Eifel Initiative for the Future, Germany

Urban-rural linkages enhancing European territorial competitiveness - Mini case study on business clusters

Short description of the setting

The Eifel region is a low mountain range in western Germany, bounded on the north, east, and south by the rivers and vineyards of the Ahr, Rhine, and Moselle, and by the forest of the Ardennes of Belgium and Luxembourg in the west. It covers an area of nearly 700,000 ha total, comprising 10 districts in two German Federal States (three districts in North Rhine-Westphalia and seven in Rhineland-Palatinate). All in all, the Eifel region gives home to about 900,000 inhabitants in 53 cities and towns. Amidst the cities of Aachen, Koblenz and Trier which mark the borders of Eifel, the region is rather lacking in infrastructure, with few industrial clusters, but mining, agriculture, viniculture, forestry and dairy farming predominating, and tourism as a growing sector. Savage beauty was and is one of the features of Eifel, and since 2004 about 110 km² of the Eifel have been protected as the nature reserve “Eifel National Park”. Vis-à-vis these conditions, the need for a joint strategy and co-operation for the development of Eifel as a competitive region was recognised by many actors across borders, and first implemented for the field of tourism.

Innovative activity

"Eifel - We are future" – with this motto, 10 Eifel districts, 53 local governments and 8 regional chambers of commerce in the two neighbouring German Federal States of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia and the German-speaking Community of Belgium have affiliated in the association “Eifel Initiative” in 2005, and thus established a remarkable regional partnership for creation of value. With the common objective to foster the recognition of the region „Eifel“ as an interrelated economic area, the partners have established a successful instrument for a targeted and joint development of regional competences for sustainable invigoration of the Eifel region. The ground for this cross-border and multi-stakeholder co-operation had been paved by the foundation of the Eifel Tourism Ltd. in 2004, and subsequently the branding of the regional label “EIFEL” in the first major partnership of local authorities and other stakeholders beyond the Federal States' borders. Further impetus from strategic action plans and declarations of the chambers of commerce and chambers of crafts in the cities of Aachen, Koblenz and Trier together with the ten districts, lead to the development of a strategic action plan for the future of the Eifel region. Supported by an external consortium, partners from all Eifel districts in Germany and East Belgium elaborated a location study and resulting action programme, to support the profiling of the Eifel as a competitive region.

At the kick-off event in December 2005, about 300 representatives of all political sectors, regional parliaments, economy, chambers, media, administration, and stakeholder associations convened for the presentation of the strategic concept and engaged in thematic networks to substantiate the concept and develop respective measures:
1. culture & tourism, led by Eifel Tourism Ltd.
2. forest & timber, led by the districts Cochem-Zell and Euskirchen
3. agriculture, led by the districts Bitburg-Prüm and Düren
4. handicraft & trade, led by Chamber of Commerce Trier and Chamber of Crafts Aachen
5. technology & innovation, led by the districts Aachen and Vulkaneifel

Through design and implementation of projects, events, services, networking activities etc., the thematic networks work on the fostering of their “fields of competence”. And their operational work is well supported: a steering group (with councillors of the ten Eifel districts, 3 mayors and representatives of Luxembourg and Belgium), an overall co-ordination board with 3 staff, and coordinators for the thematic networks ensure integration and successful co-operation. In addition, annual “Eifel conferences” serve to inform the public about results, further activities and objectives of the networks.
One of the most successful projects in the initiative is the regional brand “EIFEL” which today labels about 200 different products of agriculture, forestry, handicraft and tourism, obtainable in about 170 points of sale and involving 80 agricultural and 100 gastronomical companies in 2007. Set up as EIFEL Ltd. in all 10 Eifel districts, it represents the district associations of farmers, craftsmen, the Eifel tourism association, and the two natural reserves of the region. Four staff coordinate the value added partnerships for products, ensure quality control and support distribution and marketing, ensure the supply of highly demanded products, expand value-added chains (e.g. link a flour mill with farms and bakeries). Any agricultural and forestry producers and processors as well as touristic service providers who identify with the principles of the regional brand EIFEL and fulfill the defined quality criteria for products and services can apply for the EIFEL label. Thereby synergies have been created in the regional product chains: from producer to fabricator to either direct selling or EIFEL Ltd.’s management and logistics which market the products through sales agents to either gastronomical businesses, trade or retail shops (organic, delicatessen or alike). But also horizontal and sectoral business clusters were formed, such as the mechatronic cluster and the network for wood and timber, to serve to the competitiveness of the individual company. Another cluster of plastic processing companies is just about to be build with about 30 small and medium enterprises.

EIFEL Ltd. is strong in marketing: information about the label, products, points of sale and quality criteria for about 50 different products and services are transparent and easily accessible; and the EIFEL logo is seen on any relevant tourism portal and service in the Eifel region. Co-branding and marketing co-operation are also welcomed to strengthen the region as one economic unit. Institutions, authorities, associations, etc. which do not produce or provide EIFEL services can support the brand with a partners’ label.

Competitiveness contribution

Through the establishment of the Eifel Initiative association with steering group, coordination board and coordination team plus contact points for the thematic networks, the partners have set up a rather comprehensive and solid infrastructure for their co-operation. Partnerships exist on a multi-level basis, between regional and local authorities of Eifel, the larger cities on the fringes, chambers, associations, universities, and various actors from the private sector to support and implement the strategic concept for regional development.

The Eifel Initiative recognises the features and resources of the Eifel region, and employs them responsibly for the development of a distinctive, competitive area. The natural and cultural characteristics are preserved and highlighted for the branding of the Eifel region as a recognisable tourist destination and economic region. Pooling multiple stakeholders across Federal State and national borders with Belgium and Luxemburg - the Eifel Initiative has achieved a remarkable outreach and synergy effects.

The EIFEL brand alone has brought an added value of estimated 835.000 Euro to the region in 2006 (at 1.3 million Euro turnover) and the number of jobs created or secured through the brand is estimated at 70 by the regional management. Synergy effects are manifold: regional specialties add to the image of the Eifel as touristic region – more visitors come and buy the regional products. The common label supports the positive image of the region in public - businesses using the label pay a licence fee to EIFEL Ltd., but profit from the effects and structures of the brand label. Aside this touristic image and branding of the region, the economic competitiveness in the Eifel region is further strengthened by the formation of business clusters, for wood and timber as well as for mechatronics, plastics processing and more.

Contacts and references

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