

# **Village Development Plans and Local Governance**

**The project “Village Development Plans and Local Governance” aims to improve the quality and effectiveness of village development plans and local efforts by paying explicit attention to the links between villagers, Leader Local Action Groups, local and regional government and other relevant parties. The project will lead not only to better and more effective village development plans, but also to empowered citizens and improved local governance.**

## **Why this project?**

There are two main issues that feed this project: concern about issues of governance, and the wish to empower villagers with a tool to make explicit their development agenda.

## **Local development agenda**

Villagers have a most integral vision of the territory in which they live. Moreover, when asked to define this territory themselves, they come up with remarkably similar borders: a territory that can be defined as a village ‘landscape’. It is, so to say, the natural habitat where they feel they have a say about, and have knowledge about. This village landscape is not only composed of natural resources, but also of social, cultural and economic potential and activities. It is a source of beauty, identity and belonging, and development potential. By ‘mapping’ these village landscapes, a whole body of knowledge and enthusiasm is unleashed, that can lead to the revitalisation and revalorization of natural and cultural resources, to socio-economic activities etcetera. When done thoughtfully, a local action agenda can emerge for the next 10-15 years, that inspires people. We know that different experiences have been built up across Europe to deliver such action plans. The weak point they usually have is the link with the formal policies at municipal or regional levels. They are, e.g., written in the wrong language, propose impossible things, or are simply not backed up sufficiently by politicians. Thus, the challenge is to draft village action agenda’s in such a way that common administrative and political structures can deal with them.

## **Governance**

Village development plans ideally are generated bottom-up. Leader is working bottom-up. At the same time, there is debate on the legitimacy of the Local Action Groups (LAG): on whose behalf do they speak? Does ‘the bottom’ really ‘end’ at the level of the LAG, or is there something ‘more bottom’? Likewise, the legitimacy of the LAG is questioned in relation to formal public administration institutions connected to representative democracy. Especially the local politicians in LAG’s may find these questions pertinent and challenging.

There is also an increasing recognition that the Leader areas, as they are defined now, may be too big for 1 LAG to handle. To strengthen the bottom-up character of Leader, perhaps we should aim to work at a lower level, of ‘mini- LAG’s. Maybe this is the village level. Working at this level generates immediately a crucial challenge:

How to avoid work in isolation? How to maintain or create the appropriate linkages with the larger area? To put it differently: what models for regional governance are available and useful?

Third, it has been observed that leader projects in general tend to remain rather small, and sometimes also dispersed in nature. They face difficulties in linking up with bigger development schemes. As such this is no problem, but at the same time opportunities to really create impact are lost. Now that Leader becomes mainstreamed, it is all the more important that Leader actions create a fit with regular policies and practices. The challenge we face is: how can we do so while maintaining the Leader spirit of working?

## **Common burning issues: interfaces**

The concern for governance and the concern for local development agenda's share two fundamental issues.

One is the link between bottom and top. Interfaces are needed to make the bridge. These interfaces may appear as politicians involved in LAGs, or in the design of the process, or as new coordination mechanism. We need to identify and learn from the diversity of these interfaces across Europe.

The second is that people (either villagers, administrators or politicians) should be enabled to work from their 'natural' habitat. For villagers, this is usually the territory that surrounds them. For administrators and politicians, these are the formal responsibilities and structures they are working with (e.g. in The Netherlands the municipal or provincial development plans and policies). To put it differently: villagers provide the content; and formal procedures and responsibilities provide the context or structure where this content can grow. There is a clear mutual benefit.

***All partners in this transnational project coincide that the biggest obstacle to make village development plans work is an appropriate link with local Administration. Therefore, all partners in fact are 'partnerships' between a local LAG and local / regional Administrative bodies. These Administrative bodies participate not only as distant 'co-funders', but as interested and active partners.***

## **Village landscape in The Netherlands**

*In the province of Drenthe (Netherlands), in small villages of 300-800 inhabitants, a local action agenda was drawn by focussing on the village landscape. Using a variety of participatory methods, people were asked to express the identity of their village, by focussing on present qualities and shortcomings. At the regional level, an expert analysis was made of landscape identity and municipal and provincial policies affecting the region. After completing both efforts, joint 'design workshops' were held, in which villagers, informed by administrative officials and experts, drew up their village action agenda. The process design and outcome was so inspiring that an intermediate working group was created, in which the villagers, the municipality and the Waterboard were actively involved. This resulted in intelligent*

combinations of plans and budgets, implying a total investment of 2.7 million Euros in a village as small as 800 inhabitants. This enabled e.g. to reconstruct the small harbour that once gave life to the village, and to re-use it for tourism (canoeing routes), while at the same time creating area for water storage.

The Dutch experience suggests that working with village landscapes lead to greater social cohesion, more socio-economic activities, greater care for village history, life and landscape, higher qualities of spatial plans and a better integration with top-down policies and plans.

## **Objectives of the project**

The general project objective is **to improve village development planning in four countries, notably the link with local governance**. The five specific objectives are:

### **Improve the links between informal community based plans and the formal, statutory plans of (Local) Authorities.**

*Involved issues:* Concertation between different parties who are involved. Dynamic, type of agreements, status of village plans, how to link plans content wise, protocols, working culture, etc

### **Work towards the integration of a diversity of local activities in a coherent local plan at village level**

*Involved issues:* How can we bring all different activities and action in a village together in one plan, that is coherent, that facilitates interaction with local government, and that serves as a reference point (and linking pin) for the villagers?

### **Enhance capacity-building and democratic inclusion of volunteers in local development processes**

*Involved issues:* How can citizens become more involved in democratic processes? How to generate and maintain the motivation of volunteers (especially in times when one is waiting for funding?) What responsibility can volunteers carry? How can their capacity be improved? What methods ways of working are available that appeal to volunteers? What methods facilitate joint decision making? What skills and knowledge do we need to achieve all of this?

### **Strengthen the implementation of plans**

*Involved issues:* How can we go from nice plans to implementing these plans? How can we sustain the development process after finishing the plan? What new ideas are available to organize and implement tourist-based recreational projects

### **Improve regional learning and scaling-up of local plans**

*Involved issues:* How can we go from single-village based VDP's to VDP's that not only link between one another, but also with the regional agendas? Can villages learn from each other and collaborate between them?

## Project design

The project is centered around 4 exchange visits between the four partners. The aim of these exchange visits is to generate learning on the 5 specific project objectives, for both the visiting and the hosting partner. The visits are organized around the key-questions of the receiving partner. The visiting partners perform a kind of 'peer review' of the situation of the hosting partner, and provide feedback on the key questions. They constitute the so-called *VDP-feedback team*. This feedback is given back to the host at the end of the visit, and published on this website

**[www.villagedevelopment.eu](http://www.villagedevelopment.eu)**

All four visits contain similar elements, following a general format; yet, final design of each visit depends on local needs and possibilities.

In order to enhance mutual understanding and a purposeful exchange, all partners have prepared a partner profile. This profile contains a description of the general context (background information on the political-administrative system and most important spatial planning procedures) and of the village development case. This case description contains a summary of the partner's project around village development planning, that is being 'reviewed' by the other partners.

The results of all exchange visits will be gathered at a concluding seminar, early January 2008 in Sweden. This seminar is open to any interested organisation  
*contact the Co-ordinator:* **[gremmers \[at\] bureau-buitenkans.nl](mailto:gremmers@bureau-buitenkans.nl)**

Also the exchange visits are open to non-partners, yet on a limited basis. Please contact the Co-ordinator: **[gremmers \[at\] bureau-buitenkans.nl](mailto:gremmers@bureau-buitenkans.nl)**

Lead partner of the project is the municipality of Vara in Sweden. The project is co-ordinated by Bureau BUITENKANS and ETC in the Netherlands.

*more info:* **[www.villagedevelopment.eu](http://www.villagedevelopment.eu)**

### Partner websites

- \* **[www.betterbeantel.nl](http://www.betterbeantel.nl)**
- \* **[www.vara.se](http://www.vara.se)**
- \* **[www.galway.ie/en/](http://www.galway.ie/en/)**
- \* **[www.brandrup.dk](http://www.brandrup.dk)**

### LAG websites

- \* **[www.leaderplus.nl/nederlands/gebieden/zuidtwente/index.php](http://www.leaderplus.nl/nederlands/gebieden/zuidtwente/index.php)**
- \* **[www.leaderkarnan.nu](http://www.leaderkarnan.nu)**
- \* **[www.grd.ie](http://www.grd.ie)**
- \* **[www.leadersja.dk](http://www.leadersja.dk)**

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