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The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in the Development of Rural Tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia)

Abstract

Sustainable rural tourism requires a high rate of local participation to achieve planning and development objectives. Particularly significant is the role of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to facilitate and plan useful projects pertinent to rural development and tourism that aim to include the local population in such activities. During the last two decades, the increasing number of NGOs in developing countries has led to them becoming influential actors in sustainable development in many fields and bearers of various ideas, projects and other activities. This is particularly evident in rural tourism, where NGOs have become prominent in the field of rural attractions as well as in the training and capacity building of local communities. Tens of NGOs whose activities are essentially directed towards rural development are active in Vojvodina, however, their actual role in sustainable tourism is not completely understood. This study regarding the NGOs concerned with rural development aimed to identify, analyse and evaluate the role of non-governmental organisations in sustainable rural

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tourism in Vojvodina. The starting presumption was that NGOs have a clear and significant role in the sustainable development of rural tourism in Vojvodina. The basic methods and techniques of data collecting were observation and analysis of documents and the techniques of standardised interviews, with elements of in-depth interviews. This research has shown that the role of the non-governmental sector in the development of tourism in Vojvodina is not visible and well defined, but also that some NGOs achieve high-quality results.

Keywords: Non-governmental organisations (NGO), sustainable development, local communities, rural tourism, rural attractions, projects, developing countries, Vojvodina (Serbia).

Sustainable rural tourism

The basic premise of the realisation of the concept of sustainable development is that only a comprehensive cooperation of the public administration, the business sector and civil society organisations can ensure that sustainable development initiatives are sufficiently integrated, so that they can solve the most complex social problems (Jegdić, 2010: 153). The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) considers sustainable development as applicable to all forms of tourism and according to their conceptual definition, “Sustainable tourism should make optimal use of environmental resources ..., respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities ..., ensure viable, long-term economic operations...” UNWTO (2004).

Although there are numerous rural tourism research studies, there is no universal definition of this term in the scientific literature. A suitable definition of rural tourism was formulated by Trav Info India as: “Rural tourism is “any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially, as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the local community for a more enriching tourism experience.” (www.travinfoindia.com). A widely accepted opinion among researchers today is that rural tourism encompasses a range of tourist activities that occur in natural and sparsely inhabited areas, such as agritourism, cultural tourism, ecotourism, natural tourism and adventure tourism (e.g., see Lane 1994; Page, Getz 1997; Butler 1998; Roberts, Hall 2001; Garrod et al. 2006;

Sharpley, Jepson 2011; Silva, Leal 2015). Bernard Lane has, in several papers, dealt with setting of a conceptual frame of rural tourism and identification of sub-forms based on the activities and impact of rural tourism on the local area (e.g. Lane 1994, 1999). Lane emphasises rural resources, “countryside capital”, as the most significant element of the rural tourism system, as they provide a backdrop within which “pure” forms of rural tourism can take place. Saxena et al. introduced the notion of “integrated rural tourism” (IRT) as “tourism explicitly tied to economic, social, cultural, natural and human structure of the location in which it takes place” (Saxena et al. 2007: 3). The argument is that IRT leads to more sustainable tourism compared to other forms, as it creates a powerful network of links between the social, cultural, economic and ecological resources. Basically, the importance of territorial identity and strategic commodification of resources and location is emphasised, as well as the significance of non-local forces in starting local activities (Petrou et al. 2007).

The sustainability of a new concept of rural development does not only reflect in the preservation of the quality of natural resources and biodiversity, but also in the preservation of social and cultural diversity (Rikalović et al. 2012). Rural tourism can represent a strategy for the sustainable development of rural areas, but also the means of product differentiation in stagnating areas according to Butler’s model of destination life cycle (Butler, 1980). However, introducing tourism in rural areas can result in clashes with existing activities or fitting into them as complementary activities that diversify rural economy. Regeneration and empowerment of socio-economy may evacuate people from traditional sources of survival while uplifting the living standard, however, over emphasising the economic potentiality of tourism may lead to agriculture (the traditional livelihood) being replaced with tourism (alternative industry) in rural areas (McArdavey, McDonagh 2010). The idea is to motivate rural communities to use tourism development to garner new sources of revenue to support, not replace current activities.

The goal of rural tourism management is to achieve sustainable development of rural areas, while respecting their specificities, preserving and affirming the authentic regional and cultural values, as well as the quality of natural environment. Creating a balance in partner relations among numerous participants is a decisive factor in the successful planning and management of rural tourism development. Until recently, the focus has

been placed on the relationship between the private and the public sector, with NGOs giving a new impulse to tourism development in rural areas and rural development in general during the last two decades (Jegdić 2010).

According to the *Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia 2006–2015* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 91/2006), rural tourism is a significant and complex product that should show the way towards the development of sustainable tourism. Furthermore, rural tourism in Serbia should be present throughout its territory and should offer diverse experiences in the visual and emotional sense. According to the *Master Plan for Sustainable Rural Tourism Development in Serbia* (Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia, no. 85/2011), twelve rural tourism clusters were defined, four of which are in the Vojvodina region, Upper Danube, Northern Bačka, Fruška Gora and Southern Banat.

Although rural tourism has been developing for decades in some parts of Vojvodina, and central and western Serbia, it remains an insufficiently recognised tourist product of Serbia. There are more than 32,000 beds so far engaged in rural tourism and based on the research of 106 local tourist organisations in Serbia, it is estimated that the direct share of rural tourism in Serbian economy is around €100 million, equating to 16% of the overall GDP in the travel and tourism sector in the Republic of Serbia in 2010 (WTTC, 2010).

The support for the development of rural tourism in Serbia has so far been provided from the part of the agrarian budget reserved for rural development, as well as funds created for project financing and incentives to tourism. EU support for rural development in Serbia was defined by the Rural Development Programme (IPARD) that the EU adopted for the period 2015–2020, amounting to €175 million for co-financing of adequate projects (www.mpzss.gov.rs). In the previous EU financial cycle 2007–2013, a programme of aid to rural development of Serbia was also realised within the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Resources for rural tourism projects are also provided by foreign and international donors, such as GTZ, World Bank, EBRD, to finance regional and cross-border developmental projects. Particularly numerous are the small local projects, typically for technical assistance and training to aid the development of rural tourism, improvement in the management of small farms to include them in tourism currents, development of local services and crafts, as well as marketing and employment.

NGO in sustainable rural tourism

The term “non-governmental organisation” dates back to 1950, when the UN formulated the expression. It is presumed that the UN, which had predominantly dealt with the activities of governments, wanted to consult the private and non-profit organisations independently of the governments. Today, the UN describe non-governmental organisations as:

A non-governmental organisation (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organised on a local, national or international level ... NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, bring citizen concerns to governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Their relationship with offices and agencies of the United Nations system differs depending on their goals, their venue and the mandate of a particular institution. Some are organised around specific issues, such as human rights, environment or health. (Yaziji, Doh 2009, according to: Graf, Rothlauf 2011: 5).

Colin Ball and Leith Dunn identified five types of activities that are usually practised by NGOs: service defining and delivering, mobilisation of resources, research and innovation, human resource development, public information, education and advocacy. These activities range widely, from “care and protection” of endangered individuals/groups to “change and development” activities directed at society at large (Ball, Dunn 1995: 23).

There are numerous research studies on the role of NGOs in sustainable development (e.g. Massoni 1985; Korten 1987; Myers 1990; VanSant 2003; Kersten et al. 2012), as well as several study cases regarding the roles of NGOs in sustainable development (Catalysts for sustainability: NGOs and regional development initiatives in the Czech Republic 2002; Sustainability in Action: NGO Initiatives for Sustainable Development in the Western Balkans 2006).

In the social politics of developed countries, non-governmental/non-profit organisations hold great significance, especially because a modern state administration cannot satisfy all citizen needs, thereby including the non-profit sector in many of its programmes. Basically, the non-

governmental, non-profit sector becomes an alternative or a complement, as well as a partner to the state, but also the private sector (Jegdić 2010).

From this, these organisations can be considered to have an interest advocacy approach and can be defined as groups of individuals motivated to reach a common goal. In that sense, their influence is reflected in their interaction with other participants, such as social interests, culture, tourism, ideology, etc. (Lalić 2016). Alternatively, these institutions are not too different from others because they can be considered as institutions whose main task is to influence public policy (Marčetić, Rančić 2017). In this regard, the role and activities of NGOs can also be defined from the perspective of neo-institutional theories, in which new institutionalism considers the effect of organisations on the process of decision-making (Nugent, Campos 1999). Traditional institutionalism only considered the strength and the formal structure of institutions (Krajinović 2018), whereas neo-institutional theories of organisation emphasise institutional isomorphism, i.e. the attitude that organisations begin looking like their competitors (DiMaggio, Powell 1983). Certain branches of economy and specific fields of activity can entail a specific structural shape. According to this opinion, organisations accept institutionalised forms of organisational structure, though not to boost efficiency, but more as an imitation of earlier decisions and practices, most often by market leaders. Organisations in the early stages of development usually differ significantly and only later does homogenisation of their organisational forms and managerial practices occur (Hernaus 2016).

The Serbian public occasionally associates forming of NGOs with wartime events and social transition in the former Yugoslavia during the 90s of the twentieth century. Since 1990, when the process of political and social pluralisation began and when free association and activity of citizens was legalised until today, over 30,000 NGOs have been registered and active in Serbia. Comparison with the surrounding countries shows that Serbia is lagging in the development of civil society, with the cooperation between the government and the civil society being more formal than impactful in nature (Civic Initiatives 2015: 11).

NGOs appeared in the previous two decades as significant support and agents of sustainable tourism/ecotourism/rural tourism. For the NGOs, tourism is not just an “industry” or an activity that is undertaken as a “getaway vacation”, rather they wish to affect the creation of new and

positive attitudes, values and actions in the tourist and local community” (Wearing et al. 2005: 427). Generally, the role of NGOs in rural development and tourism significantly varies among different countries. In some countries, the networks of NGOs efficiently meet the needs of the rural population and articulate them into various activities, while their impact in developing countries remains small due to bad networking and low capacities. In rural development, NGOs are particularly active in the field of environmental protection in promoting the cultural/historical legacy, education and dealing with social issues. Even though many NGOs declare themselves relevant to rural development, few of them have implemented tangible projects in this field (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Water Management of the Republic of Serbia 2009: 30).

Professional literature features numerous papers with the primary goal of establishing the NGO role in tourism (e.g. Mitchell, Reid 2001; Timothy 2002; Halpenny 2003; Wearing et al. 2005). Research related to the role of NGOs in sustainable rural development was mostly supported by various national and international funds, with a focus on establishing the relationship of NGOs with other actors at a destination, but also with the governmental institutions, business associations, international organisations, etc. For example, the NETIF project (Nepal Environmental and Tourism Initiative Foundation) implemented a sustainable tourist project in the Kathmandu Valley, titled “Sustainable tourism, the NGOs’ tool for community development: How NGOs’ action in tourism industry lead to community development in Nepal?” (Savoi University 2012).

There are numerous associations active in the field of rural tourism in Serbia (Associations of Entrepreneurs in Rural Tourism, CenORT – Centre for Responsible and Sustainable Tourism Development, AEEPT – Association of Experts in Eco-Rural Tourism, etc.), however, the role of the non-governmental sector in sustainable rural tourism in Serbia remains insignificant (Đorđević-Milošević, Milovanović 2012). NGOs are mostly formed in the environmental and social sectors, in the field of ecological agriculture, initiatives related to rural development or education, etc. No significant research on the role of NGOs in rural development and tourism has been conducted in Serbia to date and there is generally little research regarding the non-governmental sector. NGOs can apply for funding their tourism projects with foreign and domestic funds. One should emphasise possibilities to apply for grants from international development agencies

that fund programmes encouraging the protection of biodiversity and 'green' initiatives, the development of local cooperatives, small enterprises and poverty reduction. Many such initiatives are being implemented or have already been realised in Serbia, particularly in Vojvodina (Demirović 2016).

Research

1. Research problem

The primary stakeholders in tourism are those who benefit from it directly or indirectly and who generate the quality of the tourist product through their active participation, while the secondary stakeholders are those that do not make financial profit from tourism, but who suffer its influences or support it. NGOs have succeeded in influencing the operations of numerous tourist destinations. The community is a specific participant in making sustainable tourism decisions and the local community with NGOs is showing increasing interest in promoting tourism.

NGOs have the position of an impartial actor/facilitator, encouraging other participants to come together and establish tourism partnerships, therefore, their role is indispensable in advocating strict adherence to the principles of sustainable development. Within a partnership, the NGO should monitor the development pertaining to all participants and report openly and independently on the results, implement the partnership principles, point to best practices and build the capacities of all participants. The primary research problem that emerged from this paper concerns the attempt to determine the role of the NGO sector in tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia). Specifically, this research addressed the following questions:

1. What are the attitudes of NGOs regarding their place in sustainable rural tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia)?
2. What are the attitudes of NGOs on activities related to the development of sustainable rural tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia)?
3. What is the impact of NGOs on the sustainable development of rural tourism in Vojvodina (Serbia)?

The object of this research was NGOs that primarily deal in sustainable rural development, as well as their activities. This research aimed to identify, analyse and evaluate the role of NGOs in sustainable rural tourism in Vojvodina. The starting presumption was that NGOs have a clear and

significant role in sustainable development of rural tourism in Vojvodina. The research methods employed were observation and document analysis (content analysis), as well as a standardised interview, with elements of in-depth interview. Official NGO sites dealing with the topic in question and other official documents and media were selected as holders of physical content. Data collecting was complemented by a direct, questionnaire-based interview with option-based or open-ended answers (standardised interview). In order to gain a deeper insight into certain problems, the respondents were allowed to express their opinion in more detail, to a certain degree, so the survey also contained elements of in-depth interview. The NGO interviews took place in January 2014. Eight NGOs operating in the territory of Vojvodina were chosen in a controlled sample, with the elements of a simple random sample. NGOs were also selected based on criteria previously set by the authors. The basic criterion was the existence of a concrete activity or intention, as stated in the NGO mission, to deal in supporting sustainable rural development. Care was taken that the respondents who were chosen were able to express the essence of attitudes of the entire NGO group of this profile.

The telephone interview consisted of twelve questions to acquire information regarding the state and characteristics of the surveyed NGOs. The questionnaire that was used as an instrument for collection of direct answers consisted of 21 multiple choice questions, some of which were open-ended, all divided into four parts. The first part of the questionnaire was related to the reasons for founding the NGO and the quality of cooperation with other actors, the second part was related to the presence of NGO in sustainable rural tourism, while in the third part, all organisations were asked to rank the activities that must be taken to develop sustainable rural tourism. The last part of the questionnaire asked NGOs about the extent to which they contribute to the sustainable development of rural tourism.

2. Results and discussion

2.1 Characteristics of the surveyed NGOs

This study included the following NGOs:

1. “Eko Varoš”, Novi Bečej
2. “Green Initiative of Vojvodina”, Novi Sad

3. "Green Network of Vojvodina", Novi Sad
4. "Healthy Life" association, Zrenjanin
5. Association for healthy food "TERRAS", Subotica
6. Association for development of eco-rural tourism "Podunav", Bački Monoštor
7. Centre for eco-rural development, Aleksandrovo
8. Association of producers and lovers of organic food "VitaS", Ruma

Most of the surveyed NGOs were founded in the last 15 years and ranged from 30 to 100 members, with no full-time employees and an average of fewer than 50 volunteers. The NGOs mostly see the local and regional level as the area of their activities and are members of networks (IUCN, Serbia Organic, Green Network of Vojvodina, National association for ecotourism, the "Istar" cluster...). The main fields of activities of the surveyed NGOs were environmental protection, sustainable development, organic agriculture and eco-rural development. NGOs were promoted mostly through updated and transparent websites, with some creating their own *Facebook* pages and leaflets. Depending on the main field of work, the NGOs quoted the following programme goals: development of sustainable tourism and preservation of tradition; environmental protection and development of organic agriculture; development of rural tourism on specific tourist markets; increase of environmental and civil awareness through education, information, seminars and charity activities. The NGOs were the initiators and participants of various activities in their field of work, the most important of which were the organisation of workshops, courses, lectures; participation at fairs and events; identification of environmental problems of the local community; development of the local ecological action plan, research surveys in the field of environmental protection, education via leaflets and radio programmes, etc. The local NGOs also faced the problem of financing, as they mostly depend on donations and membership fees, while organisations on the regional and international levels are financed from the budget, by international donators, governments, specialised agencies and funds. Most of the surveyed NGOs participated in agricultural, tourist and cultural/educational developmental projects and programmes of environmental protection, while only one organisation did not take part in any project.

2.2 Attitudes of NGOs regarding their place in sustainable rural tourism

The eighteen questions that the NGOs were supposed to answer considered many key elements that could define their place in the sustainable development of rural tourism. Using the descriptive assessment scale, the NGOs defined certain features through finely graded verbal statements: “no”, “mostly disagree”, “mostly agree” and “agree” (the first and the second part of the questionnaire), showing that they had quite diverse attitudes in terms of agreement or disagreement with the offered statements. There was no total agreement consensus on any of the points (Table 1).

Table 1. *Descriptive assessment scale*

QUESTIONS	VERBAL STATEMENTS OF NGOs			
	No	Mostly disagree	Mostly agree	Yes
<i>Was sustainable rural development the main reason to found your organisation?</i>	xx	x	xx	xxx
<i>Are you included in the issue of sustainable development?</i>		xx	xx	xxxx
<i>Do you think that non-governmental organisations have a significant role in sustainable rural development?</i>		xxx		xxxxx
<i>Is your organisation supported by the governmental sector?</i>	x	xxx	xxx	x
<i>Is your organisation supported by the local community?</i>		xxx	xxx	xx
<i>Are you a member of international networks that directly or indirectly participate in the promotion of sustainable rural development?</i>	xxx		x	xxxx
<i>Do you cooperate with other non-governmental organisations whose fields of work are narrowly related to the concept of sustainable development?</i>		xxx	xx	xxx

Table 1. *Descriptive assessment scale*

QUESTIONS	VERBAL STATEMENTS OF NGOs			
	No	Mostly disagree	Mostly agree	Yes
<i>Do you cooperate with the private and public sector in the sphere of tourism?</i>	x	xxx	x	xxx
<i>Are you satisfied with the current position and the role of non-governmental organisations in sustainable rural tourism?</i>	x	xxxx	xxx	
<i>Does your organisation is present in sustainable rural tourism?</i>		xxx	xxx	xx
<i>Do you take part in the elaboration of national documents of importance to tourism development?</i>	xxx	xxx	xx	
<i>Do you participate in the development of projects of national importance?</i>	xx	xxx	xx	x
<i>Do you take part in the development of projects of local significance?</i>	x	xx	xxxx	x
<i>Do you deal in issues of sustainable local development?</i>		xx	xx	xxxx
<i>Do you participate in promotion of sustainable rural tourism?</i>		xxx	xxx	xx
<i>Do you take part in education on sustainable rural tourism?</i>		xxx	xx	xxx
<i>Does your activities include domestic tourists?</i>	x	xxxx	x	xx
<i>Does your activities include foreign tourists?</i>	xxx	xxx	x	x

Source: The author team.

* Shaded fields mark the answers mostly chosen by the NGOs.

The NGOs showed the greatest degree of consent (75% “agree” and “mostly agree”) regarding the question of their inclusion in the issue of sustainable rural development, as well as regarding them dealing with issues of local sustainable development.

A high degree of consent (62.5% of “agree” and “mostly agree” answers) was recorded in the largest number of statements, including sustainable development as the main reason to found the NGO; NGOs have a significant role in sustainable rural development; the work of the surveyed NGO was supported by the local community; they (the NGO) are active in sustainable rural tourism; they cooperate with the other NGOs whose fields of work are narrowly related to the concept of sustainable development; they are members of international networks that are, directly or indirectly, involved in the promotion of sustainable rural development; they are included in the development of locally significant projects, promotion of sustainable rural tourism and education of participants.

Every other NGO stated that they were supported by the government and cooperated with the private and public sectors in the sphere of tourism (50% of “agree” and “mostly agree” answers).

NGOs were largely dissatisfied (65% of “disagree” and “mostly disagree” answers) with their position and role in sustainable rural tourism and with not being included in the development of projects of national significance. An even more supported claim was that of the surveyed NGOs not being included in the elaboration of national documents of importance to tourism development (75% of “disagree” and “mostly disagree” answers). This agrees with the report on the state of the civil society in Serbia in 2014, stating that state bodies and institutions of local self-governments rarely respect their obligation to organise public discussions (Civic Initiatives, 2015: 11).

The NGOs believe that they have a significant role in sustainable rural development, but that the results of their work are not visible enough in the public because of the insufficient support of the governmental sector. By accepting the NGO sector as an equal partner in activities such as rural development, the state would activate the mechanism of intersectoral partnerships, which would allow for an easier articulation of local entrepreneurial ideas in rural tourism and produce a synergic effect, which, in turn, would further promote the NGO role. NGOs participate in the promotion and advancement of sustainable rural tourism through quality training of employees and education of providers of specific tourist services. However, NGOs also attempt to help the local population that has not been involved in tourism by organising various seminars, meetings and local events.

It is obvious that NGOs mostly have the support of local communities, international networks and other NGOs whose fields of work are narrowly

connected with the concept of sustainable rural tourism. However, the cooperation of NGOs with the private and public sectors in tourism in Vojvodina is not intensive and sufficient to result in connectedness and integration of various actions. Equally unfavourable is that NGOs do not recognise tourists as significant factors of sustainable tourism, rarely including them in their activities.

2.3 Attitudes of NGOs regarding activities related to the development of sustainable rural tourism

In the third part of the questionnaire, every NGO was asked to identify a priority list of activities that need to be undertaken to develop sustainable rural tourism, assigning number 1 to the most important one for them through to number 10 assignable to the least important activity. By making a sum of the numbers obtained through grading, the activities were ranked and their level of importance for the development of sustainable tourism established. Additionally, by calculating the standard deviation and variation coefficient for every activity, homogeneity or heterogeneity of NGOs' grades for particular activities was determined (Table 2).

Table 2. Activities of NGOs in the development of sustainable rural tourism

Offered activities	Number of points	Activity ranking (results)	Standard deviation	Variation coefficient	Maximum rating by an NGO	Minimum rating by an NGO
<i>Project development</i>	19	1	2.78687	0.880	1	8
<i>Education of population</i>	21	2	2.16795	0.619	1	7
<i>Governmental incentives</i>	25	3	2.22860	0.298	1	7
<i>Informing of agricultural households</i>	29	4	2.63944	0.375	1	8
<i>Improvement of infrastructure</i>	32	5	3.38625	0.535	2	9

Table 2. Activities of NGOs in the development of sustainable rural tourism

Offered activities	Number of points	Activity ranking (results)	Standard deviation	Variation coefficient	Maximum rating by an NGO	Minimum rating by an NGO
<i>Inclusion of small enterprises</i>	33	6	2.25832	0.635	2	8
<i>Capacity building</i>	36	7	1.78885	0.411	4	8
<i>Forming of association</i>	40	8	2.50333	0.546	4	10
<i>Internet promotion</i>	48	9	2.44949	0.306	4	10
<i>Product improvement</i>	56	10	1.21106	0.130	7	10

Source: The author team.

* Two respondents (NGO) did not adequately reply to the third part of the questionnaire so their answers were not taken into consideration.

It is important to emphasise that attitudes among NGOs towards these questions were very different, with the variation coefficient showing that NGOs rank product improvement homogeneously, but lowly in terms of significance, whereas project development fell in a markedly heterogeneous category, being very important for some NGOs but not for others. Certain activities, such as improvement of infrastructure, accommodation and other capacities in rural tourism, project development in rural tourism and acquaintance of agricultural households with possibilities of development of rural tourism were ranked diversely by NGOs, indicating that NGOs are not profiled enough and inexperienced, probably also lacking clearly defined goals and the position that they should have in society.

The most important activity in the development of sustainable rural tourism according to the NGOs is the *development of rural tourism projects*, with a third of the NGOs ranking this statement as first or second. An equally important activity for the NGOs is also a *quality education of the population*, followed by *governmental support to the development of sustainable rural tourism*.

- Involvement in projects founded by ministries, secretariats, local government, international foundations and organisations can enhance rural tourism as one of the most important components of integrated and sustainable development, by encouraging the development of additional markets for agricultural products and non-agricultural activities in rural areas, as well as special incentives for employment. NGOs see opportunities for cooperation and cohesion of all stakeholders in the tourism industry, especially for consolidating and strengthening their role in rural tourism and bringing it closer to European standards and trends.
- An equally important activity of NGOs is quality education for all stakeholders in sustainable rural tourism, especially creators of the tourism product and service providers in the value chain of integrated rural products. NGOs encourage the education of the local population, especially in underdeveloped rural areas. They find that educated and well-trained entrepreneurs in rural tourism contribute to the quality and diversity of products. However, NGOs themselves face obstacles regarding the training of operators in rural tourism (lack of technical possibilities for the use of information technology, lack of financial resources).
- The third activity in the hierarchy of importance of NGOs is the role of the state government in encouraging the development of sustainable rural tourism and the development role of NGOs. The government must first provide logistical and financial support to the NGO sector.

In the second group, in terms of significance ranked 4–6, the NGOs listed *acquaintance of agricultural households with possibilities of development of rural tourism; improvement of infrastructure, accommodation and other capacities in rural tourism and inclusion of small enterprises into the development of sustainable rural tourism*.

- An acquaintance of agricultural households with possibilities of development of sustainable rural tourism is closely related to the aforementioned training for service providers. Typically, hosts in rural areas react negatively to tourism and refuse to participate in tourist activities. NGOs are eager to help them to gain a true picture of the tourism industry, and the best way for positive outcomes is

quality education through the organisation of public fora, seminars and workshops.

- NGOs considered that much more should be invested in the construction and renovation of accommodation facilities, and special attention be paid to the improvement of infrastructure, which is an important factor to attract tourists.
- Small and medium enterprises in rural tourism should be merged into clusters, as a concept which includes a set of common business objectives, thereby branding the whole sector/area.

Other activities emphasised as important, ranked 7–10, are *incentives for capacity building; forming of local associations of service providers; inclusion of internet communication into the promotion of rural areas and creation of specific products*. One NGO also advocated an opinion that the *development of organic production and marketing of organic products* is the most important activity that should be undertaken in the development of sustainable rural tourism.

2.4 Impact of NGOs on the sustainable development of rural tourism

It was first necessary to define the criteria based on which it was assessed whether something had any impact on sustainable development of rural tourism. As rural tourism and sustainable development promote decentralisation and certain activities adapted to the needs of local communities through concrete programmes, projects and actions, an NGO can show its impact on sustainable development of rural tourism through its very presence in programmes, projects and actions: “Most programmes, projects and actions organised by your organisation are programmes that contribute to the sustainable development of rural tourism”.

NGOs were asked to opt for a degree to which this statement was true, from among graded verbal formulations: “rarely” – 25%, “often” – 37.5%, “very often” – 12.5% and “always” – 25%. The research showed that NGOs are quite different in terms of their statements and that programmes, projects and actions that they organise, as a whole, do not have a significant impact on sustainable development of rural tourism. Nonetheless, we should not ignore the responses of some NGOs who often or always, with

projects and programmes, participate in the sustainable development of rural tourism.

In the last part of the questionnaire, the NGOs were asked to list the successfully implemented activities aimed at developing sustainable rural tourism. The following activities were cited:

- Education of the rural population on the environment and sustainable agriculture;
- Organisation of events that promote rural tourism values;
- Participation at exhibitions and fairs;
- Development of organic agricultural production;
- Cooperation with organisations dealing with environmental protection and rural development;
- Improvement of tourist infrastructure;
- Marking the important dates in the ecological calendar through events and workshops.

Conclusion

Theoretical studies indicate that NGOs are now central to development theory and practice and are likely to remain important actors in the development in the years to come. Particularly significant is the role of local NGOs to facilitate and plan useful projects pertinent to rural development and tourism that aim to include the local population in such activities. However, the situation regarding the NGO sector in Vojvodina and Serbia is unsatisfactory and is similar to that in other post-transition countries. In addition to the lag in the development of the NGO sector in these countries, the reasons for this should be sought in the undeveloped practice of cross-sectoral partnerships and democracy, as highlighted by Katarzyna Czernek (2013: 101): "...mechanical transfer of formal democratic institutions and market economy that functions well in developed market economies, is not accompanied by parallel changes in the informal institutions such as a culture that supports private property, sets collective democratic actions in motion, encourages economic sensibility and rationality, and creates trust in the environment".

This study established that the role of NGOs in the development of sustainable tourism in Vojvodina is not visible or well defined, hence the

outcomes are unsatisfactory for both NGOs and the citizens for whose benefit they are formed. Nonetheless, some NGOs have shown the ability to achieve high-quality results by using their own local and national expertise and international help, so many of their projects, programmes and initiatives serve as inputs for formulating strategic documents.

The quantitative data analysis revealed that the main presumption of research, “NGOs have a clear and significant role in the sustainable development of rural tourism”, was not explicitly confirmed but this presumption is grounded, as many examples of its confirmation in practice have been cited. The analysis of official NGO sites and other relevant documents showed that this presumption should not be completely rejected, as many NGOs conduct a wide range of activities related to the promotion and advancement of sustainable rural tourism, such as quality education and training of employees to offer complementary services. NGOs also aim to help the local population that was not previously included in tourism by organising various seminars, meetings, and local events, implying that NGOs have an important role in the sustainable development of rural tourism, but also, that it is not sufficiently articulated and visible to the public. The practical problem is that of the national rural policy being based on available data, hence, if data is unavailable, there is no adequate policy, so NGOs need to formulate and present their activities and attitudes.

The open-ended responses revealed that there are many methodological misunderstandings and ambiguities in NGOs’ comprehension of sustainable development of rural tourism, which by far surpasses creating and offering direct services to tourists. In a detailed explanation of their activities, the respondents also cited those that they deemed non-tourist in nature and which were, in fact, complementary to tourism, for instance: engagement in the field of infrastructure, old and artistic crafts, husbandry of autochthonous animal breeds, organic farming, village fairs and markets, application of information technologies, creative engagement, partnership development, marketing counselling, etc. NGOs agreed that the key activities that need to be undertaken in developing sustainable rural tourism are the realisation of projects in rural tourism, education of population and participation of the state in supporting its development.

The research showed great differences in NGOs’ attitudes towards and understanding of the existence of cooperation and partnership of NGOs with public and business sectors in the development of Vojvodina

rural tourism, with the opinions of the surveyed NGOs being completely divided fifty-fifty. Even though results in terms of “joint projects” are not visible and that the rural population does not recognise them as relevant partners, half of the surveyed NGOs believed that such cooperation and partnership existed.

Furthermore, there is no adequate image in the Serbian public regarding NGO activities and the functioning of the tri-sector structure of society. This is somewhat understandable, as an intersectoral partnership are, generally, a fairly recent occurrence. Namely, only in the World Summit in Rio in 1992 have the partnerships between the public, business and civil sector been proclaimed as crucial to reaching the goals of sustainable development. The road from proclamation to realisation in practice is sometimes a long and windy one. This, naturally, does not mean that the goal should be abandoned, but that partnerships at all levels and across all sectors should be increasingly and continuously supported. In developing countries, such as Serbia, the strongest incentives must come from the public sector.

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