

Quarterly journal of the LEADER II European programme

LEADER II magazine

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Winter 98-99 No.19

Rural Development
in the Information
Society

Western Isles
Pays de Gâtine



CORSICA



Country: France

Action carried out: the installation of "video kiosks" in remote rural areas

Cost: ECU 200 000

EU: ECU 30 000

Other public funds: ECU 170 000

"As part of its policy to reconquer the hinterland, our LEADER group has helped to install a "video kiosk" in the remote market town of Levie in order to enable inhabitants to carry out, from a distance, a series of administrative formalities (registry office business, social security office business, job searches, etc.), which used to mean a four-hour journey. This system, which combines IT and video, also offers economic services to businessmen, in particular access to databases and the possibility of organising video conferences with consular chambers. We are currently planning to set up video kiosks in every micro-region in Corsica."

Paule Pandolfi,
LEADER official

MARSICA



Country: Italy

Action carried out: creation of an Internet site

Cost: ECU 156 450

EU: ECU 45 066

Other public funds: ECU 83 694

Private funds: ECU 27 690

"The creation of the 'SITE Gal' Internet site is the fruit of cooperation between our LEADER group and the managers of the Sistemi SITE IT network. The aim is to promote the human, technical, etc. resources for the development of this part of the Abruzzi by accessing databases, which are constantly being updated, in real time. A window for businesses and local public bodies, one of the original features of SITE Gal is that it has been developed according to a geographical logic: a very wide range of information can be consulted by simply clicking on the maps of the different areas and parts of the region. A trial version of SITE Gal can be accessed at www.site.it/galmarsica"

Giuseppe Damico,
Chairman of the LEADER group

ASTRID LINDGRENS HEMBYGD



Country: Sweden

Action carried out: production of cultural CD-ROMs

Cost: ECU 36 687

EU: ECU 5 858

Other public funds: ECU 13 669

Private funds: ECU 17 160

"In a telecentre run by women, our LEADER group is supporting the production of educational CD-ROMs for children devoted to the history of Sweden and centred on various local specific features. The aim is to create jobs from a new activity based on an innovative product with a strong cultural element. This project is already a success because several CD-ROMs have been produced and marketed. The long-term aim would be to produce and market multilingual CD-ROMs with other LEADER groups."

Jacob Kaell,
LEADER official

MONTAÑA DE NAVARRA



Country: Spain

Action carried out: telelibrary

Cost: ECU 13 437

EU: ECU 4 406

Other public funds: ECU 4 969

Private funds: ECU 4 062

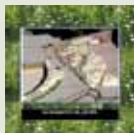
"Our LEADER group is supporting a series of actions intended to promote the use of IT to break the isolation of rural communities: the creation of a telecentre, the organisation of IT training targeted at different categories of the population, etc. One of these actions concerned the Espinal public library. Thanks to LEADER, it has created an Internet service (www.ctv.es/USERS/herrilib/) enabling the inhabitants of 30 small mountain villages to consult its catalogue, find out what its new acquisitions are and order books that they would like to borrow. The librarian then delivers them."

Marta Mañas Larraz,
LEADER official responsible for new technologies



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Patricia Vendramin and Gérard Valenduc look at the use of information and communication technologies, the challenges they present and the potential they offer, but also their limits from a local development perspective.



Using the Internet to develop the Gâtine: The "Gâtinautes" 13

In the Pays de Gâtine LEADER area (Poitou-Charentes, France), virtual networks exist alongside the very dense web of local solidarity networks, thereby strengthening the integration and effectiveness of the implemented rural development actions.



When IT breaks isolation and creates jobs: live local, work global 19

Betting on advanced communications technologies, the Western Isles, Skye & Lochalsh LEADER group has facilitated the creation of more than 200 teleworking jobs in the Hebrides, in North-West Scotland.

In a word...



Three important issues for the new Community Initiative for rural development

Dr. Franz Fischler, *Member of the European Commission with responsibility for Agriculture and Rural Development*

Although the Council has not yet agreed on a final conclusion on the Agenda 2000 proposals, I would like to take the opportunity given by this LEADER Magazine to emphasise three issues which will be important for our new Community Initiative on rural development: the continuity of the approach, the territorial coverage and the administration of the new Initiative for rural development.

Continuity in the approach

Taking up the central features of LEADER II and carrying them on, the new Community Initiative will ensure the necessary continuity in concepts and methods. Local partnerships, bottom-up approach and the opportunities to try out new ideas for rural development are the main features to be continued.

We need a kind of small-scale "show-case" for what we are trying to encourage on a larger scale in the mainstream rural development programmes, the emphasis of the new Initiative should therefore be on supporting pilot rural activities. We want to create and experiment with high quality integrated strategies for the development of rural communities.

We also need to continue and strengthen the networking of local action groups in order to inspire rural communities with the ideas and with the enthusiasm of other rural areas. Networking is also a necessary condition for co-operation in planning and carrying out joint projects. Very often the critical mass for a project can only be achieved by co-operation.

Expanding territorial coverage without watering down efficiency

The new Community Initiative should not be restricted to Objective 1 or Objective 2 regions. The potential for local action and pilot projects should also be supported in rural areas outside the Objective regions.

This is of course not to say that the new Community Initiative should be spread all over rural Europe so that it does not have its full effect anywhere. The new Initiative must be targeted in order to encourage new ideas and the people who want to implement them. Strict criteria must be used to select which groups are to receive funding in order to guarantee adequate financial support for the chosen initiatives.

Transparency and efficient administration

In Agenda 2000 we have proposed to finance each of the three new Community Initiatives from a single Fund. In the case of rural development, it is the EAGGF-Guidance Section that will intervene in rural areas. With such a mono-fund approach, the scope of the EAGGF must be expanded to include measures that normally come under the remit of ERDF or ESF. This will be an important element of simplification.

In view of the great variety of rural areas in the Union and the great differences in starting conditions, it is natural that a policy for the development of rural areas must be based on the principle of subsidiarity. This also applies to the new Community Initiative. But subsidiarity also means that the tasks must be clearly defined and that people at all levels must be prepared to assume their responsibilities. The selection of local action groups, for instance, should be the responsibility of the Member States within the commonly agreed criteria and – in order to avoid a slow start-up – within a common deadline for selection.

Rural areas have a lot to offer. By restructuring our rural development policy we want to bring it more into line with market-management policies and we want to introduce more flexibility, more subsidiarity and a much simpler way of working for the Member States and the regions. We want to sharpen the environmental focus and, above all, promote sustainable development in all the Community's rural areas, so that the people living in those areas as well as the urban population will benefit from the particular assets of rural areas. <

Brussels, 27 October 1998.

Advanced communication technologies and local d opportunities... on certain c

BY PATRICIA VENDRAMIN
AND GÉRARD VALENDUC [*]

With the Internet, multimedia, mobile telephones and groupwork software, the “Information Society” has invested in the countryside as it has invested in towns. Distance work and training, the “electronic commerce” of tourism, local products, etc. are new forms of activity that some LEADER areas are trying out. Patricia Vendramin and Gérard Valenduc look at the use of information and communication technologies, the challenges they present and the potential they offer, but also their limits from a local development perspective.



development : conditions

Seen through the eyes of a small region, information and communication technologies seem somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, they call to mind the globalisation of the economy, the internationalisation of markets, the organisation of networks on a planetary scale and other heavy tendencies over which it seems difficult to have any influence. On the other hand, their interest for local development seems evident, since it is the transformation of industries and services which is in play, in the same way as is the future of work and employment. Furthermore, the concrete policies linked to the "Information Society" must be implemented at local level, whether concerning infrastructures, research, help for businesses, job promotion, the organisation of vocational training or communications policy.



A new technological deal, dominated by communication

Most of the recent technological developments in the area of IT and telecommunications, such as the Internet, mobile telephones and multimedia, have advanced the notion of communication : our economies will henceforth rely on distance communication and exchange networks. This priority accorded to communication distinguishes the current wave of information technologies from that of the 1980s, where the use of IT concerned in particular the automation of operating tasks: robotics, computer-aided design and manufacturing, databases, word processing, data transfers, etc. What are the significant technological innovations in the new distance communication and exchange systems between individuals and organisations ? Many of these innovations are well known : mobile telecommunications have invaded our lifestyles since the appearance of the mobile telephone, the Internet network is no longer the privilege of university researchers alone, portable computers are becoming widespread in certain jobs (commercial service, maintenance, etc.) and multimedia applications are becoming more extensive. Other lesser known technological developments for the general public have also changed the ways companies are organising themselves. Here we can mention in particular groupware software ("groupware") and workflow management software ("workflow"), which facilitate the organisation and execution of joint activities, internal business networks (Intranet) or even telephones integrated within computers, as have been implemented in call centres, for example. —————>

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Computerised school in the **Pays d'Auge LEADER** area [France]

These new technologies are also at the origin of a number of new services (teleservices) and new work forms (distance work), which are gaining more and more sectors and private or public companies. These recent developments can *perhaps* offer perspectives in terms of the creation of activities at local level, but they can *certainly* give another direction to communication and opening-up policies.

The boost given to external communication

The development of the Internet and multimedia applications has given a new impetus to the external communication of economic and social agents: not only are businesses and public authorities concerned, but also the associative, educational and cultural world as well. Three aspects of external communication have been strengthened; these are already within the reach of small and medium-sized enterprises or local organisations. The first, and by no means the least, concerns advertising, brand image, information on a company's clients or suppliers; or even tourist information, the development of the local heritage, the promotion of rural activities. The second aspect concerns the very functioning of companies and local authorities: relations with partners, suppliers and clients are becoming increasingly interactive in real time, whatever the distance between them. There are important consequences in terms of flexibility and adaptability. Finally, the third aspect concerns the development of on-line services which can be accessed by the general public. But connection to global networks does not only mean getting to know oneself, getting to know and distributing one's services and accessing information. It also

enables resources not available at local level to be accessed, whether in terms of services to companies or community services, for example in the areas of health or education. Symmetrically, it can develop local resources on a wider market or to a wider public.

Furthermore, for many non-trading organisations, particularly associations with a cultural or educational vocation, the recent development of the Internet and multimedia are offering new possibilities in terms of disseminating information, communicating with the public, or even diversifying their educational or cultural "products". In this case, networks are considered above all new media, rather than working tools or instruments of organisational change.

Developing teleservices

Advanced communication technologies are also interesting for a remote region or area in terms of planning the development of new activities. Among the various forms of distance work, the development of teleservices is one to be exploited. An increasing number of service activities involve the telephone, i.e. "face-to-face" contact is replaced or complemented by telephone communication. Businesses have become experts in the production and organisation of these types of services, in fields as varied as banking and insurance, holidays and tourism, maintenance and after-sales service, real estate, direct marketing, leisure promotion, etc. These services are characterised by the fact that they are perfectly mobile, i.e. can be carried out from absolutely anywhere, as long as the basic technological infrastructure is sufficient and the vocational qualifications are available.



“Introducing IT in Longford”

Monica O'Malley [Longford LEADER, Ireland]

The County of Longford (30 296 inhabitants) has been a crossroads of Ireland since Celtic times ; three national major trunk roads currently cross it. However, Longford has neither important industries nor higher education establishments, which could both serve as levers for the wide-scale dissemination of information and communication technologies (ICT).

The area's demographic decline, its insufficient level of facilities and the reduction in the number of public services go a long way to explain the poor investment in the area. With many local actors arriving at these same conclusions, an awareness campaign on the use of ICTs had already been launched at the beginning of the 1990s. Among the various actions implemented were the integration of IT classes in school curricula, the creation of a “Computer Training College” in 1994, the development of a business centre and the installation of an Internet server in the County library.

This approach gradually helped to familiarise people with these technologies, but it lacked an overall strategic plan in order to really and sustainably establish activities linked to ICTs in the area. This plan was included among the priorities of Longford's LEADER II programme.

In February 1996, the local action group began by organising an “Internet Conference” which enabled the opportunities offered by IT to be better defined in the specific context of the County. The event led to the formation, a few months later, of an “Internet Community Co-operative”, whose aim was to use the Net to promote the areas in the County, to communicate with the diaspora and to promote the use of IT. The cooperative firstly created a website, making Granard the first Irish parish present on the Internet.

In March 1997, the Chamber of Commerce formed a task force responsible for identifying the concrete perspectives relating to the use of advanced communications technologies. The task force comprised 18 representatives from different categories of the population and sectors of socio-economic activity in the area: businessmen, farmers, teachers, cultural event coordinators, women, young people, etc.

Five thematic working parties were then set up to look at the possible uses of ICTs in five areas considered to be priority areas: business, farming, education, health and voluntary work.

A survey of 259 households and 77 local businesses was carried out. The results were the subject of a report, published in July 1997, a real mine of information on the use of ICTs in local development.

The survey and report cost ECU 45 970, ECU 36 800 of which were financed in the context of LEADER II. These amounts include an estimate of the amount of voluntary work but not the contribution of the Chamber of Commerce, who provided important technical-administrative support and made offices as well as video-conference facilities available.

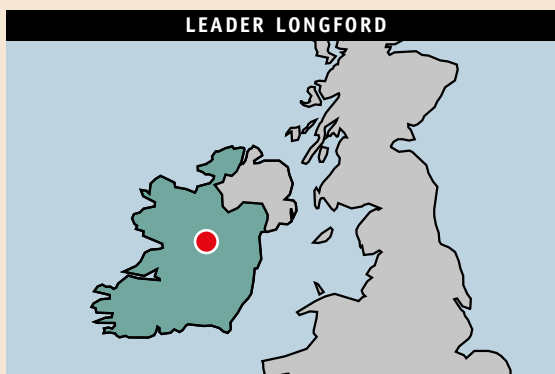


The survey also provided the opportunity to renew links with many migrants originally from Longford, who have suggested a number of interesting lines of work. A consultancy firm specialising in communication technologies also identified a significant competitive advantage for Longford : very affordable property prices, a factor which proved to be decisive in the creation of a software company, “Longview Technology”, in January 1998. Its initial workforce of 10 employees already increased to 16 in April and will reach 35 by the end of the year. Between 100 and 300 jobs could be created over the next few years.

The lessons from the survey and the success of Longview Technology have considerably facilitated the introduction of new technologies in the County of Longford. In 1998, for example, the following were set up :

- > the “Longfordonline” Internet site and database, which notably enables links to be maintained with the diaspora ;
- > an on-line service for farmers, the result of cooperation between the local action group and Teagasc, the Irish office for farming and rural development ;
- > a commercial database for local businesses in conjunction with the County Enterprise Board ;
- > mobile training courses at various locations throughout the County. The action, financed by LEADER, involves installing 11 computers in a village for six weeks at a time to enable 30 people to learn basic IT skills (at the end of June 1998, 175 people from four different villages had attended the courses). <

Web : www.longfordleader.ie/





“The future depends on training”

Werner Kräutler [Sall-Wöll-Ötztal LEADER, Tyrol, Austria]

The future of Europe's rural environment also depends on mastering communication technologies. The Ötztal Telecentre, in Umhausen (Tyrol), specifically aims to encourage people to acquire the necessary skills to be used in these new technologies.

It was two farmers who came to find out about the possibilities of IT training that gave the LEADER group the idea to create a “telecentre” in the Ötz Valley. That was in December 1996, and in less than six months, the GAL had succeeded in making the “TeleZentrum Ötztal” operational, co-financed to the tune of ECU 143 000 by the European Union (40%), the Land of Tyrol (30%) and the Federal Government (30%). Comprising classrooms equipped with 10 computers, the telecentre broke new ground by developing a training programme entitled “IT for farmers”. This programme was 64 hours long (4 hours per week for 16 weeks), given three times a year and is now known about and recognised nationally: the Chambers of Agriculture of four Austrian Länder have in fact “imported” the method themselves. About 100 farmers from the valley have already completed the course while 250 others are currently following it elsewhere in Austria. The approach chosen for the TeleZentrum is a result of the conclusions of the study that the LEADER group had commissioned from a scientific journalist from Vienna. It involved “analysing the needs of households in terms of IT in the context of Austria”, with the aim of identifying new activities and sources of income – in particular telework – based on the use of communication technologies. In this respect, the results of the study placed great emphasis on the importance of training. However, potential users of IT applications often live far away from training facilities. It was therefore the responsibility of these training facilities to go to the users and not the other way round. This led to the idea of setting up a telecentre in the Ötz Valley.

The Directors of the Ötztal TeleZentrum like to compare this to a driving school, in the sense that following the example of driving a car, telework requires the acquisition of a certain basic knowledge. The centre's other principle is that “practice makes perfect”. The IT lessons given by the centre therefore consist in training sessions heavily centred on practice, while covering a wide range of IT know-how: word processing, accountancy software, computer graphics, layout, etc.

The approach has already borne fruit: since October 1998, seven women farmers from the valley, who all followed the training course, have supplemented their income by encoding data for a large Tyrolian company. Other projects will be implemented in January 1999: the creation of websites and the provision of technical assistance to companies, particularly in terms of electronic commerce. But the training given at the telecentre firstly aims to enable participants to acquire skills that they can rapidly and effectively use in their jobs. In the case of the module “IT for women farmers”, for example, participants had to manage a “virtual farm”, as well as an “ideal” farm based on a computer programme into which the main organisational parameters of a farm had been integrated.



The Ötztal TeleZentrum also offers courses in other domains: accountancy, administration, letter-writing, graphics and layout, public relations techniques, marketing, etc.

The telecentre is currently developing an IT course intended specifically for women. The first session will begin in Spring 1999. Just like the module “IT for women farmers”, this training course will be offered in other Austrian rural areas.

Since November 1998, the Ötztal TeleZentrum has also become a teleworking centre, providing four offices to around 10 teleworkers who manage the Internet site of a large Austrian record dealer using electronic commerce (50 000 products listed).

Six months ago, the Internet did not mean very much to the inhabitants of Ötztal. Even tourist operators – tourism is the main economic sector in the valley, receiving approximately 2.5 million visitors every year – did not see the point of a website. Today, thanks to the “Introduction to the Internet” module aimed at adults and the “discussion forums” and “Internet Café” created more for young people, there is a real craze for the Net. <

Web: www.oetzi.com



Considerable technological progress has recently been made in the development of these on-line services. This concerns call diversion and voice servers and, more generally speaking, work stations integrating telephony and computers. This equipment enables a company to organise the provision of services from “telephonic platforms”, sometimes geographically located very far away from the company itself.

**Information technologies
and local development:
two decades of success and failure**

For two decades, the European Commission, among others, has set up various programmes to boost and support IT experiments at local or regional level. A quick assessment of these programmes enables one to get an idea of the successes and failures and to evaluate the advantages and problems associated with the local or regional dimension.

Infrastructures or services

A similar dilemma faces all the experiments : should priority be given to infrastructures and networks, in a model where the supply of technology provokes demand for services, or to the expression of needs and innova-

tion in uses, in a model where the demand for services guides technological innovation ? Certain programmes have favoured one or the other priority, but on the whole the results have fallen very short of expectations. Assessments show that there are serious barriers to the achievement of regional economic development based on infrastructures in information and communication technologies. Having infrastructures does not activate uses. There is a need for education, training, mobilisation of users, a need to translate technology into applications and services suited to the companies of the regions concerned.

But on another hand, offering tailor-made services and applications to local firms is very often insufficient, partly because it is often considered that the real needs are well known but in the end are poorly clarified. Furthermore, the same applications, even those designed to meet identical needs, may succeed in one case and fail in another, depending on the different organisational and socio-economic contexts.

Consequently, in order to effectively meet local and regional economic development objectives, both infrastructure policies, as well as those geared towards uses, must be integrated into other policies aiming to improve the organisational and socio-economic environment of each region. Education and training hold key positions in this environment.

*The “Mobile Computer Classroom”
is available for all communities in the **Louth** LEADER area [Ireland]*





With the support of **Donegal LEADER**, which has enabled it to purchase high-tech equipment, this London photographic agency has relocated to Ireland

→ The myth of decentralisation

A generally accepted idea that has passed through many local IT projects is to believe that advanced communications technologies are going to strengthen decentralisation, even that they could place central and outlying regions on an equal footing.

In fact, advanced communication technologies do not eliminate some of the obstacles to local or regional development: these may be related to completely different factors, such as a lack of innovation culture, managerial attitudes which are badly suited to changes in the economy, public policies which are too defensive, gaps in terms of qualifications or training, or simply characteristics of physical geography in the face of which the networks are able to do nothing.

In practice, in the area of services, experience has shown that decentralisation phenomena are not evident. Delocalised services are often those that come under an industrial type model: standardised, simplified services which are produced en masse and routinely, bringing little added value. The tendency has not, however, been to delocalise this type of service wherever. For reasons of economies of scale, these activities tend to be concentrated on a limited number of specialised sites and more in suburban regions or on the outskirts of main urban centres than in remote areas. Furthermore, most services with a high added value remain localised in large towns and central regions. In this respect, the example of teleworking in the Hebrides (Scotland) described in this edition of LEADER Magazine is probably an exception.

In theory, although a lot of work has become mobile, not all regions are on an equal footing faced with this potential mobility. A decisive criterion seems to be to have a workforce capable of providing a quality service, with a quality/cost ratio which remains decisive. It is this factor which perhaps explains the success of the Scottish experiment.

To overcome distance or to overcome complexity?

Another generally accepted idea is to believe that advanced communication technologies have the effect of eliminating distances, overcoming geographical obstacles and therefore ironing out disparities between regions. It's a fact: IT decreases dependence with regard to the distance factor, information gateways and many obstacles to interactive communication. But this does not mean that distance and localisation are no longer important. Instead, people's attention is drawn to other localisation factors, such as the quality of the environment, human capital, the dynamic and innovative nature of the local economies and communities, local partnerships, etc.

The real specificity of advanced communication technologies lies elsewhere than in the abolition of distance: it is in its ability to shorten time, deal with complexity, organise flexibility. This perspective is important for local or regional policies.

A poor industrialisation potential

A third generally accepted idea is to attribute the virtues of an "industrialising industry" to information and communication technologies, i.e. a basic activity which would give rise to other connected activities, leading to a darning of the industrial fabric.

Contrary to previous "industrial revolutions", the Information Society requires few major infrastructure programmes that could create jobs and have a multiplier effect on the economy. Even major telecommunications operations, such as cabling or the construction of Hertizian networks, carry little weight compared to other major infrastructure work, such as motorways, high-speed trains, purification stations or waste treatment installations. The added value of information technologies does not lie in the material aspect of these technologies, but in the immaterial aspects. It is therefore illusory to make it the keystone of an industrialisation strategy: it is more important to invest in knowledge and skills, because these will allow new infrastructures to be exploited and be innovative in products and services. The example of Parthenay, in France, demonstrates this point (see corresponding article).

Paths for the future

Modernising services

In many European countries, services constitute a very important aspect of economic activity, particularly in rural areas. These services could constitute a considerable growth factor. Unfortunately, in some regions, their development is still too often considered as compensation for de-industrialisation. Public services are handled as public expenditure, and not as resources. Private services are not yet sufficiently considered an activity in their own right.

In the area of services to businesses, the growth factor consists in developing activities with a high intensity of knowledge, which best exploit the knowledge and know-how accumulated in the local economic experiment, but which are also capable of transforming themselves into teleservices.



“The PARALELO 40 tourist reservation department”

Malaquías Jiménez Ramírez
[La Manchuela LEADER, Castile-La Mancha, Spain]

“Selling” rural tourism to the people requires fast and efficient communication systems.

Our PARALELO 40 network was created in 1993 by seven LEADER I groups (five from Spain and two from Portugal), whose areas of intervention were all more or less situated on the 40th parallel of latitude, and who wished to promote their tourism resources together.

The idea was to establish visitor loyalty by means of joint and reciprocal tourism promotion: thus, each area informs its visitors of the attractions of each of its partner areas. Until 1996, the seven PARALELO 40 groups were happy to publish tourist brochures together and jointly attend trade fairs and exhibitions.

In 1996, with the launch of LEADER II, our network opened up to 20 other areas (five in Portugal and 15 in Spain) also situated on the 40th parallel. This led to the need to improve our ability to take action and strengthen our presence on the market. The use of new communication technologies then seemed to us to be inevitable.

We therefore decided to create a reservations department in order to directly market our tourist products, using an IT system which enables information on and the “on-line” sale of breaks to be constantly updated. In order for the project to take shape, we turned to the ARTE-PYME programme (Regional actions in favour of telecommunications in SMEs) coordinated by the Spanish Ministry of Industry and Development. Being a national programme, non-Spanish partners were not eligible to apply for it. The project’s implementation was therefore limited to 14 Spanish groups. The Portuguese partners were involved in informing people about and promoting PARALELO 40, but not in the actual reservations department itself.

The aim of this department is therefore to directly market tourist products offered by tourism companies in each area. The project’s implementation involved the following stages:

- > installation of 156 computers, 14 in the LEADER group offices and 142 in the companies involved. The majority of these companies are small (one or two employees) and cover almost the entire range of tourist and leisure products (rural gîtes, hotels, apartments, cabins, campsites, open-air sports, guided tours, cultural activities, local cuisine, etc.). 5000 beds are available in total;
- > installation of an Internet server;
- > data capture on the services of the 142 tourism operators (dates, beds, rates, services, discounts, etc.);

> training the project’s participants (practitioners from the 14 local action groups as well as tourism operators, using the IT tool in their establishment). This involves personalised training provided within the companies themselves;

> promoting and disseminating the project. In this respect, we have produced 5000 copies of brochures to be distributed at the tourism fairs where we are present (in particular FITUR in Madrid) and to travel agencies and tour operators.

The software used is “TURCENTRAL” (for data management concerning reservations) and “TURINTER” (for image processing). This equipment initially caused us a few problems because it is not completely suited to the specifics of rural tourism (little accommodation spread out over the area) nor to the accountancy methods generally used by small operators. However, these problems were gradually resolved.

The department has been operating for too short a time for its results to be seriously evaluated at present. In August 1998, a meeting was held in Riopar, in the Sierra del Segura (Castile-La Mancha), between operators involved in PARALELO 40. The 100 or so participants discussed the system’s development prospects, which seem to inevitably involve creating an association-type organisation to manage sales made by the reservations department and extending the network’s geographical coverage: we therefore looked at the possibility of including Italian and Greek LEADER areas in PARALELO 40. Furthermore, from the point of view of optimising profitability, we believe that the equipment already installed could enable products other than those associated with tourism to be marketed: craft products, agri-food products, etc. <

Web: www.paralelo40.org



➤ But the most radical change in mentality to operate undoubtedly concerns public services. The report entitled "Building the European Information Society for us all" is very clear in this respect: it recommends making public services an engine of growth in the emerging Information Society. It proposes three specific recommendations: shifting public services from infrastructure to content; improving the effectiveness of public services; making public services models of service provision.

Priority to human resources

To state that human resources must be a priority in local or regional development strategies may be obvious. Nevertheless, the very expression "investing in skills" has only recently come into use and education is still rarely considered a long-term investment. In the past, it has often been preferable to invest in motorways, business parks or material assistance to companies rather than in training, research and development and updating skills.

Distance work, the development of teleservices and the exploitation of the networks all favour the emergence of new jobs and positions which require the acquisition of new skills. Among these, there are certainly specialised skills in technology, management and consultancy. This is most notably the case of people involved in creating, structuring and communicating the information that circulates on the networks: publishers, authors, graphic designers, network managers, creators of on-line services, consultants, etc. It is also the case of people concerned with the functioning and dysfunctions of the networks: maintenance technicians, on-line assistance experts, security experts, qualified sales staff, consultants to SMEs or authorities, etc.

But this is not all. More broadly speaking, the development of teleservices and distance work also requires non-technical skills linked to the function of the services, which concerns many current and future jobs. This

particularly relates to the ability to communicate, manage risks and particular events, etc. It does not always involve a very high level of qualifications, but often new skills which are difficult to acquire at school or university. It is therefore essential for public training agencies to ensure that there exists a structured supply in these areas.

However, the need to continuously update skills does not only concern workers, but also company bosses. Managerial skills and the managerial culture are always among the key factors for success in the use of the advanced technologies.

In the development of distance work, teleservices and other uses of advanced communication technologies, it is finally human factors which are determining. Beyond a minimum threshold for quality and accessibility, infrastructure issues are progressing to the second level.

Managing the risks and exploiting the potential of distance work

Advanced communication technologies and the restructuring of service activities are paving the way for an expansion of distance work. But like any economic evolution, distance work has its own risks.

The most significant risk is undoubtedly that of bad flexibility management, where distance work is used to exploit an additional workforce, depending on price and market fluctuations. Distance work therefore works towards developing short-term insecure jobs. It institutes the employability of the most effective workers and compels the others to continuously sort themselves out. It is a very dangerous scenario at social level, but also at economic level. It can also strengthen disparities between regions.

The delocalisation risk is indeed considerable for activities with a low added value or which depend solely on the strategies of industrial groups whose decision-making centres are situated abroad. The easiest services to delocalise are the generic services of distance data processing or specialised but standardised services, such as IT programming.

Managing these risks gives oneself the advantage of avoiding bad flexibility management and preventing delocalisations that are too easy: developing the specific characteristics of human resources at local level, modernising commercial and non-commercial services and creating a social climate which is favourable to innovation are as many elements that LEADER is specifically seeking to develop. <

One of the interactive terminals to be installed in the Ardenne-Eifel by the KOBOLD Belgian-Germanic-Luxembourgish rural network



(1) Report of the High Level Group of Experts on the Social and Societal Aspects of the Information Society, Directorate-General V of the European Commission, Brussels, 1997. Available in all EU languages.



Using the Internet to develop the Gâtine (Poitou-Charentes, France) : the “Gâtinautes”

In the Pays de Gâtine LEADER area, virtual networks exist alongside the very dense web of local solidarity networks, thereby strengthening the integration and effectiveness of the implemented rural development actions.

Question 1 : What was the only French town in 1998 where one could shop via the Internet in a “virtual supermarket”? Answer : Parthenay, capital of the “Pays de Gâtine” in the Department of Deux-Sèvres in the Region of Poitou-Charentes, with 11 000 inhabitants, city walls, a Roman church, its cattle market and, since 1996, its “digital resource centres”...

Question 2 : But what is a “digital resource centre” ? Answer (by Jérôme Chausson, young coordinator of the “Maison de la Citoyenneté active” (active community centre) in Parthenay) : “It’s a centre open to everyone, where computers, scanners, printers, Internet links, elec-

tronic mailboxes and websites created by inhabitants can be accessed by the general public. Everything is free, and even technical assistance is available if necessary.”

“The digital centres are now part of Parthenay’s heritage,” adds Jérôme. “This is proven by the fact that they have been included in guided tours of the town.”

Visiting Parthenay’s six digital resource centres is a bit like visiting the châteaux of the Loire Valley : all are similar and yet all are different. This is because each centre has a different theme and targets a different public : the “Maison de la Citoyenneté active” has a social vocation. It is in some way a one-stop shop to help with local initiatives and the creation of associations. In addition to a whole range of IT equipment, it houses an employment agency and a careers guidance centre. The other centres in Parthenay are respectively located in the town hall (local administrative services), a business park (financial services), the Palais des Congrès (commercial and tourism services), the library-cum-documentation centre (cultural services) and even a games hall (play activities). Each of these centres is

visited daily by between 50 and 100 people. There are 10 full-time staff, responsible for welcoming users and offering assistance in how to use the various IT tools. This assistance, which is one of the main features of these centres, is increasingly specialised as the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) becomes more commonplace: in September 1998, the District of Parthenay (17 000 inhabitants) had 2 100 private E-mail addresses out of a total of 7 500 households.

The electronic market

"Many things are possible because we are in a favourable technological environment", maintains Patrick Martine, Director of the Parthenay market. This "over-the-counter" market, the third sheep market and fourth cattle market in France, and soon to be the first cattle market on the Internet, is in some ways the interface between the massive computerisation of the Parthenay market town-centre (see box) and the villages of the Gâtine. In this rearing area, it is mostly through market digitisation that the direct economic use of IT will be able to reach the most remote points of this disadvantaged area of the Poitou. In existence since the 9th Century, the Parthenay market became the main market for butcher's meat in all France in the 1970s, but in the crisis at the end of the 1980s, it lost a third of its assets. The Gâtine breeders then decided to take action and rely on quality. In order to do so, they chose a local "pacemaker" product: the Parthenay breed of cattle, delicious but abandoned by intensive farming because, according to production standards, it was neither impressive enough for its milk nor impressive enough for its meat.

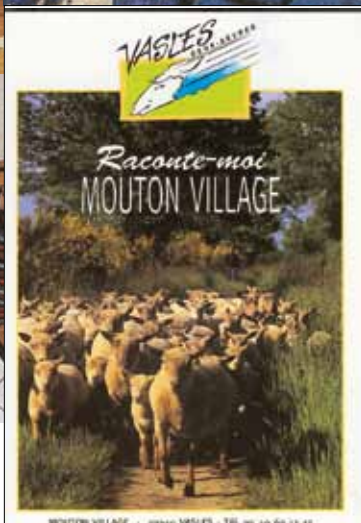
In 1990, an "Association for the Promotion of High-Quality Meats" (APVQS) was created, which today comprises some 200 cattle and sheep breeders (40 of which are organic farmers). Between 1990 and 1994, the association restructured both sectors, organised various promotional activities and obtained three quality labels both for its cattle meat and sheep meat. Encouraged by these results, the APVQS developed a five-year programme in order to continue with its aim to improve both sectors. This plan led to it being appointed project manager of the Agriculture section of LEADER II in 1995, centred mainly on developing the sheep and cattle sectors in the Gâtine and based in particular on the use of ICTs.

In this respect, its first task was to set up a "cattle observatory" for Parthenay breeders, the market and the abattoir. *"The project comprises two measures,"* explains Patrick Martine, *"making market transactions totally transparent and guaranteeing that the animals can be traced. In the case of the first measure, the action is to create an Internet site and provide breeders-sellers with a number of free computers to take to market, in order to allow them, for example, to see quotations in real time, to find out about the solvency of buyers, in short to considerably diminish the risks of bad commercial operations. As for tracing the animals, a barcode system will be put in place by Spring 1999. Among other things, this will enable relations between breeders and abattoirs to be harmonised, particularly insofar as paying for the animal's actual weight is concerned."*

"All this is a first step towards the electronic marketplace," adds Thierry Rochette, APVQS coordinator responsible for managing the operation, for which LEADER is providing ECU 15 000.

Digital centre in Thouars: schoolchildren and inhabitants of the Gâtine benefit from the "Plan Net" set up by the departmental authorities





"Mouton-Village" offers many activities for children

The Gâtine connected (www.gatine.org/)

"Since we do not yet have the fast track, the least we could do was to invest in the information highway !", says Benoît Michenot, development coordinator for the local action group (LAG). According to the "Robert" dictionary, "Gâtine" ("spoilt land") is an old term meaning a "marshy and barren land resulting from the subsoil's impermeability". "The 'Muddy Ground of Parthenay', as we used to say", confirms Yves Pacaud, in charge of new technology development for the LAG. "We were the bumpkins... It was a closed area. Communications have always been difficult; just imagine that at the end of the 19th Century, one could still come across sedan-chairs here! However, the isolation of the Gâtine has created an incredibly strong solidarity which has more recently structured itself into a very dynamic associative movement. Add to this new technologies and you can understand that we can now start talking about an 'economy of networks.'"

Thanks to the belief of certain elected representatives – particularly Jean-Marie Morisset, the LAG's Chairman –, Parthenay's IT experiment has been relayed to rural areas by departmental and regional authorities. New technologies have in some way rewarded the voluntarism of a "country" territorial strategy which began in the 1970s. "The Pays de Gâtine wager," maintains Dominique Brouard, LAG Director, "is development based on poor logistical means but on strong networks of developers and businessmen. This strategy is facilitated by area authorities at all levels and by the intermunicipality – the Gâtine has

seven municipal communities that have each taken on one or two development agents. A tight networking of resources has therefore been established. The creation of digital centres in each district and of electronic mail between the administrative services of the 76 municipalities in the Gâtine by Summer 99 should enable the poor quality of the means of communication to be overcome, the local development networks to be electronically formalised and, eventually, our area to be reactivated."

"Mouton-Village" (Sheep-Village)

The regeneration of the area is already well under way in Vasles. Here, the partnership between the local authorities, the village's key actors and associations (24 associations for 1 650 inhabitants) has worked wonders : the "Mouton-Village" project, which has completely transformed the area, is an example of a particularly successful sector integration (social, agricultural, cultural, tourism). Vasles and the surrounding areas depend on butcher's lamb for their livelihood.

In 1990, there was a crisis : the price of French lamb collapsed. No-one would bet on the sector's future, except for the municipality's Mayor, Gilles Parnaudeau, and three other "visionaries", who chose this moment to put their great idea into practice : to make sheep farming a lever of local development. "Transforming an area threatened with a population drain into an 'area-resource'", says Christian Proust, one of the "founding fathers" of Mouton-Village.

METASA, MIND, IMAGINE... Europe helps small towns get connected : the example of Parthenay

The banality of IT in Parthenay, a small town in a country where use of the Internet is still relatively limited, takes its roots in the “Digital Town” project undertaken by the municipality in 1994 and aiming to “make the citizens creative actors in the town” (1).

METASA (2) was implemented in 1996. This one-year pilot programme, initiated by Directorate-General XIII of the European Commission, consisted in :

- > making several small European towns into a life-size experimentation laboratory for new information and communication technologies (ICT) ;
- > adopting a so-called “social-pull” approach, associating the citizens to the project as much as possible, basing it on their needs and ensuring that they were co-creators of services and not merely “consumer-guinea-pigs”.

In addition to Parthenay, METASA involved Arnedo (La Rioja) in Spain and Weinstadt (Baden-Württemberg) and Torgau (Saxony) in Germany. Several large IT companies, as well as six universities and research centres, also took part.

“To identify people’s needs, we sent a questionnaire of approximately 20 pages to 7 500 households,” explains Hervé Denudt, responsible for economic development in the District of Parthenay. “25% of them were returned, which was very encouraging. The answers enabled us to identify seven types of attitudes towards new technologies, which correspond to three psychological profiles: the ‘utopians’, the ‘wait-and-see partisans’ and the ‘refractory partisans’. Based on these profiles, three homogeneous discussion groups – 300 people in total ! – were then formed. The results of these exchanges enabled three main fields of use for information technologies for the general public to be identified : culture, the economy and social affairs.”

In 1997, Parthenay benefited from a European programme to promote awareness and demonstrate the use of ICTs : in the context of the MIND (3) project launched by the Directorate-General for Industry (DG III), interactive IT services were installed in the town. The operation was to trigger the creation of an Intranet network and six “digital resource centres” (see main article).

In the same year, the municipality of Parthenay launched the “Mille Micros” (1000 Micros) operation : in view of an appropriation of ICTs by the population, this involved enabling each citizen to purchase a microcomputer at a reasonable price. In order to do this, the town held talks with France Telecom and a large computer manufacturer. For approximately ECU 1 000, each Parthenay inhabitant was able to purchase a computer and enjoy 200 free hours of communication on the Internet for two years.

In 1998, another programme of Directorate-General XIII was implemented : IMAGINE, an extension of METASA.

At the same time, the education and training sectors were also mobilised : all schools in the district were henceforth connected and working parties were set up to develop joint actions using ICTs : pooling documentation centres, creating a “package” of educational services... Even without these projects having taken shape, we can see that the “digitisation” of Parthenay is already having a positive “educational effect”, particularly in terms of socio-professional integration, the most spectacular example being that of a young person who was failing at school and who discovered a passion for the Internet, put his poems on the web and was contacted by a German publisher who



*The “Maison de la Citoyenneté active”
in Parthenay*

wanted to use them in school textbooks he was printing...

"Here, all companies are dependent on new technologies", concludes Hervé Denudt. According to the Head of Financial Services for the District of Parthenay, the impact of all the projects taking part in the "digital town" approach is considerable :

- > existing companies are being strengthened – this is the case, for example, of a hundred-year-old local company, a joke and novelty manufacturer that has been considerably expanding throughout the French-speaking world for two years now ;
- > new services are appearing – in addition to the "virtual supermarket" experiment, which has created three jobs, a large DIY chain is setting itself up in the mail-order business from Parthenay. A system for centralising orders, which are passed on to small shopkeepers via the Internet, is also planned in the context of the necessary revitalisation of businesses in the town centre ;
- > new companies are setting themselves up – 12 IT firms have established themselves, creating 30 jobs, while a large furniture distributor has chosen Parthenay to try out a new organisation of its "just-in-time" type sales ;
- > new innovative micro-activities are being developed, such as the case of the local businesswoman who rents out mobile homes all over France to mainly Dutch clients on the Internet ; or the shoe salesman who, after becoming a net surfer, discovered a market niche for very large sizes, and now receives orders from Switzerland, Spain and elsewhere... <

>> Web : www.district-parthenay.fr

(1) Michel Hervé, Mayor of Parthenay, in "Le Monde", 9 December 1996.

(2) METASA : Multimedia Experimental Towns with a Social-Pull Approach.

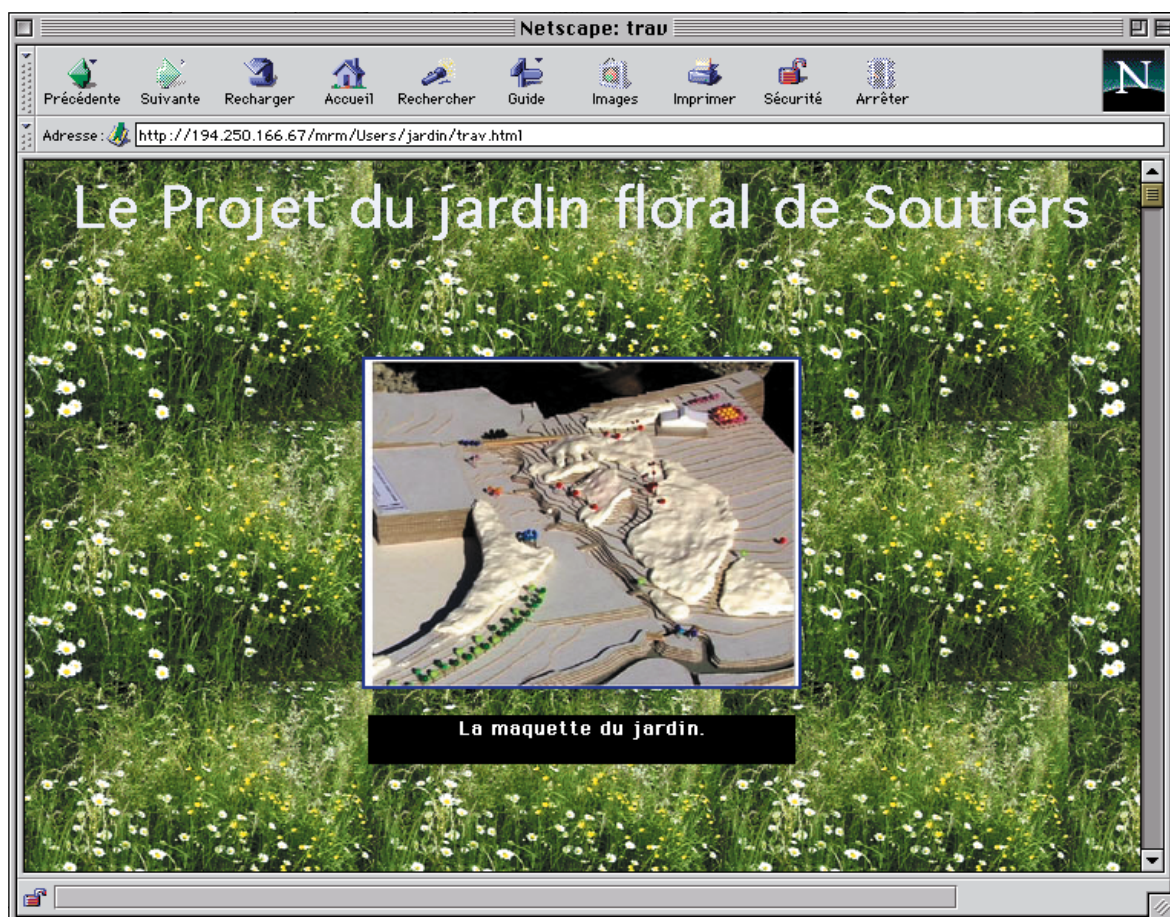
(3) MIND : Multimedia Initiation of Digital Towns.

————— ➤ *"Developing know-how by all possible means : producing an environmentally-friendly high-quality sheep, selling it at the best price, promoting the sector, using it as a tourist attraction. Quite simply a cultural revolution in the village !"*

The first thing was to build a covered market. In 1991, the project's initiators managed to convince 7, then 15 breeders to "produce the best lamb in the world". A list of specifications was drawn up which would lead to a label, then to a marketing company which in Summer 1998 secured a contract for supplying top-quality lambs to a large supermarket chain. But if we look back on all the work carried out to date, we can note that each year has seen its batch of productions : the centre of the village was entirely renovated in 1992 ; in 1993, the "Lamb Garden" was opened, where about 20 breeds of sheep from all over the world, some of which are threatened with extinction, are kept in a very attractive setting ; in 1995, the "House of Sheep" was built, an enormous building where all facets of sheep-farming activity are presented through the ages and continents in the form of workshops, automaton demonstrations, etc., the sales outlet providing "fair trade" of woollen articles from different countries. The whole forms a tourist complex covering about ten hectares, totally integrated into the village and which each year attracts more than 35 000 visitors. *"People started to believe it when the first tourist coaches pulled up",* recalls Christian Proust. *"Now they are proud. We can even talk of a 'climate of projects' in Vasles and can confirm that Mouton-Village has created 12 direct jobs and about 15 indirect jobs, not to mention maintaining the breeders. This is now the main challenge: to ensure that there are still breeders in ten years' time. In order to do this, we are planning to create an 'eco-farm' to train young people..."*

Meanwhile and with LEADER, Mouton-Village has embarked on transnational cooperation to *"open up to other practices and maintain the mobilisation of the inhabitants"*. Thus, 150 Spaniards from the Tierra de Campos LEADER area (Castile-Leon), who were in a similar position and shared the same concerns, came to Vasles in March 1997 ; 100 people from the Gâtine returned the favour in July 1998. The Portuguese LEADER group Basto has also joined this initiative dubbed "European Network of Sheep and Men".

————— ➤



Virtual visit to a Gâtine garden

► Spoiling the Gâtine

The Vasles-Mouton-Village experiment, in creating four thematic gardens centred respectively on birds, geology, make-believe and botany, is a reference for one of the main lines of the LEADER strategy. *"It is about creating an original product that is able to 'irrigate' tourist flows throughout the Gâtine, while maintaining a quality natural and landscaped heritage. Creating gardens in the great garden of the Gâtine"*, Valérie Rocher, who is coordinating the creation of the Soutiers floral garden, sums up nicely. Another significance of the "Gâtine Gardens" operation, co-financed by LEADER to the tune of approximately ECU 600 000, is that it has brought about the implementation of a social inclusion scheme based on "green jobs". Soutiers thus currently employs seven former long-term unemployed people.

These gardens also fit perfectly into the Gâtine's cultural strategy. The Gâtine cannot rely on considerable natural tourist flows but, in a strong position because of the concentration of associations, it has become a real "land of festivals": apart from cultural activities throughout the year, there is the Festival of Games (100 000 visitors) and three large-scale music festivals in Parthenay, a Painting and Sculpture Festival in St-Loup-sur-Thouet and, every autumn in the village of Ménigoude (800 inhabitants), the International Ornithological Film Festival which, in its 14 years of existence, has become one of the most important festivals of animal and environmental cinema in the world (30 000 visitors, dozens of film-makers, 40-odd films in the competition, a multitude of meetings centred on ecology).

"The first International Festival of Culinary Art will be organised in the Gâtine in 1999," says Benoît Michenot. "These events mobilise an impressive number of volunteers and it would be interesting in terms of development to carry out an entire study on the phenomenon..."

All of these achievements and attractions in the Gâtine are naturally presented on the Net.

Additional Question: Where is the centre of the world? Answer: In Pougne-Hérissou (380 inhabitants), a medieval village in the heart of the Gâtine, which every two years organises a sort of event based on the make-believe of the storyteller and humorist Yannick Jaulin, and which will be home to a marvellous "Garden of World Stories" until the year 2000. To find out more about the indescribable content of this project to which LEADER is contributing, visit the website at <http://www.gatine.org>.

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PAYS DE GÂTINE LEADER

Surface area: 1 585 km²
Population: 64 198 inhabitants
LEADER II funding: ECU 2 500 000
EU: ECU 880 000 – **Other public funds:** ECU 1 530 000
Private funds: ECU 90 000

Pays de Gâtine LAG

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When Information Technology breaks the isolation and creates jobs : live local, work global

Resolutely counting on advanced communications technologies, the Western Isles, Skye & Lochalsh LEADER group has helped to create more than 200 teleworking jobs in the Hebrides, in North-West Scotland. The distribution of these technologies also meets the approval of *traditional* economic actors: crofters, fishermen, craftsmen and tourist operators. On the occasion of the LEADER seminar "*Changing Job Scene and New Technologies*" (June 1998), an Italian journalist visited this 'tip of the world connected to the world'.

BY NINO PATERNO [*]



'Graphic designer sought for expanding multimedia production company situated in the Western Isles of Scotland. We are a small company with 17 staff, and our field of activities includes television production, services linked to communication technologies, graphic design and photography. Send CV to ken@eolas.co.uk.'

One job offer among 30 or so others found in October 1998 at <http://www.hebrides.com>, the website for the Hebrides, which claims to hold the title of the 'most extensive rural site in the world'.

From the skies, the Hebrides or Western Isles, in the extreme north-west of Scotland, resemble an enormous green field sprinkled with glassy waters set in an almost supernatural asymmetry, so beautiful that it could quite easily take one's breath away. Here, geographical insularity and isolation have preserved the environment and certain original local traditions, as many assets which are beginning to put an end to, even reverse, the multiseccular trend to move elsewhere: more and more young people are deciding to remain on the islands, which are also seeing new residents coming to settle, drawn by the genuineness of this 'tip of the world' and, for some people, by the job opportunities offered by advanced communication technologies.

"The population of the Hebrides has the highest proportion of people with higher education qualifications in the United Kingdom," says Carola Bell, Director of the Western Isles, Skye & Lochalsh LEADER group, "but the geographical isolation of the islands was considerably limiting the job opportunities available. Teleworking seemed to us to provide a realistic solution to the problem: we were able to anticipate putting this supply of

highly-skilled workers into contact with clients from afar, using telecommunications technologies combined with the flexible working culture of the islanders."

As a former sales representative for an IT company, Donnie Morrison is among those who chose to set themselves up on the islands: "I was on a business trip to Spain in 1989. While talking about portable computers, someone said that in ten years' time many jobs would be able to be done in the comfort of one's own home. The idea first of all left me somewhat sceptical, but then I started to think about it, and finally toyed with the idea of returning to live in my region, in other words here. Along with my family, we moved to the Isle of Lewis in 1994. That year, I was made responsible for carrying out the LEADER study into the local possibilities of distance working, the interest of the inhabitants in the method, the skills available, the potential markets, etc."

This research-action led to the creation of the ICT ("Western Isles Information and Communication Technology Advisory Service") with the financial support of the ERDF (Objective 1), the Western Isles Council and the Western Isles Enterprise local development agency which has managed LEADER since 1992. Donnie Morrison was appointed General Manager of the structure.

The ICT was able to create a file of potential teleworkers: a register of some 500 people (600 in 1998), either residents or people wanting to move to the islands, was drawn up and their skills listed. Since no local company existed in the teleworking sector, the ICT created a limited liability company on the island of Benbecula, 'Lasair Ltd', capable of managing contracts secured from contractors anywhere in the world.

Lasair

In 1995, Lasair was able to respond to an initial invitation to tender and landed an important contract with an American publisher specialising in indexing and abstracting business journals. The reviews (in printed form) are dispatched from California by courier and are then distributed by Lasair to 35 people, 30 of whom are women, who work at home summarising the publications, indexing the various articles, adapting them to the specific characteristics of the electronic layout and putting them on the Internet. The whole process corresponds to a five- to ten-day cycle.

The nature of the work means that these teleworking posts constitute an activity with real added value, which goes far beyond simple data entry and involves skills in editing, re-writing, re-reading, computer graphics, etc. "An experimental contract that we tried out in 1996 with the Scottish Health Board proved to us that purely 'mechanical' data entry was non-profitable because it faced fierce competition from Third World countries", points out Donnie Morrison.

IT available to all:
distance training





Isle of Lewis: feeling on the tip of the world...

Numerous other contracts have since been concluded, including : the production of digests and the indexing and abstracting of publications of the Home Office Forensic Science Departments; the conversion onto CD-ROM of all the issues of the 'Scots Law Times', a Scottish legal journal ; the conversion to electronic mediums (Internet, CD-ROM) of numerous scientific works edited by the prestigious Oxford University Press (a two-year contract was concluded in January 1997 whereby approximately 50 people are employed on a full-time basis).

Lasair therefore coordinates the services of around 100 freelance teleworkers while assuring quality control. LEADER has put up around ECU 35 000 to provide specialist training to the teleworkers. In time, the skills needed to join this *teleworking pool* have evolved : the ability to write good English is a must ; scientific or medical knowledge, for example, has supplanted purely IT knowledge (this can be acquired in the context of training programmes adapted to the specific requirements of each contract).

Virtual Hebrides (<http://www.hebrides.com>)

The success of Lasair has been emulated and other initiatives using IT have flourished in the islands. Among these is the 'Eolas' company which, with LEADER funding of ECU 43 000, has created the 'Virtual Hebrides' website (<http://www.hebrides.com>), a real encyclopaedia of the islands through the sheer diversity of the information that it contains, while also providing very concrete services to users : job offers, tourist reservations, etc.

After three years of multimedia activity (Eolas used to only be involved in audiovisual productions), the company's achievements are quite impressive: 180 teleworking contracts, 18 full-time employees, 4 servers and a mirror-site in Glasgow, a department specialising in software development and the creation of databases, etc. In 1998, the ICT was busy putting the finishing touches to its new jewel : a call centre in a 750m² building in the Stornoway Business Park. The cost of the investment was ECU 2 million. Even before work had been completed, the centre signed a contract with a telephone operator which should create 70 jobs and generate a turnover of approximately ECU 1 million in its first year. The centre will also house the ICT's offices to maximise comfort and, in particular, efficiency in terms of the services provided.

Dissemination

Alastair Nicolson, Head of New Technologies at the Skye & Lochalsh Enterprise, the development agency for the two areas of the same name, remains realistic : *"what heavily penalise our area are the major communication difficulties, both within the archipelago and on the Scottish mainland. A business trip can sometimes take a whole day by car : the roads are very narrow and it is often necessary to catch several ferries. IT brings each of us closer to the other while also connecting us to the rest of the world, by finally eliminating the age-old isolation that these islands have had to endure for so long".*



Stornoway, county town of the Hebrides

Within this logic of opening up the area, the LEADER group is helping to disseminate information technology throughout the islands. Isolated villages are therefore gradually becoming equipped with IT centres. In Port of Ness, on the northern point of the Isle of Lewis, a multimedia room with 10 computers provides access for all the inhabitants to the entire range of possibilities offered by communication technologies, from the most entertaining to the most educational: Lewis Castle College, part of the University of the Highlands & Islands, has set up a distance training programme while the installation of a video-conference suite allows the islanders to follow courses given by the University or to consult the library of this distance training network, comprising a dozen higher education establishments, on line. This equipment also enables the board of directors of the LEADER group to meet regularly, avoiding long and arduous journeys through the archipelago.

"Not so long ago it would have been unthinkable for these villages to have such services", remarks Carola Bell. "In the beginning, we had no idea of the impact that IT would have on people. When LEADER I began, we had to form ourselves surrounded by the mistrust inherent in island mentality. Consequently, our action was firstly centred on promoting local culture. The first objective of the distance education network was therefore to promote the Gaelic language, which ten years' ago was becoming obsolete but is now spoken, read and written by 70% of the population. This promotion of the Scottish language led to the creation of cultural products in Gaelic. We gradually geared our support towards modernising traditional production activities: crofting, sheep farming, the processing of fishing products, weaving tweed and tourism. As for telework, it finds fertile ground here. Establishing it has been made easier by the strong tradition of multi-activity which exists in the islands. Developing it essentially requires assistance in terms of training that we adapt to the specific requirements of each project. Downstream, the electronic commerce of local products

and tele-booking for welcome structures have the support of craftsmen and tourist operators, who are fiercely independent and have been used to managing on their own for years."

In fact, the interest in new technologies largely goes beyond the circle of teleworkers. All the traditional economic actors encountered – farmers, fishermen, hoteliers, craftsmen – share the same belief. *"Communication technologies can be extremely useful for craftsmen in terms of production, marketing, innovation, etc."* say Anne Campbell and Margaret McKay, two weavers from the island of Harris where the famous tweed of the same name is produced. Two ceramists, Alex and Sue Blair, agree: *"Applied to our sector, these technologies can create additional jobs"*. John, an employee at the Stornoway Employment Agency, also has no doubt in this respect: *"the main challenge, i.e. to facilitate young people's entry to the labour market and do everything to help this, by eliminating distances or modernising production techniques, conceals a basic strategic value. All support and resources available, including LEADER, must converge towards this objective."*

The strategy of developing an area's natural, cultural and human resources by using the financial and technological support available is already well under way in the Hebrides. This has been expressed through the creation of several hundred jobs. As far as optimal use of information and communication technologies is concerned, disadvantaged rural areas now have a model over there, far away on that archipelago of the borders of Europe. <

[*] Journalist and Editor-in-Chief of La Freccia Verde (The Green Arrow), a monthly economic, social and cultural review of local development based in Sicily.

Web : www.stepim.it/STEPIM/lafrecciaverde

WESTERN ISLES, SKYE & LOCHALSH LEADER

Surface area: 5 600 km² (Western Isles: 2 901 km²)
Population: 41 000 inhabitants (Western Isles: 31 456 inhabitants)
LEADER II funding: ECU 7 500 000
EU: ECU 3 125 000 – **Other public funds:** ECU 3 125 000
Private funds: ECU 1 250 000

Western Isles, Skye & Lochalsh LEADER Programme

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 Web : www.hebrides.com/leader/index.htm

Rural Europe : new on-line services available

For over a year now, the database containing the addresses of all the LEADER beneficiaries (919 references) has been accessible via the Rural Europe Internet site. The data is updated every month.

From this address list, and where such information has been passed on to the LEADER European Observatory, the following is also available :

- > a description of 360 LEADER areas (November 1998) containing information on the demography, economy, structure of the local action group, its development project and budget ;

- > a presentation of the actions carried out by the local action group – this includes short summaries of each project, listed by generic theme and indexed with the help of the “RURAL-VOC” multilingual rural development thesaurus ;
- > proposals for transnational cooperation – project holders can send their project proposals on an on-line application form.

It is worth noting that the monthly information bulletin INFO-LEADER can also be downloaded in its entirety (by using “Acrobat” software) and that over the past year, more than 40 000 people from all over the world have consulted the Rural Europe site.

Contact : LEADER European Observatory, c/o Katalin Kolosy / Franco Perretta

LEADER Seminars

The LEADER European Observatory is organising a series of three seminars between now and April 1999. Each of the meetings will take place in an area whose LAG has relevant experience of the topic to be discussed. The definitive programme, languages and venue are available two months before the meeting.

Contact : LEADER European Observatory, “Organisation” Unit.

- > **“Private funding, a capital resource”**

Dates : 27-31 January 1999. Languages : Spanish/Greek/French. Venue : Moncayo LEADER area (Aragon, Spain).

- > **“Research and rural development”**

Dates : 6-10 March 1999. Languages : English/German/French. Venue : Netherlands (exact venue to be determined).

- > **“Family clientele, a niche for rural tourism”**

Dates : 24-28 March 1999. Languages : German/English/Portuguese. Venue : Pillersee LEADER area (Tyrol, Austria).

LEADER Magazine, a much appreciated publication

882 of the English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese readers polled in 1997-98 returned the questionnaire inserted in the Magazine. The questionnaire generally involved evaluating and/or arranging in order various items and headings, and even making comments, listing expectations, etc. The processing of the 882 questionnaires sent back to the Observatory gave some of the following results :

> Usefulness

In general, the readers of LEADER Magazine find the publication “useful” to “very useful”, awarding it an average score of 2.4 points out of 3.

Among the various uses mentioned for the Magazine, readers selected the following in order of preference :

1) a reference publication for LEADER; 2) a reference publication for rural development in Europe; 3) an information tool on the activities of the LEADER Network; 4) an information tool on the European Union; 5) a public relations tool; 6) a tool for liaison between the group and its partners

> Content

When readers were asked about their interest in the content of the various sections of the Magazine, they averaged the following scores in order of preference (3 : very interesting ; 2 : interesting ; 1 : fairly interesting ; 0 : uninteresting) :

1) Field reports : 2.44 points; 2) “LEADER in action” : 2.41; 3) “Spotlight” : 2.33; 4) Thematic articles written by “experts” : 2.33; 5) “LEADER network” : 2.4; 6) Interview : 1.84

> Presentation

In general, the readers of LEADER Magazine consider the graphic presentation to be good to very good, with the average score awarded being 2.44 points out of 3.

As far as the editorial style is concerned, it also scored between good and very good (2.14 points out of 3), as did the quality of the translation (2.52 points out of 3).

> Distribution

The vast majority of readers (84%) pass the magazine around (“always” : 41.9% ; “sometimes” : 42.1%).

It was noted that when distributed, one LEADER Magazine is read by an average of 13.3 people. We can, therefore, estimate the potential readership to be more than 100 000 people.

Any comments and suggestions from readers are most welcome.

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“Rural Europe”: LEADER on line in 6 languages

The publications (LEADER Magazine, INFO-LEADER, technical dossiers, etc.), the programme of activities, the updated list of all approved LEADER beneficiaries as well as various databases can be consulted on line in 6 languages (French, English, German, Spanish, Italian and Portugal) on the Internet. Several forums are also open.

Name: LEADER

("Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy")

Programme type: Community Initiative

Target areas: Objective 1 regions (development lag), Objective 5b areas (fragile rural areas) and Objective 6 areas (Nordic areas of very low population density) of the European Union. However, up to 10% of the allocations in Objective 5b areas can be granted to non-eligible contiguous areas.

Objectives: providing continuity with LEADER I (1991-1994), LEADER II is intended to:

- > encourage model local rural development initiatives;
- > support innovative, demonstrative and transferable measures which illustrate the new directions that rural development can take;
- > increase exchanges of experiences and transfers of know-how;
- > support transnational development projects proposed by those active at local level in rural areas and which express their solidarity.

Recipients: LEADER II can assist two categories of final beneficiaries:

- > principally, "Local Action Groups", i.e. a combination of public and private partners jointly devising a strategy and innovative measures for the development of a rural area on the scale of a local community (less than 100 000 inhabitants);
- > other rural collective bodies, public or private, (for example, chambers of agriculture, industry, commerce or crafts, cooperatives, business groups, local authorities, non-profit-making organisations), provided that their more specific activities relate to a plan for the rural development of a local area.

Types of measures: acquisition of skills in rural development, rural innovation programmes (vocational training, rural tourism, support for small firms, increasing commercial value locally and marketing of agricultural, forestry and fisheries products; improvement of the environment and living conditions, etc.), transnational cooperation.

The various elements of LEADER II are organised around a "European Rural Development Network", permitting wide dissemination (through seminars, meetings and publications) of innovative measures implemented for the benefit of rural areas and fostering transnational cooperation. The network is coordinated by the "LEADER European Observatory".

Duration of the programme: 6 years (1994-1999)

Community grant: around 1 755 million ECU, of which over 1 000 million ECU are for Objective 1 regions, financed by the three Structural Funds.



**LEADER
European Observatory**



**European Commission
DG VI Agriculture**

LEADER magazine is the quarterly journal of the rural development programme LEADER II. **LEADER** ("Links between Actions for the Development of the Rural Economy") is a Community Initiative launched by the European Commission and coordinated by its Directorate-General for Agriculture (Unit VI-F.1.1.). - The contents of LEADER magazine do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union Institutions. - **Editorial board:** A.E.I.D.L. - **Person responsible at law:** William Van Dingenen, A.E.I.D.L., chaussée St-Pierre 260, B-1040 Bruxelles - **Journalism:** Jean-Luc Janot - **Contributors to this issue:** Malaquías Jiménez Ramírez, Katalin Kolosy, Werner Kräutler, Monica O'Malley, Nino Paterno, Gérard Valenduc, Patricia Vendramin - **Photos:** LEADER groups, EOLAS, Ramy Leon Lorenzo, Jo Strobel, Conseil Général des Deux-Sèvres - **Cover photo:** EOLAS - **Production coordination:** Christine Charlier - **Graphic design:** Kaligram - Printed in Belgium - **LEADER magazine** is published in the eleven official languages of the European Union and has a print run of 30 000 copies - **For further information:** LEADER Magazine, A.E.I.D.L., chaussée Saint-Pierre 260, B-1040 Brussels. Tel: +32.2 736 49 60. Fax: +32.2.736 04 34. E-Mail: leader@aeidl.be - WWW: <http://www.rural-europe.aeidl.be>