



Study Circle for local development: lifelong oriented models and operators' competences in the cross border area Italy- Slovenia

Circoli di Studio per lo sviluppo locale: modelli lifelong oriented e competenze dell'operatore in area transfrontaliera Italia-Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the model of study circle, not as a learning action in adult education but in its being an action of design able to put together different local partners for the construction of responses related with learning needs identified. The device of Study Circle is analysed as a model that has the potentiality to promote and develop social networks for local education. So, it is outlined the possibility that Study Circles may represent a mechanism for the establishment of local institutional spaces for continuing education: in terms of needs' evaluation, planning and management of the education system, until evaluation. The paper develops its reflection by starting from a methodological model in order to subsequently define an AE prototype as an integrated lifelong learning system. The Authors focus on the role of tutors/mentors and thus reflect on their competencies. After a description of the theoretical framework, the Authors present an interesting pilot activity conducted in the cross-border area between Italy and Slovenia, and concerning Study Circles for the development of human resources and cooperation networks.

Il contributo analizza il modello del circolo di studio, non solo come dispositivo formativo di educazione degli adulti, ma nel suo essere azione progettuale in grado di mettere insieme soggetti diversi per la costruzione di risposte formative coerenti con i bisogni rilevati. Il dispositivo del Circolo di Studio presenta infatti un modello organizzativo potenzialmente in grado di promuovere e sviluppare reti sociali per l'educazione locale. Viene così delineata la possibilità che Circolo di Studio possa rappresentare un meccanismo locale per la costituzione di spazi istituzionali di educazione permanente: dalla rilevazione dei bisogni, alla programmazione e gestione del sistema formativo, fino alla sua valutazione. Da modello metodologico per l'Eda a prototipo di sistema formativo integrato territoriale. Il contributo si sofferma sul ruolo fondamentale del tutor con

una riflessione sulle competenze. Si conclude con la presentazione di un progetto per la costruzione di un sistema transfrontaliero tra Italia e/Slovenia per la realizzazione di circoli di studio come supporto allo sviluppo delle competenze locali.¹

KEYWORDS

Study Circle, Local Development, Lifelong Learning, Tutoring
Circolo di studio, Sviluppo locale, Lifelong Learning, Tutoring

1. Local development and Lifelong Learning

It has been widely debated and acknowledged by the international community over the recent years that the enhancement of local knowledge and resources is highly important to support democratic, inclusive, sustainable development.

However, democratic and participatory governance models addressing equitable development and social cohesion by the enhancement of local territory and culture often remain mere strategic directions failing to turn into effective operational practices where the local knowledge potential can be detected and capitalised in order to promote endogenous and sustainable development.

Moreover, connecting local development with the learning and knowledge potential that a territory can express necessarily implies to adopt a pedagogical perspective given the implicit centrality of the learning approach and the essential educational component entailed by it.

On the basis of this assumption it becomes clear that it is necessary to combine local development with the local education system. Such a system though cannot be centred on the school model of formal education but must be based on the concept of lifelong learning. It is through a variety of education, vocational training, non formal education and continuous education tools that the education system fully accomplishes its mission that is to support individual and community training process and to promote locally embedded and development oriented lifelong learning processes. A local education system needs to be conceived as an investment in local human resources. This requires the inclusion of non formal and informal education.

The direction pointed out by UNESCO in this regard has international relevance: the document issued from the VI world conference on Adult education, held in Belem, *Belém Framework for Action*, explicitly highlights the role of lifelong learning for local development stressing the need to recognize all learning outcomes, including those achieved through informal and non formal learning processes. The following paragraph is taken from the recent UNESCO document *Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*:²

- 1 The present paper was jointly elaborated by the authors who agreed upon its contents and setting. The contributions are organised as follows: Giovanna Del Gobbo paragraph 1 and 2, Nevenka Bogataj paragraph 3, Elena Slaniska paragraph 4.
- 2 UNESCO *Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, UIL, Hamburg, 2012, p. 3.

«Today, in a complex and fast-changing world, it is necessary for individuals to acquire and adapt competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) through all forms of learning to cope with various challenges. However, qualifications systems in many societies still focus on formal learning in educational institutions. As a result, a large part of individuals' learning remains un-recognized, and many individuals' motivation and confidence to continue learning is not well promoted. This leads to a huge under-utilization of human talent and resources in society. Therefore, the learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their life in non-formal and informal settings need to be made visible, assessed and accredited [...] The RVA of non-formal and informal learning is a key lever in making lifelong learning a reality. It renders visible and gives value to the hidden and unrecognized competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives. Valuing and recognizing these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning, and strengthen their labour market opportunities. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies»².

The formal, non formal and informal learning dimensions should be considered integrated and synergic; that's the only way to produce innovation and, at the same time, innovation lies in the managing of the integration between these three, traditionally separated, learning environments³.

If one issue is recognition of informally and non formally acquired competences, another crucial issue is the need to redefine adult non formal education. One should avoid the risk to approach adult education issues focusing on how the system should be organised or dealing with specific problems and activities, methodologies and goals to be pursued. It's easy this way to lose sight of the overall meaning of adult education while reducing the scope of action to compensatory processes or new sophisticated forms of literacy, that is an education system designed to satisfy new demands to access existing knowledge or to answer to immediate problems, but failing to acknowledge the value of the subjects as social capital to exploit and invest upon.

Lisbon guidelines⁴ anticipated this change of perspective concerning the above mentioned issues which was further boosted in recent years by the identification of the local integrated education system as a lifelong learning implementation tool.

3 European Commission, *Innovation Management and the knowledge Driver Economy*, Brussels-Luxembourg, Directorate general for Enterprise, ECSC-EC-EAEC, 2004. p. 30.

4 Lisbon strategic guidelines have nevertheless a series of important forerunners: the White paper on *Growth, competitiveness, and employment: The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century*, COM(93) 700 final, Brussels, 5 December 1993; **White paper on education and training *Teaching and learning – Towards the learning society***, COM (95) 590, November 1995; up to the *Memorandum on education and lifelong learning*, Commission staff working paper, Brussels, 30.10.2000, SEC(2000) 1832 and the following papers among which *Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe*, 11762/01 EDUC 102 - COM (2001) 501 final, Brussels, 20 February 2002, joint of 21.11.2001 COM (2001) 678 final. See also *A European Area of Lifelong Learning*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publication of European Communities, 2002.

The local integrated approach, which had been investigated from the pedagogical point of view since the seventies (Laporta 1979; Orefice 1978; Orefice 1981), is increasingly aimed to integrate needs that were traditionally pursued and dealt with separately, the needs of economic development and of knowledge and competence acquisition.

What seems to characterise this new concept is the observation of how processes that were started out to achieve the goal of development may lead to useful results in terms of shaping a cohesive, aware and developed society. As a matter of fact, if economic development can take advantage from innovation abilities and if such innovation abilities spring from a continuous and life wide learning process, embracing the entire life, well beyond adolescence and youth, then, through training, not only it is possible to achieve development but also to provide knowledge tools that may increase the awareness about the individual right to perform an active, informed, aware citizenship (Satti 2005).

A life-long learning model cares for the local community and, as such, it cannot be based on a predetermined training supply as it is the case in the school system, but should rather start from the demand for development which is expressed at the local level through the multiple and diversified knowledge needs of the population (Laporta 1979). Such a model requires a network system that should be self-sustaining, flexible and locally expanded in order to allow for detection of real needs, when and where occurred, as well as for identification and leveraging of existing knowledge sources at local level.

What clearly emerges is that such an education system cannot be implemented by the setting up of local lifelong learning networks that simply integrate the existing local provision of education, vocational training, non formal training by education agencies and services where the main focus is on supply. Educational supply is traditionally conceived as a self referential organisation of contents, often exogenous, following the pattern of formal education. As remarked by professor Orefice, local *Networking* should take on a different value for the agencies involved:

«being in the same geographical area doesn't make a local education system whose well functioning, essential lifelong education resource for the local community, is rather attested and nurtured when agencies and services act as a real training network sustaining local personal, individual, collective growth based on the advanced knowledge of local society. Only in this case, the local education system is a real inter-institutional and inter association umbrella of the integrated education and training action built around the pedagogical planning of the learning community, whose operators, as knowledge workers, adopt educational methodologies and techniques of participatory research action for the solution of local development problems, concurring to the wider national and transnational development» (Orefice 2010).

Such a strategy focuses on a *lifelong learning* perspective and is characterised by the search for innovative and suitable methodologies to support the building process of an inclusive society. Practical example of such an approach is Slovenian study circles analysis based on diverse local societies expectations towards forests performed in the framework of the future organisational models and roles of forestry (Bogataj 2009, 57-65).

2. Beyond Adult education: the Study Circle potential in the local education system

A training device showing a strong innovative gradient in adult education as a system well matching training supply to local needs is the Study Circle⁵.

The model is based on training demand and, due to its flexibility and adaptability, it is able to answer training needs which are not yet satisfied by the traditional supply, proving to be an important medium to read and monitor the training needs of a specific territory.

This makes it an innovative type of action, that doesn't separate training needs from training supply and is concretely able to improve the living conditions of the public (adults and young adults) from the point of view of inclusion, citizenship, employability. But, most of all, the study circle proves to be a learning model showing good potential as paradigm of integrated territorial system.

Besides its educational value concerning the direct recipients, the participants to the study circle, one of the major strengths of the SC is its ability to bring out training needs which were not previously identified by the competent education institutions, both formal and non-formal. The lightness of the model itself, based on a limited timeframe, somewhat cutting red tape procedures, the provision of professionals in training demand inducement and tutoring and of a local backing system completely different from existing structures, are all distinctive elements that make the study circle functional to the creation and testing of a local *lifelong learning* network systems where all supporting subjects share responsibility for the setting up of the local training provision which is planned to widen and differentiate the existing training supply and to foster the integration of formal, non formal and informal learning. In order to stimulate self-organisation and self-directed learning of the adult population, the SC model requires an

- 5 The Study Circle is a model whose origins have been widely debated, expressing a social, political, cultural movement that characterised the late '1800s and the beginning of '1900s in Europe and in the USA. Some experiences that may have anticipated the model: English circles for the study of the Bible, the literary and scientific movement "Chautauqua" in the USA, the discussion in Swedish popular education by Hans Larsson. The model *paternity*, which spread about at the beginning of the 19th century, starting from Northern Europe, is however attributed to Oscar Olsson. Cfr. Larsson, S. (2001) *Seven aspects of democracy as related to study circles* in *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. Vol. 20. No 3, pp. 199 – 217; Pihlgren A.S., *A short introduction and handout to the workshop: Socratic Seminar in the Tradition of Early Swedish Popular Education, Folkbildning*, in *The 13th International Conference on Thinking Norrköping*, Sweden June 17-21, 2007, vol 1, LIU E-Press, Stockholm in <http://www.ep.liu.se/ecp_home/index.en.aspx?issue=021>. The study circle is a training model basically placing itself, as from its origins, in the "non formal" learning dimension of adulthood. His theorising in Europe coincided with the rise of the bourgeoisie, and the emergence and strengthening of this class, together with the development of western industrial democracies. Developed therefore about two centuries ago answering a need for "civic" education, the Study Circles definitely had a disruptive meaning: citizens getting together to study, analyse problems in order to become worthy partners of institutions, of the political power, but also to no longer be dependent subjects, or even passive actuators of decisions that did not respect their rights as citizens. It has had wide development and application over time especially in Northern Europe and in the USA. The first formally recognized application in Italy can be traced back only to the end of the '90s. Its training practice was extended to business contexts where it proved effective to stimulate innovation (cfr. P. Federighi, V. Boffo (edited by), *Innovation Transfer and Study Circles*, Pisa, ETS, 2009).

organised supporting infrastructure including a widespread local promotion system, geared for the detection and inducement of training demand, the provision of individual counselling, the setting up of education environments and the creation of a network of tutors and experts. The SC model calls for the creation of functional institutional and social partnerships⁶, making the most of local existing training infrastructure to carry out the planning, management, monitoring, evaluation and development of training programmes.

The study circle model overturns the traditional setting of demand-supply relationship and represents a concrete answer to the search for innovative and suitable methodologies concerning needs assessment as well as for policies fostering equal opportunities of access to training. Moreover, considering the need to identify concrete ways to reach for the most marginalized adult groups, normally excluded from training, the model, due the importance of demand inducement and expression, allows to set up a light, flexible system purposely geared for direct identification and involvement of “weaker” target groups. Another social and political function of the study circle, besides its immediate education value, is the promotion of solidarity and democratic co-responsibility networks. The local system, according to the study circle model, looks like a “living” body, setting its own priorities, investigating the needs of the most deprived people who will never manage to move on their own initiative using *self-help* (Demetrio 2003).

The study circle has a marked strategic political value when deeply rooted in the local context. It may help reading the territory as a place where needs integrate and are given integrated answers through networking in order to enhance, implement and bring awareness about empowerment and local participation initiatives already in place⁷. Nevertheless, it is necessary to “be able” to network and create the conditions so that all actors involved in the implementation of the training paths for adults may talk together and overcome the lack of communication which is usually the cause for the fragmentation of operations, as well as for the duplication and overlapping of services, and for the mixing and overlapping of competences.

It's worth pointing out how the networking activity supporting the study cir-

6 Federighi P., *Creating a regional partnership: protagonists, processes, tools*, in Cornett A. P., Federighi P., Ljung M. (a cura di), *Regional Knowledge Management. Promoting Regional Partnerships for Innovation, Learning and Development*, Firenze, Polistampa, 2006, pp. 53-79.

7 The reference to a level of integration and mutual acknowledgement of the different training dimensions which requires first of all to be contextualised in the territory and implemented through networking and partnership creation, is mentioned also in the European Commission Communication of November 21 2001 stating that: “Partnership reflect the shared benefits of, and responsibility for lifelong learning. [...] partnership at all levels, national, regional and local. [...] The social partners should also be actively involved, whenever relevant, given their multiple role as ‘consumers’, investors, negotiators and promoters of learning” (page 21). And also “New high quality methodologies and standards for valuing non-formal and informal learning must be developed, and existing measures implemented” (page 29) - “Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning a Reality” (COM – 2001 – 678 final) in *A European Area of Lifelong Learning*, Luxembourg, Office for Official Publication of European Communities, the conclusions of the European Council of Lisbon 2000, paragraph 38 states that “A fully decentralized approach will be applied consistently with the principle of subsidiarity, and the active participation of the Union, its member states, the regional and local levels, social parties and civil society through different types of partnership”.

cle implementation contains all the key elements of strategic partnership for innovation: *mapping, building, cooperating, learning* which also represent the four basic steps for the correct setting of a study circle initiative.

Assuming that all subjects in order to innovate need interaction through mutual training networks (which allows us to state that innovation is mainly an activity based on networking) partnerships lying behind study circles may become “places” where to learn how to create and manage a local network, that is to learn to innovate, because the innovation process, once started up, constantly requires management skills and the development of different types of learning processes (formal, non formal and informal)⁸. The study circle model, as project action, is a device that manages to bring together different subjects who are given the opportunity to get in touch, communicate and use one’s own competences and peculiarities to produce innovation through social networks for local education.

It is possible then to view the circle as a tool providing answers to local needs at different levels: for the citizen, for the community, building local development actions through the promotion of local networks, learning to cooperate to find new ways to meet local needs. The circle for the territory represents a local device for the building of institutional spaces of lifelong learning where planning and managing functions of the education system are performed. This type of intervention is de facto a training action aiming to elaborate socio-economic and cultural development programmes for the territory according to the analysis and answers to local needs formulated directly by the local community, ensuring full horizontal and vertical subsidiarity, respectfully of roles and functions and supporting the assumption of responsibility of local interlocutors in terms of knowledge investment and provision of financial resources as an answer to local development problems.

All this requires competences not only on behalf of participants but also of local operators in the context of lifelong learning, within a territorial system that is able to find new solutions, and to learn by doing.

1.1. *Competency issue in an adult education system: the study circle case study of Slovenia*

Slovenian experience of study circles practice, introduced in nineties according to the adjusted Swedish model (Gougoulakis, Bogataj 2007) proved to be effective operational implementation of European and National strategies (more about details at <<http://sk.acs.si>>). Study circles and reading circles are particularly popular in the rural areas. The knowledge exchange system promotes the matching of demand and supply of knowledge/services. The activity is financed at national level by the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport and (the scientific) coordination is provided by Andragoški Center Slovenije (Slovenian Institute for Adult Education) that carries out the following activities: research and counselling, monitoring of the system, training of mentors.

8 In traditional school education the operator is the source of knowledge and knowledge transmission is primarily his task, whereas in the network there are different educational relationships and network members are the “knowledge holders” (Federighi 2006).

At the twenty years anniversary of their implementation study circle were quantitatively and qualitatively evaluated in order to check their achievements and rationality (Bogataj 2011). Their model proved to be a subject of lively development during two decades. One branch has developed to the market offer focused predominantly to older women of higher material welfare. The other, budget based branch, kept original principles, developed regular detailed monitoring and achieved excellent response of local environments. The accent of the national coordinator to the deprived participants (for the very diverse reasons) resulted in the actual structure of participants: in 2011 33 % were from the social groups who seldom learn, do not actively participate in the development and are understood as marginal. This way new target groups were identified and new adult education challenges were found. The principles of sustainability are followed by the strong accent to people (not finances) and to the living processes (not material structures). However, they face with weak points as low budget, marginalisation due to the formal system or top-down initiatives. Therefore staff and ICT infrastructure remains constantly the lowest possible despite stable trend of growing participation e.g. from the initial thirty study circles yearly to the present three-hundred per year. From the organisational point of view four pillars seem crucial: 1. Constant support and awareness to the basic principles and aims of study circles; 2. Constant (though low) budget support; 3. Competencies and quality of mentors; 4. National focal point which cares for operators education, coordination and monitoring.

As most of mentors are locally based and self-interested in learning and development activity Slovenian study circle are interpreted as endogenous developmental element.

The basis of key competencies identification is identification of units, involved into study circle functioning (and consequently their effects). These are according to our experience:

- individual study circle participant
- a study circle as a group
- mentor him/herself
- local environment in the narrow meaning of the term (settlement, street in case that urban participants gather from the same street etc.)
- local environment in the broad sense (municipality, regional level of community, state and EU regulations)
- other points of view (self-actualisation, active citizenship etc.).

Study circle quality depends primarily on the response ability to the challenges at all these levels and frameworks. However, when focusing to the competencies, we concentrate to the level of study circle and mentors abilities to understand the situation and actively respond to by learning.

He or she has to see and understand the dynamic in the group, support goal oriented communication, moderate this communication, steer and coordinate, organise and care for the added value of individual participant and a group as a whole. If mentor does not identify him or herself with the group all these roles and skills are not easy to fulfil or have. She/he also has to be able to plan and promote the topic, group learning and its environment. Ability to step aside when the group dynamic already provides progression towards the goal is important and for example rare for teachers, who have essentially different role and posi-

tion than operators . Therefore literature about the teacher competencies was of limited value in defining operators' competencies.

Competency is a mixture of knowledge and skills, transferable into diverse contexts. It is multifunctional. We have therefore focused to the eight key areas of the EU reference framework⁹: mother tongue, foreign language, math competence, digital competence, learning to learn, social and civil competences, self-initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural competence.. The next pillar of forming the final operators' competences in the cross border area Italy - Slovenia are Tuscany findings (Federighi, Boffo 2009) which were upgraded with Slovenian recent evaluation of four main mentor competence areas (Bogataj 2011): 1. Social maturity (autonomy, mental strength, flexibility and ability of finding alternative solution and explanations). 2. Local embeddedness (references in responding of the local people), 3. Ability of resources identification and knowledge flow possibilities and 4. Sociability.

The final list of operators' competencies in the cross border area Italy - Slovenia are as follows:

1. Social competencies
 - a) long-term relationship building competency
 - b) cooperative and team work
 - c) tolerance
 - e) ability of argumentation and compromises
2. Local community and environment embeddedness
 - a) rational resource management (in the local community)
 - b) motivating adults to take part in their local community
 - c) inducement and survey of learning needs
 - e) understanding the connection between the adult learning programme and local society
2. Learning to learn competency
 - a) mastering self-learning strategies
 - b) planning personal development
4. Initiative and business competencies
 - a) organizing
 - b) coordinating
 - c) planning
 - d) leadership
 - e) decision making
5. Expression
 - a) mastery of the mother tongue in terms of acquiring and processing new information
 - b) ability of written and oral expression
 - c) contextualisation and interpretative ability

9 Official Journal European Union L 394/13.

6. Professional competencies
 - a) LLL practice
 - b) understanding the andragogical cycle, learning plans, monitoring and evaluation of learning and its effects
 - c) reliability in carrying out the programme and its goals, considering the quality of the programme in terms of adequacy with the needs of the local community and target group
 - d) understanding policy and institutional framework and goals.
 - e) documented planning , management and monitoring of the study circle
- Other mentor competences/knowledge
1. Digital literacy
 - a) basic IT knowledge and public relations (especially on the local level)
 - b) confident use of data processing applications

2. The testing of the study circle methodology in a cross-border area

The theoretical framework and a national case study practice description are the bases for an added value in form of a pilot activity concerning adult education which is being carried out in the cross-border area Italy Slovenia by a network of education and training agencies and institutions, local development agencies and institutions of Slovenia, Veneto and Friuli Venezia Giulia lead by Enfaf FVG. The pilot testing takes place in the framework of the project “Study Circles – cross border laboratory for the development of human resources and cooperation networks promoting local resources” financed by the European territorial cooperation Programme Italy Slovenia 2007-2013, Axis 2 - Increase competitiveness and development of a knowledge-based society.

The project develops in a cross-border environment the “study circle” training methodology which is used in non formal adult education and widely recognized for its being very inclusive, supportive of active participation of the learner and community oriented. The methodology is well known in Slovenia where it has been implemented for 18 years and is part of the national education and training system whereas it is not yet known and practiced in Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto.

Agriculture, environment, rural tourism are priority areas of activity of the project unfolding in the following territories: Eastern Veneto, Torre and Natisone Valleys, Collio and Carso in Friuli Venezia Giulia, on the Italian side, Upper So Valley, Municipality of Kanal, Collio and hilly area around Nova Gorica on the Slovenian side.

A common feature of the areas involved, basically rural ones, is that, despite the opportunities represented by local attractions and resources and by a growing demand for rural quality products, tourism potential is not being adequately exploited revealing the need to invest more in human resources development in order to increase competences and to promote innovation.

The Project aims to support local development initiatives promoting the enhancement of local existing knowledge and the creation of networks at community level among economic operators and citizens also stimulating mutually reinforcing relationships among economic and social activities in the different fields.

The main Project activities which are planned over 3 years, from October 2011 till October 2014, are:

- development of the model managing structure of the cross-border study circle system within the local life-long-learning system;
- development of the competency clusters defining the study circle tutor/mentor profile and of a cross-border certified training programme for the qualification of operators;
- training demand identification by awareness raising initiatives addressing local mediating organisations/institutions: municipalities and their associations, entrepreneurs and workers organisations, consortia, tourist promotion associations, civil society organisations, etc.;
- cross border networking of the service delivery system, by the creation of local contact points to be managed in collaboration with existing local public/private services;
- delivery of the pilot study circles training supply on identified priority issues (environment, agriculture, crafts, tourism) addressing micro business owners, unemployed people as well as precarious workers in rural season activities or in the crafts sector;
- documentation and dissemination at community level of the knowledge exchanged and developed during the pilot study circles activities;
- stakeholders and media involvement to promote and support the study circles activities during the project duration.

The objective is twofold:

- to experience the participatory pedagogy of the study circle with the aim to enhance and develop the local knowledge base and to promote learning networks;
- to support the development of an integrated education system at cross-border level, aligned with local development priorities and capable of promoting and sustaining joint LLL initiatives.

The project partnership has a strategic value in terms of sustainability of the model to be developed and promotes the involvement of the different levels required for the model implementation: political and strategic level, local planning and management of training activities levels. In order to provide this type of involvement the partnership is going to identify and test stable ways of needs analysis, planning and management of activities, training of operators which are necessary to support the operation and management of the system.

The activity is developed under the guidance of experts of pedagogical models for community development of the UNESCO Transdisciplinary Chair on Human Development and Culture of Peace of the University of Florence, professor Paolo Orefice (chair holder), Giovanna Del Gobbo and Glenda Galeotti, and SIAE – Slovenian Institute for Adult education, dr. Nevenka Bogataj, drawing on existing best practices in Italy (region Toscana) and Slovenia.

The Italian Slovenian partnership makes the project even more challenging since the study circle model will be tested to promote networking across the border, with the purpose of stimulating new training actions designed to improve the quality of life, to create new opportunities for development, employment and personal fulfilment. This peculiarity makes it an interesting testing ground to measure the study circles potential as a training methodology enhancing constructive and mutually enriching relationship as well as local specificities of the cross- border areas at European level.

Conclusions

Strategic directions are aimed to the development of practice. The actual recession period pressures both, Slovenia and Italy, to only those, who are rational and as effective as possible. Slovenian practice is only twenty years old, however grounded in theory, evaluated from the rationality point of view and opened to new challenges.

Also in Italy, the Tuscany experience related to Study Circle and local integrated educational system can offer elements for reflecting and best practices to transfer.

Local integrated system of adult learning in the cross border area thus does not start from zero. A project based pilot is long term oriented and such interpreted as a contribution of adult learning to the principles of sustainable development. Action research methodology is important in coping with this challenge, aimed to rise of social cohesion and open access to innovation abilities by learning. From the national points of view such an approach will contribute to the needs assessment, which is particularly important in the rural environments, seldom addressed along the borders. Adult education thus contributes not only to educational values but also to the new waves of positive and open development policies, steered towards the long-term cooperation and based on lifelong learning.

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