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**Cooperative Networks in Rural Development  
– Experiences from the Pilot Programme  
“Regional Action”\*\***

**Abstract**

The ability to build social capital is an essential precondition for developing new management expertise and putting it to use for the benefit of integrated rural development. The peripheral rural areas of Eastern Germany face a different set of constraints. Particular problems are posed by weak economic structures and a business sector that has only enjoyed limited development. There is a lack of entrepreneurship and actors who take risk as well as a decreasing interest in voluntary activities in rural communities.

While it is impossible in the short term to eliminate differences between actors in terms of cultural and economic capital through state redistribution programmes, in the medium term the informal structures that exist among actors can be influenced positively by institutional means – in other words, actors can be given more space and resources for genuine participation and greater support in their efforts at networking and cooperation. The aim of actor participation is not to compete with democratically legitimated decision-making structures but rather to be a driving force for greater involvement on the part of ordinary people (civic engagement). Encouraging these processes is indeed one of the objectives of the German model project “Regional Action – Rural Areas shaping the future,” initiated by the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture (BMFEL).

Keywords: East Germany, rural development, networks, regional governance.

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## **Agriculture and Rural Development**

Almost all recent scholarly work on rural development has begun to reassess the economic importance of the agricultural sector for rural development.

One need only look at the statistics to find confirmation of the declining importance of agriculture. Since 1999 the number of farms in Germany has gone down by about 11% to 421,400. The average size of these farms is 40.5 ha, while the total area of viable farm land is around 17 million ha (Survey of Agricultural Infrastructure, 2003). 1.3 million people are employed in the agricultural sector (of which 167,000 are in eastern Germany), which is the equivalent of a 2.4% share of the national economy. In 1991 this figure was 4%. Net added value amounts to approximately 8.3 billion euros (BMVEL, 2004). Viewed as a proportion of the gross added value of the German economy, primary agricultural production fell from 3.4 per cent in 1970 to 1.2 per cent in 1999, i.e., by more than half.

In contrast to the neo-liberal point of view, however, the fact that the agricultural sector has become less important in economic terms does not mean that its importance has declined in social terms or that it is therefore less worthy of funding. Instead, Marsden et al. argue "that from a sustainable development perspective [...] the agricultural sector cannot be residualized and left in a state of public denial. Its social, economic and physical role is a central element in achieving a more sustainable society, both for the rural and urban society" (Marsden, 2001: 75).

The EU has therefore been keen to promote the concept of multifunctional agriculture (OECD, 2001; Winter, 2003), a strategy which is also partly to do with subsidising market production in conformity with WTO rules. This approach offers ways of achieving greater social recognition of the agricultural sector as well as promoting differentiation among existing farms, for example by supplying public goods that are not suitable for sale on the market (Abler, 2001); it also reduces conflicts between agriculture and nature conservation and boosts sustainable economic development in rural areas (cf. Brouwer, 2004; Baldock et al., 2001; Knickel & Renting, 2000; Pretty, 1998). With projects such as the community initiative LEADER, the long isolated agricultural sector is finally facing up to the social challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (europeanisation, globalisation, sustainability). It is hoped that with the help of such projects, agricultural production of commodities and non-commodity goods might again become a major pillar of sustainable development in rural areas in the future (Boeckmann et al., 2003; Ploeg et al., 2002). The social and ecological benefits of agriculture may also help to lessen the extent of migration and demographic change, particularly in societies undergoing rapid transformation, where rural areas offer little in the way of alternative sources of

income (Frouws, 1997; Siebert & Laschewski, 2001). Following on from the EU-VO 1257/99, the newly designed second pillar of the GAP and the new Fund for Regional Development (ELER) are to make use of specific instruments to promote an integrated rural development that enjoys broad support within civil society (Marsden & Murdoch, 1998; WWF, 2003).

Integration not only refers to a "cross-sector" approach but also entails the all-encompassing notion of economic, ecological and social sustainability, incorporating private sector, state and civil society domains. Furthermore, nearly all recent work on rural development has been characterised by a particular emphasis on participation and a "bottom-up" approach.

### **The Pilot Programme "Regional Action"**

Following on from the positive experience of implementing the Community initiative LEADER, the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture (BMVEL) initiated a pilot project entitled Regional Action as a new way of regulating the political context governing agriculture and the regions (BMVEL, 2002). The first phase of competition for the pilot project was announced in September 2001. Regions were challenged to devise a joint vision for their future development and to lay the groundwork for a network of organisations which were to form an institutionalised partnership. A jury consisting of representatives from various associations (farming, environmental protection etc.) local authorities and scientific institutions selected 33 regions to begin with. These 33 received start-up funding to help them define in more concrete terms their objectives and the issues they wanted to address in relation to the sustainable development of the region concerned, and to produce an integrated regional development concept (IDC). The following elements constituted the requirements of such a concept:

- delineation and location of the region,
  - existing situation: stocktaking of regional features (SWOT),
  - models, objectives and development strategies,
  - definition of tasks and key projects,
  - organisation of integrated regional development (implementation structure),
  - overview of project planning and financial planning,
  - ongoing project evaluation, monitoring/data collection and indicators.
- (BMVEL proposal in the context of Regional Action competition)

The regions were also asked to explain what form of organisation the partnership would take, how it would be set up and run, how decision making and quality were to be monitored during implementation, and what its key projects would be. In March 2002, 18 regions were put forward as models for testing the new direction of consumer and agricultural policy in

Germany and were given a three-year tranche of funding. The size of the micro-regions ranges from 320 sq km to 5800 sq km, while a typical size is between 1500 and 2000 sq km. The pilot regions have between 36,000 and 1.2 m inhabitants. The regions were provided with a total of more than 45 million euros for the period 2002 to 2005 in order to put their ideas into action.

The programme's objectives in the regions are:

- to strengthen the relationship between town and countryside,
- to produce foods that will satisfy consumer demands,
- to make use of land in a way that is naturally and environmentally sustainable,
- to strengthen rural areas and create additional sources of income.

Much like the EU community initiative LEADER+, the procedure in Regional Action is characterised by the following principles:

— Regional approach: this involves encouraging "regional thinking" in a wider sense. It includes the promotion of regional economic cycles and initiatives based on projects or measures that develop regional potential and address any shortcomings. In many cases, this means safeguarding and expanding regional network/governance structures. In regional studies, this is expressed in terms of changes in sectoral structures and the dynamics of actor structures, as well as the capacity to develop "new management structures" capable of mobilising relevant actors. Finally, the aim is to bring the combined forces of a region to bear (businesses, public and private institutions, individual actors) so that measures can be put in place to increase the region's competitiveness and so that the capacity to solve problems in a cooperative way can be developed.

— Integrated approach: this consists of promoting cross-sector procedures in relation to space and function. Given the degree of differentiation that exists between specific policy areas, there is an increasing need to work in a cross-sectoral way at regional level. Improving communication about issues and tasks to be addressed makes it possible to avoid conflicts over objectives and to create more promising "beneficiaries partnerships" that are beneficial for sustainable development. The main aim here is to consolidate vertical and horizontal connections between the various sectors and levels, in order to be able to carry out coordinated campaigns across different expert areas.

— "Bottom-up" partnership: this refers to the inclusion of as many different interest groups as possible (e.g. the local population, local associations, partners in business and society, public and private actors, local authorities, specialist administrations etc.) – and in particular those that do not follow the traditional patterns adhered to in business and politics (Fürst, 2002). The idea is that they should jointly devise and actively implement a development concept and a system of objectives, as well as

play a part in funding the relevant measures. In addition to implementing project ideas, they are also expected to undertake voluntary work for the partnership related to matters of coordination and communication.

A regional management team was established in every region in order "to take up the broad range of tasks entailed in sustainable regional development, including the specific challenges involved in awareness-raising, consulting, programme planning, project management, programme implementation, marketing, monitoring and evaluation" across different sectors (BMVEL, 2004: 9). This regional management team functions as an interface between the public, the project funders, the project board, the national programme managers and the general project membership in the model regions, and is the driving force behind the processes of change.

According to a survey carried out among members of the regional management teams, the work load is divided up roughly as follows:

- Management of overall process, advising and support of the board 30%,
- Networking and Public Relations 10%,
- Information and process management 15%,
- Advising of project managers/ programme users, project development, communication with financial administrators 45% ([www.modellregionen.de](http://www.modellregionen.de)).

The projects are managed financially by a public regional body – often the agricultural agency.

### **Regional Governance**

The aim of the Regional Action programme (and of LEADER) is to complement state activities (government) using less institutionalised mechanisms of coordination (governance).

In current debates, "regional governance" is understood as "process management of collective action in which actors/organisations are connected with one another and coordinate their actions in such a way that common objectives, whether already existing or newly defined, can be pursued in an effective way" (Fürst, 2001a).

Regional Action is an example of how the state can make use of its managing capacity in a different form, namely in line with a modern understanding of the state as one that facilitates and motivates other actors. The following three features are characteristic of this approach:

- Structural policy, which is traditionally interventionist in nature, is limited in favour of competition, management of the wider context and mobilisation of initiatives on the part of those involved;
- Classic sectoral funding policy is complemented by approaches related to space or function which initiate integration through cooperation;
- In addition to export oriented, cross-regional economic units, regional cooperative relationships are promoted to support small-scale economic cycles.

These changes in state institutions can only be successful if new patterns of behaviour are also established amongst citizens themselves. In civil society, the individual takes on greater responsibility for processes of development that are open to local and regional influence. These new opportunities for involvement, opened up by the new social movements in particular, are increasingly being used by people to participate on a voluntary basis; they have led to the emergence of a third sector (Priller, 1998) which is capable of achieving collective objectives and generating public goods by means of projects with both social and ecological goals.

People no longer trust that the welfare state will sort everything out and provide for their needs. Instead, available capacity is being put to use in initiatives aimed at self-help and self-determination. New centres of power and management are coming into being alongside those of state institutions, with the formation of alliances between different actors. What is needed are "active citizens driven by intrinsic motivation who will work for the benefit of the community and support social projects and who will take on responsibility for collective concerns" (Fürst, 2001b: 375; Schmidt et al., 2002). Earlier debates about endogenous regional development are now being revitalised as decentralised self-management comes to be seen as a beneficial form of action.

There are a number of advantages in making regions the level at which projects are planned and managed:

- Functional self-management via networks and cooperative partnerships represents a counter-balance to globalisation;
- There are greater opportunities for engaging in sustainable economic activity;
- It is possible to counter failings in democracy;
- Flexible adaptation becomes possible by making a link between functional and territorial management issues; and
- Ecological and social objectives neglected through centralisation can be implemented effectively (cf. Benz et al., 1999).

Drawing on Fürst, we define regional governance as horizontal, network-like cooperative partnerships between actors from the public sphere, private business and civil society for the purpose of tackling problems related to public welfare at regional level (which occurs primarily via informal, flexible structures) (cf. Adrian, 2003, Nischwitz et al., 2002). This form of cooperation is ongoing over a relatively long period of time and is not tied to specific projects. It includes formal and informal elements, state and non-state actors (including those not bound solely to the logic of economics), hierarchical, competitive and cooperative relationships (cf. Benz, 2002; Benz & Fürst, 2002).

## Regional governance model

Management modes	Actors	Medium
Hierarchical	State	Authority, power
Competition	Economy	Money
Cooperation, association	NGOs, networks	Trust
Regulation, Legislation	State	Norms, laws, rules, plans

Modes and media of control by different actors (own Figure).

One sizeable obstacle to regional self-management is the problem of determining what the “common needs” are that will motivate actors to work together. The main reasons for this are, firstly, the problem of isolation, in that there is insufficient communication among actors regarding their respective perceptions of the problem, and, secondly, the actors’ different logics of action and consequently their different orientations regarding the areas where they perceive their role to be (Fürst, 2001b).

In this respect the aim of the Regional Action programme was to tackle these kinds of barriers and to help dismantle them.

**Experience with “Regional Self-Management”  
in the Context of Regional Action in the Model Regions  
of the Former Eastern Germany**

THE CONTEXT

As with the “regional governance” concept, the regional partnerships were entrusted with the authority to make decisions enabling them to shape the regional development process in accordance with their own ideas and regional requirements. These regional partnerships effectively constitute new forms of political management in which actors from civil society also play a role; as such, they were faced with the challenge of having to develop their own management capabilities. The underlying conditions facing the regional partnerships in “Regional Action” in the former Eastern Germany – and particularly in those regions on the periphery – were different from those facing the “old” Western Germany. One reason for this is that the rural regions on the periphery in the eastern parts are characterised by extremely weak economic structures (brain drain, unemployment).

Another reason for this difference is that people’s experience as members of civil society is rather limited, although this is a factor the pilot project actually aims to address and build upon. The concept of using the Third Sector as a model for social integration and for active involvement in

civil society is one that is underdeveloped in the former Eastern Germany in general (Seibel, 1997) and in rural regions in particular (Hainz, 1998). For one thing, the Third Sector is far less developed in the former Eastern Germany than in Western Germany due to a lack of financial resources and inadequate support within the society. For another thing, unlike West Germany, those organisations that are service providers financed predominantly from public funding are regarded as being stronger than quasi-state institutions; indeed they also see themselves in this light (Fürst, 2002). As a result, their independent role as components of the civil society structure is somewhat obscured (Priller, 1998). Authoritarian and paternalistic traditions of political culture ("the state is there to provide for the individual") also play a not inconsiderable role (Brand, 2001).

Given this background, it is not altogether surprising that rural development initiatives based on this idea of an "active society," such as LEADER, come up against a lack of local initiatives and frequently function much like conventional programmes (Bruckmeier, 2000). Witzchel (1999) also names lack of participation as a central obstacle to initiating and implementing local Agenda 21 projects in the districts of Brandenburg. However, no comprehensive studies have been carried out as yet in Brandenburg's rural areas. Existing case studies paint a variety of different pictures. Some local authorities, for example, certainly have preserved a certain degree of independent initiative and active involvement, something that has led to the setting up of ecological projects in particular (Meyer-Engelke et al., 1998). The case study carried out in Mecklenburg as part of the PRIDE project, however, seems to confirm Bruckmeier's findings, although its author does not interpret them in the same way (Stierand, 2001).

Network relationships in these rural areas are structured in a rather specific way, on account of the historical development in the former Eastern Germany (Siebert & Laschewski, 2001).

The social structures that evolved at village level as a result of shortages during the period of socialism were manifested in the form of mutual help and support among the village's inhabitants, and these have to some extent broken down since the political upheavals of 1989. Informal networks that had arisen through people exchanging services and household products became less important as products and services started to be freely available. Instead of solidarity and mutual support, the last few years have seen the "economisation" of social relations (Zierold et al., 1997).

And last but not least, regions on the periphery of the former East Germany in particular have suffered from decades of emigration involving especially young creative actors, a situation which continues today as young people seek better opportunities elsewhere. In addition, there has also been a trend towards retreat into the private sphere (Hainz, 1998), which, unlike in the past, is of a passive nature.



## EXPERIENCE WITH REGIONAL ACTION IN THE MODEL REGIONS OF THE PERIPHERY OF THE FORMER EASTERN GERMANY

Given the underlying circumstances that exist in the former Eastern Germany, as described above, it becomes apparent why the regional partnerships there are confronted with particular challenges.

These circumstances have a considerable influence on the social capacity for self-organisation and cooperation, something which is described in general terms as social capital (Woolcock, 1998). Lowe et al. (1995) also argue, with regard to endogenous potential, that peripheral regions may be unable to mobilise their own resources to an adequate extent, and they call for all those involved "to recognize and indeed celebrate interconnections between areas and between networks" (Lowe et al., 1995, 104).

Different opinions exist as to what constitutes social capital. Some see it as individuals' ability to make use of the support of groups and networks, while others see it as the collective capacity to solve problems in a cooperative way. We consider the concept of social capital to be an important element in integrated approaches towards rural development on account of the following factors:

- Common rules, norms, monitoring mechanisms and sanctions;
- Intensity of network ties between actors;
- Transformation of participants' prior attitudes and expectations in relation to action and interaction.

### COMMON RULES, NORMS, MONITORING MECHANISMS AND SANCTIONS

One important feature of Regional Action is that it involves trying out new and, in some cases, very different forms of organisation and decision making in every region. This is true both in terms of organisational structure as well as regarding the division of responsibilities and tasks and the way in which decisions are made. If processes of interaction are to be organised for the longer term and their outcomes put into practice properly, informal structures on their own are not enough – a minimum of institutionalisation is required. Such minimum standards need to include common rules, norms and sanctions and agreement on how to make decisions and put them into practice. This involves putting collective interests above individual interests (Ganzert et al., 2004). While this poses a limit to individual action at first, it ultimately facilitates the process as a whole, by safeguarding individual rights. Norms are a crucial element in the formation of social capital. In the case of Regional Action these are formal norms, such as the constitution (including decision-making procedures, distribution of power) and the project selection procedures according to which funding is given. The availability of a fixed set of sanctions has also

proved to be an important and necessary component. For Regional Action this has meant carrying out checks on the efficient and proper use of funds, setting milestones at certain points throughout the project, with quantifiable goals, including criteria for deciding when a project should be halted. Several progress reports and a mid-term evaluation was carried out. This has also meant that where there has been no benefit to public welfare or networking within the partnership, certain partners have received no further funding for projects and have not been allocated new tasks. Other minimum standards include structures based on responsible leadership, as well as an organisational core that takes care of current business affairs (Fürst, 2002). This "heart" of the partnership, the professionals of the regional management team, supported by several volunteers, has become the driving force in the regions.

In all the regions involved, this has meant getting through some difficult learning processes, which has taken up a considerable amount of time. The main factors in this were the underlying conditions that existed in the regions beforehand, previous experience with other funded projects, as well as existing power structures. It was not only actors from civil society who found themselves facing new demands and the need to develop new management capabilities – the actors in the political-administrative system too (administration, authorities etc.) had to become more open towards their new "fellow players" and new interactive forms of governance. Predominantly businessmen promoted the development process who felt social responsibility and regional embeddedness.

#### INTENSITY OF NETWORK TIES BETWEEN ACTORS

This includes the nature and extent of the social relationships between the actors themselves, as well as relationships to other actors and networks. New social and economic relationships have arisen in the context of Regional Action, formal and informal networks have been established and consolidated based on formal contracts and informal commitments. An important factor in the success of the regional partnerships is the involvement of those interest groups and actors who have a relevant part to play in the realisation of the RDC objectives. In order to achieve an integrated process, representatives from agriculture, environmental groups, commerce, tourism, education and consumer protection were invited to participate.

In order to avoid a situation in which such a broad range of participants became a hindrance, decisions had to be made regarding which groups should be involved in the different phases of the project's development and different levels of decision-making.

The regional partnerships are open to new members, although consideration needs to be given to the fact that there are limits to attracting new members in regions that have extremely weak economic and social struc-

tures. In particular, there is a lack of economic actors capable of making a positive contribution to developments with their own ideas and resources – such figures simply do not exist in these sparsely populated and structurally weak regions. In the peripheral regions in particular, where the potential for self-organisation is poor, it seems conducive for there to be strong ties to the official administration, as this enables the actors involved to draw on their experience, expertise and resources.

A further significant element in the success of these projects is when people who are highly regarded in the region are able to play an integrating role by generating favourable publicity for the projects. These promoters function rather like “locomotives,” winning over people and pulling them along with the project’s momentum (Böcher, 2002). Such personalities are also at a premium in the regions on the periphery, due to the situation described above. Nonetheless, more and more actors have recognised the benefits of collective action, and the more the learning processes have gone through and successes achieved have been communicated, both within and outside the regions, the more this has motivated people to continue participating.

However, the task of including all the actors relevant to the implementation of the projects is one that has to be carried out again and again. Especially in the less favoured regions in the former Eastern Germany, there is a considerable need for capacity building and empowerment. Networks can only be built up slowly here and it takes great effort to keep them intact. The start-up phase and preparatory period (for establishing the partnership, planning the implementation of initial projects, clarifying the rules for competition) was too short for the newly established networks in the eastern parts. Social capital takes time to accumulate, and with a new programme approach, residual questions have to be clarified, uncertainties addressed and jointly defined objectives firmed up and widely communicated. There is a considerable need for training in respect of both official and voluntary actors in these issues. Thus, the coordination and transaction costs are considerable in the context of this kind of model project.

#### TRANSFORMATION OF PARTICIPANTS’ PREVIOUS ATTITUDES AND EXPECTATIONS REGARDING ACTION AND INTERACTION

This implies trust, solidarity instead of self-interest, and cooperation instead of competition.

The most important prerequisite for achieving regional self organisation are intrinsically motivated, active citizens who are willing to work for the community and to assume responsibility for collective issues (Fürst, 2001a). The programmes aim was to mobilise regional actors to work together to solve regional problems, thereby contributing towards an accumulation of social capital (Putnam, 1993).

Collective learning processes and changes in consciousness need to take place in order to help overcome sectoral, milieu specific and regional barriers. In an ideal scenario individual actors should be open to the different interests and ways of working of the other partners involved.

Emphasis was placed on the processes of interaction with the aim of achieving consensus through learning; this was done in order to avoid a situation of "negative coordination" (Scharpf, 1993). The idea was to establish interdependencies between self-interests and (regional) community interests (Ganzert et al., 2004). As a result, those targeted by the programme were to become partners who would make the planning process their own and actively help implement the planning objectives (Fürst, 2001b). By discussing and defining potential future models, connections were to be established to the "real life" situation and between different value systems and levels of communication (following Habermas). However, changes in values and patterns of behaviour generally only take place very slowly in the minds of the actors involved, as does the emergence of new kinds of motivation. The first step is to create connections between the individuals and organisations involved. A willingness to take risks only emerges once these connections have attained a degree of stability via a recognition of common values, goals and common experience – in other words, investment is not immediately followed by profit. At this point, communication between actors no longer has to be formally guaranteed; instead, informal arrangements come into being that are guaranteed by implicit normative rule systems and therefore no longer require external support.

Developing trust, social ties and common norms of behaviour, however, requires considerable time and is an ongoing process. Only when there is an ongoing willingness to cooperate and once the forces of self-help have been mobilised (intrinsic motivation) can further projects be set up successfully.

### **Summary**

The ability to build social capital is an essential precondition for developing new management expertise and putting it to use for the benefit of integrated rural development. The peripheral rural areas of Eastern Germany face a different set of constraints for achieving this than those facing West Germany. Particular problems are posed by weak economic structures and a business sector that has only enjoyed limited development. There is a lack of entrepreneurship and actors who take risks. Historical circumstances have also conspired to produce a society of rather passive citizens, which works against any broad social participation; since this is a prerequisite for regional governance, it means that such participation needs to be developed over a longer period of time. The development problems which exist in the rural areas of East Germany are by no means atypical;

they can also be found in other rural areas of post-socialist states in Central and Eastern Europe. While it is not possible in the short term to eliminate differences between actors in terms of cultural and economic capital through state redistribution programmes, in the medium term the informal structures that exist among actors can be influenced positively by institutional means – in other words, actors can be given more space and resources for genuine participation and greater support in their efforts at networking and cooperation (Laschewski & Siebert, 2002). The aim of actor participation is not to compete with democratically legitimated decision-making structures but rather to be a driving force for greater involvement on the part of ordinary people (Schablitzki et al., 1999). Encouraging these processes is indeed one of the objectives of the model project “Regional Action,” although it is clear that there is a need to take into account the different underlying conditions that exist in the different regions in the context of such model projects. If these specifics are not thought through carefully, the danger is that otherwise promising approaches might yet come to nothing.

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