

RECITE II PROJECT – LEARNING SUSTAINABILITY

Local Development in European Marginal Areas. Learning Sustainability in Alentejo, Portugal, in Lapland, Finland and in Trentino, Italy, through Transnational Cooperation

This paper describes the objectives, processes and challenges of project management in a transnational EU project. The coordinating country was Italy and partners came from Portugal and Finland. The 'Learning Sustainability' project has been a learning forum for all the partners. The University of Évora (PT) and University of Lapland (FI) had very important roles in regional development activities. This case study shows how European Regions are working together and how they are connecting people in the rural villages. The contents of the case study are:

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Keywords: regional development; EU collaboration; project management; rural development; marginal areas

1. Introduction

In addition to a cultural identity, all *European localities* own important potential resources, which could (should) be used as a basis for a process of Sustainable Local Development. (A locality can be seen as a small universe composed of a territory, the community that lives there, and its social reality – activities, problems and interests - shared by all the population.) The potential resources of the locality may take diverse forms, such as regional products and natural production systems where rural and agro-tourism and handicraft activity play a relevant role. Furthermore, the territory and the community living there own a history and a cultural heritage, which also constitute, in themselves, an important resource for the development of the locality. However, all of these potential resources may only be useful to promote the local development of the region (locality) if they are used in the context of a Local Development Strategy.

A Local Development Strategy has to be designed and implemented with the active participation of all community actors and must be centred on people's needs and aspirations and oriented to create complementary synergies among the existing potential resources. In fact, development is not made *for* people; development is made *with* and *for* people. A Local Development Strategy, developed with the active involvement of people and based on the relationships between individuals and the territory where they live, is the only way to attract people and to create stable life projects for the residents. This is important because the localities in this project, situated in the marginal European contexts of large Mediterranean flatlands (Alentejo, Portugal), cold lands (Lapland, Finland) and high mountains (Trentino, Italy), are suffering from depopulation - a strong human desertification - which, by itself, poses a problem for any development strategy. In addition, each of these European regions is very interested in preserving its environmental capital and promoting sustainable practices in the fields of agriculture, forest and wildlife, tourism and energy. Furthermore, these European regions were convinced that critical issues concerning sustainable development could be better tackled through effective transnational cooperation among regions situated in marginal areas of Europe and suffering human

desertification.

The three regions mentioned above decided to cooperate by exchanging their local experience in promoting sustainable development based on their local resources, namely their history, cultural heritage, handicraft activity, rural and agro-tourism, and other regional products and activities. Trentino was interested in further development of a sustainable mountain development strategy based on rural cooperation, forest and wildlife management, agriculture and pastures, marketing of quality foodstuffs and integrated tourism. Alentejo was interested in preserving its environmental capital and promoting sustainable practices in the fields of agriculture, husbandry, tourism and energy. Lapland was particularly interested in developing new and more sustainable practices in agriculture and forestry (ecological cultivation and forest exploitation, reindeer grazing management, and preservation of bio-diversity), as well as new forms of tourism, based on the promotion of the natural and cultural heritage while preserving its integrity.

2. The Learning Sustainability Project

a. Origin of the project

In the final session of the European Intergovernmental Consultation on Sustainable Mountain Development in the City of Trento, in October 1996, representatives of 20 European Governments approved a Document with recommendations on Sustainable Mountain Development strategies. This important Document includes several action-oriented recommendations to promote the exchange of experiences between mountain communities and the training of decision-makers and managers working in and related to mountain contexts. One recommendation concerned the idea of creating a Centre to exchange experience on sustainable mountain development in the Trentino region. As co-organiser of the Consultation process, and on the basis of its experience in two PACTE and ECOS-Ouverture inter-regional cooperation projects, ICALPE (the International Centre for Alpine Environments) suggested to the Autonomous Province of Trento the development of an inter-regional cooperation project with other rural areas of Europe facing similar marginal conditions, problems, and concerns (especially in the Mediterranean and Scandinavian areas). Following ICALPE's suggestion, the Autonomous Province of Trento invited the region of Alentejo, Portugal, for the Mediterranean context, and the region of Lapland, Finland, for the Scandinavian context, to build jointly a project to promote sustainable development through transnational cooperation. The Project, 'Learning Sustainability' was submitted and approved under a European initiative, the RECITE II programme.

b. Objectives

The overall objective of the Learning Sustainability project was to contribute to the promotion of sustainable development strategies in marginal rural regions of Europe through exchange of experiences and practices among the cooperating regions. More concretely, the project intended to contribute to the development of tools for promoting sustainable development in marginal rural areas of Europe through interregional cooperation among three marginal areas: (1) *mountainous context* (Trentino, Italy), (2) *cold lands context* (Lapland, Finland) and (3) *Mediterranean context* (Alentejo, Portugal). For this purpose, the project has been organised into three main areas (vertical themes), namely sustainable tourism (Area 1), quality management (Area 2), and environmental management of rangelands (Area 3). Two other areas (transversal themes) have also been addressed across the three main areas, namely cooperation (Area 4) and relationships between cities and rural areas (Area 5).

The general objective for *Tourism* was to improve the partners' capacity to develop methods, references and guidelines for new forms of tourism, based on local natural, historical and cultural resources. Concerning *Quality*, the general objective was to

develop the capacity of rural SMEs and local communities to apply a Total Quality Management system to their organisational systems, processes and products. In relation to *Grazing*, the general objective was to improve the regions' capacity to develop and practise multi-purpose management of rangelands in a participatory way. The general objective for the *Cooperation Area* was to improve and disseminate Trentino's relevant experience in cooperation strategies for promoting sustainable development. Concerning the *Cities and Rural Areas*, the objective was to improve and test existing cooperation strategies between cities and their rural surroundings as a tool for promoting sustainable development in small cities in the marginal rural areas of Europe.

c. The partnership and project management

The Learning Sustainability project has been carried out by a transnational partnership composed by three regional partnerships (Alentejo in Portugal, Lapland in Finland, Trentino in Italy). The regional partnerships are composed of public and private entities, 19 in all. The leading partner for the transnational partnership is the Autonomous Province of Trento, Italy. In addition, each regional partnership is lead by a principal partner. For the Alentejo region, the principal partner is the University of Évora (Department of Sociology); for Lapland, the principal partner is the University of Lapland (Continuing Education Centre); and, for Trentino, the principal partner is the Autonomous Province of Trento (Centro de Ecologia Alpina).

The project management has been carried out by each partner at two main levels. Firstly, we have one *transnational steering committee* with representatives from the partner countries. The steering committee's task is to decide guidelines for national partners dealing with rural area issues.

Secondly, there is a *regional steering committee* in each partner country composed by the main local actors and entities. In the meetings of the regional steering committees plans and reports were prepared for the transnational steering committee. In addition, the regional steering committees have discussed and evaluated action plans implemented in the frame of identified problems and challenges.

The *project manager's role* and work has been essential to coordinate project activities and maintain the on-going project. The project manager's role requires diverse qualifications including language skills, understanding of foreign cultures, expertise in European project management, flexibility in the 'project world' and an open mood for the 'end users', i.e. in this case rural villagers.

Conducting a transnational project like the Learning Sustainability project always involves risks and unexpected things. For instance, difficulties in following the European Commission's rules, additional challenges and difficulties when the project team or project manager changes during the project cycle, the short time for meetings, and other things. So, in addition to learning about Sustainable Development, the Learning Sustainability project (1998-2002) has given the opportunity to learn about conducting and managing transnational cooperation projects and tackling and solving all of those difficulties.

d. Interregional cooperation

The project work programme is structured into five areas of activities, each corresponding to a major issue for sustainable development in European marginal rural areas. Those areas of activities are: Area 1, *tourism*; Area 2, *quality management*; Area 3, environmental management of *rangelands*; Area 4, *cooperation*; and Area 5, relationships between *cities and rural areas*.

Each regional partnership has been responsible for organising an exchange of

experience session and for conducting a demonstration action (pilot-project) in each area of activities. The objectives and themes of exchange sessions and demonstration actions carried out in each main area of activities are adapted to the specific regional context and needs of each region. In addition, the partners of a regional partnership are also involved in the corresponding area of activities of the two other regions in exchange sessions and in demonstration actions as well. Furthermore, one regional partner coordinates, across the three European regions, a main area of activities. Alentejo's partnership (The Tourism Office of Évora) is coordinating transnationally the Tourism Area; Lapland's partnership is leading the Quality and the Rangeland areas of activities; and Trentino's partnership is coordinating the areas of activities for Cooperation and Cities and Rural Areas.

The project partnership intends to further develop the results from the Learning Sustainability project by creating a multi-polar centre for cooperation between regional and local authorities on sustainable development of less favoured areas in Europe.

e. Examples of actions carried out

In Lapland, the project started with the selection of six pilot-villages, after a call inviting participation was widely published in the regional media. Only every second village could join the project. The counterparts of the project in the villages are both the municipality and the village committee, a local association of villagers. All six villages have been visited several times. A report has been prepared on the weaknesses, strengths and ideas in each village, and comparative analyses have been made. This provides the background documentation to prepare a local development strategy for each village. In addition, particular projects have been discussed with some villages; and some of the projects based on local nature and culture have been started. For all villages the project is providing multimedia facilities with the perspective to network the six villages for information and training.

In Trentino, there has been a series of meetings with local people. In the BIM Brenta area the objective is to develop a route of 'imagination' based on local traditions and legends. A first survey of original local literature has been made, and contacts made with a number of local associations. The objectives are to develop different routes for culture tourism, through a participatory approach with municipalities, local people, associations and institutions.

In Alentejo, nature tourism strategy has been developed based on a previous feasibility study. Alentejo's potential interest in a future network of tourism villages was evaluated through a first sample of three local communities. Local stakeholders (including representatives of commercial, lodging and restaurant establishments, associations for local development, entrepreneurs, local authorities and other entities) attended, with strong interest, most of the information meetings that were organised for that purpose. The network of tourism villages has been successfully organised and launched.

In Lapland, a major result is the involvement of villagers, through the village committees, in each of the six pilot-villages. For the more active villages, the project has accompanied the first steps of very concrete pilot-projects, such as the 'Telatie' footpath on the swamp environment around Kurtakko, or the local traditional dress project developed by a tourism family company at Korvala in connection with a network of local enterprises. Both projects are first exemplary achievements of the main project's initial objectives in this area of Lapland, which are to help the locality to find their own village development systems based on local nature and culture resources, and in particular, the rediscovery of the Finnish Laplanders' heritage.

For the more passive villages, the project has helped to identify the conditions and opportunities for development and design training through consultation sessions based on the very specific needs of each village, most dealing with cooperation. In all villages

the village committee is responsible for the management of multimedia facilities provided by the project, which are located either in the village shop or school for open access to all villagers. Some villages have started to create their own website, and a central website with links to the villages' sites is under consideration as a main tool to start networking the villages. Another important result is the commitment of the six municipalities in Lapland, including a financial commitment up to 2,500 Euro each. In addition two of them have facilitated the employment of two local people in the village committees to work for the project.

3. Role of the Universities

The University of Évora (Department of Sociology) in Alentejo, the University of Lapland (Continuing Education Centre) in Lapland and the Centro de Ecologia Alpina (Research and Training Centre) in Trentino have performed a very effective role as regional leaders for the Learning Sustainability project. In addition to their coordinating role, they have given to the Learning Sustainability project relevant information on sustainable development issues coming from research studies.

Universities and research centres have provided expertise in regional sustainable development and offered continuing education activities to all partners. In general, the surrounding communities see universities and research centres as an important resource for promoting sustainable development in the surrounding localities and regions through training, research and development activities. Villagers have said that the university has really 'landed' on the rural regions and have mentioned, as an important added value for their experience, the contact they have maintained with foreigners, i.e. giving different perspectives on sustainable development.

4. Final Words

Our Arctic, Mediterranean and Alpine project, Learning Sustainability, continued until autumn 2002. Through this project we have had various opportunities to learn from each other and to build thematic networks between the regions, villages and people. We think this has been a real learning process for everyone involved. We have exchanged experience in regional, and particularly in rural, development. Time on a project is always short, but anyway it has identified a need for European networking, and contributed to it.

We have seen that networking is a learning process. The interregional partnership has given new perspectives, and Italian and Portuguese collaboration will continue by some means after this Recite II project. Partners are highly motivated to create a multipolar centre network starting with an Arctic pole in Lapland, a mountain pole in Trentino and a Mediterranean pole in Alentejo. In the near future this network will promote exchange of experience between regional and local authorities on the sustainable development of less favoured areas in Europe.

In addition to the multipolar centre network, the Learning Sustainability project partnership has created the European Network of Tourism Villages aiming to promote sustainable development through a cooperative effort among the rural regions in the EU. The aim is to achieve sustainable development based on natural resources, traditions, local culture and authenticity. The finance for the first step will come partly from the EU, and partly from the local actors in several countries. This initiative will promote networking among rural areas at inter-regional level. As a first step, the process includes the spread of information and promotional activity based on village tourism, but the activities will spread to other sectors in the future. (This Network is described in [Case Study 3.7.](#))

The objectives of the Learning Sustainability project were very challenging. It is not an easy task to manage a project implemented by a partnership composed of many and

different partners in each country with different perspectives on the project activities and resulting misunderstandings. However, the learning experience has been very rich, even taking into consideration the too heavy bureaucracy of the EU.

5. Experiences from Lapland

The Learning Sustainability project has been very useful for Lapland. For instance, the University of Lapland has really 'landed' on the villages in different parts of Lapland. Without this project, the University of Lapland could not have done this so soon. Evaluations by surveys and questionnaires have been conducted from the beginning of the project. An impact evaluation will be conducted later in order to see how important the Learning Sustainability project was for Lapland's sustainable local development.

Project experiences have already shown positive inputs in villagers, i.e. they have recognised the fundamental importance of their local culture, they respect their own environment and nature more than before, and have a new perspective and place new value on their locality. In general, local people have started further development activities. Self-orientation and networking have increased.

This kind of many-sided inter-regional project is a rewarding challenge for actors from each level participating in the developing process. From the University's point of view networking and regional development processes can be classified into the following categories:

First; inside the university: The University serves as a learning platform for graduate students. Students can work, do study visits, and conduct small exploratory studies, observing and interviewing in real life contexts and challenging surroundings. Professors, other supervisors and teaching staff can also get actual experience of the social, economic and cultural life. This has constituted a very important added value to the project work and activities. And for the rural and village people, the University is not a closed strictly academic world. However, problems still exist with academic language - there are 'some linguistic challenges' - but we are going forward.

Secondly, at the regional and local level where numerous partners exist: The University is trying to work with others better for the village people. The old working model is to act separately, sector by sector. Now the University is speaking 'in the round table' about the aims, methods, expertise and opportunities to react. This is like an integrated regional development model where the focus, i.e. village people, play a key role. This grass-roots principle will take time to establish and learning processes are going slowly. But we think this is the only way to work. Once the process has started, it is like a snowball effect at its best. The villages are learning from each other. We are facilitating networks between the villages in Lapland. The first step is to see best practices nearby and then to learn more through foreign case studies. Attitudes are often the most important hindering factors.

Thirdly, international inputs are needed, not only in the urban areas but also in the marginal regions. In this process rural entrepreneurs and local people welcome international contacts and innovative ideas which they can compare and maybe later adapt some features to their living conditions.

www-pages of some LS pilot villages in Lapland:

Kurtakko village: <http://www.kurtakko.fi>

Tolva village: <http://www.posio.fi/tolva/>

Kilpisjärvi village: <http://www.enontekio.fi/suomi/index.html>

Saija village: <http://personal.inet.fi/koti/kari.saariniemi/Recite>

II Learning Sustainability project: <http://www.cealp.it/>