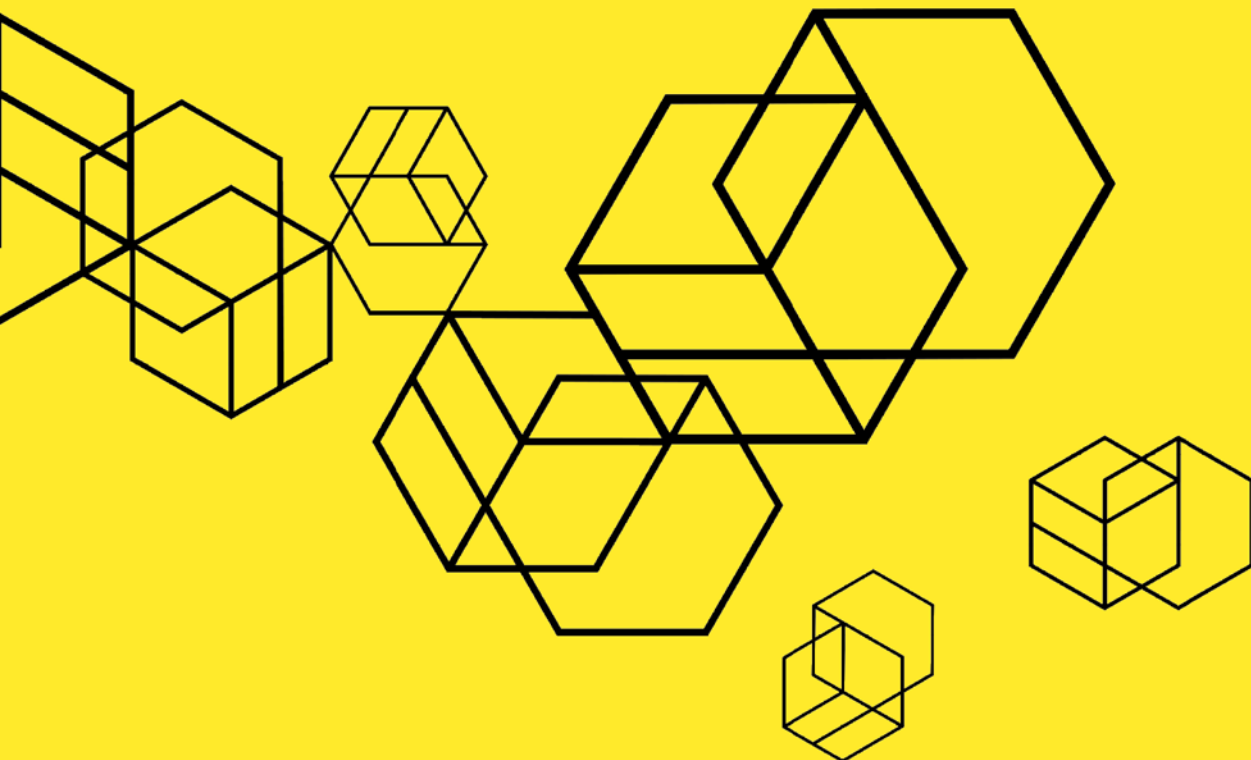




**SOCIAL
INNOVATION
COMMUNITY**

Taste of Home

Social Innovation Laboratory





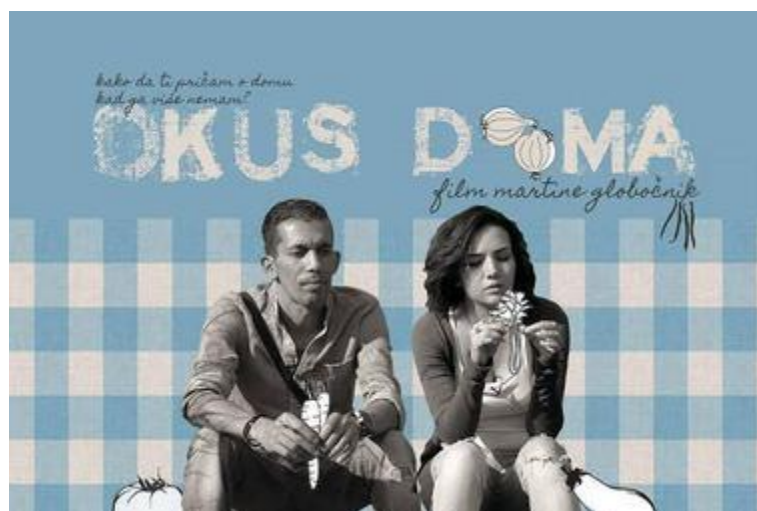
Taste of Home (“Okus Doma”)

From culinary and cultural research project to sustainable cooperative run by immigrants and asylum seekers

1. ABSTRACT

A Taste of Home started as a culinary-cultural-research project that introduced the culture, customs and societies of origin of the refugees in Croatia by recording their memories of home, smells and tastes of their cuisine. This was an experiment in sharing life stories and culinary skills of refugees and people from Croatia. By preparing food of their home, refugees were evoking memories and creating new experiences in their new home. Their vision was a colorful world embraced in hospitality. Their mission underlined economic emancipation of refugees and persons with migrant background through culinary and cultural exchange. They were led by values of appreciating human beings and their needs - Human beings in search of happiness and safety ready to offer the best of them – tastes of their childhood and youth hood as well as tastes of their adulthood in new society. Their resources were tastes of middle-eastern, Arabic, African and Asian *cuisine* (rather unrepresented in Croatia).

In considering what is domestically a mechanism for people to gain familiarity and put aside potential differences, the idea of using food and a bridge to help the domestic population connect with the immigrating population became an easy selection. Domestically gastronomy is a part of the fabric of life in Croatia and a willingness to experience new foods is an aspect of that.



2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE

THE CONTEXT

The effort behind this project was born most substantially out of the recognition that there was a lack of effective and positive mechanisms to help integrate arriving refugees and migrants into domestic culture and economic activity. This was true in large part due to a lack of any clear policy direction from the Croatian central government regarding this process.

Croatian authorities have seriously neglected creation of integration policies especially those embracing work and education opportunities making refugees state service dependent even after two initial integration years. Only 7.5% of those granted protection are non-state dependent through temporary, rarely steady jobs.

As Croatia is a predominantly homogeneous society, with a population that lacks direct exposure to individuals from cultures that are remote from their own, (excluding general European cultures), there is a lack connection with these people. However, an existing connection to people who have undergone traumatic life shifts in having to leave their home countries because of violence and/or economic distress resulting from the Balkan wars meant that an ability to connect was indeed present.

The initiative is based on support, solidarity and knowledge exchange. It gathers people of different origin who organize cooking workshops, public show-kitchen activities, language courses. Public recognition and quality of offer resulted in initiating social cooperative to be specialized in: catering and further opening of a restaurant, food production, publishing cookbooks as well as language courses and interpreting services

No less important, this activity aims at sensitizing Croatian public to refugees needs and combating prejudice followed with opening to social hospitality process through culinary and cultural exchange.



The lack of policy support from the central government meant that access to funding for skills development in this regard was also lacking, (along with the lack of integration policy). As such, a model need to be developed that could be both functional in terms of generating both skills and aiding in social integration, but also that could maintain financial sustainability.

THE CASE

The goal of the project has been to push economic emancipation of the refugees and other migrants by using their knowledge, skills and earlier experience while sensitizing environment/society on potentials of their integration. The whole action relies on multi-cultural and intercultural theoretical model and practice.

The core of the project is to support and improve integration of immigrants and refugees from war torn and otherwise economically oppressed nations of Africa and the Middle east into Croatian society. It is an effort that seeks to provide a pathway both for the arriving and domestic population to interact in a positive shared atmosphere, as well as to enable the immigrants to develop marketable skills they can use to become full economic contributors and beneficiaries within Croatia.

A Taste of home started as a culinary-cultural-research project that introduces the culture, customs and societies of origin of the refugees in Croatia by recording their memories of home, smells and tastes of their cuisine. This was an experiment in sharing life stories and culinary skills of refugees and people from Croatia. By preparing food of their home, refugees and other immigrants were evoking memories and creating new experiences in their new home. Their vision was a colorful world embraced in hospitality.

Their mission underlined economic emancipation of refugees and persons with migrant background through culinary and cultural exchange. They were motivated by the values of appreciating human beings and their needs – by the human search to connect with the happiness and safety of their homes and have sought to do so by sharing the tastes of their homes in new and strange society. Their resources were tastes of middle-eastern, Arabic, African and Asian cuisine (rather unrepresented in Zagreb).

The collective 'Taste of Home' gathers 30 refugees and volunteers/activists and is primarily supported by the Centre for Peace Studies (CPS), an NGO based in Zagreb.



The collective has grown into the social cooperative now. While it still gathers asylum seekers and collects personal memories and refuge experience, it is mainly focused on development of a cooperative that emancipates refugees and migrants as both a reality for some and a sustainable model for others.

Additionally, the need to help develop and promote skills amongst the refugee/immigrant population that could be applicable and beneficial to the domestic economy meant that cooking was a natural fit as there is a general deficit of quality cooks in the country, particularly during the tourist season.

Out of this, 'Taste of home' was developed. A non-profit orientation meant that it could both avoid issues relating to running costs by staying away from the usual market orientation, while at the same time, it opened the door to possible access to funding opportunities from international and other donors as the effort grew without being constrained by classic issues of financial return on investment.

DESCRIPTION OF THE LEARNING PROCESS

The learning process was multilayered and affected both the project implementers as well as the groups targeted by the project. In the earliest phases, during the period when the project was just in a conceptual phase, the implementers had almost no experience with actually developing a profitable business and were only scantily aware of the concept of social entrepreneurship or how they function. Additionally, while there was a base individual within the initial target group with professional experience cooking, the majority of other individuals had no professional experience in the field as such. Additionally, there was a lack of human resource capacities with the target group for marketing and other business management related skills. Critically, the shortcomings were recognized during the concept phase and developing skills in the deficit areas became a crucial aspect of the initial process.

The approach taken was deliberate, with eventualities and contingencies playing a role early in the process more than anticipated. For example, it took a long time to establish the actual cooperative, almost a year. This was due to several reasons: Legal requirements such as investment of 1000 kuna per participating target group member were a barrier for refugees and migrants, and as such mechanisms needed to be looked at in order to reduce this burden. Another aspect was a lengthy time waiting to get registration for the organization and learning the ins and outs of the bureaucratic procedures for establishing a social business. Other administrative issues were an issue that impacted the learning process such as the opening bank accounts and admin/legal activities that required a detailed review of potential liabilities and an assessment of the best functional structure to move forward with. Additionally, a number of members (asylum seekers) left the country due to negative decisions on their asylum applications. That situation required flexibility in starting certain processes



several times from the very beginning and having to adjust/taking over roles. This process was critical in assessing and adjusting the organizational structure in order to ensure its sustainability.

There was also a related issue regarding capacities insofar as there are limited internal absorptive capacities. Primarily, Centre for Peace Studies is an organization focused on social justice that mainly uses research, education, public awareness raising and advocacy as its' primary methods and tools. It had no such an experience of working in the areas related to business and entrepreneurship. It also knew it wanted to push for an economic emancipation of refugees and migrants and we have had tested it through establishing social cooperative. Few other organizations helped in that; Iskra with their social inclusion and working culture in Croatia; NESsT with their social entrepreneurship step by step workshops and finally CEDRA with social cooperative management workshops. All of that took just under a year and it was implemented under support of the EU's IPA funds within the project 'Quality Integration Solutions for Refugees' coordinated by the Fade In. Secondly, there are several other restraints to be aware of. One of them is that these kinds of projects need time; gathering group of refugees and immigrants that will stay involved in the process for several months with no assurance that business will be established and function well extremely hard. These people need assurances and they mostly need rather quick solutions in order to meet their existential needs and reach independency. Also, establishing social cooperative meant being ready to experience something completely different than what all of the team members had been doing by then; it was not only starting off business which brings socio-economic safety for refugees and migrants but also a non-hierarchical structure of decision making that is very complex. Moreover, this example is also a model of successful project done with refugees and migrants but it can also collapse rather easily due to public climate and support loss (xenophobic sentiments, lack of state based financial support to civil society organizations that are primary clients of ToH services, etc.). Understanding that this is for most participants a first experience of running a business, and in particular, a collective business, the process of gaining skills in this area can be slow and potentially difficult. As such, it was essential to build in a strong aspect of cooperative management with shared responsibilities so that transitions resulting from member turnover as new immigrants join the coop and others leave could be made as smooth as possible. Quite a lot of time was dedicated to shape the best possible model of management and collective decision making. And it is an ongoing process. The cooperative was founded by 16 co-founders. Half of them are refugees and migrants, and other half are local activists. There are three higher ranked responsibilities – president, vice-president and manager. President and vice-president represent membership, one is of migrant and the other one of non-migrant origin and then the manager is not a co-founder. Until today, almost a year after formal founding of the cooperative we have kept the same structure. More refugees and migrants are joining in, more local activists/volunteers/interested citizens too. They do not become members immediately, process of inclusion into membership is rather hard since membership now costs 2.500 kuna which is hardly affordable to anyone (according to the law, initial membership is



1.000kn to be paid before founding assembly; anyone joining in afterwards pays minimum of 2.500). Once having a cooperative and membership directives, experiencing turnover is not an issue anymore; difficulty was had in past related to asylum seekers who participated in establishing the cooperative hoping they would get refugee status. Once rejected, they had to leave the country. Asylum seekers do participate in many of the activities now and they cannot become members until granted protection status and receiving working rights according to the Asylum Act. Diversifying skills sets amongst individual members developed into an important aspect as a result. There were two primary strategies of diversifying skills. One aspect was developing skills of management the cooperative from macro (cooperative as an inclusive social entrepreneurship business with a clear vision and strategies) over middle (human resources, infrastructure, cooperation) to micro management (managing the kitchen and marketing of catering business). The Second aspect covered developing cooking and serving skills for catering as a primary small business established with the cooperative. All our cooks have therefore enrolled in courses at Pučko Otvoreno Učilište.

From the standpoint of the project implementers, all of the stated was new experientially and so there was a substantial level of organization capacity development from their perspective. Additionally, having recognized the lack of understanding of social entrepreneurship the implementers actively sought out their own internal capacity building, cooperating with international organizations in participating in an 18 month learning process. It was through this that critical skills were developed in order to ensure a successful project. Skills such as organizational management and access to start-up finances through crowd funding were developed and played essential roles during the earliest phases of the project. Within the 18 month project implemented under title 'Quality integration solutions for refugees' there had been participation in trainings on social inclusion and working culture, social entrepreneurship step by step (market research, our vision and ideas, business and financial plan) and social cooperative management (shaping up the structure of decision-making and strategic plans). That project was funded by EU IPA. The project ended in March 2015 and it took half a year to do more of an internal capacity building work and administrative work before organizational readiness was achieved. Once that was the case, the decision was taken to start off the crowdfunding campaign that was done in cooperation of the CPS and Taste of Home collective under mentorship of UNDP and Brodoto social enterprise. Additionally, gaining a broader understanding of SE organizations, domestic legal constraints, and how organizations such as this can function led to development of new "add on" services of the total organizational offering. Drivers and milestones beyond establishing a stable catering operation were developed, including eventually to open a restaurant, have an interpreting service for Arabic and Farsi (and other languages) to work with other refugees and migrants (used by different NGOs and institutions) as well as to have a language school / courses. Both ideas, food catering and language services are in line with Taste of Homes basic idea; learning about cultures and backgrounds of people who fled their homes and connecting with domicile population through spaces



understandable and acceptable to most.

Throughout the process probably one of the more difficult but nonetheless essential aspects of the learning process was how to keep a simple, straight forward business model, while also allowing for space to diversify activities in a way that would not become administratively burdensome. Work on sustainability is still a goal, and it is a part of the daily struggle. While full sustainability is not achieved yet, it is anticipated soon through setting up the diversified channels of income, through the translation and other related services. So far, there are daily catering and Arabic language courses. Launching off Taste of Home food products is under preparation as well as new language courses and interpreting services. Currently there are 7 people employed with minimum wages and the goal is to take that up to decent steady monthly salaries.

DISCUSSION

Okus Doma is a classic example of a social business/social entrepreneurship blend. It is also, both similar to and apart from classic efforts to develop social inclusion initiatives. Given the Center for Peace Studies has a substantial background in the social inclusion field as well as in capacity building for marginalized groups, this is not surprising.

As a result, unlike many other social entrepreneurship initiatives, this implementers were conscious from the beginning of the need to develop critical organizational development and management skills. There is no question that CPS's experiences previously influenced this outlook and undoubtedly played a critical role in the ultimate success of the effort. Their position as an organization that had little to no real experience with 'for profit' business development forced them to look to other mechanisms for their development of the cooperative. As CPS is an organization that tends to function on a grant based, funding cycle, (project-to-project) methodology, the recognition internally of the need to establish an organization that does not function in this fashion was essential to ensuring sustainability.

One of the most notable aspects of the development/learning process is the cooperative management function. Something that was learned more as a matter of experience, having had key individual members leave early on due to negative responses on their asylum applications could have easily ended the effort all together. There is no question that the education CPS received on social innovation and social entrepreneurship was essential in helping them to overcome these obstacles. This reinforces the idea that in order for SI/SE initiatives to succeed as a 'social business' (non-profit orientation with for-profit functionality), a deep understanding of the field is needed.

What is also important to recognize in this is the ability of the implementing organization to reach out and access capacity building for their own internal deficit. While many may recognize that they lack certain skills, the ability to access international partners and capitalize on well developed relationships



was critical in the early phases of the project. This does leave a question as to how successful the effort might have been without the presence of a reputable organization such as CPS. While others with strong networking skills may have also been able to do the same, there is no question that this does reinforce the importance of having quality organizations involved in such efforts. Certainly, it was easier for CPS than it might have been for a newly established NGO with minimal track record to build its reputation on.

Another item of importance to note in the project is the way in which it demonstrates that social innovation does not need to mean technical innovation. This effort in many ways is the antithesis of that. The innovation is in its process of establishment and its primary function organizationally rather than in its 'product' output. On that note, it is important to recognize that the mechanism of cooperative management as it has been implemented here is also an innovative way to both anticipate disruptions organizationally and plan effectively to mitigate their impact.

In many aspects, Taste of Home followed the path of typical social enterprise in Croatia. First of all, initiator of the whole project was NGO with vast experience in human rights and project management, but lack of business and managerial skills. This is in line with Strategy for Development of Social Entrepreneurship in Republic of Croatia in period 2015-2020 stating that "social entrepreneurs and CSOs in their work are facing difficulties regarding insufficient financial resources and knowledge about running, management and sustainability, as well as too high dependence on the funding from the public sector"¹. Moreover, according to Comparative Report on Social Innovation across Europe: "initiators most of the time exhibit strong motivations and a high level of awareness about the problem they want to address but they also show a naive approach about how to establish and develop business"². Luckily, this knowledge gap was recognized at the beginning and first knowledge transfer occurred through formal training. The cooperative members attended a series of courses held by organizations and individuals experienced in social entrepreneurship; this education helped them to acquire basic theoretical knowledge about running a business. Although this was a well-designed learning process, it was not sufficient and most of knowledge acquisition occurred through experiential learning model, starting from "developing the competences needed to start a new venture to recognizing opportunities and coping with the challenges of the external environment"³. This was especially the case with gaining skills necessary to overcome legal boundaries and administrative obstacles connected with employment of asylum seekers that seriously affected whole business process. Moreover, while the

¹ Strategy for Development of Social Entrepreneurship in Republic of Croatia for period 2015-2020, p.15

² Terstriep, J; Kleverbeck, M, Deserti, A. & Rizzo, F. (2015). *Comparative Report on Social Innovation Across Europe*, Deliverable D3.2 - SIMPACT PROJECT (Boosting the Impact of SI in Europe through Economic Underpinnings). Brussels: European Commission, DG Research and Innovation, p.100

³ Ferinz, A: Managing Organizational Learning as a Challenge in Strategy, Corvinus University of Budapest, Conference paper, October 20, p.4



organization was able to quickly identify its learning needs and accordingly acquire explicit knowledge (external capacity building, trainings, vocational education etc.) the large part of the gained knowledge was tacit: "this is particularly true of operational skills and know-how acquired through practical experience"⁴. Taste of Home proves the thesis that "the learning and innovative capability of an organisation is thus critically dependent on its capacity to mobilise tacit knowledge and foster its interaction with explicit knowledge"⁵.

In addition, networking skills and knowledge of partners and key stakeholders were transferred from CPS to the cooperative and in this sense it can be considered as a social capital i.e. "the sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit"⁶.

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⁴ Lam, A.: Alternative societal models of learning and innovation in the knowledge economy, ISSJ 171/2002, UNESCO 2002., Published by Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2002., p.68

⁵ Ibid, p.69

⁶ Filieri, R. and Alquezai, S.: Structural Social Capital and Innovation. Is Knowledge Transfer the Missing Link?", Journal of Knowledge Management, Vol.18 Iss 4, p.729