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Stakeholder Analysis and Gap Assessment Report

“Peer-To-Peer Cooperation with Iraqi Governorate – Al Anbar” Project

Deliverable 3.1

Prepared by Jerneja Harmel and Matevž Premelč, ZaVita d.o.o.

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1 Introduction to Deliverable

Peer-To-Peer Cooperation with Iraqi Governorate – Al Anbar, is a year-long project aiming to address the needs of the agricultural sector in Al Anbar, Iraq, focusing on the establishment of virtual markets and farmers' cooperatives. The project was developed and is being implemented by the Consortium of partners that consists of the Association of Municipalities and Towns of Slovenia (lead partner), Stritih Sustainable Development (partner), ZaVita Consulting (partner), and the Faculty of Electrical Engineering, University of Ljubljana (partner), under the UNDP supervision.

The project aims to transfer the selected good practices in the field of virtual markets and farmers' cooperatives from Slovenia to Al Anbar Governorate while taking into account the socio-economic characteristics of the Province. Altogether, three successful businesses or initiatives were selected as good practices on the Slovenian side, and their managers have shared gained experience and knowledge with the project team to facilitate their transfer to Al Anbar Province.

Within the scope of Work Package 3, preparational activities were performed with Iraqi project partners in Al Anbar Governorate to identify the circumstances and actual needs of the agricultural sector in the province of Al Anbar. These activities included the introduction of the project to Al Anbar Governorate officials, and the identification of relevant stakeholders, important for the development of virtual markets and farmers' cooperatives. Moreover, a gap assessment was performed to characterize the most pressing challenges and gaps that can be solved by this project.

At the same time, the same approach and analyses were implemented on the Slovenian side with the support of identified good practices, and the goal to learn from their experience, namely, to assess potential challenges of the upcoming transfer, as well as the needed manpower and skills, which will enable a successful transfer of the good practices.

2 Introduction to Slovenian Good Practices

In this chapter, we briefly present the three selected good practices in the field of agriculture in Slovenia. One of them is an example of a virtual market, and the other two are representing cooperatives. The first cooperative is primarily aimed at food producers and consumers, while the other one combines also food services, such as catering and restaurant business.

A virtual market is an online application or a website, connecting the producers and consumers of food or other products.

A cooperative is an enterprise, owned, controlled, and run by its members. It is a business, driven by values and not only profit, aiming to realize members' common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations (ICA, 2018).

The information presented in this Report was assembled based on the data gathered via an online questionnaire, filled out by the founders and managers of all three initiatives, as well as the follow-up interviews that were held in April 2021. The received information served as an important input for stakeholder analysis and gap assessment.



Virtual market “Tržnica na Borjaču”

Initiators of the project were the Regional Development Agency ROD Ajdovščina and the Municipality of Ajdovščina. The project was developed from the need to connect farmers of the Vipava Valley and enhance the offer of local food.

While the founders were originally thinking of establishing a farmers' cooperative, they decided to formulate the idea differently, due to the bad reputation of the cooperatives in the region. Namely, even though cooperatives in Vipava Valley have a long tradition, widespread privatization and business failure of former cooperatives, have been a reason for mistrust among farmers towards such cooperatives. Therefore, the Regional Development Agency and the Municipality decided to establish a virtual market, that will aspire to achieve similar goals as a cooperative would, in terms of creating a proxy to connect farmers with consumers. Through the development of the virtual market, they hope to build a community, where local producers and consumers would be well-connected and aware of the importance of local food production.

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It took 10 months to realize the idea – the establishment of the virtual market. The result was a demand-driven website (finalized in 2015), that was aiming to connect the producer and the consumer. However, not everything went smoothly from the beginning; the market was launched at a bad timing (there were no products in the wintery December), they did not foresee any form of marketing, and therefore the communication of the project was not successful.

These obstacles were overcome by a reformulation of the idea, and based on it, the new virtual market – “Tržnica na Borjaču” was created in 2020. The established website functions as a billboard and supports all necessary communication tools needed to connect the farmers with consumers. The timing was right this time, additionally due to Covid-19 pandemics and the consequential rise of online shopping. This time, the idea stuck and soon farmers and consumers started actively using the website for selling and buying agricultural products.

Furthermore, the virtual market has a special educational and promotional section for farmers and consumers. It features articles on the importance of local food supply and thoughtful consumerism and innovative recipes on what to prepare from local quality food for consumers. Another section at the website offers tips for farmers; expert advice on agricultural practices as well as business development advice.

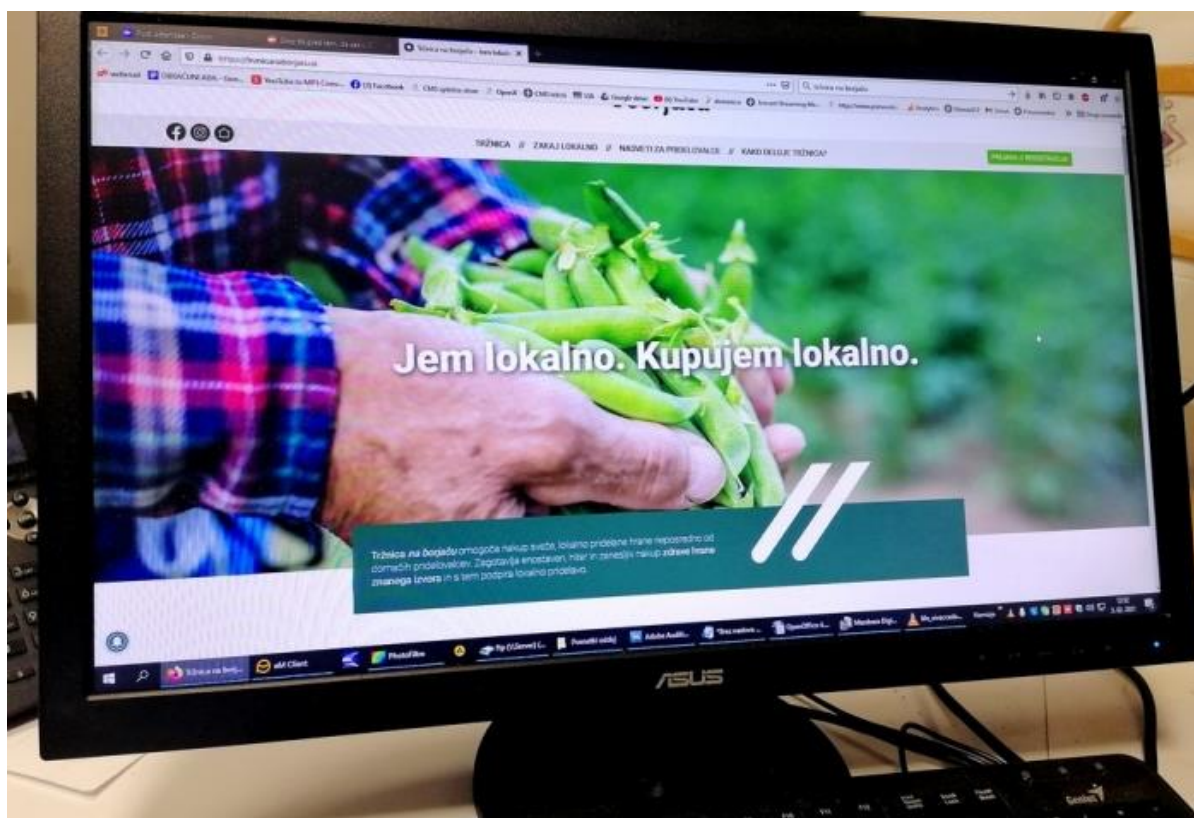


Figure 1. Virtual market in practice, the title reads: “I eat local. I buy local” (Source: official website).

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Nowadays, the website is driven by producers. The founders point out that one possible improvement would be to incorporate also the consumer-driven component into the virtual market. This way, consumers could place demand in advance. Consumers can pick up the products either at the farm or at specially designated pick-up areas, that are designated on a municipal level. The functioning virtual market lowers the risk of lack of demand to small and middle-sized farmers, and currently, the demand is outnumbering the supply.

The project was able to attract farmers, due to the Municipality's and ROD Ajdovščina's good reputation among the local population. The two institutions are known to be trustworthy and constructive partners that have previously performed many projects and were able to utilize this experience and contacts.

Everyone is welcome to join the website, but the management has especially targeted younger farmers, which have proven to adapt easier to new technology for selling. In their experience, most of the large farmers do not look for such a virtual market tool, as they have no problem entering the market and ensuring a stable level of sales. Hobby farmers that mostly produce food for themselves and their relatives are also not the typical type of virtual market user, as they don't intend for their production to grow. Middle-sized farmers, however, have proven to be the target audience, as they alone do not have a lot of power to enter the market, and they also want their business to grow.

Nowadays, the region also has its own brand for local products and farmers are selling their products using unified labeled packaging, as appropriate branding and packaging have proven to add value to the products.

Through such projects, they are additionally strengthening the visibility of the region and informing the consumer, which in turn has multifaceted beneficial impacts on the society, environment, and economics (e.g., health and wellbeing, cultivated landscape, local visibility). The Municipalities recognize this and therefore, consider this initiative as an investment in local development.

So far, using the website is free of charge, however, eventually, they will consider contributions for using the virtual market and the brand that will cover the cost of the storage, website maintenance, and other costs related to the virtual market. They promote themselves using social networks, websites, news for registered users, and they are planning promotional events at local markets once the pandemic is over.

Throughout the project, they have collaborated with various stakeholders, such as other (namely neighboring) municipalities, agricultural and business experts, users – farmers, and consumers. The

funders point out that it is important to include the most important stakeholders (farmers) already in the phase of solution design and not only after the market is already online.

The founders emphasize it is easy to establish the market, it is challenging, however, to maintain it. In the beginning, they were especially surprised by the duration of the phase to acquire the necessary legal bases. Nowadays, one of the challenges they are working on is computer literacy as well as online behavior in terms of how to describe the products, how to take photos, so that they appear good on the screen, etc.

Eventually, they would like the virtual market to function by itself, but they are not there yet. They have received offers from individuals wanting to take it over, but so far, they are not willing to let it go yet in order not to lose trust that was difficult to gain and also took a lot of time. The thing is, whoever takes on such a project over, needs a lot of manpower. This is currently handled by the Municipalities and the Regional Development Agency, and among others they do a lot of fieldwork, networking, taking care of the storage and transfer, marketing, etc.

They additionally consider their mission to communicate the benefits of ecological production, products of which are indeed more expensive as they contribute to healthy levels of ecosystem services.

In times of Covid-19, the virtual market has proven to be even more relevant, as the consumers were in a search for locally produced food with fewer options where to buy it from. This drove the demand even higher, but also the supply has strengthened as even larger farmers decided to join the initiative due to the reduced demand on their usual channels (Štolfa and Furlan, 2021a; Štolfa and Furlan, 2021b).

Official website with more information: <https://trznicanaborjacu.si/>.



Cooperative DAME

The idea for the Cooperative DAME was developed in 2014 by four women in their 50s that were left out of work. Based on their previous experiences in tourism and hospitality service they formulated the idea for a business that would provide citizens with local and ecologically produced meals for a fair and affordable price. They decided to do that in a form of the legal entity of cooperative and social enterprise, as they believe businesses should stand for other values such as social and environmental responsibility, besides profitability.

While designing the project they were hoping to address two social problems; employment of disadvantaged people, and the generally low quality of available meals in restaurants.

They aimed to provide high-quality meals to everyone that cannot eat at home and to foster sustainable eating habits by eating locally sourced and healthy (and ecologically produced) food, in the contrast to several fast-food options available elsewhere. Furthermore, they were also addressing the lack of options for vegetarian meals at that time.

To implement their idea, they connected with local farmers; for example, with Cooperative Dobrina, which is described in the following section. The Cooperative Dobrina and other local farmers became vital in providing the necessary ingredients and supplies for their kitchen.

The idea was realized relatively fast (in 2 years), and in 2016 they opened a restaurant with locally produced and homemade food. Today, they provide a wide range of ecologically certified food and drinks and their goal is to expand this offer even further. In addition to the restaurant, they also provide catering to numerous institutions and private customers, while some of their products (mostly jarred food) are sold in local shops.

Their catering services are utilized by the private sector as well as public institutions such as the University Medical Center, the Municipality of Maribor, various faculties, etc. Since last year they are also successfully competing in public tenders for public school lunches. This is a confirmation that even public tenders can take the element of locally produced and ecological food into an account.

One of the main challenges at the beginning of the project was establishing a reliable circle of suppliers as well as creating a successful marketing strategy. The Cooperative's representatives also point out that the initial investment is of key importance for the project's success.

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The Cooperative's representatives admit it takes longer to find suppliers of local and ecological food, instead of ordering at supermarkets, and such products are also more costly. As they seek to provide local food at an accessible price, their services are still not more expensive compared to conventional restaurants.

Concerning the marketing challenge, they solved it by applying for a mentoring scheme to supplement their skills and received training in this field.

Today, with the most challenging years (first three) behind them, they fondly look back at the role that the local community (the Municipality) played in their story by exempting them from rent for their restaurant in the first few years in exchange for generating jobs.



Figure 2. Restaurant of the Cooperative DAME (Source: official website).

They believe all skills can be learned, but the founder needs to have an established attitude towards a healthy lifestyle to implement such a project. The awareness of the importance of local food production, ecological agricultural practices as well as that high-quality meals can be affordable and healthy has grown substantially in recent years, which also caused the producers to adapt. Therefore, nowadays, it is easier to access local and ecologically produced food compared to when their idea was developed (Lovrec and Iskra, 2021; Lovrec, 2021).

Their story proves that even businesses can greatly contribute to greater social and environmental prosperity.

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We refer the interested reader to the official website: <http://www.kooperativa-dame.si/>.



Farmers' Cooperative Dobrina

Within the Maribor – the European Capital of Culture Initiative, several working groups were created in the Maribor city in 2012 and one of them was tasked with finding solutions for sustainable local food supply. Their work has developed towards creating a farmers' cooperative, after realizing that the farmers from the area of Slovenske Gorice can enter the market only by connecting in a legal entity.

Small farmers were previously already non-formally connected. They were selling their products at their farm or on markets, where individuals were able to buy them. Their products, however, were not reaching the legal entities, which need larger amounts of food, such as kindergartens, schools, public institutions, hotels, restaurants, etc. The reason for this was primarily, the supply was too fragmented and therefore too demanding to handle for institutions' managers.

It took 1 year to establish the Farmers' Cooperative Dobrina, which main task is to market farmers' products, all in one place. This way their supply is well-connected and it is easier to access the market. The aim of their cooperative is not to create profit, but for farmers to get a fair price for their products, that the products get sold, and that in a way, so it is not a burden to farmers.



Figure 3. The shop with locally produced products of the Cooperative Dobrina (Source: official website).

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Farmers, included in the pre-establishment phase have received training in the field of farmers' cooperatives, however, when the time came only eight of them decided to participate and found the Cooperative. Trust had an important role here, and also in this region, cooperatives were in ill repute. Soon, the Cooperative started growing and today they can pride themselves on 130 members.

The main function of such cooperatives in Slovenia is to enter the market, and rarely, they also lend and borrow machinery and services among small farmers. Everyone that wants to work with them has to be a member. The first year everyone is on a test membership, afterward, you are accepted as a regular member. The annual membership fee is 20 euros for the first trial year and afterward 5 euros plus 5% of the sales of the previous year. These fees cover the costs of the storage, transport, and management which are done by the Cooperative Dobrina.

As public institutions have mentioned several times in the past that they would prefer a single supplier instead of many small ones, the Cooperative originally planned to supply only public institutions, but realized that purchase prices of products are incredibly low and that won't be feasible for them to have a viable business. They originally also wished for their Cooperative to be extrapolated to other regions in Slovenia to relieve cooperatives to their previous extent. They put that idea aside to fully develop the Cooperative Dobrina and enable its stable financing. They still apply and implement various EU-funded projects occasionally but these are not the priority anymore.

In their opinion, the most important part for the success of such cooperatives is introducing the cooperative to farmers in a way that they recognize it is in fact their cooperative and it works for them. Transparency in doing business is therefore of utmost importance here, that is why all costs are publicly disclosed, which helps to build strongly needed trust with farmers. Involved farmers meet regularly and this way exchange information and network.

It takes approximately 3-5 years for such a cooperative to be self-sustainable. Nowadays, the Cooperative Dobrina employs four people. Recruitment of new employees is somewhat more difficult as the work has to be shared and everyone has to be in charge of several tasks and responsibilities. Together they supply approximately 70 public institutions with agricultural products as well as many regular private customers, and they also have a shop with local products in Maribor. Prices of products are decided jointly with all farmers.

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When it comes to farmers, they have received their goals, as the cooperative buys off all the food that ecological farmers produce. They don't buy everything from integrated farmers as those also have their own networks.

Had they begun again, they would increase the original entrance fee to keep only interested stakeholders. Additionally, they would develop their own food processing chain.

In their case, key needed skills in the beginning of the Project included legal support to prepare the statute, administration skills on registration of the Cooperative, as well as entry fees and accounting strategies. As with many small organizations, the beginnings included a lot of multitasking and flexibility.

Today, they are more successful than expected, as they are often pointed out as a good practice in Slovenia, as well as abroad (Ploj, 2021a; Ploj, 2021b).

More information can be found at the official website: <https://www.zadruga-dobrina.si/>.

3 Stakeholder Analysis

We performed the stakeholder analysis to identify potential stakeholders who will be involved in the Project, prioritize them according to their importance for the Project, and determine how their interests should be addressed throughout the Project.

The data, needed for the stakeholder analysis was collected using an online survey tool 1ka in both study areas (Al Anbar and Slovenia), however, Al Anbar partners have received and filled out a more detailed version of the survey.

3.1 Stakeholder Analysis of Slovenian Good Practices

The following three Tables display key stakeholders involved in the establishment and management of the individual Good Practices in Slovenia. Table 1 shows stakeholders as identified for the Virtual market “Tržnica na Borjaču”. Table 2 presents key stakeholders involved in the Cooperative DAME, and

Table 3 displays the main stakeholders for the Farmers’ Cooperative Dobrina.

Table 1. Key identified stakeholders of the Virtual market “Tržnica na Borjaču” (N=2) (Štolfa and Furlan, 2021b).

Key Stakeholders	Role in the Project
Municipality of Ajdovščina	Initiator, financing, contracting party, member of the project team.
City Municipality of Nova Gorica	Financing, contracting party, member of the project team.
Agriculture and Forestry Institute Nova Gorica	Expert support in the field of agricultural development, member of the project team.
Farmers	Product development, members of the project team
Consumers – individuals, public institutions, and caterers	Members of the project team, promotion, directing the development of solutions.
Municipality of Renče-Vogrsko	Financing, member of the project team.
Agricultural Consulting Institute	Expert support in the field of agricultural development, member of the project team, marketing, and facilitation, directing development.

Table 2. Key identified stakeholders for the Cooperative DAME (N=1) (Lovrec, 2021).

Key Stakeholders	Role in the Project
Foundation for improving employment opportunities Prizma	Idea development, help with team formation, HR education, guidance on the implementation of the idea.
Association CAAP (an NGO working on social economics development and new social practices)	Education in the field of cooperative establishment, social enterprises, differences between cooperative and other types of businesses.
City Municipality of Maribor	Enabled easier beginning by the exemption of the rent costs.

Institute PIP (legal counseling, education, and support services for NGOs)	Legal consulting (on the code of conduct etc.).
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Table 3. Key identified stakeholders for the Farmers' Cooperative Dobrina (N=1) (Ploj, 2021b).

Key Stakeholders	Role in the Project
Marta Gregorčič in Anton Komat	Designing the pre-project "Sustainable local food supply".
Team Urbane brazde (from ECC project)	Encouraging farms to enter the market together, workshops and education, visiting examples of good practices.
TIKIC Zelena Centrala (a small business)	Transfer of information in the Municipality Jurovski Dol and terrain work to gather interested farmers.
Farmers from Jurovski Dol	From all farmers that participated in workshops, 8 of them were willing to go ahead with the cooperative idea; founders.
Employees of the Cooperative	Most notably in marketing.
Elementary School Slave Klavora and Kindergarten Tezno	Information on performance, appearance in front of public kitchens, suggestions on the offer from their side; consumers.

*ECC = European Capital of Culture

3.1.1 Summary of Main Stakeholder Types and their Roles

While stakeholders and their involvement vary across the discussed three Good Practices, we can still identify the main stakeholder groups that are often involved, as well as their roles in such ventures. Based on the data from the Tables above, we can group stakeholders into three broad categories; public institutions, NGOs and social enterprises, and private sector and public.

Public Institutions

- **Municipalities in Slovenia**

Municipalities' jurisdiction is among others supervising spatial planning, infrastructure, public services, environmental protection, primary schools, etc. In some of these areas, they have legislative jurisdiction, in others, they only implement national legislation within their geographic area.

Municipalities were involved in the identified good practices either as an initiator of the project, or they have been supporting it through financing and other types of benefits, such as subsidized office/working space.

Local food production and consumption are of importance to them as they not only support job generation within the sector but also generate benefits in terms of health and welfare, as well as the environment in the case of ecological production.

- **Public Development Agencies**

Such agencies in Slovenia are supporting the design and implementation of projects, aimed at integrated development. Their role in the mentioned projects was mostly consulting on business development, especially in the field of idea development and funding search.

- **Schools and Kindergartens**

Schools and kindergartens are an important part of some of the good practices; they act as a consumer. In some cases, they also provided support with the development of strategies for entering the public institution food market.

- **Public Institutions in the Field of Agriculture or Development**

Expert institutions such as e.g., Agriculture and Forestry Institute, Agricultural Consulting Institute, have offered expert guidance on business development, including idea development and marketing of the products.

NGOs and Social Enterprises

These are active in many fields; e.g., idea and business development, guidance on legal or organizational requirements, etc. They provided vital support to the projects in terms of skill development in the mentioned fields.

Private Sector and Public

- **Farmers**

Farmers are the driving force behind such projects; they produce the food that is sold at a virtual market or through cooperatives. In the case of the Cooperative Dobrina, farmers also acted as the founders of the Cooperative. They benefit from such schemes by easily accessing the food market that ensures them a stable source of income and reduces the time spent on marketing and sales. This all, in turn, contributes towards preventing food waste.

- **Consumers - individuals**

Consumers in Slovenia are more and more aware of the importance of local and ecological food; therefore, they are more than willing to look for such food even though it sometimes takes an extra effort.

- **Companies (food and catering, agriculture)**

Private companies have been using the services of cooperatives and the virtual market, mostly acting as consumers. They occasionally also supported the initiatives through skill development or selling of their products.

3.2 Stakeholder Analysis of Al Anbar

Four individuals from the Al Anbar Planning Department and Governorate have completed the questionnaire on stakeholder analysis for the Al Anbar region. Altogether, they have identified 20 stakeholders; 9 stakeholder groups, and 11 individual stakeholders as seen in Table 4 (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021a).

Table 4. Identified stakeholders, and the reason for their importance (N=4) (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021a).

Identified Stakeholder	Their Importance
STAKEHOLDER GROUPS	
Local government	Local administration, centralized decision.
Ministry of Agriculture	Supporting agricultural sector, administration of agriculture.
Governmental departments	Contribution to development through local administration of sectors.
Services departments	To serve society through service administration.
Civil society	To make citizens' voices heard.
Specialists	Activation of the role of experts in capacity building.
Citizens	Serving citizens.
Farmers	Fieldworkers, producers.
International organizations	Supporting society for development.
INDIVIDUAL STAKEHOLDERS	
Farmer 1	A good livestock farmer who abides by guidelines and instructions in agriculture/ Experience in livestock.
Farmer 2	A good green crops farmer who abides by guidelines and instructions in agriculture/Has work experience and committed to instructions in agriculture.
Farmer 3	Has experience in production using greenhouse/A farmer abides by instructions and owns several greenhouses.
Farmer 4	Committed to agricultural plan and marketing process/A distinguished farmer (wheat and barley) and owns several lands.
Farmer 5	Has experience in irrigation systems management, has equipment.
Farmer 6	Produces big quantities of good quality feed.
Farmer 7	A good farmer with experience in grain and feed cultivation.
Farmer 8	Has several agricultural types of equipment (tractors, harvesters) and supports the agricultural process.
Farmer 9	Has extensive experience in horticulture and gardening and is highly motivated in his work/plant nursery management.
Farmer 10	Has extensive experience in green windbreaks and is highly motivated in his work.
Farmer 11	Has experience in tissue culture.

The identified stakeholder groups were then ranked by one Iraqi partner, according to their importance for the Peer-To-Peer Project in Al Anbar (N=1).



Figure 4. Stakeholder groups, ranked by one respondent, according to their importance for the Project (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021a).

Stakeholders were additionally assessed according to their **attitude, interest, and power regarding the virtual market and farmers' cooperatives.**

As several respondents have identified individual farmers as stakeholders, we firstly analyzed farmers' point of view (interest, attitude, and power) in a common radar chart where farmers are grouped according to their field of work and the deviations of their response (e.g., irrigation and machinery experts have received the same scores, so they are plotted together).

From Figure 5, we can deduce that **farmers mostly have a very positive attitude towards local food production and small farmers**, with few exemptions such as green windbreak expert, horticulture and plant nursery farmer and tissue culture expert's attitude on local food production. **Farmers, in general, appear to be very interested in establishing a cooperative, and moderately interested in establishing a virtual market. Farmers are believed to have a moderate power to establish a cooperative and low power to establish a virtual market.**

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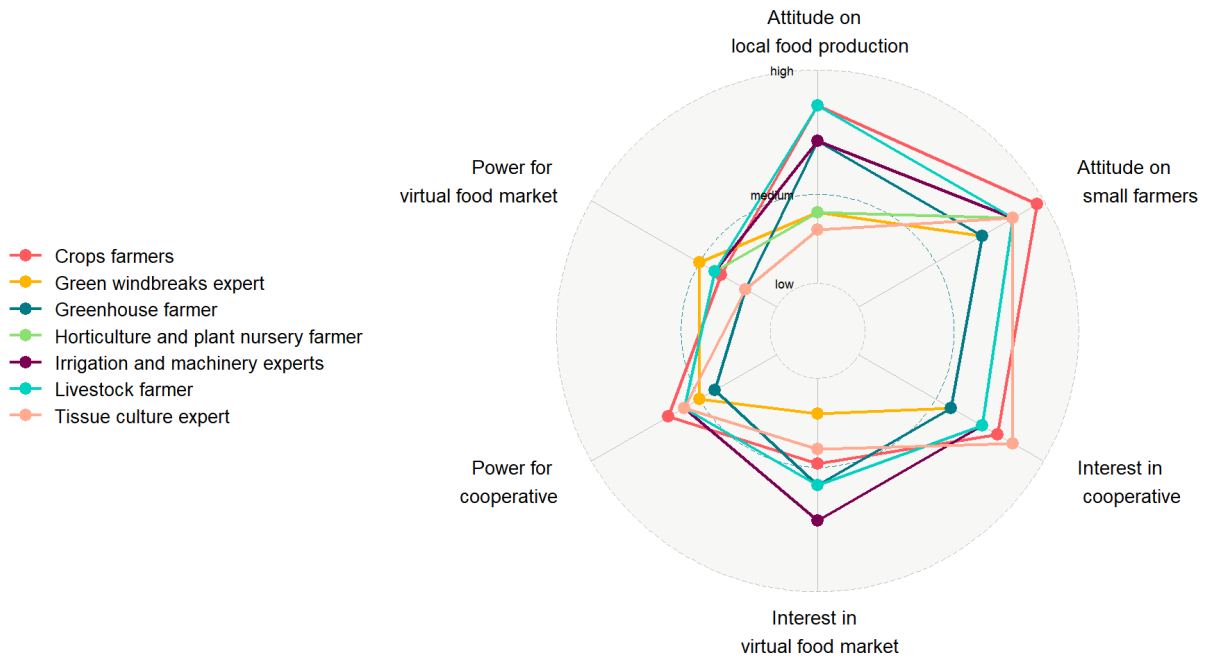


Figure 5. Radar chart of the farmer groups' attitude, interest, and power regarding the virtual market and farmers cooperatives (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021a).

In the next step, we grouped all farmers into one group named “Farmers” and plotted it together with other identified stakeholder groups from Table 4, such as the Local government, Ministry of Agriculture, etc.

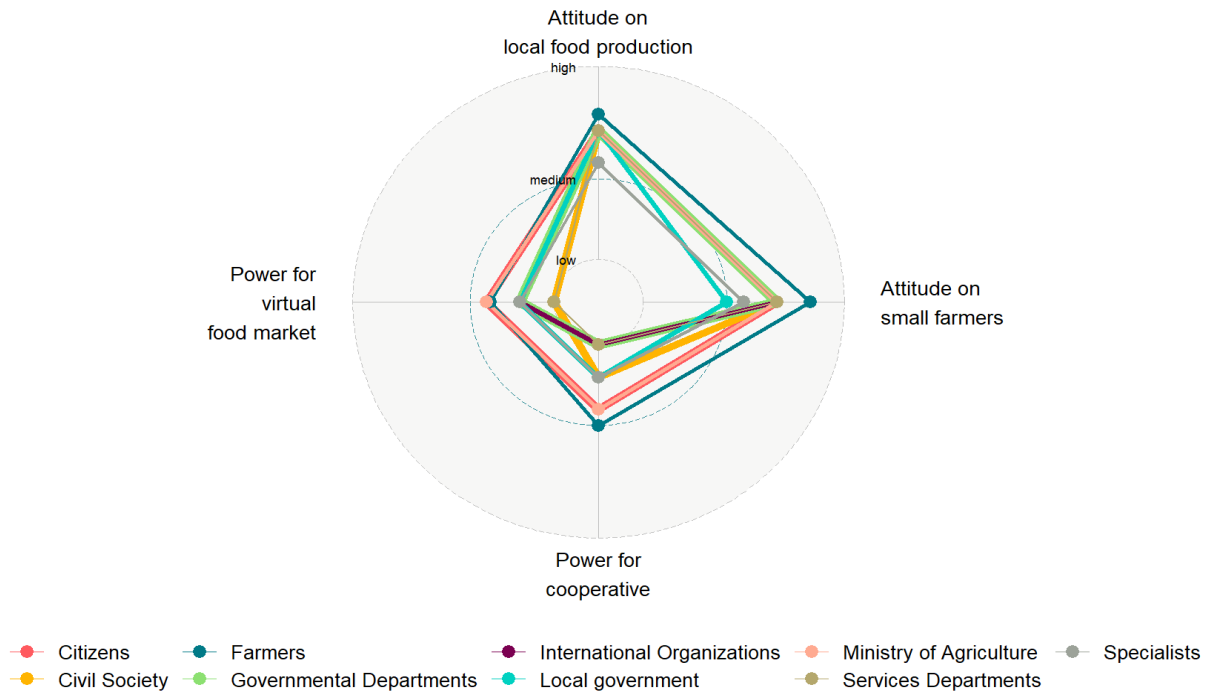


Figure 6. Radar chart of all identified stakeholder groups' attitudes and power. Interest was not plotted due to an absence of data points (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021a).

In Figure 6, we can observe a similar pattern as mentioned previously. The stakeholders appear to have a positive attitude towards virtual markets and farmers' cooperatives. However, they possess medium to low power for establishing a cooperative and even lower power to establish a virtual market.

3.2.1 Key Issues to be Addressed regarding Identified Stakeholders

We are encouraged by the positive attitude among stakeholders towards our project's goals. It would be beneficial, however, to identify the reasons for lower interest and power for virtual markets compared to the farmers' cooperatives establishment. One explanation could be the technological adaptation, needed for participation in a virtual market. This has proven to be challenging also in the case of the virtual market "Tržnica na Borjaču", where the project was subsequently aiming especially younger farmers that are more inclined towards new techniques of sales. Nonetheless, this presents an additional challenge that has to be addressed by providing training on online sales if our assumptions are correct.

Furthermore, low power among stakeholders for establishing the farmers' cooperatives or virtual markets is something to be attentive to. We believe that through continued work and training on these topics we can enhance their understanding as well as the understanding of roles and skills needed for the establishment of such projects, which will help to illuminate stakeholders that are powerful enough to lead the establishment of virtual markets and farmers' cooperatives. This does not have to be a responsibility of a sole institution or an individual, as Slovenian Good Practices have shown, even farmers are powerful enough for it, providing they receive suitable support.

Based on the experience of Slovenian good practices, we can see that one of the most relevant stakeholder roles appears to be funding or exemption of certain costs at the beginning of a project. In the case of Al Anbar, it appears that the local government or the Governorate could take on such a role, however, this has to be further elaborated also depending on the needs of future projects.

Whoever will take a lead in establishing virtual markets or cooperatives will additionally need business and expert support for developing certain skills and strategies to run the initiative/organization. While the Project Team will facilitate the identification of the necessary roles and skills, key stakeholders providing such support in Al Anbar still remain to be identified. There are two ways in which this can happen, either the existing stakeholder groups can provide such services, in which case they have to be better specified, or alternatively, new stakeholders will have to be identified based on the specific needs.

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Moreover, farmers and consumers need to be appropriately motivated to join such projects, whereas a suitable communication strategy is a key to success. At the beginning of the project, we were aiming at small farmers. However, based on our work with the Al Anbar Governorate partners (governorate representatives and university professors on the field of agriculture), it became clear, that bigger farmers are of significant importance for the regional authorities, and therefore our strategy might have to be adjusted, by firstly addressing larger producers and at the same time trying to reach more of the smaller and middle-sized farmers.

In conclusion, there are gaps to be filled regarding identifying and motivating appropriate stakeholders. We will therefore revisit this Analysis once Al Anbar Project partners are acquainted with the Good Practices and the method for transferring them (the Financial Participatory Approach).

4 Gap Analysis

The Gap Analysis is a method, aiming to identify existing challenges/gaps to the desired state of – in our case – the agricultural sector in Al Anbar Province. Along with the method, a current and ideal situation is reviewed, and gaps between them are identified. Moreover, an action plan is constructed in the end, building on identified gaps as well as existing opportunities within the sector.

4.1 Gap Assessment for Agricultural Sector in Slovenia (retrospective)

We did not attempt for our Slovenian respondents to fill out the Gap Assessment by recalling the situation that resulted in the development of the virtual market and the cooperatives. Still, we assembled it according to their answers in an online questionnaire and the following virtual interviews. The Gap Assessment below, therefore, provides insight into the circumstances of the Slovenian agricultural sector in the past that drove the need for the virtual market and cooperatives.

Table 5. Gap assessment of agricultural sector in Slovenia (retrospective).

Ex.	Current Situation	Ideal Situation	Identified Gaps	Existing Opportunities	Action Plan
1.	Many small producers with products of higher quality are not competitive on the market.	To encourage production, and consumption (local added value) of quality local food, branding, and increase the share of quality local food in public institutions.	GAP was approximately 50 - 60 %. The main challenge was to initiate and stimulate the difference.	Market demand & high (and rising) consumer awareness.	Continuous communication and building of trust and partnership with farmers & transparency.

As we can see from Table 5, the situation that led to the development of the virtual market and cooperatives in Slovenia, was that small farmers with high-quality products were not competitive enough on the food market to be able to sell their products under their terms. This, combined with high customer awareness of local food benefits has provided a good opportunity to connect such farmers in a form of virtual markets or cooperatives.

4.2 Gap Assessment for Agricultural Sector in Al Anbar

The Gap Assessment for Al Anbar Province was performed by the group of Al Anbar Governorate officials, providing for three cases with identified gaps (Table 6).

Table 6. Gap assessment of the agricultural sector in Al Anbar (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021b).

Ex.	Current Situation	Ideal Situation	Identified Gaps	Existing Opportunities	Action Plan
1.	Farmers are not organized within cooperatives.	Establishing cooperatives in different agricultural sectors.	Cooperatives: 96 %.	Existing interest among farmers in joining cooperatives.	Setting up a database of farmers.
2.	Virtual markets are not widely present.	Enhanced farmers' capacities for involvement in virtual markets.	Virtual market: 75 %.	Existing interest among farmers and producers in a virtual market.	Trainings of farmers and producers on virtual market management.
3.	Lack of manufacturing plants.	Build manufacturing plants.	Manufacturing plants: 80 %.	Surplus of seasonal agricultural products.	Promoting the establishment of manufacturing plants.

All three examples are highly relevant for Al Anbar agricultural sector. The Gap Analysis here identifies the lack of farmers' cooperatives and the virtual market as gaps that should be addressed. Within the action plan, farmers' cooperatives should be firstly addressed by creating a database of all farmers to eventually approach them for participation. Concerning virtual markets, one of the first steps should be providing training to interested stakeholders on its management and use (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021b).

The last example aims to address the lack of manufacturing plants and the surplus of seasonal agricultural products (Al Anbar Governorate officials, 2021b). This can be addressed by promoting the establishment of manufacturing plants; however, this topic does not fit within the scope of this Project. Nonetheless, the seasonal surplus of food can be effectively addressed by establishing virtual markets or farmers' cooperatives, and through them offer the surplus to the consumers that are experiencing food shortages (Fathallah, 2015). Thus, functioning and successful cooperatives may in the long run enable also better infrastructural and manufacturing conditions for farming (i.e., addressing the problem of a seasonal surplus of agricultural products).

4.2.1 Key Strategic Issues for Al Anbar Governorate

Findings of the rapid food security assessment from 2015 for Anbar Province (Fathallah, 2015) point out that besides reduced agricultural production in the recent decade (40% of farmers reported a severe reduction in wheat and barley production) due to the conflict, supply chains for transportation and storage in agriculture are often disturbed leading to higher food prices as well as food shortages, affecting consumers. From the farmers' view, this means that even the reduced production is more difficult to market due to conflict and disrupted supply chains. This contributed also to the declining number and activity of indoor and outdoor markets. The linkages between small farmers and consumers were weak even before the conflict, resulting in high post-harvest losses. Fathallah (2015) concluded that *“markets for connecting farmers to wholesalers and consumers need rehabilitation”*.

We believe the issues exposed in the Gap Assessment and the mentioned report could be addressed by the development of virtual markets or farmers' cooperatives, where on one hand farmers would benefit from a low-effort, easy-access platform to sell their products without having to rely on unstable supply chains, and on the other hand, consumers would have easier access to food, potentially at lower prices due to a more stable supply. Furthermore, such common platforms and organizations could eventually address the exchange and purchase of not only food but also other tools and inputs, needed for farming such as fertilizers, seeds, pesticides. All of course depending on the special circumstances on the ground.

The overall objective for the agricultural sector in Al Anbar is therefore to achieve food security and to facilitate the framers' efforts to produce and sell their products, therefore improving the livelihood of the communities in Al Anbar.

With this in mind, the key strategic issues our project is aiming to address are, therefore, 1) Strengthening the economy of the Anbar province and achieving social welfare, and 2) Developing the agricultural sector and the exchange of experiences in the executive and academic sector.

Listed key strategic issues will be achieved through the implementation of actions that will stimulate and enable conditions for local and regional development.

5 Conclusion

The results of the first analyses are promising, as the motivation of stakeholders, especially farmers are of key importance to initiate such projects. We acknowledge additional work will have to be put into the performed Analyses, most notably in the identification or specification of relevant initial stakeholders. Therefore, that topic is likely to be looked further, once AI Anbar partners get acquainted with the mentioned Good Practices and their functioning as well as with the method of Financial Participatory Approach.

As the Project is shortly transitioning from preparatory towards implementation phase, we believe the highly collaborative and professional working environment among partners in Slovenia and AI Anbar, coupled with the proven and needed solutions to pressing issues within the agricultural sector of AI Anbar, present an optimistic outlook for the future of our Project.

6 Amendments

At the 4th Operational Meeting with Anbar Governorate and other partners on 27.5.2021, some issues from the chapters above were resolved.

Firstly, we agreed the Project will initially target large farmers that were identified during the Stakeholder analysis. These will be the primary target group for the implementation of the Financial Participatory Approach. In a later stage, smaller farmers will be encouraged to join the initiative. The rationale behind this is that the top-bottom approach appears to be characteristic for the region, and the Governorate has the best connections with larger farmers, who could also benefit from the establishment of farmers' cooperatives.

Secondly, the Anbar partners have expressed a clear message that while the establishment of farmers' cooperatives is feasible in the socio-economic context, that is not necessarily the case for the establishment of virtual markets. The main issue here is the lack of internet coverage outside the cities, which is unfortunately also the area where most farming activities take place and where our target group operates. Therefore, farmers' cooperatives will be the first focus of the next phases of the Project. It is planned that virtual markets could subsequently develop as an addition to these cooperatives.

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