

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CLUSTER SUPPORT PROJECTS IN TOURISM FOR ACHIEVING COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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### Abstract

*In modern business conditions, the creation and maintenance of economic competitive advantage is an imperative. The EU has identified clusters as effective instruments for creating sustainable competitive advantage and regional development policy and placed them at prominent position within its development strategies. Territory-based merging of economic entities has created a synergetic effect, which means that members achieve better results by taking advantage of common functions and joint actions rather than with individual ones. A cluster model is an ideal instrument for establishing this cooperation since it links different entities that do not lose their independence by joining but only exploit joint activities in the strategy of future development. The paper highlights the importance of creating clusters support projects in the field of tourism on the territory of Vojvodina through examples of specific clusters aiming at creating sustainable competitive advantage of the regional and national economy.*

Key Words: *clusters, support projects, tourism, competitive advantage*

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### Introduction

The territory of Serbia possesses significant resources for the development of tourism. They have been widespread but not congruent spatially thus hindering the formation of integral entities with complementary forms of tourist offer. Limited opportunities for investing in the development of tourism require focusing on the development

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priorities defined under the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia (The Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2016 to 2025). Tourism can be considered, to some extent, to be the point of connection between urban and rural environments, which are increasingly becoming significant potential for tourist growth in Serbia (Matijašević, et al. 2017).

According to the Strategy (Porter, 1998) Serbia can be positioned on the international market as a tourist destination only through its tourist clusters. At the same time, Serbia's unfavorable tourism competitiveness can be improved only by establishing clusters within its tourist regions, as the critical role in creating competitive advantages lies in research and development, knowledge, technology, finance and groups of professionals, for which the easiest way for gathering is within the cluster. The cluster must be such as to meet the demands of today's society, that it is flexible and ready for changes, it is open to the outside world, that it is dynamic, in line with the economy, society and the environment. (Ničić et al., 2013). A large number of research is being carried out to determine the actual effects of projects funded by governmental and non-governmental organizations in support to projects aiming at the formation of potential Serbian tourist clusters and the development and promotion of tourism in our country.

The subject of this paper is the tourist cluster, or the presentation of the concept of clusters and the support to their establishment and development, with a special focus on their influence in strengthening the competitive position of Serbia. This paper aims at drawing attention to clusters as insufficiently used opportunity for enhancing regional tourism development in our country and point to the effects of their use, given that the role of tourism in local economic development is a topic of critical importance (Matijašević, et al. 2017).

### **The main advantages of clustering**

Porter's concept of clusters (Porter, 1998) is commonly accepted and defines clusters as geographically targeted group of interconnected companies and institutions in a specific sector that are related to unity and complementarity. This is the horizontal and vertical connection, alignment, and strengthening of the interaction link and the relationships between all enterprises and organizations that see their interest in connecting. Porter's comparative analysis of international competitiveness

shows that the leading export companies do not operate in isolation, but as part of a wider group of complementary companies, where they are successful international representatives. Clusters are a form of concentration of geographically bounded, complementary businesses and related institutions (Janković, 2013) and they cooperate and use common instruments. (Table 1).

Table 1. *Common instruments used in clusters*

Goal	Instruments
<i>Engage actors</i>	
Identifying the clusters	Conducting clusters mapping studies (quantitative and qualitative). Using facilitators and other brokers to identify companies that could work together
Support networks/ Clusters	Host awareness- raising events (conferences, cluster education) Offer financial incentives for networking organizations Sponsor company's networking activities Benchmarking the performance Mapping the cluster relationships.
<i>Collective services and business linkages</i>	
Improving capacities, scales and skills of suppliers (mainly SMEs)	SME business development support Brokers services and platforms between suppliers and purchasers Compiling general market intelligence
Increasing external linkages (FDI and exports)	Co-ordinate purchasing Establish technical standards Labels and marketing of clusters and regions Assistance to inward investors in the cluster Market information for international purposes searches of partners Supply chain linkage support Export networks
Skilled labor force in strategic industries	Supporting partnerships between groups of companies and educational institutions Education opportunities to attract talented students to region
<i>Collaborative R&amp;D and commercialization</i>	
Strengthening links between research and companies' needs	Supporting joint projects among companies, universities and research institutions Co-locating different actors to facilitate interaction ( <i>i.e.</i> science) University outreach programmers
Commercialization of research	Technical observatories Ensuring appropriate intellectual property framework laws Overcoming barriers to public sector incentives in commercialization
Access to finance for spinoffs	Technology transfer support services Advisory services for non-ordinary financial operations Public guarantee programs and venture capital Framework conditions supporting private venture capital

Source: OECD (2010), <http://www.oecd.org/innovation/policyplatform/48137710.pdf>

Clusters are the source of competitive advantage, particularly of large export companies, increasing productivity by exchanging information and using mutual resources, swiftly exchanging ideas and know-how based on

innovations. Increasingly sophisticated customer requirements have forced many companies to further explore opportunities to reduce cost, while preserving all the qualitative features that consumers expect from the particular product or service (Mitrović, 2013).

The main advantages of clustering are reflected in the following (Bošković & Jovanović, 2009):

- facilitating access to the most up-to-date knowledge;
- stimulating the knowledge sharing;
- providing cost-effective enterprises within the cluster;
- creating the possibility of cooperation;
- supporting innovation and encouraging competition;
- creating the critical mass needed for further growth.

Thanks to these advantages, primarily reflected in the cooperation, inter-connections and exchange of information, knowledge and experience, companies that are members of the cluster can achieve better results than if they have operated independently. On that basis, the clusters enable continuous improvement of products quality, thereby taking the lead over competitors.

### **The impact of the tourist destination cluster on competitiveness**

In the part of the Lisbon strategy "Global Competitiveness" (European Presidency Conference 2008), clusters are seen as key drivers of innovativeness, competitiveness and sustainable development of European industry and their economic growth. In addition, clusters, as a form of tighter association of companies and universities, are perceived as drivers of international cooperation (both regional and global), used to improve economic and social life of people within observed regions, and they strengthen innovation capacities not only within but national but international regions as well, which influences particularly tourist activities.

The competitiveness of tourist destinations can be seen as its ability to increase tourist spending to attract significantly more tourists by providing them with memorable experience and at the same time, doing that in the profitable manner, improving the welfare of the local population and preserving for future generations the natural and cultural treasures at the location (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003).

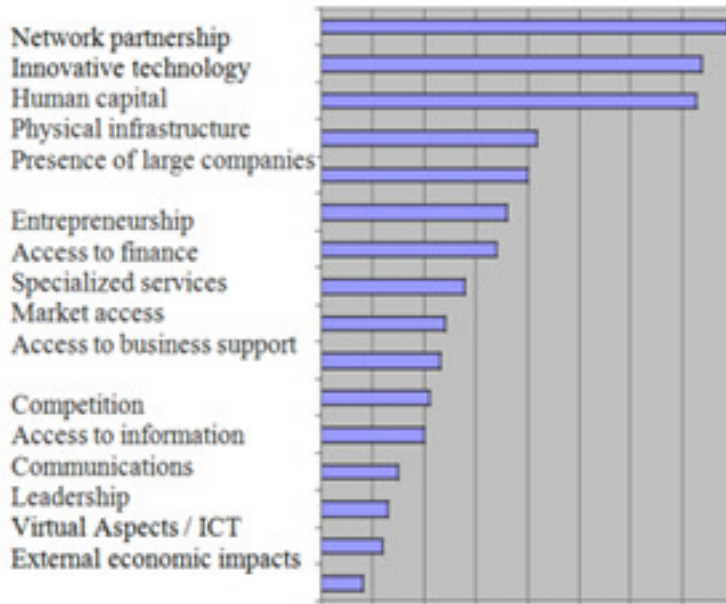
Since the mid-eighties, and mainly thanks to the work of Professor Michael Porter, there was a significantly better understanding of the most important forces creating competitiveness and ways of creating competitive advantages. According to Porter's "Five Forces" model of competitiveness, the future of tourist destinations depends on: avoiding the danger "from new competitors on the market, timely placement of alternative tourist products, adapting to changes in the negotiating position with suppliers or customers, successful rivalry with other destinations (Porter, 2008).

By unified action, the five forces of competitiveness of tourist destinations determine their average abilities to generate benefits in the tourist sector and the sectors closely related to such sectors. In other words, the competitive advantages of a destination determine its competitive position. In order to be successful, a tourist destination has to offer a greater value to the market than its rivals for the same efforts made for tourists. or to achieve the same value for less effort. Ability to provide greater value allows tourist destinations to charge higher prices and to expect better business results and profits. All this comes from the way where a number of activities in the value chain of tourism are in function to create a new tourist product, to provide better services and to offer a variety of experience and thus maintain the loyalty of existing customers but also attract new ones.

The tourism competitiveness is achieved, at the level of local destinations, by the ability to create innovations constantly and to improve the current situation while all the resources are used in the best and most sustainable way. Competitiveness requires tourism clusters to possess appropriate "competitive diamond", which is the business environment that encourages a continuous process of innovation and improvement of quality, high level of productivity of the resources and high business efficiency in the performance of competitive activity.

Tourism clusters are operationally efficient and therefore more competitive if they have a high level of attractiveness (good value for effort); they are effective in marketing, show a high level of productivity in terms of financial, technological and human resources and are effective in the management of the tourist system destination. Figure 1 shows the main success factors in the development of tourism cluster.

Figure 1: *The main success factors in the development of tourism cluster*



Source: *Cluster Development Strategy of APV (2016)*.

The most competitive cluster is the one that provides the best conditions for the implementation of the four power groups. These forces are also the strongest among the parameters of clusters of specialized tourism (eco-tourism, business tourism, religious tourism, agro tourist etc.). Each cluster must be able to undertake competitive activities in order to raise the value of its own competitive diamond.

One of the important issues relating to the competitiveness of the tourism cluster is their operational efficiency. It is the combined result of the operational efficiency of the various participants in various tourism value chains. It reduces operating costs and enhances the value that consumers represent themselves, and thus strengthens the competitiveness of the tourism cluster. This opens up great opportunities for effective cooperation among all interested parties (Đurašević, 2008).

### **Cluster support projects**

The effects of establishing and developing clusters influence not only companies within cluster but entire region due to the increase in number of work places, types of business activities, processes and products/services; reducing purchasing costs and expenses for input

materials and inventories; increasing qualified labor force; technology diffusion; expansion of markets; tighter connections of business entities and higher possibilities for investment projects (Porter, 2011).

The project of establishing a cluster is designed to cover the significant factors and the development stage of resource constraints and specific needs. It focuses on activities that are specific to clusters in less developed regions. A general project of establishing a cluster contains a list of activities to be undertaken in order to develop clusters in a region. Project support for the establishment and development of clusters can be observed at three levels (Karaev, 2011):

- a) globally.
- b) nationally, and
- c) locally.

a) *Globally* – Clusters are recognized in many countries as a model for increasing competitiveness, especially in regional and local communities. The European Union also recognizes the importance of clusters for economic development in order to achieve the objectives set by the Lisbon Strategy in 2000. The Strategy refers to the fact that in 2020, Europe is to become the most competitive and dynamic economy in the world, based on knowledge, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and stronger social cohesion. It is particularly important to promote institutional support to clusters within the regional, industrial and innovation policy. To this regard, the European Union pays great attention to the creation of clusters, because this affects the development of innovation and competitiveness of the economy. In addition, the creation of policies and actions relating to the clusters from the national to the regional level of support strengthens each cluster.

One of the examples of support to the development of clusters having global importance is The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) supported by EU as a concept of technologically cleaner production/servicing aiming to minimize both short- and long-term risks for people and environment, aiming at the prevention in all phases of products life cycle, including reduction in the produced and emitted waste, production of environmentally acceptable products and provision of services through lower prices and higher profit, which is specifically important for the development in tourist sector. Different countries have established institutional forms, but with approximately the same goals and tasks of operation. When it comes to tourism, the World Tourism

Organization advocates the DMO (Destination Management Organization), whose role is to coordinate and care for the joint action of all stakeholders in the destination that influence the formation of the tourist product.

The organization of destination management could be a basic form of gathering of stakeholders in the area, and there are other models promoting or organizing the work of the cluster, such as the model of project excellence (PEM project excellence model, which can dramatically increase the quality of project). These various forms of regional development agencies, usually organized around projects of small and medium-sized enterprises as well as other actions enhance competitiveness, districts, free business zones and others that have defined the creation of regional clusters under their development documents (Hajrović et al. 2013).

However, in countries in transition, the situation is different, since the process of institutional preparations for the development of clusters has not been either entirely or not at all developed. There has not been regionalization in accordance with European standards, and there is a very low level of communication and cooperation between different levels of government, affected by the lack of adequate policies to support cluster development. The situation is similar with the financing of tourism clusters because in the transition economies, financial institutions and financial markets are less developed and there is a high risk in investment. Financing function was taken over by the State, either independently or with the help of development financial institutions (e.g. World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development). Therefore, adequate microeconomic policies are needed in order to support the development of clusters as well as policy of education and incentives for foreign investment. It can be public or private by nature, including a wide range of participants, representatives of municipalities and/or regions, tourist organizations, representatives of accommodation sector, tourist farms, respective travel agencies, and local/regional business chamber (Horwath Consulting Zagreb, 2005).

b) *Nationally* – Government support to cluster development: it could be classified into three groups of measures including (Cluster Development Strategy of APV, 2016):

- eliminating restrictions,
- facilitating financing, and



- actively supporting the cluster development.

State policy inevitably affects the ability to improve the cluster. It can motivate, facilitate and provide the private sector with incentives for joint action. The final role of the state is in the development and implementation of positive, specific and long-term strategies and starting the process of change that mobilizes public authorities, businesses, institutions and citizens to promote and develop the general business environment and the different clusters. Almost all developed countries have established institutional networks to help the sector clusters, and they have a significant contribution, especially in the development phase and the formation of new clusters.

The government can adopt a development strategy and policy for the development of clusters with goal to:

- guides the development of clusters, by directing various forms of assistance enabling the development;
- monitors and assesses achieved effects of the support;
- provides an institutional framework to support services providers;
- supports initiatives in the private sector;
- supports the internationalization of business clusters;
- participates in partial financing, combined with other sources of funds.

The Serbian Clusters bring together more than 400 companies employing more than 22.000 people, having turnover of around one billion euro per year – nearly half of which is for exporting. The Republic of Serbia has implemented a multi-year project from 2006 to 2011 to support cluster development. This project aimed to encourage business development, growth, employment and exports through networking companies, research and development institutions and business associations in the cluster. The diversification with which the Republic of Serbia has supported clusters is based on selecting the best projects and companies that applied for grants from the funds earmarked for co-financing up to 50% of cluster activities in various stages of development.

c) *Locally* – The most common form of institutional assistance is the central agency for the development of clusters at the level of regions. Its main objective is to implement the defined strategy and policy for cluster development through the following activities (Cluster Development Strategy of APV, 2016):

- establishing the entrepreneurial centers at the local level and training of their management and operating personnel;
- allocating the budget funds;
- implementing successful practical solutions from abroad;
- monitoring the implementation of the activities of local agencies;
- ensuring budget funds for the development of local services and projects;
- assisting in development planning and the development of new forms of support to clusters;
- public relations;
- cooperation with foreign organizations co-financing the development of clusters;
- cooperation with foreign agencies for development and participating in various projects.

### **Cluster support projects of tourism in Vojvodina**

The cluster support projects of tourism in Vojvodina are implemented through:

- a) *the Association for the Development of Competitiveness – Clusters of Voivodina;*
- b) *the Centre for Competitiveness and Cluster Development.*

a) *The Association for the Development of Competitiveness - Clusters of Vojvodina*, has cluster development in the territory of Vojvodina and all regions of interest as its main objective, i.e. provides support to the establishment and development of clusters. inter-clusters cooperation and the development of economic competitiveness.

The common objectives of clustering are: the representation of common interests, business connections, strengthening competitiveness and positioning in the domestic and foreign markets, capacity building of clusters and their members, stimulating the exchange of knowledge, ideas and information, promotion of entrepreneurship, facilitating access to financial resources, the creation and development of cluster-oriented programs and projects, development of innovation, development and application of advanced technologies and fostering international business cooperation.

b) *The Centre for Competitiveness and Cluster Development* is a result of cooperation between the University of Novi Sad and the Secretariat for Economy of the Autonomous Province Vojvodina on projects to support the development of competitiveness of economic entities and the establishment and development of business networks and clusters (Catalogue – *The Clusters of Serbia*, 2017).

In the field of tourism, the following clusters should be emphasized:

7. Istar 21 - Association for the promotion of cooperation and development of tourism in the Danube region
8. Cluster Srem
9. Cluster Palić - micro-region Subotica
10. Cluster Sombor ranchers

1. *Istar 21* - Association for the promotion of cooperation and development of tourism in the Danube region. The aim of the cluster is to connect the tourist providers and other stakeholders in order to create the authentic tourist product along the Danube, attractive for both domestic and foreign tourists. The cluster members aims at: raising the quality of services, promoting the common representation and increasing the tourist attractiveness and profits for all its members. The directions of the cluster: formation of a joint tourist product Cluster Istar 21; promotion of clusters and cluster members at tourist fairs in the country and abroad; creating the web page Cluster Istar 21; creating data base cluster Istar 21; preparing educational programs for members of the cluster for the purpose of establishing standards and improving the quality services.

The project "Wealth of Diversity" was one of the biggest projects that was implemented. The aim of the project was to create a new tourist product that would attract tourists to visit Serbia and the Danube River Region and enable cluster members to achieve defined goals. All cluster activities were directed towards the increase in quality level through introduction of innovation and education, joint promotion on the market, strengthening of cooperation among cluster members and implementation of joint project.

2. *Cluster Srem* - the initiative was created with the intention to support the development of ethnic, ecological, rural, hunting, entertainment and all other forms tourism in Srem and to encourage the creation and development of the Srem tourist product and provide conditions for accommodation of domestic and foreign tourists.

Directions of clusters (The Centre for Competition and Cluster Development, 2017).

- Introducing standards according to EU requirements in order to meet all necessary preconditions to provide service of supreme quality;
- Orientation of clusters towards organizing excursions and promotion of touristic attractive offers of the Srem region;
- Promotion of healthy food and local characteristics of Srem;
- Development of cross-border cooperation with similar organizations, particularly emphasizing the promotion of domestic tourist products, exchange of experience, encouraging tourist-related traffic in order to increase the number of foreign tourists in Srem.

The aim of the cluster is to create respectable competitor and position Srem within the inbound tourism. Then there should be the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in the catering industry, tourism and complementary activities to strengthen sustainable regional development.

3. *Cluster Palić* - micro region Subotica – Cluster Foundation, over 35 members of the cluster are involved in a network cluster of 12 countries. This is a cluster of excellence included in the project Poli SEE. This is very important for the visibility of our region and the cluster members.

4. *Cluster Sombor* ranches was established in 2008 aiming at promoting the tourist offer of Sombor farms, with expert assistance from TAM programs and services for the reconstruction and business counselling by the EBRD and the Republic of Serbia. The Republic of Serbia formed, through the Province Secretariat of Economy, a team for education which previously, in cooperation with GTZ, enabled easier orientation of clusters, its organizational structuring and identification of opportunities and goals for future development.

### **Conclusion**

Clusters in tourism allow the introduction of innovation, the creation of an integrated tourist offer, achieving high business standards, combining tourist resources and development of regional and international cooperation, development of new skills, branding local products and strengthening marketing tools in tourism, which greatly increase tourism competitiveness. Compared to other forms of institutional cooperation and relations among business entities in the tourist sector, clusters are

operationally more efficient thus more competitive based on following elements: high level of attractiveness (good value for products/services for efforts invested), efficient marketing, high level of productivity of financial and technologic and human resources and efficient management of the system of tourist destinations (UNWTO, 2006).

The positive effects and advantage of clusters influence government institutions and other specialized stakeholders to be interested in supporting cluster development, therefore contributing to the creation of economic effects in the specific regions. The projects support aimed at the formation of potential Serbian tourism clusters, as well as improving existing ones, contributing to the results important for the further development and promotion of tourism in our country.

The result of the establishment and development of the tourism clusters are important, affecting positively the entire region of Vojvodina: more jobs; greater diversity of processes, products and types of work; lower procurement costs; reduction of material and components; specialized and common services qualified workforce; diffusion of technology; expanding markets and opportunities for new business connections; the ability to perform major investment projects in the region of Vojvodina, etc.

The implementation of tourist clusters and main comparative advantage of Vojvodina in tourism are river and water wealth, nautics, spas, rich historic heritage and attractive buildings (fortresses and castles) from Roman era, attractive structures of urban settlements, farms so called "salaši", wide hunting areas, horse raising areas, and entertainment activities of global and local character, have become more and more united and represent efficient and effective way of managing tourist potential of Vojvodina, but entire Serbia, as well. In that sense, clusters have become support to efficient realization of new tourist strategy (2016-2025) to prioritize the development of attractive products with the highest possibility for commercialization, with as little efforts as practicable and with effects visible as soon as possible.

In Serbia as well, clusters have become significant instrument for the development of target tourist destination and attractive tourist products/services due to smart networking and high operational efficiency, but also very important factor in the development of competitiveness. Through projects within different programs for the development of tourism in Serbia within the period from 2007 to 2015,

more than 21.3 million dinars have been invested, primarily into clusters in the sector of tourism and sector of agriculture and food industry.

Based on project support to clusters through different programs such as INTER - Territorial Economic Development, bonding companies into cluster have started and cooperation among members of cluster has improved through education of employees, mutual marketing and fair shows, introduction of standardization of all related entities, public advocacy of interests on local and broader regional and global market. Minor effects have been achieved in mutual purchase, cooperation in the development of innovative products and mutual appearance in foreign markets. Main obstacles to major benefits from program support to clusters have been identified as follows: the absence of direct cooperation (cooperation through managers), unsatisfactorily sincere collaboration among members who are direct competitors and rarely direct cooperation between companies and scientific and research institutions. Irrespective of the previously mentioned, existing tourist clusters enable the improvement of human resources and exchange of knowledge and experience but also, though to smaller extent, the development of innovative products and introduction of technological innovations.

Notwithstanding the shortcomings, having province Vojvodina as an example in practice, multicultural environments with Orthodox Christians as majority, with rich historic heritage and bordering European Union, specified clusters have survived and are developing different tourist destinations successfully in this part of Serbia, strengthening its competitiveness. They are relying on modern Marketing strategy of Vojvodina tourism (Tourism Marketing Strategy of Vojvodina, 2015), but also on significant share in financial resource having entered our country from different programs of Serbia tourist development.

Strengthening of competitiveness of Vojvodina region through the development of different clusters is observed by future tourists based on: 31500 available beds, 917000 visits and 3.2 million of stays over night, estimating double growth in tourist services, compared to previous 10-year period, through Vojvodina Cluster Tourism by increasing accommodation capacities. achieved services and incomes. Based on examples of successful tourism clusters in Vojvodina, it can be expected that the regional development significantly contributes to the positioning of Serbia as a tourist destination on the global tourist market.

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