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THE ROLE OF THE EUROPEAN RESEARCH NETWORKS IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The present paper intends to present "a short history" of a young research network established a few years ago. 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 possible the development of the activity for the future.

By this article we want to give an example of a "good practice" in this field. Could be an example for other networks, institutes, research centres and researcher of how an idea can become reality.

Key words: Europe, Networks, Rural Development, Experience

Introduction

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 (IEA) – 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, 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 2003-2008, ERDN organized six international conferences, to which all the founding members, associated members, collaborators or potential members were invited. The six conferences were organized in Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Austria 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), "Values and challenges in designing the European rural structures - Research networks experience" (2007), "Multifunctional Territories: Importance of rural areas beyond food production" (2008).

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 programme 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 programme 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 2009 the conference took place in Hungary, Debrecen and the title was "Linking competitiveness with equity and sustainability: New ideas for the socio economic development of rural AREAS").

The Conference aims to stimulate theoretical and empirical discussions on current and possible new approaches to promoting competitiveness, equality and sustainability in rural areas in different regions and nations. Economists, social scientists, policy makers, and natural scientists are invited to enrich the discussion from different perspectives.

Rural areas themselves, and our understanding of how to most effectively support their development, are in a process of dynamic development. Economic development must

promote human well-being. The conference topic aims to address many experts of different disciplines; thus the organizers invited prospective participants to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. Contributions to the conference deal with:

- developing the natural, human, social, physical and financial capital of rural areas,
- the contribution of rural areas to regional development,
- the potential for knowledge-intensive employment creation in rural areas,
- political approaches towards linking competitiveness with sustainability and sustainability with competitiveness
- community perspectives on the socio-economic development of rural areas.

The key issue underpinning this process is that the historic role of agriculture in rural areas as sites of feed, food and fiber production now represents only a part of their social and economic fabric. It is now widely accepted that beyond agriculture, which also provides new products such as fuel and feeling, the different capitals of rural areas (human, social, natural, physical and financial) offer additional opportunities. This, however, has led to the view that rural development policy should focus on "sustainability" whilst of urban areas should emphasis "competitiveness".

Just like their urban counterparts, rural areas have human, social, physical and financial capital, not just natural capital. These capitals, when properly developed and exploited, can allow rural areas to contribute fully to the competitiveness of the regions in which they are embedded, thus aiding their prosperity and attractiveness as places in which to live. Both in rural and in urban areas, therefore, competitiveness and sustainability should be developed in parallel, consistent with the objectives of the Lisbon Agenda and the Göteborg Strategy, in a managed way that ensures equality of opportunity for all communities.

EU perspectives

The legal basis is Article 66 (3) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1698 /2005, as well as article 68 and 39. The national network is funded by the technical assistance of rural development programm; Member States with regional programm may propose a specific programm to run the national network.

The main objectives and duties are:

- To group the organizations and administrations involved in rural development
- There is a general duty to facilitate at Member State level an exchange of expertise and support implementation and evaluation of the rural development policy and to secure and coordinate the information flow between the local, national and European level.
- The action plan contains at least transfer of knowledge (identification and analysis of good transferable practices and the provision of information about them, the

organization of exchanges of experience and know-how) training (the preparation of training programm for local action groups in the process of formation)

The structure needed to run the network may be established either within the competent national authorities or by selection through tendering procedures. That structure must be able to perform the tasks described in the action program. The structure must have the sufficient staff with international skills to be the contact of the European Rural Network and other national networks and to provide the support to transnational cooperation.

Member States have the responsibility to adopt the necessary structure. The following bodies are recommended:

- A permanent secretariat to manage the network (National Network Unit);
- A coordinating committee grouping the main categories of rural actors (organizations representing the categories of beneficiaries of the programme or third parties concerned by the objectives of measures) and the administrations;
- Thematic networks: they can be targeted enough to be of direct interest to actors and act as a strong incentive for their participation around common issues. At the beginning of the programming period, thematic sub-networks could determine the global process and introduce in a progressive manner a way of working together. The thematic networks would then have to widen the range of issues being developed in order to avoid division and allow for a general exchange of information and experiences. Rural actors concerned by the programm are according to the measures implemented:

Axis 1 and Axis 2: vocational training organizations for agriculture, food and forestry sectors; the farmers associations including young farmer organizations; producer groups associations and associations of cooperatives in agriculture and forestry including quality producer groups associations in agriculture; chambers of agriculture, network of advisory services for agriculture and forestry, forestry owner associations, food and forestry processing industry associations, land management agencies, energy and water supply organizations, mountain farming organizations, Natura 2000 network, environmental NGO, agro environment technical and scientific institutes, animal welfare NGO.

Axis 3: Chambers of trade and industry in rural areas, rural tourism organizations, landscape and environmental protection organizations, cultural heritage organizations, vocational training organizations.

Axis 4: local action groups and their informal networks.

Administrations concerned are: Regional and national administrations involved in the implementation of the programmes, other administrations concerned by rural policies, national association of rural communes.

Two options are possible for the establishment of the National Network Unit: It could be set up within the administration or outsourced totally or partially via one or several contracts (the more probable case in reality as normally administrations will not have animation capacity).

Several tenders might be needed to implement all tasks mentioned in Article 68. In such cases a coordinating function by the national administration or left to the contractors to manage the network is needed.

Technical resources that are essential for a good functioning and efficiency of the networks include:

- Information technologies: a good system for internet site (multilingual) and databases;
- Contacts with wider rural development networks, research institutes, resource centers, political spheres, etc. to be able to develop a horizontal approach to the (rural development) network.
- Good knowledge of European languages, cultures, contexts and history are put forward as being important since only they can lead to the creation of easy, professional and long-lasting network of people at the European level and be useful in the identification of potential partners needed by local actors or when bringing support to cross border projects.
- Expertise should be available 'inside' the network and the networking unit as well as outside to complement the internal skills:

Expertise/ skills on all themes related to rural development are needed:

- For animation (of a network being both bottom up and top down)
- To communicate (inside the country but also outside)
- On editorial matters
- For marketing
- For public relations advice
- To organize events
- On cooperation
- On evaluation
- For training
- On applicable action research, academic know-how which is based and rooted in practical expertise at ground level
- For counseling
- On administrative matters and procedures.

Human qualities: the staff of the networking units ought to have an accessible approach, show enthusiasm for the network and the projects developed by the actors, be service orientated, have a strong team spirit etc. A good team Leader is essential.

Networking needs are continuously changing. The networking units ought to keep in mind this need for evolution, not only in terms of technical resources they use or develop, but also in terms of the available human resources.

The European Rural network and the national rural networks should use common tools in the tasks related to identification of good practices and support to transnational cooperation. These tools should be included in the action plan from the beginning and will include:

- Project database based on the use of a common pilot project form (elaboration of list good and best practices)
- Transnational project database
- Expert database
- Local action groups database based on the use of a common LAG form
- Transnational cooperation partner-search tool.

Romanian perspectives

This multi-national partnership between organizations of the civil society has a clearly defined goal, that of strengthening the civil society in the rural areas, and to promote intra- and trans-national cooperation in this field. Within this context, the National Rural Development Programme (NRDP) will gather actors from different sectors, and will have a crucial role, since it contributes to the improvement of communication between the participants to rural economy. The National Rural Development Network will contribute to stimulating the establishment of active partnerships between the public, private, and non-governmental sectors, in this way bringing together the representatives of the local/central public authorities involved in rural development, local communities, institutions, interested NGOs (professional associations, foundations), etc. The success of rural development will greatly depend on these partnerships. Consequently, the National Rural Development Network will have to be formed and administrated in a manner that is open, dynamic, and accessible to all those interested and involved in the areas of rural development. The existence of a network of public and private organizations (NGOs) in Romania, active in local development, some having experience in the development of certain European programme or development projects, that may rapidly engage in the development of rural communities, may represent the starting point for the creation of a National Rural Development Network that will evolve in time and within which several mutations shall appear, in different directions, as far as the range of subjects, participants, and performed actions are concerned.

The principal role of the Network is to facilitate the exchange of experience, to support the implementation and evaluation of the Rural Development Programme, and to ensure the information flow between the local, national, and European levels. The mission of the

Network comprises a *strategic component* – for the establishment of the main directions of action of the Network (the collection and dissemination of information concerning the programmes and rural development policies at the local level; the superior capitalization of the actors' competences; rural development in general) and a *technical component* – for the implementation of the strategic elements (setting up a data base, a guide, a website, the organization of seminaries to foster communication and transparency; consultation services directly addressing the beneficiaries).

The activity of the Network shall be coordinated by a National Rural Development Network Coordination Committee, while at the regional level, resource centers (transmitters) will be established, supporting the actions of the respective committee by maintaining permanent contact with the local beneficiaries.

The action plan will encompass at least the following:

- The identification and analysis of the best practices and information as far as these are concerned;
- The management of the network;
- The organization of exchanges of experience and know-how;
- The preparation of training programms for the formation of Local Action Groups;
- Technical assistance for cooperation;

In the afferent calendar, the stages of the working plan for NRDN are presented, as follows:

- The identification of the actors involved in rural development;
- The elaboration of the Terms of Reference;
- The elaboration of the procedure for the selection of the Network administrator;
- The identification and establishment of the components of the National Rural Development Network Coordination Committee;
- The launching of the call for proposal;
- The submission of the offers to participate in the selection;
- The selection of the organization that will administer the Network;

Conclusions

The idea of a European rural development network is relatively new and that is why the work and preparations are intensive and on going. Thus, from many points of view, we cannot see too many results from the effort done. But, the general agreement is that we need a rural development network at European level.

From our examples we can conclude that the things are moving on the right direction in many countries but the level of development is different. In the same time, we can say that the perception of this idea is almost the same for all structures but the involvement

of the actors in the construction of the network is different. Of course, everything depends of their interest and capacity of reaction at the market and development needs.

There is a legal basis at European level, there is a general legal frame in each country and, in the same time, there is a big availability from many European institutions to built and develop this idea.

Instead of too many conclusions and recommendations we will shortcut by a few words: inclusiveness, valuing people, bottom-up approaches, sustainability, best practice, knowledge base, synergy, community, empowerment, outward looking, openness, learning, strengthening rural and remote communities, holistic approach and equal opportunity regardless of race or creed.

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