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The Experience of the European Rural Development Network (ERDN) from Idea to Practice

Abstract

The present paper intends to present "a short history" of a young research network established a few years ago. It is a good example for other networks, institutes, research centers and researchers of how an idea can become reality.

The network has already a European cover and impact. Its activity was very intense and the results over expectations. Moreover, the cohesion among members makes it possible to develop the activity for the future.

Keywords: network, experience, European rural development

JEL Classification: Y9

Overview

The cooperation of the research institutes within the ERDN represents the continuation of a research idea launched by Dr. Gerhard Heilig and by The International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) from Austria.

One of the main characteristics of the rural development issue is its own complexity. The investigation of the current situation in the rural areas and their future development perspectives might be highlighted during the debates and experience exchanges among the researchers coming from different research institutes and who, most often, have different points of view.

The ERDN scientific network was established in 2002 in order to integrate the efforts and competences of different European and Polish Institutes with concerns in this field into a common activity, with common goals and specific means of action. It was an attempt to put together the research works of the researchers from different institutes under the same scientific coordinates, interested in the investigation of the rural areas, the changes produced in the 1990s, the consolidation of farms and the development of alternative activities, as a result of the new orientations at European level due to the EU enlargement and the common policies for future European development. In this way, the main ERDN objective focused upon the idea of establishing a

European research network for agriculture and rural development. Through the development of the research activity in agriculture and rural development, both in Poland and Europe, with a special focus on the Central and Eastern Europe, ERDN tried to be in line with the European orientations in this field.

The Institute of Food and Agrarian Economy was designated to be in charge of the coordination of the ERDN activity and of reaching the objectives set up at the moment when the network was established.

ERDN goals

At the moment when the idea of developing this research network was launched, certain main goals for the development of future activities were set up. We shall list some of these objectives, which lay at the basis of the first steps in the cooperation:

- The development of a vast cooperation basis between the Polish and European research institutes, within the EU enlargement process, dedicated to the analysis of the Member States, of their development level, of the perspectives and strategies of action for rural area development;
- The integration of the efforts and competences of the different Polish and European research institutes under a common activity of rural area investigation;
- Experience exchanges and promoting the individual results and output of the members in the network under the established scientific framework;
- Development of international scientific cooperation in rural development, mainly the development of cooperation in those areas of European interest while focusing the efforts upon the EU framework programs (FP6, FP7);
- The development of this initiative through the establishment of a research network of European level, which should put together specialists from different fields of activity, such as: economy, agronomy, sociology, geography, computer science, etc.

Membership

The research network has six founding members, all of them from Poland. The coordinator of the research network is the Institute of Food and Agrarian Economy - Institute of National Research from Warsaw (IERIGZ-PIB). This institute (www.ierigz.waw.pl) is an independent institution, authorized by the Ministry of Agriculture from Poland; it

participates to common projects with this ministry and it has both budgetary and extra budgetary funding.

Other institutes as founding members:

- Institute for Land Reclamation and Grassland Farming (IMUZ) from the locality Raszyn - Poland (www.imuz.edu.pl);

- Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation (IUNG) from the locality Pulawy-Poland (www.iung.pulawy.pl);

- Institute for Building, Mechanization and Electrification of Agriculture (IBMER) in Warsaw-Poland (www.ibmer.waw.pl);

- Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization - The Polish Academy of Sciences (IGIPZ_PAN) in Warsaw-Poland (www.twarda.pan.pl);

- Systems Research Institute - The Polish Academy of Sciences (IBS-PAN) in Warsaw-Poland (www.ibspan.waw.pl).

Besides the founding members, there are also associated institutes to the network, six in total, two from Austria and one from Romania, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Lithuania. These are:

- Federal Institute of Agricultural Economics (AWI) from Vienna – Austria (www.awi.bmlfuw.gv.at);

- International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) from the locality Laxenburg – Austria (www.iiasa.ac.at);

- Lithuanian Institute of Agrarian Economics (LAEI) from Vilnius-Lithuania (www.laei.lt);

- Institute of Landscape Ecology - The Czech Academy of Sciences (UEK) from the locality Ceske Budejovice - Czech Republic (www.uek.cas.cz);

- Institute of Agricultural Economics (IAE) – the Romanian Academy, from Bucharest, Romania (www.ince.iea.ro);

- Institute of Geography – The Slovakian Academy of Sciences (SAVBA) from Bratislava - Slovakia (www.savba.sk).

Other countries participating to the network: Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Sweden, Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Great Britain, Hungary, and Russia.

Activities and results

Under the common activities of ERDN, several proposals for projects have been already formulated, and the applications were sent for assessment to the commissions for the Community projects selection. These funding proposals had the acronym INCAL and SOFAG. Furthermore, the international working meetings, which were periodically organized, had the mission to strengthen this cooperation and to enlarge the perspectives for new proposals and common themes. The network members were regularly informed about the results of the scientific meetings. These results were easily disseminated to the members by Internet, as well as by other active or potential partners.

For the organization of most meetings and actions proposed through the network statute at its establishment and mentioned in its main objectives, ERDN received financial support from the Polish Scientific Research Committee, under the research program "The International Cooperation under the form of scientific networks - Rural development in Central and Eastern Europe".

At present, the network is making great efforts for the identification of the research fields and themes in the strategic rural development area, together with all its partners, and at the same time for attracting new foreign partners. Since its foundation, the network was enlarged from six partner institutes to 20.

In its short history, in the period 2003 - 2006, ERDN organized four international conferences, to which all the founding members, associated members, collaborators or potential members were invited. The four conferences were organized in Poland and Lithuania and had the following themes: "Alternatives for the European rural areas" (2003), "Changes in the functionality of rural areas from the Baltic countries" (2004), "The rural development capacity in the Carpathians in Europe" (2005), "Endogenous factors stimulating rural development" (2006).

The results of the conferences, the scientific papers presented by the participants were published in a volume that was distributed to the members and the interested research institutes. The works presented and debated during the meetings were also published on the Internet, on the web page designed and dedicated exclusively to the activities of the network (www.erdn.waw.pl). Until the present moment, four volumes under the ERDN logo were edited, under the titles of the conferences mentioned above. The following can be listed among the most important works presented and published in the above-mentioned volumes: *Main problems of agriculture and rural areas in Poland in the period of transformation and integration with European Union, Transforming the functional structure of Poland's rural areas, Rural space and rural development in Romania, Regional future scenarios for rural space types in Austria, Information society and the countryside: can internet-based systems bring income alternatives to rural areas?, Role of tourism in the development of rural marginal areas (region of Šumava Mts. in Czech Republic), Distribution of income in Polish agriculture, The changes in and the spatial patterns of Polish agriculture (for the volume "Alternatives for the European rural areas"); Developments of rural economies in the Central and Eastern Europe: an overview, The development of non-agricultural economic activity in Poland's rural areas, Social, economic and demographic changes of rural areas in Lithuania, Danish rural areas: recent experiences and future trends, Future perspectives for sparsely populated areas in Sweden, Changes in population and industries in the rural areas of Finland: from analysis of administrative regions to a GIS based approach, Web-based functionality of Polish self-governmental units and its effectiveness in promoting the development of rural areas,*

Structure and evolution of landscapes in connection with strategic planning of development of rural areas - on the example of the Slavsk area in the Kaliningrad district (for the volume "Changes in the functionality of rural areas from the Baltic countries"); The EU Rural development policy in Austria, Lagging rural areas in post-socialist Hungary, Demographic changes of rural population in Slovakia, Unemployment as a reason of social exclusion – spatial analysis for Poland, Major changes in the Hungarian micro-regions, Romanian rural development and foreign direct investments, Agricultural markets in the new member states – development of agricultural production in Hungary, Land use and ownership and the Czech farm development, Agricultural engineering in the ecological mountains farms (for the volume "The rural development capacity in the Carpathians in Europe"); Public goods and rural development in Poland, restructuring in sparse regional structures – a Swedish case, On human capital and agrarisation in Poland, Existence and quality of Slovak rural municipalities' websites – the differentiating factor of rural competitiveness, Challenges in preparation of regional rural policy program for 2007-2013 – the case of Raache sub-region, Finland, Evaluation of educational measures of the Austrian rural development program - results and experiences, Human and social factors as endogenous factors stimulating the Leader program in Hungary, Endogenous rural development prospects in mountainous areas: the case of mount Parnonas in Greece, The role of Water Framework Directive in the development of rural areas (for the volume "Endogenous factors stimulating rural development").

ERDN perspectives

Through its initiatives, ERDN attempts to focus its efforts on the following directions of action:

- ◆ Finding other common research themes and their getting in line with the themes of European interest;
- ◆ Participation with applications to international projects, mainly those with European financial support;
- ◆ Strengthening the cooperation through the design of common research papers by joint research teams under the network, the participation to international scientific events, the organization of common scientific activities;
- ◆ Attracting new members into the network;
- ◆ Periodical editing of a network journal, other than the annual publication consisting of the works of the network conferences, or the development of an on-line publication;
- ◆ Organization of an international conference in each of the Member Countries (in the year 2007 the conference took

place in Romania, Sinaia/Cumpatu and the title was "Values and challenges in designing the European rural structures - research networks experience").

References

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