

BURGWALD, KELLERWALD & KNÜLLGEBIET (Hessen, Germany)

“Profil” - 3 LAGs and 1 training programme for female rural entrepreneurs



The action

PROFIL is a training programme designed to encourage female entrepreneurship in rural areas. Established initially as a LEADER I project in one German LEADER area, the training model has been transferred to three LEADER II areas in the Hessen region. PROFIL aims to support the creation of new rural activities locally which can meet the requirements of women for flexibilities, especially women returners. By gearing the programme towards tourism-related business creation, the training providers are also endeavouring to improve the quality of the local tourism provision - a sector in decline but presenting potential as an activity to support the rural economy.

Key elements

- > The transfer of a training model from a LEADER I to a LEADER II project.
- > The partnership of 3 LEADER groups in organising a training programme for rural women.
- > Partnership with the local higher education institutes, to deliver certain modules of the training, and with a variety of public and private-sector bodies in developing the course.
- > The professional integration of mainly female returners in a rural region with few employment opportunities.
- > The development of new employment meeting the needs of women in terms of flexible working hours and proximity to the home.

Context

Agricultural decline, coupled with the absence of industrial enterprise, offers few employment opportunities in the Objective 5b area of Hessen. The lack of medium-sized enterprises and service-based businesses - traditional employers of women - renders the job prospects even lower for women. Many local people commute to the town of Kassel which is about an hour's drive away but this is not a practical solution for the women, many with family commitments, who wish to work locally.

Starting point

At a presentation of a female rural entrepreneurship project, led by the Rhön LEADER group, the Knüllgebiet LAG in Hessen recognised the transferability of the model to its LEADER area. Due to budgetary restrictions (this type of action had not been foreseen in the business plan), the LAG decided to identify other partners in order to share the cost of setting up a training programme. At a regional meeting of the Hessen LEADER groups, the Kellerwald and Burgwald LAGs agreed to join the project. To determine the need and suitability of such an initiative, the 3 LAGs invited interested rural women from the three areas to a joint workshop. The some 30 women attending this meeting expressed much enthusiasm.

The aim of the female entrepreneurship project was to train women to enable them to start up their own business. The sector targeted for business creation by women was tourism as this sector was deemed to have growth potential in the area. Rural Hessen had a flourishing recreational tourism

trade in the 60s and 70s but the sector underwent a decline from the mid 80s onwards, and an accompanying fall in standards. A previous study undertaken by one of the 3 partner LAGs had outlined the need to modernise tourism facilities. Some of the study's recommendations were adopted by the training project, named PROFIL.

Implementation

The training providers of the Rhön project were appointed to design the Hessen programme. Hence, not only was the idea transferred but also a great deal of the acquired expertise and experience. A number of organisations were consulted during course preparation including rural women's associations, tourism boards and associations, economic development bodies, adult education institutes and the ESF-funded project "Arbeit und Frau" (Women and Work).

The Knüll group assumed responsibility for general coordination but each LAG designated a project officer to oversee activities within the respective area. While the original reason for involving many partners was to achieve cost-effectiveness, the LAGs came to recognise the other benefits to be derived from cooperation, namely, a wider target area and a greater market overview and access for the fledgling enterprises.

Between November 1995 and October 1996, the Knüll LAG organised a series of seminars and press conferences in the three areas to raise awareness of the project. These attracted women from diverse backgrounds, as compared to the Rhön project which had mainly involved women from the

farming sector. The majority were women returners with an average educational attainment (ie, educated to secondary school level) and generally aged between 35 and 40 years, although the age range did span from 33 to 63 years.

The training concept is based on three modules:

1. Foundation course: 17 days of courses (business administration, marketing, computing and local geography) delivered in a flexible manner by the adult education centre in each LEADER area;
2. Tourism specialisation: 41 days of seminars dealing with subjects such as accommodation, catering, direct marketing and service management. This module was delivered at one venue for all three areas.
3. Technical support: the respective LAG project manager then provided coaching to the women to help them get their business ideas off the ground. This form of group coaching fostered mutual trust and cooperation links between the women and led to many important elements of the businesses (logos, business descriptions, etc) being jointly developed.

A total of 40 women from the three areas took part in the training programme and by the end of 1998, around 10 new businesses had been set up. These include a rural café set up in a former pigsty, a horse riding facility, a set designer/decorator specialising in events, rural apartments, a tourist guide business and cookery courses. In addition, a further 20 part-time and full-time jobs have been safeguarded or created, in areas such as child-care, housekeeping or farming. The women meet once a month in their respective area to exchange experiences. This contact enhances cooperation, which in turn creates synergies; for instance, the decorator is outfitting the café, another new entrepreneur uses the café as an outlet for her food and craft products, and a women organising fasting (healthy food) weeks books accommodation at the rural apartments.

Start-up financial support provided by the Objective 5b programme has been crucial to the launch of the businesses. The moral support of the families has been an equally important factor in their success.

Budget and sources of finance

The total cost of Profil amounted to EUR 100 000, financed to the tune of 90% by LEADER and the Hessen Land authority. The remaining 10% were provided by the women who had to pay a fee of EUR 250 to enrol on the training programme.

Innovative elements for the area

Mobilising the community and social cohesion

By providing rural women with the skills and a support network to work locally, PROFIL is contributing to social cohesion in rural areas and is fostering solidarity between the women.

Activities and employment

Training has enabled more than 10 of the course participants to become new business creators, mainly in non-agricultural related activities. The majority of remaining women have secured either full-time, part-time or multiactivity-type employment.

Competitiveness and access to markets

The upgrading of the local tourism infrastructure is starting to reap rewards; for instance, three apartment owners in the Knüll area have managed to secure a contract with a Dutch tour operator. The link up of the three LAGs has created additional synergies that go beyond the project, including an improvement in the quality of tourism.

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The LEADER areas of Burgwald, Kellerwald and Knüllgebiet are situated close together in the northern part of Hessen. Population density varies from around 110 inhabitants/km² in Burgwald to an average of 65/km² inhabitants in Knüllgebiet. Manufacturing is the dominant sector in each area in terms of employment, with services taking a close second place. Agriculture still plays a role in the local economies occupying between 2% and 5% of the working population, but in Knüllgebiet, farming as a second activity engages almost 80% of working people. The type of tourism differs among the areas but a decline in this market is common to each, albeit to differing degrees.

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