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BEST PRACTICE

NEXUS MODEL: AGRICULTURAL BUSINESSES STAND STRONG WITH COMMUNITIES





CONEX BALKANS: COVID-19 NEXUS RESPONSE FOR IMPROVING THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION OF MARGINALIZED PEOPLE IN 6 COUNTRIES OF THE WESTERN BALKANS

The crisis has disproportionately affected those groups that were already facing social and economic exclusion and vulnerability even before the crisis, namely the elderly, unemployed women, and people with disabilities. The project aims to contribute to the improvement not only of their immediate socio-economic situation but also their resilience and resistance to current and future crises. The consortium operates in six Western Balkan countries under the leadership of Caritas Austria: Caritas in Albania and Kosovo, the Mother Teresa Society in Kosovo (KHSC), the Red Cross in Montenegro and North Macedonia, CARE and three local partners in southern Serbia and BiH, and Diakonie with a local partner Philanthropy in Central and Western Serbia.

The project provides financial support, goods, and community assistance to marginalized people, improves access to health, psychosocial and social services, as well as offers training and employment opportunities. It also raises the awareness of relevant actors about issues of discrimination and the impact of the crisis on marginalized groups, as well as advocates for measures to reduce them. As a result, the target groups will improve their psychosocial well-being, be better equipped to cope with their economic situation, and know where to look for social support both in their neighborhood and in public services. The project is being implemented from May 2021 to April 2023.

Within the CONEX project in Bosnia and Herzegovina, two social enterprises, "Agro-Plan" from Bijeljina and "Eko-Budućnost" ("Eco-Future") from Modriča, receive business advisory services and financial support in the form of a "social loan". In exchange for the received social loans, these companies will "repay" the communities by donating their products to 600 people in Bijeljina and 400 people in Modriča. Through this support, up to 16 new jobs will be created for marginalized individuals in their respective communities.

It is truly unsettling to witness that many of our fellow citizens live on the edge of poverty, without the possibility of employment and generation of the income necessary for a dignified life. Therefore, the establishment of social enterprises such as "Eco-Future" and "Agro-Plan" represents an incalculable contribution, especially for marginalized groups such as Roma and women who are domestic violence survivors. For them, the CONEX program for improving the socio-economic situation of marginalized people seemed to be the only solution. Fortunately, it turned out to be a genuinely successful and meaningful endeavor, having in mind that the people covered by the program now have significantly improved living conditions and better perspectives.

This is, in fact, the goal of the CONEX program: it is designed to support target groups to achieve gradual personal transformation and feel sufficiently empowered to embark on a journey of their continuous development, instead of waiting to be rescued. Furthermore, the enterprises guarantee that they will spread the seeds of mutual support by marketing their agricultural products to vulnerable populations. Since they produce and process organic fruits and vegetables, they keep an open heart and continuously donate part of their products. By doing so, they additionally help themselves because they participate in the creation of a better environment and the overall progress of the social community.

"This job is an additional support for me in my efforts to continue my education" – says the Roma woman Vesida Beganović from the social enterprise "Agro-Plan". Helping others is very important to them, and the number of people who will be helped is by no means small.

AGRO-PLAN

A DIGNIFIED LIFE THROUGH WORK



The Roma population is sadly still a target of prejudice. However, the prejudice is being successfully broken within the company **"AGRO-PLAN"** from Bijeljina. This social enterprise was founded in 2017 by the Center for Integrative Inclusion of Roma and Roma Women "Otaharin" specifically to support Roma, especially Roma women. Hence, this company, aside from its main activity of producing organic fruits and vegetables, has an even more important task: to integrate Roma into society and help them live better lives through work. The enterprise has been generously supported with funding from **the Austrian Development Cooperation and CARE International**, who both recognize the importance of upholding the rights and the integration of the Roma population into the social community and particularly acknowledge the strength of Roma women.

Namely, it is the project **"COVID-19 Nexus response for improving the socio-economic situation of marginalized people in 6 countries of the Western Balkans"** (CONEX) that has been supporting **AGRO-PLAN** to strengthen their capacities. The intervention aims to alleviate the humanitarian and socio-economic consequences of the crisis caused by COVID-19, which gravely affected those who were already facing social and economic exclusion and vulnerability.

To help **"AGRO-PLAN"** overcome the negative consequences that COVID-19 has had on social enterprises, CONEX provided them with grants. The grants (10,000 EUR) have been used to develop new products: organic ajvar (roasted red pepper

and eggplant relish) and tomato juice. The grant was sufficient to cover the costs for product storage and employment of 8 women, as well as for creating recipes, preparing documentation and obtaining certification, and finally for building brand identity. In exchange for the provided support, **"AGRO-PLAN"** agreed to distribute packages of their fresh and processed products to 600 people in need, which is worth 50% of the received grants.

Before the distribution, the Center for Integrative Inclusion of Roma and Roma Women "Otaharin" identified the most vulnerable beneficiaries who should receive those packages and agreed on the value of the packages with **AGRO-PLAN**. The packages valued at 16,00 KM each contain fresh organic vegetables (peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, zucchini, lettuce, spinach, swiss chard, and green beans) and processed products (tomato juice and ajvar).

The support that the social enterprise **"AGRO-PLAN"** received within this project served as an important springboard for expanding the capacity and sustainability of the company. The acquisition of the needed equipment created considerably better conditions for daily work as well as for the storage of processed organic products. The next step for the company's growth is to invest more effort to increase its market recognition and market size. However, the **"AGRO-PLAN"** employees vividly remember that it all started with a helping hand, so they intend to continue donating parts of their proceeds to those in need.

A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE THAT TRANSFORMS LIVES

Some of the employees' found their first job at "AGRO-PLAN", since in the past they repeatedly encountered problems based on prejudices against their nationality. For instance, **Vesida Beganović** openly shares that getting her first proper job at "AGRO-PLAN" means a lot to her and her family because it provides them with money for a dignified life. Vesida is all the more grateful because in the past she worked as a day laborer doing hard manual work. "I am very grateful for this opportunity. This job is additional support for me because I want to continue the education that I was forced to leave at the age of 14" – says **Vesida**, who for the first time in her life receives a monthly

salary, and retirement and health insurance at "AGRO-PLAN", just like her three coworkers of Roma nationality. "Nobody believed in our employees due to their background. Nonetheless, we genuinely believe in them, and we are convinced that we can expect great results from them if they are given the opportunity in an adequate environment and suitable conditions" – states the director of "Otaharin", **Dragan Joković**. Hence, it is safe to say that "AGRO-PLAN" has already achieved its umbrella goal bearing in mind that it continuously changes the lives of Roma women, improves their lives, and shows them that progress and creating a better life is very possible.



CERTIFIED ORGANIC PRODUCTS FOR EVERY TASTE

Since 2018, **"AGRO-PLAN"** has been working tirelessly on the production of organic fruits and vegetables, a dream which is slowly but steadily becoming a reality. They take this opportunity very seriously and provide their customers with safe, high-quality, and fresh products. Currently, they have about 3 plots with greenhouses and about 6 and a half plots of sown areas outdoors. **They plant lettuce, spinach, arugula, spring onions, bell peppers, and pink and cherry tomatoes. They also plant potatoes, cucumbers, zucchini, beans, green beans, beets, cabbage, and eggplant.** Their hard work is officially recognized: **their fresh produce received the certificate "OK-Organic Control"**, which guarantees that the product is of natural, organic origin.



FROM FIELD TO PLATE WITH LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE

AGRO-PLAN's ambitions include constant learning of new skills to achieve capacity expansion, as well as the expansion of the offered products. One of the newly acquired skills is in food processing. Since the company acquired a duplicator for processing vegetables, the company can now offer organic ajvar and tomato juice in a "healthy jar", alongside the fresh organic vegetables their customers are accustomed to. Taste buds rated these new



products as excellent, as confirmed by those who tried them at the International Trade Fair in Mostar. Their unique flavor and quality were also officially confirmed by the award in the category for recognizable quality and development of domestic products - **OUR IS BETTER**, which the company **AGRO-PLAN** received as part of the manifestation "Selection of the most successful enterprises in the economy of the Republika Srpska for 2021".

EXPANSION OF PRODUCTION AND NEW EMPLOYMENT IN THE FUTURE

Since much care is devoted to customers' health, everything is made following the tried and tested grandmothers' recipes handed down for centuries. **"AGRO-PLAN"** identified this concept as a new business potential that would enable them to further expand production and generate new jobs.

It is important to highlight that all their tasty products, including ajvar and tomato juice, are available to clients and delivered to their homes very quickly. The order can be placed simply by calling the number **065 469 273**. In addition to the delivery of the products to the customer's home address, the products can also be purchased at the place of production in the **street Ilije Garašanina bb**.

Although many people in Bijeljina are already familiar with the quality of **"AGRO-PLAN"** products, some are still unaware that by purchasing their products, they are directly helping the most vulnerable people of our society – those who are too often unfairly stigmatized on the basis of their origin. Yet, they give back to the community in the best possible way, by producing healthy and safe homemade food.



EKO-BUDUĆNOST ("ECO-FUTURE")

A NEW LIFE FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SURVIVORS

Despite the undoubted social progress, we still witness that women are often neglected, especially in rural areas. They are frequently victims of both physical and psychological violence. It is difficult for them to find employment and their own source of income, which means that they depend on a partner, family members, or the community members, who often do not listen to their needs, bringing them to the margins of society and making them entirely dependent on the will of others.

To break the vicious circle of violence against women in their local community, and encourage and empower them to believe that change is possible, the **Citizens'**

Association "Budućnost" ("Future") founded the **Agricultural Cooperative "Eko-Budućnost" ("Eco-Future")** in Modriča in 2014. It is a cooperative that currently brings together 8 women from socially vulnerable categories, including women who have survived domestic violence, as well as current and former users of the safe house. They diligently take care of the fruit and vegetable plantations, but **"Eco-Future"** provides much more to them: it was thanks to this enterprise, that some of them earned their first money, and some of them even for the first time felt security and peace, found friends, gained self-confidence, and dared to change.



AN ECONOMICALLY INDEPENDENT WOMAN IS A STRONG WOMAN

The cooperative provides a reliable place to earn money both for socially vulnerable women as well as for other women who do not work directly on the property, because it offers safe purchase and placement of their products on the market. Namely, **"Eco-Future"** has excellent cooperation with socially responsible local businesses, who agree to regularly buy their products and thus support the economic empowerment of women.

Director of Citizens' Association "Future" Biljana Savičić says that the activities implemented so far through this project, offer great support to marginalized people and people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. *"One of the important segments is supporting women to earn a symbolic compensation for their work in the cooperative; the second one is returning the cooperative's products to people who are in a*

state of social need. All in all, these activities contribute to the creation of opportunities for women to break free from the vicious circle of violence, through work and occupational rehabilitation, and economic empowerment. We are jointly trying to expand the cooperative and to include as our subcontractors, in addition to these women, also the beneficiaries who received a grant to start a business through the current project." – **points out Director Savičić.**

Women employed in the Cooperative are happy because this project and the Cooperative gives them the opportunity to work and live independently. *"This job means a lot to me, both financially and psychologically,"* says one of the workers in the Cooperative. And her colleague agrees: **"We make money and mingle. It is not difficult to work; we are used to it."**



CAPACITY EXPANSION IS A GUARANTEE FOR A SAFER FUTURE

The “Eco-Future” cooperative currently **owns 2 greenhouses**, one of which covers an area of 200 square meters and was purchased **within the CONEX project**. Depending on the season, the women use the greenhouses to grow **strawberries, tomatoes, and spinach**. They managed to harvest **250 kilograms of spinach**, which they partly marketed, and distributed the remaining part to selected people. They also planted **560 seedlings of the Clery variety of strawberry, and 200 tomato seedlings in the second greenhouse, and so far they have harvested 180 kilograms in total**.

They plan to expand capacity, so at the end of the sea-

son, they will plant new crops such as spring onions and lettuce. They previously acquired a fruit and vegetable dryer, a table for sorting fruits and vegetables, and an industrial sink during their launch phase thanks to the **support of CARE International and the Austrian Development Agency**. Since their initial results were excellent, their hard work was rewarded with further project support in the amount of **10,000 EUR**. The women say they intend to work even harder to bring happiness to as many as **400 socially disadvantaged people** through their tasty fresh products such as strawberries, tomatoes, and spinach.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IS AN EXAMPLE OF A HOME BUSINESS

Having in mind that Modriča is a well-known plum tree region, it seemed natural to establish plum plantations. However, since they will bear fruit two or three years from now, they currently buy the plums from their subcontractors. Most of the plums are dried, which seems to be an excellent business move, as the numbers work in their favor. Namely, they dried about **400 kilos of plums**, and what they didn't dry, they turned into a delicious jam. Owning a grinder and duplicator to make jams makes the job considerably easier. The product is still not marketed since this process requires certain technologies, certification of the end product, and branding. However, in the future, they hope to take that step as well – i.e. to become recognized for their production of plum jam and strawberry jam. Furthermore, they have also planted pear trees and expect exceptional and abundant fruit from them. A part of it will be turned into jams, and some will be marketed fresh, but also certainly given as gifts.





A GOOD PRODUCT IS DESTINED FOR SUCCESS

The social enterprise **"Eco-Future"** cooperative appreciates the help and is willing to return goods to the community, as is proven by their humane gestures. **Namely, they donated almost 70 percent of their products to those who are socially vulnerable. They sell only 30 percent of their healthy, organic products, and they take special care to treat them biologically.**

The **"Eco-Future"** agricultural cooperative is real proof that a woman, when given the opportunity, can be the driver of both her own personal development as well as

the economic improvement in the community. Through acquired knowledge in making business plans and capacity building, women who were once on the margins of society, often forgotten by everyone, are successful today. All the more, they are recognized as capable and determined persons who transformed themselves from helpless to heroes. The women from the cooperative **"Eco-Future"** are their own masters now, and they do not intend to stop their growth. For themselves, but also for many others like them who need a helping hand today.

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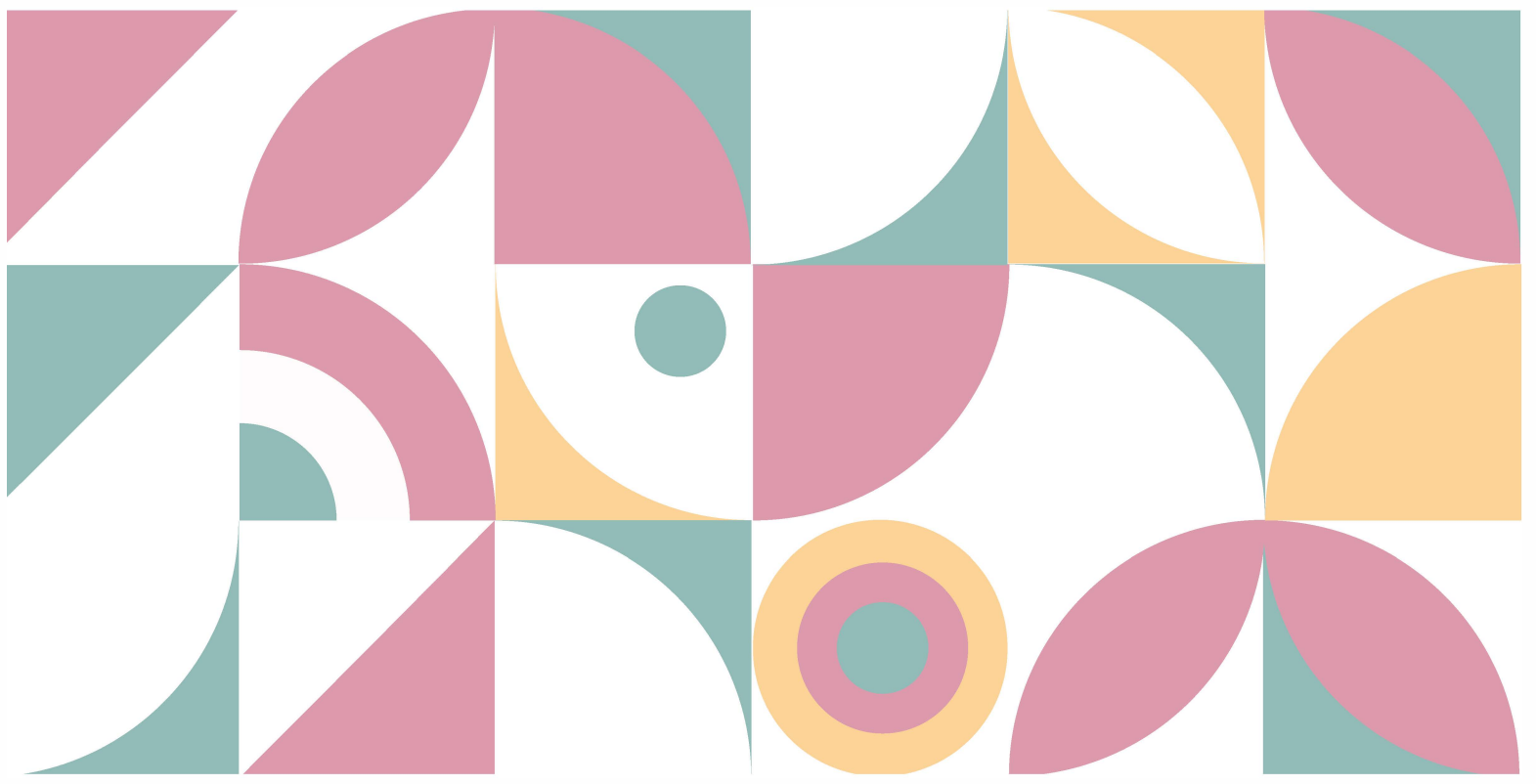
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