the AESV agents thought that such interest would increase in the next five to ten years. Those are mostly agents with previous experience in extension work relating to the rural tourism<sup>18</sup>. Second group comprises of indecisive agents (42%). Only 8% of AESV agents said that there would be no increase in interest for extension work in rural tourism.

Under restrictive rural/agrarian budget (which is likely to be for the next several years), reform of extension service even more depends on restructuring of its internal resources (human resources, organization of work, budgeting, networking). As the most important activity in strengthening the role of EASV in rural tourism development, extension agents have pointed out selection among currently employed agents in order to choose the ones

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15 Besides rural hosts' improvement of knowledge, information and skills, extension agents highlighted adequate state policy measures and general/tourism infrastructure as most important factors in rural tourism development.

16 This result is closely connected to the issue of extension service's reform. Namely, in order to establish modern extension service in Vojvodina, stakeholders (government, extension agents, experts, etc.) often discussed opportunities and obstacles in its reform. The reform is expected due to the structural and functional changes in agriculture and rural structure.

17 Even though not statistically significant, there is a difference between AESV agents with and without the experience in extension work relating to rural tourism development in their opinion on whether they should be providing such professional help. AESV agents with the experience in extension work related to rural tourism are more likely to think that currently employed agents should be providing professional advices in rural tourism.

18 The independent sample test has also shown significant difference of means of depended variable between observed groups of AESV agents (agents with experience in extension relating rural tourism: M=1.38, SD=0.74; agents without experience in extension relating rural tourism: M=2.12, SD=0.96; MD= - 0.74, 95%CI: -1.15 to -0.33 with eta square of 0.142). AESV agents who have been providing professional help relating rural tourism are keener to predict increase in interest in extension work regarding rural tourism in the next five to ten years, due to the direct insight in current state-of-art in rural tourism.



who are interested in extension work relating to rural tourism. Most of the AESV (57%) said that they are interested in providing professional help regarding rural tourism development. Those agents could be a potential group for selection, whereby estimation of the number of AESV agents should be based on the analysis of the rural hosts' needs and preferences for the systematic DKI.

According to the AESV agents, the second major factor of improvement of extension work in rural tourism development is increased available amount of finances for their professional engagement. Due to the previously mentioned restrictive state budget for extension service in general, the issue of finances raises issues of commercialization of extension work (Petrović, Janković, 2010) and alternative models of financing (e.g. project financing).

Thirdly,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the EASV agents emphasized necessity of upgrading the cooperation between extension service and local, regional and national authorities (especially those in rural tourism). Horizontal and vertical connections between stakeholders facilitate faster and superior information flow, which is crucial for the success of extension work. Besides, strengthening the actors' network in rural tourism in Vojvodina could contribute to the recognition of AESV as a referable institution in DKI and problem solving.

### **Conclusions**

Politicians, but (rural) public also often lay high hopes in rural tourism. They think of it as a magic wand for all rural economic problems. There is no doubt that rural tourism could contribute rural economy renewal. However, rural tourism development requires a broad network of support, especially in its early stages of development.

The research results confirmed our basic hypothesis of insufficient internal/managerial and external/financial resources in improvement of AESV role in DKI in rural tourism. Even though extension work in rural tourism has been present for several years, AESV agents engaged in DKI in rural tourism have been facing (and still are) several problems relating to financing, lack of relevant knowledge and information (issue of area of expertise), too many other professional responsibilities, targeting in extension work.

There is no doubt that extension work has a significant role in the development and promotion of rural tourism. In order to improve the role of extension service as a broker in rural tourism stakeholders' network, it should be paid more attention on visibility and recognition of extension service (in our case, EASV) among rural hosts and other stakeholders in rural tourism. One of the ways to achieve it is to be precise when defining the target group of extension work. Due to the specifics of knowledge, skills and information in rural tourism as the content of DKI, extension work in rural tourism should be demand driven and tailor-made. Furthermore, the same principles should be applied in education and training of extension agents in rural tourism. Such approach should enable the rational use of the limited capacities of the extension service, especially under circumstances of social transition, economic crisis and restrictive rural/agrarian budget.

The research results have confirmed our thesis on the importance of knowledge and information in rural tourism development. We advocate that knowledge and information have the same significance in rural tourism development as financial resources, if not even greater. They enable the creation of market advantages (Ventura, Milone, 2004) which are crucial for long-term sustainability of business. DKI, if properly conducted, majorly contributes to the reproduction of a viable rural economy. Therefore, it benefits not only those engaged in rural tourism, but also to the social vitality of rural communities.

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## DIFUZIJA ZNANJA I RAZVOJ RURALNOG TURIZMA – PRIMER VOJVODINE

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### Sažetak

*Promene u savremenom ruralnom prostoru uslovile su novu percepciju ruralnog načina života. Ovo je uticalo na promene u ekonomskoj reprodukciji ruralnih zajednica, prema diverzifikaciji. Ruralni turizam je jedan od načina njene realizacije. Kao oblik inovativnog ekonomskog ponašanja, ruralni turizam bi trebalo da bude baziran na difuziji znanja i inovacije (DZI). U ovom kontekstu, savetodavna služba može biti od velike pomoći u razvoju ruralnog turizma.*

*Autori su istakli karakteristike savetodavnog rada u ruralnom turizmu u Vojvodini. Rezultati istraživanja su pokazali da, iako je profesionalna pomoć identifikovana kao jedan od glavnih faktora razvoja ruralnog turizma, postoji nekoliko prepreka u savetodavnim aktivnostima koje su usmerene na razvoj ruralnog turizma (menadžment, finansije). U zaključku, autori su istakli neophodnost jačanja vidljivosti i prepoznatljivosti savetodavne službe u razvoju ruralnog turizma.*

**Ključne reči:** *difuzija znanja, savetodavna služba, ruralni turizam, Vojvodina.*

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