

Friuli Venezia Giulia, Italy



Study Circles - fostering local development



Keyword(s):

Community Education

Participation

Local and Regional Development

Introduction

The good practice presented here concerns the implementation of the study circles non-formal education model, typical of adult learning, in the context of local development strategies as an innovative learning method able to improve the quality of life of people and to promote the full right of citizenship by stimulating pro-activity and participation.

Operations started with a pilot initiative led by Enfap FVG in the cross-border area Italy-Slovenia and were followed by a wider dissemination in Friuli Venezia Giulia through specific initiatives that concerned the training of the innovative professional profile of the study circle mentor and the implementation of training activities.

The study circles methodology has been curved in order to match local development needs, involving as main promoters training agencies, local development agencies, but also municipalities, businesses, associations. The intent was to enhance each partner role and competence with respect to the main pillars for the functioning of the system that are: training needs analysis through the involvement of stakeholders, stimulation of the educational demand, training of mentors/tutors as facilitators in the learning relationship, planning and management of educational activities.

This type of contextualization made it possible to maximize the potential of the training methodology by favoring experiential and collective learning on concrete issues of community relevance calling participants to action.

Priority themes concerned sustainable development, the enhancement of natural heritage, historical and cultural heritage, the recovery of local knowledge and identity values as key elements for the qualification of the tourist offer and marketing initiatives in the area.

Main challenge

The overall vision lies at the crossroads between training/education and territorial development and responds to two types of needs:

- the recent changes that the teaching professions are going through following the principles of Lifelong learning which highlight the role of the facilitator of active learning processes with a view to promote the right of the person to the realization of his potential in the different personal, social, work dimensions
- the need expressed by local development actors to promote a flexible, personalized training offer shaped around the needs of the territory and local development strategies in order to activate human capital
- the widespread need to promote collaborative dynamics among local actors and citizens enabling them to develop new shared knowledge through investigation of local problems and finding of creative solutions.

Timing

The initiative fully harmonised with the setting up of the new lifelong learning territorial system at national and regional level operated in the last decade.

Objective

The main goal was to research, design, experience and promote the model of study circles for local development based on a participative architecture.

The model proposed fosters an integrated approach to local development with reference to the principles of endogenous and sustainable development, based on the enhancement of local specificities and knowledge and on the involvement of participants as actors of change.

Target group

The initiative involved vocational training agencies, local development agencies/institutions as promoters, and local operators, entrepreneurs, citizens willing to increase their knowledge concerning specific relevant issues for their communities.

Geographical range

The project was implemented as a pilot action between 2011 and 2014 in the following geographical areas: Eastern Veneto, Torre and Natisone Valleys, Collio and Carso in Friuli Venezia Giulia, on the Italian side, Upper Soča Valley, Municipality of Kanal, Collio and hilly area around Nova Gorica on the Slovenian side.

The mainstreaming action, after the conclusion of the project unfolded between 2015 and 2019 at regional level by the initiative of the regional administration of Friuli Venezia Giulia with the involvement of vocational training agencies and local partners.

Stakeholders and partners

The project partnerships represent a distinctive element of the study circle model and were implemented at each study circle level.

The following type of actors were involved in the partnerships for the needs analysis and promotion of the initiatives: municipalities, schools, associations, business realities, thus highlighting a very rich fabric of relationships and representing an element of great importance for the success of the initiatives.

People joining study circles were also highly diversified in terms of age, working conditions, education, etc. representatives of business associations, operators in the tourism sector, members of the voluntary sector, active citizens involved in the promotion of the territory, young people interested in new employment opportunities through the development of the territory and its resources.

In the study circles' model for local development the building of the network of intermediary subjects on the territory (development agencies, associations, institutions, economic operators) is a fundamental system element for the detection of priorities and analysis of needs, but also for the involvement of final beneficiaries, the solicitation of the training demand and the planning of the educational activities.

The pilot projects itself and the following mainstream initiatives implemented at regional level incorporated it also reflecting the new vision of the legislator concerning territorial networks for lifelong learning.

Strategy / materials

The pilot initiative concerning the design and testing of the model was implemented in the framework of the Territorial cooperation Programme Italy Slovenia 2007-2014 producing as a main final output the document Guidelines for the building up of the system.

In the mainstream phase the following strategy and tools were set up at regional Friuli Venezia Giulia level:

- ESF funding from the FVG Region, which has implemented specific programs 31/15 (mentor training), 77/17 and 77/18 for the activation of study circles related to local development priorities (green economy, sustainable tourism, enhancement of typicality, new business initiatives...)

allocating funds for the following initiatives:

- n.2 training courses for study circle mentors
- inclusion in the regional repertoire of the professional qualifier related to the planning and guidance of a study circle
- financing of about twenty study groups promoted in the various provinces of the regional territory by 7 accredited training bodies.

The synergy between ESF funding and local development strategies referring to Rural Development Plan also deserves mention in the context due to specific cooperation agreements signed between Enfap FVG and local action groups (LAG).

Communication has a very important role in the study circles for local development participatory model and was implemented at different levels involving at different levels the promoting agencies, local stakeholders and final beneficiaries, that is study circles participants.

As local stakeholders were involved in the promotion initiatives held at local level to detect existing educational needs and involve the final beneficiaries, within each study circle participants were invited to define besides a shared learning goal an action/ promotional goal in order to share the acquired knowledge at community level.

Communication material produced for the dissemination of the initiative included a web site (which was active during the pilot action) together with posters, leaflets, and videos published on you tube (L'apprendimento collettivo nell'area

transfrontaliera Italia-Slovenia), the official guidelines of the project and made available in Italian and Slovene language:

- Galeotti, G. [et al.] (2014). Linee guida per la costruzione del sistema transfrontaliero dei Circoli di Studio - Smernice za vzpostavitev čezmejnega sistema študijskih krožkov. [Guidelines for the construction of the cross-border study circles system]. Venezia: Comitato regionale dell'ENFAP del Friuli Venezia Giulia.

Scientific articles and a book were also produced in English language by the project experts :

- Unesco Chair of the University of Florence and Andragoski Center Center Slovenjie in English.
- Aa.Vv. Lifelong learning devices for sustainable local development – The study circles experience in the crossborder area Italy-Slovenia A cura di: N. Bogataj, G. Del Gobbo , ETS Pisa 2015.

Besides, many study circles produced their own promotional materials (small books, leaflets, exhibitions).

The study circles methodology is known for being highly inclusive and this characteristic permeated all the project's initiatives.

The study circles' learning environment, if accurately prepared and conducted, helps people feel comfortable and express themselves freely responding to the need for a better quality of life that is widespread in our society.

Building a dialogue between different types of knowledge, enriching and qualifying each person's knowledge through confrontation and joint investigation, while contributing to shared action goals is a challenge that fosters the growth of a full and responsible citizenship.

Resources

-

Compliance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

As already stated, the strategy underlying the study circles for local development model is fully aligned with the Agenda 2030 main goals.

Innovation(s)

The strategy proposed is innovative if we consider in particular the dimension of social innovation.

Through the study circles model for local development, it is aimed to respond to identified social needs fostering new relations and collaborations while increasing the potential for new actions/initiatives to undertake to the benefit of the community.

The following distinguishing elements of the methodology deserve mention in this respect:

- Demand driven approach
- It is inclusive, accessible, no need for heavy infrastructure
- Participatory approach to knowledge elaboration and exchange
- Freedom of decision stimulating creative solutions and innovation
- The learning process is related to personal commitment and direct experience of concrete issues
- Community dimension of knowledge supporting network creation
- Strengthening of local identity and relations
- Action goal: Educational gains are preferably concrete outputs to share at community level

Evaluation

At the base of the model lies a principle of sustainability: environmental, social, institutional and economic, educational.

A concrete element that interweaves these different levels is the training pact between various local players (local authorities, training bodies and development agencies) with the aim of promoting lifelong learning networks to support endogenous development, enhancing non-formal adult education methods, always within a local lifelong learning system.

The evaluation of the initiative is carried out taking into account all the above-mentioned dimensions.

In the study circles model for local development, evaluation concerns the effectiveness in activating human and social capital and is carried out through a shared process with the contribution of participants, mentors, organizers, local community, assuming that the more it is integrated, the more it helps the group to grow.

The activities of monitoring and evaluation have a predominant connotation of self-evaluation and self-analysis of the learning process, of the projects developed/products realized, of the set of relationships established within the group and with the local community.

Success parameters

-

Impact

Regarding the impact of the overall initiative at regional level for participants and promoting organizations the following elements were reported by the interviewed promoting organizations:

- the setting up of new relationships and an increased ability to share knowledge, goals and work in a network
- the activation, particularly in the internal areas, of stakeholders and actors crucial for development and social innovation in a marginal context (schools, associations, municipalities, tourism operators..)
- the development of project ideas and the start-up of micro-entrepreneurship both at the individual level and in networks with other companies
- the identification and activation of funding to support network projects.

Impediments

The main challenge concerned the incorporation of the study circles for local development model into the local lifelong learning system.

How did you manage to overcome them?

Through the design of a specific training programme for mentors and the activation of specific funding although on a temporary basis.

Replicability

The model developed so far undoubtedly represents a solid starting point at scientific and methodological level exposing concrete examples of application, but it can further grow and contaminate itself by incorporating new tools and technologies (see for example online tools to support classroom training).

What are the conditions that should be met by any other organization to adapt/replicate such a strategy?

Essential elements for its sustainability are:

- its recognition in the contexts that are most appropriate, such as the development of learning communities, the self-organization of territories, the creation of networks
- a stable framework and financing for its implementation

The following pre-conditions should be guaranteed:

- The study circles mentor's profile should be officially recognized through provision of adequate training,
- A collaboration framework between a training agency and a local institution/organization dealing with local development issues should also be provided

Concluding remarks

Looking at the new programming period of the Structural Funds we point out that the lifelong learning model of study circles for local development naturally integrates to CLLD management (local development of participatory type) allowing to connect different strategic themes of the new programming period with an inclusive logic.

The study circles model feeds the creation of a learning community by promoting the exchange of knowledge (database of local knowledge) and helping to strengthen the social capital in order to support local development strategies.

Website/Social Media profile(s) of the initiative

-

Contact details

Elena Slanisca

Ufficio Progetti

Enfap FVG – sede di Gorizia

Tel. 0481-533148

slanisca@enfap.fvg.it

eslanisca@gmail.com

Contributor	Elena Slanisca, project manager, Enfap Friuli Venezia Giulia Region -FVG
Researcher/interviewer	
Date of documentation	
Fotos/illustrations	istock.com/bodrumsurf; istock.com/acob Ammentorp Lund