

The role of agricultural cooperatives in the development and promotion of rural tourism: A case study of Azanja, Serbia

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to examine and analyze the role of agricultural cooperatives in the development and promotion of rural tourism. The research was conducted in Azanja, Serbia, utilizing a mixed-method research with a questionnaire technique and a case study method during March and April 2024. The key findings indicate that improving conditions for rural tourism development requires effective networking among all stakeholders and coordinated promotional activities. Establishing partnerships based on shared interests is essential for rural tourism development. In this context, the agricultural cooperative Azanja should assume several important roles: initiator, educator, coordinator, logistics organizer, tourism animator, promoter, consultant, and supervisor. By taking on these responsibilities, Azanja can effectively support and stimulate rural tourism development. Furthermore, the agricultural cooperative Azanja has the ability to develop effective promotional strategies to increase the area's visibility on the tourist map.

Keywords: *promotion, tourism, rural tourism development, agriculture cooperatives*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is the collection of relationships and phenomena that arise from foreign visitors' travels and stays in a location, provided that these visits do not signify permanent residency or a situation for generating income (Hunziker & Krapf, 1942). Understanding the notion of rural tourism requires an awareness of how tourism is classified according to the features of the geographical region, or the qualities of the tourist destination. Rural tourism refers to all types of tourism that take place in rural areas. Rural areas are defined by: low population density and structures that integrate in with the surroundings; the productive use of land for purposes other than agriculture, forestry, and livestock farming; the inhabitants' unique way of life, which is defined by their affiliation with small social groups and their relationship to the land; and their identity, which is strongly associated with the customs and culture that have been developed there (Čikić & Jovanović, 2015, p. 14). To stop the detrimental trends of rural depopulation, tourism in rural regions can be a major component in the development and regeneration of villages (Pivac, Dragin, Dragičević & Vasiljević, 2016). First and foremost, from an economic standpoint, rural tourism supports the revitalization and growth of the rural economy by generating new jobs, encouraging entrepreneurship with highly beneficial social effects, and keeping a sizeable amount of revenue within the local community. Second, from a demographic standpoint, rural tourism (particularly among the younger, working-age, and reproductively capable population) can slow down or even reverse the process of rural migration (Dejanović, 2024). This lessens the severity of depopulation in rural areas while also relieving the burden of an overwhelming influx of people into cities. Thirdly, from a social standpoint, by fortifying relationships, rural tourism encourages networking within the rural community. Fourthly, from a cultural perspective, rural tourism helps to maintain rural development, culture, and way of life. Even though rural tourism has the potential to bring these communities excit-

ing new opportunities, there is still a crucial research void. According to Liu, Chiang and Ko (2023), policy-makers presently lack the thorough data required to create and promote tourism programs in rural areas. Moreover, cooperative networks are essential to the development of integrated rural tourism and its promotion. The involvement of both external and local stakeholders in these networks is necessary to enable a cooperative mobilization of resources. Finally, this cooperative strategy improves rural communities' resources and capacities (Susila, Dean, Harismah, Priyono, Setyawan & Maulana, 2024).

This research aims to investigate how agricultural cooperatives, using Azanja (Serbia) as an example, may take an important role in significantly contributing to the growth and promotion of rural tourism. Azanja is a village in the Podunavlje District of the municipality of Smederevska Palanka, covering an area of 47.72 km². 3256 people are living there as of the 2022 census. Azanja's population is primarily involved in agriculture. This region has extremely fertile, nearly fully arable terrain.

The significance of this paper lies in the fact that the development and promotion of rural tourism has become a major strategy for fostering economic growth which requires an all-encompassing strategy (Aref & Gill, 2009; Wei & Hu, 2022). In general, significant potential for the development of rural tourism has been revealed by an analysis of Serbia's natural and anthropogenic resources (Ćurčić, Mirković Svitlica, Brankov, Bjeljac, Pavlović & Jandžiković 2021). Moreover, Laban, Janković and Stojanović (2021) assert that the growth of rural tourism in Serbia presents a viable opportunity for promoting constructive economic and social progress in rural regions. Azanja should try to take advantage of the trend of accelerated development of rural tourism in Serbia and thus strengthen its economic base, slow down and stop demographic degradation. This implies that this local community should shift its focus from agriculture to rural tourism. In this transformation, marketing and promotional strategy play a key role. Such a strategy should highlight the area's cultural heritage, natural beauty, and agricultural practices, appealing to both domestic and international tourists (Aktürk & Şen Demir, 2021). By positioning itself as an attractive destination for rural tourism, Azanja can not only improve its economic prospects but also foster community pride and sustainability. In essence, this approach not only addresses immediate economic challenges but also contributes to the long-term vitality of the lo-

cal community, ensuring that Azanja thrives amid the evolving landscape of tourism in Serbia.

The paper is structured as follows. The first part of the paper is devoted to definitions and key types of rural tourism. The second part of the paper is focused on research methodology - research questions, research methods and techniques, as well as research procedure. After that, the results of the research were presented - first of all, the results of the field research were presented, followed with a case study and proposed business model of the agricultural cooperative Azanja. At the end of the paper, the key conclusions, as well as implications, certain limitations, and suggestions for future research on this topic are pointed out.

2. DEFINITIONS AND KEY TYPES OF RURAL TOURISM

Rural tourism has become a crucial element in maintaining and improving the standard of living in rural areas (Utami, Dhewanto & Lestari, 2023). Combining agricultural goods, eco-products, cultural assets, and other spatial components, rural tourism serves a range of purposes, including social, cultural, educational, environmental protection, recreational, and therapeutic endeavors (Lee & Kim, 2010). All tourism-related activities that are centered on the unique characteristics of nearby rural communities and their way of life are collectively referred to as rural tourism. Rural tourism is a unique type of tourism that depends on both human and natural resources in the area (Čikić & Jovanović, 2015). This type of tourism is characterized by the pursuit of attractions related to relaxation, the countryside, traditional culture, and escape from the urban way of life (Ivona, 2021). According to Bartoluci, Hendija and Petračić (2016), four main components make up rural tourism: (1) natural resources found in rural areas (such as rivers, lakes, mountains, forests, etc.); (2) the rural way of life, which includes events, customs, gastronomy, music, and dance; (3) the rural heritage, which includes buildings, history, stories, myths, legends, and memories; and (4) the rural activities, which include horseback riding, hunting, fishing, hiking, biking, boating, and so on. Rural tourism has the following characteristics (Roberts & Hall, 2001):

- It takes place in rural areas, in smaller settlements;
- Functional connection to the rural area, characterized by open space, direct contact with nature, heritage, traditional society, and production;

- Opportunity for tourists to participate in traditional activities and the lifestyle of the local population;
- Direct interaction between host and guest;
- Development of rural tourism is, as a rule, slow;
- Rural tourism requires long-term planning;
- Responsibility towards nature and the social community in the rural area;
- Emphasis on quality, not quantity, of tourist services;
- Adaptation of content to individual preferences of tourists;
- Sustainability - falls under the so-called sustainable tourism, which takes into account natural and social balance (harmony).

There are numerous types of rural tourism. The most popular type of rural tourism is known as agritourism, in which visitors come primarily to live and work on agricultural farms. On the other hand, wine and gastronomy tourism, ecotourism, and ethnotourism are growing in popularity within rural tourism. Table 1 presents the fundamental types of rural tourism.

The above-mentioned types of rural tourism are not all-inclusive because many different combinations of rural tourism may be found (such as wine and food tourism, religious and cultural tourism, health and spa tourism in rural areas, etc.). New types of rural tourism are also developing at a quick pace (Dejanović, 2024). Creative tourism is a different type of rural tourism. To meet their needs for expanding their creative potential and learning new information and skills

relevant to the rural tourist destination, this type of tourism involves traveling to rural areas to learn traditional crafts or handicraft-making techniques (Rudan, 2012).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper includes mixed-method research, a combination of field research using a specially designed questionnaire and case study method. Two sections of the questionnaire were used to perform the field research. Three questions about the respondent's age, gender, and educational level were included in the first section of the questionnaire. There were three questions in the second section of the questionnaire about Azanja's potential for developing rural tourism. Adult Azanja residents (those with a government-issued document proving they are residents of Azanja) were included in the research during March and April 2024. Of the 234 surveys that were delivered, 209 surveys were fully completed properly. The research findings reflect the thoughts and ideas of the residents of Azanja regarding the potential for the development of rural tourism. They are based on a statistical analysis of the collected data by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), primarily in the area of descriptive statistics. The second research method, a case study of the agricultural cooperative Azanja through desk research and analysis of existing documents and data was performed to gather comprehensive information

Table 1: Types of Rural Tourism

Type of rural tourism	Key characteristics
Agritourism	Tourism activities taking place on a working farm.
Ecotourism	Tourism near protected natural rural areas.
Ethnotourism	The primary motive for tourists is to experience local customs and traditions.
Farmstead tourism	Tourism on traditional farmsteads.
Wine tourism	Touring wine routes, consuming wine, and attending wine-related events.
Gastronomic tourism	Consuming traditional local specialties.
Art tourism	Experiencing naive art, art colonies, and art schools in nature.
Religious tourism	Visiting and exploring religious sites in rural areas.
Cultural tourism	Visiting cultural landmarks in rural areas.
Nostalgia tourism	Tourism motivated by nostalgia and memories of one's birthplace and childhood.
Adventure tourism	Enjoying extreme sports in nature (rafting, paragliding, etc.).
Botanical tourism	The motive for tourists is to explore the plant life in rural areas.
Birdwatching tourism	The primary motive is to observe birds specific to a particular rural environment.
Hunting tourism	Hunting in a chosen rural tourist destination.
Fishing tourism	Fishing in rural areas.
Heritage tourism	Visiting historical monuments in rural areas.
Camping tourism	Camping in rural areas.

Source: adapted from Sasu & Epuran, 2016

regarding particular opportunities for development and promotion of rural tourism in this place.

The key research questions (RQ) are:

RQ 1: Do residents perceive Azanja as a place where rural tourism can be developed?

RQ 2: What roles can the agricultural cooperative Azanja undertake to develop and promote rural tourism?

RQ 3: How can agricultural cooperative Azanja organize its business model to develop and promote rural tourism?

4. RESULTS FROM FIELD RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research included a total of 209 residents of Azanja, with a gender distribution of 65.1% male and 34.9% female. The largest age group represented was 41-50 years old, comprising 29.2% of the sample. Residents aged 31-40 years accounted for approximately 21%, while those aged 51-60 years constituted around 20%. The youngest age category (up to 30 years old) had the lowest participation rate at approximately 12%. Notably, this sample structure reflects the age distribution of the entire population in Azanja, where the average resident age according to the 2022 census was 46.14

years. Regarding educational level, the majority of residents (62.2%) completed secondary school. Primary school is followed by 21.1% of residents, while higher and university education together represented 16.7% of residents.

The following set of questions aimed to analyze the perceptions and attitudes of residents regarding the future of Azanja. The responses to these questions were intended to show how optimistic the residents of Azanja are about the future of the place where they live. The research results are presented in Table 2.

As presented in Table 2, 21.53% of residents completely agree that they believe in Azanja's future success as a rural tourism destination, with 33.97% selecting the option "to a large extent". Therefore, 55.5% of the residents can be categorized as having positive expectations for Azanja's future as a rural tourism destination. However, the other residents covered by the research are more cautious. A considerable proportion of residents (23.92%) indicated that they mostly believe in the future of Azanja as a rural tourism destination, while 18.18% expressed that they believe to a lesser extent. These residents are not sure that Azanja will become a popular tourist destination. Lastly, 2.39% of residents expressed their lack of belief in Azanja's potential as a rural tourism destination. Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the residents of Azanja do not have a unified develop-

Table 2: The responses of residents about the future of Azanja

Responses	Number	Percentage
Do you believe Azanja has a future as a rural tourism destination?		
Completely	45	21.53
To a large extent	71	33.97
Mostly	50	23.92
To a lesser extent	38	18.18
I do not believe	5	2.39
Total	209	100.00
What do you want Azanja to become in the future?		
To remain a village	39	18.66
To become a small town	165	78.94
To become a city	5	2.39
Total	209	100.00
What are your plans for the upcoming period?		
I am staying to live and work in Azanja because I feel a strong attachment to this place and believe in its future.	175	83.73
I sometimes think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad.	28	13.39
I cannot decide whether to stay or go.	5	2.39
I often think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad.	1	0.48
I have decided - I am moving out of Azanja.	0	0.00
Total	209	100.00

Source: Authors

ment vision. In such cases, it is very difficult to steer development in a particular direction. The vision of a place must be widely accepted, i.e., the majority of residents must perceive it as their commitment. It should be inspiring and drive activities towards fulfilling development goals. In Azanja, there is a significant number of residents who are hesitant and even openly express doubts about this vision. This practically means that on the path of transforming Azanja into a rural tourism destination, one can expect delays, passivity, lack of enthusiasm, and even open resistance to change. Therefore, it is necessary to communicate more with the residents of Azanja and explain to them all the benefits that rural tourism brings. Likewise, it is necessary to take the first steps that will, through concrete examples, realistically demonstrate that the development of rural tourism in Azanja is possible, i.e., that this vision is realistic.

The next important question also pertained to the vision for Azanja's future. The question "What do you want Azanja to become in the future?" offered three possible responses: (1) To remain a village; (2) To become a town; (3) To become a city. The majority of residents (78.94%) want Azanja to become a town. On the other hand, 18.66% of residents do not want Azanja to change much - they believe it should remain a village. Only 2.39% of residents wish for Azanja to become a city in the future. These research results are not surprising, considering that Azanja was a small town in the past. Many older residents of Azanja still remember those times, so the narrative about that period in the history of this place has been preserved. In that sense, given the age structure of Azanja's population, there is nostalgia for the "good old days" when Azanja was a town, i.e., when it had the status of a municipality. On the other hand, almost a fifth of the surveyed residents expressed a desire for Azanja to remain a village. Such a stance is largely based on resistance to change, i.e., on the desire to preserve the existing state.

The third question "What are your plans for the upcoming period?" had five possible responses: (1) I am staying to live and work in Azanja because I feel a strong attachment to this place and believe in its future; (2) I sometimes think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad; (3) I cannot decide whether to stay or go; (4) I often think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad; (5) I have decided - I am moving out of Azanja. The majority of residents (83.73%) answered that they are staying to live and work in Azanja because they feel a strong attachment to this place and believe in its future. Significantly fewer res-

idents (13.39%) sometimes think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad. A small number of residents (2.39%) cannot decide whether to stay or move out of Azanja, and only one resident chose the answer "I often think about moving to a bigger city or going abroad". None of the residents opted for the answer "I have decided - I am moving out of Azanja". These results are encouraging, as they show that over 80% of residents want to stay in Azanja, but caution should be expressed when interpreting the research results. Most of the residents who answered that they are staying to live and work in Azanja are older residents who practically have no alternative (their chances of finding a job in larger cities are small, they do not have enough resources to start a new life in a bigger city or abroad, they are tied to the rural household, i.e., agriculture as their sole source of income, and they have a strong sense of belonging to the local community). However, the residents who are considering leaving Azanja are mostly young people who do not see their future in the village, and who are ready to embrace new challenges.

5. RESULTS FROM CASE STUDY: AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE AZANJA AND ITS ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF RURAL TOURISM

An agricultural cooperative is a type of organization that is voluntarily formed by a group of agricultural producers or consumers with the main aim of enhancing the working conditions and overall well-being of its members (Đoković, Pejanović, Mojsilović, Đorđević Boljanović & Plečić, 2017). The agricultural cooperative Azanja was established on March 23, 1894. Around 70 prominent farmers from Azanja participated in its founding, but the cooperative's membership quickly grew. Within the cooperative, specialized cooperatives were established (dairy, livestock, agricultural credit, etc.). In the period between 1920 and 1927, the administrative building of the cooperative was built, which still adorns the center of Azanja today. The development of the cooperative was interrupted due to the Balkan wars and the outbreak of the First World War. However, the cooperative was recovered after rehabilitation and consolidation. At that time, the cooperative had about 800 members. Within these cooperatives, special cooperatives (dairy, livestock, cooperative for agricultural loans, etc.) were established. The period of intensive development of

the cooperative in Azanja slowed down during the 1930s and later stopped due to the Second World War. The activities of the cooperative were renewed at the end of the 1940s in a completely new socio-political and economic environment. During the 1950s, the Vlaškodolska and Dobrodolska cooperatives were joined to the agricultural cooperative Azanja. In the following period, the agricultural cooperative Azanja achieved its best results. However, the deep economic crisis that occurred in the 1990s almost completely paralyzed the cooperative and resulted in a significant decrease in agricultural production, i.e. income (Dejanović, 2024). The cooperative, with great efforts, managed to survive in the local market and to carry out its activity, but on a scale that was not sufficient to achieve positive financial results. Regular business became almost impossible, so a reorganization plan was defined in 2015, the main goal of which was to allow the agricultural cooperative Azanja to rehabilitate and consolidate to continue its work. By observing the last few years, this cooperative has had only a few employees and has reduced its activities to a minimum. Improving the conditions for the development of rural tourism requires networking among all interested parties and coordination of their activities. Azanja agricultural cooperative is facing a business crisis that is not able to financially support the development of rural tourism, but it can create new ideas and business proposals. These new ideas could attract the attention of development agencies, governmental funds, and other potential investors. It is necessary to create partnerships based on common interests and initiate the process of rural tourism development (Ljubojević & Maksimović Sekulić, 2021). In this regard, the agricultural cooperative Azanja can assume several important roles, which are: initiator, educator, coordinator, logistics organizer, tourism animator, promoter, consultant, and supervisor (Dejanović, 2024).

Initiator. This role of agricultural cooperative Azanja represents the first step in stimulating the development of rural tourism in this area. The agricultural cooperative Azanja cannot decide on its own to transform the Azanja area into a rural tourism destination. Nor can it finance the activities necessary to steer Azanja's development in this direction. However, it can initiate ideas and propose changes. In this sense, the agricultural cooperative Azanja could assume the role of an initiator that would create the initial impetus for the development of rural tourism in this area. This implies first forming a „core“ composed of several rural households interested in engaging in rural tourism and that (wholly or partially) possess the

conditions for this activity (having accommodation capacities and the ability to serve tourists with food and drinks produced within their households). The role of the initiator involves not only making a list of households showing interest in rural tourism but also their initial engagement in creating the first proposals and plans for rural tourism development in this area.

Educator. In the initial stages of rural tourism development, it is necessary to raise the level of knowledge and skills of the local population (Apostolopoulos, Liargovas, Stavroyiannis, Makris, Apostolopoulos, Petropoulos & Anastasopoulou, 2020). The main obstacle to promoting rural tourism is the lack of skilled staff within the cooperatives. This highlights the need for training and education programs to equip employees with the necessary competencies (Đoković et al., 2017). Agricultural cooperative Azanja can play a significant role in organizing education: (1) developing training plans, i.e., selecting topics and dates; (2) contacting and engaging proven experts in this field who would participate in the implementation of this training; (3) forming a group of participants; (4) providing adequate space and equipment for training and workshops; (5) performing technical tasks such as photocopying services, distribution of printed materials, serving participants during breaks, etc.; (6) performing administrative tasks, i.e., keeping various records (on participant attendance, their impressions of the training, recording suggestions for improving the quality of training, as well as sending various notifications and information to training participants). The role of the educator is very important because raising the level of knowledge and skills creates the conditions for the development of rural tourism in this area.

Coordinator. This role pertains to the next phase of rural tourism development. Agricultural cooperative Azanja should assume the role of coordinator in a network that would bring together rural tourist households in this area. This role entails the following activities: (1) providing assistance and support in introducing interested rural households into the central information system for hospitality and tourism (e-turista); (2) performing joint tasks for rural tourist households, such as sales and promotion; (3) coordinating joint appearances at tourism fairs and events; (4) representing the interests of rural tourist households from this area before local self-government bodies and at the national level; (5) coordinating promotional and marketing activities, such as organizing press conferences for special events, attracting media attention, and maintaining relationships with the media, etc. Rural tourist households would have

main autonomy in most matters related to rural tourism but with the possibility to contractually transfer some tasks to the agricultural cooperative Azanja and pay a corresponding fee for these services.

Logistics organizer. Modern tourism activity requires a developed logistical system that involves optimizing all flows of materials, energy, and information necessary for shaping the supply chains of tourist locations and creating tourist products (Tadić, Zečević & Krstić, 2012). In this context, the agricultural cooperative Azanja could assume the role of supplying rural tourist households with various materials necessary for carrying out this activity, as well as providing accompanying services. For example, the agricultural cooperative Azanja could supply rural tourist households with various items such as bed linen, towels, napkins, spices, hygiene products, cosmetics, printed materials, and everything else that would make the guests' stay more pleasant and fulfilling. A special service of the agricultural cooperative Azanja could offer tourists transportation to rural tourist households and attractive locations in the surrounding area.

Tourism animator. In the initial stages of rural tourism development in a particular area, the role of the animator is typically assumed by the host, offering guests activities that are more or less common in the countryside (e.g., animation and guiding guests on short and interesting excursions, spending time in nature, sports, recreational, cultural, and entertainment activities). All these activities should be initiated by the host, through spontaneous communication between the host and tourists. In this way, the host appears not only as someone offering hospitality but also as an animator aiming to ensure tourists are satisfied and leave with positive impressions and memories of the destination (Đorđević, 2016). However, with the development of rural tourism, tourism animation has become increasingly important, and other service providers must participate in these activities alongside the host. This opens the possibility for agricultural cooperative Azanja to be engaged in these tasks. This implies that the agricultural cooperative Azanja gains a clearer picture of the guests, their mentality, habits, specific requirements, desires, and interests to create a tourism animation program as a unique quality in the tourism offer of the rural environment. In this regard, tourism-cultural animation, which contributes to the affirmation of rural values, is particularly important. This form of animation acts as a mediator between the guest's culture and the cultural-historical heritage of the Azanja area (helping the guest better understand the culture of the local population and the

host to better understand the culture of their guest). With this in mind, within tourism animation, socializing with guests, recreation in ecologically preserved areas, and involvement in agricultural activities on the farm (e.g., agricultural work, preparation of local specialties, fruit picking, collecting aromatic herbs, traditional crafts), as well as familiarization with folklore, folk customs, and beliefs should be organized (Selaković, 2014).

Promoter. Agricultural cooperatives can use marketing initiatives to effectively promote rural tourism, attract visitors, and improve their overall attractiveness (Kalogiannidis, Karafolas & Chatzitheodoridis, 2024). The objective is to develop a compelling story around the cooperative's unique offerings, use both digital and conventional marketing channels, and form strong ties with the tourism industry. Cooperatives can successfully raise awareness of their rural tourism experiences while also contributing to the region's economic and cultural life (Apostolopoulos et al., 2020). Furthermore, agricultural cooperatives should collaborate with travel bloggers, influencers, and social media celebrities who specialize in rural tourism. Their support can help the cooperative reach new audiences and provide legitimacy to its services. A destination's image can be defined as the subjective perception that people have of a place that is shaped by their own or other people's experiences and information about the location. As a result, how visitors view the quality of the tourism offering is directly influenced by the destination's image, and this is further reflected in how they rate their whole experience. How visitors assess their travel experience will affect their propensity to return and their readiness to suggest the location to other travelers (Marković, Borisavljević & Rabasović, 2024). Utilizing social media platforms and travel blogs can help reach a broader audience and attract potential visitors. Additionally, hosting events or festivals that celebrate local culture and agriculture could draw attention and encourage tourists to visit. By implementing these strategies, the agricultural cooperative can position Azanja as an appealing rural tourism destination and attract more visitors to the area.

Consultant. Agricultural cooperative Azanja can assume the consulting role indirectly (by hiring a consultant for the needs of rural tourist households) or directly (by providing consulting services itself). These services will be necessary for rural tourist households at every stage of development, especially at the beginning. In this domain, there may be a need for a wide range of consulting services (legal consult-

ing, financial consulting, tax advisory services, marketing consulting, etc.) (Feisali & Niknami, 2021). In any case, the agricultural cooperative Azanja could act as an intermediary between rural tourist households facing challenges and consultants offering appropriate solutions. This role would enable a crucial channel for transferring necessary knowledge and skills to the local community.

Supervisor. Agricultural cooperative Azanja should essentially closely supervise developments in rural tourism in this area and, in good faith, point out errors and omissions, „little things“, or „details“ that shape tourists' impressions of the destination to rural households. For example, agricultural cooperative should signal what needs improvement to enhance tourist satisfaction (Gava, Ardakani, Delalić, Azzi & Bartolini, 2021). Likewise, it should identify shortcomings that could lead to disrupting the natural balance and way of life in Azanja. Additionally, it is important to visit rural tourist households and point out deficiencies with the desire to help them rectify these observed shortcomings (constructive criticism). Furthermore, agricultural cooperative Azanja should monitor the extent to which defined plans are being fulfilled, i.e., whether the set goals have been achieved, and determine the reasons for any deviations.

The list of mentioned roles is not exhaustive. Agricultural cooperative Azanja can assume other roles depending on the needs that arise during the development of rural tourism in this area. It is important to emphasize that initially, it cannot be expected spectacular results and high profits. However, as the number of arrivals, overnight stays, and spending increases, the positive effects will become more apparent. When the first benefits are demonstrated, development will accelerate, and the demand for new products and services will increase.

6. PROPOSED BUSINESS MODEL FOR AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE AZANJA ORIENTED TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF RURAL TOURISM

A business model rationally describes how an organization creates and delivers value. In other words, a business model is a set of assumptions about how an organization will operate, i.e., how and to whom it will sell its products and services. Various methodologies and tools are used in theory and practice to create business models. Consequently, there is a va-

riety of business models depending on their orientation, such as business models oriented to technology, organization or strategy, and components (such as finances, procurement, service provision, revenues, value proposition, customers, network, resources, and strategy) (Wirtz, Pistoia, Ullrich & Göttel, 2016). One of the most commonly used templates is the „Business Model Canvas“ which consists of nine segments: (1) Customer segment; (2) Value proposition; (3) Channels; (4) Customer relationships; (5) Revenue streams; (6) Key resources; (7) Key activities; (8) Key partners; and (9) Cost structure (Pigneur & Osterwalder, 2010). In the following text are described the key segments of the business model of the agricultural cooperative Azanja which will benefit rural tourism development and promotion.

Customer segment is the part of the business model where the target audience for value creation is defined, i.e., who the most important customers are. When considering this question in the specific case of the agricultural cooperative Azanja and its potential role in rural tourism development, it can be stated that the customers, or service users, are primarily rural tourism households in the Azanja area and its surroundings.

Value proposition is part of the business model where it is necessary to define the core value that the organization delivers to the customer. In other words, it is necessary to answer the question, „What problem does the organization solve for its customers?“. For example, rural tourism households first need to register, i.e., fulfill the legally prescribed conditions for engaging in rural tourism. Agricultural cooperative Azanja can facilitate this process by offering them appropriate assistance and support (familiarization with regulations, document collection, filling out applications). After this first step, the next challenge follows - attracting tourists, as registration alone is not enough to achieve business success. Agricultural cooperative Azanja can offer rural tourism households a service of mediation in the sale of tourist services and thus enable them to fill their capacities and increase income, and profit. Likewise, it can supply them with appropriate products (materials), services, and information necessary to maintain their business and increase tourist satisfaction. Additionally, the agricultural cooperative Azanja can offer its clients support in promotion to make them more visible in the market.

Channels are the part of the business model that explains where, how, and when the product or service is delivered to customers. When choosing distribution channels, specific requirements and needs

of customers should be considered. Specifically, in the case of the agricultural cooperative Azanja, there are two answers to the question of how to deliver the service: (1) Directly - when representatives of the agricultural cooperative Azanja communicate directly with the client and deliver the service; (2) Indirectly - when agricultural cooperative Azanja engages intermediaries (partners) to deliver the service. The first method has its advantages, as it allows for direct control over the entire service process and enhances communication and relationships with the client. In the second case, the service process is more complex, as it involves multiple parties. An important question that requires an answer is also „Where to deliver the service?“. In essence, location refers to the place where people and service capacities are allocated. In that sense, the agricultural cooperative Azanja can deliver most of its services at the location of the user (in the rural tourism household). However, in some cases (e.g., educational services), it will be necessary for the client to come to the service organization, i.e., to the agricultural cooperative Azanja premises intended for training and workshops. Finally, it is also necessary to answer the question „When to deliver the service?“. In fact, it is a question of the time availability of the service. In modern conditions, service users are very sensitive to the working hours of the service organization. They demand that working hours be aligned with their business and life activities, and an increasing number of users expect the service to be available 24/7. Meeting such expectations requires significant investments and increased costs (engagement of more people, work in multiple shifts, increased overhead costs). In this sense, the service organization needs to find a compromise between increasing costs and increasing customer satisfaction. Modern technology offers some solutions that can make sales channels efficient and economical for the organization while being convenient for the client (e.g., online communication and sales). In line with these trends, the agricultural cooperative Azanja should also utilize these opportunities and make some of its services available to clients through electronic distribution channels. Likewise, new technological solutions can significantly aid in communication, i.e., establishing interaction between the service provider and the user.

Customer relationships are an essential segment of the business model, explaining how the organization will establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with its clients. The agricultural cooperative Azanja already has established relationships with many agricultural households that have expressed

a willingness to engage in rural tourism. These relationships are based on personal familiarity and the experience of living together in the local community. The built relationships should be harmonious, reciprocal, and supportive, allowing for easy formation of partnerships to address common challenges. This represents a solid foundation for developing valuable relationships in the field of rural tourism.

Revenue streams, as an element of the business model, show how the organization will generate income. Agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to clearly define which services it will sell, to whom, in what volume, and at what price. Revenue estimation can be calculated by multiplying each service by its price and presenting it dynamically over specific periods. The business model can include two different types of business revenues: (1) transactions based on one-time payments from users or (2) recurring revenues that involve delivering the proposed value over a defined period (e.g., monthly, quarterly, semi-annual, or annual subscriptions for services). Based on the previous remarks, it is entirely clear that the agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to define its service portfolio (service lines), and pricing policy, i.e., a price list that will include, in addition to base prices, discounts, and bonuses for specific categories of service users. Revenue projection also involves adopting a sales plan that must contain precisely expressed sales targets, defined by the principles and methodology of financial planning (forecasting).

Key resources are the part of the business model that describes the resources the organization has at its disposal, i.e., the resources necessary to create and deliver value to consumers (clients). Every business model requires the engagement of key resources to function. These resources can be human, financial, physical (material), and intellectual. The organization can wholly or partially own these resources, and certain resources can be leased or engaged from business partners on a commercial basis. In the specific case of the agricultural cooperative Azanja, a list of existing key resources may be identified: (1) Premises - e.g., offices and meeting rooms; (2) Equipment - e.g., computers, projector, projection screen, whiteboard, flipchart, etc.; (3) Personnel who would be engaged in providing services; (4) Financial resources - budget projection. After that, a list of missing key resources should be made, along with a plan for how they can be acquired. When compiling this list, one should not be excessive in demands but should ensure that only the necessary resources are secured, enabling the organization to create and deliver value to users (operate in

the rural tourism market, maintain relationships with service users, and generate revenue). As the business develops in this field, the list can be expanded to include resources that add value.

Key activities describe the activities that the organization needs to carry out to create and deliver value, i.e., for the business model to function. Therefore, this section should answer the question „What does the organization need to do to create and deliver value to users?“. It should be emphasized that the business model does not require every activity to be presented in detail, but it is important that it is concisely described or sketched in the form of a short algorithm or a map of the processes necessary to create and deliver the appropriate service. Thus, the agricultural cooperative Azanja should start thinking like a service organization. Following each of the proposed roles (initiator, educator, coordinator, logistics organizer, tourism animator, consultant, and supervisor), the agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to develop corresponding services that it would offer to rural tourism households, as well as other interested parties. Each of these services consists of certain interconnected activities, procedures (actions), and processes aimed at creating value for the client.

Key partners are extremely important for the functioning of the business model. Every organization should be capable of creating partnerships, with whose help and support it will create and deliver value to customers (users). In other words, companies form alliances to optimize their business models, reduce risk, or secure resources. Theory and practice distinguish four basic forms of partnerships: (1) Strategic alliances between non-competing organizations; (2) Strategic partnerships between competitors; (3) Joint investments for developing new businesses and conquering new markets; (4) Customer-supplier partnerships to ensure continuity in the supply chain. In this sense, agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to enrich its list of partnerships, i.e., include key partners who will enable it to establish itself in the rural tourism services market.

Costs - this part of the business model should describe the most important costs incurred in creating and delivering value to customers (clients). These costs cannot be avoided, as the functioning of any business model entails certain costs. The most important thing is to objectively estimate the scope and structure of costs for key activities, key resources, and key partnerships. One of the most common mistakes when defining business models is underestimating costs. Many attractive and innovative business models have failed

because they were not based on a realistic assessment of costs. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully and objectively assess costs by type, bearer, and time of occurrence. The agricultural cooperative Azanja has no experience in service activities, i.e., it has never been involved in rural tourism and cannot rely on extrapolating costs from the period when it was exclusively engaged in agricultural production. Services in the field of rural tourism require a completely new cost calculation and adaptation to current market conditions. In doing so, the agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to decide whether it will be an organization that will primarily rely on price competitiveness (meaning it will strive to suppress competition with low prices) or will use non-price factors of competitiveness to differentiate itself from other market participants. In the first case, the agricultural cooperative Azanja will be forced to minimize costs to gain price competitiveness. In the second case, the focus will shift from costs to creating additional value for the customer (user).

7. CONCLUSION

The agricultural cooperative Azanja has the potential to assume a strategic role in the development and promotion of rural tourism in this area. Improving the conditions for rural tourism development requires networking among all stakeholders and coordination of their activities. It is necessary to create partnerships based on common interests and initiate the process of rural tourism development. In this regard, the agricultural cooperative Azanja needs to take on the roles of initiator, educator, coordinator, logistics organizer, tourism animator, promoter, consultant, and supervisor. Among the mentioned roles, the role of rural tourism promoter is particularly important. This role implies establishing and developing adequate communication with target groups. Potential service users should first be presented with basic information about Azanja, and then the key features that differentiate Azanja from other rural tourism destinations should be presented.

The results of this research highlight how important agricultural cooperatives like Azanja are to the growth and promotion of rural tourism. The research emphasizes the necessity for additional research into how cooperative organizations might promote cooperation amongst various stakeholders, improving the implementation of rural tourist initiatives. From a practical standpoint, results outline several cooperative roles and provide a framework for others inter-

ested in increasing their influence in rural tourism. Cooperatives can better direct their operations and increase their influence on the growth of rural tourism by clearly defining their roles. The focus on building strong relationships with target audiences emphasizes how important it is for cooperatives to invest resources in tailored marketing plans that highlight their unique offerings. The results also emphasize the value of policymakers and practitioners supporting cooperative agricultures, showing how these organizations can promote sustainable tourism growth and support rural communities' long-term survival while protecting cultural heritage.

The conducted research has some limitations. The study was primarily conducted among 209 Azanja residents. Although the sample structure was generally fairly balanced in terms of gender, age, and education, future studies on this topic should involve a larger sample of residents. Furthermore, the study

used a questionnaire with close-ended questions, thus respondents were unable to give their comments and observations. It would be beneficial to conduct interviews with key leaders in the agricultural cooperative Azanja as an additional study technique to identify important constraints and challenges that they face when establishing and promoting rural tourism in Azanja. Furthermore, the proposal for future research is to undertake longitudinal studies to analyze the development stages of rural tourism in Azanja.

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Apstrakt

Uloga zemljoradničkih zadruga u razvoju i promociji ruralnog turizma: studija slučaja Azanje, Srbija

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Cilj ovog rada je da istraži i analizira ulogu zemljoradničkih zadruga u razvoju i promociji ruralnog turizma. Istraživanje je sprovedeno u Azanji, u Srbiji, primenom tehnike upitnika i studije slučaja tokom marta i aprila 2024. godine. Ključni zaključci ukazuju da poboljšanje uslova za razvoj ruralnog turizma zahteva umrežavanje svih zainteresovanih strana i koordinaciju promotivnih aktivnosti. Neophodno je da se kreiraju partnerstva zasnovana na zajedničkim interesima i da se inciraju aktivnosti ka razvoju ruralnog turizma. U tom kontekstu, posebno je važno da

zemljoradnička zadruga Azanja preuzme ulogu inicijatora, edukatora, koordinatora, organizatora logistike, turističkog animatora, promotera, konsultanta i supervizora kako bi podržala i stimulisala razvoj ruralnog turizma. Pored toga, zemljoradnička zadruga Azanja treba da primeni promotivne strategije pomoću kojih će Azanju učiniti vidljivijom destinacijom na turističkoj mapi.

Ključne reči: *promocija, turizam, razvoj ruralnog turizma, zemljoradničke zadruge*

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