



VITALIZE RURAL REGIONS BY SENIOR CITIZENS – AN EU LEARNING PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

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The Grundtvig Learning Partnership VITALISE (2011-2013) provided the framework for an exchange of experiences and ideas on this topic between eight regions in Europe. The demographic trend in different rural areas in Europe and its consequences for European rural areas was identified as a common problem:

- Young people leave rural areas due to the lack of a sufficient number of well-paid workplaces
- Those who stay, have less children
- Life expectancy has been constantly and considerably increasing over the last decades; that has led to a growing number and proportion of elderly and old people.

The basic idea of this project was to discuss and exchange best-practice examples on the issue how adult education could support such activities by:

- offering workshops on developing new, unconventional ideas
- encouraging a sense of solidarity amongst local groups
- establishing social networks
- providing the necessary professional and managerial know-how to successfully implement the projects.

The demographic trend of an ever-increasing number of 50 year-olds and over on the one hand, coupled with a simultaneous “brain drain” of younger people on the other, is becoming more and more of a problem in many rural areas within Europe. On the background of this problem a crucial issue is what can be done to maintain the social, economic and cultural environment of a rural area which is worth living in, in country regions where there is an ageing yet at the same time a decreasing population. On the other hand the question is what can those older citizens do, who stay in these places out of choice and who are looking for opportunities for worthwhile, remunerative or voluntary employment. There is a significant number of older people in rural areas, who have neither type of employment, but who could play a crucial role in “revitalizing” the area in which they live. An answer to this challenge is to reactivate the idling resources of a region for example by:

- reviving old trades and services
- directing attention more to the cultural heritage and identity of a region
- creating opportunities for paid and voluntary work especially for senior citizens as a consequence.

This way, for example an old, disused village centre or church could be renovated and developed into a cultural centre with a café, exhibitions and a varied cultural programme. An old sports ground could be redeveloped or the local cultural heritage site could be researched and access for visitors and tourists improved.

As mentioned, the ever-increasing number of 50 year olds and over coupled with a simultaneous “brain drain” of younger people is becoming more and more of a problem in many rural areas within Europe. Within the partner regions the project VITALISE raised the awareness for the consequences of the demographic trends in rural areas in Europe with regard to the problem of how to maintain the technical, social and cultural infrastructure as well as – at the same time



– how to create meaningful employment for senior citizens. VITALISE drew the attention to the potentials and capacities senior citizens have and that they can be valorized and be made useful through different kinds of adult education activities.

Best-practice examples of adult education of eight different European regions were exchanged and made transferable to other rural regions in Europe. During the project VITALISE the learning partners presented to each other a wide range of best practice activities in the field of adult education for senior citizens, which were considered to be suitable for activating potentials and capacities of senior citizens in rural areas. As a main product of the VITALISE project these practical examples have been compiled and documented in a manual. (See the website www.vitalise-regions.eu) These practice proven examples can be transferred from one European region to another.

The best-practice examples are supposed to motivate adult educators in other European regions to consider the demographic trend not first of all as a problem but as a challenge to the adult education community with a lot of chances to be seized. The examples are to serve as an inspiration and as concrete models that can be transferred to and implemented in other rural European regions.

The following insights and conclusions the VITALISE learning partners have drawn from the project may help those who are interested and willing to do so:

- There are different conditions in cities and rural areas with regard to the quantity and quality of learning opportunities for elderly – unsurprisingly they exist in rural areas to a much lower extent than in urban areas.
- Women are usually more willing to participate in and join the senior education programs; and vice versa, it is more difficult to involve men in activities (it is crucial to meet their special interests).
- It is very difficult to obtain sufficient funding for senior education projects and, because of this, to ensure the sustainability of the activities.
- But, at the same time it is an important aspect of the education of seniors maintaining the continuity of the activities; the elderly need more routine and steadiness than younger people.
- Rural areas can quite often not be considered as ‘disadvantaged’ or even ‘backward’ areas. Hence, the learning opportunities here need to be as demanding as the ones in urban areas.
- The partners of the project had to face similar problems but differences exist especially regarding to a) financial support through the state, b) a top-down versus a bottom-up approach to education of the elderly
- A lot of the project partners will set 50+ people into the focus of their education activities.

The actual program included several visits to local sites. The group of participants stopped at the memorial place of the Pan European Picnic in Fertőrákos, (Hungary) where the Iron Curtain has been cut. Many of the Eastern-German citizens, tourists left through the border to West at this place in 1989. The other station of the mobile workshop has been in Győr city. In the building of the Regional Government of Győr-Sopron County the leaders of the government delivered an introduction on the social policy dealing with elderly people of the county. Márta Mészáros from the Széchenyi University gave a presentation on the activities of Senior University Győr. In Mezőörs Gyula Szabó the president of the Hungarian Workshop Foundation (HWF) made a presentation on the activities of the schools of HWF. The HWF contains a secondary school



and an elementary school plus adult education section connected to the rural development plan of the small region which is an underdeveloped district. János Sz. Tóth, the lecturer of the Budapest University has made an overview on the activities of the Hungarian Folk High School Society (HFHSS) dealing with elderly in the framework of Vitalize project and presented other similar activities of the members of HFHSS and number of important development projects concerning active ageing in Hungary.

The second Pannonian Excursion followed in Austria, visiting the Sculpture Park on the Hills of St. Margarethen, which was established in the 1960ies by the famous Burgenland artist Karl Prantl with artist from all over the world in protest against the Iron Curtain. By walking through this archaic landscape a few sculptures could be contemplated. Then the participants visited the Landart arbour in Oggau established by Heinz Bruckschwaiger, a well known artist and political activist in Burgenland, who himself an elderly person, was present at this occasion. After this visit they took part at a workshop at the „Werkstätte für Kunst im Leben“ in Müllendorf, where artists and members of a political platform worked with the participants, who were invited to paint their „vitalised land“ which became a highly appreciated action. The ‘Werkstätte für Kunst im Leben’, a long term partner of Europahaus can be seen as a model atelier led by elderly people to stimulate community life and regional projects often in cooperation with international artists. Finally, in the evening, plantings of trees, flowers, shrubs and bushes which were brought by the learning partners took place in the Cosmopolitan Garden – and in a midsummer party with picnic, open fire and the traditional Tamburizza music of the Burgenland Croats ended the meeting

What we have learned from the VITALISE Project

What can be observed in all partner regions of VITALISE is that three trends seem to be evident in the demographic development in rural areas in Europe:

- Young people leave rural areas due to the lack of a sufficient number of well-paid work places
- Those, who stay, have less children
- Life expectancy has been constantly and considerably increasing over the last decades; that has led to a growing number and proportion of elderly and old people. An ever-increasing number of 50 year olds and over coupled with a simultaneous “brain drain” of younger people is becoming more and more of a problem in many rural areas within Europe.

As a consequence of this development it is becoming more difficult not only to maintain the technical infrastructure in rural areas (maintenance of water/waste water system, streets and roads, etc) but also to continue to provide further the necessary social services (nursing stations, physicians, care centres for persons with disabilities, etc.). Many of the social services as well as the fire brigades in rural areas, sport clubs and cultural activities depend on the engagement of volunteer fire fighters, trainers, assistants and aides.

The question of the project VITALISE was how adult education could contribute in activating elderly people, their capacities and competencies in rural areas so that they themselves can engage in compensating for the menacing loss of the afore-mentioned services and contribute to maintaining worthwhile living standards in those rural areas with a negative demographic development. One of the most important insights the VITALISE project partners gained during the project is that elderly people cannot and may not be considered as people with ‘deficiencies’



who need instruction and training to deal/cope with the consequences and phenomena of an ever-changing and ever-more rapidly modernizing technical and social environment. This would wrongly lead to an understanding of the relationship between younger and older where the younger generation tells the older generation what to do and how to behave. On the contrary, it seems that the generation of the elderly of the second decade of the 21st century has gained a lot of competencies through formal and non-formal education. Elderly also have informally acquired capacities in the work place and private life during their lifetimes, which can be used for finding and implementing solutions for problems that arise from the consequences of the demographic trend in rural areas. For example, what was true 10 or 15 years ago, namely that the older are less (or not at all) competent when operating computers, it has completely changed. Growing parts of the current generation of elderly are well educated and meanwhile 'computer literate' as well as they are up-to-date regarding the requirements of life-style in a 'globalised world' to almost the same extent as the young generation. Besides, and this is something that cannot be underestimated, the elderly quite often have developed a network of relations (a 'social capital') during their working life which still exists after retirement and which can sometimes help to mobilize external resources and know-how. These two factors are extremely useful for voluntary work projects in rural areas, which would otherwise be unachievable.

Common results – outcomes and impacts

Within the partner regions the project VITALISE raises the awareness for the consequences of the demographic trends with regard to the problem of how to maintain the technical, social and cultural infrastructure as well as – at the same time - how to create meaningful employment for senior citizens. VITALISE draw the attention to the potentials and capacities senior citizens have and that they can be valorized and be made useful through different kinds of adult education activities.

The collected best-practice examples are supposed to motivate adult educators in other European regions to consider the demographic trend not first of all as a problem but as a challenge to the adult education community with a lot of chances to be seized. The examples are to serve as an inspiration and as concrete models that can be transferred to and implemented in other European regions. The following insights and conclusions the VITALISE learning partners have drawn from the project may help those who are interested and willing to do so:

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- But, at the same time it is an important aspect of the education of seniors maintaining the continuity of the activities; the elderly need more routine and steadiness than younger people.
- Rural areas can quite often not be considered as 'disadvantaged' or even 'backward' areas. Hence, the learning opportunities here need to be as demanding as the ones in urban areas.
- The partners of the project had to face similar problems but differences exist especially regarding to



- a) financial support through the state,
- b) a top-down versus a bottom-up approach to education of the elderly
- A lot of the project partners will set 50+ people into the focus of their education activities. A very fundamental finding of the VITALISE learning partners' discussions was that learning opportunities for elderly usually need not to be created from scratch. It is much more a matter of putting existing learning opportunities for adults in a new context where the specific learning needs of elderly are being considered.

Prospects

For future activities of adult education is, to make use of the potentials and capacities of elderly in rural areas with demographic problems. Future adult education activities in the framework of a European project could focus on

- making use of practical knowledge of elderly people
- transfer of ideas from rural areas into the cities (for example to promote 'urban gardening', expertise on how to keep local tradition alive)
- possible contributions of elderly to the social and cultural life and make use of their potential
- motivating and supporting young people to stay in rural areas
- Mini-farming. Important aspects that are worth taking into consideration:
- Open places for participation (Trentino/ Germany)
- The target group – elderly people 50+ - should remain in the focus of the activities.
- Learning opportunities could be specialized for men and women
- Information about 50+ activities should be more broadly spread through website, flyer, as well as through more communication between local and regional authorities
- The general approach to these target groups should be: not coming with a solution but let people find their own solution through setting up process that gives people access to discussion, participation and own self controlled activities.
- a lack of the distribution of information about the VITALISE to young generation (school, students and pupils) need to be tackled by an intergeneration knowledge transfer
- Similar problems in the partner countries are an opportunity/ chance to exchange experiences and knowledge – the exchange of best practice example save a lot of resources for daily work.

See more on the website of the project: www.vitalise-regions.eu

In Hungarian language you can find number of articles in the journal of MNT http://www.nepfoiskola.hu/mnt_ujzag-k2.html

Participating organisations in the project:

- Federazione Trentina della Cooperazione, Italy
- Fundación PAIDEIA Galiza, Spain
- Järva County Vocational Centre, Estonia
- Obrtnicko uciliste-ustanova za obrazovanje odrashlih, Croatia
- Europahaus Burgenland, Austria
- Akademia vzdelávania, Slovakia
- Magyar Népfőiskolai Társaság, Hungary
- Bildungshaus Zeppelin – Heimvolkshochschule Goslar, Germany

