

What kinds of governance need to be devised to meet the challenges facing rural areas? What is the role of elected representatives?

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Author: Stéphane Mabon

Representing: MEDEFI

Summary

In France, rural areas are still facing the inexorable rise of urbanisation – which strengthens the phenomenon of “*métropolisation*” and weakens rural areas. This particularly affects areas that are in the process of social “desertification” through depopulation and loss of local services (as for instance the areas located on the edge of the Massif Central or in the Champagne-Ardennes region) and other predominantly rural areas.

Among the most crucial issues facing rural areas are the governance and management of these demographic changes.

Issues/Challenges

This is all the more important in a country like France, a country which is characterized by an administrative “multi-slice” (like a multi-layered cake) i.e. the Local Municipality (Commune), a Group of Municipalities (connecting local authorities in a “*Communauté de communes*” and, above that, the departments and regions. We could also add the level of the “*Pays*” in our Region, Brittany. This level is not a local and territorial authority, but a project area (based on historical and residential areas, agreed by local authorities).

Less well-off financially but also less endowed in human resources, rural areas have to innovate to offer services to the population and create a better sense of “living together” and to create a better, more collaborative society (“*faire société*”).

Interests in the issue

Local elected representatives should adopt a role of “*animateur*” (facilitator/presenter / driving force). This role is essential. They need to find ways to capitalise on the human resources of their territory, drawing in various categories of people and communities locally, whether they are citizens, associations, private companies, small local firms, or secondary schools etc. The intention should be to **mobilize the “lifeblood” of the territory** (strengths, efforts, intentions) to mitigate and make up for the lack of financial means (in comparison with urban territories).

To do this, it is necessary to intervene at 2 levels of our political and administrative “multilayered” organisation: the local municipality (“*commune*”) and the Group of Municipalities (“*Communauté de communes*”). Local committees should be focused on various themes; the chosen themes would have

Interests in the issue (continued)

been previously determined, collectively, with the involvement of the above-named categories of stakeholders.

We expect the local elected representatives to have the **role of animating or stimulating** the community. This requires that they are trained for this function. Very often, when recently elected, local representatives cannot comprehend the subjects with an overall view and they do not have the skills which are needed for the task of animation. Elected representatives have difficulties in identifying the needs of their territory, and in putting these needs to the fore. The concept of "**éducation populaire**" should be brought up to date and adapted or even re-invented. Furthermore, elected representatives do not know that they have "rights to training" (financial rights which have existed since 1992 in France). In our territory (*Pays de Redon-Bretagne Sud*), for example, the training of elected representatives should be transferred by the municipalities to the inter-municipal level (*Communauté de communes*). This would allow the building of a genuine **training programme**.

Recommendations

Here we need to stress a major point: elected representatives, although they have a democratic legitimacy, should study the initiatives of citizens and, if possible they should support them.

To favour the **mobilization of the citizens**, elected representatives should listen carefully, show a clear interest and pay close attention to citizens; they should also inquire widely about local activities (for example, simply by reading the local press which reports on local initiatives). They could also meet with citizens, and so on. It is a stance to be adopted, a state of mind, a way of thinking. **It is necessary to change the relationship: from a "no-confidence" (suspicious) logic to a "confidence" (trusting) logic.** In the interests of all (mutual and respective positive effects), points of **convergence** have to be found. This would be the necessary "compost" to succeed in most widely mobilizing the population.

One of the main advantages and opportunities for rural areas (compared with urban areas) is that people know each other and are able to exchange (talk, meet, share ideas.) This possibility of close relationships and interpersonal contacts in rural areas is a real strength. We should build on this strength to "cultivate" this advantage and to strengthen social links (which are very split in the urban territories).

Given the reduction of public finances and the imbalance between urban and rural expenditure, we need to **invent new modes of financing (alternative solutions)** which link and engage local stakeholders - inhabitants, associations, companies etc. In our territory ("*Pays de Redon-Bretagne Sud*"), we have an interesting example with wind turbines on which we should capitalize.

However, before we can mobilize local resources, our projects must be co-built and designed by both elected representatives and civil society; the launch of such projects must happen in a trusting and not a suspicious climate. This relies, once again, on the importance of the role of animation for elected representatives. Our history in Brittany, in western France, proves the capacity of the local inhabitants to work in this way. For example, we can cite the banking experience of the "*Crédit Agricole*" at the beginning of the 20th century; and the CUMA (agriculture cooperatives) at the end of the Second World War.

Recommendations (continued)

Finally, the various administrative levels in France (and these are all the more complex in rural areas) do not facilitate this approach to governance. In the "Pays de Redon-Bretagne Sud" territory, our elected representatives should **initiate a public debate about the administrative organization** of their territory, with the following objectives:

- transmission of knowledge between the municipal level and the inter-municipal level,
- the fusion (merger) of municipalities,
- Creation of a Conurbation (*Communauté d'Agglomération*) instead of the Association of local authorities.

Elected representatives have to present the important issues facing the territory and have to create the conditions to determine a common and shared fate.

Elected representatives have to take up a new position. Up till now, they have had a technocratic approach. They often think that they are the "knowledgeable individuals", but they should adopt a participatory approach, which could favour and allow the expression of the largest number of people. This is especially important as predominantly rural areas welcome more and more trained and highly educated persons.

Sources of information

https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/education_populaire

Author

Stéphane Mabon, Expert in training and inclusion policies

Contact



(M E D E F I)

Stéphanie Paris, Director, MEDEFI

3 rue Charles Sillard

35600 REDON

France

T 0033 2 99 72 31 21 | E developpement@medefi.fr

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