



Rural Alliances

Newsletter
Issue 2
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This project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme to promote strong and prosperous communities

www.rural-alliances.eu

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Rural vitality resurges through transnational cooperation

Demographic change is taking its toll in rural areas of North West Europe. Young people are leaving to study and find work in the cities, many never to return. Basic services are under threat due to the pressures on public authorities to find the money to pay for these, such as rural transport, health care and keeping public facilities such as toilets, phone boxes, post offices and information centres open. The age profile of rural areas continues to rise.

European nations in North West Europe are tackling the challenges of demographic change, spelling this out in its Lisbon and 2020 agendas: more education, more innovation, more sustainability, more competitiveness. The 12 partners from 6 different EU countries in the Rural Alliances project (co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund's INTERREG IVB NWE Programme) actively engage with business/community groups - 'alliances'. They provide them with the opportunity to interact with one another at transnational exchange meetings, via a social media networking site and through more focused thematic exchanges between interested parties. Through each of these media, partners and alliance members are encouraged to work jointly on elements that will help to revitalise rural communities across all partner regions.

Two transnational exchange meetings were held in 2013. Each incorporated workshops where alliances from the host partner used real situations to illustrate good practice or problems being experienced on the cross-cutting themes that are common to all partners. Delegates then worked together to share their experiences and jointly contribute to finding solutions to the problems raised.



Alliances and partners working together on renewable energy solutions - Lochem (NL), March 2013

The first meeting was held in Lochem (Netherlands) in March. Here the focus was on the shifting change in democracy where people are taking ever-increasing roles in delivering public services and adding value to their local rural communities. The conference was entitled 'The Power within Society' and attracted over 150 delegates, continuing the high level of support and interest from alliances.

The next transnational exchange meeting was held in Killarney, South Kerry (Ireland) in October, where around 170 delegates from the partner countries, many of them alliances, met, networked, shared good practice and set up lasting links.

The focus of this exchange meeting was 'Resource Efficiency', with workshops on renewable energy, different ways of financing projects, making the most

of natural resources, the countryside being a focus for businesses and communities working together for common ends. More detailed information on elements of these meetings can be found in this newsletter or on www.rural-alliances.eu.



Delegates attending the 4th transnational exchange meeting, Killarney – Oct 2013

Making the most of people power and resources!

The Municipality of Lochem hosted a vibrant transnational exchange entitled 'The Power within Society' in the Netherlands on 13th and 14th March 2013. Alderman of Lochem, Thijs de la Court (involved in Rural Alliances from the start), compered the event and played an active role in running a workshop to share Lochem's bottom-up approach to the governance of alliances, entitled 'Energy within Society'. On the second day he changed into his running gear to chair the presentations by key-note speakers, using the analogy of an athlete to mirror the difficult starts, hard work and subsequent endorphine-induced "good feelings" stimulated by achievements that are becoming hallmarks of the Rural Alliances project; thus illustrating that perseverance will yield its rewards.



Thijs de la Court, Alderman dons his running gear

Thijs went on to explain that the Municipality of Lochem has embarked on an ambitious target to reduce its carbon footprint and has put in place a strategy to increase and support renewable energy projects. Key to achieving these goals is the role of alliances, made up of community and business members.

Nils Roemen, an inspiring guest speaker, introduced himself as an ex-consultant, now co-creator, intriguing the audience by saying that although he had been invited to speak he did not charge but asked to be paid for what people thought he was worth. He went on to explain that people have a great capacity for giving; however they are often reluctant to be seen to



Nils Roemen inspires delegates at Lochem

fail at something. His two golden rules are: "dare to ask" and "dare to fail". He had been inspired by an initiative in Estonia called 'Let's do it' that mobilised 7 million volunteers in 84 one-day clean-up actions in Asia, Africa, North America, South America and Europe.

He stated that there are large numbers of empty buildings in the Netherlands, whilst there are homeless people needing shelter. He has worked out that each homeless person would be able to have 400 square meters if all the empty buildings were made available to them: this example was to illustrate a case of *"resources available, but in the wrong place"*. Nils challenged the audience to ask for help, and for things, and not to be afraid to fail if they are not forthcoming. He gave a pertinent example for the Rural Alliances project, explaining that he makes notes of people's skills and what they might have to offer so that when he may need to ask them for assistance, he knows who to go to. He then challenged the Rural Alliances partners to *"draw up wish lists, make them available and see what happens"*.

The Rural Alliances partners are currently working together to jointly design a method to plot people's skills and harness these by linking them to identified needs of rural communities and alliances. Alliances in all partner regions will be encouraged to use this tool to make best use of the human resources that exist in their rural communities and to identify areas where more training is needed to deliver the project plans of the communities. The 4th version of this tool is shortly to be trialled in partner regions; partners' joint feedback and evaluation will help to develop it further and make it available for others to use. A test version of the 'Skills Plotting Tool' can be found on www.rural-alliances.eu/media/7443/skills_plotting_tool.pdf.

Rural Alliances social media site – strength in numbers

318 members; 298 photos; 59 videos; 32 discussions; 93 Events; 26 blog posts: These are the basic statistics from the Rural Alliances social media site. Regular communications pass via this social media platform between a wide range of members including partners, alliances, other EU projects, rural development organisations and different parts of the EU's funding and policy-making bodies.



Upgraded library on the social media site

The library has been upgraded. It now looks more like a library, with book shelves: the covers of the books and each has been converted into a flip book so it even *"feels like opening a book"*. The library has

drawn information from other Interreg projects, such as COLLABOR8, CURE, MANDIE and Vital Rural Areas. Additional publications have been referenced from the European Rural Development Network and the Carnegie Trust. All the factsheets are also filed on the library.

The social media site has a range of features: it has a section to start discussion groups; it provides a list of events and conferences related to rural development; photos and videos are constantly being uploaded, either showing the work of partners or on interesting related subjects. There is a blog section for snippets of news and views with a Twitter feed to show the latest chats; with another section for members to set up their own groups. In addition the site lists all the Alliances and shows where they are located – it has a useful software tool called *'The Brain'* that is like a mind map showing the links between the alliances and the partners. The service provider for the main site is Ning; however, in the interests of attracting a wider audience, Rural Alliances also has a Facebook page. Please join if you have not done so already: <http://ruralalliances.ning.com/>.

A 'Skills Plotting Tool' for Alliances

"I never knew that you trained as an actor!" "That is brilliant – we need someone to take the leading role in our re-enactment of our heritage event – are you able to do this?" This is a typical outcome when people come together to share their interests, hobbies and work experiences. Marieke moved to a rural village from a busy city life to bring up her children in the same way that she grew up – in a rural area. She gave up her job in the theatre to spend more time with her family, never thinking that she could contribute her acting skills to the village. The Alliance movement, a combination of community support and business interests, needs different skills and experiences to "make things happen". In former times rural communities knew one another, intimately, taking part in farming affairs, meeting each other at auctions and in the local villages, going to school, helping each other out and being involved in the patchwork of rural activities. Time and demographics have changed all that!

Today rural areas are made up of traditional, long-standing farming families, intertwined with new families and residents. The new folk may work in the towns and cities or work from home. They don't tend to go off to the weekly farmer's market or auction. When alliances are formed from the rich mix and diversity of the new rural populations there are seldom opportunities for people to share and explain what skills and experience they can bring to an alliance.

The Rural Alliances partnership identified this challenge of plotting skills and experience of rural groups when they developed the project concept. They agreed to work together to find innovative ways to engage people to share their talents, whether these be related to their interests or past experience. "We don't want people to be put off by being asked to share what they enjoy doing or what they are good at" was one of the early comments made at a partnership development workshop. A fun, non-intrusive method was agreed on, and it had to be simple.



Field testing Version 3 in Scherpenheuvel-Zichem (BE), October 2013

The two university partners, Trinity Saint David in Wales (UK) and the Philipps University Marburg (Germany) worked with the partners and alliances through a series of prototypes and tests to develop a tool to plot the skills and experience to help match these with the needs of alliances and or training opportunities.



Delegates at the 4th transnational exchange meeting test and critique Version 3 - Killarney (IE) October 2013

Version 3 was prepared and distributed to all the participants at the 4th Transnational Meeting in South Kerry in October 2013. A workshop was held and over 120 participants tested the new version of the 'game' in 12 small groups of 10 people. They were asked, for the purpose of the workshop, to create an imagined alliance with a name and mutual goal and use it to assess their own skills and abilities in relation to the imagined requirements of their alliances. The room was vibrant with debate about the tool and the overall feedback was of disappointment that they did not have longer to 'play' it. Feedback was then given in a plenary session, which focused on timing, instructions, modifications to the layout / order; and linking the hobbies to the skills.



Version 4 of the 'Skills Plotting Tool'

The feedback and suggestions received at this meeting have since been written up and analysed, and a new (4th) version of the 'Skills Plotting Tool' has now been designed. One of the decisions taken since the meeting has been to change the description from 'game' to 'tool'. This is to reflect that it is not something that should be seen as a slightly frivolous optional add-on, but serves a serious and useful purpose that should be integrated into alliance development at an early stage. The latest, fourth version, has recently been published to www.rural-alliances.eu/media/7443/skills_plotting_tool.pdf and partners will carry out more field tests with their alliances in early 2014. For further information contact Lindsey Gilroy at l.gilroy@tsd.uwtsd.ac.uk.

Co-working on videos – capturing successes and influencing stakeholders

MEDEFI (FR) conceived the idea to create a promotional tool with a series of short 'teachable' films (cartoon+videos). The will is to show how an idea emerges, grows and becomes an alliance thanks to listening, support, goodwill, and partnership, for the welfare and the development of the area where it happens.

MEDEFI has chosen the video tool to help the audience understand that each citizen is asked to participate in local development.

There is nothing like hearing and seeing good examples to inspire and promote good practice and achievements. In order to explore the essence of an alliance, MEDEFI invited some members of alliances to talk about their experiences. The video experts who attended the meeting were able to capture the development, spirit and achievements of their alliances. They also used the Brabant Model, developed in the Netherlands to help to explain the Rural Alliances project and the processes involved in developing alliances.

The goal of this video (in progress) is to influence stakeholders at various levels on various subjects.

This development has created interest from the other project partners; when the video is ready, MEDEFI will propose a workshop and a preview showing to the selected audience of Rural Alliances partners (private screening). The aim is to share MEDEFI's experience, to invite other partners to do the same or to jointly work together to co-produce complementary videos in the same manner or with interviews of alliance members. This will take place in the early part of 2014.

Demographic challenges shared with students

Once a year, every winter semester, Philipps-University of Marburg, Department of Geography runs a course of lectures and seminars about the 'Geographies of the Periphery/Geographies of Rural Areas'. The course includes location theories, population development models like the 2nd demographic transition, as well as concepts from an economic geography's point of view.

The Rural Alliances project provides a platform for discussions related to the challenges facing rural areas in North West Europe, in particular demographic transition in European countries and theories about rural supply. The model of demographic transition shows a development pathway of today's industrialised countries like France, Germany, UK, or the USA, starting as an agricultural economy which develops to an industry- (or service-) based economy. It deals with a development from high birth and death rates to a very low level of birth and death rates and shows the related population growth rates. The very last phase 5 demonstrates that when birth rates fall below the death rate (like in Germany in the 1970s) several problems arise. Rural areas are faced with an ageing society, out-migration, a decline in (hard and soft) infrastructure or local supply facilities. In this context, a so called 'doom loop' is created to show and underline the downgrading processes in rural areas.

The Rural Alliances project examples are ideal to explain to students the problems being experienced in rural areas, such as care for the elderly, retailing, social infrastructure facilities, and agricultural changes.

Project partners' institutions as well as their core activities, main foci and regional contexts were presented to the students. During the seminar additional aspects about rural areas' issues were illustrated using the Rural Alliance examples. One session focussing on Rural Alliances was created during and after the last transnational exchange meeting in Killarney, Ireland (October 2013). What the students had to do was:

- to come together in five groups with a regional and thematical focus on:
 - 1) Economic development – South Kerry, Ireland
 - 2) Cultural heritage – de Merode, Brussels, Belgium
 - 3) Mobility – Bretagne, France
 - 4) Sustainability – Municipality of Lochem, the Netherlands
 - 5) Tourism – Brecon Beacons National Park, Wales, UK
- to read through the so called 'Alliance Building Monitoring Templates' (fact sheets about specific alliances)
- to put the information 'into a nutshell'
- to present the results considering the 'W'-questions; like who, where, what, why etc. and the speciality of their topic, alliance(s) and region.

After that, a discussion round was started, about:

- 1) What are current problems and issues in (NW-) Europe's rural areas?
- 2) What are differences and similarities between the projects/alliances?
- 3) What can we learn from that?

With this course of lectures and seminars more than 200 students take part in discussing the project and focus on specific issues and especially the way of counteracting the impacts of the (second) demographic transition in rural areas.

For more information contact Florian Warburg (florian.warburg@staff.uni-marburg.de).

Vibrant Valentia community 'put light back on' in the Lighthouse through Rural Alliances

Valentia Island Lighthouse, still a working lighthouse, has become a focus for the new rural Valentia Island alliance in South Kerry. Delegates from the transnational exchange meeting in October made a visit to the island, when alliance members shared their development plan for the whole island with them and asked for their input on how best to achieve some of their goals.



EU alliances put suggestions towards a lighthouse project in Kerry

The Alliance has recently, through the Interreg IVB NWE Rural Alliances project, "turned on the light" for a project that is likely to bring major long-term vibrancy benefits for the area. They have succeeded in securing a long-term lease on the Cromwell Point Lighthouse with the view to utilising it as a major tourism attraction that will provide a sustained source of income for the region and the Community Development Association alliance members. This is an iconic structure in a beautiful area that has a long history associated with it so it is an ideal building to utilise as a key tourist attraction on the island.

Many groups, facilitated through South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd, came together in this alliance to enable the project to happen, including Kerry County Council, the Commissioners of Irish Lights, Crown Paints, The Rural Social Scheme, TÚS and a number of local businesses, as well as the local Community Development Association.

The Rural Alliances visit incorporated a session whereby delegates were asked for their ideas and input on plans for the island as a whole. Chairman of the Valentia Island Development Association, Anthony O'Connell said: "We were delighted to host our Rural Alliance partner delegates in Valentia... and they provided us with much valuable input as to the possible management structures we can put in place to run this project over the longer term, the possible ways we can raise the additional funding required to develop these additional phases of the project, as well as in giving us some excellent ideas as to what elements to include in these future developments".

"Having the opportunity to engage with people and groups from other parts of Europe in the development of a project such as this is one of the key benefits of being involved with a project such as Rural Alliances. We can learn so much from these groups about what worked and didn't work for them in similar projects in their regions and thus we can use this learning to help ensure the success of our project". Anthony added: "We look forward to going over to visit and learn further from some of their projects in 2014".

As a result of this exchange contact details have been exchanged between all who attended, and a bilateral visit is in the process of being arranged for 2014 between interested parties from Brabant, NL, to follow up in more depth on issues raised during the visit.

For more information contact Sean de Buitlear: (sdebutlear@skdp.net).



The Alliance Journey - turning threats into opportunities

Companies in the rural region of Coëvrons in France are finding it increasingly difficult to hire some specific professional profiles (managers and specialised technicians). More and more rural areas lose young people to the cities to study and once they have qualified in their fields of expertise they seldom return to the country. Community and business members of the Coëvrons area have joined up in an alliance to attract professionals to live and work in the villages and towns in the region. The 15-person alliance will jointly identify the major challenges of the area and develop innovative ways to tackle these together.

The general aim of the alliance is to *"make the Coëvrons area more attractive"* and the concrete objective is to *"attract young people with the needed skills by the Coëvrons area by offering a complete service to facilitate job search and discovery of the territory before settling in"*.

Laval Mayenne Technopole (LMT) – one of the Rural Alliances partners – is supporting this group by chairing their monthly meetings, providing innovative methods and tools and providing networking support as well as links to other organisations and EU partners.

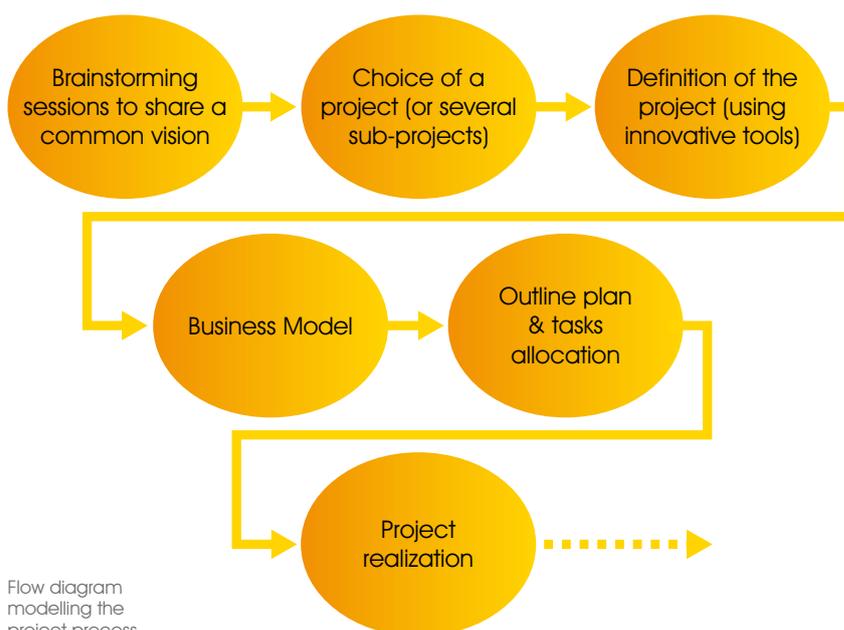
LMT's support role is to introduce and mentor the alliance in respect of innovative methods and tools, also used for innovative start-ups development, and to make the most of the Rural Alliances partnership network, knowledge, experience and to share good practices.

The process of the project so far, and of all projects run by LMT that start from a blank page, is modelled in the flow diagram:

This is the story of the journey of the Alliance. First, the members (people with a good knowledge of their community) spent time to share a vision of their area or situation, by brainstorming and describing the territory in detail, (i.e. feelings about it, main stakeholders and decision makers, economic sectors, identity of the area, advantages and weaknesses...). One of the tools that they used for this is mind-mapping software ('Xmind'). This is easy to use, very interactive and can capture ideas, plans and organise these visually.

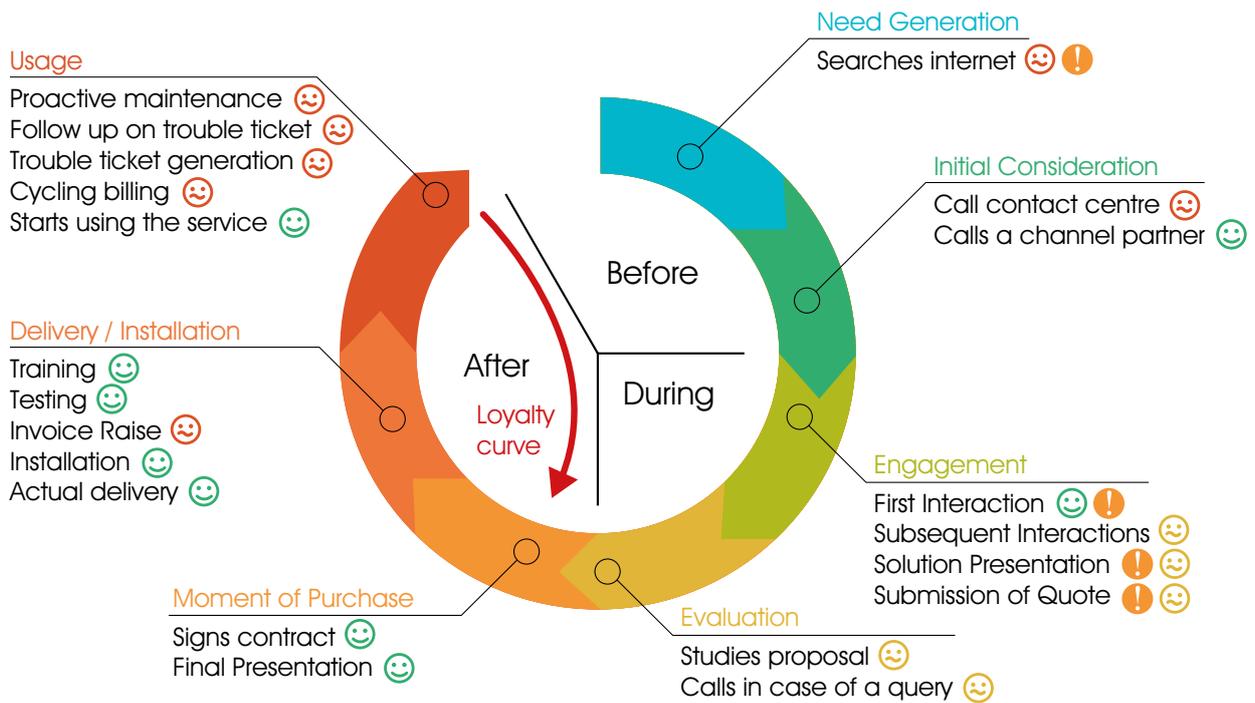
The next stage in the journey involved the Alliance choosing an (or more) issue to tackle and developing this into a project (or different sub-projects). First a list of projects or ideas was generated and discussed by alliance members. The alliance then chose one or more projects: selected by a vote, a discussion, or a more structured process (choice based on specific criteria...).

The project (or projects) was then defined more precisely. At this stage LMT supports the alliance by providing tools used for innovative start-ups development, like the 'Customer Experience' or the 'Business Model Canvas'; or by calling on experts (e.g. in design-thinking tools...).



Flow diagram modelling the project process

Customer Experience Journey



The **'Customer Experience'** is a process to map out what experiences, behaviours, emotions and services are manifest with customers; also to broaden opportunities to attract new customers (communication, new services ...).

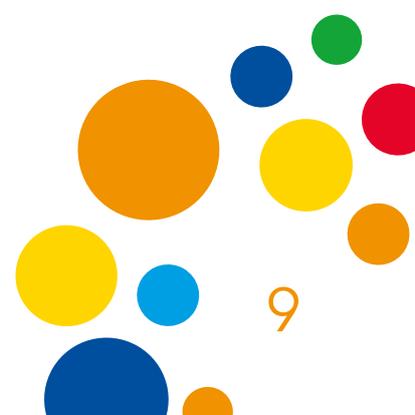
The **'Business Model Canvas'** is a creative tool used to define how the alliance could organise its value proposition to customers, how valuable the project is, what partners they should contact, their key activities or resources, their costs structure and revenue flow...

This was followed up with the Alliance members holding a workshop to generate ideas for improvement and development. The role of the alliance is to make decisions about their objectives, the definition of the project...

In parallel, LMT brings tools they experimented for their former experiences or projects, like in the 'Open Innovation' European project: an on-line challenge called imayen'Action to all Mayenne inhabitants was launched to collect ideas on how to attract newcomers to and facilitate their move to the area. (57 ideas were collected with the best 3 being awarded

at a ceremony by a Member of Parliament, attracting 2 radio interviews and a host of other publicity).

Until the precise definition of the project, the alliance is a little work group; after this it is the leading group for the project: it has to federate local actors and partners around the project, to keep the original spirit of the group.



'Totally Locally' initiative helps boost the local economy

By shopping locally one contributes to the local community, economy and its future. This is a message that resonates across all the Rural Alliances partners: besides, the project was set up to revitalise rural areas through local people helping to help themselves!



'Totally Locally' initiative launched in Crickhowell, a rural Welsh town

A new initiative that puts the message into practice, 'Totally Locally', was launched in Crickhowell in the Brecon Beacons National Park in October 2013. *"If every adult in the Crickhowell area spends just £5 per week in their local independent shops, instead of online or at the big supermarkets, it would be worth AN EXTRA £1.4 million per year to the local economy."* This means more jobs, better facilities & a nicer place for all to live.

'Totally Locally Crickhowell' is a Crickhowell & Black Mountains Tourism (CBMT) initiative in support of businesses and traders who collectively want to do something to boost the local economy and promote their independent shops and businesses.

CBMT representative and retailer Emma Corfield Walters said, *"We're very lucky to not have any empty shops on our High Street, and with the help of our community and visitors, we plan to keep it that way! It is increasingly unusual for a small town to have so many independent, family run businesses; Crickhowell is a very special place. When we heard about 'Totally Locally' we knew it would work here".*

'Totally Locally Crickhowell' is supported by the Rural Alliances project, Crickhowell Resource and Information Centre (CRiC), CBMT and lots of enthusiasm from local business owners. A second initiative is now starting up in Hay-on-Wye.

For more information on the 'Totally Locally' scheme see <http://ruralalliances.ning.com/profiles/blogs/totally-locally> <http://totallylocallycrickhowell.co.uk> and <http://www.totallylocallyhay.co.uk>.



Emma Corfield-Walters promotes the value of local shopping

Buy local and save your village!

There are a growing number of alliances who are taking advantage of the demand for local produce. In North Brabant they have 'taken a leaf' out of the initiatives of other partners; such as 'Kempen Goed', 'Pure Kempen', 'de Merode Brand', and 'Totally Locally' to create a new 'Brabant Brand'.

By buying local produce you benefit many people in your locality. Buying locally benefits local producers directly and encourages them to reinvest and produce more produce. The local community benefits, as buying locally is directly supporting local businesses, leading to employment, and ensures that the money is kept within that local community. By buying from local producers customers build-up a relationship with that producer. Local products are certified under this brand to ensure its provenance. The 'Brabant Brand' will be marketed locally and internationally and include over forty local breweries who want to take advantage of this initiative. For those who want more information about this contact: paulspapens@home.nl.

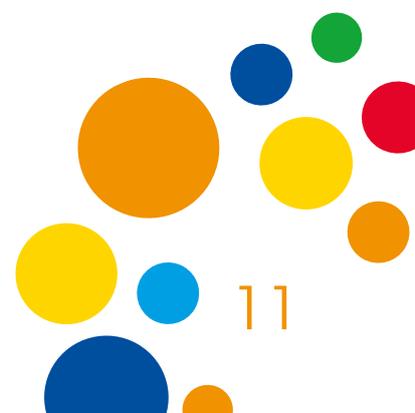


North Brabant (Netherlands) is becoming more local, working on a provincial certification: 'Brabant Brand'

Next transnational exchange meeting – Leuven, 25–28 March 2014

'Financial engineering' and 'Building alliance networks' will be the key themes of the 6th transnational exchange meeting to be held in Leuven, co-hosted by the two Belgian partners, Boerenbond and the Flemish Land Agency. The exchange will include master-classes and workshops on alliance-building, the Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index and innovative financial techniques.

There will also be joint working on rural development issues, with workshop groups being divided into specific themes, such as heritage, health care, energy, tourism and demographic challenges. In this way delegates wishing to discuss similar challenges will be grouped together - encouraging more focused and meaningful transnational networking between alliances, both at the meeting and thereafter.



Inclusion – a lifeline in rural areas

At the transnational exchange meeting in Killarney, Mayo County Council teamed up with Rural Alliances partner MEDEFI (FR) to jointly develop and run a master-class and workshop on rural inclusion issues.

Mayo County Council has been conducting community plans, called 'Community Futures' in its rural villages and towns. This initiative is run through a partnership of communities and agencies to:

- encourage more people to become active in their communities;
- strengthen and develop local community organisations, i.e. set up alliances;
- enable communities to identify and progress priority projects and actions;
- enable communities to effectively represent their interests at local, county, and national levels.

Through this process community groups review themselves to get a current status on elements such as housing provision, jobs and job potential, key assets, tangible and intangible and this includes investigating the mix of people in their communities and identifying areas of concern. The 'Community Futures' project importantly asks communities to future-gaze and set out projects and priorities to maintain and improve the vitality and sustainability of their area/town/village. This process specifically includes a review and reflection on inclusion issues.



Delegates pool their thoughts at the end of the workshop on rural inclusion

Following a master-class which gave a detailed explanation of the 'Community Futures' programme, illustrated with case studies and anecdotes, delegates took part in a workshop, where they were set challenges to jointly solve.

The first of these was, "**how to involve communities and with businesses?**" Ideas included: co-hosting festivals; setting up robust governance structures and managing a dynamic network; co-evolving development plans and projects with both sectors; ensuring that there are good participation and consultation processes as well as open and regular communication.

Secondly, "**how to welcome newcomers?**" Suggestions included: developing a welcome pack with samples of local produce and coupons for local activities and services; creating a pool of volunteers to welcome and guide new comers; hosting an annual welcome party; facilitating business networking; providing information on the history, culture and a full list of services and business for newcomers; providing a community tour; having a good website and welcome section; and baking a welcoming cake!

Another increasing problem in rural areas is **lack of transport**. Solutions to this challenge included: providing a locally delivered community transport service; encouraging lift share and organised hitch hiking; improving facilities for teleworking and creating shared spaces for working; highlighting cycle track and footpaths and making them safe; providing community car schemes; improving provision of information and information channels.

This workshop generated many more ideas, such as how to cater for different age groups and how to support volunteers programmes. The lessons from this workshop and from the field are being widely shared and developed by the Rural Alliances partners. For more information contact Mary Wrafter mwrafter@MayoCoCo.ie.

Cooperative care alliance

What price can you put on care? It is priceless! However, many countries in the EU are having to deal with the high costs of providing care with the aging population and the increasing demands of people for high quality medical treatments and services, particularly in rural areas.

A positive response to the challenge of providing a high standard of care has been the initiative of the residents of Oisterwijk, who have set up a care alliance. The foundation aims to use different local people and services to ensure immediate care can be given when needed. This care is arranged locally and jointly, making it cheaper and more personal, and in many cases delivered by volunteers. The type of care needed is mapped out, an assessment is made as to how much can be supported by volunteers, (family, neighbours and friends) with the balance, often specialist care, being purchased as and when needed. Public meetings have been organised on care cooperatives and this attracted interest and the catalyst for this initiative.

Laval Maynne Technopol, a French partner in the Rural Alliances project faces similar issues. In the rural region of Coëvron there is real difficulty in attracting medical professionals to work and live in rural areas, such as doctors, dentists, nurses or other professions.



Meeting of the care cooperative, Oisterwijk 25 Sept 2013

Partners are sharing their different alliance methods to contribute to the overall alliance-building blueprint that will take the best ideas from each alliance and share these more widely across other rural regions of North West Europe.

Partners from MEDEFI and LMT (France) and Lochem, Kempenland and HGW&DM (Netherlands) will meet up for two days in February, with one day devoted to 'Health Care' and one day on 'Renewable Energy'. For those who want more information about the scheme contact: hennievanschooten@home.nl.

Sustainable Valley Alliance

'>4<' the winning formula: 'More for less!' Four different organisations have joined forces under the name 'Sustainable Valley' to develop sustainable projects along the Voorste Stroom river near the village of Oisterwijk (Netherlands). The alliance will focus on improving the countryside, tackling a renewable energy project (hydropower) and tourism. The alliance is committed to involving both the young and the elderly in raising awareness of this fragile valley and the measures that can be taken to conserve it. The members of this alliance are reviewing the good practice and methods used by similar alliances in the partnership,

particularly those that have been dealing with renewable energy, tourism and nature conservation. For those who want more information: cjbrands@carelbrands.nl.



'Sustainable Valley': along the river



Resource efficiency – a focus of the 4th transnational exchange meeting

The 'Europe 2020' strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, includes promoting resource efficiency in rural areas with a focus on facilitating the supply and use of renewable sources of energy, providing finance for community-based projects and harnessing the wealth of experience and time of volunteers, businesses and public sector staff to revitalise villages and towns.

The 4th transnational exchange meeting for Rural Alliances was hosted by the South Kerry Development Partnership in Killarney, Southern Ireland, on the 8th and 9th October 2013. The over-riding theme was to strengthen the transnational relationships between partners and alliances as well as to focus on the cross-cutting theme of resource efficiency. For the opening of the event, two MEPs, Phil Prendergast and Sean Kelly, took the time to pre-record video presentations to support the work of the Rural Alliances project and underpin the importance of this EU co-funded project to revitalising rural areas in North West Europe.

This exchange meeting attracted over 170 delegates, many of whom represented alliances from the 6 partner countries. Two Irish models of alternative sources of finance were showcased, illustrating one of the core resource requirements for alliances: access to finance. Jim Boyle representing 'Clann Credo' explained his organisation's approach to assisting communities with finance when they had exhausted all other means to raise funds for projects. 'Clann Credo' provides loans for community projects without the need for securities, based on the fact the communities are on the whole stable and long-term and pride often plays a part in the loans being repaid. Mr John Knox, representing the 'League of Credit Unions', explained how businesses and community members contribute to a fund which then lends money to community ventures with interest paid on these loans. The Credit Union concept resonated with other partner members who saw this as a valuable means of funding for their community and business groups and it is expected that the Credit Unions will provide support and advice to these partners in the following period.

On the second day of the exchange visit, partners and alliance members travelled to alliances in the outlying areas of Kerry. Here workshops were held with each local alliance describing its particular circumstances, coupled with a site visit and followed with intensive facilitated discussions to draw out opportunities and solutions and make lasting links to assist both local and visiting alliances.



Delegates are shown electricity-generating meters at a former woollen mill on the Sheen River, Kenmare - now used to generate energy.

These co-working sessions featured: access issues to the highest mountain in the Republic of Ireland the Macgillycuddy's Reeks as this is co-owned by private farmers; the renovation and development of a former woollen mill; community and business opportunities to develop Valentia Lighthouse into a tourist attraction; and the development of community/local business-owned wind turbines. These visits and workshops created a wealth of good ideas that were shared amongst the alliances and project partners, but more importantly links and commitments were made to continue to work together and to arrange follow-up visits to continue the co-working that the transnational exchange created as a catalyst between the different participating countries.

Bi-lateral visits intensify transnational working

A delegation of active alliance members and staff, led by Alderman Thijs de la Court from Lochem Municipality, spent 3 days in South Wales on a bilateral exchange visit hosted by the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority between the 26th and 28th August 2013. The two themes: renewable energy and tourism (not often seen as common bed-fellows), and how these could be better integrated through alliances, resulting in more sustainable initiatives.



Dutch and Welsh delegates of the bilateral exchange visit hosted by Brecon Beacons National Park Authority

The unusual mix of delegates - public and private representatives from both these sectors - were a mix of people who do not normally come together, and this in itself stimulated innovative exchanges and ideas for future collaborations. Alderman de la Court addressed political representatives, the management team and staff of the National Park, explaining the ambitious strategy of Lochem Municipality to pursue a carbon neutral agenda.

In turn, National Park staff provided insights into their Sustainable Development Fund, the support for community renewable energy projects, the Ambassador scheme and the Green Business Tourism Scheme. They also visited local villages: Crickhowell, Hay-on-Wye, Talgarth and Talybont-on-Usk, where they saw at first-hand the community car-share scheme and the eco-travel network initiative that involves tourism businesses hiring out electric vehicles to visitors.



'Mr Chips' – powered on processed chip-fat oil – can be booked online by members of Talybont-on-Usk car-share scheme

As one result of the visit the representatives from the tourism industry in Lochem were spurred on to produce their own branding strategy, based on the eco-tourism one developed by Talybont-on-Usk.

Universities team up

The rewards of transnational exchange meetings cannot be over-emphasised. During the exchange meeting in October in South Kerry Ted van de Wijdeven and Laurens de Graaf, both researchers from Tilburg University's School of Politics and Public Administration (NL), presented their findings on an extensive case study research in which they tried to understand the crucial mechanisms in 'making rural alliances work'. Four Brabant rural communities were studied thoroughly over a period of a year: 'citizen initiative Mooi Straten', 'Cooperation Biest-Houtakker', 'SPILL Liempde' and 'Liveability group Gemonde'. All are bottom-up in initiatives in which citizens and/or entrepreneurs are the driving forces. Main characteristics are a do-it-yourself attitude, a network organization and an inherent productive 'messiness'. Four crucial elements energize these alliances: (1) people; (2) local embeddedness & social support; (3) matching & connecting; (4) contact & communication. In their presentation the researchers elaborated on each of the four factors, and they suggested some 'do's and don'ts'.

Following on from this presentation, staff from the 4 universities present at the conference have got together to create a joint module on rural development, which they plan to roll out to students

in 2014. These are Lindsey Gilroy and Emma-Jayne Abbots from the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David (UK), Brendan O'Keeffe from Mary Immaculate College in Limerick (IE) and Florian Warburg from the Department of Geography at Marburg University (DE) agreed to work alongside Tilburg University to develop joint teaching modules to cover the whole semester (approx. 3 months) with a curriculum related to key aspects of the Rural Alliances project. One session about has already been conducted in November 2013, when more than 150 geography students from Marburg were involved. Another result of the exchange meeting was that Tilburg University and Philipps-University Marburg have agreed to work with the Dutch-speaking Rural Alliances partners to run a 'Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index' symposium in the New Year. These linkages and joint working developments are beyond what was envisaged at the start of the project, demonstrating the added value of transnational exchange meetings and combining the research and experience of four Universities from four different North West European countries.

For more information contact Florian Warburg - florian.warburg@staff.uni-marburg.de.

'Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index' – testing in full flow!

There is an old saying: "If you can't measure you can't manage!" Vibrancy in rural areas in North West Europe is under threat. Villages and towns are losing their shops, pubs, post offices, public telephones, transport, schools, young people, medical services and even their public toilets! Whilst many aspects of rural decline can be seen, others are less obvious. The transnational 'Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index' (RVMI), is jointly being developed and tested by the partners as a tool to monitor and measure the different rural communities and initiatives, to better understand the drivers for success and the types of support needed. It aims to provide baseline data and evidence, to share good practice with other rural areas, to adopt model

approaches and to influence policy. Pilot testing of the tool is taking place across the partner areas. In South Kerry over 86 groups were involved in testing the jointly-designed tool, which asked core questions common to all partner areas; and as an add-on they completed additional questions covering local development issues and topics of particular relevance to South Kerry. Early results show that there is a wealth of voluntary time and effort given to keeping rural areas vibrant. Development of the RVMI is an iterative process. Further refinements of the method, following the testing, will take place in the winter of 2013/4 with all partners testing the updated method in Spring 2014.

Consensus, examples and evidence lead to influencing policy-makers

Rural development is a disparate and diverse area of public policy. It can cover everything from providing education and health care to rural populations, through to the management of national parks and the challenges facing the farming industry. Nor are they the same from one country to another: the problems and challenges faced by rural dwellers in Ireland are very different from those of Flanders and the rural territories of France.

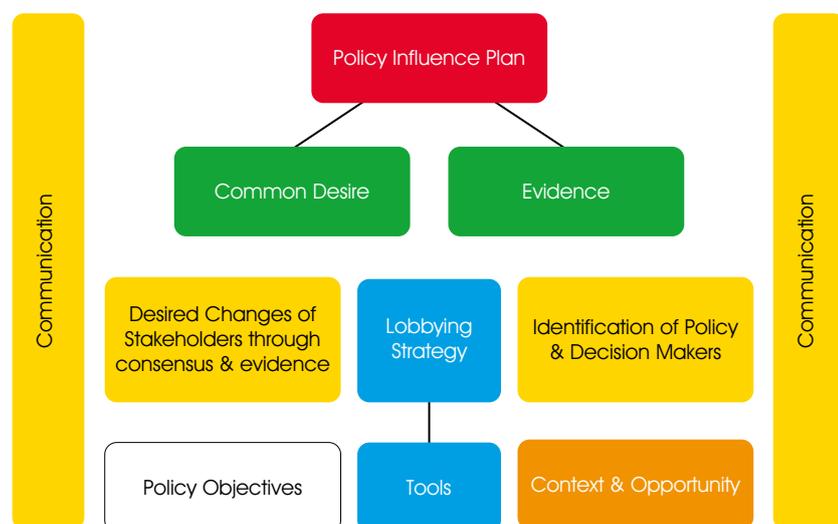
The EU has acknowledged the importance of understanding these differences through its grant support for a wide and diverse range of initiatives to support rural areas. The Rural Alliances project represents rural areas in the UK, France, Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium. Albeit they display different issues, there are common interconnected demographic trends: in-migration, ageing, the growing predominance of higher income groups and increasing social and cultural diversity. Other common trends include the continued decline in local services and a growing variety in the types of businesses found in rural areas.

The Rural Alliances partners have set themselves the task of influencing rural policy as issues emerge and consensus and facts strengthen the case for proposing changes to decision-makers at different levels of

government. Policy-makers and politicians governing rural areas require knowledge of the key issues and innovative, yet tested and rigorous approaches, for addressing them.

The Rural Alliances '*Policy Influence Plan*' identifies key policy- and decision-makers and has started to identify key issues that they wish to take forward as policy recommendations. With more and more alliances being formed and supported and many of the cross-cutting issues being tackled; i.e. on inclusion, financial engineering, governance and resource-efficiency, examples of rural development challenges have been identified, such as:

- attracting young medical professionals to work and live in rural areas
- engaging elderly people in delivering services and accommodation to allow for elderly and infirm people to remain in their rural villages
- stream-lining legislation and rules to allow for community renewable energy projects to progress more quickly and to cut down bureaucracy
- supporting alliances to take on rural services on behalf of the public sector and other bodies, such as road and verge maintenance, toilets, post offices, transport etc.



These challenges are shared between the partners, the alliances, Policy and Advisor members, stakeholders, policy- and decision-makers and organisations in rural development issues. As more data is provided that supports the role of influencing policy, the tools, relationships and opportunities are taken by the partners at local, regional, national and at an EU level as appropriate and within the right context – the '*Policy-Influencing Pathway*'.

Can heritage and silence deliver economic development?

The speech by Professor Gregory Ashworth, at the opening conference of Rural Alliances in Cardiff in June 2012, challenged partners as to whether 'heritage' can deliver economic development. He argued that 'heritage' is something that is conceived by people, it does not exist in isolation to context, politics or attitudes. This challenge motivated one of the emerging heritage alliance members and the project officers of the Vlaamse Landmaatschappij, Belgium, to build an alliance on the theme '*Heritage and silence in the Merode*'.

The alliance brings local heritage alive in activities for local inhabitants and builds the community of people who are conscious of the qualities in its region. Two of the heritage alliance members participated in the transnational exchange in Oisterwijk (Netherlands) in October of 2012, gaining inspiration for developing heritage activities to shape the Merode as one community, based on the Oisterwijk model of alliance-building and the field visits to alliances. Since the start of Rural Alliances, the project has supported the communication and funding of 30 activities within the local heritage events alliance. The heritage activities enhance the five storylines that shape the place-branding for the community of people living, working and visiting the Merode. Examples of heritage events are: literary walks in the valley of the Demer, festivals linking heritage spots and art and crafts workshops, workshops on local heritage with primary schools, guided bike trips along routes that were important for economic development and animated evenings with interactive entertainment with old films and traditional music and song.

A second heritage alliance concerns itself with the compilation, production and dispersion of a heritage publication for the Merode area. This alliance is concerned with two concrete products that tell the story of the Merode. During a dedicated workshop in Kerry, partners worked together to assist this alliance to develop innovative funding proposals to finance the printing and distribution of the heritage book to as many people as possible.

A third heritage alliance is a group of people that embrace silence as heritage value and want to build a broader community of people. Silence and tranquility are values that are associated with rural areas. The change in demographics in rural areas means that there are more and more people commuting, being busy with stress full lifestyles. The '*Silence*' alliance members are convinced that building a community in the Merode around silence is a strength for persons and communities in the future. This alliance organises activities like silent hikes, annual silent platforms and writing workshops.

Perhaps heritage cannot always bring about economic development, but certainly the heritage alliances add social dynamism, integration and rural vibrancy.



Event involving local people, organised by heritage alliance, brings vibrancy to the Merode (BE)

Interreg IVB North West Europe Annual Event

500 people attended the INTERREG North-West Europe Annual Event on 14th November in Roubaix (France). NWE Programme members and professionals from 9 countries exchanged information and ideas about the desired results of the 2014-2020 Programme that focuses on Innovation, Low carbon and Resource and Materials Efficiency. Rural Alliances was represented at the event, displaying its pop-up stand, a poster, cards to entice delegates to join the social media sites and a swath of banners showing the comments made by citizens and visitor in Luxembourg during an outreach event prior to the INTERREG NWE Programme's Annual Event in 2008. This earlier event had focused on demographic change – most relevant to Rural Alliances - and the comments made on the Kaleidoscope of ribbons are still relevant today as they were then.



Banners created from citizens' comments, Luxembourg 2008 – Photo credit: NWE Programme

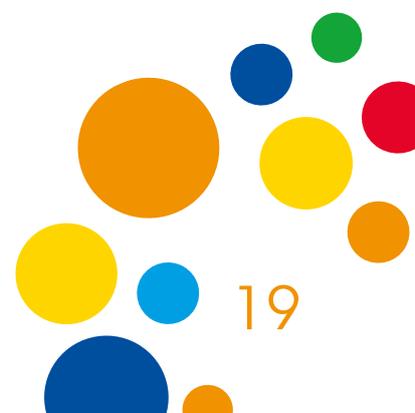
The themes for the next programme (still in draft form) include:

Strengthening research, technological development and innovation - i.e. to develop the capacity of the NWE territory to generate innovation, on the basis of its existing potential and to involve a combination of the public and private sectors (particularly SMEs), academia and end users – the so-called 'quadruple helix'. This measure will seek to reduce the innovation capacity gaps between regions and contribute to the implementation of the smart specialisation strategies of participating regions.

Supporting the shift towards a low-carbon economy in all sectors - i.e. to invest in the area's climate change mitigation potential, reduction of GHG emissions, energy efficiency and the share of renewable energy sources in the consumption and production mix.

Protecting the environment and promoting energy efficiency - i.e. to invest in eco-innovation and resource efficiency. The purpose is to reduce the environmental footprint of human activity on the environment, and decouple the growth curve from the material consumption curve.

The Programme should be approved in late 2014 with the first call for project proposals in Autumn 2014.





Partners



Rural Alliances will:

- Form a new type of alliance (Enterprise and Community Alliances) between enterprises and local communities, mobilising rural residents of all ages, backgrounds and residential status. They will work together to help their communities to adapt to the changing demography in modern rural society.
- Harness the best qualities of enterprise principles, combined with community values, to construct these new alliances, empowering people living in rural areas to be their own agents for change and contribute to better social inclusion and increased competitiveness.
- Create new relationships between the public sector and rural communities to work together to safeguard and enhance rural resources and services, including innovative finance methods.
- Create a Rural Vibrancy Measuring Index, to help people assess their community and identify actions to make improvements.

Partners

12 partners from North West Europe:

- Brecon Beacons National Park Authority (UK)
- University of Wales, Trinity Saint David (UK)
- Boerenbondvereniging voor Projecten vzw (BE)
- Vlaamse Landmaatschappij (VLM) (BE)
- Stichting Streekhuis Het Groene Woud & De Meierij (NL)
- Huis van de Brabantse Kempen (NL)
- Gemeente Lochem (NL)
- Philipps Universität, Marburg (DE)
- South Kerry Development Partnership Ltd. (IE)
- Mayo County Council (IE)
- Maison de l'Emploi, du Développement, de la Formation et de l'Insertion du Pays de Redon-Bretagne Sud (MEDEFI) (FR)
- Laval Mayenne Technopole (FR)