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## THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM FOR EMPOWERING RURAL AZERBAIJANI YOUTH AND WOMEN THROUGH TOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Məqalə redaksiyaya daxil olmuşdur: 16 sentyabr 2025; çapa qəbul edilmişdir: 22 noyabr 2025; online-da çap edilmişdir: 17 dekabr 2025.

Received: 16th of September, 2025; accepted: 22th of November, 2025; published online: 17th of December, 2025.

**Key words:** *community-based tourism, rural tourism, youth and women, entrepreneurship, Azerbaijan.*

### Introduction

Tourism is a globally significant sector with a uniquely inclusive workforce profile. Women comprise a majority of the tourism workforce worldwide (54% in 2019, versus 39% in the broader economy), reflecting the sector's potential as a platform for women's employment and empowerment [36]. In line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) leverage tourism for empowering women and youth has gained strategic importance [32]. Community-Based Tourism (CBT), which emphasizes local ownership and benefit-sharing, has emerged as a key approach to realize inclusive and sustainable development [37].

CBT is defined as a form of tourism “where the local community has substantial control over and involvement in its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community” [25]. Through directly engaging local residents (often in rural or economically marginalized areas) as hosts, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers, CBT can help ensure that tourism's economic and social benefits reach those most in need [30]. Previous studies indicate that CBT initiatives can empower community members by providing jobs, supporting small enterprises, preserving cultural heritage, and improving collective confidence and skills. Notably, CBT projects around the world have been linked to greater gender parity and community well-being, as they place traditionally underrepresented groups, including women and youth at the core of tourism development [30].

In many developing contexts, women and youth face structural barriers that limit their economic participation. Azerbaijan is no exception: despite overall economic growth fueled by oil and gas, rural areas of Azerbaijan lag in development indicators, and women in rural communities often have limited opportunities due to traditional gender norms, early marriage, incomplete education, and lack of access to resources [33; 34]. These challenges contribute to rural-to-urban exodus and the underutilization of a significant segment of the population in local development. Recognizing this, Azerbaijan has begun to prioritize inclusive rural development through tourism. The national Regional

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<https://doi.org/10.30546/25194011.2025.14.5.3089>

Tourism Strategy (2023-2026) explicitly aimed to reduce rural–urban migration by creating local tourism opportunities that directly engage communities [3]. Likewise, development programs and mechanisms have targeted rural entrepreneurship: for example, a Second Rural Investment Project supported by the World Bank enabled communities in all 58 rural districts to implement microprojects and livelihood programs, with a strong emphasis on women and youth inclusion. In that project, local youth were trained as community business promoters and helped establish rural business incubators to support women entrepreneurs [40].

### **Literature review**

#### **1. Community-Based Tourism: Concepts and Theory**

Community-Based Tourism (CBT) has been widely studied as a form of sustainable tourism that can generate local socio-economic benefits while preserving cultural and natural resources. By definition, CBT involves strong local community participation in managing tourism and sharing its benefits. CBT ensures that local people have ownership and control over tourism experiences and that economic gains predominantly stay in the community [25]. This stands in contrast to mass tourism models where external investors or tour operators reap most benefits, often resulting in economic leakage and limited community input. CBT, often organized around initiatives like homestays, community lodges, village tours, or cooperatives, is seen as a vehicle for “placing local people at the forefront” of tourism development [30]. A key theoretical lens to examine the impacts of CBT on local communities is empowerment theory. Empowerment in a tourism context refers to the process by which individuals and groups gain greater control over decisions and resources affecting their lives, as well as increased confidence, skills, and ability to positively influence their communities through tourism. Scheyvens (1999) provided a foundational framework for assessing empowerment in ecotourism (and by extension CBT) which includes four dimensions of empowerment: economic, psychological, social, and political [27].

Over time, successful CBT can lead to what some call community empowerment cycles – early economic gains boost confidence (psychological empowerment), which encourages more active participation and collective action (social/political empowerment), leading to better bargaining power and policy influence, which in turn can attract more support and resources (reinforcing economic empowerment). The virtuous cycle, however, can break down if any dimension is neglected. For instance, economic benefits alone may not lead to lasting empowerment if local people have no say in decisions [26; 37]. CBT, while widely recognized for its potential for sustainable development, faces several critical challenges that can hinder its effectiveness. Capacity and skill limitations remain a major barrier, as many communities lack tourism management expertise, leadership capacity, marketing skills, and entrepreneurial mindsets necessary for successful operations. Infrastructure challenges such as inadequate transportation, accommodation shortages, lack of basic utilities, poor waste management, and limited investor interest further constrain the scalability and quality of CBT experiences [1].

*Figure 1*

*Challenges and Limitations of Community-based Tourism*



*Source: Author's own compilation.*

## 2. Women's Empowerment through Tourism Entrepreneurship

Tourism is often lauded as an industry that provides relatively accessible entry points for women's employment and entrepreneurship, especially in developing countries. Globally, women not only form the majority of the tourism workforce but are also found in various entrepreneurial [5]. Empowering women through tourism entrepreneurship can have multiplier effects on community welfare. Women tend to reinvest a significant portion of their income in their families and communities, thereby spreading the benefits [16]. Studies in various countries have reported that when women gain income and confidence from tourism jobs or businesses, their societal status improves, leading to greater say in household and community decisions [14]. For instance, one study from Indonesia found that a CBT initiative provided diverse job opportunities to local women (such as running guesthouses, guiding tours, managing craft workshops), which "positively affected the economic standard of their families" [2; 29]. Similarly, in Egypt's Nubian communities, CBT projects enabled women to generate income from cultural tours and handicrafts, improving their autonomy and community standing [9]. However, women's participation in tourism is not without challenges. Traditional gender norms and patriarchal systems can limit the roles women are allowed to play in tourism, especially in conservative rural settings [19]. A case study from a Berber community in Morocco illustrates how tourism arrival initially primarily benefitted men (as guides, drivers, hotel staff), while women were expected to continue unpaid domestic and farm work – effectively increasing their workload without direct gains. In such contexts, women's lack of mobility, lower education levels, and societal expectations can impede their entrepreneurship [20]. This underscores that tourism development alone doesn't guarantee empowerment; the design of initiatives must consciously involve and benefit women. Encouragingly, numerous programs and social enterprises have arisen worldwide to empower women through tourism. For example, in Nepal, the Community Homestay Network (CHN) was established explicitly to empower women entrepreneurs via homestays, enabling women in rural villages to generate income by hosting tourists [11]. Initiatives like women's tourism associations or cooperatives can provide mutual support, collective marketing, and a unified voice to advocate for resources [12]. For instance, the Azerbaijan Rural Women's Association (ARWA) was formed in 2018 as the country's first network of rural women entrepreneurs (many in agriculture and cottage in-

dustries, including tourism crafts) [40].

### **3. Youth Empowerment through Tourism Entrepreneurship**

Youth empowerment in the context of tourism is an emerging area of focus, as industry can offer avenues for meaningful employment, skills development, and leadership for young people. Around the world, many rural youths face high unemployment and underemployment and often feel compelled to migrate to urban areas or abroad for work. Tourism development, especially in rural or remote areas, can provide local alternatives by creating jobs ranging from tour guides and hospitality staff to digital marketing and creative roles (like content creation for tourism promotion) [23; 35].

Young entrepreneurs can bring fresh ideas and tech-savvy innovations to tourism businesses, such as starting adventure tourism ventures, community tour operations, travel tech startups, or social enterprises that appeal to socially conscious travelers. Engaging in entrepreneurship allows youth not only to employ themselves but potentially to create jobs for peers, thus multiplying impact. A study on youth entrepreneurship and community tourism in India observed that with a growing young population, tourism entrepreneurship has great potential to drive development, but youth face significant challenges such as limited access to resources, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of awareness about opportunities. These barriers are common in many countries and often more acute for youth who have less experience or collateral. Community-based tourism projects in some Indian regions have started providing young entrepreneurs with training, resources, and support to start and grow businesses [22]. International organizations and NGOs have begun to specifically target youth empowerment through tourism. For example, the UNWTO has organized a Global Youth Tourism Summit, underlining the idea that youth should be part of “tourism’s decisions” and emphasizing tourism’s role in youth empowerment and intercultural exchange. In practice, programs like the EU’s Youth Empowerment Project in The Gambia have launched training for youth-led tourism and creative industries startups [13]. There is also Oxfam’s Empower Youth for Work program in countries like Indonesia and Bangladesh, which includes CBT as a pillar to create jobs for rural youth. In Indonesia’s South Sulawesi, a pilot CBT initiative under this program established youth-managed tourism hubs: 774 youths (296 female) were directly involved in developing tours (such as village trekking, homestays, cultural experiences), and indirectly 3,500 youth benefitted, as they gained skills in communication, digital marketing, and business through the project [21; 10]. Youth empowerment in tourism is closely tied to education and skills training. Many young people from rural areas lack exposure to the skills needed in tourism (e.g. language skills, hospitality, guiding techniques, business management). Programs that provide vocational training, internships, or mentorship in tourism can significantly increase youth employability. For instance, in Azerbaijan, the government and donors have supported vocational education in hospitality and tour guiding for youth, though these are mostly based in urban centers. Expanding such training to rural youth is critical. Also, engaging youth in leadership roles in community tourism organizations or committees can empower them to take initiative and build leadership skills early on [4]. In many rural CBT contexts, youth become the bridge to the global marketplace by helping their community list homestays on booking platforms or promote on social networks [38; 39]. Many youth-led tourism successes involve leveraging digital tools or adventure/ecotourism niches [8; 6].

### **4. Community-based Tourism in Azerbaijan and Theoretical Framework**

While the concept of CBT is relatively new in Azerbaijan, there have been steps

toward community-inclusive tourism. As mentioned, Azerbaijan's tourism strategy and various development projects indicate a policy interest in leveraging tourism for rural development and inclusivity [3; 15]. A recent study focusing on the South Caucasus found that policymakers and development agencies are actively promoting CBT to revitalize rural areas that suffer from out-migration and weak economies [17]. The European Union has supported projects in the region to facilitate cooperation between stakeholders and the inclusion of local communities in tourism planning. In Georgia, different stakeholders had varying understandings of CBT, and challenges ranged from lack of specific guidelines to limited capacity among local facilitators [18].

In the context of rural Azerbaijan, a few pilot initiatives are noteworthy. For example, the village of Khinalig has seen some community-based tourism development with locals offering homestays and guided treks. Likewise, Sheki and other regions have small family guesthouses and craft workshops that form part of cultural tourism routes. These organically grown examples show that the basic elements of CBT do exist in Azerbaijan, though not yet framed as "CBT projects" per se. Additionally, Women Resource Centers established in regions like Bilasuvar have provided entrepreneurial skills training to rural women, some of whom then launched small businesses [34].

Azerbaijan's government in recent years has taken steps to encourage Small and Medium Entrepreneurship (SME) development and women's entrepreneurship. The "State Program on Socio-Economic Development of Regions" and the activities of the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (SMBDA) have provided grants and training to rural entrepreneurs. Additionally, the ABAD (Simplified Support to Family Business) public service, established in 2016, plays a pivotal role in supporting rural SMEs, including those in the tourism sector. Through a combination of financial grants, entrepreneurship training, and marketing support, ABAD helps strengthen local capacities, promote self-employment, and enhance the competitiveness of CBT initiatives across Azerbaijan [28]. Culturally, Azerbaijani women in rural areas have always contributed through agriculture, crafts, and hospitality, but much of this work was unpaid or under-recognized [24]. According to a UN Women report, the main sectors employing women in Azerbaijan include catering, manual labor, factory work, and tourism. This indicates that a significant number of women are already active in tourism and hospitality services (e.g. as cooks, cleaners, hotel staff) but often at lower levels. The challenge is to elevate women from low-paid employment to entrepreneurship and leadership roles in tourism. Through targeted interventions, female entrepreneurship has risen sharply from 4% a decade ago to 29% of all entrepreneurs now. Over 170,000 women are now business owners or self-employed in Azerbaijan. Many operate home-based businesses (baking, handicrafts, agribusiness) that can tie into tourism value chains. For instance, rural women's associations have begun marketing traditional jam, cheese, or woven carpets directly to tourists, thereby capturing higher profits than through middlemen [31; 7].

#### *Research Methodology*

This research adopted a qualitative case-study approach to gain an in-depth understanding of how community-based tourism can empower rural youth and women in Azerbaijan. In particular, semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection tool. Semi-structured interviews allow for a flexible yet guided conversation. Since formal CBT projects in Azerbaijan are limited, author relied on expert informants who have knowledge of tourism development and community initiatives in the country. The author identified four experts through purposive sampling chosen for their expertise and roles in relevant areas (rather than for statistical representativeness). The criteria for selection were: (1) at least one expert from a government or policy-making body related

to tourism or rural development, (2) at least one tourism entrepreneur or practitioner (such as a rural guesthouse owner or community tourism project leader), (3) an academic or consultant with research experience in sustainable tourism or entrepreneurship in Azerbaijan, and (4) a representative of a youth-focused organization in tourism or entrepreneurship. Each expert was interviewed once, with interviews conducted over a period of three weeks in March 2025. Interviews lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and were conducted in a semi-structured format.

**Table 1**

***Profile of Interviewed Experts***

<b>Expert ID</b>	<b>Role / Title</b>	<b>Sector / Organisation</b>	<b>Experience</b>
<b>E1</b>	Senior official, State Tourism Agency	Government (Tourism policymaking)	~ 8 years (tourism development)
<b>E2</b>	Rural guesthouse owner & community leader	Private sector (CBT entrepreneur)	~ 4 years (tourism business)
<b>E3</b>	Professor of Tourism Development	Academia / Research	~ 15 years (tourism studies)
<b>E4</b>	Manager, Youth Entrepreneurship Incubator	NGO / Development project (youth)	~ 3 years (youth programs)

*Results and Discussion*

The interviews with the four experts yielded a wealth of information regarding the current state and potential of community-based tourism in rural Azerbaijan, and how it intersects with youth and women’s empowerment. The results are organized into several sub-sections corresponding to the major themes identified: (1) Perceived benefits of community-based tourism for rural communities, especially for youth and women; (2) Barriers and challenges that prevent rural youth and women from engaging in tourism entrepreneurship; (3) Suggested strategies or needed measures to enhance the role of youth and women in CBT. Within each subsection, perspectives from different experts are integrated, and differences between stakeholders (government vs. grassroots views) are noted where relevant.

**5. *Benefits of Community-Based Tourism for Women, Youth, and Communities***

All experts generally agreed that if developed properly, community-based tourism could bring significant benefits to rural Azerbaijani communities, and in particular could create new opportunities for women and young people. Table 2 summarizes the key benefits of CBT that experts highlighted, along with example quotes:

**Table 2**

*Perceived Benefits of Community-Based Tourism for Rural Communities, Youth, and Women (Expert Views)*

<b>Key Benefit of CBT</b>	<b>Description (as per experts)</b>	<b>Illustrative Quote</b>
Income generation and jobs	CBT can provide direct income (from homestays, guiding, etc.) and indirect income (selling food, crafts) for local families. Empowers women/youth by giving them their “own money.”	“When tourists come to our village, women can sell their homemade jam and handicrafts – it’s cash that goes straight to them” – E2
Business opportunities	Empowers locals to start micro and small enterprises (guesthouses, tour services, craft workshops). Builds business skills among youth/women.	“I’ve seen young people become quite enterprising – one started a small trekking tour business with almost no capital, just his knowledge of the mountains” – E4
Cultural exchange and preservation	Encourages communities (especially youth) to preserve traditions, crafts, and heritage to showcase to tourists. Builds pride and inter-cultural understanding.	“Our traditional dances and storytelling were fading, but now the youth are learning them again because tourists are interested” – E3
Community development (collective)	CBT projects (if revenues are pooled or cooperatively managed) can fund community needs (e.g. improving a local museum, environment cleanup).	“The village came together to create a small museum for tourists – it became a source of pride and a community hub” – E1

## **6. Barriers and Challenges for Rural Youth and Women**

Despite the optimistic potential, the experts identified a range of challenges that hinder rural women and youth from engaging in or benefiting from community-based tourism.

*Lack of Skills and Training (mentioned by 4/4 experts):* Every expert brought up the issue that many rural women and youth lack the necessary skills for tourism. This includes foreign language ability (especially English), hospitality service skills, basic business knowledge (accounting, marketing), and technical skills like using online booking platforms. E4 pointed out that local youth often have limited professional skills beyond farming or trades; they might be tech-savvy with phones but do not know how to create a structured tour itinerary or manage a small enterprise.

*Limited Access to Finance (4/4 experts):* Starting even a micro business (like a homestay or tour operation) can require some capital to renovate a room, purchase equipment (e.g. tents, bicycles for tours), or simply to sustain initial running costs. Experts noted that rural entrepreneurs face difficulty obtaining loans or grants. “Banks require collateral and have high interest; most rural women don’t have property in their name to mortgage,” explained E1, adding that existing microfinance in Azerbaijan is more focused on agriculture or livestock than tourism. E2 shared her personal experience: “I wanted to add two more rooms for guests. The local bank wouldn’t give me a small loan because I had no steady salary and my husband had already taken a loan for a tractor.”

*Inadequate Infrastructure and Connectivity (4/4 experts):* Poor road access, unreliable transport, and patchy internet connectivity in many rural areas were cited as practical obstacles to growing community tourism. E3 mentioned, “Some beautiful villages have huge tourism potential but are literally hard to reach – if a tourist has to endure 4 hours on a bad road, tour operators hesitate to send them.” Additionally, the lack of local public transportation means youth can’t easily travel to town for training or supplies,

and tourists can't come unless they hire private cars.

*Sociocultural Norms and Gender Roles (3/4 experts):* A major theme, especially from E2 and E3, was the influence of traditional norms. In some rural communities, women's roles are expected to be domestic; running a guesthouse or interacting with strangers (especially foreign men) can be frowned upon by husbands or elders. Early marriage and large family responsibilities also mean young women have little time or freedom to pursue entrepreneurship. For youth in general, a top-down social structure means young voices are not always taken seriously in community decisions.

*Lack of Awareness and Networks (3/4 experts):* Another soft barrier is simply that many rural communities and individuals are not aware of the opportunities in tourism or how to access support. E1 admitted that government programs haven't effectively disseminated information at the grassroots: "There might be a grant available or a training workshop in the region, but the villagers often don't hear about it in time." Women, being more confined to home, are even less exposed to information networks.

#### *Experts' Suggested Strategies (Preview of Solutions)*

Some of the key strategies or solutions that experts themselves suggested during interviews.

✓ *Capacity Building Programs:* All experts advocated for localized training programs in hospitality, guiding, language, and business skills for rural women and youth. They suggested mobile training units or partnerships with local colleges to reach villages.

✓ *Mentorship and Role Models:* Having successful women entrepreneurs or youth from other regions come and speak to communities was highlighted.

✓ *Micro-Grants/Loans and Financial Inclusion:* Experts urged establishing a small grants fund specifically for community-based tourism startups, and/or simplifying micro-loans for women and youth (possibly with government interest subsidies or credit guarantee schemes).

✓ *Marketing and Partnerships:* One idea was to create a national online portal for community-based stays in Azerbaijan.

✓ *Infrastructure Investments:* While experts know it's a long-term play, they encouraged continuing to improve road access, public transport to tourist sites, and internet connectivity in rural areas as part of government's broader development (not solely for tourism but it will benefit tourism).

✓ *Policy and Institutional Support:* This includes embedding CBT in the national tourism strategy with clear targets (e.g. number of community projects, number of women-led tourism businesses to support).

### **Conclusion**

This research set out to examine how community-based tourism can serve as an inclusive platform to empower rural youth and women in Azerbaijan through tourism entrepreneurship. Through a comprehensive literature review, qualitative perceptions from experts, and international comparisons, the study has highlighted both the significant potential of CBT for empowerment and the challenges that need to be addressed to realize that potential in the Azerbaijani context.

Community-based tourism, if properly supported, offers a multidimensional basis for empowerment. It can generate income and jobs for rural women and youth, build their confidence and skills, and strengthen their roles in society. The majority of experts and global cases concur that women's and youths' engagement in CBT leads to tangible improvements in livelihoods and intangible gains in dignity and voice. However, rural women and youth in Azerbaijan currently face numerous barriers to participating in tourism entrepreneurship. These range from lack of relevant skills and training opportunities to limited access to startup capital, restrictive gender norms and skepticism towards youth, inadequate infrastructure in tourist areas, and insufficient market linkages for

community tourism products. Existing initiatives in Azerbaijan have shown promising results in empowering these groups. In sum, the empowerment of rural youth and women through community-based tourism in Azerbaijan is an achievable goal, but it requires an integrated strategy and collaboration among stakeholders.

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*Резюме*

*Симран Гаджалиев*

***Роль общественно ориентированного туризма в расширении возможностей молодежи и женщин сельских районов Азербайджана через туристическое предпринимательство***

В современную эпоху, когда особое внимание уделяется равенству и ориентированности на сообщество, туризм на основе сообщества рассматривается не только как инструмент содействия экономическому развитию, но и как новый механизм, который ставит местные сообщества, особенно молодежь и женщин в центр планирования туризма, принятия решений и распределения выгод. В данной статье рассматривается потенциал туризма на основе сообщества для расширения роли молодежи и женщин в туристическом предпринимательстве в сельских районах Азербайджана. Основываясь на научной литературе и специфических данных по Азербайджану, исследование подчеркивает существующие пробелы в интеграции молодежи и женщин в туристическую деятельность в рамках развития сельского туризма. Для исследования применялась качественная методология, включая интервью с пятью экспертами в области туризма. В работе выявлены основные препятствия, мешающие полноценному участию молодежи и женщин в предпринимательстве в сфере сельского туризма, такие как недостаток знаний и навыков, ограниченный доступ к финансовым ресурсам и социально-культурные барьеры. Результаты показывают, что государственные стимулы играют ключевую роль в создании благоприятной среды для инвестиций (например, в инфраструктуру, образование и финансирование), тогда как программы НПО выполняют дополнительную функцию по повышению потенциала на местном уровне и формированию социального капитала.

**Ключевые слова:** *Туризм, основанный на участии общины, сельский туризм, молодежь и женщины, местные сообщества, предпринимательство, Азербайджан*

*Xülasə*

*Simran Hacəliyev*

***İcma əsaslı turizmin Azərbaycanın kənd yerlərində gənclərin və qadınların turizm sahibkarlığı vasitəsilə səlahiyyətəndirilməsində rolu***

Müasir dövrdə, bərabərliyə və icmayönlüliyə xüsusi diqqət yetirildiyi bir vaxtda, icma-əsaslı turizm təkcə iqtisadi inkişafa təkan verən bir alət deyil, həm də yerli icmaları, xüsusilə gəncləri və qadınları turizmin planlaşdırılması, qərar qəbulu və faydaların bölüşdürülməsinin mərkəzinə qoyan yeni bir mexanizm kimi nəzərdən keçirilir. Bu məqalə, icma-əsaslı turizmin Azərbaycanın kənd yerlərində gənclərin və qadınların turizm sahibkarlığındakı rolunu genişləndirmək potensialını araşdırır. Elmi ədəbiyyata və Azərbaycan üzrə spesifik məlumatlara əsaslanaraq, tədqiqat kənd turizminin inkişafı çərçivəsində gənclərin və qadınların turizm fəaliyyətlərinə inteqrasiyasında mövcud olan boşluqları vurğulayır. Tədqiqat üçün keyfiyyət metodologiyasından istifadə edilmiş, o cümlədən turizm sahəsində beş ekspertlə müsahibələr aparılmışdır. İşdə gənclərin və qadınların kənd turizmi sahibkarlığında tam iştirakına mane olan əsas maneələr, o cümlədən bilik və bacarıq çatışmazlığı, maliyyə resurslarına məhdud çıxış və sosial-mədəni baryerlər müəyyən edilmişdir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, dövlət təşviqləri investisiyalar üçün əlverişli mühitin yaradılmasında (məsələn, infrastruktur, təhsil və maliyyələşdirmə) əsas rol oynayır, QHT proqramları isə yerli səviyyədə potensialın artırılması və sosial kapitalın formalaşdırılması üzrə əlavə bir funksiyanı yerinə yetirir.

**Açar sözlər:** *İcma əsaslı turizm, kənd turizmi, gənclər və qadınlar, yerli icmalar, sahibkarlıq, Azərbaycan*

Redaksiya heyətinin üzvü i.e.d., prof. Həsənli Yadulla Həmdulla oğlunun rəyi əsasında çapa məsləhət görülmüşdür.