Leadership, Entrepreneurship, and Vision: The Case of the Women’s Association of Farmers in Stragari, Central Serbia

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Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the community leadership role taken by the Women’s Association of Stragari, Central Serbia, and its subsequent impact on the economic development of the region. Due in part to its turbulent past, the population of Serbia, most especially its rural population, had to forge a new path in the country’s post-conflict transition economy. Unemployment is a major problem in Serbia, but it has had an even greater impact on women. The Association was created out of a need to address the challenges faced by the community of Stragari. Data were collected during a focus group meeting with members of the Association involved in the agricultural production, marketing, and sales of its organic products. The Women’s Association of Stragari has helped to revitalize a dying rural community. Membership in the Association increases yearly, with both men and women joining the Association with the aim to improve their livelihoods and have gainful employment. What started out as a small local venture has gained national and international recognition.

Keywords: Agriculture, women, leadership, Serbia, community
Introduction

Agriculture has always played an important role in the history of a country. In virtually all developing countries, agriculture is an industry of major proportions, and often the only existing industry of any consequence. Agricultural development on small farms has been a powerful force for promoting growth and reducing poverty in many poor countries (World Bank, 2005). The benefits from agricultural development are demonstrated by the increases to small-scale farmer incomes, rising wages earned by landless laborers, and the improving availability, quality, and accessibility of food. Agricultural development possesses the potential to address the rising social and economic costs attributed to poverty, hunger, and gender inequality that exists in developing countries (World Bank, 2005).

Historically, women have played an important role in agriculture, taking on a wide range of activities related to food production, marketing, and processing. Women sow, weed, apply pesticides and fertilizer, thresh, and harvest the crops. Once the harvest is in, women provide much of the labor for post-harvest activities such as storage, handling, processing, and marketing (WE, 2005). Women also contribute to secondary crop production, such as legumes and vegetables, grown mainly in home gardens. Not only do these secondary crops provide essential nutrients, they are often the only food available during the lean seasons or if the harvest fails (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2002). In the livestock sector, women feed and milk the large stock, raise poultry and small stock such as sheep, goats, rabbits, and guinea pigs.

Women have also played a key role in community leadership. In developing countries, a rise in the number of female-headed households has been noted as males migrate to cities and women become heads of both households and farming activities (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001). In addition to male migration, widowhood and divorce also contribute to an increase in the number of households headed by women. War, sickness, and death from HIV/AIDS have also taken a toll on the rural male populations of developing countries. According to a 1992 study of female headed households conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), female-headed households were not only smaller in size but also significantly poorer. In the past, the role of women as head-of-households was largely unacknowledged in government statistics and decision making (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001). Thus, women have often been left out of development planning.

The role of women in agriculture and rural life has been especially important in Serbia. Due in part to its turbulent past, the population of Serbia, most especially its rural population, had to forge a new path in the country’s post-conflict transition economy. For many years the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) had been plagued with conflicts which culminated with a NATO bombing campaign in March-June 1999. The resulting destruction of the country’s infrastructure, industry, and commerce resulted in an estimated 23 percent decline in both industrial output and social product (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2001). What followed were some major political, economic, cultural and social changes in the FRY as a result of international pressure and economic sanctions.

Unemployment is a major problem in Serbia, but it has had an even greater impact on women (see Table 1). There is a larger proportion of women in the total number of unemployed people, women have greater difficulties finding employment, and their time spent on job searching is much longer than that of men, regardless of their qualifications (Bajic, 2005). The end result of high levels of unemployment in the country is women are increasingly accepting jobs for which they are over-qualified or work in the informal sector. The informal market sector in rural communities is comprised of non-farm activities, such as growing and selling vegetables,
making and selling arts and crafts, and selling jams and sweets for example, that are livelihood-oriented, but are not a provider of significant economic returns (Pearce & Davis, 2000). This creates a general reduction of wage levels and labor standards for all Serbians (Bajic, 2005).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Status of Men and Women in Serbia</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Full employment rate (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate (%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average consumption (din)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average income (din)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poverty index (%)</td>
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<td>Poverty gap (%)</td>
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</table>


The problems for agriculture in Central Serbia are exacerbated by the lack of an effective agricultural extension system in the country. The purpose of extension is to provide scientific, research-based information and education to serve the agricultural community. There is a disconnect between agricultural research and agricultural practice in Central Serbia (Van Wageningen, Groome, & Hogberg, 2005). Much of the scientific agricultural research is conducted at the research institutes, not the major universities. Most of the major universities in Serbia do not have the adequate infrastructure to conduct high-level agricultural research, so the research falls to the institutes. These institutes are under the direction of the Ministry of Science and Technology, not the Ministry of Agriculture, so the Ministry of Agriculture does not control the dissemination of scientific agricultural research to farmers. According to the assistant manager for the Agriculture Research Institute Center for Small Grains, to finance their activities the institutes sell their scientific discoveries to those who are willing and able to afford it (Z. A. Jestrovic, personal communication, January 20, 2006). Research scientists from the institutes, agricultural research stations, and university faculty members also provide consulting services to those customers who can afford to pay their consulting fees. These customers are large agricultural firms (such as seed companies) or large-scale producers. The average farmer in Central Serbia does not have a sufficient income to cover these costs. Without an adequate agricultural extension system, most farmers in the region are left to their own devices when it comes to resources and information for their production activities.

**Purpose and Objectives**

“Leadership is a process that helps get things done. It is not a person, a position, an organization or a community. Leadership is a verb, not a noun. Only when action takes place in a community or organization – when projects are started, worked on and completed, you can truly say leadership has occurred” (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs, 2005, par. 1). Therefore, community economic development depends on many different people in a variety of roles. Traditionally communities have found the best way to accomplish this is to organize and work in groups, teams, or committees. “For communities to be successful, they must support and
nurture a leadership philosophy that welcomes widespread citizen involvement. The best leadership is shared and recognized as a process by which people are empowered to make their own decisions through collaborative efforts with diverse sectors of any given community” (Mississippi State University Extension Service, 2005, par. 1).

The Women’s Association of Farmers in Strašari, Central Serbia formed out of a need to fight for the survival of their community. Strašari is a rural community located 36 kilometers from Kragujevac, a major industrial city in Central Serbia. For the smaller surrounding rural communities, Strašari used to function as the center. The schools, health center, government offices for the municipality, and the post office are located in Strašari. According to the residents of Strašari, there no longer exists a cultural life in the village. There is no money for local activities and gatherings, so the social life that once flourished is almost non-existent these days (President of the Women’s Association of Farmers in Strašari, personal communication, January 31, 2006).

The unemployment rate among young people in Serbia is high, as shown in Table 2. Young people are leaving their communities in search of better economic opportunities both domestically and abroad (Serbian Statistical Service, 2006). In the last 20 years, the number of Strašari’s inhabitants migrating to Kragujevac and Belgrade has caused a significant decline in the number of younger residents remaining in the community. Of the 470 households in Strašari, 150 are elderly households. When the only factory in town closed down, 400 families in the community were left without an income. Several of the agricultural cooperatives operating in the area that previously employed many people from Strašari ceased operations as a result of political and economic restructuring.

Table 2

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>55 and over</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 54</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 - 24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
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Source: United Nations Development Program 2005

In April 2004, a group of motivated women, led by a schoolteacher (and current president of the association), organized an association that involved itself in economic endeavors to help support their families and their community. The first goal of the organization was to give women ofStrašari a place to gather and discuss their problems. Concerned about the economic and social condition of their community, the women formed an association to empower its members to tackle these problems (President of the Women’s Association of Farmers in Strašari, personal communication, January 31, 2006). The President of the association stated a strong belief in the village’s potential for economic growth, despite all the financial, social, and economic hardships in the area. The association’s primary economic activity involves the production of natural fruits, jams, preserves, vinegars, and liqueurs, as well as the preparation of traditional Serbian foods and breads. All these products are produced organically. The Women’s Association grows all their own food for production themselves.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the community leadership role taken by the Women’s Association of Strašari and its subsequent impact on the economic development of the
region. With this purpose in mind, the following guiding research questions were used to obtain data:

1. What are some of the major issues or challenges faced by women in Serbian agriculture today?
2. Given the current conditions of agriculture in Central Serbia, what changes would women involved in agriculture like to see that would better meet their needs?

Methods

The phenomena under study utilized a qualitative methodology. “Qualitative research is naturalistic inquiry, the use of non-interfering data collection strategies to discover the natural flow of events and processes and how participants interpret them” (McMillan & Schumacher, 1997, p. 391). Qualitative research methodology can uncover intricate pieces of evidence that are difficult to obtain using quantitative methods.

Feminist critical theory and social change theory were the inquiry paradigms that support this study. Feminist critical theory examines the nature of power relationships, marginalization, and social, political, historical, and cultural dynamics beyond the conceptualization of gender. Social change theory examines changes in the patterns of interaction in cultural norms, values, and technology, and how those changes play a role in shaping society. The methodology used was a phenomenological inquiry approach. Phenomenology allows researchers to look through a lens for the purpose of understanding a participant’s lived experience. Phenomenological approaches explore how “human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as shared meaning” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). The purpose of utilizing phenomenology in this study was to understand the nature of the participants’ knowledge, beliefs, and actions from their own perspectives.

Data were collected during a focus group meeting. In focus groups, the “goal is to let people spark off of one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p. 140). Data were also collected during participant observation and archival or document research. The instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide comprised of open-ended questions. Data were analyzed using an open coding system. Strauss and Corbin (1990) state “open coding is the analytical process by which concepts are identified and developed in terms of their properties and dimensions” (p. 74).

Results

The Women’s Association of Farmers in Stragari, Central Serbia came into existence out of necessity. High unemployment in the village and the mass exodus of young people to urban areas was creating havoc on the fabric of their rural village community life. The women felt it was their responsibility to create a better life for their children and to give them viable economic options for their livelihoods, thus allowing them to remain in their rural community. One of the members of the Association stated the following belief: “Despite all the economic problems that are present in this village, this area has good potential for growth” (Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 5).

One of the obstacles faced by the Association is the lack of educational resources available to them. Within the past decade, the changing economic situation in Serbia has caused many factory workers to become “redundant” workers. A redundant worker describes a worker that was no longer needed as fewer and more efficient numbers of workers were being employed.
to do the job that previously a larger number of workers had been employed to do (United Nations Development Program, 2005). Jobs in the cities are scarce and highly competitive. As the move to the privatization of factories and industry has been a slow and lengthy process, many people have moved back to the rural villages to try and survive off their families’ land. Many of these people have no experience with or knowledge of agricultural practices. As there is no widely accepted form of agricultural extension for this region, farmers have no one to rely on for appropriate resources, information, or training.

According to participant responses, people that are moving back to the village to take up agriculture have limited knowledge about agriculture. In order to assist them to survive on the farm, these new farmers require training that is not offered by any existing governmental agency.

All our information is gained through the passing of knowledge from one person to another. As we are producing our products in the traditional Serbian way, we do not use technology or preservatives. We are keeping it all natural. The information is passed on from grandmother to mother, from mother to daughter. Our big need is for information on marketing so that we can sell our products to a wider market. Our main source of agricultural business information comes from attending agricultural fairs. We meet producers and exchange opinions, ideas, and stories. We think we have a comparative advantage in the production of all organic traditional foods and products. As we grow all our own raw product for our traditional Serbian foods, we need to learn more about good agricultural practices. We don’t have internet access in our village, so expanding our market is difficult. (Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 8)

In order to sell their products and be a profit generating organization, the Women’s Association of Farmers in Stragari had to be registered as an official agricultural co-operative. According to Serbian law, the criterion for qualifying as a co-operative involves having at least 10 founders and paying dues and registration fees. The members of the association claim the lack of available capital to expand their production is one of their most pressing challenges.

We have no means to invest in our production, and we have no access to capital or credit. We can’t get a commercial loan since we don’t own any land as a co-operative. All of our land is privately owned by members who grow the products for us. We need our own facilities for production and storage. Currently we make the products in the kitchens of members and store our merchandise in their homes. As we grow in membership and production, this is getting progressively harder to maintain without a facility. (Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 3)

The Women’s Association of Farmers in Stragari has an open door policy. They are open to anyone, male or female, who is responsible and willing to work, according to their president. All the members of the Association have other jobs besides the duties and responsibilities at the Association. All have other professions or duties but they are united in their common aim: to create economic opportunities for women and contribute to the future of their village. According to the president of the Association, the position of women in the village is deteriorating. The number of women employed in the community is very low, and women are living with up to three or four generations in the same home. Women cannot be financially independent because they cannot earn an income.
Women want to participate in the decision-making process in their communities. They attend town hall meetings, they manage the local school, and they manage positions in the local industry. For our Association, we want to promote women in leadership so that we can influence policy and local decision making. Women should not be afraid to show their knowledge and their qualities. Women have the added burden of balancing multiple roles: family, work, and association duties. Women play the most important role in the family at home. They fulfill all obligations, sometimes going without sleep, and with little or no personal free time. They do all this in the hope that one day life will improve for them and their families. That is the motivation that keeps us going.

(Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 7)

The responses from the women’s focus group conducted in Stragari reflected the participant’s concern for the well-being and survival of their rural community. Their responses centered on what changes were needed to improve their community as opposed to what changes they would like to see that could aid their association. As one female participant stated, “If you help the community, you are helping us. We are also part of the community.”

We want to see the government invest locally in our facilities and our infrastructure. We also need their help to encourage foreign investment in our community. We had a factory that closed here. Our people have skills, they are willing to work. This would be a good place to open a factory production. We also need a better education system in our village. Finding qualified teachers is difficult, especially since the community cannot afford to contribute much to their wages. There is no money available to help families in need. We need government assistance programs to help those families that lost their jobs in the factory. We need to find some other employment for them here, or else they will leave and the community will start to die. (Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 6)

The lack of economic prosperity and political stability in Serbia has contributed to a sense of uncertainty about Serbia’s future. This feeling is especially prevalent in agricultural and rural populations which have witnessed an increase in the gap between the standard of living between their communities and those of the urban centers. This uncertainty is also contributing to the large numbers of youth leaving rural communities for search of better employment in the cities and abroad. Despite this trend, members of the Women’s Association of Farmers in Stragari have a sense of optimism concerning their future and the future of Serbia.

We as a people have lived through a lot in the past few years. Through it all we have maintained our sense of community, our pride in a job well done, and a commitment to our children’s future. Even when times are tough, neighbors and families help each other. I think that shows what the Serbian people can do. I think it gives us hope that one day the troubles will be gone and we can once again focus on our families, our jobs, and our happiness. (Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 10)

The Association has been successful in obtaining recognition for the work that they do. Recently, the Women’s Association of Stragari won first prize in an international fair for
national culture. At this event they were able to showcase their products to a wide range of influential international figures.

“We are proud to have this opportunity to present our work to foreigners, especially those who do not know much about Serbian culture. We are representing our village and our region. We also get to learn about the cultures of other peoples.”
(Women’s Association, interview #18, 1/31/06: p. 8)

**Conclusions**

Historically the Balkans has always been among the least developed regions of continental Europe. The regional economy was destabilized for most of the last decade of the 20th century with the break-up of the former Yugoslav Republic and the ensuing conflicts. As a result, the agricultural sector and rural communities in particular saw high rates of migration, widespread poverty, unemployment, and social dislocation (Pearce & Davis, 2000). This destabilization and the process of transition are reflected in the voices of participants in this study.

Agriculture is the backbone of rural villages in Central Serbia. Improving the state of agriculture in Central Serbia will contribute to the revitalization of struggling rural communities. Improvements in productivity will enable farm communities to improve their standard of living and invest back into their communities, schools, and agricultural enterprises. Associations, entrepreneurs, and visionaries are needed in Serbia in order to move it ahead economically and politically. The Women’s Association in Stragari is an example of how a community can take a leadership role in its own economic development, even without political or economic support.

The women of the Association expressed their satisfaction with the results of their endeavors for the last two years. During this time, they became well known and established a reputation for producing quality projects. This has led to increased support from local villagers, local and regional government authorities, financial support from several humanitarian non-governmental organizations, and participation in a number of national and international arts and crafts and food fairs.

The Women’s Association of Stragari has helped to revitalize a dying rural community. Membership in the Association increases yearly, with both men and women joining the Association with the aim to improve their livelihoods and have gainful employment. What started out as a small local venture has gained national and international recognition. The new challenge for the Association is to find ways to expand their production and marketing capabilities. Lack of informational resources, financial resources, and infrastructure continue to plague the Association.

**References**


