12. Promoting economic and social empowerment among rural women in south-eastern Serbia

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Unemployment among rural women in south-eastern Serbia is high

In remote rural areas of Serbia, especially in the south-eastern part of the country, there are significant differences in unemployment rates between cities and rural areas and between men and women, which result in high poverty rates in some areas. The Western Balkans is a priority region for Slovenian development co-operation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs uses development aid as an opportunity to reach those left behind. One of the criteria of the Ministry for projects in partner countries is that they should take a Human Rights-based Approach (HRBA), including to women's rights and equal opportunities. The Ministry issues tenders for projects, indicating that proposals should pay special attention to addressing the needs of vulnerable groups.

Promoting women's employment through training, raising awareness and networking

The Ministry leaves options for project design fairly open. The project in south-eastern Serbia was selected because it identified the problem of unemployment among women and set out solutions. The project, led by Slovenian NGO, Caritas Slovenia and involving a local partner, Caritas Beogradske Nadbiskupije, interviewed unemployed women of different ages, nationalities and levels of education in order to come up with practical solutions. The project also involved four municipalities and local offices of employment in identifying the problems and practical solutions. The inclusive approach meant that all the local actors co-operated closely. A total of 240 unemployed women participated in the project.

The project provided practical knowledge, raised the awareness of women of their rights, imparted soft skills, and encouraged networking and peer learning. Most importantly, the project guided women towards providing products and services that do not require significant investment and for which there is sufficient demand (e.g. agricultural products and services, and home care). The project also combined the Ministry's grant with local authorities' funds for the best business ideas.

Correctly identifying beneficiaries and involving them and other relevant stakeholders in planning promoted local ownership

Key success factors were, firstly, precisely and inclusively identifying the problems faced by a marginalised group in an otherwise relatively well-developed partner country. Secondly, including beneficiaries and other relevant stakeholders in the first stages of planning. Thirdly, the constructive co-operation of local authorities, such as by providing

additional finance, which assured local ownership. Fourthly, offering practical solutions and, lastly, ensuring a critical mass of beneficiaries by working in four municipalities. It was also vitally important to work with local institutions that had sufficient capacity to provide institutional support and take an active role. By providing practical guides and a casebook on starting a business, and by developing educational programmes for adults and awarding micro-finance to best business ideas to start or upgrade women's small businesses, the project was designed to have a sustainable impact on reducing poverty among participants and future generations.

What next?

The know-how acquired in implementing the project will be applied in other similar rural environments. In the current project the local market is limited, presenting boundaries to the expansion of businesses set up during the project. Providing additional expertise in business skills, and financing opportunities for marketing and business expansion, would add value to the project results.

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