

Rural 3.0: Service-learning for the rural development. The case study of Croatia.

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Abstract

Rural 3.0 Knowledge Alliance intends to bring together higher education institutions (HEIs) and rural partners (LAGs or NGOs) to create a transnational curriculum based on the innovative Service-Learning (SL) approach that offers university students academic credit for the learning that derives from engagement within a rural community. Three separate surveys were conducted in April and May 2019 in Croatia to reveal the needs and gaps of the main target groups: university students for rural community partners' organizations and their beneficiaries. All examined students were very motivated for rural SL and volitional for increasing competences for entrepreneurship. LAGs/rural NGOs in Croatia pointed out three biggest challenges for the future: the **insufficient human capacities** induced mostly by **difficulties in funding sources** which reflects on the **development and implementation of new projects**. Croatian LAGs and rural NGOs are supportive of rural SL and inclusion of students into the work of their organization. The local community of LAG 5 area had no experience with SL. The older population recognizes a great opportunity to get support in meeting basic living needs and everyday activities, while younger population shows a great interest in engaging students in the quality improvement of the tourist and cultural sector. It is essential to increase the relevance of HEIs in rural development, as students aim to fulfil a service that is in line with the demands of the businesses and social needs in rural areas. That could give an additional boost and support to the LEADER program and implementation of CLLD strategy. The innovative SL methodology could improve the quality of education for sustainable development and promote university-community partnerships in rural areas.

Introduction

Rural 3.0 ERASMUS+ Knowledge Alliance aims to set a framework for an integrated transnational approach of academic teaching and learning that contributes to the development of rural residents, meeting their needs through an innovative methodology. It will build on the knowledge of rural service-learning (SL) models and infrastructures to support their implementation through the active collaboration between HEIs and community partners, among which the most numerous are Local Action Groups (LAGs). LAGs initiatives in Croatia carried out as part of the LEADER program help the development of rural areas with supporting projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalize the rural environment and create jobs. Unfortunately, university students are not actively encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to contribute to the improvement of rural communities. Service-learning as a pedagogical approach offers students academic credit for the learning that derives from active engagement within the local community and work on a real-world problem.



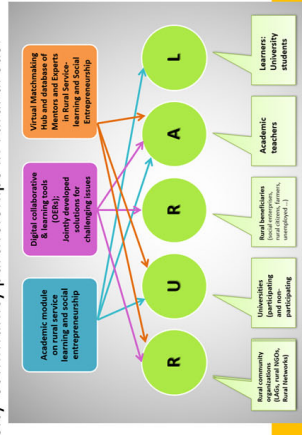
Figure 1. LAG 5 area.

Material and methods

For the purpose of identifying the needs and gaps of the main target groups, 3 different surveys were conducted during April and May 2019:

- a) needs of community organizations (Local Action Groups - LAGs and rural NGOs);
- b) needs of the beneficiaries of LAG 5 (e.g. local farmers, retired, rural housewives, rural entrepreneurs and social businesses), and
- c) needs and competencies of university students.

The list of questions was created to be used as an online survey or used as an interview /focus group guide. The online survey is a part of Virtual HUB where community groups and higher education institutions can find each other to collaborate on Service-Learning (SL) and/or Social Entrepreneurship (SE) (<http://beta.ffzg.hr/ruralhub/Survey/LAG>). LAGs/rural NGOs and rural beneficiaries of LAG 5 had to describe the domain, focus area and rural development priorities for their organization/community as well as study fields that would be helpful to cope with their challenges.



Results and discussion

LAGs/rural NGOs covered by this research come from different parts of the Republic of Croatia with different experiences in cooperation with higher education institutions (HEI). Mostly, this cooperation is based on the implementation of joint projects from different fields of applied science where LAGs provide local support for HEI. Many LAGs carry out education or work assignments at local primary or secondary schools. The three biggest challenges for LAGs in Croatia are the insufficient human capacities induced mostly by difficulties in funding sources which reflects on the development and implementation of new projects. Croatian LAGs have shown interest in SL where students could participate in the day-to-day activities, from general affairs to the preparation and implementation of various development projects. Inclusion of students into the work of the association is more than welcome and each LAGs can offer good working conditions and several hours of mentoring. The list of study fields that would be helpful to cope with LAGs challenges are shown in Table 1.

The local population from LAG 5 area covered by this research had no experience with SL. Respondents are mostly farmers, pensioners, and housewives over 50 years old. Their interest in SL is largely tied to meeting basic living needs and closely related to everyday activities such as primary and specialist health care or education and help in agriculture work. Younger respondents (less than 50 years old) come from the cultural and tourism sectors that reflect their needs too. The results obtained through interviews or focus groups with the local population (mainly from the Pelješac peninsula and the island of Mljet) are presented in Figure 2.

Table 1. Study fields represented in more than 10% of the LAGs/rural NGOs surveyed (N=20). The fields of study are listed in alphabetical order and not in order of importance.

Accounting and taxation	Architecture and town planning	Audio-visual techniques and media production
Biochemistry	Biology	Business administration
Computer use	Database and network design and administration	Economics
Education science	Electronics and automation	Environmental protection technology
Environmental sciences	Fabrics, textile and industrial design	Finance, banking and insurance
Fisheries	Food processing	Forestry
Handicrafts	History and archaeology	Horticulture
Hotel, restaurants and catering	Journalism and reporting	Language acquisition
Law	Management and administration	Marketing and advertising
Mathematics	Natural environment and wildlife	Political sciences and civics
Secretarial and office work	Sociology and cultural studies	Software and applications development and analysis
Sports	Teacher training with subject specialisation	Travel, tourism and leisure
Vegetary	Work skills	Other

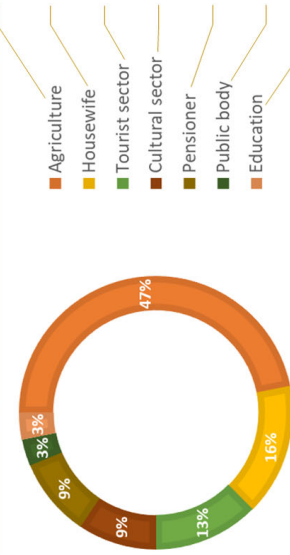


Figure 2. Structure of stakeholders covered by the survey and their interests for SL implementation at LAG 5 area (N=31)

Building and civil engineering, Business administration, Computer science and information systems, Design, Economics, Engineering, Environmental sciences, Food processing, Health sciences, Humanities, Law, Life sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Natural environment and wildlife, Physical sciences and civics, Social sciences, Technology, Veterinary, Work skills.

Art and design, Business administration, Economics, Engineering, Environmental sciences, Food processing, Health sciences, Humanities, Law, Life sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Natural environment and wildlife, Physical sciences and civics, Social sciences, Technology, Veterinary, Work skills.

Business administration, Economics, Engineering, Environmental sciences, Food processing, Health sciences, Humanities, Law, Life sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Natural environment and wildlife, Physical sciences and civics, Social sciences, Technology, Veterinary, Work skills.

Business administration, Economics, Engineering, Environmental sciences, Food processing, Health sciences, Humanities, Law, Life sciences, Medicine, Mathematics, Natural environment and wildlife, Physical sciences and civics, Social sciences, Technology, Veterinary, Work skills.

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Conclusions

Not a single Croatian university offers a curriculum that includes rural service-learning because such a curriculum would require collaboration between different (and sometimes remote) stakeholders and teaching/learning context much more demanding than urban context. Higher education should respond to these challenges. Innovation in education and strengthening of social capital are important development need and potential of all Croatian rural areas. LAGs and rural actors should benefit from the community-university partnerships, leveraging and increasing the social capital in the community and implementing innovative models for funding and empowerment to the existing LEADER approach.

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