

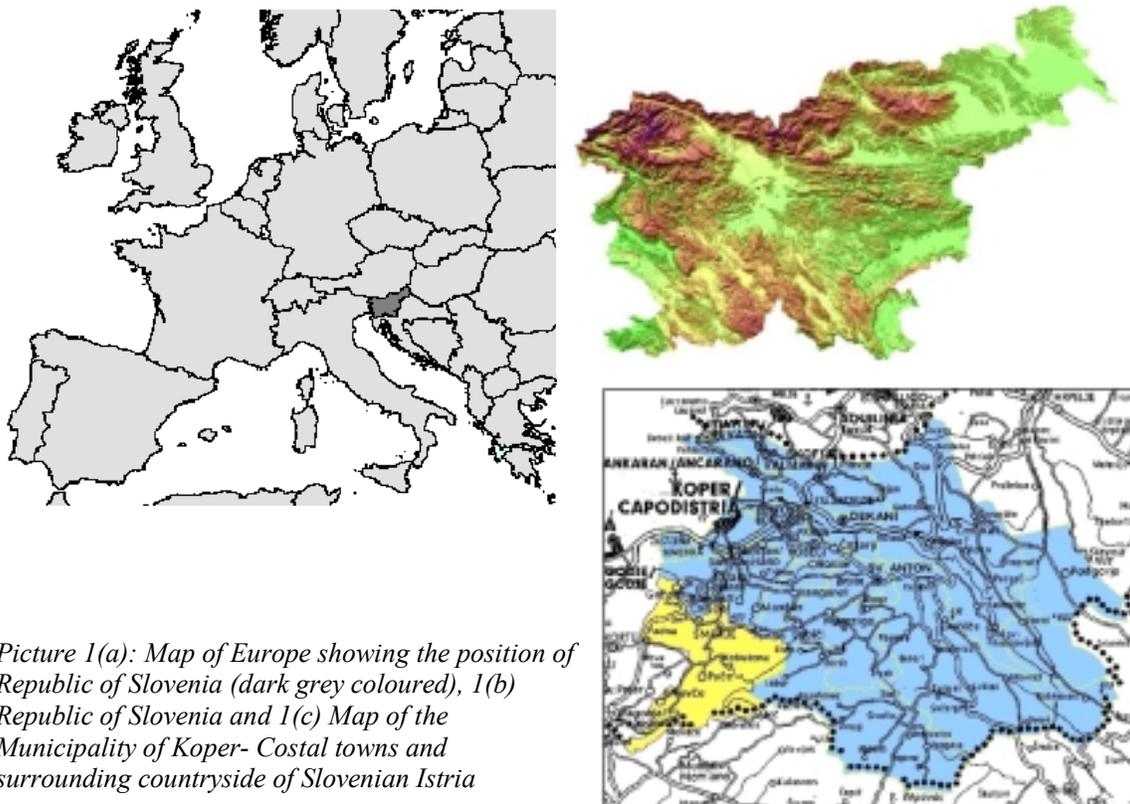
The Role of Information and Knowledge in Rural Development: A Case from Slovenia

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Introduction

Rural areas can be peripheral even if they are physically/geographically closed to urban ones. Metropolitan areas almost as a rule develop on their own principles considering their rural surroundings only as a source of cheap /less qualified labour and/or as places for depositing waste. Fast growth of nearby cities can have one of the two possible effects on the surrounding rural areas and rural population. It can make rural residents feel powerless and passively accepting the backwardness of their home areas or can stimulate them to activate their potentials in searching their own ways of development. Innovativeness, knowledge, information and partnership are the key factors of successful local development projects of physically and/or socio-economically peripheral rural areas.

The paper deals with a locally initiated development project of a rural area behind a highly developed tourist and industrial towns along the Slovenian coast (Picture 1).



Picture 1(a): Map of Europe showing the position of Republic of Slovenia (dark grey coloured), 1(b) Republic of Slovenia and 1(c) Map of the Municipality of Koper- Coastal towns and surrounding countryside of Slovenian Istria

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Background/Situation

Slovenian Istria (the Slovenian part of Istrian peninsula at the north of Adriatic see) is composed of two, geographically and socio-economically different parts. One part belong to the costal area where after the Second World War three towns have been developing rather fast (industrial and yacht port, motorbike factory, fishing industry, tourism) employing local labour. The other part covers inland rural areas with the majority of residents either migrated to the costal towns or commute day-to-day to work there. Among 1697 households in the project area (area of planned Landscape park Dragonja) (Barbič, Medved, Černič, 2005:84) only 483 (28.5%) has agricultural holding.

Residents of rural part of the project area are far from being poor but rather unsatisfied with the quality of live compared with the perceived quality of life of the residents of the costal towns. They complain of having poor infrastructure (roads, sewage system) and being generally neglected by municipality administration. Even though that there is some truth in those complains, it has been predominantly a subjective feeling of a gap between the costal towns and the countryside. Namely, Republic of Slovenia was paying special attention to its rural areas and agriculture already during the period of pre-accession to the EU and even before, but has, at least to some extend, neglected to build interdependency between urban and rural areas within the policy of equal regional development.

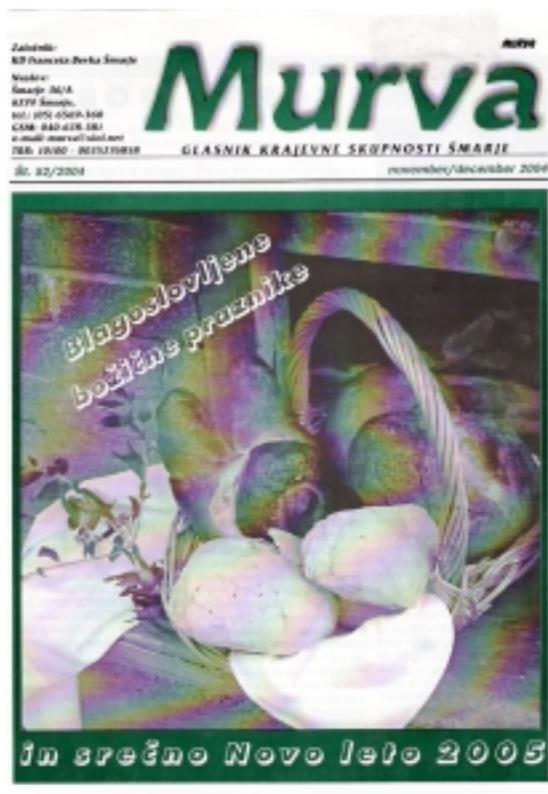
Rural development project “Šmarje – the door into the heart of Slovenian Istria”

a) The role of information / knowledge and partnership in the project

The initiative. A group of local young intellectuals united in the NGO PANGEA – Environmental Protection Society of Koper (Koper is the largest costal city in the area and the headquarter of the municipality Koper) composed mostly of graduates and students of the University of Ljubljana (Ljubljana being the capital of Slovenia) took the initiative for promoting the development of rural areas along the Slovenian cost. They had determination, energy and at least some knowledge necessary for the start.

The aim of the project. The basic aim of the project was two-fold: First, to revitalize village Šmarje and the whole local community of Šmarje in accordance with integrated and sustainable rural development paradigm. The second aim was to build the identity of village Šmarje as “the door into the heart of Slovenian Istria”.

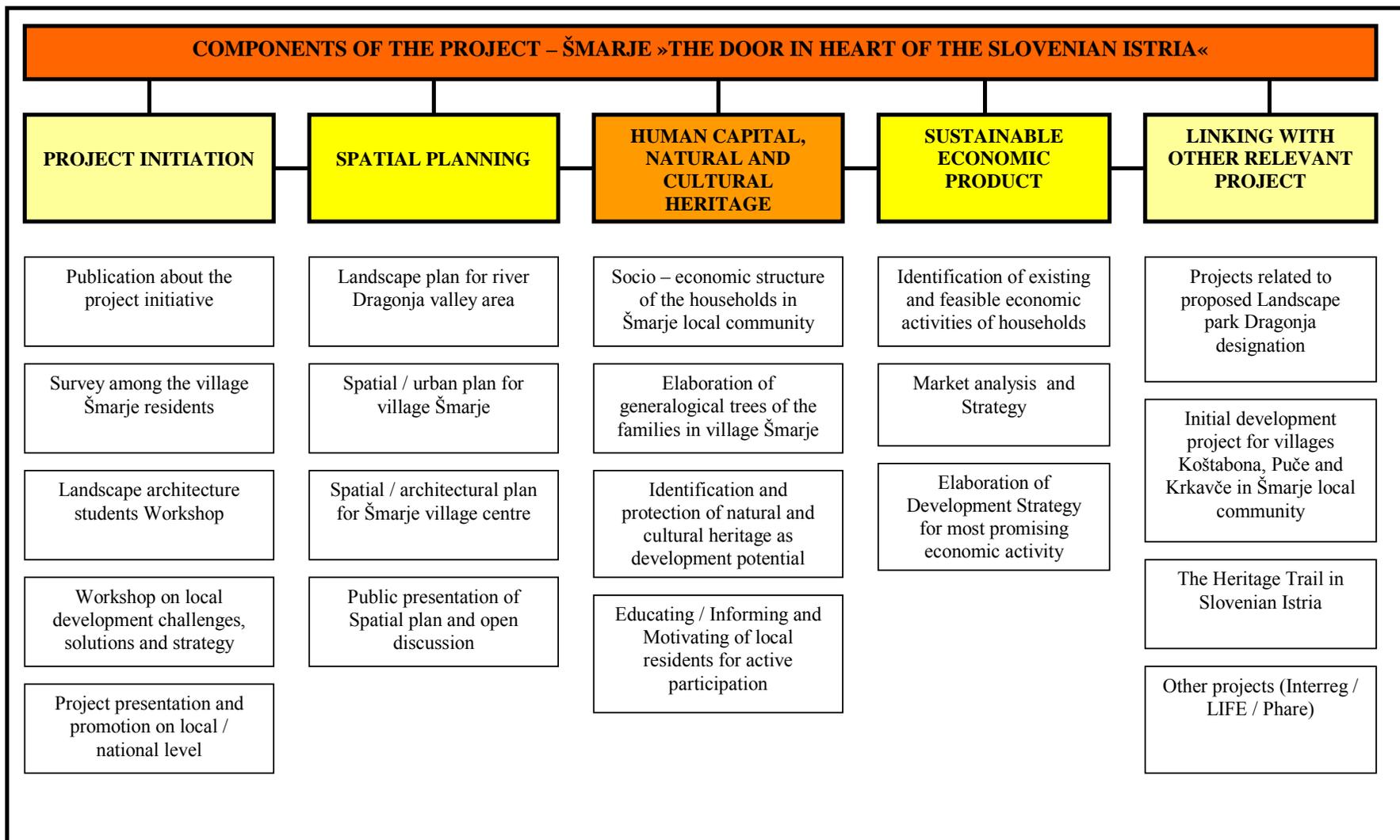
Activation of local residents. The leader of the project initiative group, a graduate of University of Ljubljana, Biotechnical faculty and the co-author of this paper, on the basis of knowledge gained at rural sociology course, was aware of the fact, that the first condition for the success of such a project is its acceptance by local residents. In order to achieve this, with the support of local community council a short survey among the village residents was carried out (February 2003) in order to identify the advantages as well as the problems and to invite the residents to participate actively in the process of revitalization of their village. The first information about the project idea together with the survey questionnaire was published in a special issue of local community monthly journal “Murva” in March 2005. (Picture 2).



Picture 2 – Cover page of the local issues of monthly journal named *Murva*

Few months later (in May 2003) the project initiative group organized a workshop in which in addition to local residents invited municipality officials, outside professionals, university professors and students of landscape architecture who had just finish their field work in the village of Šmarje, participated. After few introductions participants worked in four thematic groups: spatial planning and infrastructure, protection of the environment and cultural heritage, the local sustainable economic product and the participation of local residents.

Formalization of the project and the extension of the project area. On the basis of theoretical knowledge and empirical information the project of integrated and sustainable development was formulated covering five components: initiation of the project, specification of three thematic development components (spatial planning; human potentials, natural and cultural heritage; sustainable economic product) and formulation of long-term development strategy (Picture 3).

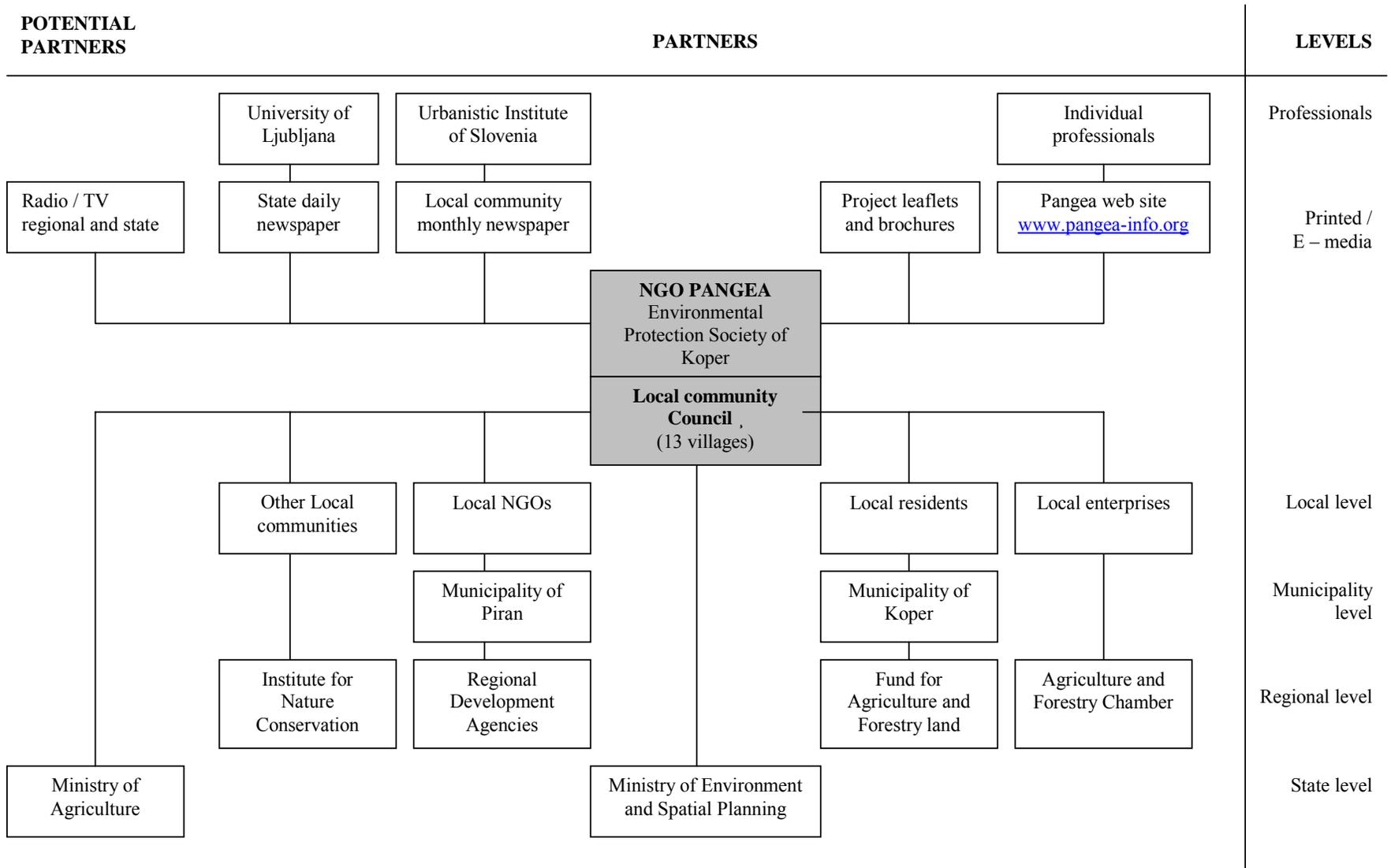


Picture 3: Work model of the project “Šmarje – The door into the heart of Slovenian Istria” (Medved, 2003a)

The very first initiative of the project was aimed to the revitalization of village Šmarje. However, it has been soon realized that the project should not cover only the local community main village but the whole local community which at the same time represents the majority of the area of planned "Landscape park Dragonja". Local NGOs and some individuals as early as June 1998 signed "The obligation to river Dragonja" in order to stimulate the foundation of the landscape park. Indeed, in May 2001 the municipality of Koper passed Degree about the temporary protection of river Dragonja with its affluxes, which has been extended it each year. So far, the state of Slovenia has not yet founded the landscape park.

Network of partners. Partnership network (Picture 4) has been built step by step. Initial partnership between PANGEA and the council of local community Šmarje was firstly enlarged with local residents the majority of which supported the idea of a development project and some of them (from different villages) continuously actively participate in the project as do some local enterprises. Step by step some university professors and researchers from relevant research institutes have been incorporated into the network of partners. They have been giving professional assistance the local team to formalize the project and its components, to carry out research activities and students' workshops and enable the local team to present the idea of the project at national (at the annual conference of the Society of urban planners of Slovenia with international participation in November 2003 (Medved, 2003b)).

Municipality of Koper was informed about the project initiative after the work model of the project was elaborated (Picture 3) by the project initiators and the professionals from the University of Ljubljana at the official presentation of the project idea, project model and project activities at the meeting hosted by the municipality of Koper (December 2003). Later, the head of Office of space and environment of Koper municipality acquired even the state money for the elaboration of the guidelines and directions for the municipal strategy of spatial development for local community Šmarje. By this action as well as by financing the realization of some other project components and by moral support to local residents' endeavours the Koper municipality has entered the project partnership network.

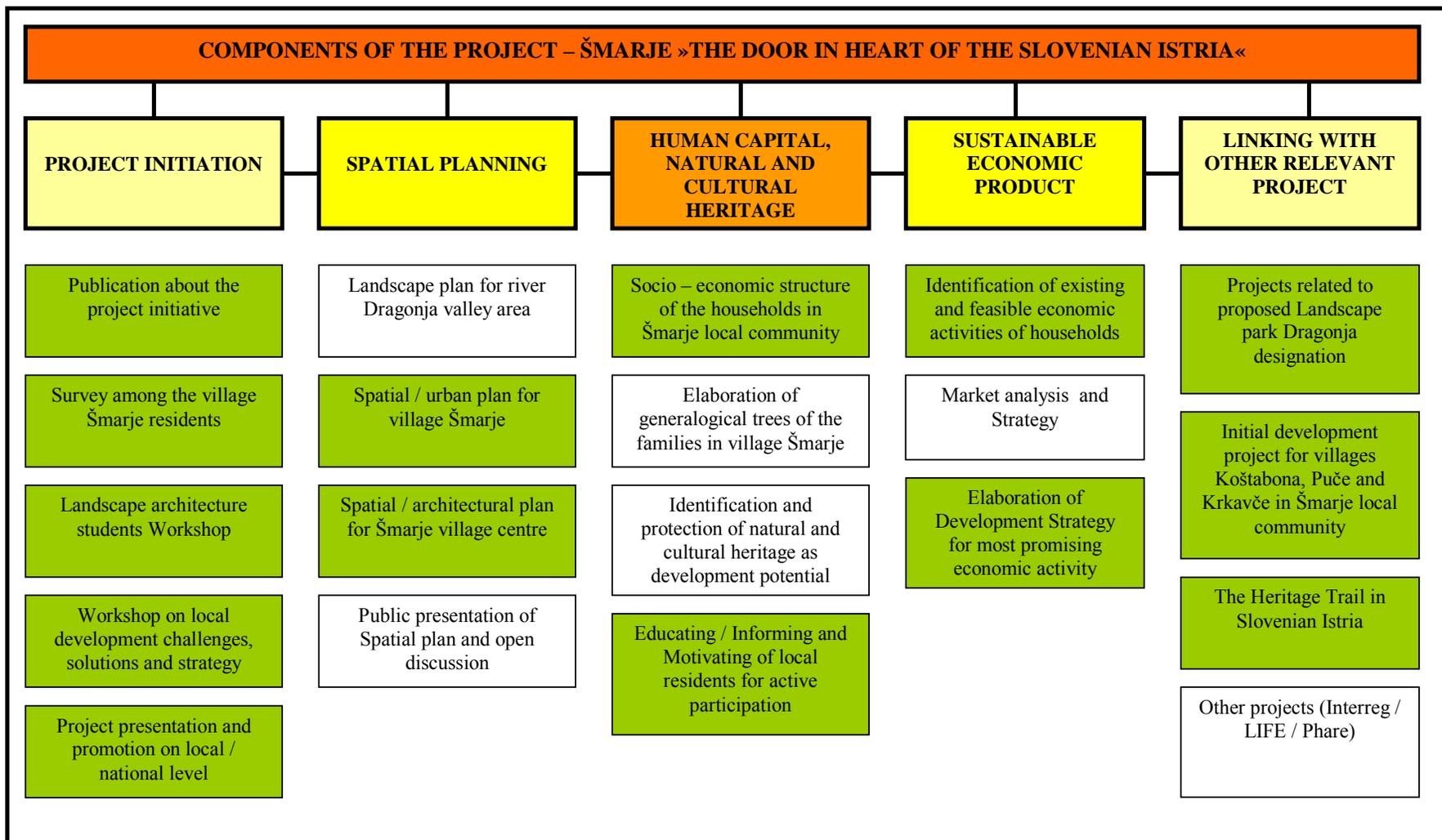


Picture 4: The project partnership network

From the very beginning the project activities were covered by the local monthly journal and occasionally by regional and state newspapers. In the light of the recognition that there has not been an event if not covered by media, the media (especially radio and TV) has not been enough present in the project activities and has not been adequately included in the partnership network. For the project is in the process of realization, there is still time and also the need for additional partners to be included into the partnership network (Picture 4).

b) The process of the project realization

Any development project is a dynamic system which components might be modified by introducing new themes, dropping or redesigning other in accordance with new experiences and project developments. Within the 3-years period the project area has been extended and now covers the whole area of planned landscape park Dragonja. Some of the project themes have been realized, some are in the process of realization and some have been put aside/postponed (Picture 5).



Picture 5: The present status (green boxes represent activities that have been already started / finished) of the components of the project “Šmarje – The door into the heart of Slovenian Istria” (Medved, 2003a)

The component: Spatial Planning is in the process of realization with the exception of the sub-component “Landscape plan for the valley of river Dragonja” which will become an urgent job within the actions for formal designation of planned landscape park Dragonja. In 2005 the Ministry for Environment and Spatial Planning together with the Municipality of Koper (Office for the Environment and Spatial Planning) and NGO Pangea has started the elaboration of spatial plan for all 13 villages within the Local Community of Šmarje. The project is led by the Urbanistic Institute of Slovenia with intensive cooperation of local community representatives. A special local project council has been established in order to expose local interests within the Spatial Plan Project team. Following the letter of complaint that has been addressed to the Municipality of Koper (Office for real estates) the Local Project Council together with assistance of NGO PANGAEA has achieved an important role in managing the local real estate market. The old abandoned buildings in the village centre are recognized as Municipality ownership and could not be sold within Local project Council approval.

The component: Human resources, natural and cultural heritage have been partly realized, partly extended and partly abandoned. The sub-component “The socio-economic composition of the households has identified the socio-economic status of individual residents in Šmarje local community and in the whole area of planned landscape park Dragonja. The ratio of active residents (47.9%) of the project area is closed to the state average (48.3%). In spite of the rural character of the project area, only 4.6 per cent of the population (SURSTAT, 2002) of the planned park area fall into the category “self-employed” which in addition to farmers includes all other self-employed individuals. Even though that the per cent of self-employed persons within the active population is higher (9.7%), it does not disapprove the hypothesis that agriculture represent an after-regular-job activity, the activity of retired residents or of those who own a second-home in the area. Among 483 agricultural households 82.4 percent of the household heads are older than 50 years, 82.2 per cent of the household heads are male and 59.6 percent of the household heads of either gender accomplished elementary school or less. The agriculture is the only (15.5%) or the main (9.1%) economic activity only to one quarter (24.6%) of the heads of agricultural households (SURSTAT, 2000).

A large part of natural and cultural heritage has been already identified and numerous traditional cultural events are performed regularly by local residents/local NGOs. However, there was still some room for discovering forgotten traditions. Thus, PANGAEA has traced the “Boškarin route” on the territory of planned park (Picture 6); organized an evening of ethno music and songs named “Istrian night” (Picture 7) and carried out some actions aimed at the protection of the environment. In addition, links with some other relevant projects have been established (joint project of the municipalities of Slovenian Istria and neighbouring Italian municipality Dolina called “Heritage of Slovenian Istria and of municipality Dolina” – 2004; The programme for tourism and recreation development on the territory of planned landscape park Dragonja – 2003, etc.).



Picture 6: The boškarin cattle is a brand of traditional cattle once used as a working power in agriculture in the Slovenian Istria area. Soon after 1970 the boškarin cattle has totally disappeared from the countryside due to the introduction of tractor engines.

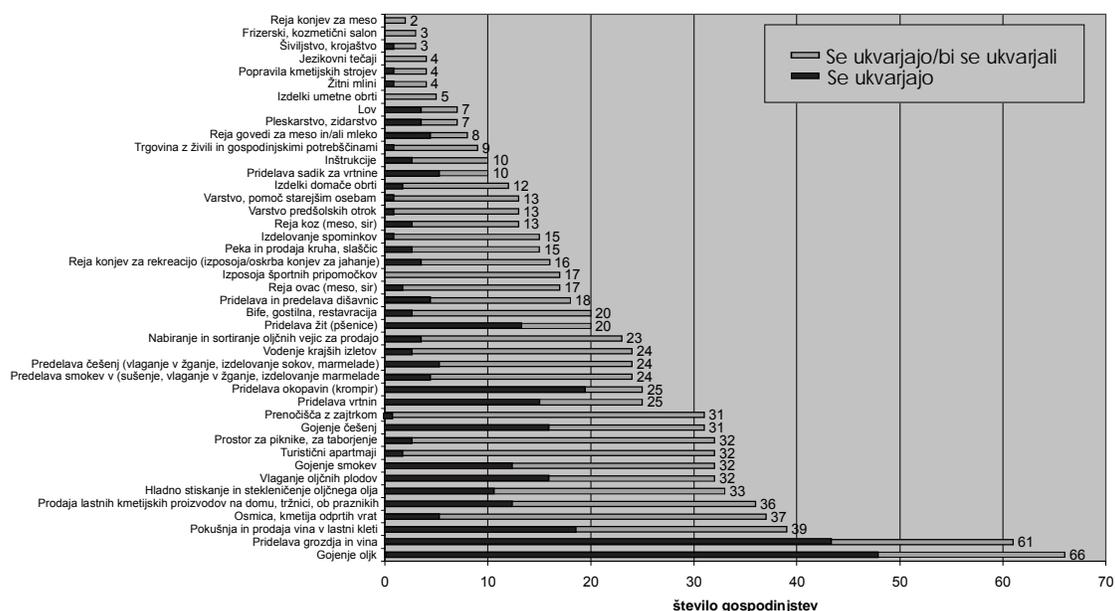
The aim of the sub-component »Identification of genealogical trees of the households of Šmarje and Krkavče» has been to identify the roots (spatial, national) of local families on the basis of which local residents would learn about one another on the one hand and a new information for building local identity would be acquired. The idea for such a project appeared on the first workshop (May 2003) and the project proposal was formulated soon after, but a person to acquire financial resources and to carry out the project has not been found yet.



Picture 7: Traditional event called “Istrian night” organized by NGO PANGEA in village Krkavče in Local Community of Šmarje

The component: Sustainable economic product with special attention to agriculture and supplementary activities covered whole territory of planned landscape park. It was defined on the basis of evaluation of suitability of as many as 79 economic activities for the project area provided by municipalities' administration. The list of 43 activities identified as suitable for the area was used in the survey among local residents (November 2003 – January 2004) identifying present economic activities of the respondent household as well as its readiness to extend or to introduce them. It turned out that locally typical agriculture and supplementary activities (N=24) are the most popular among the practiced as well as among desired ones, followed by tourist (N=6) and crafts/services (N=13) ones.

On the basis of survey data and foreseen market demands the 11 steps strategy was defined for promoting medical and aromatic herbs production. The rationale for the choice of medical and aromatic herbs was rather reasonable number of the respondents (21.4%) who are already involved in growing and processing various herbs (5.9%) or are willing to do so (15.5%). Additional arguments for this choice are favourable natural conditions for such plants, expected foundation of the landscape park and the endeavour of local NGOs and local/municipality authorities for preserving authentic animal and plant sorts. The analysis of (potential) markets and plan of marketing activities would follow if the proposed strategy for production of medical and aromatic herbs will be selected as a follow up activity.



Picture 8: Picture showing that locally typical agriculture and supplementary activities (N=24) are the most popular among the practiced as well as among desired ones, followed by tourist (N=6) and crafts/services (N=13) ones.

The evaluation of project realization process and partial results. There is no doubt that project has brought a lot of energy into the area. In addition to the growing number of local residents identifying themselves with the project, Municipality officials (mayor, The office of the environment and space) have supported the project and even acquired state money for the realization of the project's spatial component. A representative of Ministry of environment and space lobbied for the project at his Ministry and even attended several project's workshops.

The project has intensified not only the traditional and new activities of NGO PANGEA (www.pangea-info.org) (identification of wild refuse dumps in the Dragonja valley, lectures for local farmers on organic farming, festival EtnoIstra – traditional Istrian music festival in Šmarje, Istrian night – traditional food, vine, olive oil and cultural heritage promotion, special leaflet for public,...) but also the activities of local cultural and tourist society as well as local community (olive trees excavated on the territory of the new highway trace were planted at the crossing point of the state road and the road to village Šmarje; two information desks of the rural part of Slovenian Istria were put up accompanied by a leaflet; a leaflet about local bread and some other information have been produced; a sidewalk from the crossing point to village Šmarje was built and a walking pass through the village Šmarje traced).

The project together with the accompanied activities has not only engaged a remarkable number of local residents but has also contributed to their self-confidence and to the intensification of local identity.

Besides positive accomplishments and effects of the project also some problems and shortcomings have been identified. So far the leadership of the project has been a voluntary activity. With the expansion of the project on the whole territory of planned landscape park, and with the simultaneous realization of several project components, at least a part-time manager of the project is required. A realistic opportunity for financing further activities of NGO PANGEA should be found within the financing of the planned Landscape park.

A problem is also the lack of financial resources, especially for the implementation of professional proposals/solutions for the elaborated project components. Due to the lack of financial resources the elaboration of architectural plan for the central part of village Šmarje has not even started yet. Possible solutions for this problem are incorporation of the project into larger projects financed by the state and the EU budgets and/or attracting private capital for investments.

In spite of numerous residents have participated in project, mostly as participants in the workshops, the project has not activated as many individuals and groups as expected. The reason for this is not so much a lack of information (there were spread at the workshops and other meetings, by special issue of local journal, by leaflets and via personal contacts of the members of the project team) as it is in the fact that the area is rather developed with a decent living standard of the majority of the residents. Only few of those who run an efficient business in the area express their interest for the project.

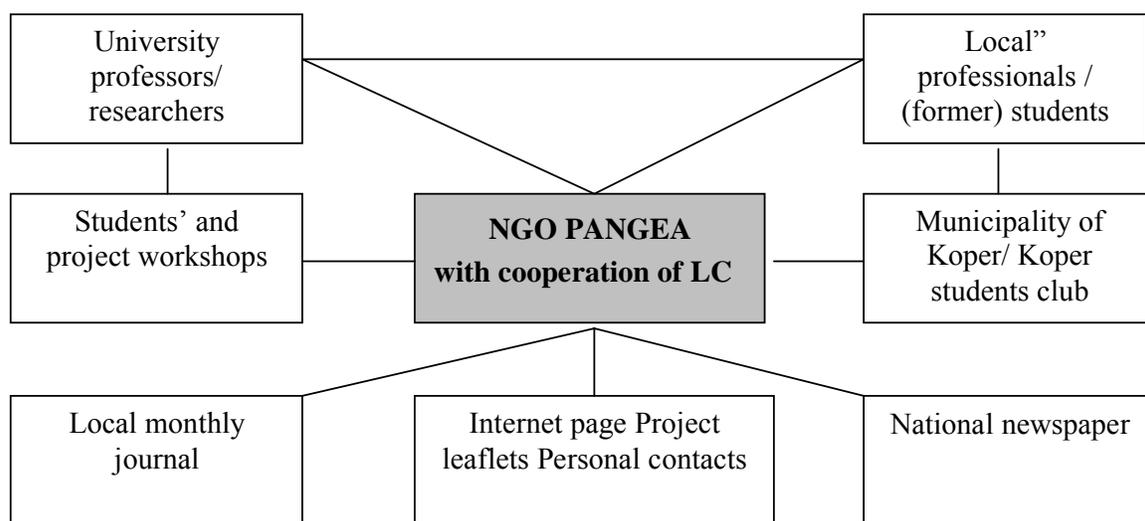
c) Information and knowledge as a driving force of the project

In spite of the fact that numerous research and projects have been carried out during last 10 or 15 years on the territory of Slovenian Istria, none of them has stimulated as many actions/activities in a relatively short time that this one and motivated a pronounced number of local residents/local NGOs to participate in common actions.

There are several causes to which this accomplishment might be ascribed. The first and most powerful factor seems to be knowledge of the university professors/researchers and their (former) students on the one hand and knowledge of young professionals in most cases the members of PANGEA society who have initiated and led the project. Local professionals, the majority of them working/studying in the state capital city of Ljubljana (over 100 km distance

from the project area), have attracted some of (their former) professors who invited other university professors and researchers they know to participate as the members of the project team (Picture 9).

Two several days workshops of the students of landscape architecture and several project workshops have brought not only new spirit but also many new ideas to the area, especially to the central village Šmarje but also to some other villages, the young residents of one of which initiated similar project for their village starting by founding a PANGEA section for the development of village Krkavče. The village team is closely related to the team of project “Šmarje – the door into the heart of Slovenian Istria” but is at the same time independent in formulating the project goals and inviting other professionals (professors/researchers) to join it.



Picture 9: the network of knowledge and information flow

The second activation factor are local human resources which core is represented by “local” professionals and students who possess knowledge and information, and are at the same time strongly attracted to their homeland, its natural and cultural heritage with which they do not only identify but try to make it richer and wider recognized. To reach this goal they do not only value still existing heritage but are re-discovering the forgotten one and try to revitalize it. An example: The village Šmarje as a fast growing settlement presently having 651 residents which represent 40 percent of 1614 residents of local community Šmarje (SURS, 2002) planned to introduce streets in the settlement but LC council suggested to re-introduce old names for various parts of the village.

As the third activation factor of local residents to co-operate is the urgent need for local producers of grapes/vine, olive oil and early vegetable to efficiently market their high quality products under a common branch.

Conclusion

The most pronounced feature of the project realization process is the combination of local events organized and performed by local residents for themselves not just for visitors on the

one hand, and active participation of local residents'/NGOs in the project activities. If this is or it is not an innovative approach towards local development can be discussed, but in any case, it works! However, the project team has been aware of the fact that future (economic) development should be to a greater extent, based on information and knowledge. The economic activity selected for the formulation of strategy for its implementation (production and processing of medical and aromatic herbs) is exactly the one, which will in addition to information/knowledge require an innovative approach in production and processing as well as in organizing producers in promoting production, processing and marketing.

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