

# PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY OF CREATING CULTURAL TOURISM PRODUCTS

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## ABSTRACT

Although participatory research can be an improvement over conventional research, there is a lack of self-critique and self-reflection by scholars. The aim of this paper was to develop a method of participatory research in human geography based on a case study of the local community. We evaluated the positive and negative aspects of carrying out participatory research in community development from the local community and academic points of view. The participatory method was used in a rural local community in Slovenia, where cultural values were identified as an alternative developmental source. The method was presented in detail in three steps: 1) knowledge acquisition, 2) knowledge synthesis, 3) knowledge implementation and evaluation. The results yielded important social impacts, some economic and cultural impacts, and no significant ecological impacts. The paper discusses the impacts of conducting such research on the local community. It recognizes that, if the community is actively engaged in research, outcomes are likely to be matched to its needs and expectations. We discussed scholars' bias towards economic aspects of community development and the fact that ignoring local knowledge may result in the failure of developmental initiatives. There is a need for more accurate and unbiased critical assessment of long-term impacts of carrying out participatory research. We believe we avoided two common traps of participatory research: regarding the positivist critique, this method offers sufficient scientific vigour and could be reproduced in similar communities; regarding the post-structural critique, personally committing stakeholders towards implementation and legitimising all social groups to overcome intrinsic power relations within the community. We concluded that participatory methods are important for obtaining local knowledge that complements traditional academic research.

**Keywords:** participatory research, community development, local knowledge, cultural tourism, participatory method, human geography

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Why conduct participatory research?

Participatory research (PR) in geography is often merely a phrase used in theoretical literature, but there have been few attempts especially in Central and Eastern European human geography to develop and present appropriate methods of conducting it. Researchers have to rediscover participatory methods fragmented across disciplines, which are generally not adapted to geographical research. One of the issues that motivated us was also our own experience, that a top-down process may alienate local community members and fail to capture locally important factors (Fraser et al. 2006). This is especially true for community planning projects. Evidence shows that top-down initiatives achieve statistically significantly lower results on the accomplishment of local communities' goals and end-user satisfaction (Larrison 2002). Secondly, keeping scholarly debates exclusively in the scholarly domain and not involving citizens in the process is increasingly understood as unacceptable (Robinson et al. 2014) because the public can help to transfer academic theories into practice. Finally, although PR 'often represents a vast improvement on conventional modes of

research' there is a lack of self-critique and self-reflection by social geographers (Pain 2004: 660).

Robinson (1996: 127) gives a heavy critique of 'many social scientists that have left a rather tatty and shameful record in the communities of their research by objectivizing people, their lives and cultures'. In contrast, PR means engaging local communities and people in the processes, structures, spaces, and decisions that affect their lives in order to achieve sustainable outcomes in their own terms (Kindon 2010). An important difference from traditional research is that PR combines scholarly research with community participation. For PR the research process is as important as the scholarly findings themselves. This is why some writers mention it as part of a larger movement toward more openness in academia, because researchers are now working 'with' more than 'on' (DeLyser and Sui 2014). Especially in social geography, PR contributes to community projects and not only 'produces' research findings, but also educates and trains residents, non-academics, and NGOs in order to revitalize local communities (Pain 2004). Minkler and Wallerstein (2008: 6) emphasise that PR is not a research method per se but an 'orientation to research', because the methodological context is more important than the actual methods used. The methodological context usually involves a distinct

attitude on the researchers' part and blurs the distinction between who does the studying and who is studied.

The roots of PR can be traced back to developmental projects from over fifty years ago that dealt with ethnic, racial, poverty issues. They draw on Kurt Lewin's problem-solving research model of planning, action, and investigating the results of those actions. They try to carry out focused research to challenge power relations within communities in order to benefit the local community (Minkler and Wallerstein 2008). According to Racadio et al. (2014: 50), community-based PR originates from the 'Southern' tradition of 'action research', wherein researchers believe that their role is to support and educate the community, but that the transformative change has to come from the community itself. In contrast, the 'Northern' tradition emphasises co-participation of researchers in institutional settings, such as schools and workplaces. There they can jointly solve problems on a small scale and thus affect their own lives. Going even further, Tress et al. (2005: 487) define the participatory process as a project in which academic and non-academic participants exchange knowledge in a parallel process to try to solve a problem, but 'the focus is not on the integration of the different knowledge cultures to create new knowledge and theory'.

In short, the distinction between participatory and traditional research is in the purpose of conducting it. The aim of PR is usually not only to gain new knowledge for the researcher but also to aid the local community with developmental, social and other issues. Bergold and Thomas (2012: 2) state that PR is the 'convergence of two perspectives – that of science and of practice. In the best case, both sides benefit from the research processes.'

### 1.2 Criticism of participatory research

Despite its wide application, PR has its limitations and has been criticised. The traditional positivist critique is mostly related to its 'unscientific' and 'informal' approach. Neef (2003) sums up the main positivist stances of PR. It is methodologically weak since there is a lack of scientific vigour. Participatory methods do not have the same degree of method formalisation as traditional methods and are not open to the same academic scrutiny and validations. Results of PR seem to produce single case studies that are not usually valid outside of its specific territorial context. Low control of environment and the lack of objectivity due to personal over-involvement are also problematic for positivist critics. They see the weakness of the PR ad-hoc approach, where most of the study is done in cycles with temporary reports, methodologies and frameworks. This may be considered as lacking scientific discipline and is regarded of low academic interest (Kock et al. 1997). Cook and Kothari (2001) also warn of the danger of 'romanticising' local knowledge gained by PR and lack of its critical assessment.

The latest PR critique is influenced by post-structural approaches (see Cook and Kothari 2001; Cameron and

Gibson 2005; Kesby 2007; McCartan et al. 2012). They argue that although PR may grant an alternative view on another world, it is fraught with a range of relationships that require constant negotiation and self-reflection. The public and formal character of PR events, further reinforce local power relations rather than reversing them. Neef (2003) warns of the danger of being too naive about internal power structures in the community when applying participatory approaches to research and development. He thinks that most PR exercises pay insufficient attention to the community heterogeneity, differentiations by gender, ethnicity, social position ... 'It is necessary to acknowledge that there is not just one 'local reality', but a myriad of positions, interests and needs' (Neef 2003: 492). This implies that not all participants have equal knowledge about reality, nor the means, tools and skills to represent it. Kesby (2007) also criticizes the inability of most PR projects to expand beyond their specific spatial context and thinks that they should seek transformation not just at the local scale but also at the global scale of struggle for social justice.

### 1.3 Objectives of the paper

We want to test the words of Bergold and Thomas (2012) of scientists and local communities co-producing new knowledge that has benefits for both of them. The purpose of this paper is primarily to develop and present a PR method in human geography based on a case study of a local community. Thus, we present a PR method in which the main goal was to encourage development by promoting and creating cultural tourism activities. We wish to contribute to the development of PR in geography, or 'methodological pluralism', which is vital for the discipline's development (Barnes 2011; DeLyser and Sui 2014). We want to see if it is possible to incorporate science and local communities in PR. Second, we want to evaluate the pros and cons of performing PR in community development in contrast to 'classic' top-down research in human geography, for the local community and scholars alike. We want to test the thesis that PR offers short-term and long-term socioeconomic benefits to the local community (in our case development of new cultural and tourism products) and gives researchers the opportunity to discover new local knowledge. Third, we wish to evaluate how successful was our PR method in the context of avoiding most frequent critical traps being attributed to PR.

## 2. Method description

Our method is based on the theoretical and practical research done in various disciplines. Theoretically we relied on the work of Checkoway (1994), who presented core concepts for community change, especially the power of 'getting organized', which is the key process of

community change. In shaping our concept of PR we took other studies as a starting point (Buchecker et al. 2003; Kasemir et al. 2003; Golobič and Marušič 2007), but in practice our method came into being largely as an organic process, whereby we adhered to the following principles used in other studies (Checkoway 1994; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 1999; Bergold and Thomas 2012):

- Researchers are merely guides, moderators, in the best case, advisors, if the local participants request this of us.
- The stakeholders are directly included in the research and are not merely observers that are ‘asked for their opinion.’
- Autonomy, whereby stakeholders are given a chance to voice their concerns and ideas and are listened to, so that they take pride in a policy or program.

Research was carried out throughout 2012 and 2013. Before explaining the method, we briefly introduce the territorial setting of the case-study area and the ‘tool’ or resource that was used to spark new development. Both are important for understanding the context of conducting PR.

### 2.1 Background of the case-study area: Why development by participation?

The case-study area is a small, rural local settlement community called Črni Vrh on the fringe of Idrija Municipality, which has 650 inhabitants and is located in a hilly area in western Slovenia. Local community has in total 1370 inhabitants in nine settlements. Actively involved in PR on a voluntary basis were fifty-nine non-researchers (or 5% of all inhabitants) of three largest settlements: Črni vrh (675), Zadlog (278) and Predgriže (164). Although this is a rural area, the majority of inhabitants work in industry because there are two successful and global industrial plants in the nearby municipal centre, Idrija. Thus, unemployment is not currently a problem, but the municipal strategy has long sought freedom from employment ‘dependence’ in the industrial sector. It seeks to promote other economic activities and thus increase local resilience from the perspective of employment prospects (Pipan 2013). A high dependence on two major enterprises results in a low level of self-employment, a monostructural orientation, and a lack of entrepreneurship in the community. The poorly represented service sector offers limited job opportunities for highly-educated people from fields other than engineering (Urbanc et al. 2012). The problem lies especially in the outmigration of well-educated young people, who do not see their future in the industrial sector, and the resulting aging of the local population (Fridl and Repolusk 2010; Kladnik 2010).

Paradoxically, the success of Fordist industry in this community also represents its major weak point because it is stagnating socially and economically. It is also vulnerable because industrial production in the globalized

world can be outsourced momentarily. However, the local population currently lacks the motivation and the skills for a systemic approach towards new social and economic development sparked by tourism. This condition is ‘a space for action’ for conducting PR because there is a need to activate the passive local community and seek transformative change. PR is ideal for communities that need to reinvent themselves in the post-Fordist reality and find new development impulses because it is place- and context-specific, bringing local conditions and local knowledge to the fore (Pain 2004).

### 2.2 The tool: local development through cultural tourism

We focused on the development of cultural tourism, which is recognized and managed by the local community itself and offers diversification to the local economy, creates added value, and strengthens community resilience. Participation is very important because the development of tourism can pose a threat to the local inhabitants. Especially if the activities and investors ‘come from outside the community’ and are merely interested in making a profit, which has more the effect of a nuisance than a benefit to the local community (Horáková 2013). Properly managed cultural heritage can be instrumental in enhancing social inclusion, developing intercultural dialogue, shaping the identity of a given territory, improving the quality of the environment, providing social cohesion, stimulating the development of tourism, creating jobs, and enhancing the investment climate (Bole et al. 2013; Dümcke and Gnedovsky 2013: 7). Although heritage and its preservation have long been regarded as being in opposition to economic development, they are now increasingly seen as effective partners in community development (Loulanski 2006). Apart from the anthropological notion of culture, there has been less attention devoted to the functional interpretation of culture; that is, the analysis of how cultural production and the valorisation of cultural resources may foster economic development (Saccone and Bertacchini 2011).

The integration of culture as an ‘alternative’ community developmental source is a concept that has also proved useful in other studies (MacDonald and Jolliffe 2003; Marková and Boruta 2012; Šmid Hribar and Ledinek Lozej 2013; Gorlach et al. 2014). In the development strategy of this area, culture-led development is recognized as a tool of new development and of moving away from heavy economic dependence on industrial production. In the past, the study area was known for its crafts and tourism between the two world wars and an important fact is that it is very close to the Idrija mercury mine, which is on the UNESCO World Heritage List. Culture and tourism have been identified as endogenous potentials in development strategies in this area, but these traditional top-down initiatives have been poorly received and have not yielded visible results (Nared et al. 2011, 2013).

Due to methodological reasons, we decided to use the term cultural values. The term heritage signifies something that was or can be inherited, whereas value originates in the verb “to value,” which refers to defining, establishing, ascribing, acknowledging value, and thus addresses the relationship between a group or an individual and a specific cultural element. For the purpose of this study, we developed a definition of cultural values with development potential. ‘Cultural values are various tangible and intangible elements and individual natural elements of cultural significance and local origin that are identified by the stakeholders and have economic, social, ecological or cultural development potential. The development importance of a specific cultural value co-depend on the utility, compatibility, and scope of development potential’ (Šmid Hribar et al. 2012).

### 2.3 Participatory research method in three steps

#### *Step 1: Knowledge acquisition*

In this step we identified the community’s cultural values that were able to be transformed into tourism products and made the first contact with the community. This step can be summarized by the following phases:

- Conducting a traditional survey and community observation;
- Stakeholder analysis;
- First contact: locals voice their opinion of cultural tourism products.

Knowledge of the selected area represents the start of a long-term process and Golobič and Marušič (2007: 996) described this initial process as to ‘obtain the knowledge possessed by people living in the area – “raw” local knowledge and information, uninfluenced by experts, local opinion leaders, or mutual communication’. This is a preparatory phase for the real participatory research. It is required to uncover the social and political structures that could later affect the research. In this phase we inventoried all official registries and documents in which the policy and research focus was from the past few decades. This phase proved to be important because we assessed local conditions, entered into the community, and identified decision-makers and local leaders.

The second phase is relatively straightforward. Goal-driven research demands that a broad array of people and organizations be involved from the very start of the process and, as Checkoway puts it, they are a ‘central tenet of community change’ (1994: 12). Main stakeholders were the local residents. They are regarded as caretakers of their culture and they are the ones that benefit the most from its development. Information about research activities and local involvement was publicized through local conventional media and social media, although personal contact proved to be the most efficient way of ensuring broad representation of individuals. In our experience, the most significant stakeholder group were the young and the elderly, and identification of these stakeholders was

an ongoing process throughout the project. For the young communication by electronic means was sufficient, while we had to make personal visits to the elderly population in order to inform them about the project and make possible their eventual participation. A snowball effect happened, where at each meeting stakeholders themselves continually identified new individuals and groups that were personally invited to participate. Some of the stakeholders eventually became ‘agents of change’: individuals that emerge spontaneously and facilitate the research with their voluntary commitment (Checkoway 1994). The second type of stakeholders – institutional and political actors – were easier to identify. In addition to local politicians, we invited representatives of all institutions (i.e., museums, societies, and development organizations) that had been identified in the previous phase. In order to follow a bottom-up approach it is important that public officials or heritage experts abandon their usual role of ‘decision-makers’. We found it more effective to define their role as advisors serving only to steer the process, rather than taking over the process from the most important actors, the local community. The result was a heterogeneous mix of participants: workers at factories, young unemployed, retired factory workers, some farmers and hospitality workers (tourist farms) and representatives of the public sector.

The third phase is the most crucial and already involves participatory techniques, such as Open Space technology and World Café. In the workshop with stakeholders identified in phase two, we gave them the following task: to point out the cultural values that represent their local community and could become potential tourism products. Our role was merely to facilitate this brainstorming process and to answer potential questions from an expert view. In a lively discussion they pointed out twenty-two cultural values that they believed to have developmental potential. At the end of the workshop we asked them to rank these values according to their priorities, interests, and feasibility. Six cultural products out of the twenty-two values were selected to go into the next phase. The goal of such ranking in the participatory process is to explain and emphasize the priorities of local stakeholders, meaning that their voices should not only be heard but also acted upon. This phase conveyed a wealth of new knowledge for researchers. We learned about previously unknown forms of intangible cultural heritage and we gained precious insight into the local social structure and local opinion leaders. This would have been hard to achieve through conventional research.

#### *Step 2: Knowledge synthesis*

This part of the method is the most time-consuming and involves designing cultural tourism products. It can be explained by two phases:

- Taking responsibility for implementation;
- Getting organized and planning.

The first phase requires active participation of local stakeholders, giving them the power to interact and accept

the possibility that they could be changed by this process. For the six cultural products identified in the knowledge acquisition step, we held one workshop and invited all the stakeholders involved in Step 1. By using brainstorming techniques, the goal was to suggest actions on how to turn the six ideas into six cultural tourism products; to specify the goals, potential outcomes, and end results for each idea separately. An important part of this joint workshop was at the end, when we asked them to decide which of the six ideas they wished to engage with further and assume responsibility for its implementation. They were not limited to only one idea and most of them decided they would work on two or more. Some decided that they did not wish to actively participate anymore.

The second phase was planning step-by-step activities for implementing cultural tourism products. The researchers' role was to facilitate and maintain structure; that is, to establish working rules and phases. Selecting an appropriate strategy is therefore central to community change. We used the technique called the Logical Framework Approach (LFA), which is an interactive set of tools for project management and fostering project performance (Walsch 2000). This meant that we carried out six separate workshops, one for each cultural tourism product envisioned, with the end goal of creating the final design plan for these cultural tourism products. Using the LFA technique, the researchers and local stakeholders negotiated short- and long-term objectives, expected outputs, and results already in the first phase. The second phase focused on operational aspects of creating tourism products, which included the following:

- Breaking the activities into manageable tasks;
- Clarifying the sequence, interdependence, and 'connectivity' of tasks;
- Specifying the duration and start and end dates of tasks;
- Assigning responsibilities for tasks.

At the end of each of the six tourism product workshops an 'application form' was completed that summarized the goals, concepts, and individuals taking responsibility for it.

#### *Step 3: Implementation and evaluation*

For the researchers this was the final step, and it represented a transition from an active to a more passive form of involvement. Our role as 'community organizers' ceased and the local community took the implementation process further through each responsible person appointed in step 2. Still, we can distinguish two research phases:

- Providing expert support for implementing cultural tourism products;
- Evaluation of completed projects.

After the matrix for designing cultural tourism products was finished in step 2, we had no active role in the implementation of the tourism products and we were merely observers of the process only acting if we were asked to. For instance, one of the cultural tourism

projects involved reviving the tradition of flax farming and producing souvenirs from it. The population had the necessary tools, arable land, and workforce, but lacked the knowledge and skills. Therefore, we arranged an exchange between residents of our local community and those of the Peio Valley (Trentino, Italy), who showed them all phases of working flax and gave them flaxseed.

The last phase was evaluation of the completed projects of all cultural tourism packages. In the case of short-term objectives, this involves checking whether the tasks and milestones had been completed and whether new cultural tourism services exist. The more difficult part is to evaluate long-term impacts, which involve wider and more profound social, cultural, and economic effects on the community; this is important for attaining our second research objective. We made post-hoc interviews with those stakeholders responsible for tourist packages four years after the project ended for us in 2017. We made an informative matrix of the observed social, economic, ecological, and cultural impacts on the community for each tourist product developed (see Table 2), established in our previous paper (Šmid Hribar et al. 2015). This matrix is based on community observation at workshops and three non-structured post-hoc interviews with community members responsible for implementation of four active cultural tourism products.

### **3. Results**

The factual information regarding the method's application in the local community is presented in Table 1. The design plans of six cultural tourism products and partial implementation of four of them was the most important result for the local community. Our second objective was to evaluate the long-term socioeconomic impacts on the local community. Due to the methodological and temporal limitations discussed in step 3, we were able to assess the observed social, economic, ecological, and cultural impacts of each of the six tourism products (Table 2). We observed important social impacts, some economic and cultural impacts, and no significant ecological impacts on the community.

### **4. Discussion**

#### **4.1 Critical reflections on participatory research for the community**

The PR results confirm that it can engage local communities in order to achieve 'sustainable outcomes' on their own terms, as stated by Kindon (2010). However, at the outset the researchers and some of local community officials were heavily orientated towards additional jobs and income creation as primary goals. Yet our impact evaluation (Table 2) shows that over the course

**Tab. 1** Results table of conducting participatory research in the Črni Vrh local community, Slovenia.

| Research phases                                                 | Results of each step and phase                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Knowledge acquisition                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Phase 1: survey                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Detailed inventory (status, usage, problems, etc.) of fifty tangible cultural heritage items, one intangible cultural heritage item and one tourist hiking trail;</li> <li>– Assessment of twenty local and regional documents on tourism, development, and culture and heritage protection;</li> </ul> |
| Phase 2: stakeholder analysis                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 127 stakeholders identified</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Phase 3: first confrontation                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Twenty-two potential cultural tourism products identified;</li> <li>– Six cultural tourism products selected for implementation</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                              |
| Knowledge synthesis                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Phase 1: taking responsibility                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Six workshops for the selected tourism products for setting objectives and designing services and activities;</li> <li>– Fifty-nine stakeholders (thirty-nine individuals and eighteen from public institutions) taking responsibility for implementation</li> </ul>                                    |
| Phase 2: planning action plan matrixes for six tourism products | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Stargazing;</li> <li>– Flax farming and processing;</li> <li>– Trnovo cross-country ski marathon;</li> <li>– Matuckar ethnographic trail;</li> <li>– Narrow gauge railway;</li> <li>– Collection of WWI and WWII items</li> </ul>                                                                       |
| Implementation and evaluation                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Phase 1: providing support for implementation                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Partial implementation of four cultural tourism products (flax farming and processing, Trnovo cross-country ski marathon, Matuckar ethnographic trail, collection of WWI and WWII items);</li> <li>– Two exchanges of local communities (Črni Vrh, Slovenia and Peio Valley, Italy)</li> </ul>          |
| Phase 2: evaluation                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Matrix of the developmental impacts for six tourism products</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

of the two-year process there has been little impact on economic development. Additional income was created for individuals that were already employed (for example, in the case of a private museum with a collection of WWI and WWII items), but no full-time jobs were created. The owner manages and offers interpretations of the collection to visitors on a volunteer basis and accepts only donations. The other two products (narrow gauge railway and flax production) developed in a similar way while three tourist products cased in active development (Trnovo cross-country marathon due to lack of snow, stargazing and Matuckar ethnographic trail due to lack of interest). This could prove that structural changes (i.e., moving from an industrial to a service-oriented economy) is a process involving deeper changes in forms, identities, practices, and mental constructs, as claimed by Cruickshank et al. (2013), and it cannot be achieved in a short time frame.

On the other hand, we observed strong positive social impacts of PR on intergenerational and intercultural dialogue in the community. Younger residents were included in identifying, designing, and implementing tourist packages and they eventually took responsibility for implementing three tourism products (flax production, the narrow gauge railway, and the ethnographic trail), but they were also assisted by older residents. At the meetings there was also a renewed feeling of strengthened social

ties or ‘community-building’ by connecting previously alienated various stakeholders: especially civil society (represented by individuals, NGOs, and volunteer associations) with the public sector. For instance, those involved in flax production connected with municipality run Geopark Idrija and created “GeoFood” brand offering culinary products made of flax (bread, oil, etc.). The variety of tourism products selected enabled the cooperation of very different social groups with different interests and age groups, contributing to strengthening the social dimension of sustainable development, a feature that is often overlooked in discussions of sustainability. Post-hoc interviews confirm that the main positive impact for community members was in social networking or as one person said: ‘We needed someone to come from the outside, from the Capital, to wake us up a little’. Thus our results lead us to agree with Lehtonen (2004), who highlighted the importance of social capital in sustainable development: weaving new social relations and facilitating new actions of actors in those relations are at the core of social capital definitions.

The cultural impacts observed were also positive. Our research also verifies what Richards (2007: 295) has described, that culture and heritage tourism ‘can be the means for learning and exploring one’s own environment, and hopefully awaking interest in other cultures too’. Developing tourism products renewed local interest

**Tab. 2** Observed impacts for each of the developed tourist products on the community (+ high impact, 0 medium impact, – negligible impact).

|                                  | Economic development |             |                     |                        |                                     |                                | Social development           |                                     |                          |                 |                                         |                            | Ecological development |                                     |                                                        |                                          | Cultural development |                                                       |                                         |                         |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|-------------|---------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|
|                                  | New job position     | New company | Sustainable tourism | Use of local materials | Encouraging new business approaches | Encouraging tourist activities | Strengthening local identity | Educational role/knowledge transfer | Developing new knowledge | Place promotion | Integration of vulnerable social groups | Intergenerational dialogue | Community empowerment  | Preservation of existing ecosystems | Maintaining the complexity and stability of ecosystems | Supporting local organic food production | Erosion prevention   | Inspiration and encouragement for artistic Expressing | Active involvement, personal experience | Personal identification |
| Stargazing                       | -                    | -           | 0                   | 0                      | 0                                   | 0                              | -                            | +                                   | 0                        | +               | -                                       | +                          | -                      | -                                   | -                                                      | -                                        | 0                    | +                                                     | -                                       | +                       |
| Flax production and processing   | -                    | -           | +                   | +                      | +                                   | +                              | +                            | +                                   | +                        | +               | +                                       | +                          | +                      | +                                   | 0                                                      | -                                        | +                    | +                                                     | +                                       | +                       |
| Trnovo cross-country marathon    | -                    | -           | 0                   | 0                      | 0                                   | 0                              | +                            | +                                   | -                        | +               | -                                       | +                          | -                      | -                                   | -                                                      | -                                        | -                    | +                                                     | +                                       | 0                       |
| Matuckar ethnographic trail      | -                    | -           | 0                   | +                      | -                                   | -                              | +                            | +                                   | 0                        | 0               | 0                                       | 0                          | 0                      | 0                                   | -                                                      | -                                        | -                    | 0                                                     | 0                                       | 0                       |
| Narrow gauge railway             | -                    | -           | +                   | +                      | 0                                   | +                              | 0                            | +                                   | 0                        | +               | 0                                       | +                          | -                      | 0                                   | -                                                      | 0                                        | -                    | +                                                     | 0                                       | -                       |
| Collection of WWI and WWII items | 0                    | 0           | +                   | +                      | 0                                   | +                              | +                            | +                                   | 0                        | 0               | 0                                       | +                          | +                      | -                                   | -                                                      | -                                        | -                    | 0                                                     | 0                                       | +                       |

in preservation, interpretation, and knowledge of the locals' own cultural heritage. Flax processing and making flax products was a strong tradition in this community until the Second World War, when it started to decline. By 'packaging' flax production into a tourism product, we promoted new interest in learning this old knowledge when participants started to search for old processing tools and original flax seeds within their community. This cultural tourism product eventually evolved further into an educational product because activities were included in the Europe-wide educational initiative 'European Cultural Heritage Days'. According to Scheyvens' framework for determining impacts of tourism on local communities (1999), we also observed positive social and psychological empowerment. This is because the local community recognized the uniqueness and worth of their culture and later developed more confidence to look for further education and training opportunities. The involvement of individuals, especially young people and in some cases entire families, working together to create tourism products also enhanced their sense of social cohesion, which corresponds to the concept of social empowerment. We think that the key action that enabled positive results for the local community was in step 2 where local participants

took personal responsibility for implementation of activities. This dissolved traditional power relations, because in the past the municipality with institutions (museum, developmental agency) was the driving force behind developmental and tourism projects. By putting the power of implementation into the hands of individuals, a real sense of empowerment was felt. We created a context of enjoyment and friendship among participants, an observed effect also in some other PR exercises (Cameron and Gibson 2005). We took particular attention to the participant heterogeneity and diversity. We found out that for participants the project meant different things: the younger generation was more interested in participating for future economic benefits and ready to 'take things into their own hands'. The elderly and the employed factory workers saw their participation more as a volunteering exercise for community-building and social revival of their town. We ensured them that both motives are completely legitimate and not excluding to avoid what Cook and Kothari (2001) refer to as 'power imposition' of one group over another. In our case, this proved effective enough and finally both groups worked alongside.

Although we can conclude that the local community mostly benefited from this PR, we must also acknowledge

that this was limited to social and cultural developmental aspects. One probable reason for the 'failure' to attain tangible economic and environmental results could be that the cultural tourism products implemented are only the start of reinventing the community with new developments across longer time dimensions. Some products that are currently marketed on a volunteer basis could eventually evolve into permanent employment-offering ventures. An additional reason could be that the current economic situation with stable and full employment in the industrial sector limits the desire for new full-time ventures in tourism. Generally, people in the community are more interested in socializing and volunteer work rather than finding additional employment or profit. On the other hand, this is a positive outcome of the research and we agree with Mahjabeen et al. (2009), who write that, if the community is actively engaged in planning, plans are likely to be matched with their needs, interests, and expectations.

We find that PR could potentially be useful for drafting community-led local development programmes (such as the LEADER funds in the EU) where participation could ensure the better realisation of funds and the matching of local interests. This type of PR could also be useful in other post-socialist communities, where due to specific socio-economic development some research found a general apathy of people regarding public participation and civil involvement (Greenberg 2010; Coman and Tomini 2014).

#### 4.2 Critical reflections on participatory research for researchers

The first research benefit that we point out must be identification and prioritization of the community's needs, which once again points to the need for transdisciplinary research, based on intense integration of academics and non-academics. Such approach would enrich the participation process and contribute to solving challenges within the community. Our premise at the start of this study was that the community desired new development matched by their needs and terms. However, we were unaware that, for them, 'development' did not mean new jobs or extra income, but socializing, developing community links, and creating small-scale cultural experiences. This fact was also observed by Blangy et al. (2008) and Mair (2015), and it forces us to rethink our concepts of community development and geographers' fixation merely on its economic aspects. PR has the potential to grow into transdisciplinary research if scholars from various academic fields integrate local stakeholders as early as the design step instead of merely inviting them to participate, as stated by Tress et al. (2005). As they comment, this would lead to transdisciplinary research with the involvement of researchers from various unrelated disciplines as well as non-academic participants working from the beginning and trying to create new knowledge and theory.

The second research benefit gained by conducting PR is obtaining new local knowledge. This is best illustrated in the knowledge-acquisition phase of our research, when we conducted a survey of cultural heritage based on research literature, official registries, and fieldwork. The list of 'cultural values' predominantly included tangible cultural heritage, especially secular architecture (e.g., old homesteads), sacred architecture (e.g., churches, chapels, crosses), and memorial heritage (Šmid Hribar et al. 2015). After the local community gave its own input the list was completely different, with the focus shifting to intangible heritage, with economic practices and skills in the foreground (Table 3). This proves that the local people have a very different yet detailed understanding of local culture and its role in new development interventions. This also implies that not including local perceptions and knowledge may result in the failure of developmental initiatives.

There is still a need for more accurate and unbiased assessments of the long-term impacts of PR. Because it is being created largely through practice, 'the theory often takes a back seat', as stressed by Wiewel et al. (2012), and critical assessment is lacking. Another danger is 'romanticizing local knowledge' into development practice and assuming its inherent superiority over knowledge produced by traditional academic research, as pointed out by Smith (2011). In our opinion, the participatory method presented here could be useful in order to draw local knowledge into decisions that affect people of local communities so that they can achieve sustainable outcomes on their own terms. However, this local knowledge should be investigated just as critically as any other form of knowledge.

If we evaluate our method, we can conclude that we have avoided some critiques attributed to PR. The main positivist stance is that PR uses unreplicable methods. We believe our method is concrete and structured and does not differ in scientific vigour from other human/social empirical procedures. By including well-known techniques (LFA: logical framework approach, open space and word café workshops) this method is replicable yet still flexible enough for other territorial contexts. By clearly defining the PR process at the very start as a mutual symbiosis with benefits both for scientists and the local community, the overall confusion about the research goal is less likely.

We are less confident about our method being used in larger local communities. Post-structural criticism of negative power effects of participation or 'group tyranny' is a threat especially for larger communities. In our case, the local community was small and it was possible to reach out to all social groups, even disadvantaged ones such as the unemployed youth and the elderly. In practice, this meant that we communicated with them personally or via phones and ensured their participation. For us the key moment was when we identified 'gatekeepers' or trusted

**Tab. 3** Numbers of cultural heritage items identified in various steps of the knowledge acquisition phase. The last column provides items selected by public participation for having the best developmental potential.

|                                    |                                             | 1st phase /<br>official<br>registries and<br>literature | 2nd phase /<br>participation<br>of locals | Items selected in the workshop                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Tangible<br>cultural<br>heritage   | Archaeological heritage                     | 1                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Secular architectural heritage              | 12                                                      | 6                                         | Windmill, dugouts and bunkers, Tominc House, renovation of a blacksmith's workshop, tower on Point Peak ( <i>Špičasti vrh</i> ), flax-drying device |
|                                    | Religious architectural heritage            | 23                                                      | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Religious-secular architectural heritage    | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Memorial heritage                           | 13                                                      | 1                                         | Military cemetery in Črni Vrh                                                                                                                       |
|                                    | Garden architectural heritage               | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Settlement heritage                         | 1                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Cultural landscape                          | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Historical landscape                        | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
| Intangible<br>cultural<br>heritage | Oral tradition and folk literature          | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Performances                                | 0                                                       | 1                                         | Singing activity                                                                                                                                    |
|                                    | Custom and habits                           | 0                                                       | 0                                         |                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                    | Knowledge of the environment                | 0                                                       | 2                                         | Stargazing, pond                                                                                                                                    |
|                                    | Economic practice                           | 1                                                       | 6                                         | Flax production and processing, making a charcoal pile, restoration of Idrija lace, teamsters, lime kilns, homemade baked goods                     |
| Other                              | Hiking trails                               | 1                                                       | 4                                         | Trnovo cross-country marathon, Matuckar Trail, narrow gauge railway line in connection with hiking, Via Alpina hiking trail                         |
|                                    | Natural heritage with cultural significance | 0                                                       | 1                                         | Ivanjšek linden tree                                                                                                                                |
|                                    | Item collection                             | 0                                                       | 1                                         | Collection of WWI and WWII items                                                                                                                    |

Source: Šmid Hribar et al. 2015

individuals that reached out to certain social groups and in effect represented them at workshops. It is difficult to imagine this kind of face-to-face communication to take place in larger urban environments since trust-building process is time consuming. We agree with Kesby (2007: 2827) who said that understanding that participation is 'enmeshed in power rather free from it is very helpful to the practice of participation'. There were indices in our case study that the local government (especially municipality officials) wanted to use this PR project to legitimise their top-down actions in the Črni Vrh community. We had to make clear to them that they had to abandon their usual decision-making role. This caused some friction at first, but on the other hand, this 'relinquishment' of power enabled real participation of other stakeholders later on. This also implies that researchers have to be aware of

those 'power issues' and to recognise and deal with them as soon as they arise.

Of course, we cannot claim that repetition of our PR method would lead to similar results in other territories, which is an objective limitation of doing this kind of research. The method may be the same, but the context, issues and interests within the local community may be very different. However, we think that by iterating the guiding steps of our method (knowledge acquisition, knowledge synthesis, implementation and evaluation) and by using standardised participatory techniques (LEA, Open Café) we can achieve a more rigorous PR. That is a prerequisite to develop more general knowledge and theories, which would address global socioeconomic issues and needs of communities in the future.

## 5. Conclusion

Participatory research in human geography can be applied and can achieve substantial results, not only to gain new knowledge but also for the benefit of communities involved. Building a trusting and respectful relationship among stakeholders and scholars is the key ingredient. Only after this climate of trust has been developed does the PR method become feasible. Abandoning the traditional role of researchers as 'wise outsiders' and assuming the role of 'enabling facilitators' proved helpful in achieving positive results as well as putting the power of implementation into their hands. We found out that personal communication with certain social groups as the unemployed youth or the elderly and finding the (informal) representatives of those groups (gatekeepers) is of outmost importance to ensure heterogeneity of local community and to avoid the 'tyranny' of the majority. An important but unexpected finding in this study was the realization that in the short term local stakeholders, especially older people, see the strengthening of social cohesion and local identity as more important than economic gain. The next finding is that the participatory process also has the power to bring together previously alienated stakeholders in the community, especially the public sector with private operators, individuals, and even academia. This finding can also be the start of a new kind of research: from participatory to transdisciplinary research. It is important that researchers from various academic groups begin working with non academics from the very beginning, working to shape (or 'co-design') the study in line with their needs. We conclude that the participatory process in communities is a long-term process and that it does not offer immediate economic impacts. It requires knowhow and the investment of significant human capital, whereby heterogeneous local and public stakeholders, experts, and even international participants can work together. We believe that this method offers sufficient scientific vigour and could be reproduced in similar smaller communities. However, it is questionable if it can bring positive results in larger communities, where personal contact between scientists and the community is harder to make and maintain. However, the long-term results, largely in the form of social empowerment for the communities and a way for researchers to obtain embedded local knowledge, can be very rewarding any may open up new research questions.

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