

Community Engagement within VAST-VIEW.



Education and Culture DG

Lifelong Learning Programme



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Introduction

VAST VIEW builds on a long history of community engagement by a partnership of core partners. Most recently, in the Green Village Project, the VAST VIEW partners Náttúrustofa Vestjarða – NAVE (Iceland), Grampus Heritage & Training (United Kingdom), Biuldungshaus Heideiland (Germany) and Satul Verde Association (Romania) all helped to create the training programme ‘Sustainable Rural Development – Focus on Culture & Nature’. Two further VAST VIEW partners, Moorforge (UK) and Stokkar og Steinar (Iceland) were subcontractors.

The course focused on...

RURAL FOOD

RURAL ENERGY

SUSTAINABLE BUILDING

WOOD PRODUCTS

.....and 3 more key areas that are more overarching and transversal....

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES

OUR SUSTAINABLE ANCESTORS

ACCESS TO RURAL RESEARCH

In total these 7 key areas were selected to mesh with the 4 pillars of rural sustainability.....

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY – low impact and low carbon generating processes that do not deplete resources and encourage ecological biodiversity whilst respecting rarity and typicality.

CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY – giving respect and recognition to the culture of our ancestors but also giving opportunity for contemporisation of culture and recognising multi-culturalism.

SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY – supporting family values and selecting development pathways that retain all age-classes in rural areas; at the same time giving support to social networks, structures and institutions.

ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY – building the foundation for job creation in the rural area through best use of cultural and natural assets and value-adding to raw materials at or close to source.

It is the ‘Empowering Communities’ element that this report concentrates on – if communities are to be empowered, they must be engaged. Within the four pillars of rural sustainability, community engagement and empowerment are critical for social and cultural sustainability.

Objective

The prime objective of this short report is to explore ways of engaging communities by looking at examples from all 5 VAST VIEW partner countries. We can then explore, through the 2-year VAST VIEW project period, how the experiences of one partner can help another. Ultimately, we can try to explore new ways of engaging communities and transferring proven methods from one European country to another.

Examples from Romania.

With 'Green Village' it was the Satul Verde Association in Romania that led the partnership on community engagement. The reason for their nomination to this part of the project was because of numerous successful examples of successful community engagements in Romania

New Horizons Foundation developed the "IMPACT" programme which is designed to address poverty and apathy in one of the poorest regions of Romania through a graduated hands-on learning process that fosters both personal development and community engagement. Young people learn to identify issues of critical concern to their communities, while developing the skills they need to design a response and take responsibility for seeing projects through to completion. This includes raising funds and learning how to form partnerships with local government, business and civil society organizations in order to advance these projects. For VAST VIEW the most critical lesson is – give the community some responsibility within the project.



Ratiu Foundation Romania- through "Community development through art" wants to create opportunities for individuals to actively participate in the live and problem solving process of their community. The project brings together Roma and majority students in Romania and Moldova to lead local art projects through a community schools model. The programme supports youth in becoming active citizens who mobilize their peers to build tolerance across ethnic

divisions. Using art as a catalyst. For VAST VIEW the message is that opportunities to be creative spark the interests of community members of all ages.

Skills of the Roma – by recognizing and valuing their skills, this hard to reach ethnic minority can be engaged.

Community Resource Centre (CERC) in Schela created a proper space for dialogue inside Schela community between Petrom, community members and local authorities in order to develop sustainable projects and resolve mutual problems. The community were engaged in activities like local countryside cleaning exercises, support for poor and lonely old people as well as in local cultural events. For our VAST-VIEW partnership, the creation of infrastructure – a community space, is of critical important and gives a core and focus to the community. We plan to do this in Germany

(Saxon House), UK (Viking Forge) and Romania (traditional village house). In Iceland with NAVE, we want to build on the community ownership of the pit-house at Aebar,

ARDC - The Romanian Association for Community Development attempts to solve identified issues within a community by piloting a new type of approach to community development. This was about involving children and young people in the process of identifying the issue and presenting this back to the community through art. This was tested out in 3 counties within Oltenia – SW Romania. Marza was the only community where the majority of the population was Roma 80% and to which the final outcome with such a big success that led to building a church in the village; this then spiralled out to wider improvements in the village, including roads, public wells and even a school. Another art project but taking a further step in getting community members to open up about the issues that they face. For VAST VIEW we might seek to do the same.... For example, if rural unemployment is an issue, show that skills training and creativity drawn from tradition can lead to real jobs.

As well as showcasing other successful Romanian examples, Satul Verde (SV) has experience of its own. SV is concerned with the future of rural areas and the rescuing of traditional skills. They want to help communities make better use of their knowledge & skills that have been passed on from one generation to another. They started with small international groups that spend a day in the village of Girbovita to take part in different activities then discuss & compare uses of land, traditional skills, way of life, food. Various people from the community attended, including the mayor's representative, the priest, the forester. This was the start of involving the community – by seeing that visitors were interested and



thought traditional skills and lifestyles were valuable, they began to value them more themselves. The lesson for VAST VIEW is to make sure local community members meet and have access to visitors from the other 4 countries – they will see things that are familiar to them in a new light.

Engaging the community in Rimeț – through asking their help to survey old houses

As a result of people's interest in local food & beverages, a training room for traditional cooking was

set up in a house in the village. It was and still is used for demonstrations with various groups. In the Green Village Rural Food action in Romania (August 2011), the people in the village of Girbovita:

- showed the area (including vineyards, orchards, vegetable gardens) to participants in GV Rural Food action;
- demonstrated the daily activities in a small farm (feeding the chickens ,pig, rabbits, milking goats & cow);
- cooked traditional village food using the wooden oven & stove.

10 children were involved as well - they had a drawing activity on the “food” theme combined with a pie- tasting session! Again, for VAST VIEW we could consider giving the community some responsibility for showing the village, the buildings, the skills they have.

Empowering the community by valuing their skills and asking them to pass them on – cookery and craft with a practical and sustainable future



In the Apuseni Mountains, in the village of Avram Iancu, local people got involved with the visiting groups also:

- a lady showed traditional costumes, carpets & bags woven on the loom;
- Emil & his wife prepared a tasty lunch for the group;
- Traian showed the use of wood in making flutes, rakes, barrels, churns. We also had a hay- gathering session with Traian’s family.
- Viorica, a berry picker from the village, showed the group how she collects blueberries & we discussed about various uses of wild berries.

The message for VAST VIEW is – allow local people to involve visitors in their every-day lives and what they do/make.

Examples from Iceland



In the south of Iceland, around Selfoss, craft, creativity and history has been successfully used to engage the local community.

Community engagement through textiles – a common interest to build around

Pingborg ullarvinnsla specialise in textiles, especially wool and they give some strong messages about successful community engagement. They are a community group consisting of mainly but not exclusively, women. They come together to make woollen goods and socialise at the same time. Importantly, they have become a community enterprise

because they are successful in selling their products. If we think in terms of the four pillars of rural sustainability (that VAST VIEW might seek to follow) Pingborg ullarvinnsla score highly in all of them....

Environmental sustainability

They use wool, a sustainable natural product. Sheep farming in Iceland, if correctly managed has a beneficial effect on the landscape and nature. They wash the wool as a group activity without making excessive use of industrial technologies

Social sustainability

Their wool centre, workshops and shop have become a social hub and they attract some younger members to their group. They share a common interest in textiles but they can meet and discover other common interests through social activity.

Cultural sustainability

Pingborg ullarvinnsla keep alive some traditional crafts and patterns – they are not just concerning wool (yarn) but also do braiding, knotting, twisting and felting. They experiment with traditional dyes, tell stories, etc. They also lead in some new designs, adding a contemporary aspect to culture.

Economic sustainability

This, in the countryside, can be the most elusive pillar of sustainability but Pingborg ullarvinnsla have achieved it, making income without compromising the other 3 pillars

NAVE (Náttúrustofa Vestfjarða/ Westfjords Natural History institute) are the leaders of VAST VIEW and want to increase their success in community engagement. To that end, they have carried out some successful examples...

Engaging the community to build a Viking Age pit house and then use it for the community



NAVE is a regional institute involved in natural and historical researches. It opened in 1997 and is based in Bolungarvík, Hólmavík and Bíldudalur covering the entire Westfjords area. It is one of seven regional research centres of this kind in Iceland united in a project called SNS.

The institute conducts basic and applied researches on Icelandic nature with emphasis on zoology, botany, archaeology, ecology and geology. It maintains a collection of scientific specimens and database. It assembles literature about Icelandic nature and history. It manages two museums, the Ósvör Maritime Museum and the Natural Museum both in Bolungarvík.

The main aim of the institute is to collect information about the Nature of Westfjords and make it available to the community and part of their transnational strategy is to join projects that increase their capacity, skills and knowledge in community engagement

In the Green Village project, Árbær village was the focus for community engagement and two very successful community orientated actions were delivered there; the building of a Viking Age pit-house with international and local community

volunteers – the pit house then used for craft, music and storytelling. A second action under 'Our Sustainable Ancestors', saw members of the local community pooling their knowledge to smelt iron in the way that the Vikings did.

Examples from the United Kingdom

Grampus Heritage and Moorforge are the UK partners in VAST VIEW; both have some experience in community engagement.

The main home-focus of Grampus's community work is in interactive training actions on sustainable rural development. In Green Village the subjects were limeburning and the production of a community smokehouse. The idea of this building was that villagers from four nearby villages (Threapland, Plumbland, Parsonby and Arkleby) were invited to come and see the building being created. Plumbland primary school also brought two classes down to the site (totalling over 40 children plus their teachers). In all, we had over 60 visitors during the course of the week – most were locals and a few were invited from further afield using Grampus's network of partner organisations established over several years. In the spirit of 'lifelong learning', Grampus were pleased to receive the local Old Age Pensioners group and Village Hall



Above: Community smoke house, built & used by the community – Ashgill – venue for creativity

Sub-Committee group, as well as local schoolchildren; the youngest visitor was 4 years old and the oldest was 84 years old!

All felt it was crucial to the long-term success of the smokehouse to have interested parties from the local community – Grampus had spoken to villagers and also put information out into the community newsletter expressing their wish for everyone to use the smokehouse at some point in the future. Because were not running the smokehouse in a commercial way, they were happy for people to just have a look even if they didn't use it for themselves. Grampus intend to run future smoking courses and continue disseminating the project throughout the community.

Similarly, those who came to Grampus' site also had a chance to look at the lime-burning in progress. Whilst at times there wasn't much to see (once the fire starts, it just needs constant feeding of wood but little else happens during that week), the lime-burners were on-hand to talk about what they had done. And, of course, show off their skills to a new audience who will have never seen a working lime burn in the UK.

The lessons that VAST VIEW can learn in terms of community engagement from the UK examples are...

- Choose a subject / topic that is interesting to different age groups – this draws the community together – younger and older members.
- Produce a legacy in this case a smokehouse that can be used into the future, re-enforcing the fact that the community has been drawn together.
- Select existing networks within the local community in order to disseminate and invite a broad audience – in this case Grampus involved the school, the Methodist Church, the Orthodox church, the Parish Council, the Village Hall Sub-Committee, the local crafts circle and the West Cumbrian Archaeological Society.

Examples from Denmark.

It is very interesting that in Nymdegab, where e-consult, the Danish partner in VAST VIEW is based, the Nymdegab Museumsforening is something of a community hub. The museum, which is a Non-profit Organisation, is successful in showing history through well-designed exhibits. Equality importantly that history is brought to life by inviting members of the community to demonstrate traditional skills.

Community engagement at the museum through family events, creative activities, community boating and community focused exhibitions



They hold regular community events and bring in members of the community to show...

- Textiles
- Ceramics
- Wood working
- Cookery

Also community members are given some responsibilities, for example in the management of a traditional vegetable and herb garden and the everyday maintenance of some of the outdoor structures, such as the windmill.

Community engagement is also through festivals. Annual gatherings to celebrate dates important to the village and nationally to Danes

The link to community enterprise is also notable with the whole community co-operating to offer local and traditional hand made products to tourists,

Examples from Germany.

The VAST VIEW partner, Bildungshaus Heideand, is closely connected to the Dubener Heide Naturpark and act as their contractors and maintenance experts. In this way, they share the ethos of working with and serving the community.

Engaging the community by training local rangers and guides, showcasing local products and the now famous Wood Festival at Tornau



They have some good examples of ways to involve the community....



1. They operate a ranger training for local people – who act as volunteers and get involved as guides to visitors, promoting the cultural and natural assets of the area

2. They run a magazine and invite community members to participate and submit news items

3. They lead walks, mushroom collecting trips, bird watching, beaver watching. These are enjoyable but also promote nature conservation.
4. They offer work experience to community members – for example those in local schools and colleges.
5. They have community members on the Board and listen to the communities ideas and needs – which they try to meet
6. They organize community festivals, like the international Wood Festival each July, which has become well known for wood carving using chainsaws.

Some conclusions.

The involvement of the community is of critical importance when developing & implementing a project. It is often the key to a successful project. In small rural areas, the community can be reached through:

- schools;
- townhalls;
- churches;
- Sunday meetings.

In bigger areas, you can also use:

- local & national newspapers;
- the TV, radio.

The community can be involved in a project as spectators, assistant organizers, doers trainers/demonstrators. Most local people are willing to show to others local crafts & skills (weaving, fencing, pruning, grafting, cooking, silversmithing, blacksmithing, building) or to share their knowledge (plants, trees, natural remedies).

Children are interested in drawing & playing – so project related activities can be design for them as well.

Communities can organize:

- training sessions on various subjects;
- festivals;
- circles (crochet, knitting, reading)
- social meetings.

Identifying the heart of the community.

From what we have seen, it is obvious that in order to successfully engage a community it is necessary to find the focal point, the heart of the community. One big problem in Europe is that the physical places where people meet are being reduced because of outward migration and money saving measures. I refer here to the closure of schools, shops, pubs, youth clubs (not thriving if the number of young people reduces), reduced church congregations. We can consider the physical places where people congregate, as being important for meeting the community, telling them about VAST VIEW (dissemination) and also maybe using them for training...

- The Church
- The School
- The Youth Centre
- The coffee shop

- The pub
- The village shop
- The community hall
- The cultural centre
- The museum

We can keep adding to this list as we work more closely with the communities that surround us.

To finish this report, here are some more thoughts from Romania....

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats of community involvement

Community Strengths:

- good knowledge & skills in different subjects;
- ability to share own experiences & learn from others;
- rich cultural & natural heritage;
- ability to adapt to different circumstances'

Weaknesses:

- lack of resources (access to internet, money) to organize & promote local events;
- some communities live in remote areas, not easily accessible (no paved roads, no means of transport). In these cases it is more difficult for people to get together & take part in activities.
- cultural differences: in some areas people don't have the culture of working together for/with the community;
- language barriers, especially for people in the rural areas.

Opportunities:

- to promote the area, local food, traditional skills;
- to improve the use of natural & cultural heritage;
- to add value to local products & skills in order to make them marketable;
- to improve people's communication & social skills;
- to learn a foreign language;
- to interact with people coming from different cultural backgrounds;
- to boost people's confidence in own forces;
- to develop entrepreneurial skills that would lead to local businesses.

Threats:

- lack of human/financial resources to involve the community on a regular basis;
- lack of interest to work within the community.

By considering this SWOT analysis, we can be prepared for some of the problems in engaging communities that we may meet in VAST VIEW

One observation from the UK that is probably less prevalent than in Romania concerns the transient rural community. Considering (especially) English rural settlements communities have been very fluid since the end of World War II and especially since the late 1960's. There are several facets to that fluidity....

1. Family members no longer live in the same proximity for life.
2. Young people invariably move away, usually to a town or city and those that remain are 'less adventurous, lateral thinking, outgoing and optimistic – they become more difficult to engage with.

3. In Cumbria, UK, the region is famous for landscape and a healthy environment and property prices are high; this has led to second home ownership (same in Nymindegab, Denmark I think?) and a community that is only really present in the summer making engagement sporadic and interrupted. For example the museum in Nymindegab closes in the 'off season', which is not useful if it is a community hub. Also second home owners are not locals with the same knowledge or commitment to the village

4. Even if those who settle, effectively replacing the more adventurous young people that leave, are permanent residents they are often older and have life experience that makes them behave differently. Many were successful leaders in business and they can 'muscle-in' to the local hierarchy and appear to 'take over' – leading to resentment by (true) locals. With the regard to cultural sustainability a population of villagers made up of retired bankers is not likely to want to add new dimensions to culture through youthful pursuits, so they become a little rooted in the past, not the present and with little ability to change culture.

Martin Clark – January 2013