Chances of the new EU Regional Policy for rural (peripheral) areas – The case study of LEADER+

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Abstract

The new tendencies on the EU regional policy, since the late nineties may represent a threat to the rural peripheral areas. The traditional integrated approaches of the development programmes are giving place to a project-support oriented policy. The financing plans result more and more from the total of the projects budgets. Under the “regional competitiveness” umbrella, this approach overemphasises though the economic vertices of the sustainability concept and a short term planning practice, and will promote the urban regions and urban networks and corridors at the expends of the weaker (rural ?) regions.

This paper presents the results of a comparative study of four LEADER+ regions, in Germany (Bavaria) and Portugal (Northern Region) and aims to put some questions on the current EU Regional Policy. Above all, the main question is, are there still any chances for the rural european peripheries in the new EU Regional Policy?

The case study presents several Best-Practices of a potential “beginning networking” process in transborder cooperation through the search for common platforms for new kinds of Public-Private-Partnerships and flexible instruments of Regional Management. It goes further analysing Regional Management policies, developed in the past in order to play an active role in the future regional competition after the EU east enlargement.

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1. Central Questions

1.1. Rural areas in the new EU’s regional and rural management

The definition of the guidelines for the EU Regional Policy (sectoral, thematic or territorial) as well as the theoretic model (paradigm) associated to them, might be seen as the strategic expression of the evaluation and relating political enhancing by society, bearing in mind the state of its region’s development. At least during the first half of the Eighties of the last century, the rural areas were greatly enhanced and its problems were given a great deal of attention, and the European Union’s Regional Policy sought to define the fundamental principles of its management. Those were years of economic growth in which the states carried out an intensive policy of support to society’s basic needs. On the contrary, in the last years of the 90th decade, the rural areas were given much less attention, while the problems of the big cities and the search for the relating solutions was converted in society’s priority subject. Meanwhile, the economy was stagnant and the financial problems of the state increased, namely at a local level.

EU’s Regional Policy, that is, the European Commission, reflected this change in the enhancement of the rural spaces throughout the different phases of its evolution. Before UE’s enlargement southwards and Portugal’s accession (1986), with the separation of the European Regional Policy from the national regional policies, in 1985, regulated in the new version of the European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) a few opportunities were open for an innovating development also for the rural areas, by the political re-orientation towards the endogenous development potential.

1.2. The paradigm shift in the Community Support Policy and the thesis from it resulting

Associated to the reforming phase of the Structural Funds (1988-93), there has been a change in the paradigm of the European Regional Policy. Besides the aspects related to the support to the less-developed regions, the idea of competitiveness has been strengthened, namely the competitiveness of the regions by support means (Structural Funds). The Community Initiatives are the most evident expression of that tendency, directing towards both to peripheral territories or in a risk situation, which is the case of LEADER or INTERREG, and excluded social groups, as NOW or HORIZON, or even integrated situations, like URBAN, to social and territorially degraded urban segments. With comparatively smaller financial endowments than the ones attributed to Objectives 1 or 2, the Community Initiatives’ philosophy rested, from the start, in a “bottom-up-approach” taking actions through selected projects with a strong demonstrative effect, trying to develop the learning processes from best-practices. Since the reform of the Structural Funds that the Regional Policy of the EU has stopped functioning as a large financial reserve (backup) of distribution of the means according to the needs, thus introducing a new philosophy of support to the regions and projects that have created a better response to the competitiveness conditions. It is important to point out that, with this kind of support there was the risk that to have Winners, there had to be also Losers, namely the peripheral areas structurally weak that couldn’t afford creative
consultants or innovating experts. With the end of Objective 5b this situation will become more and more evident in the rural areas.

"In terms of trends, there has in recent years been a clear move in Europe away from automatic incentives and towards discretionary schemes" (Allen and others, 1999, p.108).

Furthermore, the community policies have always been greatly contested, in what concerns the rural development. Even representing the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), the better consolidated policy and with more resources, the results for the rural areas, were not always positive. In 1989, Patrick Drudy, after having made a balance for Ireland, that had joined EEC in 1973, declared: "Apart from specific sectoral policies, it can be argued that the general thrust of EEC philosophy is in fact unlikely to help the poor rural areas" (Drudy, 1989,p.139).

In the sequence of what has been above mentioned, the hypothesis that were the basis for the empirical work on the regions are thus presented:

1) The Chances (opportunities) of development for the rural areas, depend, in the new EU's Regional Policy framework, more and more on the increase of the creative human capital, on innovating entrepreneurs with a tendency for co-operation as well as consultants from out of the region;
2) In the context of competitiveness, there will not only be "winners", but the danger of the increase of the regional discrepancies is real.

2. The example of the Community Initiative LEADER+ and its application in two case studies in selected peripheral regions, in the North of Portugal and in Bavaria

2.1 Objectives, tasks and strategies of the LEADER+

For the present support period, 2000-2006, the European Commission has defined the Community Initiative Leader+'s guidelines and objectives in order to meet the challenges placed to the rural areas in a more efficient way. Leader+ must be an experimental laboratory of an original and ambitious integrated rural development. A central objective is thus the rehearsal of new ways of enhancing the natural and cultural heritage, through the creation of jobs and the capacity of organization of the relating regions, so as to support the endogenous development potential. The co-operation component achieved a greater meaning from which it possessed hitherto in LEADER Community Initiative, whether in the co-operation in the rural spaces, or in inter-regional relations.. The Local Actions Group's role was once more emphasized, in which private and public actors shall contribute for the activation and innovating strength of the region.

The next step of our paper will be to test and evaluate the application of the objectives and strategies of Leader+, from two regional examples. Two case studies have been selected, in the North of Portugal and in the North of Bavaria. The scientific co-operation among the Oporto and Bayreuth Universities (that, ultimately, has provided this empirical exercise), was decisive for the choice of two examples, besides the thematic framing.
2.2 The application in Vale do Lima Northern Region of Portugal

- Localization and Region’s Boundaries

The area of intervention of Vale do Lima’s Leader+ corresponds to the valley of the river Lima in Portuguese territory, excluding the city of Viana, and presents a great natural, economic, social and cultural coherence that reinforced itself throughout time due to the existence of a transports system oriented east-westward, with no North-South crossing axes (the Porto-Valeilha highway, opened in 1998) that kept a certain isolation from the valley. The valley extends itself from the west to the east, across the Atlantic shore, presenting a wide bottom, in most of its extension, with large and irrigated tilled plains, that close upstream, as the altitudes get higher, eastward in the mountain area, dominated by the Peneda, Soajo and Amarela Mountains. The area kept its rural character for quite a long time, even though with a less agricultural quality suffering from a growing peripheralization which is evident in the emigration and ageing of its populations, as well as in the degradation of the economic base. It was in the Eighties of last century that the first initiatives within the scope of Tourism began to develop, namely the Tourism of Dwelling, that had its first project in Portugal. It was also in the Eighties that first started being registered investments in Industries, mainly concerning the relocation of companies in the older or foreign urban-industrial areas, which, despite introducing a certain revitalisation in the economic base, still create a few incompatibilities within the Tourism sector.

- SWOT Analysis

The analysis of the strengths, weaknesses and potential of the territory for the Leader+, has been mostly made, bearing in mind the ex-post’ evaluation of the Leader II. Among the strengths identified in the region, there were also those which had been created by the previous application of the Leader, namely

. Tacit Knowledge – Know-how, in the tourism in rural space management sector;  
. Support infrastructures to tourism: tourism offer and tourist animation equipments and tourism reserves management centrals in rural space for an international network of European Regions.  
. Institutional dynamism developed around ADRIL, both through public institutions networks and through public-private networks, associations and social partners.

The strong theme for the Leader+ has resulted from the SWOT analysis, “Enhancement of Natural and Cultural Resources”, being thus structured the Local Action Plan around the pillars Leisure and Heritage.

- The role of the Local Action Group-- LAG

The Local Action Group of the Vale do Lima’s Leader presents a few specificities. In the application of the Leader programme in Vale do Lima it is important to point out ADRIL, Association for Integrated Rural Development of the Lima Valley, composed by a group of public and private partners, responsible for the application of the Leader Programme and the management of ADRIL, composed by 3 members, which constitutes the Local Action Group, the LAG and is responsible for the management of the Local Action Plan. ADRIL has registered the adhesion of new members, after its creation, but the LAG has remained since
LEADER I. The “bottom-up” approach is thus conducted in an indirect manner. The LAG has conceived the Local Action Plan with the support of experts that had executed Leader I and II's evaluations, presented it to ADRIL's General Assembly and is responsible for the approval and follow-up of the projects, elaborating the related monitoring and evaluation reports. The LAG has as a President, the president of one of the partners, The Turihab, Association of Tourism of Dwelling and two experts in planning, an engineer and an economist. In the previous evaluations of Leader I and II the LAG was confronted with questions concerning the overlapping of competencies and the interference between institutions to which the members of the LAG belong. The efficiency measured through the financial and physical execution levels, as well as the obtained results, for the projects in which measurement was possible, allow us to conclude the LAG has applied Leader in a positive manner for the region. Throughout Leader's time of application, the degree of confidence of LAG, of other ADRIL institutions and of the projects promoters, public, private and social, increased and might have established a factor of success.

- Objectives, development strategies, interventions and projects' domains

_Vale do Lima's LAG has clearly defined from the start the pillars of the strategy for Leader+. While Leader I had been structured below the topic “Tourism” and Leader II, below the topic “Heritage”, having privileged equipments and infrastructures projects, for Leader +, the strong theme “Leisure and Heritage”, had as a goal the consolidation and sustainability of a development model for the rural areas, alternative to that of urban-industrial growth areas, in a long term perspective. The concepts orienting this model are, as explained in the Local Action Program, LAP, the environment's sustainability, the reinforcement of economy and the challenge of innovation. Thus, the strategic domains of Leader+ will be the reinforcement of the insertion and work in the national and international networks in which ADRIL already participates, as well as with its eventual enlargement and a widened introduction of the territorial component, in the development scheme. A great planning project corresponding to the fulfilment of a regional Master Plan for Vale do Lima, was conceived for this second goal. In the future, this Plan shall constitute the reference framework for all interventions concerning urban and regional planning and development of the area. For Leader+ it is particularly important to define new centralities in the mountain areas, so as to concentrate the interventions and the projects, this was seeking to fix tourists and lead them to remain more time in the region.

The idea of a Master Plan came from LAG, through research works developed by the president, in England, at the University of Bournemouth and has occurred from ADRIL's necessity to define a system of compatibility and articulation of policies to different territorial and political scales, for Vale do Lima's globalism. This project is innovative because it starts off with a private institution and ends up being executed by a public institution (it is a project conceived by the LAG and to be executed by Valima, Association of Municipalities of the Vale do Lima).

LAG's structuring process was centrally determined by Lisbon, once the Leader programme for Portugal is centralised. Thus, the measures of the programme (4: 3 plus one for expenditure), were initially defined and LAG has adjusted its strategy and its projects, bearing in mind that structure from above.
The strategic projects are centred around the dynamism of Networks and in the Master Plan.

The LAG tried to insert the LAP in the context of the mainstream programmes under Objective 1, Objective 3 and Interreg III of the Structures Fonds.

- **Environmental Protection and Sustainability**

The environmental component has, since the beginning of the application of Leader I, always been respected, even if in some projects there has been compromise solutions among the economic viability and the environmental impact. Leader I and II’s evaluations have been positive in what concerns the environmental impact.

There was a particularly innovating project from Leader II, about energy savings in manors and old houses inserted in the Tourism of Dwelling. That project was developed within the scope of the European programme SAVE, by the energy agency AREALMA, which was also inserted in SAVE. Leader+ is regarded in those projects’ enlargement.

A group of projects about environmental education in Leader II had also a great success, namely a prize from the Ford Foundation for Environment. In Leader+ the projects on environmental education will continue and will essentially involve activities with schools and execution of information brochures for the local and tourist population.

The combination of the ecological, economic and social sustainability criteria has had positive results, although the social component is still often the most penalised once there are never projects to create jobs, like it would be expected.

The bigger project in LEADER I – Golf Park - received several critical remarks from an ecological point of view, since it led to a real estate expansion project, exclusively based upon economic viability criteria.

- **Financial Issues**

A total of € 4 760 951,11 for the period 2000-2006 will be spent, in Leader+ of Vale do Lima of which € 2 530 748, 15 is funded by the EAGGF Guidance section and the remainder by public and private contributions. The support from the National Government will represent 55% of the public contribution and the local support 48%. The private contribution will reach at least € 1,3 million, which is ca. 27% of the global investment.

- **Global Evaluation**

Leader’s proposal regards an *ex-ante* evaluation with analysis of the programme’s external and internal coherence, economic viability and financial programming and, characterisation of the actions, namely in what concerns the expected results, with the identification of the monitoring indicators. Given the previous experience, LAG manages to keep active, at the moment, a fairly efficient monitoring system and continuous evaluation. That is particularly important so as to correct programming errors. A project that fails is easily replaced by another, once there has always been a demand for financing and there have always been more candidatures than possible to the financial availabilities.
2.3 The application in *Wohlfühlregion Fichtelgebirge* Northern Bavaria

*Localization and Region’s Boundaries*

The region in study is located in North-eastern Bavaria and is composed by – as it is shown by the SWOT analysis – different types of areas, from valleys and lowlands, to the mountain areas (*Vorland* and *Hohes Fichtelgebirge*). However, among those diverse spaces there are important functional articulations and together, they face common challenges such as emigration, adaptation of the tourist offer to the weather changes, as well as the fulfilment of EU’s enlargement to the East carrying its opportunities, but also its costs, for instance, the pressure under the transport system. The intervention region is thus coherent and appropriated to a strategy of integrated development.

*SWOT Analysis*

The SWOT analysis has been developed from the basic statistics, and has been worked with the follow-up of experts from Bayreuth University. A compared analysis has been made bearing in mind reference indicators. In that context, for each domain, a strategic orientation has been defined, from which the bottom questions have been formalised, namely towards the following:

- The future of the winter sports with weather changes (warmth);
- EU’s enlargement to the East;
- The population’s quality of life and possible sources of income.

The specificnesses of each sub-region were identified and analyzed, from the lowland areas to the mountain areas (*Vorland* versus *Hohes Fichtelgebirge*). From the SWOT analysis it was possible to make a clear identification of the needs for an intervention in the selected priority domains.

*The role of the Local Action Group – LAG*

The main characteristic of the Local Action Plan LAP, lies in the population’s extraordinary capacity for mobilisation. In the initial sessions about 120 people in 5 Working Groups were allowed to participate. Furthermore there is, besides the Local Action Group „*Wohlfühlregion Fichtelgebirge e.V.*“, a Monitoring Commission with a widened Management Board of 18 members. Half of its members are social partners or private companies. The women's participation is rather limited, there are only 3 in 18. In the Monitoring Commission there are no representatives of young people's special interest groups, although both have worked together intensively, in the Working Groups. The bottom-up-approach happened in the best way possible, due to the population’s participation, although there has been an exterior influence in the definition of the Local Action Plan, through the advisory from the University and the Oberfranken’s Development Agency of the Regional Council (*Entwicklungsagentur des Landratsamtes Bayreuth)*

*Objectives, development strategies, intervention domains and projects*

The designation „*Wohlfühlregion Fichtelgebirge*“ (Well Being Region Fichtelgebirge), as a strong theme of the programme, has been defined bearing in mind the SWOT analysis of the strengths and weaknesses and shall meet both the local population’s feelings and the tourists
that visit it, as well as other associations. In that sense, there have also been defined, for each intervention domain, strong themes, in which the relating intermediate objectives are introduced, with the purpose of integrating the concept of „Wohlfühlregion“ in the several fields (Measures) of the programme.

Considering the strong themes and the objectives, the „Quality of Life“ was chosen as the main theme in the region’s development. It is possible, with it to cover the priority domains of intervention in the region and establish the basis to define the principles of an integrative policy. The fields of tourism, health, sport and attraction of the built and leisure spaces are comprised. The strategy was pondered from the “Challenges of the Century”, with a special attention for the weather changes. In the tourism segment, it is thought that the implementation of pilot-projects might be repeated in other mountain areas that are facing the same problem.

Globally, the Local Action Group predicts the execution of 36 projects, divided by 6 measures:

- Regional management, regional marketing and co-operation,
- Wellness-Fitness-Beauty- Element 5,
- Sport throughout the year – Nordic Park,
- Women, Young People, Senior People and Social,
- Agriculture, Nature/ Landscape Protection, rural activities,
- Geology, History, Culture.

Almost all measures have a strong articulation with the tourism sector.

- Environmental Protection and Sustainability

The ecological sustainability is only relevantly regarded in a few projects. In many projects there is a component of environmental education, as for instance in the project „Landschaftspflegehof/Schulbauernhof“ (Fifth-school for nature protection), or „Wald-Wasser-Natur: Umwelt bewusst erleben“ (Forest-water-nature: to live a more aware environment). Some of the other projects, namely the ones related with tourism infrastructures, „Loipen, Schanzen, Skiroller/-Inlineskaterbahn“ (Ski Track, jump track and Inline Scating area) can be questionable, under the environmental point of view. Some of the most sensitive areas may suffer a great pressure because of the concentration of tourists towards the new equipments. In terms of sustainability, the economic and social interest once it is intended to keep the tradition of the winter sports alive was also took in consideration, as well as the tourism’s capacity to create jobs, as a priority sector and the profit of the new infrastructures to it associated.

A social and cultural sustainability was particularly considered in the projects of the measure “Women, Young People, Senior People and Social”. It is important to point out the projects „Frauen helfen Frauen, Frauenberufe – Zukunftschancen“ (Women help women, professions for all women – future opportunities) and „Sammlung und Weitervermittlung alter Sagen und Mythen“ (Collect and pass on old sayings and myths). Almost all projects are directly contributing, as for instance the ones mentioned above, or at least indirectly for the increase of profits in the region. Above all, the sustainability’s economic dimension was considered.
- Financial Issues

For the measure “Ganzjahressport – „Nordic Park“ (Sport throughout the year - Nordic Park), which will mobilise around one million Euros, a regional co-financing was achieved, most of it private. In the remaining measures, the mobilisation of private assets is fairly small, from which results a participation of private assets in the program’s total of 23.3%, referring to the total investment’s programming, of € 6.3 million. The result of the regional competition in Bavaria and the acceptance by the Regional Government of Bavaria is now a financial support of € 2.8 million.

- Global Evaluation

The Local Development Plan LAP „Wohlfühlregion Fichtelgebirge“ presents new ideas, above all in what concerns the challenges due to weather changes. In that context it could perhaps have been introduced in the programme a contribution for the weather protection, in order to reinforce the population’s consciousness and some environmental education. The LAG intends to implement a “bottom-up” process anchored in the region and intensify the cooperation with other rural areas, particularly, the neighbour areas. A network articulation, both intra and inter-sectoral, of the regional actors will have a special support (Sport – Tourism/Health – Tourism /Productive Activities – Tourism).

3. Similarities and differences of the case studies as an answer to the initial thesis

1. Both regions were in a similar socio-economic development situations, marked by the peripheralization and lack of economic and social vitality;
2. both regions attempted to enhance and reinforce its specialities, with a special emphasis on tourism. In Vale do Lima, the strong theme for Leader + is “Enhancing the Cultural and Natural Resources” centered around “Leisure and Heritage”; in Fichtelgebirge, the strong theme is “Quality of Life”, centered around the concept of “Welfare Region” (“Wohlfuehlregion”);
3. both regions faced tourism in a futuristic – proactive - perspective searching to meet the medium and long terms challenges. Vale do Lima has sought to reduce the seasonal factors, increase the occupation rate in the tourism offer and increase the tourists’ period of stay in the region, creating and giving dynamism to new activities, which are in its turn creators of product and employment capable of competing with other touristic regions. The Wohlfuehlregion Fichtelgebirge has conceived a group of projects around an idea of tourism throughout the year, to face the decline expected in the traditional winter sports, due to weather changes and warming;
4. the strategies for both regions are similar, for they intend to give tourism some dynamism in a self-sustainable way, keeping the demand throughout the year;
5. none of the regions has conceived the relating projects internally; there has been in both an exterior participation, an outward impulse and afterwards technical support. In Wohlfuehlregion Fichtelgebirge’s case, that process is particularly evident, for there has been an initial non-approved candidature, prepared internally and a second, approved, developed with the University’s consultancy;
6. in both regions Leader has constituted an “impulse” for the institutional dynamism, although it is different in each region;
7. both regions have developed new schemes of partnership, with new public-private partnerships and others, in a new institutional framework;
8. both regions seek to be inserted in interregional and international networks, not only with economic goals, searching for markets for tourism, but also bearing in mind a change of information that allows them to know best-practices applicable in the resolution of its problems. In Vale do Lima’s case, the tourism reservation centrals are a good example of those processes. In the Fichtelgebirge there are partnerships projected with identical peripheral areas, mainly in the South of Europe;

9. in Vale do Lima the initiative was, initially, exclusively private, giving that the public partners started participating, from Leader II and have progressively occupied a more distinguished place; in the Fichtelgebirge, although the public partners lead the process and LAG, the level of participation is higher and the working groups indicate greater dynamism and collaboration;

10. the Leader+ Vale do Lima integrates a new component, regarding the previous periods, of integrated planning, with a strong territorial component, through one of the strategic projects of the Local Action Plan: the Master Plan for vale do Lima;

11. the knowledge acquired with the previous applications of Leader I and II, in Vale do Lima is particularly visible in the way Leader+ is articulated with national policies (sectoral and operational programmes and regional programme) and local policies, with a special emphasis on the Association of Municipalities of the Vale do Lima (Valima). This aspect can be nevertheless analysed not only as positive (for instance, regarding INTERREG or EQUAL), but also as negative, given that, on the one hand it may bring synergies and maximise local development common goals at various levels, on the other hand, it might wrest the spirit of the Leader and some of its strengths, converting it into an extra financial reserve for the Municipalities. The Municipalities’ appetite for the Leader had already been clearly felt in Leader II, once these have executed some of the larger financial dimension projects, not necessarily the larger socio-economic impact projects. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that ADRIL has meanwhile presented candidatures to other programmes and is executing projects with exterior financing to Leader, which reflects its evolution towards a growing economic sustainability.

In conclusion, it is possible to realise that the Community Initiative Leader can meet the challenges placed to the rural areas and carry out an important role, not only as a financial instrument, but mostly as an intervention model. However, there are possibilities of certain conditions and risks. Above all, a technical exterior support (Know-how) is important for the peripheral rural areas, so as to set the endogenous capacity of organisation and development in motion. The creation of ways of promoting the areas in the fields of knowledge, science and research, could establish a support to strategies of endogenous development. In Vale do Lima, the delegation of the Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo in Refóios could become a pillar of the local development. In the second place, it is important that the multiplying effects of Leader are not appropriated by a public administration with serious financial difficulties, being thus converted in a financial reserve.

In a regional competitiveness framework, regions such as Vale do Lima or Fichtelgebirge, develop essentially reinforcement strategies of its internal competitiveness, based on its resources and in other strengths, giving more attention to complementarities than to a growth at the expense of other regions, as for instance is the case in the big urban areas, where economic growth and attraction to investment dominates the local policies. These peripheral rural regions play in second base of the competitiveness championship, often following satisfaction criteria rather than optimisation. However, there are also champions and
disqualified at this level and innovation and the capacity of imagination to do what others don't, are important.

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