



Support for new agricultural entrepreneurs in Bulgaria

Rositsa Djambazova works for a business incubator which provides support to new entrants into farming in Bulgaria - "We put a lot of effort into bringing together people with complementary needs, solutions or resources, which is one of the main successful aspects of the incubator."

Rositsa is a member of the EIP-AGRI Focus Group on New Entrants. We interviewed her on her work with Gotse Delchev Business Incubator.

You are the director of a private business incubator, how did it come about?

Business Incubator - Gotse Delchev (BI-GD) is a non-governmental and non-profit organisation which provides support to entrepreneurs in the Gotse Delchev area in Bulgaria. It was born as an initiative of the United Nations Development Programme and the idea behind it was to create employment in the municipality. With this aim in mind, the incubator was created to help the setting up of new businesses in the area by supporting and coaching entrepreneurs.

Tell us a little bit about your incubator Gotse Delchev. What do you do?

We do a lot of things to cover the needs of entrepreneurs in the region. We mostly focus on helping them with the assessment of their business idea, mentoring to set up and develop their business and networking. For that, we organise several events (workshops, business to business meetings, etc.) but also courses - we are a certified vocational training centre and we train farmers, employees of enterprises and SMEs, people from industry, etc.

Also, as we are close to the border with Greece and Macedonia, many of these actions are developed in collaboration with people from those countries.

What do you think is innovative about the incubator?

We put a lot of effort into bringing together people with complementary needs, solutions or resources, which is one of the main successful aspects of the incubator. In addition, our clients appreciate talking directly with others that have been in their same situation or are running similar activities.

As we do not receive direct funding, we opted for diversification of the services we provide. We therefore rely on our network of contacts for certain expertise and resources.

Finally, very important, we also try to build community, not only between business partners, but also with all society (local authorities, researchers, services sector, public institutions...). This contributes to a more stable and sustainable economy, which is key for maintaining this new business in a region like ours which is a bit isolated (mountainous area with very small farms and a variety of companies). For example we help to connect farmers with local shops, restaurants, tourism enterprises, to sell their products, so they may benefit from each other. Also, local authorities try to play an important role with their active involvement in a rural strategy development. We also work very closely with the Agricultural high school and vocational schools in the area, trying to make them more oriented towards entrepreneurship.

Tell us about the needs of people entering agriculture without any previous background in your region

The new undertakings are very influenced by the particularities of our area. We live in a mountainous region which results in limited communications with the rest of the country, small villages and little agricultural plots due to the steep terrain. This is both an obstacle and an advantage. On the one hand, this is challenging because suitable land is a very limited resource and market circuits normally are very local. On the other hand, this aspect forces people to be very innovative and efficient when farming. For example many of them run on ecological principles and seek quality, rather than big productions. Also, the landscape is beautiful and therefore an excellent value for rural tourism. And tourists are the main consumers of high quality products and services on the area.

In terms of background, new entrants to agriculture are very diverse, but many of them are highly educated. Even without any prior experience or background related to agriculture, the new entrants tend to have a link to the land – for example a member of the family that will have at least a small plot where vegetables are grown.

For example an inspirational case we had was Ema Eneva, an ecologist who became a farmer and wanted to produce organic honey. We helped her on the assessment of the idea, business and orientation plan, etc., and networking. We tried to connect agriculture with sustainable tourism, by putting her in contact with potential clients on Bulgaria and Greece.



Considering your experience, which are the main needs of these new entrants without any previous background?

In our region, as in many other countries, the most challenging task is access to market. In Gotse Delchev particularly, the small size of businesses is a big set-back. So, in our case, we focus on improving qualifications (the more skilled and professional is the entrepreneur, the more chances of success) and the cooperation with others, building bigger agri-business enterprises or cooperatives. For example, milk producers associated with a small processing plant, may lead to better and more diverse products, longer terms for selling the milk and a stronger bargaining position. We are now preparing a strategy with a Local Action Group to promote these kind of initiatives.

But, that is when the new entrant is already running the farm. Frequently, our main task is to make sure that people realise what they have let themselves in for! For example, often they come with the idea that their main need is funding to start farming, or they have kind of idealistic (even romantic) vision of the activity. In these cases, we work very carefully on the assessment of the idea. Indeed farming may be a very satisfying and exciting activity or way of life but is not easy, you have to deal with weather, bureaucracy, peaks in the need for labour, etc. After having realised this, if they decide to go ahead and jump, we jump with them. During the setting up of the project, we also show them that, to succeed, it is necessary to look at agriculture as a business.

How long do you support the entrepreneurs?

We usually work very intensively with the agri-entrepreneur for one year. During this time our main task is to set up the project. After that, they are on their own but as they are now members of the network, the relation is still very close. They keep coming to activities of their interest (events or courses we organise), but also, we call them to speak to others, to cooperate with potential partners, hosts demonstrations, etc. Therefore they still benefit from the incubator's network but also contribute to it.

What would your advice to other supportive actors to better assist new entrants into farming?

First, try to understand and see the real needs of the agri-entrepreneur. As I said, frequently they think that main priority is money, but the fact is that they are not prepared for running the business and to deal with markets, calculate cost, incomes, etc. So it is very important to first set the idea and then look for the resources (financial and others).

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