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11. Europe-wide Experiences of the LEADER Programme

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11.1 LEADER and the new policy approach to rural development: opportunities for participation and partnership

Until the 1980's there was an overall consensus about the role of State intervention as a means of attenuating the effects of uneven economic and social restructuring in the countryside (Bowler and Lewis 1991) — 'development' was the business of the State. Those approaches were sectoral and undertaken by individual government departments, and the main focus of EU policy in rural areas was on agriculture. Therefore the improvements achieved did not reach everybody, only particular rural groups, especially farmers. In fact, it has been said that many problems facing rural communities arise from the structure of government decision-making based on vertical sectors and individual departments. (Wright 1992) In Northern and Central European countries 'ntegrated Rural Development' approaches sought to bring together these sectoral agencies in a co-ordinated development. However, there were failures when targeting specific rural groups and disagreements between the agencies and local communities about the way of approaching problems and the relationship between the goals of a policy and the aspirations of individual enthusiasm. In Southern European countries the case was different since these integrated approaches did not take place.

The Third World experience on 'Self-reliant Development', which was regarded as the solution or response to dependency, also contributed in a

fundamental manner to the emergence of new conceptions of rural development in Europe. This approach to development was meant to be a process used by the inhabitants of a region to direct their region's adaptation to the world and the future in an autonomous way, i.e. according to goals which were inherent in the local cultural background. (Bassand 1986) However, in addition to experience in a Third World context some 'grass-roots' experiences can be found from the 1970s and 1980s in the 'periphery' of industrialised Europe. (Bryden 1986)

Issues such as partnerships, community involvement, capacity building and empowerment are crucial in this context. Empowerment has been defined as the 'process by which disadvantaged communities define their own needs and determine the response that is made to them'. (Barr 1995) Since empowerment is a continuous process that enables people to understand, upgrade and use their capacity to better control and gain power over their own lives, Schuftan (1996), among others, considers the processes of capacity building and community involvement as empowering and decisive for any community development process to succeed. Capacity building consists of raising people's knowledge, awareness and skills to use their own capacity to tackle their needs; it implies understanding, to communicating and taking decisions.

Empowerment, capacity building and community involvement are very inter-related processes and, in any case, the emphasis being placed on them needs a justification; what makes the difference between involving people or not? A series of rationales for community involvement have been set out following the basis of good practice in rural development:

- Advancement of democratic practice in society and increasing the legitimacy of public action.
- Meeting the needs of clients, consumers and communities.
- Recognising and tapping local knowledge and involving 'stakeholders' who have the power to act locally.
- The control of dissent and the desire to change individual and social behaviour.
- The education of the public.
- Encouraging negotiated outcomes in situations of conflict of interests.

- Gaining 'local ownership' of projects and encouraging self-reliance through "empowerment". (Bryden *et al.* 1997)

In fact, it has been recognised that many rural areas face a situation which needs the support of the institutional framework if a bottom-up approach is to be initiated. (Pérez, Esparcia and Noguera 1995) For example the issue of control over local resources (land, water, minerals) is often a critical aspect that can only be solved by legislative changes at national or European levels. Nevertheless, when local circumstances do not provide the necessary conditions for communities to identify their needs and to determine, or at least influence, the responses to them, a capacity building process needs to be promoted by those bodies that have the technical support and the institutional credibility to do so. Capacity building may not be a *sufficient* condition due to the importance of external forces, but it will be a *necessary* one if endogenous development is to occur. Within this context, partnerships were promoted directly by the European Commission in the early 1990s, as very relevant tools to promote integrated rural development and the processes related to it. (Structural Funds review 1992)

It was as a response to this existing dialectic, but also reinforcing it, that the LEADER programme appeared. The European Initiative LEADER (*Liaison entre actions de dévéloppment de l'économie rurale*) was conceived within a theoretical context demanding a greater participation of communities within any strategy that might affect their lives and areas, at the same time taking into account the experience of 'grass-roots' initiatives in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. It was also initiated as a means of involving ordinary rural citizens in EU policy, and, as with all the 'Community Initiatives' under the Structural Funds, as a 'Policy Experiment' from which successful elements could be drawn for mainstream programmes.

The main operational characteristics of LEADER can be summarised as follows:
- An approach based on rural areas of limited size with some measure of identity or cohesion.

- Active involvement of local people, firms, associations and authorities in all stages.
- Local Action Groups (LAGs) bringing together the main partners concerned.
- Business plans with integrated, multi-sectoral development strategies based on a careful analysis of problems, potentials and perspectives.
- Financial support through a system of global grants providing a good deal of flexibility.
- Establishment of a network of local rural development groups at a European scale. (CEMAC, 1997)

All these elements were conceived in order to achieve the following main operational aims:
1) To improve the development potential of rural areas by relying on local initiative.
2) To promote the acquisition of know-how on local development.
3) To disseminate this knowledge.

'Top-down' elements which characterised Community interventions in the Member States were maintained when designing the programme, while recognising the need for encouraging partnerships between government departments, public agencies and the private sector as powerful tools for the achievement of rural policy objectives and, of course, of securing 'matching funding' from national and regional sources.

11.2 The local action group

Partnerships have become a very influential factor determining the shape that a development process may adopt in a particular area. Partnerships have taken different forms, in terms of constitution and functioning, in different regions in an attempt to provide the areas with a wider flexibility when creating the necessary structures for development.

But partnerships were not, at the time that LEADER was launched, a common practice for rural development promotion in most of the European member States. The implementation of the LEADER programme,

however, required the constitution of partnerships to initiate and manage the programme in each area. Therefore, all the participant local areas had to fulfil this requirement. How the partnerships were constituted, their composition and their functions need to be considered since it varies between countries depending on their institutional basis.

When launching the new European Initiative for rural development, the Commission had in mind that the "readjustment of activities and the maintenance of a sufficiently diversified socio-economic structure call for an approach firmly geared to local requirements and local origin, and making use of available organisational capacity and expertise". (European Commission 1991) The major element in the delivery of this action programme was to be the Local Rural Development Action Groups which were envisaged as a "tool for the decentralised development". In the view of the Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, "[...] rural development is only possible if all local partners share a common aim which is rooted in the geography, culture, local society [...] This is what marks LEADER out from wider programmes [...] drawing directly on aspirations and projects born at local level" (MacSharry 1992). According to this, the Local Action Groups could be public, private or mixed in nature: "leading figures in the local economy and society will take part in the operation of the groups which may, in some cases, be local collective bodies (association of municipalities)". (European Commission 1991)

By 'partnership' is meant not just a structure but a process of working, and its values lie in the local legitimacy, participation and co-ordination that are thereby ensured or enabled. (Moseley 1996) There is a general recognition of the fact that LEADER has meant a very innovative bottom-up approach to rural development and that the structures and processes (LAG partnership, community involvement, etc.) initiated with it were even more important to encourage the dynamic for development.

The organisation of local partnerships and of new forms of local democracy were highlighted by several member states when asked about LEADER's contribution to rural areas. For example, 60% of the Groups in Sweden recognised that "local partnerships build bridges between the official institutions and the activist organisations"; also around 50% of

the groups in that country recognised that the partnership model demonstrates that local co-operation can be developed through the introduction of new structures and that the local partnership was a true innovation and a non-traditional approach. (LEADER European Observatory 1997)

In Italy the importance of LEADER as an instrument for the improvement of local government structures was pointed out. In Spain the local partnership structure, as an expression of democracy, was highlighted as one of the valuable contributions of LEADER.

It is also useful to mention the idea expressed by the Federation of French LEADER groups:

> [...] the notion of partnership is essential. The local partnership brings together the institutions, the professionals and the organisations. It is this togetherness which confers legitimacy and effectiveness. It is this combination which prevents sectoral or technical segmentation. (European LEADER Observatory 1996)

At the same time, difficulties were also identified when implementing LEADER in the areas. Taking into account the fact that 'partnership' was an idea first introduced by LEADER in the majority of the rural areas, the sometimes negative role of local institutions was mentioned especially by the Italian (62%) and the Spanish (45%) groups since this fact has an important influence in the functioning of the partnerships. The representative character of the LAG is also an important issue and 45% of the Spanish LAGs believed that the excessive weight of public institutions undermines democracy within the LAG and local partnerships. Also the risk of LEADER been understood by local entities merely as an additional source of finance, as some Italian LAGs mentioned, may lead to underestimating the capacity of LEADER to encourage partnerships in order to create consensus and co-operation among different partners in the areas.

The fact is that the LAG partnerships in the different regions have been a reflection of the existing institutional structure, historical factors and current community development situations. In the Spanish cases, for example, there has been an important representation of the Local Authori-

ties within the LAGs. This situation has been also seen in the Italian and Portuguese cases. In other cases such as that of Scotland, the Local Enterprise Companies were appointed as the bodies in charge of the implementation of the programme.

There is also a risk of confrontations between the members of the LAG if some of them take the leading role within the group. In this sense, the issues of in what proportion and how the members are represented within the group takes a special relevance. In some cases decisions on which projects to approve are only made by a small group of members, the 'decision group' within the LAG, and this may lead to decision-making problems.

The project co-ordinator or management team play a decisive role in shaping the programme in those cases where these are given delegated responsibility to approve certain kinds of project, as in Scotland.

11.3 The impact of LEADER in the development process and the institutional structure of rural areas

The LEADER programme has grown in significance since it was first set in progress in 1991. From LEADER I to LEADER II, the number of programs, the amount of funding, and the territory and population affected by the programme have also increased. Furthermore the program has become the model for the establishment or consolidation of other rural development initiatives, some of them involving partnerships.

As a tool for participation and the empowerment of rural communities, LEADER has shown strong capabilities to consolidate development processes involving wide sectors of the local population. As the European Commission points out:

> [...] we realise that in placing confidence on the creativity and resources of local actors the LEADER initiative has demonstrated that the territorial development strategy was the appropriate one to restore vitality to the rural territories, to stimulate the creation and maintenance of activities and hence to increase their attractiveness. (COM 1999).

Thus the innovative approach initiated with LEADER — bottom-up, participatory and integrated — has demonstrated its important advantages and beneficial effects for rural areas, helping to introduce new ways of thinking about rural problems, and making an essential contribution to the development of existing potentialities among the rural population and territory. And being a deeply integrated initiative in its philosophy, LEADER has sought to promote co-operation among the different components of rural society and economy. In this sense, it has frequently encouraged the constitution or consolidation of associations, co-operatives, foundations, etc., aimed at different objectives including the social or economic development of the local area. And so, in different ways LEADER has effectively contributed to the consolidation of local partnerships in rural areas.

Moreover many of the LEADER 'principles' have had a leverage effect in the wider decision making processes and development strategies of the member states. Thus, in the Scottish Office document 'The Scottish Office Rural Framework' (Scottish Office 1992), the importance of integrated approaches when tackling rural issues was outlined, emphasising the ideas of partnership, community involvement and sustainability. More recently, the Scottish Rural White Paper *Rural Scotland: People, Prosperity and Partnership* (Scottish Office 1995) highlighted the relevance of partnership when tackling rural development actions. In the Spanish case, the evident consequence of the existence of LEADER is the emergence of other similar initiatives which imitate the LEADER approach or philosophy. As explained in chapter six in this literature review PRODER was conceived under a National Operative Programme for the period 1996–1999 (coinciding with the LEADER II application period) as a programme for the promotion of rural development in areas with very similar characteristics to LEADER areas. The approach is the same as that of LEADER with very small variations.

Authors in some countries have started looking at LEADER as a form of creating new territories and new forms of governance (Ray 1997, 1998). Regions with centralised systems and no powerful representative structures at a local level may have seen in LEADER a new chance to provide local people with structures that will allow communities to better ex-

press and satisfy their needs. In Ray's words "[...] LEADER has the potential to democratise rural development". Also, as a product of the European Commission action new rural development territories have emerged which, at the same time have encouraged the construction of a LEADER territorial identity. (Ray 1999)

11.4 The future of LEADER; continuity and change in the practice of 'partnerships'

With the agreement of the Agenda 2000 there has also been a presentation of the new community initiative for rural development. This initiative, although keeping the name LEADER will not be designated LEADER III but LEADER PLUS in an attempt to break with the LEADER I and II continuity. (Van Depoele 1999)

In the words of the European Commission, "The objective of the new initiative would be to continue to encourage, on the basis of local partnership, the emergence and experimentation of rural territorial development strategies". (European Commission Services 1999) The new initiative becomes horizontal and potentially applicable in all rural areas of the Community. This implies that a more strict selection process will take place in order to "concentrate on areas demonstrating their real willingness and capacity to experiment with original forms of territorial development". (European Commission Services 1999)

In relation to the LEADER partnership, the Commission has become more explicit about the composition of the local groups stating that "they must constitute a balanced and representative unity of partners from different socio-economic environments of the territory (including the public sector)". (European Commission Services 1999) By requiring a 'balanced' and 'representative' group the problem of groups dominated by one partner (or type of partner, normally the Local Authorities) is to be avoided. However, there may be a problem when trying to make 'experienced' LEADER areas fulfil the new requirements. Experience suggests that it may be difficult to modify certain 'habits' or make the groups change their 'routine' developed over an eight year period.

The prospect of LEADER continuity into the new century has been much welcomed in those rural areas which have seen in LEADER the main instrument for helping them to come out of a situation of deprivation and neglect. In political terms, LEADER may have been especially important for local political leaders to stop thinking that they (the rural areas) have been left to their own devices. Now that the process has been initiated that first dependency on LEADER funding, which was seen as fundamental for allowing the permanence of partnership in the area, has in many cases disappeared. Therefore, the idea is growing amongst the groups that even if the European initiative disappeared, the Groups will still continue operating in the area.

In this sense, LEADER has been crucial not just in mobilising local human and financial capital in rural areas but in changing local leaders' mentality over the necessity of coming together when addressing common problems in the area. At the same time, participation and community involvement processes have been encouraged and with it the emergence of new local partnerships as a way of mobilising broad participation and involvement.

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