

SIERRA DE BEJAR Y FRANCIA (Castilla-León, Spain)

The local population contribute towards the financing of a centre for the promotion of the arts and crafts industry



The action

Fifteen years of perseverance and unprecedented mobilisation of local players have enabled Sierra de Bejar y Francia to safeguard the traditional arts and crafts industry. Indeed, not less than 85 artisans helped create the collective enterprise ARTESA, a limited liability company, by collecting authorized capital of EUR 180 000. ARTESA aimed initially to be a training initiative based on the promotion of arts and crafts. However, with the creation of a centre for rural tourism, the company took on a more economic dimension. The Sierra de Bejar y Francia LEADER group bought and restored a traditional architecture building and transformed it into a centre for promoting arts and crafts activities and supplying tourist services. The profit generated by tourism finances training activities and the promotion of local arts and crafts.

The key elements

- > The opening of a centre for the preservation of arts and crafts, including a shop, exhibition halls, workshops and information and training services.
- > Creation of an integrated rural tourism centre.
- > Combination of social and cultural objectives in such a way as to enhance the area's economic independence.

The context

The area has a very lively arts and crafts tradition that has its roots in the Moorish, Jewish and Christian cultures that made this region their home as early as the 12th century. Until recently, communication was difficult between the Sierra and the rest of the province. The isolated nature of the area, which has obliged it to be self-sufficient, has contributed to maintaining and preserving local arts and crafts skills. The area has more than 60 artisans grouped in workshops specialising in ceramics (pottery), leather working (shoemaking and saddlery), embroidery, basket-making and silver and goldsmithing, a typically Salamancan profession. However, in the early 1980s, these professions seemed to be threatened by extinction. The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the young people in the region often had no other choice than emigration, seasonal work, unemployment or indeed marginality.

Starting point

The project started in 1993, when a young student in industrial arts and crafts who had just completed his studies in the provincial capital Salamanca decided to settle in San Esteban, a village in the Sierra. He established contacts with a group of rural players and together they formed ASAM (Salamanca Association of Mountain Agriculture) in 1986, which became the LEADER I LAG in 1991. In 1986, the association launched a large training project with the essential objective of enhancing self-confidence among young people. This project led to the creation of an arts and crafts school-workshop (Escuela-Taller) in 1988.

In 1992, several of ASAM's founding members decided to form a Sierra de Bejar y Francia LEADER group based on the creation of a centre for the safeguarding of local arts and crafts. The best way to carry out this project was to encourage the creation of an association of artisans in order to organise and focus the interests of this particularly diverse sector. After a year of endless meetings and debates, the association was created. Other groups emulated the idea. An organisation of women artisans bringing together women involved in embroidery work and other local craft sectors was created. The two associations later merged. The first catalogue presenting the arts and crafts in the Sierra was published. Concurrently, arts and crafts fairs were held on a yearly basis between 1992 and 1996. The quality of the arts and crafts surprised the public, who discovered Sierra's unsuspected cultural wealth. This recognition of the quality of the work of the artisans enhanced the latter's self-esteem and reinforced their solidarity.

The LAG was aware that it was going to be difficult to create a centre devoted to the promotion and safeguarding of traditional arts and crafts that would generate a profit. However, having demonstrated the quality of Sierra's arts and crafts, the LAG aimed to pursue its training activities and to organise the sector by creating a centre that was open to the public. In 1995, a few months before the end of the LEADER I programme, the situation seemed quite gloomy. The results of twelve years of work were in danger of "going up in smoke". But because those carrying out the project were particularly determined, within six months they reversed the situation and convinced the associations to re-launch the project.

Before the last tranches of public funds were disbursed, the associations had managed to create a private enterprise, ARTESA, by mobilising 50 people, who contributed a start-up capital of more than EUR 90 000. The contribution was based on shares costing EUR 750 each, with each shareholder owning not more than 10% of the shares. The project was redefined and greater emphasis was put on tourist activities in such a way as to achieve self-sufficiency.

Implementation

ARTESA purchased a building in one of the most beautiful villages in the Sierra and renovated it in a style reminiscent of the local architecture. The rural tourism centre consists of 9 rooms (20 beds, 7 with a bathroom) and a restaurant. Various open-air activities are conducted there in collaboration with local professionals. The arts and crafts centre, known as the Regional School of Industrial Arts and Crafts, has a weaving, carpentry and design workshop, as well as a ceramics and crystal workshop. An arts and crafts shop situated on the ground floor and smaller workshops complement the larger workshops. Two floors are used for permanent exhibitions.

The centre offers two types of courses: one targeting the local population and the other tourists. Courses for the local population consist of two hour-long sessions held on a weekly basis for three months throughout the school year. Among the subjects taught are: embroidery, furniture restoration, ceramics, painting and design. There are a maximum of fifteen pupils per class and the fees are EUR 72 per pupil per term. Although all the vacancies are usually filled, the tariff charged barely covers the running costs. The centre also holds training courses for tourists. Fees for a one-week course vary from between EUR 150 and 180 per person, plus accommodation costs. However, for this course to be profitable, each class must have a minimum of eight pupils.

The artisans sell their produce through the arts and crafts shop. A 35% profit margin makes it possible to cover the shop's running costs.

Gradually, actions aimed at improving production and marketing have had to be put on hold in order to concentrate all efforts on making the rural tourism centre yield a profit. This option has proved to be a success. Revenue from tourism covers two-thirds of the total costs and represents practically all the project's added value.

Financing and the budget

Initial investment amounted to EUR 300 500. However, the costs of purchasing and restoring the building and equipping the centre brought the amount up to EUR 565 000. The 85 shareholders contributed EUR 182 000, i.e. 32% of the total budget. The start up capital was EUR 90 000 and was gathered by the first 50 shareholders. LEADER provided a grant of EUR 144 000 (26% of the total), and the regional government and other programmes provided EUR 90 000 (15% of the total).

With an annual turnover of EUR 222 000, the centre achieved financial balance and even generated a small profit of EUR 12 000 per year. Tourism-based activities contributed largely (about EUR 144 000) to this profit. Although the revenue from the restaurant hardly covered the restaurant's running costs (EUR 72 000), accommodation brought in EUR 36 000 profit.

Elements of innovation in the area

Mobilisation of the population and social cohesion

The facts speak for themselves. The project is based on authorized capital of EUR 182 000 contributed by the artisans who feel directly concerned by the future of this collective enterprise.

Activities and employment

ARTESA has created seven full-time jobs and one part-time job. The viability of about thirty workshops employing nearly 45 people depends on the success of the enterprise.

Identity and image of the area

ARTESA has contributed towards enhancing a feeling of self-confidence among the local artisans and changed the manner in which local culture is perceived both in and outside of the area.

SIERRA DE BEJAR Y FRANCIA

Magnificent landscape, rising up to 2 400 m in some areas, has made Sierra de Bejar y Francia a place renowned for mountaineering and hiking. The area has a number of villages, some of which, e.g. Alberca and Candelario, are considered to be gems of traditional architecture. Situated not far from Salamanca and three hours by road from Madrid, these villages receive a large number of tourists. Among the 44 000 inhabitants, about 40% of the active population are employed in the agricultural sector. The unemployment rate is close to 20%. The population is stagnant and aging.

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