

## COOPERATING THEIR WAY INTO NEW JOBS

France has one of the largest areas of countryside of any EU country, and rural affairs are deeply rooted in the national psyche. The Coopérés partnership aimed to improve the quality of life in rural areas through a process of community economic development. Though its 'STEP' process, it has brought unemployed people together to create new businesses in the heritage, energy and personal services sectors. One of its most promising results has been to establish a local industry processing wood chips, bringing home an economic activity that was previously carried out elsewhere.

Being out in the country just makes providing services that much more difficult. The Coopérés partnership addresses some deep-seated problems of rural populations – women's unemployment, the isolation unemployment leads to, the fact that young people pack their bags and head for the city, the absence of support services for SMEs or for anyone who wants to get something going. It therefore set out to support the development of 'services of collective interest' in a rural area. It thus contributes to European growth and jobs guidelines 10 – 'promoting a more entrepreneurial culture and creating a supportive environment for SMEs' – and 18 – 'ensuring inclusive labour markets for job-seekers and disadvantaged people'.<sup>1</sup>



To carry out the project, a special association called *Réseau Coopérés 71* was set up, to bring together 15 organisations active in employment and the solidarity economy in four rural areas in the Saône et Loire–south Burgundy area. It aimed to encourage the local population to develop economic activities, thus both creating jobs and strengthening the social fabric. The partnership was led by the Mutualité Sociale Agricole Saône et Loire ('MSA 71'). France's farmers have a separate social security system from other members of the workforce, administered on behalf of the state by 69 independent MSAs across the country. The MSA serves 60,000 members in the Saône et Loire *département*, about a tenth of the population. It is

democratically controlled by its members through 700 representatives elected in different colleges, and its board is presided over by a farmer. It aims to be a single point of reference for the agricultural community, providing sickness insurance and family benefit, as well as piloting new ideas and offering policy advice. "We are the main interlocutor of the Ministry of Agriculture," says Lionel Badot, "the equivalent of the Caisse des Allocations Familiales (CAF) for the population at large, but with a more global and participative approach."

Lionel Badot is a delegate as well as an employee of MSA, and works out of the office in Mâcon, where the local mutual's 400 staff work. The MSA was one of the pioneers of health services in rural areas, and the building houses doctors' consulting rooms as well as its benefit administration and local development functions.

The MSA started its local development actions in the Saône et Loire in 1995, the ideas springing from Mr Badot's involvement with the solidarity economy movement. "The aim was to help people to do things for themselves," he says. "We set up the association to bring together 15 local development organisations," explains Véronique Maillet, the development agent who is one of the two staff of the Coopérés 71 Association. "We built on the experience of the 'Association du Pays Autunois-Morvan', which had already been financed as part of a *contrat de plan* under the Loi Voinet. The role of the 'Pays' was to be a focus for the development of an area based on its

<sup>1</sup> *Integrated guidelines for growth and jobs (2005-2008)*. See [http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/pdf/COM2005\\_141\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/growthandjobs/pdf/COM2005_141_en.pdf)

cultural identity rather than on administrative subdivisions, based on a mixed membership of elected representatives and civil society. Its objective was the fill the gaps in the formal structures.” The initial stage of the Coopérés project was thus based on gaining the consent and active participation of local people by calling on their sense of local identity and their existing organisational membership.

By contrast the approach to EQUAL was relatively technical. MSA’s only other partner in the formal sense was AFIP, a national association which offers *à la carte* training for local elected representatives and volunteers on issues such as personal services. Its aim is to create an endogenous approach to rural development, to encourage participation and try to make actions autonomous. “We kept the formal Development Partnership simple, purely to cut done the paperwork,” Ms Maillet says. “The empowerment was at a lower level, through the members. We held open steering committee meetings four times a year to give people the chance to offer constructive criticism of each other’s work. This created a new network among the local projects, and people want to make it a permanent thing.” One result of EQUAL is therefore a stronger local network and a greater capacity to launch new projects.

## STEPS TO SOMETHING BETTER

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The partners worked on varied development projects in 18 separate locations across the *département*. They found a wide range of ideas that they submitted to a feasibility test, among them agrotourism, organic market gardening, food processing, heritage restoration, textiles, arts and crafts, traditional rural skills, personal services, environmental protection, grounds maintenance and forestry.

To get things moving in three specific areas, the partnership applied a method it calls ‘STEP’ – *stimuler le territoire par l’emploi et les projets* (‘stimulate the territory through employment and projects’). This involves gaining support from the local municipality, provoking the interest of the local people, and then applying a participative methodology to tease out the real issues. Solutions can then be suggested and working groups set up.

Sylvie Faure, ex-president of the association Ac’tive BL, describes how the EQUAL partnership reacted to the closure of a local textile factory in the nearby town of Bourbon-Lancy, throwing 250 people out of work. “Our first step was to create an association of unemployed people, and to launch this we organised a meeting in March 2003. The national employment agency ANPE sent out a letter to all the people on their books,” she says, “so we expected quite a good attendance. We put out 60 chairs, but 170 people turned up! We organised into working groups of about 15 and met each week to discuss problems such as transport, childcare and access to work. This led to various



**L to R: Lionel Badot of the MSA with Sylvie Faure, Cécile Lasset and Géraldine Saint-Arroman in the newly occupied office of the Agence du Patrimoine in Charolles.**

initiatives. Some people nursed plans for self-employment and others developed collective projects. In all, 23 people were supported for six months to develop their projects.

“The next step was to create a place to meet, and the commune made a flat available to us, which we staff on a rota basis. We organised computer training, car sharing, workshops in manual skills, Christmas markets, jam-making and a whole range of activities that are preferable to staying at home. We have about 60 people involved, three-quarters of whom are women.” The association now has a plan up its sleeve to take over a bar and a grocery that have closed down.

## **JOBS IN HERITAGE**

In the main street of the quiet town of Charolles, which has a population of 3,000 and is the home of the famous charolais breed of cow, a shop unit is under conversion into the *Agence du Patrimoine* or Heritage Agency. The Coopérés partners had identified a considerable potential for employment development in the renovation of historic buildings, and so they launched a training course for heritage development agents, in which Cécile Lasset took part. "The course started in September 2004 and ran for four days a week for nine months," she explains. "Eleven people from all over the region graduated. It included specialist teaching on architecture and art history, as well as a practical restoration project. In our case this was to restore a totally ruined public wash house. It took 11 of us 1½ months to restore it relying on our own ideas, our own skills and our own hands. It is near a footpath which is being developed as a tourist attraction and makes a perfect picnic place. After that, the third module of the course is on how to make heritage sites accessible to the public – for instance by creating a heritage trail with interpretive signs linking six historic laundries. We are learning how to create sustainable assets for the community."

The idea behind Coopérés is that heritage restoration can provide livelihoods for local people at the same time as rendering a public service. The project has therefore now opened a consultancy business which is to be incorporated as a SCIC – *société coopérative d'intérêt collective* or collective interest co-operative – which will provide five jobs.

The agency currently takes the form of an association that has 20 members, including individuals, trainees and local notables. It foresees four business activities:

- advising property developers and people considering the renovation of an old building. The association is carrying out a survey of the properties that are available. The responsibility to look after vernacular architecture has recently been devolved to the communes, so there are numerous opportunities to redevelop unused buildings for public purposes;
- integrating unemployed people into work, by carrying out building and environmental improvements. There are opportunities to create new synergies, for instance riverbank restoration has benefits for flood control, fishing and education trips for schools;
- perpetuating rare skills such as ironwork, stained glassmaking and statue painting, which have a market niche in the restoration of old buildings;
- creating tourist facilities and carrying out educational work in schools.

## **A FOCAL POINT FOR LOCAL SERVICES**

A local development project with a slightly different accent is under way at Toulon-sur-Arroux, population 1,700. It revolves around the restoration of the old watermill and 500 metres of surrounding riverbank just below the village's 11<sup>th</sup>-century bridge. The Moulin des Roches now accommodates a multi-functional *Espace Rencontre* or meeting point. The renovation cost €900,000, three-quarters of which was borne by the European Agricultural Fund.

The EQUAL project in the village started with a survey of local needs, which pinpointed two problems: mobility and services to the population. The second stage was to set up an association of unemployed people, which in its three-year life has managed the remarkable feat of finding work for 25 of its members – about half of all the unemployed people in the village.



***A vital meeting point – the Moulin des Roches at Toulon-sur-Arroux***

The renovation of the mill answers the need for a place to house a whole range of facilities for the local population. The mill itself houses a library and offices, while across the yard stands a 60-seat performance space, which opened in October 2004. "People can come here for a whole range of services," says the mayor, Paul Dumont. "The centre is entirely wheelchair accessible and offers access to a computer for job searches, railway ticket reservations and distance

learning – it is the only public internet access within a 12-kilometre radius. We offer services such as issuing residence permits for residents from outside the EU and carrying out the ‘alertness test’ you need to renew your driving licence after age 60. The library hosts activities such as a bridge, Scrabble and public readings. We reckon we have about 2,500 users, coming from eight communes.” It also provides office space for Sylvie Barnay who looks after the local voluntary associations and Elisabeth Guesnon who is a youth worker for the Foyers Ruraux de Saône et Loire.

## BRIGHT IDEA

It may sound outmoded, but using woodchips to heat your home is back in fashion. Indeed in Lionel Badot’s view, one of the Coopérés partnership’s best results is to be seen in the market town of Autun, where it has helped establish a new business based on wood-burning heating systems. Around two-fifths of the area of the adjoining Morvan is forested, so wood could be a major economic resource – if it is correctly exploited.

“Heating with wood chips is extraordinarily cheap. It costs about 2 eurocents a kilowatt-hour,” says Jean-Pierre Duvignard, president of the association *FLAM Bois Energie* (FLAM being an acronym for *Filière Locale Autunois Morvan*). “This compares with 3.5¢ for diesel oil, 5.5¢ for coal and 8¢ for electricity from EdF. A cubic metre of wood chips costs €25 and will generate a megawatt-hour of energy – it’s the equivalent of 100 litres of fuel oil that costs €54. The main deterrent factor is cost of installing a new boiler. This costs about €15,000, but a 40% tax rebate reduces this to €9,000. And this for a system that is less polluting and has three times the local job content.”

The FLAM association was set up in 2003 to link together the different actors in the timber production chain, to promote wood-burning, to sell its members’ products, and to create local jobs. It involves farmers, foresters, heating engineers and the communal authorities. It took out a bank loan to buy a wood chipper, and has gradually built up customers, for instance among people opening small hotels. “Our work changes mentalities, mobilises people, and encourages them to work together. It creates local wealth from a locally controlled resource. Before, the wood was processed elsewhere – now it is a local industry. And it respects the environment because wood is a renewable resource,” says Mr Duvignard.

It now offers eight full-time posts, with half the week given over to training. To commercialise the activity it plans to convert into a SCIC. Project manager Franky Sabot, one of the beneficiaries of these integration jobs, believes that the new status will give the business credibility and increase its members’ commitment. “It unifies the interests of our three types of members – producers and customers – individuals, communes, an association of communes – as well as employees. It also provides a proper legal mechanism for the local authorities to contribute to our working capital by buying shares. We shall be carrying on developing the business in the second half of EQUAL, as part of the ‘Recoltes’ partnership.” A possible opportunity for faster growth is communal heating systems, which some public organisations in the area are considering installing.

## STRUCTURES FOR PARTICIPATION

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“We use three organisational tools to stimulate entrepreneurship, the *couveuse*, the *coopérative d’activités* and the SCIC,” says Mr Badot. “The *couveuse* or incubator acts as a supportive setting in which a start-up can take its first steps. The *coopérative d’activités* is more than that because the new entrepreneurs each become a member of the promoting organisation, and manage their own support. They therefore help each other. They are each responsible for their own business, and all pay a percentage of their profits to the co-operative to ensure their collective survival.

“The SCIC, or *société coopérative d’intérêt collective*, is a new type of co-operative introduced in 2001 which furthers the general interest while also involving the employees. This idea of participating, joining in, doing something active, is at the core of local development. The SCIC is important because it offers a way for us to create an economic activity out of an associative one. The important thing is that you must have the business idea first, not create a SCIC in a bid to realise a fantasy. Its strength is that it is a vehicle through which the working capital can be accumulated through local people and organisations buying shares, and because the employees

are also members it gets away from the traditional pyramidal structures and the rigid hierarchies which many associations have,” says Mr Badot.

The SCIC brings the idea of multi-stakeholder co-operation into French law. SCICs must have at least three different interest groups as members. Users and employees must be represented, thus ensuring both a user orientation and employee participation in decision-making. Other possible stakeholder categories are volunteers, public authorities and other individual or corporate supporters. Voting is on a ‘one member, one vote’ basis, though voting in colleges is also provided for under certain circumstances. SCICs must declare their ‘general interest’ objectives, be approved by the local prefect, and undergo a co-operative audit. They must set aside at least 57.5% of their profit as an indivisible reserve, but the remainder can be distributed to shareholders, subject to the legal ceiling of the average interest paid on private bonds. Dissolution is altruistic, in that any assets remaining are transferred to a body with similar objectives. Their legal minimum capital is €3,750. Public bodies can subscribe for up to 20% of the capital.

## A TOOL FOR PARTICIPATION

The partnership’s objective was to involve local people, so it arranged a 2½-year training course in participative methods, based on the ‘GERDAL method’ pioneered by the *Groupe d’Expérimentation et de Recherche – Développement et Action Locale* at ENESAD in Dijon. It is a technique for encouraging people who have difficulty speaking out to reformulate their ideas in a way that can be worked on – the so called *dire – relier – proposer* (‘say – link – propose’) method. This works through first of all listening to the problems that people express, then feeding back the issues they have raised to them in a usable form, investigating the questions that lie behind the perceived problems. Then you can start developing solutions.

## TIME AS A TALKING POINT

Practice also proved that it is women who tend to take the lead in the local development projects – perhaps because they still face discrimination when applying for jobs, especially manual jobs. It therefore used the reconciliation of work and family life as a key, as a way of reading reality.

“Thinking about how one uses time obliges one to introspect, so it is a good way of mobilising people,” says Lionel Badot. “To get discussion started, we showed a film that had been made by the Danish Ministry of Labour about the provision of water in Africa. The filmmakers interviewed both men and women, and what came out was that the men had no idea how many tasks their womenfolk performed. For men the issue of time was simple – it was divided into work and leisure – whereas for women time management was much more complicated as they had to prepare food, care for children and so on. This led our group to think for the first time about time management. Their initial conclusions were quite negative – that starting a business would simply take too much time – but after thinking about it, it became evident that it was about organising time. For instance in the old days farmers just did not take holidays, whereas today they can call in a holiday cover service.” The participants then made their own video about time, based on eight individual experiences.

## JOBLESSNESS ON THE AGENDA

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Apart from the broader horizons, participative skills, professional qualifications, community organisations, jobs and businesses that Coopérés leaves in its wake, the project has changed the political environment. At Bourbon-Lancy the STEP project that created the unemployed association built a new partnership between the unemployed people and their elected representatives. The project got the problem of unemployment out in the open and made it a local political issue – so much so that the ANPE opened an office there. The SIVOM (the local inter-communal body) has also been convinced, and has said it wants to create an association and open an information centre there to help inhabitants (it has joined the development partnership in the second half of EQUAL). “This is really impressive because local unemployed people have organised themselves to make demands of their local politicians,” says Mr Badot. “It is also interesting that the attitude of the local councillors has changed – beforehand they used to talk about the social economy in philosophical terms, but now they talk about it as a reality.”

## THREE-WAY EXCHANGE

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The three-way transnational partnership between France, Italy and Portugal worked through half a dozen working groups that each met three times. They jointly produced a series of guides covering participative methodologies; enterprise in mountain areas; the social economy and local development; and the reconciliation of different social times; as well as a video comparing the experiences in the three countries. A further result has been a permanent twinning between the Terra Cha in Galicia and the Canton du Pierre-de-Bresse, and especially La Chapelle Saint-Sauveur. A particular benefit for the French participants was sharing their experiences with their colleagues from the mountains of Lombardy, the concrete result of which is the guide to developing fragile economies.

More broadly, says Mr Badot, the experience of seeing social co-operatives in action gave the French partners the desire to create the same type of structures. "It was instructive to see how the Italians, who don't have such a history of a strong central state as the French, have done it for themselves, in a very pragmatic way. They also know how to manage participation: it was impressive that there was real commitment from the local councillors – they were proud to be part of an EQUAL project."

## CONTACT

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**DP ID:** [FF-BRG-2001-11127](#)

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