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Can the Invisible Become a Model? A Case of Slovenian Female Forest Owners

Abstract: Adult education has been always particularly sensitive to marginalised groups of adults. A large group, up to now neglected and still publicly invisible, has been identified and described in Slovenian context for the first time. The main criteria for identification of its members have been gender, property ownership and public invisibility. A contact with them was possible due to the monitoring of the main community learning initiative in Slovenia, study circles, and cooperation with the Slovenian Forestry Service female forestry professionals. Quantification and qualitative analysis has been performed in order to get an insight into their self-description and self-interpretation. Particular attention has been given to interpretation, focusing to the strengths of this target group and its potential developmental role. We conclude with some implications for theoretical developmental perspectives.

Key words: adult education, women, female forest owners (FFO), rural development, Slovenia.

Introduction

Slovenian is vastly covered with forests which cover 60% of the area and are in 70% a part of Natura 2000 network. They are in 76% a private property, while recent data about the number of their owners change from majority of women to 38% of men (Medved et al 2010). People experienced living in multicultural conditions, relatively frequent political changes, rather quick wave from a predominantly rural into urban society after the Second WW (Ravbar, 2000), a heavy decline of GDP at the moment and - as throughout Europe – demographic changes (population ageing). Formal education level is only one of indicators which describe situation of large gap between young generation with high average formal education and more individualised lifestyle and old generation with low average

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formal education and in general more socially cohesive lifestyles. Individualisation of lifestyles due to plural values lowered social cohesion so the role of non-formal learning is gaining weight. One of the most successful non-formal forms, Slovenian study circles (more in Bogataj, Gougoulakis, 2007, <http://sk.acs.si>), useful for all generations, enabled us to get in touch with a large segment of society, which has up to now not been studied. These are female forest owners. This study provides preliminary information about them, entitled FFO. International literature about this issue roots in Sweden (Lidestav, 2007) and an overall picture has been given for the first time in 2006 (Turunen in Toivonen, 2006).

The aim of the study is an outline of FFO as a new target group but also consisting of self-determination and FFO qualitative characteristics. The main research question therefore was: who are Slovenian FFO? Due to statistics (2007) we presumed that they are mostly older rural inhabitants facing also poor educational offer (figure 1).

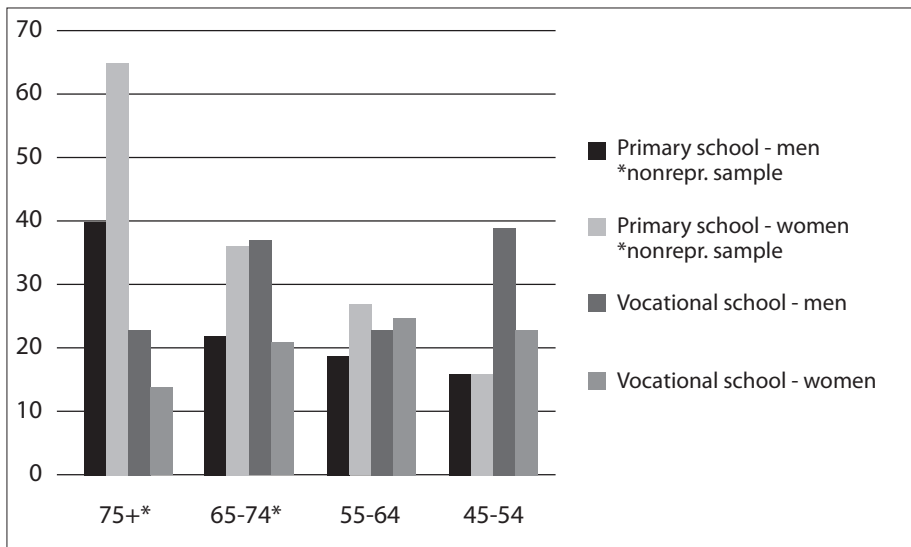


Figure 1: Statistics about formal education of older people according to their gender in 2007

The challenge has also been what are potential strengths of FFO and their potentials for future development. Our hypothesis is that FFO can be described as a specific marginalised group.

Methodology

As we could not afford the statistically sound research, we founded our study in triangulation of resources and methods (comp. Secco and Peruch, 2006). An action research was performed in the period from March to September 2009. It consisted of personal observation, inquiry, focus groups, interviews and secondary resources study. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered and examined in order to test a hypothesis.

Data collection

An inquiry was performed in 2009 online and by personal visits of FFO. We administered survey questionnaire, which has been developed just for this analysis. It consists of twenty eight questions in four lots, namely: (1) Ownership start, decision making and role definition (2) A link with a forest and forestry, (3) Knowledge level and its provision, (4) General Information and information on the household. Open questions were targeted into proposals or notest about FFO. General data description has been done by SPSS programme.

The second method, focus groups, was used twice. In both cases a location was selected at the state border. The first focus group was characterised by north border position with a long tradition of female foresters' activity. References of the latter are characterised by successful rural developmental results (Radlje ob Dravi). The second focus group was performed along the south state border which lacks of any developmental efforts (Vimolj ob Kolpi). In focus groups three topics were discussed:

- Self-description of FFO
- A list of knowledge and educational needs for FFO
- Identification of existing conflicts in forest mangement and FFO response to them.

The third method of data collection was semi structured interview with forestry professionals, employed at the research institutions (n=5). The discussion has been performed on the basis of the main quantitative data about FFO.

Results

Sixty two questionnaires have been gathered in a period of a month by a set of self-learning centres and the local Slovenian Forestry Service forest rangers.

Media, non-governmental organisations and two web-journals, asked to help in reaching those, who are not reachable by ICT, were irresponsive.

General findings about FFO studied

Most of FFO were found in the rural and they were above fifty years old. Due to historical circumstances most of older people in Slovenia learned foreign languages at least on the basic level. Their knowledge resource about forest management has not been institutional but personal network, usually family or »important others«. There were some essential circumstances which define their situation:

- Loss of men (fathers, husbands, brothers) because of WWII, so working force and decision makers were simply erased for many of them in the certain period;
- The distance from urban centres where most of their children live (e.g. education).

Taking care for family survival and schooling of their children usually defined their lives. As later educated young generation moved they usually stay at home alone, in environments of low population density, local social networks and absence of infrastructure or state investments. Only some of them adjust lifestyles and relationships to new circumstances, but most do not enter public discourse neither want to become its part. Public agencies follow their situation through statistical data only, if at all. The formal educational level of older people is low and is rising with a declining age. Gender based differences are larger when older generations are in question. This means relatively low functional literacy of older rural women which are seldom non-local services beneficiary. A serious barrier of their welfare is their limited mobility, ICT equipment and knowledge. Their personal life has to be organised in different way, more traditionally. However this also means that they are not consumers of transportation energy. Their knowledge resource are seldom or never institutions who took over this role for younger generations. Third age university rises the share of educationally active above 65, women in particular, but mostly among those who are better educated. Therefore most of those between 25 and 64 are educational inactive (60 %), and unfortunately 80 % of those between 16. and 65. have the lowest level of the functional literacy (Mohorčič Špolar et al., 2005).

Quantitative data - age structure

Slovenian Forestry Service provided the data for 2007 with a note that the Register has not been updated to the actual state and therefore there is no exact number of FFO. The data available provide an immense number of FFO, over 120.000. New data emerged a year later Medved et al., 2010), with a category of co-owners added.

However the main relations remain, so the FFO age structure is presented from the first set of the data illustrating shares of subgroups among which no FFO were registered in the subgroup of younger than 25 years (figure 2).

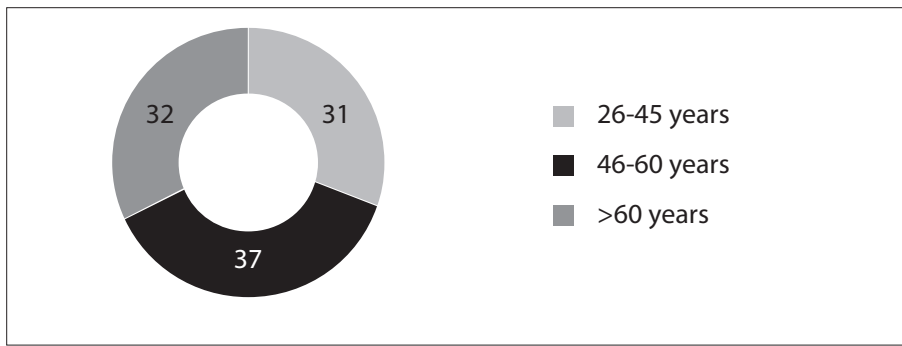


Figure 2: FFO age groups according to the data from 2009 (Slovenian Forestry Service)

An inquiry reached 0,1% of FFO, representing all age groups and diverse social settings: large mountain farms, small plain farms, employed women living in urban or periurban areas. Logically we reached more of those between 26 and 45 years (48%) as they were reached by e-mail. Personal meeting reached 24% of those between 46 and 60 years and 14% of those over 60 respectively. Some of them have large property, are highly educated and have left their job in order to start forest management. Some live abroad and became forest owners during the denationalisation process. In general they belong to small forest owners, which started by inheritance. This means that their property has been »accepted« and not consciously »decided for« (e.g. bought). A forest is rarely understood as a subsistence resource, as our respondents usually live on pension and sometimes employment.

Focus groups age structure of participants (n=19) is closer to the structure of those in the Register (21% of those btw 26-45 years, 47% of those btw 46-60 years and 32% of those over 60 years). The main findings of quantitative part of the analysis are:

- FFO are a huge group;
- Age structure of FFO is asymmetrical, inclined to those with higher age.

Qualitative characteristics

Without an exception every single FFO whom we met or ask to fill in the questionnaire was surprised and happy to have this opportunity. We received no negative notes but more than ten percent of encouraging and supportive commentaries. Some were underlining gratitude for help in filling in the questionnaire (e.g. to Slovenian Forestry Service staff), reading difficulties and inaccessibility overcoming. Most of respondents live in a framework of a family, mostly at farms. This means that we can find them in small settlements or at single houses in the rural areas, sometimes even on lonely locations. A status of owner brings satisfaction, a link with previous generations and a certain level of knowledge about the forest and management, so only two respondents would refuse the role of forest owner if they would find themselves in position of decision making, while 60 % would accept it again.

For most of respondents a knowledge resource were relatives (50,7 %), school only in 38 %, while professionals and literature do not play a significant role (7,4 % and 2,9% respectively), media (0,7 %). Nearly half of respondents (45 %) transmit their knowledge to the others, family and social network.

The criteria of duties division is seldom typical (physical work for men) but circumstances at the working time e.g. health, availability of help of relatives or neighbours. The process of decision making is according to our data relatively democratic as decision are usually commonly accepted with a partner, relative or in a family.

They feel accepted in their own social network but not in general public. They are publicly unknown. Participants of the first focus group stressed that they do not want to be exposed and that they refuse gender based delineation from the rest of forest owners. Their absence in public discourse was explained by a long period of negative standpoint toward farm rural live or towards lower educated people.

Some of them have relatively unusual biographies providing evidence of particular life energy, successfully coping with unusual challenges (a widow dependent on the income of forest succeeded to raise the family in high mountain farm, unemployed mother became a forest worker; an urban girl decides to study of untypical vocation etc.). They regard themselves as “communicative and able of excellent organisation”. However, in fulfilling their duty toward their prop-

erty, they feel limited as they are exposed to the local entrepreneurs who do not consider their will and experience. They cope with motor riders and recreational waste in the forest which directly degrade the forest. Direct degradation means costs but also a pressure of unrespectful behaviour due to the free access to the private property. The second focus group exposed the feeling of social marginality and dependence from their neighbours or their family. However, this has been interpreted positively, as they »have learned to be suppressed« and understand themselves as well suited into their environment, satisfied with material modesty and happy with their forest that surrounds them and enables them to have an emotional tie with it. Common characteristic has been outlined:

- Balance among economic, social and ecological forest roles
- Care for forest and in particular for its younger phases;
- Care for forest and society (community) at the same time.

By the professionals from the state based forestry institution (Forestry Service, Department of Forestry and Renewable Resources and Forestry Institute) they are seen as “important”, “surprisingly numerous” and “worth of further study”. However until 2009, when we started to collect the data, no investments have been done into this segment of forest owners (and users).

Discussion

FFO were extremely difficult to reach. In the public discourse they do not exist, they are dispersed and do not use internet. They are also marginalised among forest owners but always glad to respond to our initiatives. This might be interpreted as the first indicator of their marginalisation. Scarce data are usually linked to certain points of view (wood production, gender equity, formal education and participation in educational activities (Medved et al., 2010, Černič Istenič, 2007, Mohorčič Špolar et al., 2005). Internationally most information has been gathered in Scandinavia (Folo 2002, Suopajarvi, 2009), particularly by Swedish researcher Lidestav who provided an overview in 2007. Triangulation was therefore the only way to provide the data about FFO.

A recent situation is a consequence of the previous developments. Due to absence of young FFO (younger than 25 years) we can speculate about the future of FFO. The state agency provided quantitative insight in 2009 but soon changed criteria of a forest owner definition, so recent data count only 38% of female forest owners. No studies are provided on this topic as priority is given to other topics.

As forestry is considered a “male based” so self-determination of FFO consists of this stereotype – they do not want to be treated and exposed as special. This is typical for any socially deprived group which is considered in need of particular attention by state supported entities only. This is interpreted as the second sign of the social situation of FFO as an overall definition of special needs at European level does not exist (Haller, Block 2011).

The state considers FFO as private owners and these have not been considered important for decades. Therefore it is not a surprise that datasets are inconsistent, a detailed sum of them changes frequently and internal FFO structure is poorly known. Their prevalence has been a surprise for forestry professionals, similar to situation in Sweden when the same reaction was noticed decades ago (Lidestav, 2007). Weak data are according to this study regarded another indicator of marginalisation of the target group under examination. In case of Slovenian FFO other absences were also evident: absence of their self-description, attitudes, needs and feelings, essential for any adult education provision. FFO might be studied in the framework of old people as their share is rising all over Europe (Bogataj and Findeisen, 2008). Slovenian adult education institute already provides two infrastructural possibilities for their activation through learning: study circles and (functional) literacy program for less educated rural inhabitants. Participation at both is excellent so the state can not respond to all needs. Study circles as a community based adult learning faces structural change in terms of higher participation of older rural people, women in particular. According to our interpretation this is a reflection of the lack of other learning possibilities in the rural and certain stability of the project which proved to be proper and of high quality. Its participants take responsibility for learning by themselves what has at least two important consequences: 1. Individuals gain weight and personal value/satisfaction by/through learning and 2. Results have been at least in eight municipalities recognised as worth of the local community award. However FFO up to now did not organise themselves in a study circle nor were other way understood or recognised as a resource. The research level has found other priorities for the last two years.

We argue that FFO might be presented as an inspiration, a resource, a model, e.g. in the framework of recession we face. Their values of the land and a family were developed in long-term and might be the most significant indicators of their lives. The essence of their skills and values are not promoted or marketed, but delivered freely as FFO are relatively independent and gain no state based care or investments. This is worth to notice and relate to their relative unjust social position in society. Their experience of survival from local natural resources

makes them strong and might gain more attention. On this basis it would be possible to interpret FFO as a potential model.

Our hypothesis is confirmed – FFO can be described as a group with the following characteristics:

- Not easily accessible
- Numerous, predominantly older than 45 years, usually living in the rural
- Heterogeneous
- Poorly known; even a measurable indicator - their age - is weakly documented due to unadjusted ownership register
- Many of them are economically weak (farm pension is the lowest possible)
- Predominantly with low formal education and low functional literacy
- Socially marginalised in particular if their property is small (they prevail) and when they live in distant areas with inaccessibility of infrastructure, dependent on their social network (neighbours, family and friends)
- A resource of our recent well-being as all they ever had they provided to us (free access to their property, children who usually moved to the nearby urban areas); in this respect it has to be noted that rural women had in average higher number of children who are also particularly successful students (Bevc, 2002)
- Not organised
- With clear common good orientation, modest material flow and low/absent expectations towards the state.

These characteristic qualify Slovenian FFO at least potentially for a model. A threat of welfare decline perspective opens up new perspectives of intergenerational learning. The last lecture we can learn from them is that many FFO express personal life-satisfaction and a certain energy/will, broadcasted into the local community, which thus gains quality. This might be one of the backgrounds of study circles success but might also become a backbone for new adult education programmes development.

Conclusions

FFO has up to now never been defined as a target group. Their self advocacy does not exist, but they are not inactive. Their participation in social roles, family

members care and education, and landscape maintenance makes them strong despite at the moment they are understood as economic externality (unpaid benefit for all). FFO are therefore absent in the public discourse, socially marginalised, statistically poorly described, but not without an impact and needs. Their social marginalisation may be logical in the »male defined« state based forestry profession. Less logical it seems in the field of adult education, which by definition engage with less educated and non-motivated groups. Being a minority or not (e.g. among forest owners) FFO have several common characteristics: most of them inherited the property; they mostly live in the rural, understood also in terms of their segregation. As most of them are old, they share past experience of survival, limited social role and particular lifestyle. Their common good practice and low expectations towards the state seem important in the context of new developmental paradigms which are more inclusive than exclusive. Sustainable development (which the presumably practice) is based on long term perspective and balance between the three pillars: economy, ecology and social pillar. Low public recognition and exclusion of FFO from the public infrastructure makes FFO marginal despite their high number. This proves that the recent model is based on exclusion and not inclusion. However, Slovenian FFO linked subjective worlds with cultural assets of society by three communicative forms: adjustment, negotiations and resistance (Suopajarvi 2009). This makes them vital and developmentally promising. We suggest understanding FFO a target group.

Slovenian FFO are not only in need of new skills and information but can also be understood as a resource, a model, a pillar of sustainability. Why? Because they consider economic, social and ecological benefits at the same time and thus practice sustainable development even if they do not know/use this term and the concept. The core of this concept is the fact that state itself does not provide efficient control mechanisms, while local environments, which incorporate social capital are more rational in this respect (comp. Ostrom, 1990) and thus closer to the long-term developmental model. As the weakest Slovenian indicator in European lifelong learning study (Hoskins, 2010) is cooperation, we argue to invest more in cooperative learning models and target groups who already base their existence on cooperation. FFO do not contribute to welfare in terms of free access, family care and landscape maintenance only. Their positive, although non-formal, private and non-profit behaviour provides goods for profit, public and formal initiatives, so as a huge, overlooked segment of society faces an unjust position. Due to their low ecological footprint and self-limitation practice they provide common and long-term goods and can also be understood as a model for the future. The first pilot and preliminary outline of FFO might continue in more statistically sound examination. An insight into FFO is therefore a new step

towards understanding of the long-term developmental waves and linking past with the future. We suggest not only stopping of FFO marginalisation and provision of existing and new educational programmes for them but a general turn from marginalising developmental models into inclusive and more rational ones.

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Mogu li “nevidljivi” postati model? Slučaj vlasnica šuma iz Slovenije

Apstrakt: Obrazovanje odraslih je oduvek bilo posebno osetljivo na marginalizovane grupe odraslih. Velika grupa koja je doskora bila nevidljiva i zanemarivana sada je identifikovana i prvi put se pojavila na mapi slovenačkog društva. Osnovni kriterijum za prepoznavanje članova ove grupe je rod kome pripadaju, posed zemljišta i nevidljivost od strane javnosti. Kontakt sa njima moguć je zahvaljujući glavnoj inicijativi za učenje zajednica u Sloveniji, krugovima učenja i saradnji sa Slovenačkom šumarskom službom i ženama profesionalcima u oblasti šumarstva. Sprovedena je kvantitativna i kvalitativna analiza kako bi se dobio uvid u njihov doživljaj i tumačenje sebe samih. Posebna pažnja usmerena je na interpretaciju sa fokusom na snage ove ciljne grupe i njihov potencijalni razvoj. Zaključak donosimo imajući u vidu implikacije teorijske razvojne perspektive.

Ključne reči: obrazovanje odraslih, žene, vlasnice šuma (FFO), ruralni razvoj, Slovenija.

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