

Governance for rural areas: the relevant competences for an approach to project management

Dated: March 2015
Author: Anne Patault
Representing: MEDEFI

Summary

If governance is the set of rules and methods for the consideration, choice and control of decisions in a society, governance is about the operational implementation of democracy.

Generally speaking, whatever the territory is, governance of public action is subject to tensions and paradoxes which question it, at its foundations and in its functioning. In essence, governance - which consists of guiding and regulating public action - requires partnerships and collaborations of various kinds between multiple partners. The current debate on borders and limits for territorial "polities" in France masks the real question of the levels of governance for every territory and the allocation of governance responsibilities between the various territorial links. The "institutional layer cake" (*mille-feuilles* as we call it in France) would represent a failure of shared governance, requiring either the absorption of certain territories by others, or their fusion. The French Law which designated *Métropoles* (big cities), defines new skills and new arrangements for relations between the State, the Region, the Department; a new governance of the main communities within each *Métropole*.

As for the rural territories, future decisions on the regions, departments and associations of local authorities will doubtless answer, in part, current questions about their governance. But they will not settle everything: the questioning of territorial governance will also require changes of scope, roles and methods. Let's consider governance in rural areas further.

Issues/Challenges

The issues include the withdrawal of the State, the thinning out of resources generally and public money in particular, the sociological and economic transformation of areas (from countryside to mixed rural/urban or peri-urban etc.) and existing communities, with the emergence of social tensions, a crisis of political trust, the challenge to maintaining public services and services to communities (e.g. the disappearance of medical, post-office and other local services).

So, the challenge is to think of a new way to lead public activity, to change the "software", to take note of changes, to respond to the needs of inhabitants, to involve them and so on. This requires all the "governors" to agree to revisit and rethink what they consider as fundamentals.

Background

Lines are shifting in the rural world:

- The “rural area” is a variable notion: besides the layers of diverse administrative, political “zonings”, the territory actually *experienced* by its inhabitants makes defining it more and more complex. We may vote in one municipality, but work in another one; we send our children to school in one or more municipalities but their leisure activities are in other ones; we find administrative services in the local town centre but we go shopping in the nearby metropolitan area. Finally the inhabitants of the rural world are very mobile even without public transport.
- The dichotomy between public and private action is less and less obvious and will doubtless have to be examined. From starting a new initiative, through to guiding and supporting it into action, roles are shared between public and private operators (which may be community based or not). For example, local authorities expect local actors to submit proposals for action and then decide to support them or not (through public subsidies). Sometimes, civil society takes into account the funders' established proposals (answering calls for projects/tenders), not to mention bids from public service contractors. In this context, the notions of public services or services to the public deserve to be redefined. We need to find a new way of describing these jointly-led actions and to clarify the nature of the relations between operators and funders.
- We need to distinguish between the notion of services (collective, public or individual) as opposed to the concepts of free access and of paid-for services.

In a rural setting, where the local tax is “cheaper” than in the urban areas, the demand for public service, public transport for instance, is not met - or at least, not at the level of expectations of the inhabitants. Nor with regard to the environmental and climatic issues!

At the moment, the absence of common services implies that each “paid-for” service must, in fact, pay for itself. We need to remind inhabitants that services are never free but are paid for through tax. It is also necessary to accept the fact that when paying, different price rates can be applied. The question for the decision-makers is then either to try to create “urban-like” services (but with an exaggerated cost), or to innovate to find other alternatives. Regarding transport, for example, it may be car sharing, mixed transport (parcels / passengers) etc.

In this case, individual initiatives are called for and the community then has a role of initiator, facilitator or support for individual and collective mixed solutions.

Interests in the issue

Who is involved in this governance? Who has legitimacy? Who asks for it?

A “crisis of trust” in the politicians must not imply a debate on the question of the legitimacy conferred by the ballot. We should not confuse this issue (of electoral legitimacy) with the increasing call for participation by local people.

Both questions must be followed up; but not mixed up.

Interests in the issue (continued)

So, who is involved? They include:

- Municipal representatives, the EPCI (in France, Public Intermunicipal Cooperation Institutes), elected representatives and technicians from the decentralized administrations etc. Administrators of European funds participate in the governance of the territory and shape the big strategic decisions.
- Civil society, associations, citizens: The question of the role of the citizens arises. How are they associated to the question of governance ? The idea of participation often limits itself to information, sometimes to the consultation. Decision and follow-up stay in the hands of the institutional bodies. This is far removed from participative democracy models. New rules must be established so that everyone can completely assume their responsibilities, with legitimacy.

NB: in Brittany, the choice of the Pays (like Pays de Redon) as the appropriate level for the strategic and operational management of public action and regulation was made. The reason was its "neutral" position and the fact that it had a specific remit as a forum for different interests, and for negotiation.

The Brittany Region chose to give more power and more means in to the development councils which represent civil society (in each Pays) so that they are vibrant and representative.

Cf. Thierry Burlot, VP Brittany: "We decided to trust the territories. "

- The "technicians", who have the role of clarifying and preparing decisions but sometimes substitute themselves for the political process. It is true that politicians who have to decide on broad objectives and provide a road map for their area sometimes behave like technicians. Nevertheless the number and the quality of these technicians affects the wealth or the poverty of an area. They constitute the engineering resources of territories, without which no clear public action can be carried out. They are the pillars of support for governance. From this point of view, the worst scenario, for a rural area with little engineering strength, is to encourage competition or conflict between the technicians of the various communities.

The requirement for efficiency, which leads to a mutualization (or pooling) of resources in a given area, also promotes cohesion between various services and the pooled service of the area.

The roles of the different stakeholders

In a rural area, governance is a shared script and one where none of the individual actors take power (unlike the *Métropoles*, for example).

So, how should we review, decide the general direction, put things into effect, build action plans, implement and evaluate public action, without discord?

On the one hand:

We have:

- A Europe which exists only by "funding" and administrative and financial rules.
- A State which aims to be "conductor" but which does not always have the baton.
- A Region which gains additional competencies and which has to learn to decentralize itself (in terms of sectorial and territorial policy) especially if it overlaps with the départements.
- A Department which wants to be as big as an ox so that it doesn't disappear altogether.
- EPCIs (Public Intermunicipal Cooperation Institutes) which are immature and inept, and need/have to do a further apprenticeship in democracy.
- Municipalities which have a more restricted power, unless they understand their role as a facilitator for local debate.

The roles of the different stakeholders (continued)

On the other hand:

- Demanding residents, who can be more like consumers than actors. (Cf. Demands for participation, and yet high rates of abstention in practice)
- Organizations (associations, groupings and other lobbyists) which just fizzle out.

We see that in this maze of decision-makers the exercise of governance requires rigour, a kind of self-discipline by everyone to stick to their own role, without encroaching on that of others and without putting the legitimacy of others in danger.

It often requires a willingness to trust, to make way for a leader or to agree to be the leader.

It means knowing how to stick to your role in these cases.

In summary, it puts project skills at the heart of the skillset of elected representatives, technicians and concerned third parties (skills in leadership or project participation).

Recommendations

1. Nothing is possible without a common project.

The action plan for projects to be jointly led in an area presumes a prerequisite i.e. *agreement* on a shared project which sets out a framework for everyone. It is not only about a list of the actions to be jointly carried out, but also of the broad objectives which each player in an area wants to share in and put into effect.

Collaborative strategic territorial development tools such as SCOT, SAGE, PLH and PLIU allow for a coming together in points of view. Also, territorial contracts between EPCI and *départements* or *Pays* (in Brittany) are the opportunities to address everyone's policy priorities and for others to agree. It is a politics for projects which are *co-built* as against the politics of the ticket office, where the customer can only say, in effect, "I've brought my wallet and you are just going to help yourself to the ticket-price".

2. Skills and methods to be acquired.

As previously argued, shared governance requires control of project management (from project launch to evaluation) and greater rigour in the conduct of project activity, with respect for each person's role.

Governance needs to rely on tools and resources in quality engineering. So there is a need to strengthen and improve the "agencies" which serve governance (monitoring centres, *Maisons d'Emploi*, development and energy agencies, tourism offices etc.) These tools should be "above" the tensions of power, that is co-led, and in keeping with the size of the territory concerned.

Author

Anne Patault, Regional Councillor for Brittany

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

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 20 - Governance for rural areas:

the relevant competences for an approach to project management

Page 4 of 4