



Stronger and Empowered Rural Women for Resilient and Prosperous Pelagonija

“When women thrive, all of society benefits.”
Kofi Annan

“If women farmers have the same access to resources as man, the number of hungry in the World could be reduced by 150 million”.
FAO, State of Food and Agriculture, 2011

Organic production is good on many levels. Firstly, for us producers, while working is much better as we are not exposed to harmful chemicals, for our families as they are the first consumers, for our customers...and the for the land and environment itself, as it stays alive full of good microorganisms, producing more and better quality products. Otherwise, land treated with pesticides and herbicides becomes dull and gives less and less products...

(Roza Anackovska, s. Dobrushevo)



Unfortunately, rural women's voice has not been heard for a long time. Systematic collection of data, regular meetings and collaboration with the academia, local and national bodies is required for improving the situation of rural women in Pelagonija. And it will take time to solve the issues...if it is not already too late.

(Tanja Divjakoska, s. Sveto Mitrani)



Branding of some products and relating the agricultural supply to the touristic offer can be very helpful. Mاريو's beaten cheese, ajvar, cocktails from wild berries to name a few. Krushevo women are already producing and selling those products to the tourists and paragliders....

(Lefkija Gazoska, Krushevo, Feel Krushevo organisation)



What is needed is mentorship of the women and better education and skills trainings on systematic and regular level, with special focus on young and entrepreneur women. In situations where complex documentation is needed, and women from rural areas are faced with its preparation for the first time, a mentoring approach is needed, which will aim to facilitate the application process and clarify the extensive documents and forms. A mentor should be appointed throughout the procedure to guide the women throughout the whole process, from the beginning to the last stage.

(Biljana Stojanoska, Krushevo)



Main findings

Women in Pelagonija believe that their voice is not been heard systematically in a longer period. They are interested in additional training, mainly related to improving their business and farming skills, but they requested a closer **mentoring programme** that will support their activities.

The organic production is rare in Pelagonija. Less than 1 in 1000 farmers produce or make an effort for organic production, of which almost none women. Main reasons are related to complicated procedure, lack of information, lack of know-how and bureaucracy. Closer and **continuous cooperation between academia, local governments' bodies and farmers** is required.

Agricultural cooperation in Pelagonija is weak. Lack of cooperation between farmers (horizontal cooperation or cooperatives), is accompanied by lack of competitive food industry side and buyers (vertical cooperation). **The oligopsony market structure** is a problem for agriculture in Pelagonija, characterised with small number of buyers. The role of various agencies and institutions that are regulating the markets of various products has an important role, but mostly is perceived as distrustful and problematic.

Divided and scattered land and production does not allow for using economies of scale. For some of the land, farmers do not have documentation due to old or non-existent urbanistic plans. In addition, this means unused mechanisation, duplication of costly equipment and inappropriate allocation of resources.

Infrastructural problems are also huge hindering factor for agricultural development in Pelagonija region. Lack of roads, weak or non-existent irrigations systems, continuous problems in electricity and water supply just to name a few. Without basic requirements there is no place for initiating the progress.

State subventions are important driving force, with 80 percent of producers claiming subventions. However, there many issues in the distribution of subventions, such as their dimensioning without any evidence based analysis, delays, technical problems and inefficient distribution, with lack of control and monitoring from the state bodies. All these accentuate the non-market dimension of subventions.

The IPARD programme and other finances' access are highly welcomed but mainly very distant, especially for small farmers. Starting with issues with the high requirements for official documents, lack of knowledge and lack of time, women believe that the finances are mainly for big projects and big producers and sometimes for newcomers in a region that get on a concession/buy land just to use these funds based on the regional-distribution criteria. Women believe that only direct support can be helpful, accompanied by mentoring and supporting programme.

Data for proper analysis of the situation and for better planning are necessary. Census of Agriculture needs to be performed urgently, in order to have data for any analysis and evidence based decision making in agriculture.

Branding of the region and of some products is can also be helpful, as well as connecting the production with rural tourism. "Mariovo's bitten cheese", bitten peppers with garlic, ajvar, home-made pies, white pine honey, home-made jams, and juices from domestic but also wild berries are some of the products that can be interesting for the market. Short live span of the agricultural products and **no freezing facilities** are problem for most of the farmers. SMEs need

to be developed in order for the agricultural products to gain longer life span and more value added in the supply chains.

Finally, **corruption and distrust in institutions** are perceived as a highest concern of the women in Pelagonija. These are considered as main factors, along with the lack of jobs, as main factors for the extensive immigration from Pelagonija.

Background

The Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations¹ warns the World of the possible shortages of food, emphasizing that the food crisis can be especially hard in developing countries. A key part to decrease food insecurity is to take actions towards better prevention, anticipation, and targeting of agricultural production and to address the root causes of food insecurity. Women can play a vital part in solving the problem, as they are well educated and equipped with equipment and know-how can provide support to the efforts.²

In the last two years economic growth in North Macedonia slowed down considerably, mainly, due to the Covid-19 crisis and global crisis caused by Russia-Ukraine conflict. The agricultural sector is especially hit by the crisis, as one of the main partners is Ukraine and Russia. Two-digit inflation especially put agricultural producers in unfavourable position, by increasing costs, devaluating the value of delayed subventions and making export and placement of products impossible.

North Macedonia's legal and regulatory framework is declaratively favourable to agriculture and farmers. The country has made significant efforts to harmonise its legal framework with the laws of the European Union. However, the criteria, standards and practices are yet to be implemented especially in the agricultural sector.

Agriculture (including forestry, hunting and fisheries) in North Macedonia contributes to the GDP gross value added (GVA) with around 9%, and encompass 13, 9% in total employment. When it comes to the number of the enterprises, agriculture participate only with 2 605 or 3% in the all enterprises in North Macedonia. Mainly, above 90 % enterprises are micro and small, up to 19 persons employed. Pelagonija, southwest of North Macedonia is huge agricultural valley abundant with fertile land and sunlight. Characterised with great agricultural production in the past, now Pelagonija's lands and potentials remain only partly used, due to immigration and bad policies in the past. In 2019, cultivated land represented around 519 thousand ha or about 41% of total agricultural land (EU Rural Development Report, 2022). Hence, INOS from Prilep conducted a study using novel data from the Survey on rural woman in Pelagonija. Based on the survey data, the educational seminars were tailored suiting the needs of the Pelagonija's women. Hence, this study brings forward several key messages and policy recommendations for policy makers in North Macedonia.

The research was conducted with a structured questionnaire consisting of 3 parts: the first part are questions related to the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of the respondents, the second part of the questionnaire refers to the knowledge that respondents have about business and marketing, legal framework for organic production, as well as

¹ *Global Report on Food Crises: acute food insecurity hits new highs*; <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/global-report-on-food-crises-acute-food-insecurity-hits-new-highs/en>

² *Empowering women and girls is crucial to ensure sustainable food security in the aftermath of COVID-19, say UN food agency heads ahead of International Women's Day*; <https://northmacedonia.un.org/en/115246-empowering-women-and-girls-crucial-ensure-sustainable-food-security-aftermath-covid-19-say>

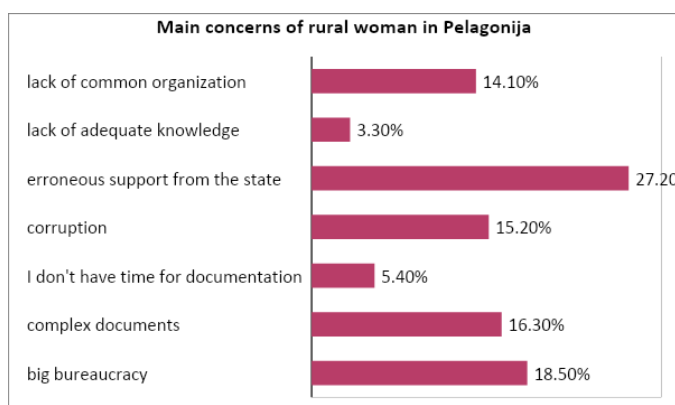
financing opportunities. The last part refers to characteristics of the agricultural and farming practices and activities of the respondents.

The questionnaire was distributed online using the Google Forms platform. In addition, a team of researchers from the Center for Innovation and Development Inos Prilep and students from the local University “St. Kliment Ohridski” Bitola conducted terrain research by visiting the rural areas of the Pelagonija region and surveying the women who live there. The research was conducted on 327 women of different ages from rural areas of Pelagonija region as follows.

Rural women in Pelagonija – Facts and Figures

The main problems that rural women in Pelagonija face are presented in Figure 1:

Figure 1. Main concerns of rural women in Pelagonija



Source: Authors own Calculations based on a survey of women in Pelagonija (2022).

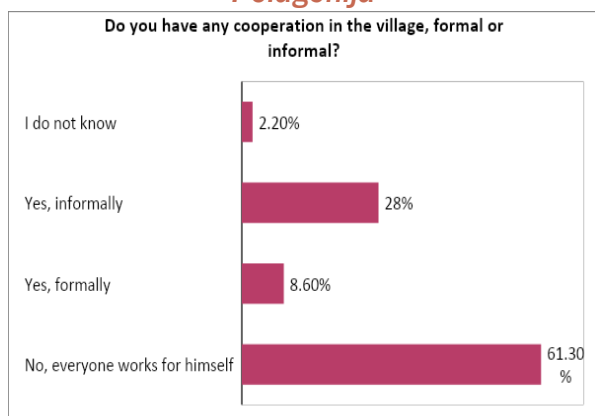
Most rural women emphasized the system problems as the main concerns that affect their life and production. Almost half of the women identified the complicated documentation process (16.3%), great bureaucracy (18.5%) and no time for the procedures (5.4%). The rest think that the high level of corruption (15.2%) and inappropriate support from the government (27.2%) also contribute to the problems. Interestingly, rural women believe that not having the appropriate knowledge is not a main issue.

Similar to all regions in North Macedonia, rural Pelagonija has problem in keeping the young population, especially in the rural areas.

Women in Pelagonija are especially concerned about immigration, naming lack of jobs, lack of financial support and perspective, as well as bad conditions and non-existent rural areas as main reasons for its increase. The high unemployment rate of young people (15-24) is an additional problem that leads to the out migration of the young labour force from rural areas to urban centres and abroad.

Additional main problem are the lack of infrastructure, irrigation systems, stabile water and electricity supply. As reported by the Public enterprise for Water Economy only 7, 2% of irrigated agricultural areas are actually annually irrigated due to deteriorated irrigation systems. Women’s agricultural land is divided and scattered with no access to roads, with no official documents. The cooperation with academia and innovations are almost inexistent. All these give archaic undeveloped dimension of agriculture with great use of pesticides and other chemicals, and no possibility for economies of scale and inappropriate allocation of resources. Additional worrying fact is that mainly Pelagonija’s women are not having any formal cooperation. Only 8.6% of them answered that participate in some formal cooperation, while around 28 % cooperate in some informal way (Figure 2). Rest, that is approximately 60 % are working separately. This situation reinforces the oligopsony power of the buyers on the markets. With respect to organic production, most of the women (approximately 90%) stated that they are not produce organically, mainly due to lack of information, lack of economic reasons, and lack of knowledge.

Figure 2. Cooperation of rural women in Pelagonija



Source: Authors own Calculations based on a survey of women in Pelagonija (2022).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Given the problems of women in Pelagonija, and their potential for contribution to regional growth, urgent attention is needed to develop and execute supportive and development policies targeting women.

Firstly, **on a central level, the state institutions and government need to simplify the procedures, and fight against corruption.** The main demotivating factor for women is bureaucracy and distrust, hindering the efforts even before they start. The positive climate must be built in order for the trust to be restored.

Additional efforts to support women, such as educational trainings are needed. Women in Pelagonija, need free of charge trainings in practical issues related to business skills and organic production. In addition, they need training related to the use of the structural funds aimed at supporting the agriculture.

Formalisation of the cooperation throughout the Pelagonija region is required, in order to leverage the position of the producers in respect to buyers. Women can even better if they see interest in it. In addition, **substantial analyses of cost benefit of subventions for each agricultural product are required.** Justification and proper valuation of subventions shall combat dubious agricultural activities and possible corruption.

Finally, **independent monitoring on an on-going basis of the production, trade, and exporting of products** is necessary for accurate and consistent analyses and evidence-based policy making.

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This Policy Brief was prepared by team of researchers from INOS from North Macedonia, students and professors from University St.Kliment Ohridski - Bitola. The authors would like to express gratitude for the valuable insights from the students and women from rural areas.

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