

CLUSTER FACILITATORS – CONCEPT, ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE

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Abstract: The concept of a cluster facilitator has only been recently elaborated in economic literature, whereas sources of information on cluster facilitators on the territory of Serbia are scarce. Therefore, further in the text the role and the significance of a cluster facilitator will be demonstrated through an empirical aspect of activities and operation of LEDIB Cluster House. That particular aspect implies examples of good practice of cluster facilitators from other countries cooperating with Cluster House in enhancing interaction and exchange of experience. LEDIB Program has invested significant resources in the training of the cluster facilitators and the following text represents a combination of acquired theoretical knowledge and practical experience. The most significant series of cluster facilitators training modules organized by the Cluster House was held in REG X Danish Cluster Academy, so that some of the definitions and conclusions cited in the text have been taken from the experts working at this prominent institution for the cluster development.

Key words: facilitators, acquired theoretical knowledge

KLASTER FASILITATORI – POJAM, ULOGA I ZNAČAJ

Rezime: Pojam klaster fasilitatora je tek poslednjih godina detaljnije obrađen u ekonomskoj literaturi, a izvori informacija o klaster fasilitatorima sa područja Srbije su malobrojni. Stoga će u daljem tekstu uloga i značaj klaster fasilitatora biti prikazani i kroz iskustveni aspekt delovanja i rada u okviru LEDIB Kuće klastera. Taj aspekt odnosi se i na primere dobre prakse klaster fasilitatora iz drugih zemalja, sa kojima Kuća klastera podstiče interakciju i razmenu iskustava. LEDIB program je uložio značajne resurse u obuku klaster fasilitatora i tekst koji sledi je spoj stečenih teorijskih znanja ali i iskustava u radu. Najvažniji od niza modula koji je Kuća klastera organizovala u cilju obuke klaster fasilitatora održao se na Danskoj Akademiji za klastere REG X, tako da su neke od definicija i zaključaka u tekstu preuzete od stručnjaka ove renomirane institucije za razvoj klastera.

Ključne reči: fasilitatori, stečena teoretska znanja

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1 CONCEPT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CLUSTERS

The concept of cluster was first introduced in economic literature in 1890 in the work of Alfred Marshall on industrial districts in England. However, the introduction of the cluster concept is assigned to Michael Porter who defined clusters as “a geographical concentrations of interconnected companies, specialized suppliers, service providers, affiliated sectoral industries and associated institutions (e.g. universities, agencies, chambers of commerce) which are competing in a specific field of work but at the same time cooperating with each other“ [2].

The term “cluster“ was used by an American composer for the first time to denote a group of simultaneous, dense consecutive tones in a scale. In translation, this English term signifies “a grape, group, flock“ but its original meaning is widely accepted.

European Commission adopted the concept of cluster as an important initiative in competition and innovation in 2008, due to an improved interaction among sectoral companies, education, scientific and research institutions and public sector. The studies of relevant international institutions show that the cluster concept is an important drive in competition and innovation and as such influencing the economic development of a particular region. Joining of companies into clusters and cooperation with supporting institutions (education, scientific and research institutions and public sector) may lead to a synergy of action and an increase in competitiveness of cluster members in relation to those in the same environment acting individually. The studies showed that in almost three fourths of companies that are members of clusters there has been an increase in their competitiveness.¹

There are three key elements that make up cluster „Ekosystem“ [1]:

1. Economic entities
2. Public institutions
3. Education, scientific and research institutions.

The level of success in cluster functioning depends on the level of understanding and cooperation among all three elements and on interpersonal relations among individuals in each of the afore listed elements. That is exactly why it is necessary to have a cluster facilitator.

2 CLUSTER FACILITATOR – CONCEPT

In contemporary business environment, the economic entities encounter numerous challenges such as frequent changes in business environment, competition, globalization and necessity of continual improvement of products and production process. One of the ways to achieve competitiveness in such dynamic conditions is joining in into clusters [3].

The benefits of such kind of association are numerous, increase of production and employment, increase in innovation, specialization and improvement of professional education, knowledge and technology transfer, quality improvement, higher level of production, export growth, efficient use of resources, cutting down on expenses at various levels, increase of flexibility, easier access to grants, information update, etc. However, clusters cannot be taken as a “medicine to cure all diseases“, as there are also negative implications of clusterization such as, economic entities are not interested in joint activities, lack of trust among members, inadequate system of information sharing, low coincidence of structure and business culture of interconnected actors, lack of funds, lack of entrepreneurial spirit, etc.

Benefiting from the cluster membership and overcoming challenges one encounters during the establishment and functioning of the cluster does not happen spontaneously. That is where a cluster facilitator plays a key role [7].

Generally, the term cluster facilitator defines a person responsible for successful functioning of a cluster. According to the definition of the Danish Cluster Academy, a cluster facilitator is “a person responsible for managing relations among economic entities, education, scientific and research institutions and public sector in order to achieve economic development and benefit for all members within the cluster“ [5].

In different parts of the world the term “cluster facilitator“ may have other titles. For example, in Scandinavian countries they are called “process leaders“ and in other parts of Europe “cluster managers“, whereas in USA the term “executive director“ is often used. Regardless of the term used, it denotes the same concept everywhere.

Referent sources make the division of cluster facilitators into two categories: internal and external cluster facilitators [8]. External facilitators are experts who are objective, impartial, not completely introduced to all cluster elements but have wide network of contacts and capabilities to recognize

business opportunities. On the other side, internal facilitators are familiar with the cluster structure in detail and are in direct contact with cluster members whose trust they have. In practise, the combination of characteristics of both types of facilitators can be found in one person, with certain of characteristics from both types prevailing more than the others.

A cluster facilitator “manages“ the cluster in the most acceptable way to all cluster members. He takes care of both individual and collective needs of the cluster members. A cluster facilitator has not the title of a director but is expected to manage the cluster impartially and independently.

The role of a cluster facilitator is therefore very complex and involves a series of activities that require adequate knowledge and skills. The theoretical aspect defines five personal characteristics essential in cluster facilitation [1].

1. Modesty- absence of imposing one’s personal beliefs during the process of facilitation;
2. Flexibility – embracing changes, new ways of thinking and unobstructed by the existing structures;
3. Honesty – empathy and acting in accordance with personal system of values;
4. Professionalism –integrity and trust inspiring among cluster members;
5. Awareness – fully aware of his role and cluster members interest during decision making, as well as of the risk taken once the decision is made.

A cluster facilitator must have trust of all cluster members and he must make constant efforts in securing quality improvement in interpersonal relations among cluster members.

Some of the most important characteristics and skills required for the successful cluster facilitation are listed below [4]:

- Innovativeness
- Organizational skills
- Social skills
- Communication skills
- Team work orientation
- Decision Making competence
- Creativity
- Enthusiasm
- Conflict resolution competence, etc.

The role of a cluster facilitator may be compared with a sports team coach whose task is to unite different actors and coordinate their activities in order to achieve a common goal.

3 ACTIVITIES IMPLEMENTED BY A CLUSTER FACILITATOR

Activities implemented by a cluster facilitator are numerous. The most important activity is maintaining constant contact with cluster members. Only then, a cluster facilitator can keep an update of the opportunities and needs of cluster members which is the basis for cluster activities implementation. This type of approach prevents creation of an unreal picture of the situation and needs of the economy and strengthens social relationships between cluster members and a cluster facilitator. One of the most significant tasks of a cluster facilitator is creation and strengthening of social relationships among cluster members. It implies a series of activities, one of them being to convene informal social events. Organizing cluster business club events, study tours, visit to fairs and alike are the examples of good practise implemented by the Cluster House since its foundation.

The main goal of a cluster is to contribute to achieving the added value for its members and therefore the activities of a cluster facilitator must be streamlined in that direction. It implies a series of secondary activities which will eventually result in an increase of profit for the cluster members. Such activities take considerable time but if the social relationships are adequately established there will be no drop off in membership.

One of the basic tasks of a cluster facilitator is to recognize and analyse essential needs of the economy, i.e. sector. The state of our economy is such that small, family companies unable to afford sufficient number of workers to cover all aspects of business are predominant. Cluster facilitators must recognize what activities have been “neglected“ by entrepreneurs or for what particular activity each of them individually lack sufficient funding. In previous experience it has most often been marketing activities so that on the basis of a detailed analysis of the cluster member needs by the Cluster House a set of projects were implemented in that field, such as joint web site design, joint catalogue, promotion material, organization of joint exhibiting at fairs and alike. These and similar activities led to the fact that some of economic actors joined the clusters they do not naturally belong but whose products and services meet the needs of the cluster members in that particular sector. Such a case is evident in agro sector where producers of package and marketing agencies dealing

in product and branding design are members of the cluster.

Clusters include big number of actors very often. Therefore, the necessity of establishing successful system of information and uniting partners within the cluster arises which again represents one of the activities of a cluster facilitator. Namely, a cluster facilitator has to collect, analyse and distribute information in accordance with the established system of information. It implies further necessity to update new information and to recognize favourable opportunities where a cluster may achieve some of its goals.

The activities implemented by a cluster facilitator are also promotion of the concept of cluster, promotion of joint projects, lobbying and intermediating between economy, education and scientific and research community and government sector, promotion of education, identification and inclusion of all relevant institutions into a cluster, support of cooperation between education and scientific and research institutions, etc.

A cluster facilitator must be familiar with the sector very well but it would be good if he does not come from the state administration or from some of the economic entities who are cluster members.

4 LEDIB CLUSTER HOUSE CLUSTER FACILITATION UNIT

LEDIB Cluster House Cluster Facilitation Unit was established as a result of the need to improve the existing structure and efficiency, as well as to make a detailed analysis of the needs of the economy in the region. It was established during 2012.

Initial activity of the Cluster House Cluster Facilitation Unit was to introduce the first module of training for potential cluster facilitators. The cluster facilitators who applied for the assignment and successfully completed the training and gained required skills visited a big number of economic entities and established direct contacts with entrepreneurs. In order to simplify the activity of information collecting for the need assessment of cluster members and economy, a special questionnaire was designed to explore the potentials and problems of the cluster members, and a sector as a whole. The Cluster House Cluster Facilitation Unit has the aim to establish a comprehensive database of precise and detailed information on economic entities in southeast

part of Serbia, as well as on their capacities and challenges they encounter.

The strategic goal of the Cluster House Cluster Facilitation Unit is to establish and improve capacities of human resources in view of professionalisation and professional improvement of cluster facilitators which is in accordance with the main goal of the Cluster House as a supporting institution of the cluster development in the region.

5 CONCLUSION

A cluster facilitator is a relatively new job profile in Serbia which requires further promotion and increase of awareness of economic entities and other elements of the cluster ecosystem on significance of cluster facilitators as an essential segment in cluster development and economic prosperity.

Besides, cluster facilitators already engaged in this activity must invest additional efforts in further education and in mastering new skills and improvement of skills they have already adopted. One of the required characteristic of a cluster facilitator is never to be satisfied with own accomplishments but to aspire to new ones, one of which is surely upgrade of personal education.

Having this in mind, the LEDIB Cluster House in cooperation with the experts from Denmark is working on ensuring advanced education for the cluster facilitators on the territory of Serbia and on the increase of awareness on the role all actors relevant for their development.

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