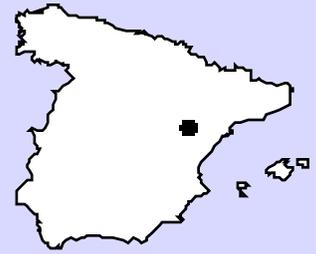


MAESTRAZGO-TERUEL (Aragon, Spain)

Involving the academic world in local development



The action

As soon as LEADER I was launched in 1991, the Maestrazgo group made working with university researchers from its region a systematic rule of operating. Today, this collaboration with the academic world has spread to a number of fields. In addition to helping the group learn about and develop the area's resources, the action has turned a remote and deserted area into an attractive place to train people of a certain cultural and intellectual level.

Key elements

- > Research and development which are part of a long-term action strategy of the local action group (LAG) and whose aim is to safeguard and find new uses for local resources and create new economic opportunities in a declining area.
- > Involvement of the region's universities in local development.
- > Policy of recruiting young technicians through a partnership with the university.
- > Drive to find additional non-LEADER funding for the research.

Context

In southern Aragon, Maestrazgo de Teruel is the typical rural area threatened with desertification. Its two traditional sectors of activity - agriculture and coal mining - are in crisis, the rural exodus to the large cities nearby having drained this already sparsely populated area (5 inhabitants/km²) of its inhabitants.

Under these conditions, any renewed development has to be based on a two-pronged strategy: in the short term the people still living in the area have to be encouraged to stay, and in the longer term new economic opportunities based on the utilisation of local resources have to be created. This second part of the strategy implies practical research work not only to catalogue and analyse existing resources but also to communicate what has been learned about these resources and to help the local community find profitable ways to use them. Aragon has a university whose main buildings and activities are in Saragossa, but some of the faculties have sections in Huesca and Teruel. This last town, the closest to Maestrazgo, is home to the departments of history, geology and archeology.

Until the late 1980s, the university was relatively cut off from the social reality of its surrounding area, in that the academic research it conducted was of a very specific nature but did not take into account the local context: e.g. there is a world famous palaeontological site (dinosaur fossils) in Maestrazgo where the University of Saragossa did work in the 1960s, but this did not have any local benefits. However, by the 1990s, the university had greatly changed and was also interested in working on socio-economic development.

Starting point

With LEADER in 1991, the Centre for the Development of Maestrazgo (CDM) was set up. Its technical coordinating team immediately expressed its will to create strong links between the academic world and rural development actors. Inspired by a French experiment, the LAG team decided to make the entire area of Maestrazgo a "cultural park", meaning a geographical area whose resources - natural, palaeontological, archeological and anthropological - are all "interpreted". The departments of history, geology/geomorphology and archeology of the University of Saragossa in Teruel were contacted for this purpose.

Research got under way on the ground, marking a triple change in university practices:

- > research would no longer be limited to subjects of great academic value, there would be a systematic analysis of existing resources in the area;
- > the work would no longer just be for the scientific community but would also focus on development and communication for the general public;
- > the research and development work is done with and for the local community from the perspective of sustainable development.

After three years of work, the "Cultural Park of Maestrazgo" could boast all kinds of attractions: the geological park of Aliaga and visitor information about the area's geology and geomorphology; an interpretation centre of the surrounding land features and ecology; an archeological museum, an ethnographic centre and a palaeontological park.

Implementation

After this successful experience, the LAG began considering other forms of cooperation with the university. An opportunity arose when the LIFE programme was launched in 1994. It included setting up a Geographical Information System (GIS) to collect and update information on an area's natural resources and ecosystems. For this, Maestrazgo received the help of the faculty of geography of the University of Saragossa.

Protecting the local water resources became one of the most urgent matters to be dealt with, and it was at the same time a unifying theme for the area. The LAG came up with a "Plan to restore the rivers of Maestrazgo" and began exploring the possibility of creating a "River Park" around the main waterway, the Guadalupe. The Spanish government's decision to set up a National Fund for the Reconversion of Mining Areas in 1997 provided the opportunity to carry out the project. This heavily endowed fund (EUR 54 million a year for eight years) is primarily for infrastructures. However, part of the fund (EUR 4 million per year) is available for other activities. Because the fund has to be managed by the municipalities, it was decided to go with the LAG's proposal of setting up three communities of municipalities corresponding to three catchment basins.

The river restoration plan was built around three main objectives: environmental (clean water, sturdier river banks and improved plant life, prevention of soil erosion upstream), social (local community awareness and involvement, better municipal management and reincorporation of the river in the local cultural identity), and economic (creation of water treatment stations, development of tourism). For the plan's elaboration and implementation, several departments and faculties of the University of Saragossa were contacted and included in a multidisciplinary approach. These contacts led to new research in rural development, notably:

- > with the department of contemporary history, work was done on Maestrazgo's cultural identity (the characteristics of this land of resistance in the 19th century, the experiments in management of the anarchists in the early 20th century, and the social history of the mines were studied, leading to the organisation of a symposium in June 1997 and the publication of several books);
- > with the faculty of economics, work was begun on rational water management;
- > also in 1997, the faculty of industrial engineering was contacted to study energy production forms compatible with the area's sustainable development. The people at

the university proposed installing a biomass power plant and participating in a certain number of research projects, including the largest, the Regional Integration Project for Renewable Energies, supported by the ALTENER European programme.

Budget and sources of funding

LEADER financed 35% of the cost of the publications relating to the Cultural Park's creation, and the Community Initiative provided EUR 3 000 for the symposium organised in partnership with the department of contemporary history. But most of the research work was funded outside LEADER by LIFE, other European programmes, and the Spanish Fund for Mine Reconversion.

Innovative elements for the area

Closer relations between the university and the LEADER group

The process radically transformed the relationship between the university and rural development bodies. Research practices have changed: "the universities were cut off from the social context; today they are an integral part of it". This remark by the LAG officials clearly sums up the change in mentality that has occurred. Today the university is doing more and more research on rural development actions, and its image is changing: once an institution whose activities were purely academic, the university is now seen as an actor fully involved in its region's economic development.

Furthermore, the links between the LEADER group and the university have grown and are stronger, making it easier for the LAG to find researchers for a wide range of specialised fields. The positive growth of this relationship culminated when the University of Saragossa signed a cooperation protocol with the Maestrazgo Development Centre in July 1998. This protocol makes it easier to have young academics as trainees in the area.

The links with the university have also enabled the LAG officials to capitalise on the knowledge of their area and of rural development in general. This precious asset was put to use to set up the "Maestrazgo Rural Development School" in the LAG's offices.

Image of the area

In contrast to the image of a poor, neglected area, today, the image is that of an area rich in natural, archeological, and historical resources and a place where there is new entrepreneurial dynamism.

MAESTRAZGO DE TERUEL

In southern Aragon, Maestrazgo de Teruel (2 789 km²), a dry mountain area with a heavy Mediterranean influence, has 14 423 inhabitants, or two times less than in 1960. The very low density (5.17 inhabitants/km²), the scattering of the population (43 municipalities of which the largest has 3 000 inhabitants), and very winding roads make communications between the inhabitants difficult (the regional capital, Saragossa, is a one-and-a-half-hour drive away). The closure of the coal mines which provided most of the wage-paying jobs has worsened the economic situation of this LEADER area.

Contact

Miguel Angel Gracia, Javier Dias, Mateo Andrès
Centro de Desarrollo de Maestrazgo
Plaza Mayor, 1
E- 44556 Molinos (Teruel)
Tel: +34 978 849 431
Fax: +34 978 849 303
E-mail: cedemate@arrakis.es