

Involving the Local Community - Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation, Successful Implementation of Action Plans, and Understanding the Importance of the Human Factor

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Introduction

The aim of the workshop is to demonstrate how to sustainably engage different actors, especially craftspeople, and how to build cooperation based on trust, ethics and a long-term vision. Pomelaj also aims to demonstrate the crucial role of good management and a shared vision (including values) among the people and institutions involved in the sustainable and successful valorisation of crafts as defined by the project **COMMHERITOUR**.

The workshop is based on the long-standing experience of Pomelaj, both as an employment centre, where the employed craftspeople preserve the Slovenian intangible cultural heritage, and as an institution with the status of a Handicraft Centre, which connects and supports local artisans, craftspeople and other stakeholders within the community. Pomelaj is a model for sustainable inclusion of craftspeople and communities.

1. European Framework for Heritage Cooperation

Cultural heritage is a fundamental part of our identity, memory, and belonging. It shapes how people feel about their communities and future. The Faro Convention affirms that cultural heritage belongs to everyone and is essential for building democratic, inclusive and sustainable societies. Cultural heritage is a human right. As living heritage, the traditional crafts are part of intangible heritage and our social fabric. New European Bauhaus builds on these values by linking aesthetics, sustainability, and inclusion. It encourages creative reuse of traditional knowledge in design and production, community-cantered innovation, rooted in local identity and values, and crafts as drivers of circular economy, environmental responsibility and meaningful work. Together, these frameworks invite us to see crafts not as a thing of the past, but a shared tool for shaping a more humane, resilient and better future.

2. Pomelaj: From a Craft Cooperative to a Craft Centre

This presentation is built on experiences of Pomelaj, which is a social enterprise that employs weavers from vulnerable groups, particularly people with disabilities. As such, it collaborates with a wide range of stakeholders who support its mission and contribute to its development. At the same time, Pomelaj also functions as a recognized handicraft centre – it serves as a supportive institutional environment for artisans and craftspeople from different craft sectors. It actively includes them in its activities with the aim of preserving and developing traditional crafts. You will learn about **Pomelaj's key success factors**, the challenges they faced, and how they overcame them.

Pomelaj began as a local weaving workshop aimed at reviving heritage skills, using corn husk and willow. From the very beginning, it was a collective effort supported by multiple stakeholders: municipalities provided infrastructure and project support, local companies contributed expertise in human resources and programme development, and one key company managed market access and sales. The initial model was home-based production, tailored to the capacities of each worker – many of whom had lost jobs due to the closure of large factories

in the region. The workers who joined were at first distrustful shaped by the negative experiences with previous buy-back schemes that had left them feeling used. One of the most important elements in overcoming this mistrust was the introduction of a transparent purchase pricing system for each product. This ensured fairness, trust, and dignity for all involved. Collaboration had to be built slowly, based on equality and mutual respect. The key tools? Coffee, home-baked cookies, and real listening. Through face-to-face meetings and personal engagement, Pomelaj initiated a slow cultural shift—from hierarchical factory structures to open participation and collaboration.

As the initiative grew, formalisation as a cooperative became necessary. This came with its own set of challenges – especially the "one founder, one vote" principle, which still persists today, as those with larger contributions often expect greater influence.

Today, Pomelaj is recognised as a model of community-based heritage preservation, inclusive employment, and long-term trust-building. Pomelaj employs seven weavers in the craft workshop, two assistants in the culinary workshop – all of whom are persons with disabilities, one professional support worker, and a CEO. Pomelaj is a registered employment centre and an officially recognized handicraft centre. Their traditional weaving is listed in the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Slovenia, and their handcrafted products hold nationally recognized Art&Craft certificates.

3. Reaching and Supporting Craftspeople

To successfully reach and support craftspeople, Pomelaj has developed a strategy based on fieldwork, networking, trust-building, and practical support across various areas. They operate through direct outreach and mapping by field research, collaborating with ethnologists, monitoring local events, fairs, social media and local news etc. They make regular visits to their workshops, and build true relationships. They organize group meetings at their premises, where craftspeople meet, are informed about the plans for new coming projects etc.

It is important to describe some characteristic of regional craftspeople in order to understand the supportive role of Pomelaj centre. Local craftspeople are often from the older generations, often without digital skills and lacking computers/printers/scanners or other modern equipment at home (important for maintaining contact and understanding their capacity for project participation), often require significant support in understanding formal documents, tender requirements, preparing applications for certification, etc., often need extensive support in promotion and sales (meaning Pomelaj must handle a large part of the work and make it easier for them), often have a low level of self-organization, often do not recognize new opportunities, often do not keep up with novelties, often need support in valuing their work and products – they require encouragement and confidence-building, often face financial difficulties.

A key insight is that craftspeople cannot succeed alone – they need a network of supporting institutions that provide sustainable assistance.

Pomelaj regularly identifies its needs and, based on this, connects with relevant stakeholders or already known actors to enable the development. Similarly, craftspeople face comparable needs, and Pomelaj's approach helps address them through targeted collaboration. There are some concrete examples of how Pomelaj collaborates and searches for solutions with their stakeholders:

Municipalities / Public institutions: they provide space, place public orders, and co-finance events. *Challenge:* Limited understanding of their specific context and needs. *Solution:* Establishing a relationship with a key contact person within the institution, who then helps facilitate understanding and ensures more responsive collaboration.

Local Associations and Communities: they help mobilize volunteers and are engaged in events. *Challenge:* facing demographic changes – the aging population means fewer people attend their events, while younger people move from the villages or are less willing to participate in community activities. *Solution:* always find the key persons in communities which will open doors for you to every other member. They also reach out to broader public via social media, which enables them to involve new stakeholders, like nature lovers, volunteers from urban areas etc.

Museums: collaborating in documenting and promoting craft heritage, they provide continuous and essential support to craftspeople by advising on product development, interpret heritage for artisans, show them archival materials to learn various traditional techniques, and play a key role in preparing important documentation based on academic expertise – for example, in completing or reviewing applications for entry into the Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage. They also oversee the development of crafts to ensure it represents a modern enhancement of heritage and help set standards for craft National Vocational Qualifications schemes. Ethnologists also serve as evaluators of craft products for obtaining national certificates. *Challenge:* Since (active) handcraft work is not the sole focus of museum studies, there may initially be hesitation about collaborating on joint practical craft projects. Additionally, museums are more scientific institutions, while Pomelaj is a practical actor. *Solution:* Connect with museum professionals whose specific expertise includes craft heritage. Through these experts, they met with the museum management, which opened doors for preparation of larger projects together.

Schools: Enable knowledge transfer, participate in workshops and educational visits, and thus raise awareness of the importance of preserving crafts among younger generations. They are included as target groups in projects we implement. *Challenges:* Limited time in the curriculum for crafts, high transport costs, and lack of funding for visits. *Solutions:* Adapted programs during mandatory school activity days, workshops held directly at schools, and collaboration with donors or funded events to reduce or cover costs.

Universities: They collaborate with the Faculty of Design on joint projects to develop new products – where students present their design concepts in research assignments (students thus learn about the craft sector, materials, heritage, techniques, and the feasibility of transferring ideas into tangible handicraft products). *Challenge:* Initial lack of interest or understanding of how to integrate crafts into their designer research projects. *Solution:* Presenting good practice examples (showcasing the joint development of products), which motivates students and professors to collaborate.

Designers: They collaborate with several designers who assist them in developing new products. Initiatives for collaboration come both from the designers and from Pomelaj. Designers are often also involved in co-funded projects. *Challenge & solution:* designers new to the field of certain craft must practically learn to work with the material and the artisan. This collaboration must work as a co-creation.

Companies: Sometimes companies approach designers to develop unique products for them, and the designers engage artisans to produce them. More commonly, companies select business gifts from their existing product catalogue. *Challenge:* Businesses do not recognize craft items as suitable business gifts. *Solution:* They create high-value package offers to raise awareness for thoughtful purchasing, highlighting the sustainability of local sourcing, and presenting the story behind the products.

Tourist agencies, Tourist Information Centres, Regional Tourism Board, and Local and other Stores: These are sales channels and partners in joint promotional activities. With Tourist Information Centres and incoming tourist agencies, they collaborate as providers of 5-sense and boutique experiences. Employees in Tourist Information Centres are key figures, as they are often the first people visitors and tourists encounter when arriving in the area. *Challenge 1:* Staff at Tourist Information Centres often lack first-hand knowledge of the local area – they have not personally visited key sights, or are unfamiliar with traditional crafts, or are not motivated enough to actively promote regional heritage to visitors and tourists. Traditional craft are sometimes seen as an unattractive experience. *Solution 1:* Invite tourism workers to field visits and hands-on experiences. Engage them in developing package offerings (e.g., 5-

sense experiences), and prepare clear and informative materials that help them incorporate your programs into their offer. *Challenge 2:* Shops do not recognize the value of crafts and are reluctant to include them in their sales portfolio. *Solution 2:* Present products in person, not just through promotional materials. Share the narrative behind the craftsmanship. Acquire national-level certificates to convince retailers of the high quality of handmade products. This helps build understanding around the higher pricing. Be flexible in negotiating fair pricing that satisfies both sides. Always define terms in a written contract, including delivery schedules, return policies, and care guidelines for the products. *Challenge 3:* Larger stores have issues with boutique-scale production. *Solution 3:* To address boutique-scale limitations, consider expanding production capacity through outsourcing – by involving more handcrafters in fulfilling larger orders. This requires consistent quality of craftsmanship products, transparent coordination, fair pricing for all contributors, and clear terms of collaboration to ensure consistency and trust. In parallel, communicate with larger stores about the value of artisan-made goods, offering curated collections and flexible delivery arrangements. Emphasize the uniqueness and sustainability of the products with storytelling and certification to support premium positioning.

Media: An important part of multi-stakeholder cooperation is the relationship with local, regional, and national media – including print, digital outlets, radio stations, and television. At key milestones, during notable achievements, or when announcing new projects, it is essential to organize a press conference to present updates, results, and the broader significance of the craft sector or project for the community. Without public visibility, there is no real promotion; without promotion, there is no sales growth, and without sales, there is no progress. *Challenge:* At times, media shows little interest in crafts or requires paid promotion, which makes gaining media coverage expensive and challenging. *Solution:* Despite this, Pomelaj continues to send invitations and build relationships with journalists. In the long term, this approach pays off – media eventually responds once they recognize the value of the content. When possible, Pomelaj also includes media partners in funded projects, offering them visibility and engagement as a form of compensation for earlier coverage or reduced rates.

Key insights that will help to build local support for craftspeople:

- Craftspeople carry knowledge, dignity, and local identity.
- Community inclusion means working with care, trust, and respect.
- Heritage is alive – and it needs people like you to keep it that way.

From Insight to Action - Practical Tools for Engaging Local Stakeholders

1. *Corn Husk Weaving.* Objective: Relaxation and connection with heritage through a hands-on activity.
2. *Co-Creation Sprint.* Objective: Group work to design a draft cooperation plan with a local stakeholder. In small groups, you will design a fictional or real project with a stakeholder (e.g., farmer, museum, craftsperson). Questions help define common values, shared goals, and realistic first steps.
3. *Mapping Ethical Impacts and Stakeholder Reflection.* Objective: Identification of key stakeholders and analysis of the social, economic, and environmental impacts in collaboration. Each person reflects on their own project using a quadrant (A4 sheet divided in four). The four areas are: A. Community Economy (income, jobs, fair pay, value chains), B. Preservation of Techniques (transmission, innovation, mastership), C. Youth and Vulnerable Groups (inclusion, empowerment, human factor), D. Environment (materials, footprint, sustainability, identity).
4. Homework: *The story of a Master Craftsperson.* Objective: Personal reflection. Write a short, real or fictional story from the viewpoint of a local artisan. How would they like to be remembered in your project? What would they say about the cooperation?