

## **Overview on various rural entrepreneurial activities in UNESCO Global Geoparks**

UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas, where sites and landscapes of the international geographical value are managed with the holistic concept of protection, education, and sustainable development (UNESCO n.d.). One of the key concepts which is the founding pillar of the Geopark is the welfare of the local communities living in the Geopark area (UNESCO 2017). The rural entrepreneurship, happening in the scarcely populated areas based on the limited number of resources is one of the ways for income for local people living in the area (Korsgaard et al. 2015). Therefore, the study of the rural entrepreneurial activities in the UNESCO Global Geoparks area is needed, because of limited amount of coherent research done in this field (Hunt et al. 2021).

## **Background**

### *Context environment of entrepreneurial activities*

UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas, where sites and landscapes of the international geographical value are managed with the holistic concept of protection, education, and sustainable development (UNESCO n.d.). The Geopark is formed by number of geological-paleontological heritage sites of special scientific importance, rarity, or beauty. In addition, the Geopark may not be only of geological-paleontological significance, but also of archaeological, historical, ecological, or cultural value. (Han et al. 2018.) The approach of combining conservation with the sustainable development while involving local communities has become extremely popular. Nowadays, there 161 Geoparks in 44 countries, allowing tourists have access to unique concepts of tourism experiences. (UNESCO n.d.)

The UNESCO Global Geopark stands on three pillars: education, geoconservation and geotourism. All Geoparks must promote and develop educational activities for people of all age groups so the awareness of geological heritage and its relationship with other aspects of natural, cultural and intangible heritage would be raised. It is impossible to guarantee the conservation of geoheritage if society in general does not understand the significance of geodiversity and geoheritage. All geoparks should hold the responsibility of being active promoters and supporters of geoscience education for sustainable development which is addressed to all members of the public. (Catana & Brilha 2020.)

In order to become a UNESCO Global Geopark, a geological site should contain four fundamental features, which are outlined in the Operational Guidelines. These features are:

- Geological heritage of an international value: the area must contain geological heritage of international value assessed by scientific professionals from “UNESCO Global Geopark Evaluation Team.”
- Management: the area must be managed by the body having legal existence recognized by national legislation. The management body should have all rights to address the whole area and include all relevant local and regional actors and authorities. In addition, the management plan is required, which is agreed among all partners. The plan must address social and economic needs of the

local populations, protect the landscape of their living place and conserve their cultural identity. The main parts of the plan are: governance, development, communication, protection, infrastructure, finances and partnerships.

- **Visibility:** UNESCO Global Geoparks promote sustainable local economic development mainly through geotourism. For stimulation of the geotourism in the area, it is crucial that Geopark has a visibility. The relevant information must be available for visitors, as well as for the local people. Therefore, the UNESCO Global Geopark must provide the information via a dedicated website, leaflets and map of the geographical area, connecting geological and other sites. In addition, UNESCO Global Geopark should contain the corporate identity.
- **Networking:** the key word for the UNESCO Global Geopark is cooperation. It includes the cooperation not only with local people but also with other UNESCO Global Geoparks through Global Geoparks network and regional networks for UNESCO Global Geoparks. Cross-border cooperation improves the quality of the Geoparks, supports peer learning, increase understanding between communities and supports peace-building processes. (UNESCO 2017.)

The UNESCO Global Geoparks are far reaching because their activities include geo conservation, geotourism, climate change, natural risks, sustainable development, education and research. Therefore, it takes time to create networks, to connect and inspire local population and to communicate. It is important to share the information among the parties and construct the long-term goals which would survive regional political renewals. Geoparks have a holistic approach, providing narrative for the area, as the geosites are connected to the national and cultural heritage. These stories are told multiple times to be reformed for understanding of wider audience from school children to foreign visitors. (Justice 2018).

### *Entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of creating incremental wealth by individuals who assume risks in terms of equity, time, and career commitment of providing value for some product or service (Kuratko 2020). Entrepreneurship is viewed as one of the means of sustaining local communities living on the territory of the UNESCO Global Geopark, since remote areas where Geoparks are located require support due to its slow economic development (UNESCO 2017). In here, spatial context for entrepreneurial processes means naturally and/or socially defined geographical location with a certain socio-material makeup (Korsgaard et al. 2015). The role of spatial context remains to be underdeveloped in the entrepreneurship research and even less advanced than research on social and institutional contexts. (Müller & Korsgaard 2018).

One of the examples of the literature streams which steps away from the “standard model” of entrepreneurship and challenges notion of large and growing profit streams is the subfield of entrepreneurial places (Welter et al. 2019). One of the research group of contributors to this field, Korsgaard et al. (2015), developed a theory of rural entrepreneurship. (Korsgaard et al. 2015). Historically, the researchers of rural entrepreneurship field were forerunners in the exploring the explanatory power of context (Gaddefors & Anderson 2019). They distinguished the entrepreneurship which is located but not embedded in the rural context and aiming for the profit and being

spatially mobile (so called entrepreneurship in the rural) versus the rural entrepreneurship which uses local resources, requires strong local embeddedness and it is unlikely to relocate into different spatial context. (Korsgaard et al. 2015.) In addition, rural entrepreneurship is about the engagement with the contexts rather than simply being in the context (Gaddefors & Anderson 2019).

Rurality, as an operating context for entrepreneurship, offers dynamic entrepreneurial resources with the help of which entrepreneurial firms may flourish and prosper or become inhibited. Elements of rurality which are incorporated in the UNESCO Global Geoparks and are viewed as external physical and socio-economic environment, provide important sources for the opportunities as well as weaknesses for social entrepreneurship and innovation. (Stathopoulou et al. 2004.) At the same time, there is a current trend of blending the borders between urban and rural employment, where the more urban jobs like ICT consulting, finance and services are moving to the countryside and local farming, artisan production and agriculture moves to the city environment, blending the real definition of urban and rural entrepreneurship (Hunt et al. 2021).

### **Purpose of the research**

UNESCO Global Geoparks are interesting for maintaining of the communities via preserving and encouraging the economic development in the rural areas, therefore rural entrepreneurship theories are likely to be most suitable for theoretical base of the research. At the same time, lack of research into geoparks from the entrepreneurship angle creates a potential to make significant practical contributions by understanding the entrepreneurship taking place in geoparks. The research has also noted that generic entrepreneurship theories may not always fit to explain phenomena happening in special places and contexts, hence the Geopark context serves well to study the embeddedness, impact of regional environment as well as public sector initiatives have on the quality and quantity of entrepreneurship. Thus, research in this context creates potential to contribute towards the development of entrepreneurship theory.

During last decade, the academic interest for geoparks in general had grown significantly. However, as Stoffelen (2020) has identified in his literature review, the interest has grown towards a geoscientific orientation like a nature and landscape preservation, leaving a societal orientation of communities and their welfare behind. This lack of information creates a gap, leaving a space for the societal and economic research in the context of geopark. Limiting availability of such information does not provide a full insight on how geopark contribute to the development in all three dimensions: geographical, economic and societal development (Stoffelen 2020.) That is why, it is equally important to provide contribution to the economic development of the local communities in UNESCO Global Geoparks.

Since UNESCO Global Geopark has a potential to create an employment and new economic activities, which provide a supplementary income to the local population, it is interesting to take the research target to the individual level, meaning an entrepreneur himself (Rodrigues et al. 2021). Considering the fact, the entrepreneurship is the key driver of rural development, it is important to pay attention and explore the main initiators of entrepreneurial activity – entrepreneurs (Müller & Korsgaard 2018). Therefore, possible research question to the topic could be such as:

### *What kind of businesses are there in UNESCO Global Geoparks?*

The need of answering the research question provides an opportunity to discover wider picture of range of entrepreneurial activities in Geoparks as this element is under researched in the Geopark's research (Stoffelen 2020). UNESCO Global Geoparks in their unique forms provide an ability for the research of entrepreneurial inspirations and activity in the geographical/spatial context. Geoparks in general contain three factors which act as the base for entrepreneurial sense of rurality: cultural positioning, territorial embeddedness and place-sensitive products (Muñoz & Kimmitt 2019). In addition, researcher's curiosity is inspired by the dynamic resource capabilities of the Geopark's environment and context and their possibilities as source of entrepreneurial creation (Stathopoulou et al. 2004).

The assumption of the research is built on the absence of the earlier research output on this topic. It was a surprising discovery, considering the amount of UNESCO Global Geoparks in the world together with its vast extension from West to East, how little the entrepreneurs and their activities in Geoparks are researched. With the clear outlined research gap on the topic, comes the curiosity to explore the field.

The research assumption is that entrepreneurs in Geopark are employed as entrepreneurs as part-time or full-time, providing the experiences to the tourists visiting the Geopark area.

### **Impact and novelty**

Recent research of Stoffelen (2020) shows that research about Geoparks is mostly concerned about their geological significance and qualities, but not the social and/or economic features (Stoffelen 2020). This provides the necessary gap in the context of the targeted research. As for the entrepreneurship theory gap, the need for the more exploration of various contexts is necessary also. For example, rural entrepreneurship field of research is lacking the research results characterizing rural entrepreneurs themselves: their personal characteristics, difference from urban entrepreneurs, motivation of rural entrepreneurs to locate their business in rural area or how the rural entrepreneurship compares to the urban entrepreneurs as well as one working for pay (Yu & Artz 2019).

In addition, there is also little understanding of underlying processes and the strategies of micro level entrepreneurial efforts. Entrepreneurial practices can differ depending on their spatial context and the identification of mechanisms of influence of spatial contexts remains to be not as advanced as social and institutional context. (Müller & Korsgaard 2018.) Therefore, the proposed research subject has a potential to contribute to this field of entrepreneurship.

Since rural businesses require the ability to recognize innovative, unexploited market opportunities in the resource- and knowledge-constrained environment, they need to create something different that can change the rules of the game in the area and add value. Quite often it is achieved by extracting new values from the traditional resources and by connecting characteristics and uniqueness of the local to produce goods with value (Pato & Teixeira 2016.) By research the types of the business activities in UNESCO Global Geoparks as well as the individual characteristics of the

entrepreneurs in the area, can provide contributive insights into the decision-making as well as creativity of the rural entrepreneurs living in the Geopark area.

However, author realizes that shifting the attention to rural entrepreneurs could create an “excessive granularity” in the understanding of rural entrepreneurship, as Muñoz and Kimmitt (2019) has described it (Muñoz & Kimmitt 2019). In this context, “excessive granularity” means that detailed researching about rural entrepreneurs themselves may lead to the vast results of the particular cases of entrepreneurship and do not provide the generalized examples on trends and typology.

## **Implementation**

Initially, the project would start with exploring of the entrepreneurial opportunities that UNESCO Global Geoparks provide by conducting the desk study on the businesses and entrepreneurial ventures in the Geoparks, who received UNESCO Global Geopark status. Specific interest would be the rural entrepreneurs located in Geoparks further away from the big cities and urban clusters. The desk study would pursue two goals: to collect the number of possible contacts of entrepreneurs which would be certainly needed further on and create the typology/classification of entrepreneurial/business activities taking place in UNESCO Global Geoparks.

At the same time, such desk study would need empirical information to be collected from the organizers' part to show holistic situation of the Geopark entrepreneurship. That's why interviewing with local coordinators of the Geoparks would be necessary to collect information regarding the rural entrepreneurial activities.

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