



LEADING YOUTH OUT OF UNEMPLOYMENT?

Applying the Opportunity Group Approach in Kosovo

Youth unemployment is a global challenge and a variety of approaches have been tested to address the issue. In the Eastern European country of Kosovo, the Skills for Rural Employment (S4RE) project applies the opportunity group approach to help young people in geographically remote areas find a way into wage- or self-employment. As opposed to conventional training methods, the facilitator of the approach helps young people identify the skills they lack to have a fruitful career. He or she then helps them organize their own skills training, find employment, or open their own business. The approach builds on the understanding that the owners of the problem are also the owners of the solution. After the training, the approach's effectiveness is measured in a tracer study. This evaluation tool assesses the employment status of the graduates to gain insights into the outcomes and impact of the trainings and traces the graduates' path into wage employment or self-employment. This experience sheet explains the opportunity group approach, the tracer study, and its findings.

CONTEXT

In 2017, more than half of Kosovo's population (55%) was less than 30 years old, and over half of 15 to 24-year-olds were unemployed. Young people, men and women alike, are twice as likely to be unemployed as older people in Kosovo. Migration from rural to urban areas, mainly Pristina, and towards better opportunities elsewhere has fueled growth in the capital. Kosovo's economy has not been able to provide enough jobs for a rapidly increasing workforce. Up to 30,000 youths are entering the labor market every year, and demographics suggest that this number will continue to grow each year. The transition from school to work takes up to ten years.

Rural Kosovo in particular is not sufficiently serviced by the formal Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions. Besides outdated VET-curricula, students face issues of restricted access to VET facilities, including distance, transport, social barriers and required level of education prior to VET enrolment. These have resulted in a large number of rural poor being excluded from employment opportunities.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Skills for Rural Employment (S4RE) started in January 2013 to contribute to employment and income generation in rural areas by combining local economic development and skills development in remote municipalities in the Sharr Mountains and the Southeast of Kosovo. Young men and women, particularly from ethnic minority groups, who are amongst the most disadvantaged groups in these regions, are the main target group of S4RE (S4RE is funded by Medicor Foundation and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation). The project started its first phase in 2013, and given the promising results, moved to a second phase from 2016 to 2018.

In phase I, the project directly supported these young people with trainings. In phase II, we shifted our focus towards ensuring that initiatives and their impacts continue beyond the project's lifespan. We worked for two main objectives:

- a) strengthening and institutionalizing local ownership by stimulating local actors to align skills and training programs with local economic development strategies, and,
- b) capacity development and coaching of partners by developing business models that allow the sustainable delivery of training programs for youth and that provide initial start-up support.

HOW DOES THE OPPORTUNITY GROUP

APPROACH WORK?

The 'opportunity group approach' was introduced to reach young people in remote rural areas (Find a short explanation of the approach in the following video: [youtube.com/watch?v=uA-qn6XAFf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA-qn6XAFf4)). It is a participatory process that guides young people through different steps of self- and market-assessment and skills development that lead towards job orientation and entrepreneurial initiatives. The concept is based on the LearnNet approach, which builds on the understanding that the owners of the problem are also the owners of the solution (Edda Grunwald, 2004).

The opportunity group, consisting of peers with similar interests and aims, is at the heart of the approach. The group determines its own learning process, the learning content, and the planning and organization of the training. Together they identify a potential training provider, negotiate conditions, and set up a contract. They also come up with the required finances through cost-sharing mechanisms and by applying for loans and grants as needed and available.

By doing so, youth strengthen their potential and jointly learn and apply new technical, entrepreneurial, and life skills. The training provider designs and imparts the training based on the background of the group members, considering context and available employment opportunities for the trainees.



The group is supported by a facilitator who is an expert in all aspects related to the approach. His/her tasks are to mobilize the community for learning; stimulate and accompany the opportunity groups; support them in identifying business ideas; help mobilize resources and funding; and to assist with organizational development.

TRACING IMPACT

A graduate tracer study is a monitoring and evaluation instrument to gain information about the relevance and effectiveness of Vocation Skills Development projects by measuring output and outcome.

Tracer studies track a sample of graduated trainees to assess their training and the employment situation through interviews. The core questions are:

- Are the graduates (wage or self-) employed? Are they employed in their area of training?
- Has there been a change in income?
- Can they apply the skills they have learned?

How did they like the training? (if no such evaluation was made previously)

Tracer studies also provide information on the graduates' ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic background to assess the poverty alleviation potential that was realized, along with a disaggregated analysis of the impacts.

In the case of S4RE, local consultants implemented the tracer study. They conducted face-to-face interviews with 187 graduates using tablets for the data collection, and they analyzed the data disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, geographical regions and age.

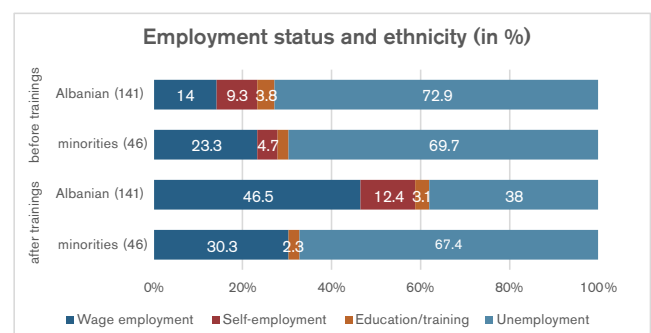
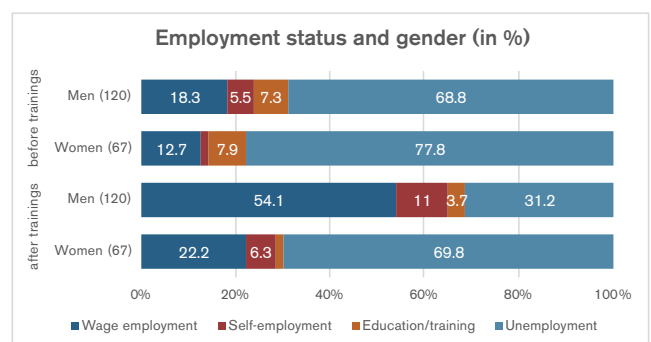
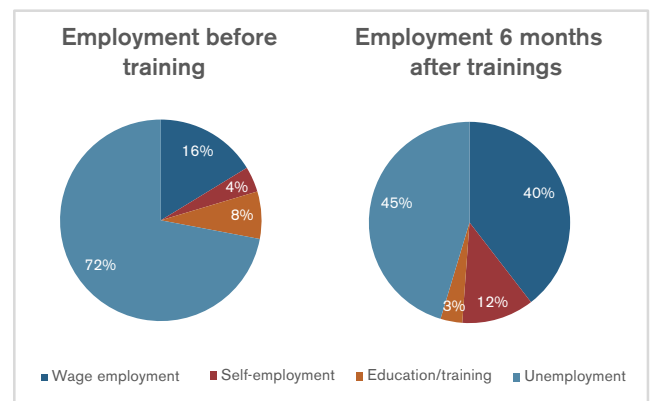
Short interviews based on a predefined questionnaire make tracer studies an effective method for collecting data on the outcome and impact of trainings provided.

KEY RESULTS

By the end of 2018, S4RE has trained over 2,500 youths through 250 opportunity groups. The tracer study conducted in 2017 assessed the satisfaction with the training among the 187 graduates surveyed. 64% of the working youth reported using the skills obtained during the training in their daily jobs and overall, 84% were satisfied with their training. A key element of the opportunity group approach is to give young people access to the specific skills they will need in their future profession. The majority of the working youth (77%) reported using the skills acquired during the training in their current profession at least to a small extent, while 39% stated that they are using them to a very large and large extent. Only 23% reported not using the skills at all.

Whereas the unemployment rate among the sample group before the training was 72% (with 8% in training and 20% in wage or self-employment), it decreased to 45% in the half-year after the training, with 40%

graduates being in wage employment and 12% in self-employment. The number of employed graduates has thus more than doubled since before the training. When disaggregating the data, it becomes clear that the highest increase in employment occurred among men (42% compared to 14% among women) and among the Albanian ethnic group (35% compared to a 2% increase among minority groups). This gender disparity remained despite the project's enhanced efforts to be inclusive. As examples, S4RE actively involved local Non-Governmental Organizations catering for minorities and women as co-facilitators and tailored trainings to cater for the needs of women (special training hours, building their self-confidence, etc.). The increased interest of young women in traditionally men dominated professions such as beekeeping or fruit cultivation in the agricultural sector, indicates the success of S4RE's advocacy efforts.



CASE STUDY



© Mimoza Mirashi

Fatbardha and Herolinda in their sewing studio

The municipality of Viti is located in south east of Kosovo with a population of 47,000 living in 38 villages and Viti town itself. The economy is mainly based on agriculture and small businesses. A group of women joined together to form an opportunity group. They assessed various opportunities and decided to pursue tailoring. Their decision was based on the local market assessment, as well as on their passion for fashion. The group attended the training and developed skills in designing, cutting and sewing. While some of the group members found employment after the training, two young women decided to start their own business to provide tailoring services. With the support of the facilitators, they developed a business plan and asked for financial support from the municipality. They mobilized their own and other available resources and have managed to open and run a business. As the business is running successfully and increasing in size, the group of two young entrepreneurs is expected to grow. Thereby, they will motivate and engage more youth, especially during the busy summer months, when abroad living Kosovars return home for the holidays.

LESSONS LEARNED

The case of S4RE has shown that young people can find their own way out of unemployment. To do so, they need easily accessible support structures and contact persons in their close environment. The gender and minority-majority disparities reflect existing societal and structural challenges, and they highlight the need for additional support and mentoring for women and minorities.

An important lesson learned is the involvement of local entrepreneurs as training providers. In return, they get a pool of well-trained, potential employees. Moreover, their entrepreneurial expertise is helpful for mentoring purposes and supporting the graduates on their way into self-employment.

The opportunity group must be adapted to the local context, existing structures and possibilities, which the project successfully did do to a considerable extent. The close involvement of local ministries, entrepreneurs and facilitators with a good reputation in the community proved to be a key factor in the institutionalization of the approach beyond the project's lifespan.

The difference between the disaggregated datasets (gender and ethnicities) shows the importance of evaluation tools such as tracer studies to assess where additional attention and support are needed. To optimize the results, the guiding questions of a tracer study need to be aligned with the project's overall goal. Doing so in this case highlighted the need for additional measures for women and minority groups to fully benefit from the interventions.

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