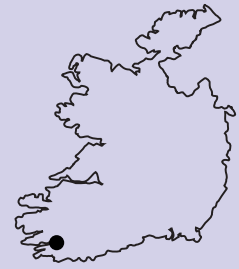


WEST CORK (Ireland)

## Agri-food enterprise partnership



### The action

The West Cork Food Enterprise Partnership is a joint initiative of the public and private sectors to support small local agri-food companies and create an environment favourable to the creation of new businesses, and at the same time a sort of local development forum. What each of its members contributes (time, equipment, premises, financial support, etc.) depends on the nature of the enterprise. The - informal - partnership essentially concerns small companies offering specific food products, businesses which are just starting up and farmers wishing to diversify their production.

### Key elements

- > Boosting of the quality agri-food sector.
- > Support for the diversification of agricultural activities (notably organic farming).
- > Development of a business culture among the sector's operators.
- > An advice and training structure.
- > Long-term objective: to create links between sectors (agri-food and tourism, for example) and to take a coordinated approach to building a regional identity that can be marketed.

### The context

A major component of the local economy, the agri-food sector of West Cork is made up of numerous small businesses offering a wide variety of quality food products but facing many difficulties, namely: growing competition on markets, rapidly changing distribution circuits, increasingly strict health standards, lack of facilities adapted to small-scale food production.

To create an innovative partnership structure to promote the development of agri-food companies was for the LEADER group an original way to meet the challenges of the sector and exploit its potential. It seemed that advantage should be taken of the fabric of small local firms and the reputation for quality that many of them enjoyed at national and international level. Potential outlets exist: demand for specific quality products is growing and new marketing circuits can be developed. West Cork also has a solid network of agricultural cooperatives seeking to launch new products and encouraging their members to diversify their production.

### Starting point

The partnership structure was set up in January 1993 with the aim of promoting West Cork as a region producing specific quality food products. It took shape under the impetus of the LEADER group in collaboration with the Faculty of Food Economics of the University of Cork. In 1992-93, the LAG appraised a selected number of food businesses and noted various support requirements: advice, technical, financial and marketing assistance, suitable premises, etc. The partnership was therefore created to fill these gaps.

### Implementation

The West Cork Food Enterprise Partnership is an informal grouping of four local agricultural cooperatives and two dairies, the University of Cork and Teagasc (National Institute of Research and Training in Agriculture and Food).

An annual fair of West Cork products has been organised to group and promote local products and help develop a brand image for regional products. The partnership has also taken part in feasibility studies to help a large number of companies seeking to diversify into fishfarming, bulb growing and mushroom production. The appraisal is done by members of the partnership, and if necessary by outside experts (the University of Cork, for example, took charge of the fishfarming project). The studies have essentially benefited small operators interested in moving into new production to supplement their income (the agricultural cooperative of Bandon, for example, is helping a number of the area's farms grow daffodils and tulips).

The partnership organises marketing and quality control courses for small firms. Here too, the partnership's members rely on their own experience while occasionally bringing in outside help like the Southern Health Board, whose job is to advise agri-food companies on health standards.

To form ties between the University of Cork and the food companies, the partnership has created a prize for the best new product created by final-year food business students (whose projects have to deal in detail with anything involving the launching of a product on the Irish market: production, marketing, financing).

The partnership has helped set up in Bandon the "West Cork Food Production Centre", a business incubator enabling potential entrepreneurs to work on the development of new products. Three companies work there: Bandon Vale Cheese Company, which produces English-type cheeses (double Gloucester and Red Leicester), Bandon Valley Foods, which prepares onions for the food industry and for local retailers, and Naturale, which offers quality products to the region's restaurants.

### **Budget and sources of funding**

A ECU 7 980 budget, equally financed by the agricultural co-operatives and LEADER, has paid for a part-time development agent. The costs of the Food Production Centre (ECU 1.6 million) are paid by the agricultural cooperative of Bandon, the South Cork Enterprise Board and the LEADER group.

### **Innovative elements for the area**

#### *Identity of the area*

By promoting food products and environment-friendly tourism, West Cork has earned a brand image for its products and an area-based identity. The strategy was confirmed by the inauguration of a trade fair to promote regional products, which also serves to strengthen cooperation ties between the area's small businesses.

The setting-up and stands were done by professionals in order to materialise the West Cork image. The operation in this way benefited not only enterprises in the food sector but also the tourist sector and local craftsmen.

#### *Activities and jobs*

The partnership has contributed to the emergence of a participatory dynamic and facilitates synergies while providing the necessary support for the development of businesses. Links between the agri-food sector and tourism have also been consolidated.

The creation of a "Food Forum" has improved communication and exchanges between the actors of West Cork's agri-food sector. The initiative has strengthened cooperation between the private sector (agricultural cooperatives and small businesses) and the public sector (Teagasc, University of Cork and LEADER group). Links with the University have multiplied, allowing better circulation of the information flowing from basic and applied research.

#### *Competitiveness and market access*

Outlets have been identified on the internal and external markets, and collective marketing operations have been undertaken to improve competitiveness. The partnership has provided these operations with the full range of services and public aid at its disposal: technical training courses, training courses in marketing, consultations offered to individual entrepreneurs, suitable premises. The regional product fairs have enabled small companies to enter in direct contact with Irish and foreign customers.

## **WEST CORK**

In south-western Ireland, West Cork (71 500 inhabitants) is an essentially rural region with a varied and well preserved natural environment. Agriculture, which employs 35% of the working population, remains the cornerstone of the economy. Fisheries and tourism are two other important economic sectors and are also the subject of targeted interventions (training, professionalisation of operators, diversification aid, etc.). In 1995, 15% of the working population was unemployed.

## **Contact**

Ian Dempsey  
West Cork LEADER Co-operative Society Ltd.  
Shinagh House  
Bandon  
IRL-Co. Cork  
Tel: + 353 23 41271  
Fax: + 353 23 41304