

Rural development in the Eastern Cape

An initiative for communities to mobilise

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Background

Towards the end of 2007, and in early 2008, the Cooperation Framework on Innovation Systems between Finland and South Africa (COFISA) sponsored a Foresight exercise in the Eastern Cape, involving a range of stakeholders who are concerned with the future of the province. (For more information about COFISA, see the text box below). One of the key outcomes of this exercise was to highlight the challenges of development of the rural component of the Eastern Cape, which forms the major part of the province in terms of both population and geographic area.

This led to a visit in June 2008 by Prof Eero Uusitalo, Secretary General of the Rural Policy Committee of Finland, during which seminars were held in four centres in the E Cape (East London, Mthatha, Grahamstown and Port Elizabeth). Some 120 stakeholders participated in these seminars. During the seminars Prof Uusitalo provided inputs on the Finnish experience of the development of an integrated rural policy since the 1990s. A dialogue then followed and the seminar attendees had an opportunity to engage with his views and bring their own perspectives (see below for a digest of the views expressed).

One of the key inputs provided by Prof Uusitalo was the Finnish experience of the slow but crucial process of rural communities mobilising at a grass-roots level, and engaging with the relevant players in the rural domain (government, at all levels; higher education and research institutions; others) in order to pursue appropriate policies and initiatives for rural development.

A general consensus emerged that there is both a need and an opportunity for similar mobilisation at a grass-roots level in the Eastern Cape.

The next phase

In line with its catalytic role, and to take further these insights concerning rural development in the Eastern Cape, COFISA plans to sponsor an action-study later this

What is COFISA?

The Cooperation Framework on Innovation Systems between Finland and South Africa (COFISA) is a programme that has been developed jointly by the Governments of South Africa (through the Department of Science and Technology) and Finland (through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Its objective is to enhance effectiveness of the South African National System of Innovation, contributing to economic growth and poverty alleviation. In particular, COFISA aims to build structures and competences that accelerate innovation system development at the provincial level, with a focus on its three pilot provinces: Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Western Cape.

See www.cofisa.org.za for more information.

year, which will have the following high-level goal, and specific objectives:

The **goal** of the action-study is to make a contribution to the sustainable improvement of the livelihoods and quality of life of impoverished rural communities in the Eastern Cape. To this end, the purpose of the study is to produce a framework for supporting and enhancing innovation and knowledge creation and sharing amongst rural communities and individuals, and specifically to explore the possibility of mobilising rural communities towards their sustained participation in the development of rural areas.

The **specific objectives** of the action study are:

1. To compile a database of policies, strategies, initiatives and other activities in the Eastern Cape (past, current and planned) that have a potential impact on rural development;
2. To pilot the establishment of several new community-based associations, modelled on the concept of Finnish Village Action Groups, but adapted as necessary to meet local conditions;
3. In partnership with the community-based associations, to identify the top priority interventions for appropriate action.

The action-study will again include the participation of a Finnish rural development expert, along with appropriate Eastern Cape and South African partners. The approach to be taken will involve in-depth engagement with several rural communities in the Eastern Cape to facilitate their exploring ways of mobilising and organising at a community level, with a view to engaging in a substantive way with relevant role players concerning the challenges of livelihood and community life that they face.

It is expected that the action-study will commence later this year, and run into the first few months of 2009. It is hoped that, following a successful outcome of the exercise, there will be roll-out on a larger scale during the rest of 2009, driven by Eastern Cape stakeholders.

More information about this action-study, and related matters, may be obtained from:

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A digest of perspectives on rural development and related issues

The old versus the new paradigm

The old paradigm views rural policy as a subset of agricultural policy. It focuses on vertical structures that are solely market driven. This is a dangerous approach for holistic rural development. In contrast, the new paradigm views agricultural policy as a subset of integrated rural policy. There are many different groups involved in many different activities, not only those focused on agriculture. The emphasis falls on horizontal rather than vertical structures.

It is very important to avoid including those (whether individuals or organisations) whose thinking and processes entrench the old paradigm, as they will undermine the new approach.

The socio-psychological component

It is natural, when setting up pilots of village-level associations, to focus on the structures and processes required. However, of equal importance are the socio-psychological issues that must be addressed. These include factors such as:

- Local people must be trusted and included – leaving them out ensures failure.
- Sole reliance on political leaders should be avoided.
- The reality that many in government see cross-sectoral activities as “a threat” should be anticipated and managed.

Top-down and bottom-up strategies

- Combined top-down and bottom-up strategies are needed. The first step is usually top-down, but in successful initiatives, it should stimulate 1000 bottom-up steps.
- The most important part of the strategy is bottom-up – it is therefore essential to stimulate the creation of strong units at the local level.
- In Finland, 400 villages developed informal village committees in the 1970s because ‘action researchers’ moved into the villages for up to 18 months, and to undertake their research they needed these informal groups (what became the Finnish Village Movement). How could a similar model be adapted for circumstances in the E Cape?
- Activities should be initiated by getting together groups of individuals who are committed to making something happen. Individuals who are doers or actors are needed, rather than representatives.
- In particular, look for the champions, those who lead naturally by doing. It is essential to find the right people to be champions, in each village or community. The champions should also act as the link people between the community and the external study participants.
- Since this approach depends on local actors, there is a problem to be faced: in the current South African context, centralised power is favoured.
- “Development officers” are usually highly (over) qualified, and primarily urban-oriented. It is therefore often inappropriate to involve them.
- The long-term goal is to establish appropriate horizontal groups and networks. The aim

of the study is therefore to assess the feasibility of this horizontal approach, but the feasibility can only be established by piloting the approach. In conducting the pilot, the following questions are being addressed:

- How do we facilitate the creation of the horizontal bodies to drive local development?
- How do we facilitate the “bottom-up” approach?

Short-term versus long-term

One of the biggest problems to deal with is that the proposed process of facilitating rural development needs at least 10-15 years before significant results start to appear. So, the external authorities, usually in urban areas, are very likely to lose patience. How can this be addressed?

The role of external funding partners

Many initiatives do not need a decision by government. This is true in particular where alternative funding sources are available (e.g. the important role that EU money has played in Finland). What are the potential sources of such funding in South Africa and SSA?

Broad and narrow approaches

Based on the Finnish approach, an integrated rural policy requires both a ‘broad’ component and a narrow component.

Broad rural policy: includes all the policies and actions of government which can impact on rural areas and seeks to provide equity and equal access to public services. It aims to influence the different policy sectors (employment, welfare, environment, industry, agriculture, taxation, communications, community planning and housing etc), to amplify the positive impacts, and to minimise the negative impacts.

Narrow rural policy: focuses on the measures and tools which are specifically targeted at rural development and seeks to address competitiveness. It advocates rural policies based on the special characteristics of the regions, cooperation across sectoral boundaries and extensive partnership and participation.

Potential obstacles

- Land tenure, and in particular the ability to use land as financial surety in rural areas, is an unresolved problem.
- There is also the issue of dependence on state pensions – this creates a culture of inactivity throughout rural areas.

Lessons from Finland

There are several lessons learned in Finland, that may have applicability in the E Cape:

Proposals

The Rural Policy Committee collects proposals from many stakeholders to ensure the quality of the proposal before any action is taken.

The most important rule is **preparation** of high quality materials and inputs for the decision making mechanisms, rather than the decision making itself.

At different stages of a proposals life (from design to implementation), those who are involved should be changed so that their abilities match the required activities.

Local Action Groups

Local Action Groups (LAGs) have important features, and are central to the EU's approach to rural development (known as LEADER). A LAG Board has an equal number of members from three areas:

- Municipalities
- Village Associations
- "People"

This prevents abuse or domination by one group (major problem with most/all other models).

In this context, existing old associations must be avoided, since they cannot adapt to the new approach that is required. **Do not** bring them in, but instead build new, multi-player associations.

At the urban-rural interface, similar associations are now being established in Finnish cities. These associations then put pressure on decision makers by direct, well conceived actions.

Miscellaneous

- A Rural Policy Programme is a simple tool to handle a wide range of issues.
- An important issue is how best to combine public money and voluntary work.
- Finnish rural policy and implementation has benefited by having a leader such as Prof Uusitalo who has been active over several decades, at national and local levels. How can such a leader be identified for the E Cape?