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Civil society driven innovation in a peripheral area

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Civil society driven innovation in a peripheral area

How military conversion can turn into – a regional food brand, and more

As part of the “peace dividend” following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, a good number of military bases in an area approximately 100 -150 km west of Frankfurt am Main / Germany were successively closed in the 1990s. That area in the German Land of the Rhineland-Palatinate had been known as the “continental aircraft carrier” with German, American and Canadian military bases.

During the late nineties, a foreign investor planned a huge entertainment park on and around a former German Air Force base, in a pretty pristine natural area. Besides small and medium-sized enterprises, the area is characterised by wine culture and smaller farms growing a broad variety of products (cereals, animal husbandry, fruits and vegetables). 2,000 to 3,000 daily visitors were forecast for a quiet rural area. This led to an alliance of concerned citizens opposing it. It named itself Regionalbündnis Soonwald-Nahe (“Alliance” in the further text) and was founded and is still led by paediatrician Dr Rainer Lauf (regionalbueundnis.de). The Alliance has always sought to have a balanced representation of regional actors on its board, and over time its key players have included local planners, journalists, vintners, farmers, education experts, specialists in regional economic development and foresters. It is incorporated under the German Law on Associations, as a non-profit making entity. The innovation driven by the Alliance is related both to product development and marketing as well as to taking a new approach in strengthening a region by helping develop and cement a common identity. After the investor had given up, the alliance decided it would be sensible to be in favour of something innovative, rather than just opposing potential developments. Possible options to develop a regional identity within a rather parochial environment were discussed. Following a number of culinary events under the motto “Local Delights”, a key idea was the introduction of a regional brand, initiated with a conference entitled “Ploughing and Savouring”. This served to discuss regional potentials with interested local actors (producers, hotels and restaurants, municipal representatives) and experts. Potential actors showed sufficient interest in developing a concept. The regional government initially agreed to fund a study and then to subsidise limited start-up costs of developing a regional brand. A catching name – “SooNahe”, playing on the region and local proximity (“so nearby”) -, was chosen and branding developed. This comprised a logo and compulsory specifications that brand users need to adhere to (local inputs and extensive agriculture being key; but it is not an organic brand).

The innovation means that, through their choice of groceries, consumers have an influence on the region’s quality of life; since by buying regional products

- local producers and processors are strengthened,
- regional incomes and jobs are secured,
- energy savings / reduced pollution are achieved through short delivery distances,
- the extant good biodiversity of the cultivated landscape is preserved through responsible agriculture.

The „SooNahe“ brand symbolises quality regional produce and products. This regional brand entices towards buying these and thus contributes to strengthening the region, in line with the EU and regional government funded programme for integrated rural development (LEADER).

„SooNahe“ land is a region with slightly blurred borders. The core area consists of the counties of Bad Kreuznach, Birkenfeld und Rhein-Hunsrück with a total of around 340,000 inhabitants and an area of approx 2,600 km². Thus, the areas of the Nahe River valley, the northern Palatinate hills and large parts of the Hunsrück uplands are covered.

Moreover, “SooNahe” is active in an area which has hitherto not necessarily seen itself as „one“ and belonging together. In fact, it is not an entity and counties, natural parks and the national park „Hunsrück-Hochwald“, the press and regional support programmes have their own lines of demarcation. “SooNahe”'s radius of action has resulted in an area encompassing a good number of smaller territorial units; the regional brand is increasingly seen as a unifying force versus parochialism.

Prominent features of “SooNahe” country are diverse and highly varied uplands characterised by substantial biodiversity, meadows, forests, fields, vineyards and small-scale agriculture without agro-industry, small villages, numerous small enterprises and little rainfall. In Europe generally, regional disparities between fast-growing metropolitan and lagging peripheral areas have increased of late; the other side of the coin are “dying” infrastructure (as in terms of schools, grocery outlets, meeting places such as pubs and restaurants and small pensions / hotels), disappearance of farms, long work commutes and the outmigration of the well-educated young.

It is against this background that the regional alliance Soonwald-Nahe and the limited liability company marketing “SooNahe” products are active in strengthening the region. Promoting regional economic linkages and more added value contribute to keeping jobs and incomes in the region. The business side of the regional brand is overseen by the Hunsrück-Nahe-Vermarktungs-GmbH (Ltd), its chief executive and board. They develop and verify admission parameters and criteria, organise marketing activities and generally advance the brand's objectives. The central task of the limited liability company is organising the “SooNahe” brand's activities, but additional marketing support to other actors within the region is possible.

Beyond the professional actors of the limited liability company, “SooNahe” can count on volunteers of the Soonwald-Nahe regional alliance and the Hunsrück-Marketing association (both incorporated as non-profit associations under German law). They support awareness-raising and convey the brand's philosophy. Hunsrück-Marketing mainly deals with producers' concerns, the regional alliance owns the brand and supports consumer information and regional awareness. Both of these non-profit associations nominate the president and vice-president of the board of the limited liability company Hunsrück-Nahe-Vermarktungs-GmbH.

Intensive linkages with businesses, smaller crafts enterprises, distributors, educational, cultural and other community actors have been developed through approximately 180 members producing and selling branded products, along with 80 other partners supporting the brand's objectives and using the logo against a fee. Membership and partner fee income is sufficient to run the commercial operations – mainly brand management, distribution and marketing.

A marketing campaign, with support of the local press, helped to introduce initial products into smaller outlets, points of sale have been steadily increasing and the brand is carried – in dedicated sections – by most of the large supermarkets in the region. At the beginning, marketing was organised largely through the two non-profit associations on a voluntary basis. As described above, the brand has been operating, for a number of years, on a commercial basis as a limited liability company and is continually expanding. Innovative marketing tools such as online and printed shopping guides and different size “relationship boxes” with a variable assortment of branded products are used. The brand's tenth anniversary will be celebrated in the context of the “Day of the Regions”, which are organised throughout Germany by the regional movement around Thanksgiving.

An annual event, it presents regional strengths and showcases the benefits of a regional approach. “Day of the Regions“ aims at raising awareness of the link between personal consumption and regional development opportunities. The Alliance has been running this as multi-day events in several locations. The approach comes alive through manifold activities such as markets, cultural events and festive menus, thus providing information and exposure to products emanating from regional economic cycles.

This core competence developed by the Alliance is framed by a raft of other initiatives aimed at increasing identification with the region. Other Alliance activities include a network of 10 revitalised biotopes along local rivers and streams, along with activities such as putting into focus the beauty of blooming meadows (and collecting and preparing their herbs) and promoting regional identity through poetry competitions and protecting the character of villages and landscapes. Recently, “Living Forests” has been launched along with the state forestry administration and the national and nature parks. These have resulted in broad and stable networks.

Not to be overlooked is the commitment of Alliance members in the three „local action groups“ overseeing the EU-funded rural development „LEADER“ programmes. Impact is achieved by channeling grants into public and private projects which help strengthen the rural areas. One of these is the Hildegard von Bingen pilgrimage path, which crosses several administrative borders. This holds significant potential and has been dovetailed with the regional brand: Producers and restaurateurs wishing to use the Hildegard seal need to undergo a prior SooNahe certification. The pilgrimage path and its impacts are a good example of bridging the region from east – the national park - to west – the Rhine River (in this case, organised under the regional destination marketing agency). The area is covered by one Germany’s largest contiguous forests, which contains a nature park, and the Alliance has also promoted renewable energies – mostly wind and biomass. Especially wind energy is popular, with one county a net exporter of wind power. Furthermore, the Alliance is co-operating with the local county administration and lobbying the regional government in the ongoing development of the nature park. A biosphere reserve has been mooted. All of this resonates with the local population and administrations. During 2017, there have been close contacts with and a certain rejuvenation thanks to younger members - representing organised rural youth and cultural initiatives – whose mentality is anything but parochial.

Building regional cohesion through identity

The regional brand is anything but an end in itself. It helps to establish the basis of an identity in an administratively diverse area. On this achievement, a more pronounced effort aiming at further developing regional identity may now be built.

We are witnessing a long-term civil society driven process of social innovation, which has helped to spur the development of a profitable regional brand. The brand is a means to an end. “Building bridges, networking and moving things” – this has been the motto and the strength of the Alliance. Their actors are working hard at ensuring that energies are not wasted in divisive debates, but channelled into sensible ideas and projects. Developing regional identity will help to merge potentials and thus strengthen the region. The momentum is now such that the question of regional identity, as a source of cohesion and common action, is being addressed head-on. Based on a 2015 paper of the Alliance’s president entitled „Regional Vision 2025“, possible avenues were studied within the Board. Elements and markers that may help form the region’s identity were looked at, with a view to identifying potential fields of action, along with possible impediments and pitfalls. A first step was assessing the three EU-funded regional rural development concepts (LEADER), which cover SooNahe-Land with the following areas of intervention:

Soonwald-Nahe – Fountain of health

- Health economy and education
- Lively co-operation
- Tourism
- Wine, agriculture, forestry

The Healthy Hunsrück-Region – Humane, business friendly, forward-looking

- Moulding lively villages
- Promoting a sustainable economy
- Strengthening regional identity and culture
- Strengthening inter-village co-operation

Erbeskopf - Naturally farsighted

- Development of villages and towns
- Social co-operation
- Tourism
- Nature, agriculture and forestry
- Regional economy and energy

The cultural element can be considered as basic for forming an extensive regional identity. This includes varied landscapes as shaped by smaller-scale agriculture, traditional building culture, the culture of eating and drinking (regional specialties, along with wine in all valleys framing the Hunsrück uplands – but also beer), language and dialect culture. What is recently developing is a culture of health and wellness. On the other hand, the west of the region is aiming to build its identity based on the recently established national park. These elements need to be reconciled and combined.

As an identity-shaping factor, the national park can radiate to the rest of the region if its basic aims – essentially maintaining biodiversity and raising awareness in this sense – are also actively implemented throughout the region. This implies a measured use of natural resources, maintenance of the still present chequered landscapes and overall appearance of (lively) localities. One of the pillars of the Alliance – developing regional identity by marketing of sustainable local produce and foods – is a key contributor to this. Some villages are actively and successfully integrating refugees into their communities. Such openness could also be described as a potentially unifying factor. All these potential elements of identity formation need to come alive. This implies identifying and motivating suitable actors.

These topics have been discussed, within the Board, in more detail since 2017 and they form the Alliance's focus in 2018. There are a number of creative and fruitful initiatives in different areas of the region developing interesting perspectives. The Alliance has set its sights on bringing these together and bundling them. Dialogue and communication are prerequisites for successful co-operation. The region needs these if it wants to become more resilient, offering a perspective to future generations. The Alliance has demonstrated for years – not least through the regional brand - that co-operation across and beyond administrative borders is possible. Talks have been held with a raft of regional actors from different walks of life, and initial meetings organised. These have

demonstrated a pronounced readiness to exchange views and work together. Actors from industry, commerce, farmers, vintners, gastronomy, forestry, environmental protection, tourism, culture, women and youth organisations – these go together. And actors from all parts of the region can co-operate if they stop wearing blinders and begin to realise that jointly, more can be achieved.

A working group on regional identity has been established and will explore where relevant common denominators may be found, and how these can be put to use in the region's interest. An initial approach consists in highlighting the topics of identity and regionality in current projects and events (including in those not organised by the Alliance). For the autumn of 2018, a joint Hunsrück-Nahe Forum with a wide participation and interactive elements is being conceived. The substantial potential that the region holds will be highlighted – natural forests, rivers and meadows, rare species, wine, wellness, quality regional products; quality of life and homely abode. This is intended as a step to raising awareness and self-confidence within the region.

Lessons learnt and outlook

The Alliance was founded in 2001, in a region seen as haemorrhaging, with the key objective of promoting regional development with an ecological and social focus. This is to be achieved through

Tending to the region by strengthening regional identity and safeguarding and developing its natural / environmental, cultural and health-related potentials.

Promotion of nature protection and tending of the landscape, along with environmental education in the region.

Promotion of consumer advice and protection by awareness-raising on the importance of a regionally-focused way of life.

It has come a long way since. A regional brand has been successfully established and is running on a purely commercial basis. It is present in most regional supermarkets. Momentum has been sufficient to start a focused effort aimed at promoting regional identity. This is to be achieved by bringing together actors from the fields of industry / commerce, agriculture (farms and wineries), tourism and administrative areas such as forestry and nature protection. A major regional event with a cultural focus is envisaged for the autumn of 2018. Fields of Alliance action such as “Living Rivers” (small improvements along watercourses) and “Living Meadows” / “Living Forests” (outings to study rare fauna and flora) enjoy unbroken popularity; they enhance the building of identity – along with the Alliance's image. Efforts are under way to unite other regional brands such as for wine marketing, tourism, national and nature parks under one overarching roof. Corporate design and presentations will be approximated and bundled to make for a coherent regional appearance; this should be furthered in practical co-operation projects with a view to developing joint structures.

Factors of success comprise the following:

- Continuity in leadership in such a civil-society driven, bottom-up development process

Since its gestation, the Alliance has been masterminded and led by a team of committed individuals, with limited change to accommodate new team members as others depart. The Founding President remains in office. General Assemblies have generally been uncontroversial and elections taken place in a consensual manner.

- A well run secretariat

An effective back-office is indispensable to achieve impact and sustainability. This requires dynamic and highly committed volunteers to ensure administration, preparation of meetings, mailings and communication; the Alliance has had a very low turnover in secretaries running the voluntary office.

- Wide representation of and networking with local actors in the process

Members of the alliance are persons from all walks of life. Membership has recently hovered around the 500 mark. A wide representation is thus ensured; it is also reflected in the composition of the Board.

- Some financial support during the gestation phase is extremely helpful

During the conception phase of the regional brand, the regional government funded a study and related advisory services. This helped to get the brand established. The Alliance benefits from limited grant support for activities in the context of the “Day of the Regions” and for certain events.

- Regular PR activities

In this case, communication takes place largely through the still widely-read local press, as well as the Alliance’s website. There is no social media presence due to lack of personnel capacities to maintain this in the required manner.

In terms of Science Parks and Areas of Innovation, a number of business incubators have recently been established in the region – public (environmental economics and technology, under construction) and private (metal working / logistics). For their success, these depend on the region remaining attractive to innovators and entrepreneurs. Therefore, the Alliance has an indirect role in supporting business incubation as well – it contributes to keeping the region attractive, and it provides a platform for highlighting and addressing impediments to nascent entrepreneurs (such as a widespread lack of high speed internet connections). Here, co-operation with a regionally wider and more formalised economic networking initiative, run by municipal administrations and businesses (www.milder-westen.de), will be useful.

One may conclude that regions outside of agglomerations may also be seen as innovation areas – albeit not necessarily in the strict technological sense of research and transfer, but certainly in terms of socio-cultural and product marketing / branding approaches. It is clear that smaller municipal entities (such as counties), on their own, cannot solve the problem of lagging behind metropolitan areas. Civil society actors and businesses should be encouraged to get more involved in regional development, regional policy and to pool their efforts. Grant schemes to support locally anchored development projects and social innovations should be further honed. In the region covered by the “SooNahe” brand, such projects comprise multi-generational living, developing “the village as a hotel” and revitalising villages from within - rather than new housing and commercial developments blighting their periphery.

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