

Heritage values: a way to connect people: de Merode as an example

Dated: June 2014

Author: Jan Van den Berghe (SPK)

Representing: Flemish Land Agency (VLM)

Summary

This paper is about how to use heritage as a power to connect people.

Issue/Problems

Rural Alliances is about how to strengthen the vibrancy of rural areas. Most certainly, vibrancy is about the welfare and wellness of people. In a lot of rural areas the vibrancy of communities is threatened by the disappearance or the lack of basic elements in life: a vibrant rural economy, a vibrant network of services (schools, pubs, libraries, public transport, public services) and a vibrant social network.

But there is more than that: in a more global world people feel the need of connection with the ground they live on, with the history they are a part of, with their own locality.

De Merode is not a region where the basics of vibrancy are threatened. Because of that, the aims of VLM in Rural Alliances always were a little different: we want to protect and develop the rural character of the region by using and strengthen the value of natural and cultural heritage. This scope teaches us a lot about the value of (heritage) values and how to use them.

We think this paper can be useful for every rural area in the whole of Europe. Connection with their own region is a growing value, probably for always.

Background

Glocalization is a new word. It is composted by two words: globalization and localization. It seems to have a strong contradiction in it, but anyway it is a word with future.

Throughout history, localization was the key word. However people travel history long, there was always a strong connection between people and the region where they were born. Globalization is a rather young concept. However there is a global economic market since the 19th century, real globalization is younger than that. A free economic and financial global market, cheap and fast transport and communication are concepts of the last three, four decades. So, almost everyone have the feeling to live in a global world.

Background (continued)

Rather fast, the reactions on the globalization came fast. Without giving comment on the content of these reactions, there is the simple observation that there is a reaction. And more important than the political and visible reactions, in the whole of Europe, there is a more important and less visible reaction: the renewed and increasing interest in locality. Some examples:

- The market on local products increases in Flanders, the consumer's attitude for local products becomes more and more positive.
- Rural tourism grows strongly and there is an increasing range of facilities.
- The heritage sector is one of the few who gets more government money.

The heritage sector organizes itself in bigger and more professional managed organizations.

We see the same thing in de Merode. One of the Rural Alliances events on heritage was a lecture of a university professor about the leading nobility in the 13 – 15th century in de Merode. Totally unexpected, more than 250 people came to hear the lecture. Also, other events on heritage are very successful.

Localization is, as told, a success, but has certain dangers. A conservative reflex to keep the world as we know as it was, is of course not a solution. It creates a non-existent island.

Glocalization is therefore an interesting concept. It uses the interesting insights and technology of globalism to strengthen an actual and modern view on locality. It can also host 'inclusion' for people that are not born and bred in the community to take part in the heritage that community thinks is important to identify and treasure.

Interests in the issue

The Rural Development Project de Merode chooses from the beginning to use the quality of the region to build up the project. The quality of the region is defined as the above average attendance of:

- Forest and nature values and landscape quality, including agriculture.
- Strong cultural/religious heritage with the abbeys and Scherpenheuvel
- Silence as heritage value
- Oral and written heritage (famous heimat writers, oral folk stories)

VLM invest in three ways to develop that regional quality:

- Site quality development
- Heritage holder network development
- Rural economy development

VLM believes strongly that these three ways are all together necessary to reach the goal. Only investing in site quality delivers good sites, but without a sharing network the durability of it is weak. Only investing in a heritage holder network delivers enthusiastic organizations in the beginning, but without more quality (on sites and in product) it stops soon. Only investing in rural economy gives economical grow, but it is grow without a base and so not durable.

Site quality development

VLM invested in land redevelopment projects as Averbode Bos en Hei, silent gateway Gerhagen, Beeldekens – Kwarekken and Hertberg. The aim is to increase the landscape- en nature quality or the quality of heritage sites. Recreation and public admission of nature and landscapes is often combined in these projects, together with segregation of 'soff' target groups like horse riding, mountain biking and hiking.

But there is more than only the value of the site itself. A modern and joint vision on visitors and visiting tries to strengthen the relationship between the inhabitants (and tourists).

Heritage holders network development

From the beginning of the project VLM has invested in the creation of a heritage holder network. We believe they could be the ambassadors for de Merode. But more important, with the concept of the heritage holder events (Rural Alliances) we see a growing success. This is important, because of a lot of the inhabitants are not de Merode – born. This way we help to develop a stronger social network/community in the region.

The heritage holder events are assigned by a jury. This makes it possible to promote innovation. Not all events are innovative, but we see the use of almost avant garde – theater to promote de Merode and the values in it.

Another important initiative is the development of a widespread and written for a broad audience public book on the Merode. It will be ready this year and we believe it will help people to know better their own region and the values of it. Knowledge is a base for connection. The content of the book will also be used to develop a visitor – app.

Most certainly, the project gives an increasing attention for less known aspects of heritage.

Rural Economy Development

Beautiful sites and nice events create visitors and consumers. VLM has also invested in a entrepreneurs network on rural economy. The network started to work together for product development, product placement, marketing, new product – service combinations and were also busy with promotion for de Merode as a region with a story.

Nowadays, the network is fully self – organized and is called dMO vzw. or translated de Merode – entrepreneurs. It shows how a group of entrepreneurs believes enough in the idea of the Merode to connect themselves in a cooperative way.

Does it work?

Heritage as a key stone for rural development is certainly a success in de Merode. More heritage holders in a network (with less usual suspects), more visitors, more people who want to tell about the Merode, more innovative techniques, more rural economical development: a lot of signs shows the possibilities.

Is this the ultimate form of glocalization? No, but a start is made.

Author

Jan Van den Berghe (SPK)

Contact Details

Goele Vercammen

VLAAMSE LANDMAATSCHAPPIJ

SAMEN INVESTEREN IN DE OPEN RUIMTE

dienst projectrealisatie, VLM Regio Oost

(Antwerpen – Limburg – Vlaams-Brabant)

vestiging Herentals, Cardijnlaan 1 – 2200 Herentals – Flanders, Belgium

T (0032-014) 25 83 89 | E goele.vercammen@vlm.be

This policy recommendation paper has been jointly produced as part of the Rural Alliances project, involving twelve partners from Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium.

The project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, to promote strong and prosperous communities.

Policy Recommendation Paper 07

- Heritage values: a way to connect people:de Merode as an example

Page 4 of 4