



CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

Example of Good Practice

April 2020

Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics, Rural and Mountain Research & Regional Management of the Metropolitan Area of Styria

Theresia Oedl-Wieser and Kerstin Hausegger-Nestelberger

theresia.oedl-wieser@bab.gv.at

WWW 4.0 – Mit Weitblick Weiblich Wirtschaften

Living Lab Metropolitan Area of Styria, Austria

Key words: business women, rural entrepreneurship, cooperation, networking, synergies

1. Introduction

The initiative “WWW 4.0” is an acronym for the German project title “Mit **W**eitblick **W**eiblich **W**irtschaften” which means literally “Female businesses with foresight”. The aim of this initiative is to build a cooperative of self-employed women and female start-ups in rural areas. It started in December 2018 in the district of Voitsberg, which represents the western part of the Metropolitan Area of Styria (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Maps of the Province of Styria and the Metropolitan Area of Styria



Source: Land Steiermark & RMSZR and BAB, 2019



The district of Voitsberg comprises 15 municipalities and is located about 40 km west of the City of Graz. In addition to the district capital town Voitsberg with 9.385 inhabitants, the small towns Köflach (9,872 inhabitants) and Bärnbach (5,644) are the regional centers of the district. The other communities are very rural.

Figure 2: Municipality Voitsberg in the Metropolitan Area of Styria – 40 km west of the City of Graz



Source: Google Map, 2020

For many years there has also been a continuous loss of population including many young people, especially in the remoter parts of the district. There are also many daily commuters to Graz as well as to the surrounding municipalities and small cities of the Metropolitan Area.

The project WWW 4.0 is supported by two organisations, on the one hand by the "akzente" association, which is located in Voitsberg and on the other hand by the "Ländliches Fortbildungsinstitut" – literally called "Agricultural Training Institute". "akzente" is a regional nonprofit organisation, that works for equality between women and men and is working towards its leading objective of supporting the image of a gender democratic society in all its activities. The Agricultural Training Institute provides formation and training for farmers, farm women and in general for people in rural areas.

These two partners are coordinating the project and are supportive in organisational matters. akzente sees itself as a platform or hub for the participating economically active women. Their role within the cooperative is to stimulate and coordinate the underlying processes while the project implementation is carried out by the economically active women themselves.

The aspiration for networking and cooperation between the participants within the project WWW 4.0 is intended to foster knowledge sharing, mutual support and synergies due to multi-sectoral occupations of the participating women. During the first meetings of the project the participants formulated these mottos to characterize the main thrust of their cooperative action, including the following three slogans (see also Figure 3):

- Success gets bigger when it is shared by women.
- Committed to the region - grow beyond.
- Together we create space for the essential things.

Figure 3: The slogans of WWW 4.0



Source: akzente 2019

2. Project Intention / Background information

The team of WWW 4.0 took part in the call "FRAUEN.LEBEN.REGIONEN" (Women.Life.Regions)¹ in 2018 offered by the Styrian provincial government. The project WWW 4.0 was selected for funding and received 70% of the total project budget. The remaining 30% are financed from the regional budget of the Metropolitan Area of Styria.

On that account, the project could start in December 2018. At the beginning research on data, facts and framework conditions were carried out concerning existing cooperation and relevant cooperatives in the rural region. Furthermore, discussions were held with experts and stakeholders on the situation of economically active women in the region. Finally, around 50 interviews with self-employed women, female entrepreneurs as well as female farmers were conducted in order to get an overview of the situation in Voitsberg and the western part of the district Graz-Umgebung. The interview questionnaire included questions dealing with challenges for self-employment, additional support for entrepreneurs and start-ups and ideas for cooperation with other economically active women. In the meantime, women participating in the cooperative started to organize thematic meetings and trainings in the field of social media.

¹ The call "Women.Life.Regions 2018" should help to do justice to the diverse life models of women, to positively influence framework conditions worth living at regional level, to establish more diverse development and future perspectives, to reduce income inequality and to integrate women into society and politics to improve in the Styrian regions.

3. Main Description

The intentions of the project WWW 4.0 are quite divergent and cover different aspects: An important aspect is the aim to make the existing economic potential of women in rural regions visible. From a gender equality perspective, the networking of economically active women in the region and their cooperation should be supported. Having made the hidden potential accessible, WWW 4.0 is intended to bundle the female innovative power in the region so that it can be used in a targeted manner in the future.

The idea of enhancing cooperative action of economically active women is based on concentric circles. In the innermost circle, the participating women work together very intensively and actively, in the second circle they take part in events and exchange ideas. In the third circle there is a loose docking without obligations. It is important that moving between the circles is possible and that there are different levels of participation and cooperation.

The women who participate in the cooperative come from different professions: artisans, service providers, cosmetics producers, etc. It is a major concern of the project organisers “akzente” and “Agricultural Training Institute” that the focus is on female-related sectors such as nutrition, art, food production, fashion, health and other services are taken into account, and related support is provided. Special attention is given to agriculture since it is becoming increasingly difficult to generate a main income from this sector. The aim is to develop the cooperative into an independent hub for female entrepreneurs and women on their way to self-employment. Furthermore, the cooperative should serve as a platform for innovative business ideas. The following narrative illustrates how this could work in practice (see box 1):

Box 1

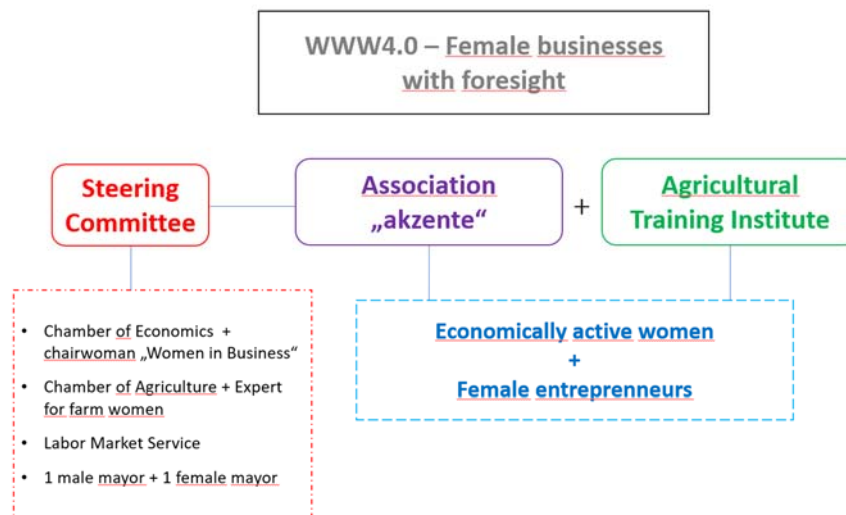
Renate is a farmer from the remote part of the district of Voitsberg. Among other farming activities, she is fond of cultivating herbs on her farm. *Marlene* is self-employed and produces cosmetics. The two met at a meeting of WWW 4.0 and decided to cooperate. Together they developed a new cosmetics product line. They got to know *Sylvia*, who runs an impressive web shop, and the photographer *Karin* who takes professional pictures of her new cosmetic products so that they can be offered in *Sylvia*'s web shop. As part of the WWW 4.0 cooperative, they also came into contact with the accountant *Ingrid* who offers tax advice for their activities and products.

Source: Interview, 18th March 2020

As part of the project, numerous existing and operating institutions in the region are involved as partners or advisors. Both the regional office of the Chamber of Commerce (regional office manager, district chairwoman “Woman in Business”) and of the Chamber of Agriculture (chamber secretary, expert for farm women) as well as the regional Labor Market Service

(office manager) are on the advisory board, together with two mayors (one male and one female) and one representative from “akzente” (see Graph 2).

Figure 4: Organisation chart of WWW 4.0



Source: BAB 2020

The cooperation between the various institutions is working very well. It is based on a high level of mutual trust. Within the WWW 4.0 project a cooperative will be built and existing initiatives and networks (“Women in Business”) will be linked up. The further development is characterised by the greater commitment for the cooperative and for the concrete cooperation between the women involved.

Thus, the goal is that economically active women in rural areas can jointly develop and advertise their products and services. Many expectations are attached to the project in the sense of:

- Establishing a cooperative to combine the innovative power of economically active women in rural areas and therefore, to develop competitive and marketable products and services.
- Creating employment that provides an adequate livelihood - self-employed and employed activities - for women in the region.
- Further development of regional value chains in feminine connoted business areas.
- Creation of inspiration for cooperative work and a framework for innovative cooperation between micro and small business owners in rural areas.
- Supporting female entrepreneurs and female farmers on their way to self-employment.
- Creating a network for knowledge sharing, pooling of resources and mutual empowerment.

Figure 5: Invitation to the “WWWorkshop for inexperienced entrepreneurs”



Source: akzente, <https://www.facebook.com/WeitblickWeiblichWirtschaften/>

As example of a main activity of WWW 4.0 in the year 2020, the invitation to the workshops which provides knowledge and training in the field of social media, is shown in figure 2 and will be briefly explained (see box 2). The workshop aims to support female farmers and entrepreneurs as well as women on their way to self-employment.

Box 2

“My company online - The WWWorkshop for inexperienced entrepreneurs” for farm women, female entrepreneurs and women on their way to self-employment (monthly in 2020)

The content of the practical WWWorkshop is ...

- How to present your business online,
- How to professionally manage various social media channels and
- What tools can make your work easier

You can expect ...

- Personal meetings (1x per month) with theoretical input, practical exercises and the
- Possibility to ask questions,
- Specific tasks for at home,
- Accompanying coaching via the WWW 4.0 Facebook group,
- Exchange knowledge with other women entrepreneurs and farm women.



The project WWW 4.0 can be seen as a good practice example in the sense of its multi-dimensional structure and its creative regional impact. It can be characterised as an instructive example of social innovation in this region. Social innovation can be defined as “... the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors” (SIMRA 2017, 6). WWW 4.0 fulfills these aspects by addressing economic, social and demographic challenges, increasing the power of “weak” members of the rural society, increasing networking of and cooperation between business women and strengthening their entrepreneurial knowledge. In a medium-term perspective WWW 4.0 will also contribute to rural-urban interaction because developed products and services within this project will be also be available in Graz and surrounding smaller towns.

4. References

Amt der Steiermärkischen Landesregierung (2018) FRAUEN.LEBEN.REGIONEN. Call 2018. Richtlinie des Landes Steiermark zur Förderung integrierter Regionalentwicklung mit den Schwerpunkten Regionalmanagement, Regionalentwicklungsprojekte und Beteiligungsprozesse (Lokale Agenda 21). Graz.

Google Maps 2020.

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Gemeinde+Voitsberg/@47.0343967,15.2211651,10.92z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x476e2cb242d7db05:0xa76c2018acc1fa7f!8m2!3d47.0504!4d15.14661> (22.04.2020).

SIMRA (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) (2017) Transdisciplinary understanding of Social Innovation in MRAs. Report D2.2. H2020 project, Grant No. 677622. http://www.simra-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/SIMRA_D2_2_Transdisciplinary_understanding_of_SI_in_MRAs.pdf (25.03.2020).

Interviews:

Interview with Claudia Wagner and Astrid Kniendl, Head of akzente Hand:WERK and, respectively employee of akzente, on 3rd July 2019.

Telephone interview with Claudia Wagner and Dorothea Sauer, Head of akzente Hand:WERK and Head of akzente, on 18th March 2020.

Links:

<https://www.akzente.or.at/projekte/www-4-0/> (20.03.2020)

