

BALLYHOURA (Ireland)

Local participation in village appraisals and local planning



The action

The local development agency 'Ballyhoura Development Limited' (Ballyhoura LAG) asked a "Community Advisory Committee" (CAC), on which local associations were represented, to structure the local community's participation in the area development process. Most of the action consisted in finding and training coordinators from the local communities and organising a participatory appraisal in each village to detect existing resources and skills. These appraisals led to the framing and implementation of village action plans.

Key elements

- > Development of coordination methods designed to involve the community in the collection and analysis of information on local resources.
- > Framing, on the basis of the data obtained, of detailed action plans at village level.
- > Local community awareness of the importance of the "quality" of development and actions aimed at young people and the most disadvantaged groups.
- > Rediscovery of the potential of the management of living space and the organisation of local resources.

Context

Despite its decline and the lack of diversification of its activities, the region had a certain dynamism and the capacity to respond to a difficult situation. As elsewhere in Ireland, rural communities were organising volunteer working groups, and cooperative initiatives were taking form, with a view to diversifying activities and optimising environmental potential. The context was thus conducive to mobilising the community, though this mobilisation had not yet taken the form of collective appraisal, discussion and definition of local action plans. This was the task that Ballyhoura Development Limited was going to assume with the help of LEADER.

Starting point

Two years after its creation in 1986, a rural tourism development cooperative decided to set up the area's first local development agency, Ballyhoura Development Limited, in which local groups and public and semi-public organisations are represented. Thanks to the tourism development already under way, the agency succeeded in establishing itself as a local development assistance structure by building on four elements:

- > the forging of a quality partnership with the local authorities, businesses and associations;
- > the participation of the community in the development process through the creation of appropriate structures;
- > the recruitment and training of field coordinators;
- > the elaboration of strategic planning.

In 1989 a formal partnership structure was set up between locally active volunteer groups and associations with the task of discussing topics of common interest but also

guiding and monitoring the development actions supported by Ballyhoura Development Limited. It was named the "Community Advisory Committee" (CAC). From 1989 to 1993, the Committee focused its efforts on actions to improve the conditions of community participation and the impact of voluntary work on local development, and piloted a series of initiatives, including the training of coordinators. In 1993 the decision was taken to conduct an appraisal of resources and skills with the help of the network of coordinators and, for certain specific tasks like the collection of data, of certain local volunteers. Working groups were planned, as was a village coordination programme.

Implementation

To give the initiative a certain credibility in the eyes of the community, the cooperation was sought of the Agribusiness department of Dublin University and certain local and national institutions. The University was asked to design the three sections of the survey: analysis of the family structure, census of human resources and an inventory of historical, cultural, natural and physical resources. The District helped in counting the number of households, which helped make the survey more representative. TEAGASC, Ireland's national Agency for research, training and agricultural popularisation, helped with the planning and implementation of the appraisal.

A series of coordinating methods were tested, including information sessions, seminars and training workshops, which were organised to enable the community and key information providers to learn working methods and to give people a taste for the discovery of resources and skills. The appraisal covered a total of 45 villages, or 21 777 persons, and

took 3 065 hours of volunteer work, provided by coordinators, village "leaders" and key information providers. The information thus obtained was processed in a databank, making it a precious local development planning tool. Integrated development plans lasting from one to five years were devised in 30 of the 45 local communities.

Emphasis was placed on everything affecting the quality of life: recreational areas for young people, housing, village cleanliness and appearance, and community services, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups. From an economic point of view, these plans opened up new prospects of intervention for the community action groups. It was thus decided that they would intervene in the local property development process by changing the use of land and buildings for new potential users, overcoming the obstacles these transformations can create and developing the necessary infrastructures locally.

The appraisal's success gave the Committee and Ballyhoura Development Limited the legitimacy and recognition they needed to deal with questions of collective interest. In 1995 the Committee was able, for example, to build on the conclusions of the appraisal - which indicated the absence of links between local development initiatives and businesses to be a weak point - and produce a programme to coordinate groups of rural actors, including private businessmen. Specific coordinating methods have therefore been put in place to enable these links to form and to harmonise community development and development of the private sector.

Budget and sources of funding

The total cost is estimated at around ECU 44 000. The cost of the volunteer work was put at ECU 7.2/hour for a total of 3 065 hours, or roughly half the total project cost. The other half - technical assistance from Dublin University (ECU 12 000), TEAGASC (ECU 4 200) and local coordination (ECU 5 500) - were financed by the LEADER I programme.

Innovative elements for the area

Mobilising the community and social cohesion

- > The appraisal proceeded from the idea that rural communities must first and foremost rely on themselves to develop their own potential by combining local participation and the formation of social and economic partnerships.
- > The action transformed a situation where initiatives to mobilise the community were few and far between to one where a good proportion of the community was involved in a process of collective discussion and local planning. It sparked the interest of the inhabitants in the problems of their village and reinforced the sense of belonging to a community of interests.

Activities and jobs

The action mobilised new human resources to assist local development. The job of collecting information identified individuals prepared to become involved at local level. The success of this information-gathering work gave the community a sense of confidence and a belief in the potential of its region and its capacity to engage in a process of local development.

Migration and social and vocational integration

In a region like Ballyhoura, which suffers from rural exodus and the decline of the local economy, but where mobilisation is already beginning, this kind of action plays a decisive role. It gives a collective dimension to the existing mobilisation and turns it into a dynamic rich in new ideas and innovations. It remains to be seen whether this dynamic will be strong enough to open up new development prospects and revitalise the area.

BALLYHOURA

Ballyhoura, a rural inland area of Ireland, has approximately 37 500 inhabitants for an area of 1 165 km². Forests cover 4% of the area. Agriculture and livestock farming (milk and meat) are the main sources of income and employment, accounting for 40% of all jobs. The other economic sectors are relatively undeveloped, but a certain takeoff of tourism has been observed in recent years: its contribution to local income rose from 0.2% to 3% between 1986 and 1995. In 1996 it generated value added of ECU 2.5 million.

The region suffers from high emigration, translating into population decline and the disappearance of basic village infrastructures and services, such as the post office, small shops, health care facilities and schools.

Today, the average density is about 30 inhabitants/km² and the two main towns, Charleville and Mitchelstown, have less than 3 000 inhabitants.

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