

Partnership for Change and Development in the Local Labour Market (*Partnerstvo za promjene i razvoj na lokalnom tržištu rada*)

Croatia - 2013-2015

Brand “zdravKA” – an innovative marketing strategy for strengthening women’s labour market chances in a rural area

Summary

Partnership for Change and Development in the Local Labour Market (*Partnerstvo za promjene i razvoj na lokalnom tržištu rada*) is a gender equality initiative aimed at increasing rural women’s participation in employment, launched in Croatia in 2013. It focused on unemployed women in a rural area of Karlovac County, one of the least developed counties in Croatia, with a very low employment rate.

The project, which was supported by the European Social Fund, was a joint effort of several organisations and stakeholders. It was led by the Women’s Group Karlovac “STEP” (Ženska grupa Karlovac “KORAK”) in partnership with Karlovac Natural Science High School, The Centre for Civil Initiatives, EKOP – Association of ecological producers of Karlovac County, and LAG – Local Action Group “Vallis Colapis”.

The project developed a tailor-made empowerment programme focused on enhancing women’s employability and entrepreneurial capacity. This was combined with an innovative marketing strategy for strengthening women’s labour market chances. A brand named “zdravKA” was developed which gathered a number of agricultural producers from the Karlovac County (from producer of fruits, honey, and hazelnuts to cow and goat cheese), and who benefited from joint marketing activities and joint selling points.

Project activities included the implementation of a tailor-made and local partnership approach to provision of agricultural training which has been strengthened by workshops, individual counselling and an entrepreneurship training based on the best practice of small entrepreneurial ventures.

62 women successfully completed the training and gained the knowledge and skills needed for (re)entering the labour market; structures for support to farmers and unemployed persons in entrepreneurial ventures were established; and a tailor-made model of support in entrepreneurship was defined and analysed, and information about it was disseminated. The project contributed to the promotion of women’s employment and increased their chances in employment and self-employment, in particular for long-term unemployed women facing social exclusion.

Women in rural areas

Croatia is one of the countries with the highest unemployment rate in the EU. The employment situation in the Karlovac County is even worse, and in particular for women. The majority of Karlovac County is rural and more economically undeveloped than the rest of the country. The GDP of Karlovac County is lower than the Croatian average and puts Karlovac County among the least developed counties. According to official data, the Karlovac County unemployment rate was 24.6% in comparison to the Croatian average of 18.8% in 2014. The share of women among the unemployed was 56.2%.

The labour market situation is extremely unfavourable for women. Besides the scarcity of employment opportunities experienced by men and women in Karlovac County, there is a strong traditional gender division of labour in private life which leaves women to bear most family responsibilities. Women are also heavily involved in domestic agricultural activity. However, this work remains largely invisible and is not viewed as important by family members or the wider community. Living in isolated, remote rural areas, far from administrative centres, also contributes to a severity in the gender discrimination experienced by women. These additional factors combine to leave women in this rural area distant from the labour market.

At the national and local levels there are many policies that focus on gender equality, employment, and poverty reduction. However, their implementation is far from satisfactory. There are few projects and initiatives to drive the implementation of such policies. Examples of such policy documents in Karlovac County include: The Human Resource Development (HRD) Strategy of Karlovac County, The Strategy for Employment of Women in Karlovac County, and The Development Strategy of Karlovac County. Partnership for Change and Development in the Local Labour Market was among the few projects developed to drive the implementation of the priorities set in these policy documents.

Empowering rural women

The Women's Group Karlovac "STEP" (Ženska grupa Karlovac "KORAK"), a non-governmental organization established by a group of women from Karlovac in 1998, decided to contribute to the employability and self-employment of unemployed women in Karlovac County by developing a programme focused on enhancing their skills and entrepreneurial capacity. The project addressed women trapped in poverty and social exclusion, and evolved around the concept of activation. Social inclusion through participation in the labour market and through developing economic and social skills was the main feature of the project. It focused on rural women with no chances to be otherwise successful in the labour market.

The specific objectives of Partnership for Change and Development in the Local Labour Market were to:

- Increase employability and self-employment of unemployed women in the Karlovac County by applying an innovative tailor-made empowerment programme focused on enhancing their skills and entrepreneurial capacity.
- Establish support structures for existing agricultural producers and unemployed persons for development of their small entrepreneurial ventures in agriculture based on partnership.

The project comprised several activities:

- Information about the project was spread through different channels (radio shows, commercials, leaflets, workshops). The beneficiaries of the project were women, and preference was given to long-term unemployed women, those currently involved in domestic agricultural production but whose products are not sold on the labour market, and those who had been assessed to have entrepreneurial capacities.
- Agricultural training, in areas such as fruit growing and cheese making/milk processing, and training on accounting for family farms was organised.
- Two study trips were organised to learn about good practices of agricultural producers. Workshops and individual counselling were held by job coaches where women learned about the functioning of the labour market and skills necessary to meet labour market challenges.
- Ten agricultural producers were selected to act as mentors to all women who finished agricultural trainings.
- A brand named "zdravKA" was developed, together with its official slogan and logo, followed by a marketing strategy and development plan. The joint marketing strategy included promotional materials (leaflets, roll-up banners, product labels, billboards, T-shirts, bags and cups) and a web page (<http://ledi.vallis-colapis.hr/zdravka/>) with the important information about the project, brand and producers themselves.

The project was innovative because it linked the goals of gender equality, social inclusion and entrepreneurship in the rural context, with a focus on long-term unemployed women as a disadvantaged group. It contributed to the support and promotion of women's employment and increased their chances of employment and self-employment. In this way, the project contributed to the social component set in the Karlovac County Human Resource Development Strategy through the implementation of a tailor-made and local partnership approach.

The gender dimension to the project included the specific focus on diverse channels of communication to draw in women who might otherwise have found it difficult to participate due to barriers from the strong

prevailing gender stereotyping and the expectations flowing from this. One of the shortcomings of the project was still the limited number of beneficiaries involved, and the small number of those who continue to work under the brand “zdravKA”. It is clear that the involvement of women in rural areas in which traditional gender roles are very strong is particularly difficult. Specific communication initiatives can assist in such a context.

The empowerment elements to the project were another important gender dimension. This was important in a context where a combination of the lack of skills needed to engage in (self)employment, the reluctance to take risks connected with entrepreneurship, a lack of motivation and insufficient self-esteem among women were barriers. A further gender dimension was the emergence of new role models for women, particularly from those participating in the new brand “zdravKA”.

Breaking into the labour market

The women gained knowledge and experience to assist them to become employed and/or to sell their products. This improves their economic and, most importantly, their social position. An economic contribution by women to their households is an important step in empowering women. 62 women participated and they all successfully completed the training and passed the exam. 28 women successfully finished training for the profession of fruit grower, 22 for milkmaids, and 12 for accounting in small farms. During the project 18 out of 62 (29%) women participants were employed. Without this project the women, mainly in the age group 30-50, would not had a chance to get additional and free training, that is so important for (re)entering the labour market.

The target group increased their technical capacities in fruit growing, cheese making/milk processing, accounting, job search, entrepreneurship, marketing and sales. They also improved their capacities in cooperation and development. The women improved their situation by gaining relevant knowledge, skills and support in order to be employed or to be self-employed. They can utilise and build on this knowledge and skills further, after the end of the project. They can also disseminate the information to other women in the areas in which they live.

Brand “zdravKA” involved 13 agricultural producers, out of which 4 were women, beneficiaries of the project, 5 were mentors involved in the project, and 4 were existing producers, members of the EKOP, the Association of ecological producers of Karlovac County, a partner organization in the project. Under the brand name of “zdravKA”, beneficiaries have the opportunity to expand their market and to sell their products at several stores in the Karlovac County. Through the kind of networking involved in this, beneficiaries can upgrade their entrepreneurial knowledge and can rely on assistance from experienced producers. With the brand name and image, organised joint marketing, sales under one name, they have more chances to develop their business and create new jobs.

While “Zdravka” is a Croatian female name, “zdrav” means healthy, and “KA” refers to Karlovac, which contributed to its visibility and recognition by the local community. Brand “ZdravKA” continues to operate, and they are trying to include new agricultural producers from the Karlovac County whilst they are currently negotiating with the City of Karlovac about financial support for the joint selling point.

According to the project's evaluation, beneficiaries were motivated by and satisfied with the programme. They were proactive in job searching. The empowerment programme was particularly welcomed. Participants found it useful in job searching and in everyday life. Beneficiaries stressed that the project helped them to positively evaluate their skills, which is a precondition for changing their unfavourable social position.

The leadership of a woman's organisation was important for the development of the project. The partnership developed between civil society organisations and public sector organisations was crucial to its success. A significant and secure source of funding in the European Social Fund was another important factor for success.

Small project - great learning potential

One of the main challenges was coordination between the partners involved, and in particular working on effective partnerships between civil society and the public sector. This is of importance, as cooperation between civil society and the state is, in general, poorly developed in Croatia. As the project engaged a number of partners, it demonstrated how joint actions can generate more comprehensive and cost-effective solutions. Although this was a major challenge, the work put in maintaining the close and effective partnerships brought results.

The particular situation and experience of rural women presented its own challenges. Strong traditional gendered roles are hard to break. Low self-esteem and lack of recognition are complex to address. It became obvious that more time was needed to confront these challenges and to develop the project in accordance with the individual situation of beneficiaries.

In spite of this, and the fact that it was a complex project to manage, Partnership for Change and Development in the Local Labour Market achieved significant change, not just for the women involved, but also for the wider community as it focused on the unfavourable social situation of women in Karlovac County. The project has demonstrated which types of activities are needed in order to improve the social situation of rural women. It can be replicated elsewhere, in particular because it is well documented and the experience of the partners involved is available to others. The project's success and impact was recognised by an external evaluator and by partner organizations.

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