

Boosting capacity for communities and businesses to play active roles in rural development

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Summary

This paper is about how to strengthen capacity for communities and entrepreneurs to play an active role in rural development in a context as described: the Merode context.

Issue/Problems

Rural Alliances is about how to strengthen the vibrancy of rural areas. The concept 'rural area' is on a European level hard to define commonly. In some countries rural areas have very low amounts of people that decreases because of emigration. In other countries or regions, this is not the problem. The rural areas there can be defined as a semi – urban area. The main problem there is to keep the rural character alive: protect open space, keep the social networks as they work in rural areas alive, have contact with the big cities, but don't become a part of those big cities.

De Merode is such a region. In an international context, it is a semi – urban region. In the Flemish context, it is a 'green lung' with more open landscape, arable land, forests and nature reserves than average in Flanders.

We think this paper can be useful for semi – urban rural areas in the whole of Europe. Such areas can be found everywhere in Europe in the broad area around big cities.

Background

De Merode is a concept, a new point of view. Of course the communities of de Merode already existed before the area was named de Merode. A major land purchase gave birth to the Rural Development Project de Merode. Suddenly, the area becomes 'de Merode – area'. This concept is an important challenge for the project itself.

The solutions as described here try to give answers within this specific context. It is important to know that when reading this paper. This paper is more a case study, then policy brief.

Interests in the issue

Building community networks supported by the government

The existence of community networks is always (or almost always) the result of a cultural process that starts naturally. People feel the need – on whatever basis – to work together and thus form a community.

In areas with low amounts of inhabitants and loss of people because of emigration, community building/formation decreases because of an uncertain economical base or communities which become too small. A project as Rural Alliances tries to organize & support those communities by giving impulses to the inhabitants. The character of that support is restore the natural process which community building is. De Merode is a different case. It is the government who creates incentives for cooperation in an existing region through a branding process of identification with a new name, new goals and new chances for economic development.

Community building in such a context is different than 'natural' community building. In a way it is a new governing choice to use land redevelopment processes in an integrating way with community involvement.

So, the first goal for the project group (VLM) was how to find local support for the Rural Development Project de Merode, for the name, for the aims, for the future well-being. The question is then: how can a government as the Flemish Land Agency create alliances of communities and businesses which want to share the intentions in developing the region?

Show opportunities, see opportunities, give opportunities

The Rural Development Project de Merode is more than a land redevelopment plan with financial chances and concrete realizations, it is also a story. It is an invitation for storytelling initiated by a government to the communities of the Merode. The government is convinced that major investments in land redevelopment is only sustainable when the communities that live and use the region are tied to it by a joint story. They believe that the aims of that story will strengthen the region on which the story is made.

The next question is who you want to tell the story too. Here, the goals of the project are important. In de Merode - project, the main goals are to strengthen the qualities of the region (natural and cultural heritage) to make live more interesting for the inhabitants and create an economical added value on those qualities.

So, it looks like that heritage holders and entrepreneurs who build business on rural development (tourism, local products, ...) could be interested in the story.

And that is exactly what is happened. Enthusiastic staff members of VLM tell the story and show opportunities. Some of the heritage holders and entrepreneurs see the opportunities and want to share them.

Of course, telling things is one, doing things is something else. Of course, there is the question: what's in it for me? That is the third part: give opportunities.

Interests in the issue (continued)

In a certain way, there is an economical agreement between government and the alliances:

- The alliances tell the story of de Merode by doing events, communication, product placement,
- The government supports the alliances with logistic and financial support. The quick – win – system and the heritage events (supported by Rural Alliances) strengthen the alliances to help the government to create more support for the story.

Does it work?

At the start of the alliances building, we see that we reach a small group of pioneers in de communities (champions). In 2009, the group of entrepreneurs has 15 members, the heritage holders less than that.

Now, five years later, the entrepreneurs have their own organization (dMO vzw). They not only tell the story, they work together on sales, product- and service development, marketing, ... We also see that there is an important increase on business development in rural economy (new B&B, new pubs and restaurants, new products and services). But it is important to know that the government supported the process to create their own organization (Rural Alliances – support).

The group of heritage holders is grown strongly. The system of heritage events created new members other types of heritage holders (not only the usual suspects) and a lot more people tell the story in a lot more places and reach other types of inhabitants. A problem with the heritage holders is that, however they have more contact with each other, there is until now not a self-supporting organization. This gives a high risk: once the base of the agreement (telling the story in exchange for support) does not exist anymore, the enthusiasm probably will decrease.

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