

BJÖRKSHULT (Sweden)

The Village Model



The action

Community interest and participation in the development of the small area of Björkshult (southeast Sweden) steadily grew throughout the late eighties and early nineties, culminating in the foundation of a village group in early 1995. In connection with its creation, local surveys had identified the development needs and priorities of the local people. As a consequence, the group put together a development plan reconciling two of the main concerns of the local community: unemployment and quality of life. With LEADER support and the extensive voluntary work of local people, the village council has been able to implement this plan called the "Byamodellen" (The Village Model) project; its aim being to create local job opportunities by fostering new activities that are designed to improve the quality of life.

Key Elements

- > A model for how village groups may contribute to creating new job opportunities.
- > A holistic outlook on local development work with local participation as its foundation.
- > The creation of a company to develop the economic activities arising from the project.

Context

The inhabitants of Björkshult (comprising Björkshult village itself and the tiny neighbouring village of Pikaböl) have been actively involved in the regeneration of their area since the beginning of the eighties following the closure of the village glass works - a major employer - and the threat of depopulation. The participation of the wider Högby municipality in the nation-wide local democracy scheme "Village Politics for the 90s" served to demonstrate further the enormous resources that can be released when citizens become actively involved in finding solutions to common problems.

Starting Point

In early 1995 a small group of local residents met with municipal rural advisors to work on a questionnaire designed to survey the development priorities of local inhabitants and to gauge their interest in taking part in the work. After gathering the responses to the questionnaire, a village meeting was held to form the village group. The survey had triggered a great interest in issues concerning the community's future, with 60-70 inhabitants out of a total population of 100 attending the initial meetings.

With an annual budget of around ECU 3 350 obtained from various sources - municipal funding, lottery monies, and entertainment, the village group funded a variety of local improvement projects including new lighting, an improved bathing place, parks and other green areas. In early 1996 it started to develop ideas on an integrated development strategy. This resulted in the formulation of "Byamodellen"

(The Village Model), a project which aims to create job opportunities by introducing measures designed to improve the quality of village life. The areas singled out for development were the environment, commercial and public services, tourism and culture. The ultimate goal of this project was to test and define a model for intensive community development. A successful application to the LEADER Småland group in early 1997 enabled the work to get underway.

Implementation

A part-time project leader, who reports to the village council board, was appointed. Four interest groups, comprising between 5 and 30 local residents and coordinated by the project leader, were set up to steer forward the development work in the respective areas of tourism, the elderly, handicrafts and Agenda 21.

The introductory phase involved scheduling and prioritising. To capitalise on the approaching summer season, it was decided to focus on launching the tourism and environmental activities of the strategic plan. Hence, a new camping ground was constructed and a cottage converted into a retail outlet for local handicrafts. Two unemployed local women have been hired to run these enterprises on a part-time basis. Summer cabin owners were also approached with the offer of cabin and garden maintenance on a fee-paying basis. This service has proved to be very popular although it must be developed further (more customers and higher rates) to make it a viable business and to create sustainable employment.

On the environmental side, a small glass recycling company with smelting house and bottle cleaning facility has been set up with the collaboration of a glass recycling company, located just outside the village, and the owner of Björkshult's closed-down glassworks. This operation has created one part-time job.

Community activities were begun when the tourist season was over. Voluntary services for the elderly have emerged, including gardening and the introduction of a day-care facility in Björkshult meaning that elderly residents no longer have to journey to the town of Högsby for this purpose. As these free-of-charge services would normally be delivered by the public sector, the project is endeavouring to obtain support from the local authority.

A further scheme to emerge from the Agenda 21 interest group concerns the collection of sorted recyclable waste from the households of Björkshult and two neighbouring villages, and delivery to large containers situated outside the villages. This collection has been made possible by a villager who lends his van for this purpose. Again this service is offered freely although discussions are currently underway with the municipality of Högsby on the possibility of introducing a form of community charge to meet the costs of this service. The project is also considering approaching the government-contracted company responsible for collecting the containers with a view to obtaining some form of sponsorship.

In January 1998, an economic association (established as a company) was formed as a vehicle for the "profit-making" activities. The move to separate the profit and non-profit activities was made for legal and fiscal reasons and to appease the many villagers who felt uneasy about being involved in a business. The association "BUC" has some 25 members who have signed a contract committing themselves to working a minimum of 25 hours per year on a voluntary basis.

Budget and sources of finance

The total budget for the 3-year project is ECU 102 000 with LEADER support amounting to ECU 51 000 (30% from the EU and the remainder financed by local and regional authorities). Matching private finance has been generated by the project through payment-in-kind (voluntary work) primarily and own-revenue.

BJÖRKSHULT

The village of Björkshult (pop. 100) is situated in the parish of Fagerhult (pop. 1000), in Högsby municipality, Kalmar County (southeast Sweden). The parish's main sources of employment are in public service delivery and small-scale farming village in the mainly woodland areas. There were 64 unemployed people in Fagerhult in 1998.

Innovative elements for the area

Mobilising the population and social cohesion

Through the various interest groups, the local community has been able to put forward its ideas for the development of Björkshult and to see some of these ideas become reality thanks to the work of dedicated volunteers. The project is not just about creating employment but about engaging the community as a whole in finding solutions to common issues, such as refuse handling, tourism and public services.

Activities and employment

Since the outset, the project has given rise to several part-time employment opportunities (equivalent to 1.5 jobs) and it expects to create 4-5 by the project end. This number may appear small but it is of great importance to a village with a population of just 100 persons.

Management of the environment, natural resources

By integrating environmental issues, such as waste handling, into the project, it is expected that the village inhabitants will become more environmentally conscious.

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