

MARGEM ESQUERDA DO GUADIANA (Alentejo, Portugal)

A local partnership structuring civil society



The action

A local partnership embracing as many men and women as possible from the left bank of the Guadiana, the "Rota do Guadiana" association has gradually become a "permanent forum for local development". The municipalities and the main bodies concerned by the area's development have all joined the association. It has built up a set of internal structures, both formal and informal, that are area or theme-oriented, making it possible to mobilise and gradually structure civil society and maintain dialogue with the local authorities.

Key elements

- > Structuring of civil society in a context of organisational deficit.
- > Transformation of the association into a "permanent forum for local development".
- > Mobilisation of human resources around projects of collective interest.
- > Permanent mobilisation through flexibility and the continual adaptation of working methods.

Context

When the association was set up, Alentejo was still a traditional, largely unstructured society where a certain organisational vacuum reigned outside the local authorities. Several factors explain this situation:

- > this part of Portugal has a dual socio-economic structure (minority of large landowners, overwhelming majority of farm workers and landless farmers, absence of middle classes);
- > the region has virtually no manufacturing;
- > fifty years of the Salazarist regime left a strong imprint on mentalities (the "Estado Novo" forbade any form of non-public organisation of civil society).

Since the restoration of democracy in 1974, all sorts of organisations have emerged (trade unions, professional groups, cultural associations, etc.) but inter-institutional partnerships have remained rare. When the association first began, the people of the left bank of the Guadiana still had an extremely local-based outlook, resulting not least in a certain rivalry between municipalities.

Starting point

The implementation of LEADER I coincided with the emergence in Alentejo of the first local development associations. In 1992, an agronomist and a doctor took the initiative of creating a local development association for the left bank of the Guadiana. These two people were rapidly joined by ten others.

Noting the difficulties encountered by the promoters of the LEADER I programmes in their attempts to mobilise civil society and set up local partnership structures, the promo-

ters chose to involve as many people as possible in the association right from the start so that it would become a permanent place of debate ("permanent forum of local development") and encourage the establishment, within itself, of formal and informal groups.

Implementation

A few months after the association was set up, a membership campaign was launched. In two years, 75 individual members were recruited in this way, as well as 8 collective members (including the municipalities). Several non-members also take part in activities. The association remains open to all, but a special effort is made to attract individuals who work in public institutions and who are capable of intervening and coordinating or who have skills in a particular field.

In parallel to this, and even before having access to subsidies (LEADER II financing would not come until two years later), the association worked on developing sectoral work programmes (tourism, crafts, SMEs) and creating its own informal structures in order to maintain a high level of mobilisation and internal cohesion. In so doing it set up:

- > thematic working groups within a large permanent team (27 people);
- > one "local action core" (LAC) per municipality;
- > one advisory council per municipality to manage the HORIZON programme;
- > an advisory council at area level for the LEADER II programme.

To optimise their chances of success, the association's members laid down simple rules of intervention: systematic openness to any proposal of collaboration; great flexibility regarding forms of participation. The circulation of information within the association (publication of internal or external newsletters, for example) also plays an important role in mobilisation and overall cohesion.

Innovative elements for the area

Mobilising the community and social cohesion

Remarkable results were obtained in terms of mobilisation and social cohesion, despite the initial situation having been particularly unfavourable. The Rota do Guadiana association succeeded in bringing an original response to the problem of structuring civil society in a situation of organisational deficit.

Its measures also integrated marginalised people. The association opened up "spaces of social recognition" where the most disadvantaged members of the community can assert themselves. By mobilising young people around projects to mark out tourist trails, for example, the association provided them with a means of expressing themselves while interesting them in the development of their region. Actions of the same order were also proposed to elderly people, the disabled and women's groups.

Activities and jobs

The association rehabilitated old activities and launched new ones. It organised training sessions by individuals well versed in traditional techniques (former seamstresses gave a course on sewing, for example).

While there is very little business culture in this region populated essentially by former farm workers, the association is currently creating several firms in fields that have priority for local development: tourist organisation, aid for local investment, rural centre, etc.

Environment, management of space and natural resources.

The association has allowed initiatives whose range of action had until then only been local to acquire a regional dimension, thereby widening their impact and, in the long term, making them more viable, without jeopardising their nature or dynamism. That has been the case, for example, for associations for the protection for the historical and natural heritage.

MARGEM ESQUERDA DO GUADIANA

In south-eastern Alentejo, between the Guadiana river and the Spanish border, the Margem esquerda do Guadiana (left bank of the Guadiana) is a 3 780 km² area divided among five concelhos (municipalities): Serpa, Moura, Mourão, Barrancos and Mertola. This micro-region has the same characteristics as the rest of Alentejo: an area of peneplains with a Mediterranean climate, low population density (13 inhabitants/km²), an agricultural structure dominated by the large latifundia, a population essentially of farm workers, a high rate of illiteracy. The isolation of the left bank of the Guadiana, combined with poor soil and the absence of all resources but agriculture and marble, has hampered development considerably.

For the past twenty years, the rural exodus has been rising because of chronic unemployment and the situation of poverty and exclusion in which much of the population lives.

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