

Turning unifying themes into development levers

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Choosing one or more "unifying themes" (strong, priority themes) to build a development strategy can prove effective if this choice is based on participation, integration and openness to change. A theme is a means, not an end in itself.

The purpose of this article is to show that the concept of “unifying theme”, which gives rise to various questions and interpretations, may turn out to be particularly effective in consolidating the special characteristics of the LEADER approach and in widening their scope. In what conditions can a theme actually be a lever? What are the risks and pitfalls that need to be avoided? How can a “strong” theme become the focal point of an integrated development strategy?

“Strong” theme, “unifying” theme

In the strict sense of the word, a “theme” is defined in the dictionary as “the main subject or idea in a discussion, conversation, lecture, etc.”. In music, for example, it is a “short simple tune (...) on which a piece of music is based” and “(...) may be repeated several times in a piece.” The theme therefore begins as a simple idea that can lead to all kinds of developments. In the concept of theme there is something fundamentally open that encourages imagination, creativity, and initiative. However, there are constraints which include retaining a link with the original idea and sticking to a general guideline.

As for the adjectives “strong” or “unifying”, they imply that the idea contained in the theme cannot materialise without the help of several players who have different interests and who taken individually do not have sufficient visibility and viability to launch a project, activity or enterprise. In all the rural areas of Europe, we thus find assets like know-how, and cultural and natural resources which remain “hidden” or are on too small a scale to have any impact. If they remain marginal or are forgotten for too long, these resources and know-how can end up disappearing when they could have been put to profitable use.

The “strong”, unifying theme is an idea with connotations of revitalisation, dynamism, new images, new dimensions, and new markets. The thematic approach is one that cannot materialise without the collective adherence of the players and the inclusion of all kinds of elements scattered across the areas. In other words, a unifying theme cannot mean exclusion but instead brings together all the players of the area while facilitating integration between the sectors of activity. And it is here that the greatest challenge probably lies, that of reconciling the thematic approach and the integrated approach.

Obvious advantages

In the current context of the European rural world, there are several reasons why the notion of unifying theme has to be introduced in development strategies.

The unifying theme is the focal point for the organisation of the area's future. It is part of a forward-looking approach that is used to decide the strong elements around which the area's future is going to be organised. It therefore implies a free choice of the direction that the area is to pursue in the long term but only after a review of the area's assets, potential and difficulties.

- Unifying themes are a way to revive and enhance the identity- defining elements of the area - first of all, they “highlight” important aspects and can be used to find the right angle from which to view the diverse and distinctive features of the area. In so doing, they create a focal point for all kinds of activities, cultural and identity-defining elements, and know-how specific to each area. Thus they enable local players to rediscover in a different light the special features of their area which they no longer considered of any value. By presenting local players with a different picture of their own resources, unifying themes convey a new identity arising from the original combination of what were previously scattered and unconnected elements.
- Themes create links, integrate sectors - strong themes help overcome any divisions created by sectoral interventions, bringing together people like farmers, craftsmen, restaurant owners and cultural agents who have a common interest.
- They can give economic viability to areas that had none - through the links that they create and through the systemic approach that they imply, unifying themes can offer new economic opportunities and open perspectives for the development of scattered resources or resources no longer used because seemingly worthless. In particular, they are a way to engage in a quality approach to satisfy new demand from consumers and better position the resources concerned in a global market. The thematic approach can be an answer to a form of globalisation that requires strong and differentiated images.
- The thematic approach is a way to learn about development - while respecting the local identity and plurality of the area's players and resources, the thematic approach introduces learning cycles based on consultation, the discovery of common interests and networking. It opens real laboratories of reflection on the interdependence and complementarities of the resources and players.
- Unifying themes provide answers to the great challenges facing the rural world - they give real meaning to the notion of “endogenous development”, involving an approach that establishes a closer link between the various players, resources and sectors of an area, particularly those that are “hidden”, isolated or vulnerable. A unifying theme can thus be the starting point of the creation of new activities while at the same time an answer to the scattering of local activities.
- They are cooperation and networking levers - for an area, a unifying theme can also help launch transnational cooperation projects, facilitating recognition and closer relations between local action groups. For this reason, a lot of LEADER groups join

forces and build their relations around a priority theme already at work in their own area. By promoting a theme, it is possible to better position an area in relation to others while at the same time highlighting the possible complementarities.

Organising the area's development around a unifying theme

The building of a unifying theme is part of the debate on the area's future. The aim being the implementation of a "project area", this debate is first of all an exercise in democratic consultation which takes account of the visible and dominant components as well as the hidden components of an area. It is a collective procedure that combines animation, discussion of common ideas, and the reorganisation of human and economic resources around an important shared objective.

It is a long-term process but one that has to demonstrate its viability in the short term in order to arouse and maintain the interest of the players. This alliance between the short term and the leverage effects expected in the longer term is a determining factor in the choice of the unifying theme. Thus, building a theme means in the beginning identifying a particular feature that exists or has to be built and that is an answer to these needs. Below are a few examples.

Reviving or improving the area's identity

Reviving the area's identity can be a way of achieving large-scale local mobilisation, dynamic institutional consultation and a strong marketing position. The very name of the area can be the vehicle of this energy if it is recognised and put to profitable use by its inhabitants. In this way, areas have been renamed to associate them with a clearly identifiable characteristic that serves as a common reference.

The simplest case is one where an already existing name, rather well known, is used. This name can be based on a local cultural identity that is widely recognised or rediscovered (eg. in Portugal the LEADER intervention enabled an area in the North to recover its historic name: the "Land of Basto") or can come from a very identifiable geographical site (a mountain, waterway, particular biotope, etc.) such as "Anglona-Monte Acuto" (mount Acuto is the new identifying link uniting the microregions of Sardinia. See [article by Jean-Luc Janot](#) in this issue), "Canal de Castilla", or "Forest of Bowland".

In other cases, the local players have taken a page from the history of their area and made it a central element of an identity, creating new products in its wake. They have often highlighted historic episodes from the more or less distant past ("Pays Cathare" / "Land of Cathare", "Terres Romanes" / "Romanesque Country", "Pays de D'Artagnan" / "Land of D'Artagnan") to create and develop a coherent range of tourist and craft products.

Others have based the name of their area on a more specific element. It could be the dominant feature of the area (eg. "The Valley of Cherries" in the Jerte valley in Spain), the symbol of a cultural identity (eg. the "Land of the Sorbs" in Germany or the "Land of Song" in Portugal), a literary identity ("Don Quixote" and "Dulcinea" in Spain, the "Land of Giono" in France and the "Land of Astrid Lindgren" in Sweden), or even a totally new identity ("RaJuPuSu",

the land of the “Passionate Kiss” which is actually an acronym combining the first two letters of the name of the four Finnish municipalities concerned and now famous across Finland) which usually uses the name of a local initiative as a lever to organise more activities on a larger scale. “Land of Music” (Marsica, Italy), “Land of Mathematics” (Emilia-Romagna, Italy), “Bread Villages” and “Book Villages” (Wallonia, Belgium) are all based on this idea. These thematic names for areas give greater visibility to cultural and economic activities, among other things.

A last group has built its territorial identity around a name that is suggestive of and gives visibility to underutilised local potential. This is the case for example of areas with a variety of uninhabited landscapes and areas which have generated and united interests for the development of tourism based on the image of the “Land of Adventure”. The LEADER group of Ribatejo Norte (Portugal) did this, and it is also the case of groups which, like the LAG of “Tarn des Talents” (France), have built their area’s name around a local quality that is gaining in recognition.

Building a unifying theme around specific elements

In other cases, the strong theme is not concerned with recreating an identity or finding a new name for the area but with working on a more specific element that is an essential challenge for the area concerned.

This may involve, for example, mobilising the local players and energies to preserve a natural element whose future is threatened and to create new economic and cultural activities around this element. The Pays du Val d’Adour which built its programme around the theme of water gives us a good example. In this area, the preservation and sound management of water was an essential challenge for the future of the area. This led the LEADER group to define as the general objective of its programme the improvement of the collective management of water with a view to sustainable development and to base all its actions on this theme (see article ["Water at the heart of a diversified, innovative and sustainable development"](#)).

This is also the case of areas which used a native breed or extinct animal species to revive interest and develop activities. In the LEADER areas of Redange-Wiltz (Luxemburg) and Bastogne (Belgium) which still have rare Ardenne breeds of sheep and poultry, the theme “Protecting the Rustic Breeds of the Ardennes” united the interests of local breeders, restaurant owners and producers. The meat from these animals was added to the menu of local restaurants and included among the local products. In addition to research and promotional activities (studies, logo, brochures, etc.), specifications (breeding, production and development criteria) were established to certify the conformity of the Ardenne sheep. Research findings were used to put together a programme to develop extensive grazing in the two areas in order to prevent the land from being definitively left fallow.

In other cases, more than preserving and developing an endangered resource, the aim was to unite individual interests around an already well-developed resource. That is the case in particular of the various thematic roads named after the product being promoted (Cheese Road, Wine Road, Lace Road, Organic Farm Road, etc.). Here, the unifying theme created synergies between similar small-scale elements or activities to make a new collective tourist and cultural product which boosts their individual potential.

Among the strong themes built around a specific element are also those which correspond to a major challenge for the area concerned. A lot of LEADER groups are engaged in debates aimed at focusing their future actions on one or more thematic objectives which are essential challenges for the future of their area of intervention. The focus can be, for example, on: the relationship between rural areas and urban areas (theme already found in the name of the LEADER II area of “Stad- och Land - Hand i Hand” in Sweden which means “City and Country hand in hand”), the case of rural areas where there is a small town or which are near a large city; development actions conducted with people who left the area (for areas where there is high outward migration or on the other hand whose emigrants are returning in large numbers); and social inclusion, particularly in areas with large pockets of poverty.

Building the unifying theme around territorial coherence

Another situation is one where the unifying theme is built around a geographical entity whose aim is to give renewed coherence to the public interventions and private initiatives in the same rural area.

Included in this category are the common themes and concepts developed around parks. The first to come to mind are natural parks and those derived from them (biosphere reserves, Natura 2000 areas, etc.), but this concept of “park” now has a much wider meaning. More than just dealing with ecology, today’s parks also develop the historic, architectonic and other elements scattered across an area and give them overall coherence.

The LEADER group of Maestrazgo (Aragon, Spain) has launched the concept of “cultural park”, a notion that includes in the same project the development of a whole range of resources - geological, ecological, archeological and of course cultural. In a similar move, the neighbouring area of Prepirineo is giving renewed meaning and coherence to all of its resources by uniting them in an area called a “territory museum”.

Building a unifying theme around a label

A lot of unifying themes have been built around labels. The aim is to access specific markets by collectively developing quality resources. In this case, the unifying aspect is reflected in the obligation that the players concerned have to observe rules of behaviour as laid down in a quality charter, for example.

The three LEADER groups of Condado del Jaén (Andalucia, Spain), Pays Cathare (Languedoc-Roussillon, France) and Valle Umbra (Umbria, Italy) each designed a quality trademark for their area based on a label bearing the name of each area. This label follows a general quality charter and more specific specifications, adapted to each type of product and applied by the producers who use it. The three LEADER groups carried this action out as a network, first working together in a transnational cooperation project which they would now like to extend to some forty LEADER areas in various countries in Europe.

Making the launch phase a success

A unifying theme can begin with a public intervention that aims to turn a common denominator of “great interest” into a lever of development and coherence. This is the case of the LEADER groups which gave new suggestive names to their areas to win over local players to an idea holding promise for the future. It is also the case of public officials working together on a transversal action: eg. the “Road of Tolerance” in the Cevennes (France) is a cultural tourism route created by several municipalities and other public entities.

Although the initial course of action often assumes this form, a theme nonetheless needs to take root in the collective consciousness to grow and produce results. How therefore can the different existing wills be incorporated and guided towards the acceptance of a new collective dimension? This is a job involving coordination and consultation where a lot of attention is paid to individual interests, like in the case of the thematic roads and other “discovery trails”. In other cases, the work has to focus on the imagination of the players and institutions to go from the basic idea to common projects. This often implies research and other courses of action to take the idea further and help the process move forward.

A successful theme is often the result of a subtle combination of elements like public intervention supported by outside technical assistance (studies, etc.), the capacity to plan for the area’s future, a process of animation and gradual education to convince the individual players of the importance of the action. The area project of “Pays Cathare”, born of an intervention of the local authorities, gradually got the local players more and more involved in the action, especially to promote and protect the “Pays Cathare” quality trademark.

Avoiding certain pitfalls

While a unifying theme can be an effective lever to release new energies and synergies in rural areas, its choice can also generate some harmful effects: adoption of a sectoral and vertical approach, introduction of barriers between players, concentration of efforts on only a few resources, thereby creating or reinforcing imbalances which increase dependence on grants. So how can these traps be avoided and full advantage taken of the unifying theme or themes?

Probably the first rule should be not to consider the priority theme as a goal in itself but rather a local development tool shaped according to needs. This implies retaining a certain flexibility in building the unifying theme.

Not sticking to just one theme but looking for possible connections between several themes

Sometimes one theme alone is not enough to bring together all the players of an area. Several unifying themes or “subthemes” are necessary, provided that there are links between them and they are part of an integrated development strategy. It is also possible to choose a central

theme that generates others. In Ireland, the creation of a natural park, objective of the Duhallow LEADER group, led to the identification of four derived themes: ecotourism, agriculture, deer breeding and territorial development.

Working on the presentation of the theme

The way in which the theme is presented can play an important role in determining what effects the theme in question will have. Sometimes it is better to present the theme in the form of a phrase or slogan. For example, in the Valle del Jerte (Extremadura, Spain), an exploratory study with the members of the LAG led to the adoption of the unifying theme of “Valley of Cherries” which illustrates what is most characteristic of this area. But after further discussion, it seemed a better idea to use the expression “The Good Life in the Valley of Cherries”. By simply turning a name (“Valley of the Cherries”) into a slogan (“The Good Life...”), a leverage effect could be given to the theme in terms of mobilisation. This facilitated, for example, debates with the local people, who all specified what they understood by “the good life” in their village: what services do we need? what facilities have to be built? what kinds of new activities, new jobs could be developed around the valley’s image? This also makes it possible to give an intersectoral and integrating dimension to a theme which might first seem limited to a particular sector.

A key element for the future of rural areas

More than the strong theme itself, it is the process of building the particular theme(s) which leads to development. The same theme can be totally demobilising if it is imposed by a few individuals or institutions or be a vehicle for new social and economic dynamics if it has been clearly supported by all the local players.

In this sense, the unifying theme elaborated in a flexible bottom-up approach is a powerful development lever. It is first of all a catalyst for the creation of links: links between players, between sectors of activity and also between areas in the context of thematic networks. It is also the focal point of learning processes and the accumulation of knowledge. The unifying theme causes new learning cycles to emerge through an unusual combination of factors and sectors and through adherence to a project where there are common interests. Locally, this leads to connected and systematised knowledge built around common references.

For all these reasons, a theme must be able to evolve over time, according to the needs of the area and its players.

In rural areas where people and resources are scattered, organising development around a unifying theme can play a crucial role in instilling new life in areas often in crisis. This is especially true in today’s world of globalisation where new alliances have to be created to be present in all the great areas opened up by internationalisation (markets, areas of communication, common standards, etc.).

It will take one more step, however, before the methods of exploratory reflection and construction of unifying themes, still too often empirical and intuitive, are systematised and become recognised widespread methodological references.

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