

Fouli Papageorgiou

EUROPEAN ACADEMY FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable rural development has attracted substantial interest in recent years, stimulated by several EC programmes and initiatives. However, it has been widely accepted that to inspire and manage rural development under the principle of sustainability is a demanding task, which calls for a high level of awareness and special skills from those that “lead” the development process.

The European Academy for Sustainable Rural Development started as a project co-funded by the European Commission’s Leonardo da Vinci programme in 2000 under the acronym *Euracademy*, with the ambitious aim to offer local actors of rural development the opportunity to improve their skills, widen their experience and expand their professional qualifications, starting a personal itinerary of lifelong learning. A multi-national, inter-disciplinary team of university teachers, researchers and consultants of rural development worked together for 3 years to achieve this aim.¹

The philosophy of Euracademy was based on three principles:
– emphasis on human capital as the driver for rural development,

¹ The Euracademy Project partners are:

1. Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU), Rural Development Centre, Sweden, Project Leader;
2. PRISMA Centre for Development Studies, Athens, Greece, Project Co-ordinator;
3. West Hungary Research Institute, Centre for Regional Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary;
4. University of Helsinki, Seinajoki Institute for Rural Research and Training, Finland;
5. Nicolaus Copernicus University, Department of Rural Sociology, Poland;
6. Mediterranean Institute for Sustainable Development (IMEDES), Valencia, Spain;
7. University of Ioannina – Medical Technology & Intelligent Information Systems, Greece;
8. Masurian Academy, Faculty of Marketing and Management, Poland.

- focus on a key group of rural actors: the managers and other animators of rural development,
- encouragement of lifelong learning through an innovative approach of “blended learning.”

EMPHASIS OF HUMAN CAPITAL

Euracademy takes the standpoint of endogenous development, adopting the bottom-up approach. In such an approach, the skills, knowledge and energy of people and communities are the main resource for local development. However, people or local communities need time and effort to build their skills, expand their courage and strengthen their ability to participate in rural development programmes. Such “capacity building” calls for leadership and animation, education and training, networking and technical support.

One of the main objectives of the Euracademy project was to design and test a methodology for capacity building in rural areas that would bring together as many of the above requirements as possible. However, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by capacity building. Three main types of capacity-building may be distinguished: individual, social and institutional. Individual capacity-building is about helping people to increase their individual stock of skills, knowledge and readiness to act and to innovate. Social and institutional capacity building is about promoting the development of social capital and strengthening the ability of formal structures (both within and outside government) to conceive, fund and manage development programmes.

These three types or levels of capacity-building are distinct but closely related to each other, in that social and institutional change may depend upon improving the skills of the people who are involved. Euracademy has recognised this by focusing on both the “personal” skills (those improving the efficiency and productivity of the individual) and the “animation” skills (those facilitating networks and building partnerships).

A KEY GROUP OF RURAL ACTORS

Euracademy has targeted specific groups of rural development actors for individual and social capacity-building. The targeted groups have been chosen on the basis of their ability to bring change in rural society and economy; and influence the rural development process and its stakeholders. Three main groups have been addressed. The first group includes individuals from the public, private and civil society sectors, holding positions or roles that allow them to mobilise, en-

courage and stimulate rural communities to undertake sustainable development initiatives. They are the animators or mediators of rural development. The second group includes managers of local development programmes and planners, who are targeted as "key" actors that can influence the development process. Trainers and teachers form the third group with a direct influence on skill development, who can also provide training of trainers, having a multiplier effect in building the capacity of rural development actors.

A needs analysis performed in the context of the Euracademy project in a wide range of EU and accession countries, has shown that the most valuable and in-demand skills in rural areas are communication and networking skills. Moreover, the same analysis suggested that the best way to ensure continuous access to knowledge and skills acquisition for rural development actors is through exchange of experience and peer-based learning.

A BLENDED LEARNING METHODOLOGY FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong learning has been seen by Euracademy as the primary means for capacity building. The modern world is one of uncertainty and rapid change, in which people may need to upgrade their skills or acquire new skills many times in the course of their career. This is reflected in a multi-country survey conducted by CEDEFOP, which proved how important lifelong learning is perceived to be for the majority of people (85% of a large sample).² Lifelong learning can be achieved by several means, including formal, informal and non-formal education and training. Euracademy has chosen non-formal means for lifelong learning. These include both face to face and distance learning courses, complemented by specially designed manuals and supervised by a team of tutors or learning "facilitators".

The Euracademy project developed a methodology for capacity building based on the concept of the "integrated learning package" which brings together a variety of learning media, allowing the learner to construct his/her own "pathway" of learning. This methodology provides the individual with different learning options and with the flexibility to create his/her own learning material, learning focus and learning pace. A mix of different "learning resources" become available to the learner, via the internet, manuals, face-to-face learning in Summer Academies and networking. The training methodology adopted in the Summer Academies is based on the theory of andragogy (Knowles, 1980 and 1984)³ leading to forms of

² Questionnaire survey conducted in the EU countries, Norway and Iceland, *Eurobarometer*, 2002.

³ Malcolm Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Cambridge/Prentice Hall Regents, New Jersey 1980; idem, *Andragogy in Action*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco 1984.

learning that are open, based on exchange of experience and peer-group guided. Instruction focuses more on process and less on content being taught.

An innovation of the Euracademy methodology is that the "learning resources" developed and tested during the past three years, have a clear focus on self-development of students and on the enhancement of their communication and animating skills. Moreover, it places the learner within an international learning group, in which not only the exchange of professional experience between peers becomes an educational vehicle, but also the national culture becomes a dominant level of knowledge and experience exchange, forcing the students to develop new, sharper communication skills and to adopt new channels for understanding reality and turning it to knowledge.

The principles of the Euracademy learning methodology can be summarised as follows:

- a flexible learning environment, adjusted to personal needs, style and pace of learning
- learning through exchange of experience, acting as both teacher and learner
- learning in a group situation, real or virtual and building personal learning networks
- providing human resources to "facilitate" learning (facilitators or tutors)
- guiding the learning process through a number of "themes" that are pertinent to rural development (e.g. tourism, ICT, diversification of rural economies etc)
- relating learning to real life situations through "case studies".

EURACADEMY ACTIVITIES

Two learning cycles have been completed during the life of the project: The first cycle was built on the theme of sustainable rural tourism; and the second cycle was built on the theme of ICT as a vehicle for rural development. The learning resources that were developed for the two themes include:

– A website has been created as the central learning and communication vehicle for Euracademy www.euracademy.org

– The first summer academy took place in Gotland, Sweden, 10–21 August 2002, organised by the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences; the second took place in Ioannina, Greece, 12–21 July 2003 organised by the University of Ioannina. Open learning has been implemented in the summer academies by incorporating in the curriculum a combination of learning methods, such as lecturing in plenary sessions, workshops in small groups of students and study trips. Both academies included one open space day, 4–5 days of lectures and group work sessions constructed on the basis of the chapters of the Thematic Guide; and 2–3 days on a study tour, which was followed by the production of a study trip re-

port by students and the presentation of these reports in a plenary session. A closing day was devoted to conclusions and networking sessions. 39 participants, 13 facilitators, 8 lecturers took part in the first summer academy and 37 participants, 15 facilitators and 8 lecturers took part in the second summer academy.

– A Thematic Guide on Developing Sustainable Rural Tourism was produced as a manual for the first summer academy and subsequently published and translated into 5 languages. A Thematic Guide on ICT and Sustainable Rural Development was produced for the second summer academy and published.

– A Distance Learning Course on Sustainable Rural Tourism, from 28 April to 7 July 2003, attracted over 60 participants and was supported by a team of 10 tutors. A Distance Learning Course on Information Society and Sustainable Rural Development, from 29 September to 24 November 2003, attracted 55 participants and was supported by a team of 8 tutors, 4 of whom participated in the 2nd summer academy.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND BENEFITS

The achievements of the project can be seen at different levels: methodology development, creation of semi-formal structures (repeated training courses, available every year on a different theme) and personal benefits for the participants.

The Euracademy training model, which combines a multiplicity of training media (summer schools, distance learning courses delivered through the internet, manuals, and an interactive website) gave the opportunity to the learner to use the training offer at will, selecting each year the elements that suited him/her best, in the course of establishing an on-going, lifelong learning process. Moreover, the project provided the opportunity to the students of summer academies to return to Euracademy activities either as facilitators of summer school workshops or members of the tutors' team ("resource unit") in the distance learning course, offering additional value by "training the trainers".

An external evaluation of the project, including both summer academies and Distance Learning Courses was conducted. According to a survey of Euracademy participants, conducted by the evaluator, those who decided to take advantage of the Euracademy courses aimed to expand their networks, gain knowledge (both general and specific) and inspiration. These aims were to a large extent fulfilled, as shown from their own description, as recorded in a survey 3 months after the end of the course, when they had returned to their usual work environment and assessed in retrospect the benefits gained from their Euracademy experience:

- Made professional contacts, created personal networks;
- Started new projects, new partnerships;
- Gained knowledge from various sources, with emphasis on exchange of ex-

perience and practical first hand experience gained through study tours;

- Used knowledge in everyday work;
- Used learning material, including case studies and manuals as teaching materials (those who taught in educational establishments);
- Enhanced their understanding of rural development by having contact with other European cultures.

Finally, added value is also accrued from the introduction of Euracademy training materials to the curricula of university courses run by project partners. N. Copernicus University in Poland has moreover started offering a post-graduate course by distance learning, based on the Euracademy Thematic Guide on Sustainable Rural Tourism, leading to a Masters Diploma granted by the university.

THE WAY FORWARD

A conference organised by the Euracademy team in Győr, Hungary in November 2003 placed the subject of capacity building for sustainable rural development in a wider debate. The conference has shown that Euracademy is only part of a wider scene of capacity building. However, it is addressing a wide and growing market. Its approach works, as has been shown by the reaction of participants. There is clearly room for more of the same activity, and also for continued experimentation in the methods that Euracademy uses. The focus may remain upon individual capacity building, but this in itself will contribute significantly to social and institutional development. The way forward was marked by the need to give a formal shape to the Euracademy network, expand it and strengthen it, with the remit to continue and enrich the activities of the Euracademy project, bringing together the “providers” and “clients” of lifelong learning for sustainable rural development.

The Euracademy Association was formally established as a non-profit membership organisation to sustain the successful effort initiated by the project and take forward and expand its philosophy and activities, hoping to influence the process of sustainable rural development at this crucial moment of the substantial enlargement of the European Union. The Euracademy Association was launched in November 2003 at the Győr conference in Hungary and officially registered in Greece in the same month. The core vision of the Association is to promote capacity building in rural areas based mostly on non-formal lifelong learning, providing at the same time ample space for networking and cooperation to rural development actors. The Association will continue to offer “integrated learning packages” to rural actors; provide a mix of different learning resources, including the www.euracademy.org website, organise seminars, conferences and exhibitions addressing issues relating to capacity building and sustainable rural de-

velopment; and undertake research and studies on sustainable rural development issues, with a view of building up a body of knowledge on this theme.

The statutes of the Association were signed by 37 founding members, including all partners and many participants at the 2nd Summer Academy. Membership to the Association is open to all the participants to the summer academies and distance learning courses free of charge for one year. Six out of the eight partners of the Euracademy project have joined the first Board of the Association, pledged to make it succeed. A seventh member of the Board has been recruited from outside the partnership, as a first move to expand the core of the Euracademy network. A strong interest has been demonstrated from Euracademy participants to join the Association and new corporate members have registered, beyond the above participants, trebling the initial number of founding members so far.

The 3rd Summer Academy is scheduled to take place in Toruń, Poland, in July 2004, on the theme: "Diversification of Rural Economies and Sustainable Rural Development in the Enlarged Europe". This new learning cycle also includes a full Euracademy package, that is running a summer academy, a distance learning course and publishing a thematic guide on diversification. The 3rd Academy is planned by the Euracademy Association without EU funding, largely based on the voluntary work of the Association members. This learning cycle is organised by N. Copernicus University.

EPILOGUE

Rural areas in Europe are currently facing many challenges and changes; efficient use of the knowledge and skills of the different actors involved in or affected by rural development is needed in order to address them. The advent of Information Society and the need to redress the "digital divide", which includes a geographical and social component in rural areas, call for the development of new skills and competence to be developed by rural actors, in the context of life-long learning. In the knowledge society, communication skills and the ability to cooperate flexibly with different people in varying networks, have become more and more important in addition to knowledge management and the use of expert knowledge and experience already existing in networks. This takes on particular importance in rural areas because of the multi-faceted nature of rural development, the broad network of actors involved at different levels, and the different perspectives adopted by these actors. Such issues as diversification of rural economies, standards of social welfare, redressing the development gap between urban and rural areas, constitute a significant challenge in view of the enlargement of the European Union. The concept of "sustainable rural development" can play an important role as an over-arching policy direction for the achievement of cohe-

sion within the enlarged Union, referring both to cross-country cohesion but also to rural – urban cohesion. Building the capacity of rural development actors for co-operational learning opens new prospects for transnational and transregional cooperation, networking and continuous improvement of skills and competence that are in demand in the new European and world era.

The Euracademy project was a successful experiment in rural capacity building, facilitated by EU funding. 250 participants in total joined the activities of Euracademy coming from over 20 European countries: two thirds from Central-Eastern Europe, a third from the EU. Most of the Euracademy participants held an academic degree in economics, business administration, town planning, geography, agriculture or ICT.

The project introduced an innovative concept of capacity building exploiting experience-based learning and peer-guided learning on the one hand; and the provision of integrated learning resources on the other, which were based on a multiplicity of learning media and encouraged networking and partnerships between the participants, as part of the capacity building process. The learning materials developed by Euracademy guide the rural development actors to shape their own learning pathway according to their needs but also provide them with the opportunity to meet other professionals in similar situations, exchange experience, learn from each other and become members of wider learning and professional communities. What is especially important for these networks is their multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary nature which creates added value to the learning process, breaks the barriers of borders and nations and opens up horizons and prospects for cooperation and cohesion in rural Europe.

The achievements of the Euracademy project include the development of an innovative training methodology, suitable for lifelong adult learning and shaped to meet rural development skill needs; the creation of long-term, semi-formal structures that offer training, facilitate networking and update knowledge necessary for sustainable rural development; and personal benefits for the participants of Euracademy activities, including self-development, self-actualisation and improvement of career prospects. The structure of Euracademy activities, allowing for a different theme to be adopted every year, gives the opportunity to the learner to expand his/her competence on a large variety of rural development subjects while consolidating partnerships and networks through repeated participation.

Finally a major achievement of the Euracademy project is the setting up of the Euracademy Association, to take the legacy of the Euracademy activities forward and ensure the long term viability of the structures created already by the project. The announcement of the 3rd Summer Academy in Toruń, Poland in July 2004 is a proof of the sound roots of the Euracademy network and of the commitment of its members.