Fishing communities have been facing fundamental challenges due to their high dependence on declining fish stocks, and economic alternatives being limited. This has led to poverty and depopulation in communities. A change is hampered by difficulties in accessing financial support, markets with fragmented and inconsistent institutional set-up, and particularly by weak entrepreneurship. With a clear lack of other possibilities to earn a living, overexploitation of wild fish stocks continues, and in some cases, this might even include the illegal catching of sturgeons.

It is therefore an urgent requirement to increase economic and social stability in villages that are deprived of former income from sturgeon fishing. Opening up opportunities for substitute revenue, based on the specific local situations, will help to reduce pressure on wild fish stocks.

**METHODOLOGIES**

1. **THE EXPLORATION PHASE:**
The socio-economic situation of fishermen was evaluated in 15 communities that used to fish sturgeons. Together with project teams, subcontracted experts visited the communities and assessed the availability of natural resources and the potential use of these. The evaluation included research and discussions with relevant local fishermen, mayors and municipality staff, business owners, tourism managers, etc.

   This **local context analysis** showed similarities in all four countries: most of the selected fishing communities are in rather remote, underprivileged regions, which lack infrastructure and investment capacity and suffer from low living standards. Inhabitants have been going away to work or study, leaving behind elderly communities with lower levels of education, social capacity and entrepreneurship.

2. **THE IMPLEMENTATION PHASE:**
Based on the local context analysis, the most suitable communities were designated for piloting activities on alternative income generation. In an exploration phase, workshops and personal meetings were organised with national project teams, external experts and community members. Ideas for activities that could provide alternative income were discussed broadly,
**RESULTS**

Eleven business plans were developed for nine communities in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia and Ukraine.

- Most proposed ventures focus on the hospitality and tourism industry. Sustainable tourism — partly based on sturgeons as natural heritage — was identified as a promising business opportunity for five ventures. One sturgeon exhibition centre and two production ventures were also proposed.

- All business plans build on local capacities and resources available. Most ventures have the capacity to reach break-even point in 2 to 5 years.

- The ventures are in different stages of development. A gastronomic point based on fresh fish in Romania was built and equipped, and is now in the testing phase. A small grant was secured for training Bulgarian fishermen and is now in the testing phase. A small grant was secured for training Bulgarian fishermen in customer care and business skills. Some ventures need to gather additional market information to formulate a compelling value proposal for their customers.

- A total of 35 seasonal jobs and independent earning opportunities would be created. A minimum of 27 households and 75 people would be positively impacted by a significant income increase.

- Ownership over the alternative income generation activities could be fostered in most targeted fishing communities. This included active collaboration in developing ideas and in providing information. It also extended to business initiatives being set up by fishermen themselves, with support from the project.

The most feasible ideas were selected. These ideas were further analysed, necessary information collected and business plans drafted. The plans were shared and discussed with fishermen and other suitable stakeholders in the communities. Their feedback was incorporated into the final business plans. These were provided to the community stakeholders, and potential ways to realize the business concepts were discussed. In the most feasible cases, small amounts of seed money were spent on equipment or a funding application.

Each business plan includes an explanation of the product or service(s) that will be offered, how it will be promoted, the target groups and the competitors, the required investment budget and running costs, and how much income and how many jobs will be created.

**FISHING COMMUNITIES HAVE BEEN FACING FUNDAMENTAL CHALLENGES DUE TO THEIR HIGH DEPENDENCE ON DECLINING FISH STOCKS, AND ECONOMIC ALTERNATIVES BEING LIMITED**

**CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Grass-roots business development needs a patient approach and long-term commitment. Insightful engagement with the local communities and openness to acquire new working methodologies are likely to generate a higher success rate.

- Local leaders are key in creating ownership in communities. Building trust is sometimes difficult, but always crucial. Communities are often hesitant in the beginning and do not see business opportunities. The most progress was made where a local leader (often the head of the fishing association) endorsed a business plan and started getting active. However, in some communities proactive leaders and full venture teams have not yet been identified or formed.

- Start small and grow. Ventures are planned to be realistic, with rather low investment costs and small-scale volumes projected for the start-up stages. They produce experience and confidence, attract additional funding and act as pilots for larger income generating activities.

- Income generation is difficult to ascertain. It is a common challenge in all ideation and incubation processes to determine how these ventures will generate (or if there is enough market demand to reach a level of sales that would cover all the costs).

- Many business models, especially those based on tourism activities, have a strongly seasonal aspect. This means that more work and income will be available in the summer months and less at other times of the year. This has to be considered in order to plan liquidity and cashflow needs, and to realistically determine the output that can be achieved.

- More detailed explorations of the target markets have to be conducted. This is necessary for a solid strategy to address the target market — such as the promotion strategy. It should include e.g. more specific drawing of customer profile, an approximation of addressable market, understanding the strength of the competition.

- An incubation process should support the communities for the first steps. An experienced knowledge partner should provide ventures with hands-on support to successfully start their businesses.

**THE BUSINESS PLANS**

**Bulgaria**

**TARGET COMMUNITY:** Nikopol (a town with rich historical and natural resources)

**Proposed venture:** boat rides with fishermen on the Danube (boat trips to beaches or nearby islands; fishing trips with local fishermen presenting traditional fishing; boat trips with lunch at the beach, prepared by fishermen)

**Investment budget:** app. 16,000 EUR (mainly for infrastructure, incl. purchase of 2 boats)

**Financial projections:** breakeven will be reached with 153 boat trips per season.

**Romania**

**TARGET COMMUNITY:** Borcea (easily accessible, an emerging tourist destination)

**Proposed venture:** boat and e-bike services (guided boat rides and e-bike rental with different lengths and itineraries)

**Investment budget:** app. 33,400 EUR, incl. infrastructure and salaries for 3 people

**Financial projections:** breakeven will be reached with 15 full boat trips or 97 bike rentals per month.
TARGET COMMUNITY: Fetesti (at the “Highway of the Sun” between Bucharest and Constanța)

Proposed venture: gastronomic point with freshly caught fish (offering 2 different daily menus, based on the local catches of the day)

Investment budget: app. 13,700 EUR (incl. salaries for 3 people, infrastructure, etc.)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 97 menus per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Vadu Oii (a well-known fishing destination accessible by land and water)

Proposed venture: lodging facilities and gastronomic point (cabins for recreational fishermen and gastronomic point offering 3 different daily menus)

Investment budget: app. 74,600 EUR (mainly for infrastructure and salaries for 4 people)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 200 menus per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Galati (big city with large and popular Danube waterfront)

Proposed venture: boat trips on the Danube (3 types of boat rides, 1 including a meal)

Investment budget: 21,200 EUR (mainly for purchase of a boat, salaries for 3 people)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 15 full boat trips per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Sfantu Gheorghe (traditional fishing village and up-and-coming tourist destination in the Danube delta)

Proposed venture: guided boat trips in the Danube delta (different durations and itineraries)

Investment budget: app. 20,200 EUR (mainly for purchase of a boat, salaries for 3 people)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 10 full boat trips per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Jurilovca (established touristic destination accessible by land and water)

Proposed venture: boat and e-bike services (guided boat rides and e-bike rental with different lengths and itineraries)

Investment budget: app. 33,300 EUR (mainly for purchase of boat and e-bikes, salaries for 3 people)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 15 full boat trips per month.

SERBIA

TARGET COMMUNITY: Negotin (close to the Danube, several national parks and popular cycling routes)

Proposed venture: Sturgeon exhibition centre and sustainable tourism (exhibition centre on sturgeons and the local tradition of sturgeon fishing; sustainable tourism packages for 1 to 8 days)

Investment budget: app. 248,000 EUR (incl. salaries and infrastructure, excl. purchase or rent of exhibition space)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 3,500 tickets for adults plus 7,800 tickets for pupils per year.

UKRAINE

TARGET COMMUNITY: Vylkove (in the Danube Delta, with large ecological potential and abundance of natural resources)

Proposed venture: apple cider production (production facility, incl. visitor tours, and small shop)

Investment budget: app. 6,600 EUR (mainly for purchase and installation of equipment and construction work)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 572 litres of cider per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Jurilovca (established touristic destination accessible by land and water)

Proposed venture: frog farming (production and trade of frog legs for the domestic market; a historic local industry until the fall of the Soviet Union; 98% of the frog legs are imported from Asian countries, imports increased by 741% in the first half of 2018)

Investment budget: app. 9,700 EUR (for purchase of equipment, infrastructure works on the facility, frogs for reproduction, etc.)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 170 kg of frog legs per month.

TARGET COMMUNITY: Jurilovca (established touristic destination accessible by land and water)

Proposed venture: living farmstead (a “living farm”, where guests can experience the traditional way of life, with access to a variety of options to spend time and explore nature and the local culture)

Investment budget: app. 17,400 EUR (for repurposing of buildings as accommodation facilities, equipment, etc.)

Financial projections: breakeven will be reached with 5% occupancy per month.

For more information, please contact:

sturgeons@wwf.at