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Modalities to Promote the Rural Development Research Networks - A French Experience -

Abstract

According to the official documents of the European Union targeting the new programming period (2007-2013), the two CAP Pillars (market policy and rural development) "should decisively contribute to competitiveness increase, to a better integration of the environmental problems, to job creation, to the development of economy and rural society". For this purpose, the rural areas from the EU must be prepared to face the many challenges in relation to sustainable rural development, in the conditions of national identity preservation, as a guarantee to a true REVIVAL of rural communities.

This desideratum cannot be reached without reconsidering the *role* and *place* of RESEARCH-INNOVATION in this field.

The existence of rural networks in France is based upon a solid tradition in the associative movement, and their operation improved by the recent experience accumulated under the EU programs in this field, and by promoting the public-private partnerships, in which the state plays an extremely active role.

Regardless the field/territory where they operate, these STRUCTURES benefit from all the advantages of networking and can best carry out the SUPPORT role for the development of research networks.

Keywords: research-innovation, rural networks, rural excellence poles (PER),

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The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform (initiated in 1992 and adopted in 2003), as well as the integration of the Lisbon (2000) and Göteborg (2001) strategy objectives in this approach represented a much expected and necessary impetus to RESEARCH-INNOVATION in the field of agriculture and rural development.

According to the official documents of the European Union targeting the new programming period (2007-2013), the two CAP Pillars (market policy and rural development) "should decisively contribute to competitiveness increase, to a better integration of the environmental problems, to job creation, to the development of economy and rural

society". For this purpose, the rural areas from the EU must be prepared to face the many challenges in relation to sustainable rural development, in the conditions of national identity preservation, as a guarantee to a true REVIVAL of rural communities.

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In a world under accelerated globalization and development of the new information and communication technologies (NICT), any "successful" activity should be inevitably conceived and developed taking into consideration three essential factors:

- **Permanent support to the RESEARCH - INNOVATION - OPERATIONALIZATION relation**
- **networking** (NETWORK – set of NODES (POLES) united by flexible links, which generates a STRUCTURE that is most often horizontal and possibly evolutive. The *networking* is most compatible with the requirements of the ECONOMY OF KNOWLEDGE, which requires putting together the KNOWLEDGE and COMPETENCES
- **promoting the benchmarking method** (benchmarking - the marketing technique that refers to the study and analysis of the management techniques and of the most performant organization modalities of famous firms, in order to identify the optimum practices and adapt these practices to the conditions/requirements of the interested organization)

It is obvious that the problems of the European rural area, which is facing a tough competition from the part of other similar areas in the world, will have to be addressed by identifying solutions to them, from the perspective of these three aspects.

The brief analysis of the modalities to promote the rural area research networks considered the French experience in this field. At least three arguments plead for this choice:

- I. France in the 21st century is still characterized by a strong "rural influence".
- II. The associative movement generating "networks" has an old and solid tradition in the French rural area.
- III. The recent measures of the French Government referring to the competitiveness increase of the rural area (PER), the optimum utilization of the EU funds in this field, actions of the rural associations in providing support to urban inhabitants to set up in the rural areas, etc. These add to the experience in promoting LEADER and LEADER+ Axes and the increased level of government involvement/participation into partnerships for projects and actions targeting sustainable rural development.

I

The rural area covers about 60% of the territory of France, with over 39% of total population, i.e. 22.8 million inhabitants (Source: National Rural Development Strategy Plan 2007-2013).

At present the rural area is not limited to the “agricultural world” and according to the specialty literature “three facets” of the rural France currently (co-)exist:

- The rural area of the towns (peri-urban areas)
- The economically fragile rural areas
- The new rural areas

They are not characterized by a single function, but most often by a “mixture” of *residence, production and natural area function*.

Out of this reason, the RESEARCH as field/fields can be suitable for a certain rural area, but less suitable or unsuitable for other rural areas.

Yet for all cases, RESEARCH features several common characteristics:

- Concern for the identification of different modalities to associate the local *savoir-faire* with the different encoded forms of KNOWLEDGE, as well as for the adaptation of technologies and services to the population's needs
- Concern for the identification of competitive advantages that the rural areas can provide to the economy and society
- RESEARCH-INNOVATION orientation to as many sectors possible of rural community life: agriculture, environment, transports, energy, SMEs, NICT, services, national heritage, vocational training.

It results that the *networking* RESEARCH represents the optimum research modality, as it ensures, on one hand, a global-integrating perspective of the rural area realities, and consequent solutions implicitly, as well as the “opening” of these areas to other (geographical and/or knowledge) territories by knowledge transfer and exchange.

II

The associative movement from the French rural area that eventually led to the establishment of networks has quite a strong tradition.

In this context, the financial support provided to France as a EU Member State and in particular the support based upon the CAP reform provisions (LEADER and LEADER+ axes) provided an impetus to the development of rural networks (e.g. GAL network).

The rural networks are present in most various areas in the life of the rural communities: from crop and livestock production increase to eco-agro-tourism, environment protection, renewable energy, waste storage/management, putting into value the natural heritage and vocational training.

Yet, regardless the area in which these networks activate, they represent the “netting” on which the research activity is based. This activity is generally carried out by associations, affiliated specialists or associated partners and mainly targets the following objectives:

- Collection of information on the problems of interest for the community
- Exchange of opinions
- Identification of solutions
- Communication of results, transfer of knowledge
- Dissemination of good practices
- Editing different publications (journals, catalogues)
- Promoting collaboration and partnerships with other associations, networks, research institutes
- Consolidation of European cooperation through participation to transnational programs/projects

The rural networks organized at local, regional and national level generally include several federations, unions, and associations, groups, which operate through association or under different partnership forms. The small networks, in quite a small number, are self-financed, while the large networks usually operate under complex public-private partnership forms, benefiting from access to EU funds and co-financing from the national government.

An eloquent example is represented by the network **CELAVAR (Comité d'Etude et de Liaison des Associations à Vocation Agricole et Rurale)**.

The network was established in 1990, operating under partnership basis with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and has 15 associated networks (AFIP, Chantier Ecole, Culture et Liberté, Culture et Promotion, FNCIVAM, FNFR, GREP, INTER-AFOCG, La Ligue de l'enseignement, Mouvement Rural de Jeunesse Chrétienne, PEC, UNAADM, UNADEL, UNAREC, UNCIPIE) totalling 30,000 local associations and 600 regional associations and 9 partners (ARF, CNIDFF, Bergerie Nationale, FCST, FNCUMA, FNHD, SOURCE, UNMLR).

The activities of **CELAVAR** target the following missions:

- Promoting debates
- Evaluation of network animation practices
- Best use and sharing of good practices and experiences
- Designing methodologies for the local and national players
- Regional cooperation development
- Informing the local and national players
- Development of European cooperation in this field.

For the research activity the following are worth noticing: **GREP** (Groupe de Recherche pour l'Education et la Prospective), **AFIP** (Association de Formation et d'Information pour le Développement des Initiatives Rurales) and **ARF** (Association des Ruralistes Français).

GREP was established in 1964 as a place open to research, debates and proposal making on issues related to education and training, in relation to the issues raised by the new developments in contemporary society, in economic, social, cultural and civics. Initially concerned only with issues related to vocational training in the rural areas, in time its scope was enlarged to the new problems of the rural

world, by setting up *EUROPEA FP*, as a professional network meant to ensure a type of research open to the rural area problems at European level. At present, it can be considered a true *forum* for all the players involved in the social life of the communities: local people in charge, professionals, trainers, researchers, experts, institutions, and academics. Since 1967 GREP has been publishing the magazine "FOR" ("**Pour**") and created the collection **pour/avec**.

AFIP is a vocational training and animation organization, as an independent and pluralistic entity, targeting the consolidation of the initiative and intervention capacity of the rural people, which supports the development of collective practices and contributes to the creation of links between the rural development players. At the same time, it ensures the methodological monitoring of the teams involved in rural development projects (e.g. the project *DORA* (2002) - new activities in the rural area, new jobs, the project *DIANE* - creation of Internet sites). It publishes the journal *Transrural Initiatives*, together with FNCIVAM.

ARF was established in 1974; it has a pluridisciplinary activity, targeting the support to research and scientific exchanges in rural sciences, as well as in the related domains. Since 1997 it has been publishing the journal *Ruralia* (initially on a yearly basis, at present on half a year basis); in 1981 it established *The Library of Ruralists* and each year it organizes a workshop followed by debates on themes of great interest for the rural area (*Power and Patrimony in the rural area, Farmer and Society, Food: traditions, innovations, mutations*).

An extremely significant example for the place and role of the RESEARCH in the French rural network activities is represented by the **GAL Network**, established under the LEADER and LEADER+ Axes. This network is organized at local level (140 territories), regional level (*RIA* - Interregional animation networks - 5) and national level. GAL Network benefits from EU funds (EAFRD) totalling 223 mil. euro.

RESEARCH-INNOVATION is the defining element of the LEADER Program, and through "*networking*" the participants can share and transfer knowledge, as well as encourage other groups in the direction of research activities.

According to Art. 68 of (EC) Regulation 1698/2005 of the European Council referring to the support to rural development through EAFRD and France, each Member State has the obligation to establish a **national rural network** by January 31 2008, conceived as a "**platform of initiatives and knowledge exchange between the rural development players**" based on a large-scale public-private partnership. The network is to be managed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) and the Inter-ministerial Delegation for Land Management and Competitiveness (DIACT), to which representatives of local authorities, of associations, researchers will also join. According to the French official data, the **national rural network** will cover 26 regional networks.

Through the promoted actions, a new and complex perspective is open for RESEARCH-INNOVATION (studies, network animation, databases, etc.).

III

In conformity with the Lisbon Strategy provisions, in September 2004 France launched an ambitious industrial policy based upon the creation of "competitiveness poles". Besides the numerous and exceptional advantages of such an approach, it should be mentioned that a strong spatial concentration enters into contradiction with the *territorial cohesion* objective that characterizes the French tradition in territory management, and the rural area, which is very dynamic from the demographic standpoint at present and represents one of the main attractiveness assets in France.

In this context, the French Government's objective to create **RURAL EXCELLENCE POLES (PER)** represents a "*diversification of its intervention range*" having in view the consolidation of support to sustainable rural development, through the "activation" of all the resources in the rural areas.

The rationale behind PER establishment can be formulated in the following way:

*"Any rural territory, be it very small, with less population and very few assets necessary for international competitiveness, is endowed with resources able to put it into value from the economic and residential point of view. Through its best use, **added value and jobs** are created."*

The initiative for PER establishment was preceded by two measures with a strong impact upon the rural area:

- **Launching by DIACT of a policy to support the "new active population" in the rural area and to stimulate the development of the economy and services** (03. 09. 2003) – National chart of population setting up in the rural areas
- **Promulgation of Law no.157 on the rural areas** (23. 02.2005)

On 28.12.2005 the bidding on PER projects was launched (territories eligible for projects -**RRZ**-RURAL REVITALIZATION ZONES and communes outside the towns <30 00 inhabitants).

PER research program consists of two modules:

MODULE 1 – EVALUATIVE RESEARCH – Bidding on projects by which 4 research axes are supported and an axis referring to the collection and dissemination of results (axis 5).

MODULE 2 – PROSPECTIVE FOLLOW-UP – In order to ensure the viability of research as "public action" the prospective follow-up group will be co-chaired by a university member and a practitioner. Besides the **animator** role (establishment of a research network funded by DIACT), the group has also in view to trigger prospective debates on the basis of which to evaluate and optimize its activity.

The priority themes of the PER projects should focus upon:

- 1 *Promoting the natural, cultural, tourism heritage*
- 2 *Commercial use and management of bio-resources*
- 3 *Diversification of the supply of services and accommodation*
- 4 *Technology, industrial, handicraft production, services*

More than 700 proposals were submitted, out of which 379 projects were selected:

Selection I (23.06.2006), 176 projects, Selection II (26.02.2007) 203 projects

The 379 projects are distributed by themes as follows:

Theme 1 41%

(e.g.: project no.70 Reconversion of a historical site in the context of a global territorial development project - Pays de Montmedy)

Theme 2 22%

(e.g.: project no. 169 Innovating chain of bioresources in the rural area - Pays de Couleurs)

Theme 3 19%

(e.g.: project no.271 NATURE - SPORTS - HEALTH POLE - Cote de Noirs)

Theme 4 12%

(e.g.: project no.341 Platform of on-line services and virtual networks for SMEs

- Val de Saone)

Mixed 6%

(e.g.: project no.353 Economic excellence consolidation - Pays Doubs Central)

Value of expected investments: 1,194.00 billion euro

New jobs created: 35 000

Funding from the government 235.00 mil. euro

By the Decree no. 256/27.02.2007 of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Territory Management, the 379 selected projects received **EXCELLENCE POLE (PER)** certificates.

On the basis of the data collected from all the bidding documents submitted for **PER**, on 13.01.2007 DIACT launched an evaluative research program targeting a **three-fold operational objective**:

- **Animation of a pluridisciplinary research network that should facilitate a permanent bilateral relation between research and operationalization**
- **Capitalization of analyses for evaluation purposes**
- **Collection of the research results to make them available to researchers, partners and interested territorial communities.**

The rural area exercises an increased attraction for the city dwellers, and the "town to village migration", which by its size became a *phenomenon*, raises increasingly numerous and various economic and social problems.

The rural associative movement was also actively involved, besides the governmental action, in the support to the new rural people coming from the urban areas. One example is the “**Ville Campagne**” team, established in 1999. At present, it comprises 21 bodies whose specialists carry out studies, guide surveys, opinion polls, organize workshops, fairs, and provide necessary counselling to the interested people, not only to settle in the rural area but also to find a job, to change profession or to develop their own private business or business under partnership.

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