

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EUROPEAN UNION INITIATIVE OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT *LEADER* IN THE SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAIN REGION (SPAIN)

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The present analysis is based on a study entitled, *Public Opinion and Rural Development: The Intermediate Evaluation of the European Union Initiative Leader Plus in Andalusia*. This study addresses rural development in Andalusian mountain areas, within an empirical framework focused specifically on the Sierra Nevada, Spain. It aims to show the difficulties and hindrances that slow the development process for mountain populations in the Sierra Nevada in modern times, as well as the perceived changes and opportunities for improvement detected by this population within the framework of the LEADER Initiative.

Concern about development in European mountain regions

Mountain areas have suffered significant deterioration in the last few decades. As shown by other work and research conducted in Spain, they have been characterized as underprivileged by comparison with other rural zones, owing to their permanent natural disadvantages and resulting socioeconomic conditions (Figure 1). This circumstance, together with the significance of these territories for the European Union (EU), soon aroused concern about underdevelopment within the civil services of many European countries, including the European Committee (EC) itself. This concern inspired the design and application of certain policies for the development of mountain zones.

The present brief analysis concentrates exclusively on rural development experience within the framework of the LEADER Initiative, in a specific area of Andalusia: the Sierra Nevada National Park. This National Park is made up of 60 municipalities with a total area of 171,829 ha.

A summary of the main results drawn from the successive evaluations of these programs is presented below. These evaluations consist of analysis of public opinion about the LEADER program in different areas of implementation, within the environment of national parks. The information was obtained through in-depth interviews and focus groups from residents and interest groups in those areas.

The Experience of the LEADER

Program in the Sierra Nevada Implementation of the LEADER Initiative in the environment of the Sierra Nevada began to take place in the first half of the 1990s. During the years of implementation of the Initiative, the villages and rural areas of the Sierra Nevada experienced great changes, characterized by a notable improvement in the living conditions of the population. However, it is necessary to emphasize that this conclusion is full of nuances, given the great degree of heterogeneity that characterizes the different regions of the Sierra Nevada. This heterogeneity is manifested in the variety of natural resources and in the imbalance in funding for public infrastructure, as well as in the pronounced and faltering relief that characterizes this territory. It is also linked with the uneven population structure and the social, political, and economic stratification that this represents.

The status of development

Different appraisals of the situation of the rural world and its difficulties can be found in different regions, explained here by the heterogeneity mentioned above. Despite this, the mountainous population of the Sierra Nevada generally perceives development in negative terms, by comparison with the conditions experienced by the inhabitants of other, non-mountainous rural areas. Mountain dwellers in the villages of the Sierra Nevada attribute this situation to economic stagnation, social immobilization, and the lack of basic infrastructure. In the majority of the municipalities, the interviewees reported great difficulties occasioned by the predominance of a self-centered culture (independent and competitive with the rest of the municipalities), with the political representatives of the town councils doing nothing to seek a middle ground. The rough orography of this area has resulted in dispersed and differentiated zones and municipalities throughout the territory.

Assessment of the territorial approach

The territorial approach is questioned in the regions of the Sierra Nevada. Articulation of interests, and the relation between existing development needs and actions carried out, constitute a complex and difficult panorama for various reasons. In the first place, the different sub-territories which make up these regions reflect both natural and cultural diversity. Secondly, in the last few years, these municipalities and sub-territories of the Sierra Nevada have had different development experiences. Some areas have benefited from specific, resolute actions (improvement of communication channels, development of the tourist sector, support for innovation in agriculture, etc). Thirdly, the efficacy of the LEADER Initiative in the Sierra Nevada setting has also been questioned, as a result of little coherence between the true needs and interests of its population in different zones and sub-territories, and the actions developed. This aspect particularly affects communication between different social, political, and economic actors.

Assessment of natural and cultural heritage

The natural and cultural heritage of the Sierra Nevada is appreciated mainly for its commercial value, which offers a strong comparative advantage. The population of the Sierra Nevada is aware that its heritage (protected natural areas in the countryside, gastronomy, rustic village architecture and lifestyles) constitutes an important tourist attraction. For this reason, many rural development activities initiated in this region aim at consolidation of a competitive tourist market.

Localization or concentration of this activity could be the primary disadvantage for development of the municipalities of the Sierra Nevada, and, at the same time, a threat to the diversification that the LEADER program specifically aims for. In the eastern part of the Sierra Nevada, for instance, it is believed that favorable treatment is being given to the municipalities nearest to Orgiva, situated in the lap of the Sierra Nevada, and particularly to those found in the Poqueira River depression. On the other hand, interviewees complained about the little support that sectors other than tourism—such as agribusiness and the meat-processing industry—receive in this area as well as in the western area. These areas feel excluded from the process of rural development.

The innovative character of rural development

Rural development projects in this area are characterized by a lack of innovation and diversification among the activities developed. The population of the area attributes this to lack of participation in the processes of rural development, as a consequence of low levels of training, an underdeveloped business culture, and limited dissemination of information concerning program opportunities. This can be directly observed in the context of the actions referred to above, but also in other sectoral

strategies, such as the application of new technologies in the business, education, and domestic fields. Owing to obsolete telephone lines in the towns, there are great communication problems with the Internet. This evidently has a major impact on the capacity of companies in the area, be they in the industrial or the service sector. Information obtained also showed little support for small- and medium-sized firms in all parts of this region.

Conclusions

Rural development in mountain areas should be integrated. The integrated approach of rural development coordinates all the specificities of the LEADER Initiative. It involves the ability to reconcile the necessities of a certain territory with the conditions of the population that inhabit it and the resources available. All in all, integrated rural development involves fluid communication between all development actors, manifested in working and cooperation networks, and not just through the joint subsidiarity of some actions.

Rural development of mountain areas should be sustainable in a dual sense. In the first place, development activities promoted by RDAs should guarantee their subsistence, which tests the success of the program. Continuity of the initiatives acts as a stimulus to new proposals. In this way, development programs can generate the required multiplicative effect. Finally, development activities carried out today should not have a negative influence on opportunities for future development.