

The Gers region and the willingness to change

The Gers Department in the Southwest of France, historically known as Armagnac, is one of 18 local areas (statistically classified as a NUTS3 region) that have been studied in depth by the European Network for Rural Development (EN RD) Thematic Working Group No 2 on links between agriculture and the rural economy in EU rural areas.

The group's main aim was to examine the contribution of agriculture to rural development, and to provide insights and guidance for the improvement of the implementation of Rural Development Programmes and the forthcoming review of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy. However, the exercise also threw more general light on the way rural agricultural areas were facing up to the challenges of structural change and development.

The qualities of Gers

Gers is a rural Department characterised by an attractive climate - early springs and mild winters - and a high quality soil which, together, contribute to its continuing success as a prosperous area of agricultural production. For many people outside the region it is perhaps best known as the leading producer of foie-gras although, in reality, the mainstay of its agricultural output are cereal products such as corn and wheat.

As a rural area, Gers stands out from many of the other regions studied by the Thematic Working Group in a number of respects. Firstly, agriculture occupies most of the land area, with less than 10% given over to forests (unlike most of the regions studied, which tend to be closer to the EU average of 40%). Moreover, agriculture in Gers contributes some 13% of the region's total output and 16% of its employment – against an EU-wide average for employment in agriculture of just 5% of total employment.



While employment in agriculture has declined in Gers, in line with most other regions in Europe, the rate of decline (under 7% over 10 years) was far less than in the most of the other areas studied. Hence the agricultural industry remains strong, has good links to other parts of the rural economy such as food processing, trade and hotels and catering (these linkages were analysed in depth using sophisticated economic input-output techniques), and is clearly central and fundamental to the vibrancy and cohesion of local community life.

The population of the region numbers some 170,000 people, but the area is sparsely populated, with fewer than 30 inhabitants per square km. The average living standards, as traditionally measured by GDP per head, are only 80% of the EU average. However, there is plenty of evidence that the quality of life is a major compensation for those who live there, and this is continuing to help attracting new arrivals to the area, including into farming.

Life on and off the farm

As elsewhere in the most developed economies of Europe, farms in the region are becoming more like other businesses in the sense that they are less and less built around families, and more and more around partnerships of people with different skills. This provides opportunities for new people to enter the industry, often renting rather than purchasing land. This trend is also reflected in a strong co-operative sector, with over a third of the top 40 agro-industrial groups in the region being co-operatives.

Those seeking to set up in business in Gers are not short of encouragement or appropriate advice. A number of organisations exist to welcome and assist new entrepreneurs. The Cooperative Gers Initiative, created in 2000, is a typical example. It offers support to help entrepreneurs set up their businesses (analysis of business development, advice on business strategy and market research, etc.) as well as the opportunity to test business projects on the market, and help in making the transition from employee to entrepreneur (www.gers-initiatives.com).

Likewise, the Soho Solo project encourages growing numbers of self-employed home workers to make use of advances in information and communications technologies. Thus enabling them to move to the area and enjoy the quality of life that can only be found in the countryside. At the same time they are still deriving much of their incomes from cities and urban areas but without the associated stress and noise. The project has been so successful that it received the European Enterprise Awards 2008 from the European Commission (www.soho-solo-gers.com).



Other collective initiatives exist to build on the natural strengths of the region – its agriculture, climate and environment – with its food and related qualities promoted through the 'Excellence Gers' initiative (<http://www.excellence-gers.fr/>). Its activities of the latter range from promoting local products in venues like music festivals, to helping local farmers attend national fairs, like the "Salon de l'agriculture" in Paris.

However, community spirit and collective action does not mean that individualism – a traditionally respected trait of farmers - is being lost. Diversity rules in many areas. The Lectoure County of the Department, for example, is described as a typical diversified local agricultural community, with some 150 different farmers producing several products, ranging from vegetables, plums, melon, garlic, to beef, pigs, and dairy products, as well as wheat and grain.

Likewise, while the region is one of the main areas of foie-gras production, it still has more than 1,800 independent producers; 1,500 of whom sell directly to consumers from their farms or at street markets.

Ferme de Mounet: from cereals to foie gras and agro-tourism

The 60 hectares *Ferme de Mounet*, which had only produced cereals until 1980 when, in the face of difficult market conditions, it decided to diversify into ducks and geese breeding and later into agro-tourism. Today the farm is an excellent model of integrated agricultural production combined with agro-tourism. It is one of the main foie gras producers, offering a full range of *foie gras*, *confits*, *cassoulets*, *magrets*, *pâtés* and *rillettes* - all appropriately labelled '*production fermière*' under the Gers brand, and all sold on-site. Tourists have the opportunity to taste the homemade products while staying in the farm's self-catering cottage or in one of the four *chambre d'hôte* (bed & breakfast) guest rooms.



This farm has benefited from some grant funding – notably to renovate property in order to provide holiday rentals – but feels that the process for EU funding should be simpler and better publicised ([Ferme de Mounet - full description](#)).

On the one hand, food processing, an important activity in the region, is much more subject to other kinds of economic forces - economies of scale and the availability of local supplies – which result in an unusual structure of production. In effect, while the region's chief products are cereals, they are largely exported for food processing because of insufficient processing facilities in the region. On the other hand, the region imports products from other countries and regions for domestic processing, including meat from Spain and Italy, milk powder from other parts of France, as well organic carrots, chickens and beef meat.

The scale of food processing is sufficiently important, and it is estimated to account for half of all industrial employment in the region - some 3,000 people, the bulk of whom are employed in three large companies - Danone (dairy), Prolainat (desserts) and Mais Adour (co-operative). In parallel, there are also nearly 400 smaller companies involved in this sector in some form or another.

The importance of SMEs in the food processing sector, as well as the value of collective promotion of the region, is illustrated by the example of the agro-food company BPC Traiteur. This agrofood company has capitalised on the Gers quality 'image' to promote some 250 different products (salads, biscuits, ready-to-eat meals) that are sold to an organic food shop network throughout France and Belgium.



Capacity and willingness to change

Pressures to diversify economic activities and jobs are strong in many rural areas as employment in agriculture declines. A variety of initiatives are being taken by governments and the EU to encourage farmers and farming communities to seek alternative or additional sources of income, notably related to tourism and recreational activities.

While France is well known as a strong defender of European agriculture, rural tourism is also seen as an important instrument of regional development in the French National Strategy Plan (NSP) for rural development, because the jobs generated by these activities help to retain populations in local areas. Various EU funding sources are used to support this approach.

In policy terms, the French National Strategy Plan (NSP) recognises that the number of farmers with incomes from outside the agriculture sector is below the EU average (at 24% against 31%) and the figures for Gers will be significantly below the French average

In the case of Gers, however, while progress has been made in this direction, it has been slower than might be expected. Part of the problem is that there is a long-standing shortage of hotel accommodation in the region, with only three or four hotels capable of accommodating 50 people – a cause of concern for the Gers Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which has prepared a 2010 plan to support tourism entrepreneurs.

The development of 'on-farm accommodation' (i.e. farmers converting buildings and properties for visitors), is a particular thrust of French policy, however only around half of the new accommodation provided in the region each year comes about thanks to government support. The other half is accounted for by the spread of the ubiquitous '*gites*' (self-catering holiday homes for rent) or 'bed and breakfast' providers, often manned by newcomers seeking a new business challenge or an active retirement. It is not sure how extensive such facilities are in Gers but, in the wider Midi-Pyrenees area, it is estimated that there are now close to 5,000 *gites* and over 3,000 bed & breakfast facilities. Given that the countryside is the second most important destination for French tourists, there is obviously considerable potential for development; at present, no more than 5% of farms in the Midi-Pyrenees seem to be involved in agri-tourism.



All of this is despite the fact that the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CDT) reports that tourists are attracted to Gers by the quality of life, the pastoral countryside, and the cultural heritage of the region: indeed the Department sees itself as 'the Tuscany of France', with gastronomy being the best asset of the area and foie gras 'the best ambassador'.

This positive gastronomic image in the minds of those who consume its products outside the region comes in contrast with the somehow limited possibility of enjoying local foods in the region's restaurants; this is clearly a concern for the CDT. With its project '*Tables du Gers*' (<http://www.restaurant.tourisme-gers.com/>) - a new quality label awarded to local restaurants – the

CDT aims to convince more restaurants to source products directly from local farms and cooperatives. At the same time, some restaurants see difficulties in working with local producers - higher prices, delays during the deliveries, availability of products throughout the entire year.

To help tackle this, the *Comité Départemental du Tourisme et des Loisirs du Gers en Gascogne* (CDTL) has also prepared a strategic tourism plan for 2010, including several actions concerning the 'Tables du Gers'. The Tourism Board will focus on qualifying and selecting new restaurants to achieve the quality label and will provide help for restaurants - such as Gersoises recipe/cookbooks and Gersoises wine lists - to assist them in selecting and preparing local products.

There are other profitable options available to farmers in the region, with favourable conditions of climate and geography providing opportunities for successful diversification into new energy generation without disrupting agricultural production on their land ([Agro-forestry project](#)). An increasing number of farms are seeking to install photovoltaic solar panels on their buildings, and the Gers Chamber of Agriculture has established a service to help farmers with 'renewable energy' projects, whether these aim to make them more energy efficient, or diversify their sources of income. In 2009 training was provided to 120 farmers interested in putting photovoltaic roofs on their farms.



Public policy support

France is widely recognised as a 'well run' country, with a hierarchy of political and administrative authorities that work effectively together. This is as true in relation to agriculture and rural development as it is in other policy areas and it is much appreciated by the local communities who draw on it. In this respect, the reputation of Gers is particularly strong: being recognised throughout France as a well organised Department with a variety of different initiatives.

The Rural Development Programme (RDP) in France (France *hexagone*) is focused on maintaining and developing the economic and residential attraction of rural areas to keep them populated and dynamic. These measures include marketing new products, provision of services to maintain the landscape and diversification of farms being supported with the aim of increasing farm tourism.

The RDP also supports the implementation of local development strategies, notably with the involvement of farmers, cooperatives and farmers' unions in Local Action Groups. Competitiveness in agriculture and forestry, supported through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), is supplemented by European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) support for research and innovation in enterprises.

The analysis of various programmes concerning Gers highlighted a high level of consistency, with local priorities developed to reflect both national objectives and local needs and circumstances. Equally, there appear to be no major conflicts of interest between public administrations, regional and local government authorities, and the various rural development stakeholders in implementing the RDP at regional level.

In many ways, both the policy frameworks and the delivery systems can be seen as models for other regions and countries. This is reflected in both the coherence between levels of planning, and in the

types of measures used to promote synergy between agriculture and rural development. Most welcome of all, as far as farmers are concerned, are the simple and effective systems for ensuring that decisions on funding are made in a timely manner, and that agreed funds arrive swiftly – not something that always occurs everywhere!

Facing the future

Gers is a region with favourable climatic conditions, an enterprising population, and public authorities whose policies are in tune with local goals and needs. However, it cannot escape the challenges that rural areas are facing everywhere in terms of increasing the economic returns from agriculture, taking better account of environmental concerns and changing attitudes towards the use of the countryside, as well as developing the local economy in ways that improve job opportunities and quality of life.

Gers' greatest strength, in these respects, lies in its entrepreneurial dynamic backed by appropriate public support. Although so far, exploitation of some of its tourist potential may have been slow, there is little doubt that the actions in place will ensure that many more outsiders as well as current residents, will learn to appreciate its values and potential and join in helping bring that potential to fruition. Moreover, if Europe's energy demands continue to grow, its climate conditions may well prove an additional bonus.