

# UPORABA PRISTOPA SOCIALNEGA PODJETNIŠTVA ZA USTVARJANJE INOVATIVNIH EKO-SOCIALNIH INTERVENCIJ V KMETIJSTVU V SLOVENIJI: ŠTUDIJSKI PRIMER, PILOTNA RAZISKAVA

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**Povzetek:** Slovenija se sooča z vrsto problemov: družbeni, demografski, okoljski, ekonomski in kmetijski. S sintezo praks, ki so nekoč že obstajale na našem ozemlju (medgeneracijsko sodelovanje, zadružništvo), in z modernim pristopom lahko rešimo omenjene probleme. Zraven tega omogočamo nove možnosti razvoja podeželja in povečujemo uporabo novih poslovnih modelov, ki temeljijo na pristopu socialnega podjetništva. V tem prispevku predstavljamo pristop akcijske raziskave, učenja z delom, ki je podlaga za razvoj novih zaposlitvenih priložnosti. Akcijska raziskava temelji na prenosu znanja od starejših generacij na mlajše in implementaciji tega znanja v današnji čas, za reševanje problemov v družbi in okolju. Člani ekipe smo testirali projektno idejo s sodelovanjem v raziskovalnih aktivnostih in dobljeni rezultati nam bodo služili za nadaljnji razvoj ideje. Naš cilj je ustanoviti socialno podjetje, opolnomočiti ljudi za zaposlitev in omogočiti nove trajnostne razvojne možnosti na podeželskih območjih.

**Ključne besede:** akcijska raziskava, medgeneracijsko sodelovanje, socialno podjetništvo, ekološko kmetijstvo, trajnostni razvoj podeželja

## USING THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP APPROACH TO GENERATE INNOVATIVE ECO-SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS IN AGRICULTURE IN SLOVENIA: A CASE STUDY

**Abstract:** Slovenia's society is today facing a series of problems: social, demographic, environmental, economic and agronomic. With the synthesis of practices that once existed in our territory (intergenerational cooperation, cooperatives) and using modern approach those problems could be solved. Moreover, this would enable new possibilities for the development of rural areas and increase the use of new business models based on social entrepreneurship. In this paper, we are presenting the approach of participatory action research (PAR), learning

by doing, which is the foundation for the development of new employment opportunities. PAR research is based on the knowledge transfer from the older generations to younger and implementation of this knowledge in today's situation for solving problems in society and environment. Team members have tested project idea by participating in the research activities and obtained results that will serve for further development of idea. The goal is to establish a social enterprise, empower local people for employment and enable new sustainable development opportunities for rural areas.

**Key words:** participatory action research, intergenerational participation, social enterprise, organic agriculture, sustainable rural development.

## **1 Introduction**

We are introducing a pilot eco-social project that unites people with a desire for locally produced organic food. Idea is to connect elderly farm owners of uncultivated agricultural land and unemployed people in towns for cooperative food growing to improve their economic and social situation.

The aim of our project is to establish frame conditions for sustainable development in rural areas with intergenerational cooperation. With the cooperation we want to restore multipurpose organic farming which took place in the past. The knowledge transfer from older generations, who actively participated in these farming practices, to younger generations will empower people for employment and show participants new sustainable development opportunities in rural areas.

Through restoration of traditional multipurpose organic agriculture we will restore traditional landscapes and their economic and ecological functions with ecosystem services, which are foundation for organic agriculture. Through restoration of ecosystem services and traditional landscape elements we will enable the existence of endangered flora and fauna species in these landscapes.

With the method of participatory action research and social innovation we have tested our idea in real time. Main goal of idea is solving more problems together and enable new opportunities for rural development.

### **1.1 Problem**

First and most important problem is the social exclusion of people due to their low financial income and differences in these problems between countryside and towns.

Older people in the countryside possess agricultural land; due to their age they are unable to cultivate it alone. Consequently the land is not cultivated and they cannot get additional income which could improve their economic status.

Unemployed people in towns possess no arable land, but are willing to work and would like to grow food to improve their economic status. They cannot afford to buy expensive organic food and food represents a significant expense for a family budget.

This situation leads to low self-sufficiency with local food, overgrowing of landscape and disappearance of traditional landscapes.

Slovenia is losing traditional landscapes and landscape elements that are important for provision of ecosystem services. Organic agriculture depends on these ecosystem services. Demand for organic products is increasing in Slovenia and domestic farmers cannot grow as many organic products as demanded.

Slovenia does not cover all needs for agricultural production; there are negative demographic trends on countryside, land is being abandoned and young people do not see future in agriculture. They are losing traditional landscapes with their biodiversity and landscape diversity and knowledge how to preserve them.

### **1.2 Solution**

The solution is our pilot project, which connects unemployed people from the towns with the elderly owners of farms in rural areas for the purpose of cooperative growing of organic food.

The project will empower unemployed people for local organic food production on derelict land or overgrown areas. Elderly owners of agricultural land will establish new social contacts and transfer their knowledge of traditional farming practices to younger generations. With the establishment of an organized cooperative work in social enterprise one will enable new business opportunities in rural areas and improve economic and social status of participants.

This is a new approach on how to establish frame conditions for sustainable development in rural areas with new concepts for cooperation and a partnership including local people and it is in line with the emerging Green Economy concept supported by the EU policies.

Goals are not just solving economic and social problems but through restoration of traditional agriculture practices one will preserve functioning landscapes.

The present framework conditions in society are very suitable for implementation of this project, economic and social situation make people more receptive for new ideas.

## **2 Methods**

### **2.1 Action research method**

“If you want it done right, you may as well do it yourself.” (O’Brien, 1998)

Action research is “learning by doing” - a group of people identify a problem, do something to resolve it, see how successful their efforts were, and if not satisfied, they try again. It is used in real situations, rather than in contrived, experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems (O’Brien, 1998). It seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it (Baum et al, 2006).

Action research projects are generally situational unique, but there are elements in the methods that can be used by other researchers in different circumstances (O’Brien, 1998).

These included differences in perceptions of priorities between researchers and community members, dealing with community politics in the different communities involved in the study and resolving different ways in which researchers and communities might interpret new findings. (Baum et al, 2006).

#### **2.1.1 Participatory action research (PAR)**

PAR is approach to research. It is a set of principles and practices for originating, designing, conducting, analysing and acting on a piece of research (Pain et al, 2014). It is a methodology that promotes researchers to create partnerships with communities in order to promote positive social change. The advantages of PAR are that it is applied collaborative research created through use of a committed community (Allen et al, 2010). It is collaborative research, education and action used to gather information to use for change on social or environmental issues. It involves people who are concerned about or affected by an issue taking a leading role in producing and using knowledge about it (Pain et al, 2014). Furthermore, the topic of research originates from the community itself (Allen et al, 2010).

To gather and use information so that benefits come to the people it directly affects, PAR is used by a whole range of community groups and organisations (where people already know each other and/or work together), and also by groups that come together for the purposes of research and action on a particular issue (Pain et al, 2014). The reflective process is directly linked to action, influenced by understanding of history, culture, and local context and embedded in social relationships. The process should be empowering and lead to people having increased control over their lives. (Baum et al, 2006).

The PAR movement challenges the system of surveillance and knowledge control established through mainstream research. When communities seek control of research agendas, and seek to be active in research, they are establishing themselves as more powerful agents. (Baum et al, 2006).

It is often the case that those who apply this approach are practitioners who wish to improve understanding of their practice, social change activists trying to mount an action campaign, or, more likely, academics who have been invited into an organization (or other domain) by decision-makers aware of a problem requiring action research, but lacking the requisite methodological knowledge to deal with it (O’Brien, 1998).

Research in PAR typically goes through a cycle: Planning, Action, Reflection, Evaluation (Baum et al, 2006).

#### **2.1.2 Social innovation**

Social innovation consists of new ideas and solutions aiming to resolve social needs and problems. What is central to the concept is the involvement and empowerment of citizens (Science Communication Unit, 2014). Social entrepreneurs have as their central goal, societal impact, with capital wealth creation a secondary consideration. Success for social entrepreneurs is measured in the ability to innovate, facilitate and sustain positive changes and growth for a defined social problem (Allen et al, 2010).

Social innovation is a powerful and valuable tool in the environmental sector. It involves social groups and communities creating, developing and diffusing ideas and solutions to address pressing social needs. More recently, social innovation has been gaining policy attention, providing a means to stimulate new ideas that address complex issues alongside ensuring citizen participation. Due to its participatory and creative nature, it is well positioned to address environmental challenges, which are multifaceted and often require societal or behavioural shifts towards more sustainable options (Science Communication Unit, 2014).

### **2.1.3 PAR and social innovation**

As Allen et al (2010) said success of social entrepreneurs is measured in the ability to innovate. With citizens and society at its heart, social innovation is a collaborative and participative process, seeking to address the system rather than its separate parts (Science Communication Unit, 2014).

The concept of social entrepreneurship provides an additional framework for those engaging in applied research and provides a unique focus on innovation and adaptation, which is not necessarily stressed in PAR. Furthermore, social entrepreneurship follows a structured timeline, which includes amongst others, specific milestones indicative of project success. The presence of a timeline may be helpful when attempting to deal with one of the disadvantages of PAR (Allen et al, 2010).

## **3 Pilot project - PAR social innovation approach**

Idea, presented by Erjavec and Bizjak (2013) had to be tested in real time conditions. Team of institute decided for PAR approach. Since PAR is not method but approach to research it allows use of many different methods (Pain et al, 2014). It allows us to try and relay alternative knowledge and opinions; this is important in testing in real time, where unpredicted situations can occur and it is important to respond immediately for continuing of research.

This method allowed our team to acquire knowledge, experiences and results for improvement of our work. Further development of idea and work with participants in cooperation will be based upon PAR carried out in 2014 by members of institute.

Our PAR has timeline, which is growing season. In first growing season (2014) members of institute have tested idea and obtained results will serve for further development of idea and work on idea. Aim is to be prepared for next growing season, when we will work with participants. In 2015 we will establish cooperative growing between participants, so we need the experience that we will gain from our PAR.

PAR research is divided in two steps:

### **First step – first season**

PAR carried out by team in 2014

### **Second step – next season**

Intergenerational cooperative growing of food by participants in 2015

## **3.1 Planning**

Our plan was to establish cooperative growing by team in 2014 to see how our idea can be implemented in real time conditions and improve further work on idea in next season. Team wanted to identify the problems that may arise: the cooperation with the owner and how organic farming actually works in practice through season. Aim is to be a team with practical cooperative experiences and able to work in the field. We want to help people in organic farming, especially when, due to the nature of the work, the participants will not be able to do all the work at the optimum time (planting, harvesting).

Experiences in cooperation with owner are of great importance for earning confidence of people and providing help by problems that could occur during their collective work.

Pilot project was carried out with the purpose to discover all advantages and disadvantages of our idea for improvements in areas where problems occurred and gain confidence in our work. This will help team by work with participants in future.

### **3.1.1 Action**

We contacted the owner of a farm that used to have ecological agriculture, but due to the owner's lack of time (working) and the fact that farm is too small to have a decent living from organic agriculture as full time job, some parts of the land are not cultivated. This uncultivated land was given our team to work on.

Aim of established cooperation was to learn about:

- How team work is functioning,
- The process of growing plants through all season,
- Relations with owner and possible problems that may occur,
- Is it possible to make cooperative food growing as cheap as possible,
- Problems in organic agriculture that may occur during growing season.

During the action process we have made a diary of our work for reflection and evaluation of PAR approach.

### 3.1.2 Reflection

In agriculture harvest is dependent of nature. In year 2014 there was lot of rain: it prevented planting in the optimal time, work on field was regularly obstructed and growth of plants was not optimal as in normal weather conditions. Due to these problems harvest was not optimal.

This experience showed team that organization of work has to be improved. Team members have to take advantage of every opportunity to work in the field, because the wet soil obstructed or prevented work. When this was not done then, problems with weeds occurred that had negative impact on plant growth.

Establishing a friendship relation with owner is of great importance, especially trust between participants. If participants don't trust each other the cooperation will not work. Owner recognized our idea and it's potential, she helped team with advices and experiences from organic agriculture, what made field work easier and some problems were avoided. Team members got an insight into organic farming and first experiences from it.

Project budget was low income. Idea was to make field work as cheap as possible. It started with seeds and plants. Team members asked people for donations of plants and seeds; the result was planted field with no financial income. This showed that seeds and plants, which are available in stores are not better in quality than the ones which were donated to us. Owner borrows team members her tools for work in the field and there was no need for buying tools.

Current situation in Slovenia is also problematic; there is a lot of mistrust between people. So if we want to convince people to cooperate in our project, we must show them an example and the results.

## 4 Evaluation

PAR has shown to be the right approach for real time condition test of idea. It has shown to be necessary for further development of idea on the basis of obtained results. Team defined the main condition that must be achieved for successful cooperation between people and learn about problems.

The obtained results will improve idea implementation and served for the next growing season for improvement of our work and helping participants by their work.

Organization of work in the field is the most important; we have to organize it better. We have seen the problem in year 2014. At least once a week people must come to work in the field to make all necessary arrangements and to strengthen cooperation with owner. In the next season we have to improve organization of team members for work in the field and schedule the work for the proper cultivation and better harvest.

Team obtained a lot of information from owner about organic agriculture, which have helped us work in the field. This deepens relationship and leads to discussions about new possibilities for cooperative work on the farm.

If there are no funding options, it is still possible to do organic agriculture, obtain necessary plants and seeds that you need for the field.

Overall results for evaluation are that the PAR method has fulfilled expectations. Team members had acquired experiences for future work with participants and gained insight in what had to be improved.

This research is just one step towards our goal. This step is important for organizing work in the future. Team has shown what can be achieved and now we can show it to others. Promotion of results will serve as an example when approaching our potential partners in the cooperation.

The first step is done; now there are new challenges awaiting us.

## 5 Conclusion

PAR has shown to be the right approach to test the idea in real time conditions. It was necessary for gaining experiences, knowledge and reflection of work. Results will help us to improve our work in future.

It gave team confidence in continuing of work and enabled international promotion of the idea (Erjavec and Bizjak, 2014a, 2014b)

The presented social innovation is a new approach to solving existing problems in Slovenia and it was tested in real time conditions. With simple cooperation between generations for a common goal it is possible to solve more problems simultaneously and in a way that does not require large financial resources. This bottom up approach will enable new opportunities for rural development and can be implemented all over the world to improve the current situation of people and environment in which they live.

This is the first step toward establishment of social enterprise.

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