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INVESTING IN THE FUTURE OF THE RURAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract

From 1991 the European Commission established a new rural development approach called 'LEADER'. Through this initiative funding was given to community led, autonomous, local action groups that could invest in local projects of their choice based on a multi-annual plan within a framework of rules and regulations. Another major departure from previous programmes of this nature was that all sectors of the rural community, including but not exclusive to the farming sector, were to be included as potential beneficiaries of support.

In 2007 the LEADER approach became one of the four main axis of the European Rural Development Programme. In this paper the authors focus on the features of one of the most successful local action groups in the South of Ireland, its structure, experience and extraordinary impact to date and outline the organisations plans for the coming years against a background of growing economic uncertainty.

Keywords: LEADER, European, rural, development, community, investment.

Investing in the future of the rural community

The LEADER Approach

'LEADER' is taken from the acronym *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Economie Rurale* which roughly translated into 'integrating investment into the development of the rural economy'. The approach, adopted as a 'pilot project' in 1991 by the European Commission supported the 'bottom-up' approach to development providing financial support to autonomous 'local action groups' to invest in locally defined priority projects to stimulate the local economy and improve the quality of life of people living in rural areas.

The Local Action Group

There are now thousands of Local Action Groups adopting and delivering the LEADER approach in every member state of the EU. Some are formed within local government structures; others are based upon farming union bodies etc. The local action groups in the Republic of Ireland are acknowledged by the European Commission as a model for others in terms of capacity, effectiveness and impact. This model is based on a partnership structure representing the social partners (farmers, employers and trade unions), local government, state bodies (relevant to the area and aims of the partnership) and the community sector which constitutes the largest block of directors, coming from volunteer based community groups that annually elect their directors. All directors are unpaid. These partnerships are legally constituted as private limited companies (with charitable, not for profit status) and are autonomous of government. Each local action group operates exclusively within its own distinct geographic area, but many of the funding programmes accessed by these groups encourage collaborative planning and delivery within and across European boundaries and in some cases to other parts of the world.

The typical local action group will act as a platform for a number of national and European funding programmes and are increasingly becoming ‘the structure of choice’ for community targeted investment programmes due to their accountability and effectiveness. Most groups employ a staff complement of ten to twenty employees who are primarily facilitators of community projects or mentors to employment and enterprise initiatives. Local action groups are also becoming increasingly recognised as a very efficient way of getting funds on the ground (delivering funds to specific identified groups or individuals).

The Local Action Group Plan – An integrated Approach

A central element to the success of a local action group is its area based investment plan usually timed in a period that reflects the National Development Plan (six to seven years). The approach favoured by most is to develop an overall plan based upon the needs of the community within a broad sustainable development framework integrating economic, social and environmental objectives. – rather than writing a separate plan for each funding source a process has evolved over the past decade to reflect the types of initiative that the local action group can undertake or initiate across the community utilising a range of potential funding programmes. The group can then extract the relevant elements of their plan to use this as a basis to secure funding under a series of programmes (see below), which results in the provision of resources required to implement the LAGs objectives.

Funding Programmes

The LEADER Rural Development Programme is one of the funding sources accessed by local action groups. As it is now a mainstream part of the European Rural Development Programme it has sizably increased in the levels of funding made available to groups. This programme primarily invests in capital projects in terms of small enterprise development and the development of community facilities and amenities – thus meeting objectives of an economic, social and environmental nature. The Irish Government also

provides a national social inclusion programme accessed by all local action groups which is targeted at specific disadvantaged low income groups in terms of supporting employment access and family support measures – thus meeting economic and social objectives. Other national funding programmes accessed by groups include the Rural Social Scheme (providing supplementary income for low income farming and fishing communities), the Rural Transport Programme (providing a community transport service in areas without public services) CLAR (providing specific funds to low density population areas) as well as a range of regional and local support programmes. Many groups are now also working in partnership with local authorities across Europe to access trans-European funding programmes to further supplement their resources.

A Local Action Group – LEADER in Context

East Cork Area Development (ECAD) Ltd. was formed in 1995 one of almost forty integrated, local action groups formed to deliver the LEADER Approach in Ireland. The group operates in an area east of Cork City on the southern coast of the country. Since its inception the company has been recognised to be one of the most successful administrators of local funding programmes. In 1996 ECAD won their first LEADER Rural Development Programme contract. The following year the group were awarded the Social Inclusion Programme contract. In the interim years further programmes such as the Rural Social Scheme, the Rural Transport Programme and a range of other funding initiatives have been awarded to the organisation including a prestigious INTERREG trans-national collaborative contract awarded to only a small number of local action groups. In line with Government Policy ECAD's area of operations has been extended to incorporate the full Cork Harbour Area – this sees the company now operating with communities to the south as well as to the east of the County. Many of these 'new' communities have never been involved with this type of Investment Company or Programme in the past but their issues, needs and priority actions mirror those highlighted and in already addressed by communities in East Cork with the support of ECAD. In order to reflect the expansion of its geographic remit a new company has been formed to replace ECAD called South & East Cork Area Development (SECAD). This new area will have a population of over 145,000 people making SECAD one of the largest local action groups in Europe.

SECAD – creating a real impact

From its inception in 1995 the organisation has won contracts valued at over €1m which have been invested in a range of actions (outlined below). Perhaps more importantly the group has acted as an advocate and secured additional €14 million from the private sectors, corporate bodies, state agencies and government departments to create local enterprises, employment options and community facilities and amenities.

Investing in the local economy: Since 1995 the group has supported the generation or protection of over 800 jobs which have been created in the area and a further 2,500 people have been assisted in accessing employment. Enterprises that maximise the use of local skills, crafts, added-value food products and tourism are prioritised with parallel investments made into the creation of 'Enterprise Incubator Space' (which provides reduced rent space for new enterprise) and 'Collective Producer and Collective

Marketing Initiatives'. Grants of up to 50% are provided to business development projects which prove their capacity to create or preserve employment in the area.

Investing in community priorities: Over 1000 community projects have been supported in East Cork since 1995. These include supporting a number of 'basic services' such as Community Playgrounds, Youth Café Projects, Community Hall Up-Grades, and Community Walking Routes etc. There are also 'village enhancement type initiatives' which focus on projects that increase civic pride and a considerable number of investments in supporting local heritage, environmental and cultural support projects. SECAD grant aid community projects up to 75% of the project cost. Critically, community projects which utilise the support of volunteers can claim their time as 'matching finance' against the value of the grant.

Parallel Supports: To underpin enterprise and community investments, parallel training and capacity building programmes have been delivered to over 9,000 people within the SECAD region. As part of such ongoing training activities, entrepreneurs are offered free mentoring and business planning support. Community groups develop skills in management, legal and insurance issues in addition to accessing and maximising volunteer time.

Preparing a Rural Investment Plan in an uncertain economic climate - Developing a vision for success

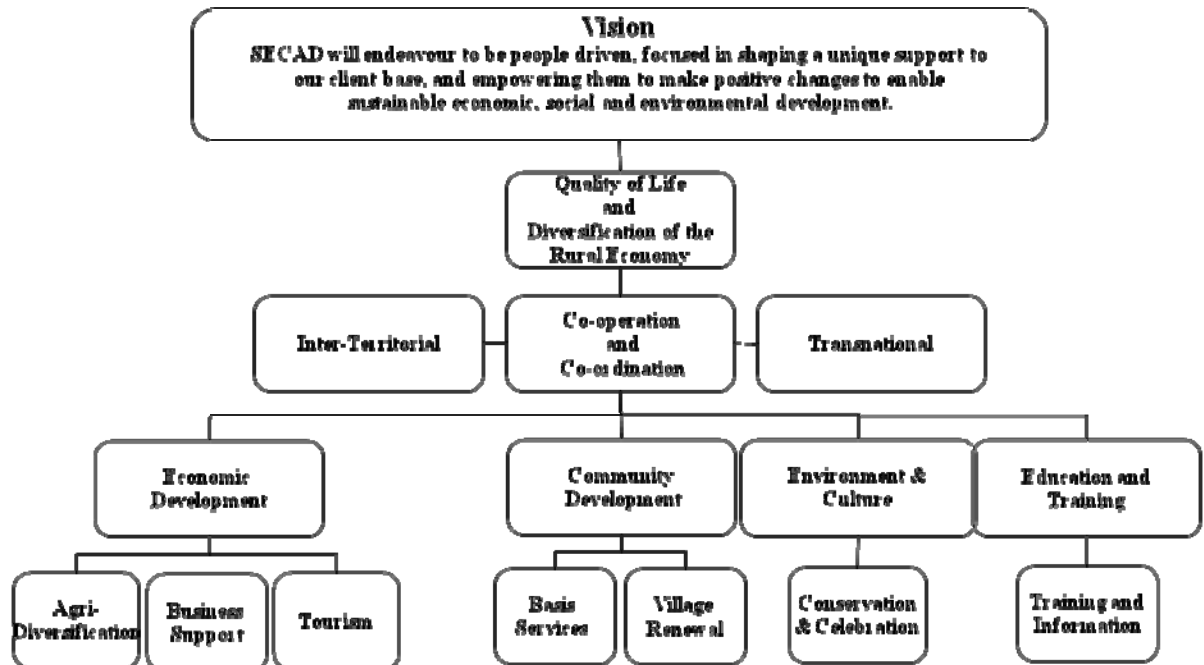
At the beginning of 2008 the board and staff members of SECAD began the process of re-developing the company plan, to develop a suitable plan for the next seven years (2009-2015). Despite the economic downturn, SECAD set an ambitious target of attempting to win public investments in the region of €20m. The largest public investments needed to come from the European Rural Development Programme (LEADER). The following outlines the level of preparation involved preparing the rural development plan, to secure funding by SECAD.

The importance of consulting the key 'stakeholders'

The stakeholders of the rural development programme involve all organisations, agencies and institutions that could potentially be investors or beneficiaries in the actions promoted by the local action group. In preparation for their Rural Development Plan 2009-2015 SECAD undertook the most comprehensive consultation process including over two hundred planning meetings with a range of private, public and community stakeholders. Additionally, a series of twenty nine large scale public meetings were held in the months preceding the completion of the plan. These meetings involved the community sector and public representatives involved in policy making at local, national and European level. Through this approach SECAD established and completed a needs analysis, agreed the central objectives of the rural development plan and identified the strategies (and related actions) that would be employed in meeting these needs.

A framework for investment

The following framework was agreed through SECAD's consultation process, to provide a direct link between the company's vision statement, the main objectives and the key strategies to be implemented, as part of their Rural Development Plan 2009-2015.



Main investment needs of a rural community

Through the consultation process the priority needs agreed were framed within the two primary objectives of the SECAD Plan:

A. 'Diversification of the Local Economy'

- The need to promote and expand the small business sector;
- The need to provide 'incubation space' to foster fledgling enterprises;
- The need to maximise 'market space' within and adjacent to the area;
- The need to develop and expand producer and marketing collectives;
- The need to support the diversification of agriculture and provide for additional income streams for farm families;
- The need to avail of opportunities to expand the tourism sector;
- The need to develop niche products and services; and
- The need to integrate the development of major tourism products of interest

B. 'Quality of Life'

- The need to foster and develop innovative volunteering support systems;
- The need to develop and skill community groups;
- The need to enhance community spirit;
- The need to upgrade and develop appropriate community facilities;
- The need to develop community services;
- The need to provide new and expand existing recreational facilities;
- The need to promote the appreciation of the area's culture and heritage;
- The need to protect and preserve aspects of the natural and built environment; and

- The need to develop through partnership with the local authorities, an effective community waste and litter management programme.

SECAD strategies to be applied to meet local needs;

Based on the priority issues and needs identified through the consultation process a series of six integrated strategies were developed and agreed by the board of SECAD together with targets set to achieve through the implementation of these strategies.

1. Enterprise Creation & Development

Increase the numbers and types of micro-enterprise being established or developed in the South & East Cork Area through provision of Mentoring and Entrepreneur & Business Owner Training Programmes, Capital Investment Options and support for Collective Marketing Initiatives. Key elements of the SECAD strategy to promote more business creation will be the further development of the Company's 'Business Incubator Units' and 'Market Place' initiatives in strategic locations.

Targets: 325 existing enterprises supported; 175 new enterprises created; 350 full-time jobs created/sustained

2. Tourism

Expansion of tourism in the area through capital investment in attractions and activities with reference to the areas strengths (Marine, Heritage and Leisure); Promote the development of Niche Tourism Products and Services with a particular focus on Eco-Tourism and Food Based Tourism Projects: Maximise return overall investment through collective marketing initiatives to promote the area's resources.

Targets: 62 new and existing tourism actions supported; 50 small scale infrastructure and recreation projects; 75 full-time jobs created and 100 jobs sustained; Increase of 750 day-visitors per annum; Increase of 250 overnight visitors per annum

3. Diversification into Non-Agricultural Activities

Development of additional income sources for farm families using specific strategies which reflect the opportunities that exist in the South & East Cork Area - for example; Converting unused farm buildings to enterprise units, developing an innovative 'enterprise and employment' options programme in conjunction with Teagasc (National Farm Advisory State Body) and promoting the availability and accessibility of healthy food through the development of garden allotment projects across the area to service urban needs.

Targets: 200 farm families supported; 64 full-time jobs: 10 on-farm and 54 off-farm; 41 agri-diversification project supports: 13 agri-tourism; 10 craft enterprises, 3 trade/retail and 15 others; 500 extra agri-tourism visitors per year

4. Investing in the development of Basic Services, Village Renewal & Local Heritage

Increase the availability and type of leisure and activity trails and countryside access routes; Maximise the capacity of Cork Harbour and the coastline, its beaches and foreshore as a key amenity asset of the area and support the development of appropriate in-door and out-door recreational projects. Invest in the enhancement of public space and

its accessibility to all. Promote and facilitate litter and waste management schemes such as the ‘Clean Coast’ initiative with An Taisce (National Environmental Agency) and Cork County Council and support appropriate energy conservation and alternative energy usage projects.

Targets: 30 amenity/leisure actions supported; 25 arts & cultural facilities; 25 recreational infrastructure actions; 45 communities benefitting; 50 building renovations; 67 environmental upgrades; 9 farmers markets; 100 surface and amenity improvements and 60 other small-scale infrastructure projects; 285 village and community actions supported; 50 natural/vernacular heritage and 50 cultural heritage actions; 50 environmental initiatives; 25 renewable energy actions; 38 full-time jobs created/sustained

5. Training & Information

Facilitate the expansion of SECAD’s very successful IT training programmes such as the ‘Silver Surfers’ Programme (older people learning to utilise the internet) through investment into Community IT Facilities and training areas, providing a successive series of training programmes for a range of community users through these facilities and encourage communities to utilise these resources to develop and expand their use of web-based information sharing options.

Targets: 5,000 people trained; 12,500 training days; 6-10 new and existing IT centres developed or expanded; 224 groups animated; 1,600 individuals (capacity building); 14 capacity building initiatives (in 4 centres) involving 150 groups; 24 special interest/marginalised groups animated; 10 SME’s involved in supporting volunteering through CSR Network and 10 Volunteer Fairs

6. Trans-National & Inter-Territorial Linkages

SECAD has formed strong linkages with similar groups operating within Ireland and in a number of different countries. National and international projects which promote the sharing of experience and best practice within the overall strategies supported by SECAD will be facilitated by the organisation. These can lead to a greater level of recognition of the endeavours of the respective communities and often form the basis for collaborative actions funded directly by offices of the European Commission.

Targets: 4 major trans-national projects completed

The SECAD Plan & Outcome

The SECAD Rural Development Plan was adopted by the board and submitted for consideration by the Irish Government in July 2008. This included an extensive statistical review for the area, together with the consultation, needs analysis, objective, strategies and targets summarised in this paper. In December 2008 SECAD were awarded a contract of €10.64m for their Rural Development Plan 2009-2015. This translates to a 360% increase from the previous programme.

In 2009 the company will submit its Social Inclusion Plan which together with the Rural Social Scheme and Rural Transport Programme will be targeted for €7m investment into the community by 2015. SECAD has also been invited to become part of trans-European collaborations which could provide upward on €3m in investment programmes. If

achieved this will provide investments in excess of €20m to stimulate the local economy at a time of economic uncertainty.

Conclusion

The LEADER Programme began as a pilot, experimental initiative that was based on the premise that locally based groups, if provided with the resource, might be in a better position to stimulate the local economy whilst addressing basic community needs in terms of services, facilities and amenities. For thousands of local action groups it provided the opportunity to enable positive changes within their locality. As highlighted these groups when given autonomy have the capacity to act as a funding platform for a range of resources, both public and private, thus increasing the range and scale of investment into local endeavour. A longer term vision for this type of rural development approach is that it can be one of the key elements to a global sustainable development strategy that provides the stimulus to address the growing levels of urbanisation which in turn is creating a depletion of resources in rural areas across the world.

South & East Cork Area Development (SECAD) has set its vision to be people focused, enable growth and development whilst fostering a sense of community spirit and shared responsibility. The successful 'LEADER Model' developed by SECAD and other local action groups in Ireland will be demonstrated by the authors as an effective and innovative 'rural development tool' than can be considered worldwide.

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The authors would firstly acknowledge those that have become directors of local action groups such as SECAD. Combined they volunteer hundreds of hours each year to create and support policies and strategies to best use funding provided, not for any direct financial gain, but for the betterment of their communities and for future generations.

Secondly, the staff of local action groups are a breed apart. They come from a range of backgrounds but share a sense of responsibility to maximise the impact of the resources available, energising and enabling individuals and communities and always focusing on the needs of the client. They have brought the local action groups from a very local level to a point where local action groups are a central element to strategic planning at local, regional, national and international investment forums.

Finally, the authors recognise the hugely positive inputs made by a range of policy makers, primarily senior politicians and civil servants that recognised there was merit in taking a different approach to supporting rural development, not to replace existing practice, but to supplement it. A key element to the success of the LEADER approach is the levels of autonomy given to local action groups. Releasing control of resources and giving it to the local community cannot be understated, both in terms of political belief, courage and vision and in terms of underpinning the capacity, stability and strength of the local action groups themselves.

The authors believe that these three essential elements exist worldwide. LEADER has proven itself even in uncertain economic times to provide the capacity at local level to

create a platform for increased investment into essential elements of the local economy so that they can be well positioned to create jobs and social impacts when the global economy begins to grow again.

End.

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