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BRANDING REGIONAL IDENTITY AS A DRIVER FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Within the globalizing world, regions and their identities are subjected to great pressure. At present, places are engaged in a process of “territorial competition” in an integrated world economy. The identity of the region can be used as a starting point to brand a region and differentiate it from others. In the regional branding process, the region as a whole becomes a product or brand and offers a “basket” of regional products and services. This paper discusses the possibility of regional identity as a mobilizing force for rural development, by studying best practice examples of regional branding. Using the grounded theory approach, we conducted interviews in three case regions: West Cork (Ireland), Groene Woud (the Netherlands) and Pajottenland (Belgium). The study of these cases led to the formulation of critical success factors on the organization of regional branding.

Key words: identity, region formation, regional branding, rural development

Introduction

Globalization processes expose most parts of the world to similar influences (Simon, 2004). As a consequence, people and companies are less bound to a particular region. The “pull to sameness”, leading to convergence (Taylor 1999: 162), loosens traditional cultural boundaries and lifestyles and results in “uniformization”. Regional identity becomes threatened. People may start to feel insecure as their traditional cultural underpinning weakens.

This cultural insecurity leads people to look for recognizable points of reference in their own surroundings. Differences between regions are emphasized, and region-specific features, such as scenery, regional products or cultural-historic heritage, are assigned more value and used to fix identity. These “forces making for difference” (Taylor 1999: 162), which lead to divergence, return the processes of globalization to place-specific forms. In this way, globalization and localization are not opposite, but rather part of the same development: globalization. (Simon, 2004). Globalization results in a shift of focus to the regions, and a regional approach to politics, science and society (Wiskerke, 2007).

Rural areas share these trends of globalization and localization, particularly in the agricultural sector. Globalization, coupled with modernization, has created specialized, integrated and larger-scale agricultural enterprises. Modernization processes in the agricultural sector have consequences on the economy (e.g., oversupply, cutback of internal market instruments), ecology (e.g., nitrate surpluses and pesticide residues) and

the social sphere (e.g., isolation, bad image). These side-effects of modernization put pressure on modern agriculture (Van Huylenbroeck, 2006). Modernization has also resulted in rural restructuring: there is a transformation from an economy centered on agriculture and manufacturing to a more service-centered economy, and likewise from production to consumption (Floysand and Jakobsen, 2007).

Localization is the rural inhabitants' response to modern agriculture and the changing needs and expectations of society. Place of origin is becoming more prominent, as seen from labels like Protected Denomination of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) (de Roest and Menghi, 2000). More and more regional products and rural tourism arrangements are entering the market. In newly emerging approaches to rural development, the region is seen as the level of integration and identity takes a central theme (Leader+, 2008).

Identity is part of the institutionalization of regions, the process through which regions come into being (Paasi, 2002). The concept of identity is ambiguous and dynamic. Kruit et al (2004), and Ernste (2005) indicate that identity is a multi-complex concept that is difficult to grasp. It also relates to an abundance of topics. Spatial identity must relate to the individual's personal identity, and it is a social construct as well. People attribute "meaning" to the observed characteristics of a place, making the environment more than just a random collection of physical and material elements. They identify themselves with a certain area, not only with the landscape, but with a whole set that encompass culture, sociality, morality, tradition and the social system specific to that region (Raagmaa, 2001). Identity is not the same as the history or biography of a region, nor is it tradition or folklore (Ernste, 2005). It is a dynamic concept, subject to ongoing social processes.

Paasi (2002, 2003) differentiates between the "identity of a region" and "regional identity". The identity of a region refers to those distinguishing physical, cultural and historical features that make one region different from another. Regional identity (or regional consciousness) refers to the extent to which people identify themselves with the region as the whole of institutionalized practices, discourses and symbols. While these exist simultaneously as part of the process of social reproduction, this distinction helps us to understand and analyze both the structure and power elements hidden in discourses on regional identity and individual regional consciousness (Paasi, 2002).

As mentioned above, identity is closely interrelated with region formation, and the rise of regional identity must be seen in the broader context of region formation (Simon, 2004). There are two major perspectives regarding the formation of regions: a structurally oriented perspective and an agency-oriented perspective. In structurally oriented perspectives, the rise of the region is considered to be a logical outcome of broader trends and pervasive developments, such as globalization, flexibility of production, state restructuring, and urban expansion (Lagendijk, 2007). In agency-oriented or social-constructivist perspectives, regions are seen as social constructs, defining and shaping

themselves as part of, and through, different social and discursive practices (Legendijk, 2006). Paasi (2002), one of the founders of the constructivist approach, describes region formation as a process of institutionalization. Here, institutionalization is the outcome of four simultaneous and interconnected working forces: i) territorial, ii) institutional and iii) symbolic shaping, and iv) internal and external recognition or identification.

Legendijk (2007) facilitates study of the construction of regional identities by linking both structurally and agency-oriented perspectives together in a framework. This linkage is seen as part of an evolutionary process in which the region first becomes privileged, and then achieves coherence once institutionalized. It begins with a limited set of pervasive economic, political or social driving forces creating some “windows of change” (structurally oriented perspectives). These various windows are then converted or translated into specific forms of policy-making, as well as practices and performances at both the individual and organizational levels. Finally, these “new” practices and ways of policy-making become regularized and institutionalized in new forms of regional governance (agency-oriented perspectives). Once regions have a recognized position, they receive an established role in the territorial structure, and thus have a regional identity.

Regional branding

Places are currently in “territorial competition” in the context of a world economy that is becoming more and more integrated (Hospers, 2004). Although many places offer the same “product” – territory, infrastructure, educated people, and an almost identical system of governance – they must compete with each other for investment, tourism, residents and political power, often on a global scale. To stand out from the crowd and capture significant mind- and market share, place branding has become essential (van Ham, 2008). Place branding or place marketing is a promotional strategy that includes all activities that increase the attractiveness of an area as a place for working, living and spending free time (van Ham, 2001). Place branding can be applied in cities or countries, and it can also be adapted to regions. Regional branding is aimed at creating a more distinctive image or reputation, which helps to increase regional competitiveness (Maessen et al., 2008). Regional branding markets the qualities of the region in the broadest sense: landscape, nature, cultural heritage, regional products, regional gastronomy, traditional quality products, and so forth (de Bruin, 2008). In regional branding initiatives, the identity of the region and the regional identity, as defined by Paasi (2002, 2003) serve as a basis for the regional brand or mark used to promote the region (Sonneveld, 2007). Regional branding stimulates the regional economy, creates added value for the regional products and services, and can break through existing restrictions of sector-oriented approaches to rural development (Hegger, 2007).

As mentioned above, the countryside has experienced a transformation from production and consumption and has become a commodity that can be bought and sold (Floysand and Jakobsen, 2007, Kneafsey et al., 2001). Regional branding rides this

trend of “commodification”. Regional branding goes beyond commodification and can be equated with mode IV of the culture economy, a concept developed by Ray (1998) and adopted by Kneafsey et al. (2001). In the cultural economy approach, cultural identity is used to attempt to localize economic control in order to (re)valorize place. Culture economy includes those strategies to transform the local knowledge into resources available for the local territory, i.e., the recognition (or construction) and valorization of local knowledge (Ray, 1998). The culture economy model has four modes. Mode I can be compared with the commoditization put forward by Floysand and Jakobsen (2007) and Kneafsey et al. (2001), among others. Mode II activities emphasize the incorporation of cultural resources into a territorial identity in order to promote the territory to the “outside” (Kneafsey, 2000). In Mode III, the territorial initiative sells itself internally, to the communities, businesses, groups and official bodies of the local area. Mode IV, which emphasizes the normative capacity of the culture economy, can operate within each of the other three modes. Mode IV suggests that a local economy, during re-examination of the territory’s indigenous culture, may choose to pursue “alternative” development paths (Ray, 1998). The local culture then becomes more than an instrument to fuel trade in the global economy, and instead is rediscovered as the source of local wisdom and ethics.

Lee et al. (2005) state that the internal marketing of the region to itself, as a part of regional branding, is a way of creating social capital. Social capital – with respect to rural development processes – could be defined as the capacity to get things done collectively. It is embodied in the ability of individuals, groups, organizations and institutions to engage in networks, to cooperate, employ and use social relations for common purpose and benefit (Tisenkopf et al., 2008). When a region markets itself internally, a stronger sense of shared identity emerges, which fosters trust and cooperation that can be mobilized for developmental benefits (Ray, 1998).

Material & methods

The aim of the current research is to discover the factors that create success and failure in regional branding processes, to understand how these processes take place, and to map the complexity of the matter. Because the research question stated above expects qualitative answers based on subjective data, case analysis has been based on the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory involves a consequential induction from empirically collected data in order to build theoretical frameworks. These empirical data, in the form of transcripts of semi-structured interviews, are analyzed through the process of coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The central concepts that form the basis for a theoretical framework are derived from relating and abstracting the data categories (Devillé, 2008). The collection and analysis happens simultaneously, and the theory developed should explain most parts of the process studied. One important aspect is constant comparison, which implies comparing data from different

respondents, comparing data with the category and comparing a category with other categories (Charmaz, 2000). Analytic interpretations of data, developed throughout the research process, are used to inform and refine the developing theoretical analysis.

Empirical data collection in this research is done through the method of purposeful or theoretical sampling, which involves searching for information-rich data (Baxter and Eyles, 1997). The cases are selected based on their suitability for illuminating and extending relationships and logic among constructs (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Sample size is determined by the need to involve as many experiences as possible for the development of the conceptual framework, and saturation occurs when no new themes emerge. This research includes all stages of the regional branding process, from the very beginning to the mature stage. The criteria were formulated, and the cases selected, to cover different stages of this process and to ensure informative results (Table 1).

Table 1 - Criteria for case selection

	West Cork	Groene Woud	Pajottenland
Way identity is perceived and used	++	+/-	+
Development of the region	+	+/-	-
Stage of the branding process	Mature	Intermediate	Very beginning

Research began by contacting and interviewing key informants of the region. These key informants then referred to other possible interviewees (snowball sampling), which could be farmers, entrepreneurs, local guides, mayors, chairmen of local societies, teachers, and the like. Topics of the interviews were the region, the region's agriculture, regional development and regional branding processes. The international cases, namely West Cork and Groene Woud, served as exploratory case studies. These regions were examined on-site during one week each. Factors of success and failure of these cases are then verified in the Belgian case study, Pajottenland. This region, which started only recently with a regional branding process, can be observed in detail due to its close proximity.

Results

West Cork is the southern region of Ireland, with Cork as its capital. It is a rural area of 320,000 hectares of mainly grassland, has mountainous scenery, and is surrounded by the sea. Other distinguishable characteristics are small villages with colored houses and fuchsia hedges that border narrow meandering roads. Many people from outside the region have chosen to live and work in West Cork in order to improve their quality of life. These "outsiders" pointed out some unique regional advantages to the original inhabitants. The passion and pride of the inhabitants for the region and its food products emerged out of conversations with various inhabitants. The peripheral location of West

Cork impedes access to external markets, but on the other hand, it contributes to a more pronounced regional identity and collaboration among the inhabitants. Many respondents stressed the importance of the connection with the soil and the awareness of the food they are consuming. In this regard, small-scale family farms that provide genuine food make a substantial contribution to the territorial identity.

Like the rest of Ireland, West Cork has been receiving European support for rural development since 1992. The West Cork Leader Co-operative Society started in 1995 to use the unique image and identity of the West Cork region as the key driver of the rural development strategy of the region. The basis of the regional branding strategy, the Fuchsia brand, is seen to assist broader development, rather than as a mere marketing strategy. Through images (calendars, posters, brochures, and the like) the Leader Co-operative raises the inhabitants' awareness of the exclusive qualities of the region. The Leader co-operative, a project agency with seven young and dynamic staff members with a private-sector ethos, now coordinates the development process as well as the branding process. Their European and national funds are spent on wages of the staff of the Leader Co-operative, communication of the brand and the branding concept, and capital investment in individual entrepreneurial projects. These entrepreneurs can be farmers, artists, hotelkeepers, restaurant owners, retailers, and so forth.

Het Groene Woud is a rural area of 35,000 hectares located between three Dutch cities: Hertogenbosch, Tilburg and Eindhoven. The very flat landscape is characterized by small agricultural parcels framed by lines of poplars and a few nature reserves. The core of the region consists of 7,500 hectares of forests, swamps, heath, and agrarian landscapes. Typical to the area are picturesque villages with small chapels. Het Groene Woud was only named in 2005, when the area was recognized as a "National Landscape". A National Landscape is an area in the Netherlands that has a unique combination of agricultural area, nature and cultural heritage. A couple of entrepreneurs started the branding process of Het Groene Woud as a reaction against the increasing influence of the green movement, which was found to be threatening. One of the interviewees mentioned that "the P of profit deserves as much attention as Planet and People". In 2005, a group of these entrepreneurs traveled to West Cork in Ireland to learn from a region more experienced in region branding.

The interviews with the inhabitants of Het Groene Woud did not give evidence of much intrinsic passion for the region, nor of regional pride. This probably has to do with the recent, rather artificial demarcation and recognition of the region as "National Landscape Het Groene Woud". The entrepreneurs want to make money by branding the identity of the region, because they expect customers to pay more for products with a regional brand. The development process of Het Groene Woud is led by a number of enthusiastic entrepreneurs (mostly farmers) that wanted to cooperate. The entrepreneurs used the available Leader funds to hire a project

agency that drew up and implemented a business plan for their projects. All projects include several regional partners, as Leader funds are not used to support individual project partners: financially supported projects must be able to continue without this support. To resolve the lack of coordination between the different projects, the same project agency was asked to draw up a business plan for the region as a whole, based on the view of the different stakeholders.

Pajottenland is a rural region located in the southwest of the Belgian province of Vlaams-Brabant, only 10-30 km from the center of Brussels. The northern municipalities are more urbanized, while the southern municipalities are rural towns. The proximity of Brussels, the capital of both Belgium and Europe, has unique consequences for Pajottenland as a rural area. The majority of people living in the region work in Brussels, which results in reduced economic activity in the region itself. Pajottenland is characterized by a sloping, closed rural landscape, peaceful living despite the proximity to Brussels, the presence of many “outsiders” and many French-speakers in a Dutch-speaking region, a strongly represented agricultural sector, many castles (including Gaasbeek castle), the Brabant cart horse, and others. Almost everyone in the region still feels somehow related to agriculture.

Since 2002, Pajottenland has been recognized as a Leader+ area and receives European support for rural development. Only the southern, rural municipalities comply with the conditions put forward by the European Union. The development strategy for 2007-2013 takes three tracks: boosting the rural economy, strengthening the infrastructure and rural accommodation, and preserving the rural character. The Local Action Group (LAG) is made up of 24 regional associations (social, economic, cultural and ecological), the town councils, and the social services departments. The acknowledgement of the region as a Leader+ area has led to more cooperation, as funds are only awarded to partnerships and investment costs are only partly refunded. Since the start of a number of coordinating projects, people have started to think more outside the box of their organization. One particular mayor is seen as a very important person in this whole process and is supporting and stimulating several different cooperative initiatives. The majority of the associations and municipalities see this closer collaboration as a very positive outcome of the Leader+ projects. There are many good individual initiatives in Pajottenland, and more cooperation is sure to follow, but co-ordination is still lacking.

Compared with other Leader areas in Flanders, there is rather little emphasis on support for the agricultural sector. Although agriculture is inextricably bound up with the region, Pajottenland’s development process aims much more at creating of community. People try to work bottom-up as much as possible, which is not always easy. Compared with other Flemish Leader areas, Pajottenland’s provincial administration has limited influence and is not imposing too much. Even so, some

decisions made by the Province are not always accepted in Pajottenland, and people feel they get top-down instructions to which they don't feel related.

A new project to brand the region was begun in November 2008. This project is also financed by the European Fund for Regional Development and is done in cooperation with two other Flemish regions. Under coordination of Leader+, a steering committee was created to outline the future direction of the regional branding project. An external marketing bureau was contacted to help determine some unique regional characteristics and to outline the branding strategy. This regional branding project also includes efforts to raise the awareness of the inhabitants and build community.

Discussion

The analysis of the interviews of these cases led to the formulation of some critical success factors. First of all, there is no such thing as a standard manual for regional branding. Every region has its own physical, social, cultural and historical features, which define the case-specific context. Regional branding is based on this specific context and every region has to find a way of organizing it, in order to meet the region-specific needs.

In West Cork, there is a strong sense of belonging to the region and a strong identity, while in Het Groene Woud, there is little or no attachment with the name of the recently defined National Landscape. The name 'Pajottenland' was first mentioned in 1789 and has been used ever since. Recently, the region receives more attention by the inhabitants as well as by visitors. Inhabitants of the region feel strongly connected to their region. If we use the terms of Paasi (2002), we can say that the regional identity or regional consciousness is most pronounced in West Cork, followed by Pajottenland and Het Groene Woud. As for the identity of the region, all three regions have important physical, cultural and historical features that distinguish it from other regions.

If we look at the intention of the regional branding processes in West Cork, we can state that the main focus there is on rural development. There is a strong focus on community-building and raising awareness on the uniqueness of the region. In Het Groene Woud, the basic motivation for the regional branding project was to earn money. On the other hand, in Het Groene Woud, the initiative was launched by a group of motivated farmers, while in West Cork it was the Leader co-operative that started the regional branding project.

For the management of the budget, there is a clear distinction between West Cork on the one hand and Groene Woud and Pajottenland on the other hand. In West Cork, money is granted to individuals, who need this support to be able to continue their business, which is not economically sustainable. In contrast to this, in Groene Woud and Pajottenland, Leader means are only spent on projects of associations or partnerships and the intention is that afterwards, these initiatives can continue without this support.

This context-specificity does not mean however that we can't find some points of attention that are common to all case studies. Maybe the most important point is that passion is indispensable in the process. People who feel closely connected to the region are willing to take the lead in the rural development processes. A strong and common regional identity is necessary in order to mobilize people to take action to preserve and develop their region.

In the regional branding process, cooperation and networks are very important. Successful results can only be obtained through cooperation among the different actors (entrepreneurs, government, associations and so on). Coordination over all these actors is necessary, however this coordination should not be too bureaucratic. It is also very important to take into account the desires and ideas of residents and local organizations. There's little chance of success if they are not convinced of the benefits of the project or if they don't feel involved.

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