



# **ASSESSMENT OF AN INTERNATIONAL LEADER- PROJECT BETWEEN THREE LOCAL ACTION GROUPS FROM GERMANY AND FINLAND**

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## ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this thesis was to find out what kind of advantages this international co-operation project between three local action groups from Germany and Finland has brought for the areas, associations and people involved. The objective was to assess how the project has proceeded and what kinds of results have already been achieved within this international co-operation project. In addition to finding out the advantages that the project brought, one objective was to clarify the challenges of international projects.

The theoretical framework included practices in traditional and international project management, as well as the management of a development project. The theory concentrated on the structure, management, communication and the challenges of international development projects.

The research was conducted through qualitative methods. Experiences of this co-operation project were gathered in personal interviews with the participants of this project from the administrative as well as the more grass-roots level.

The interviews showed that this co-operation project has proceeded as planned and that the participants interviewed from different levels were generally pleased with the project and the project partners. The partners established good contacts between the actors in different countries. More concrete results can be expected after the project has ended in March 2012.

The results of the research indicate that there were fewer challenges in this project as first thought. Because of good communication and relationships between the actors, some risks were avoided and problems were solved when such arose.

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Keywords: international project management, Leader, challenges of international projects, co-operation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the thesis

The countryside is not dead yet, not at all. Three rural areas, two from Germany and one from Finland have joined forces to keep it that way. There are many future challenges in the rural areas. Demographic change is a big issue and also the services move further away and so do the people. To prevent that the areas have to be prepared and ready to make changes that answer to the needs and demand of people. It is not an easy task to respond to these challenges, but when the main issues are discussed together and one uses the chance to learn from one another, it is possible to keep the rural areas alive and vibrant.

This thesis is written to analyze and evaluate the success of one EU-supported international project. Leader-program ([http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/rural-development-policy/leader/en/leader\\_en.cfm](http://enrd.ec.europa.eu/rural-development-policy/leader/en/leader_en.cfm)), which is more thoroughly explained in its own section, supports the rural areas to develop independently. Thanks to the wide range of local action groups (LAGs, explained in chapter 3.2) in all over Europe, it also gives the possibility to internationalization. Germany and Finland often tend to compare their working methods and actions to one another. In Germany one reads an article about Finland's great school system and in Finland the Finns wonder the success of green initiatives in Germany. Instead of wondering, the partners in this project wanted to share their knowledge and experiences and to execute projects in different areas.

I as the writer of this thesis have been a part of this project from April 2011 until September 2011, when I did my practical training in Regionalrat Wirtschaft in Simmern. My task, among others, was to take part in the planning and implementation of the Finnish-German co-operation project. Regionalrat Wirtschaft is an economic development center in Rhine-Hunsrück area in Germany. In addition to economic development in the area, it is also responsible of the management of the EU-supported Leader-projects in the region. I have been taking part to many of the subprojects implemented within

the framework of the international co-operation project and I have been present at two different workshops, in which the new initiatives within the project were planned and the work in progress was revised. There I have gathered personal information about this project and I will base some of my writing to my own experiences and knowledge about this co-operation.

## 1.2 Purpose of the thesis

The goal of this thesis is to find out what kind of advantages this international co-operation project between three local action groups from Germany and Finland has brought for the areas, associations and people involved. In the co-operation project there are participants from different societies and groups, such as education and gastronomy. The objective is to assess how the project has proceeded and what kinds of results have already been achieved within this international co-operation project.

The assessment is done through gathering information from both countries, Germany and Finland, in personal interviews in different co-operation fields. The experiences are gathered from the administrative level as well as the more grass-roots level, which means the people who have taken part and who are involved in the project. This gives a broad enough of a view, how people in different sectors of the co-operation have experienced it and the results can be compared.

In addition to finding out the advantages the project brings or has brought, one objective is to clarify the challenges of international projects. The challenges in international projects differ from purely national projects and in this thesis the focus is on challenges that could occur or have occurred in this particular, international co-operation between the three local action groups in Germany and in Finland.

### 1.3 Research methodology

This thesis is conducted through qualitative methods. The assessment of the international co-operation project between three local action groups from Finland and Germany is done through personal interviews from pre-defined co-operation areas in the project and through personal observation of the writer of this thesis during two workshops and from the events organized concerning the co-operation fields.

### 1.4 Limitations

The project in question is an international development project. Hence some of the traditional project management practices are not applicable. In this thesis are emphasized the practices and styles that apply to development projects. This work is written as an assessment of the results of the project and because the project's goals and results are not financial, finance-subject is not handled profoundly.

Every area of the co-operation is presented in this thesis, but the evaluation and qualitative research concentrates on three specific areas of the co-operation, administration, gastronomy and education. The three areas were chosen in co-operation with the commissioner of this thesis, Regionalrat Wirtschaft.

The international development project between the three local action groups is during the writing of this thesis still an ongoing project. All of the results of the project cannot yet be seen or evaluated. This thesis concentrates on the results achieved until the end of year 2011.

## 2. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

### 2.1 Definition

A project is a clearly defined and scheduled set of actions, which are performed with a predetermined set of resources (Paul Silfverberg 2007, 21). According to Silfverberg (2007, 21) a project has four main components: a project has unambiguous goals, it is unique and it has a beginning and an end, a project has its own organization and has defined resources.

A project is started to make improvements and achieve sustainability in the desired area. The challenge is to create a project that results to a situation that the process created continues independently after the actual project has ended (Silfverberg 2001, 22).

Lientz & Rea (2003, 3) define international projects as complex projects, in which the regular project management rules are hard to apply. An international project involves many locations, entities and organizations. International projects and co-operations bring along challenges which have to be considered. These challenges are discussed more closely in its own chapter, number 2.5.

In the Leader –approach a transnational project is defined as a co-operation between different rural areas from at least two Member States. At least one local action group has to follow the Leader –approach and the other members of the co-operation can be other local action groups, or groups using similar kind of approach. (Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide 2010, 5)

### 2.2 Project structure

The project structure according to the traditional project management life cycle (Wysocki 2007, 35) includes five stages. The stages are named in figure 1.



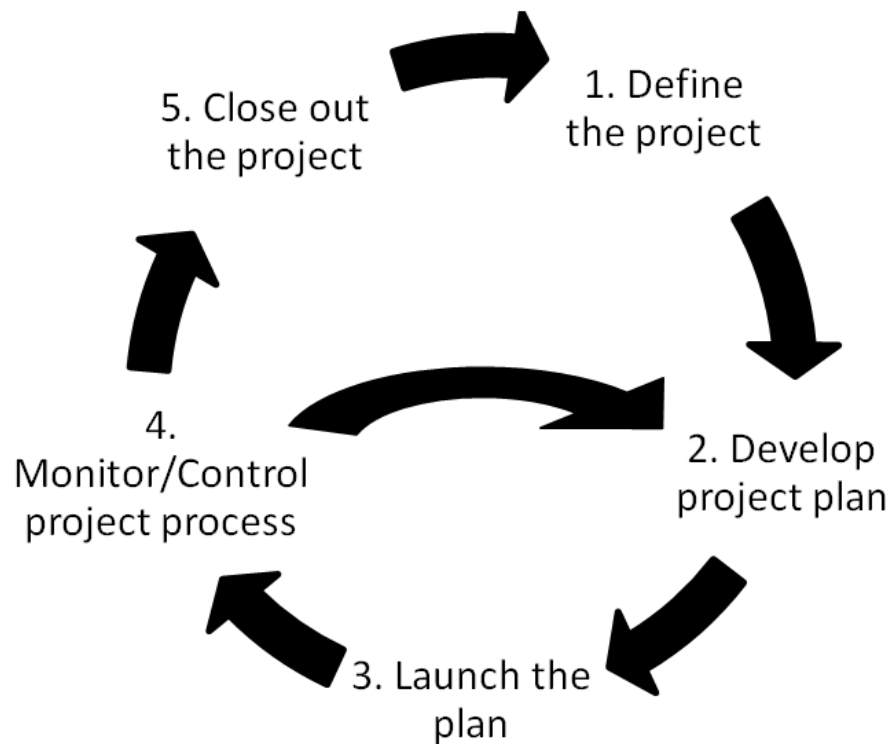


Figure 1: Project cycle management (Compare: Wysocki 2007, 35 and European Commission: Project Cycle Management Guidelines 2004, 24)

Figure 1 shows the nature of the Project cycle management (PCM). The stages follow each other, and the next phase cannot be implemented before the previous has been completed. This management style also gives the chance to revise the plan in the stage 4: Monitor/Control project process. If faults or mistakes are noticed, the project can be taken back to the drawing table, to the stage 2: Develop project plan.

According to the European Commission's Project Cycle Management Guidelines (2004, 17) the Project Cycle Management is used to describe the activities and decision making processes during the life cycle of a project. The management style helps for example in making sure that the project is relevant to the actual problems of the beneficiaries, that the objectives are realizable and that the project results are sustainable.

The project cycle makes the planning of the project flexible and the actors are able to learn during the project. The process enables and requires the monitoring of the project. With the goals of the project in mind, it is possible to

change the operations models during the project if there is need for improvement. (Silfverberg 2007, 35) The details of the stages are explained in the following chapters.

Even though, in a development project, all of the traditional project management routines are not practical, the building blocks in the project cycle are the same. These phases are now explained through the execution of a development project.

### 2.2.1 Defining the project

In the first phase of the project cycle (Define the project) the purpose, the scope and the preliminary outlines of the project are defined. According to Lientz and Rea (2003, 23) in this phase it is important to include not only the parties who will be involved, but also the beneficiaries of the project. They add that especially in international projects it is important to consult the different parties, to define the scope and to make sure that there is interest and enough resources to the project.

Silfverberg (2007, 46) introduces a planning seminar as a one alternative of defining the project. In the seminar the problems, needs and opportunities in the background of the idea can be handled. It is also important that the significant interest groups are present. With the interest groups the main goals, ways of implementation and measurement tools are defined. The roles of the different groups can also be described. With the opinions of the interest groups, the project leaders can now start framing the actual plan and the financing of the project.

If the management of a development project has a top-down approach and they are not considering the needs or possibilities of the parties that will benefit from the results, those people might experience the project as inappropriate for them. Development projects are often aimed at different societies or groups and should be adapted to their needs. (Silfverberg 2007, 25) This is why it is

important to include the beneficiaries to the project in a very early stage. Especially if the project is aimed for example to many different kinds of groups, it is important that the project plan is tailored to meet all their needs.

### 2.2.2 Developing the project plan

The project plan is developed after the preliminary outlines of the project have been defined. The plan should answer to the questions what, why and how. The product of this phase, the product plan, is used as a management and an evaluation tool. (Silfverberg 2007, 40, 74)

Silfverberg (2007, 75, 76) explains the construction of the project plan as a continuum. The most important objectives have to be defined in a quantitative and qualitative way. From the base of the objectives the strategy, work plan and the executive organization are clarified. After this, the needed resources can be described and in the base of the resources the budget and the finance plan can be drafted. Silfverberg (2007, 29) mentions that sometimes it is not possible to define the needed resources in advance. When the amount of resources and financing do not meet, the project plan has to be adjusted to meet the obtained financing, so the objectives and resources are not in contradiction with each other.

In the project plan the goals and objectives of the project should be described properly. Because the project plan is used when assessing the progress and results of the project, the goals should be defined in a clear way. If the project plan or parts from it is used as a financing application, the goals should be expressed in a way, that they meet the conditions of the possible sponsor. For example financing from EU-programs is targeted for certain kinds of programs or groups and the approved applications have to meet the terms of the finance program. (Silfverberg 2007, 116)

If the project is between several partners it is necessary to write a co-operation agreement. According to the Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide (2010,

26) the co-operation agreement should include the detailed roles, tasks and responsibilities of the parties. This agreement should also tell how possible conflicts are handled and under what law. The agreement is signed by all the parties in the project and has been approved by the administration of all participating states. In an international project, the co-operation contract brings certain confidence to the fact that all of the parties are now committed to implement the project plan.

### 2.2.3 Launching the plan

The detailed work plans are made only in the launching and implementation stage. Some of the small details are easier to define after the project has been launched. Also in the implementation stage, the project should be monitored and checked that it goes towards the defined goals and according to the plan. In longer projects the work plan should be reviewed for example after every quarter of a year and in shorter projects the review is done when necessary. (Silfverberg 2007, 30) "When necessary" can mean for instance after every completed workshop or action during the project. In international co-operation projects the changes and details made to the plan are agreed together with the partners.

According to the European Commission's project cycle management guidelines (2004, 39) the launching of the project is the most critical phase. The purpose of this phase is to deliver the results, manage the resources and report the progress. The other stages performed earlier support the actions in the implementation.

In traditional project management the actors in the project are named in the project planning stage only with a title, such as "software developer". In the implementation stage the team members are chosen according to the plan and brought together for the first time. (Wysocki 2007, 40) In an international project the teams and actors are chosen in an earlier stage. An international project

requires a stable base already in the implementation phase, because of the many challenges of international projects, further discussed in chapter 2.6.

In the launching stage of an international project, the team members have already been informed by the project leader what is expected of them and they have already been a part of the project in the planning stage. (Lientz & Rea 2003, 71) So during the implementation, the team members are ready to start working with the project right away.

#### 2.2.4 Monitoring/Controlling project process

The revision in a project is an important stage. It tells the parties, if the project is going towards the agreed goals, within the agreed time and within budget. Monitoring is necessary because when errors are noticed, there is a possibility to take a few steps back and review the project plan, as can be seen from the figure 1 in chapter 2.2. The monitoring of the project starts right after the project has been launched, even though figure 1 does not show that clearly.

The reporting and monitoring schedule can be detailed in the work plan, made in the beginning of the launching of the project. The reviewing of the work can be done through informal communication, instead of some formulas and such (Lientz & Rea 2003, 125). Lientz and Rea suggest this because that is how the project manager gets true feedback from the project and the team members do not tell the things that the manager wants to hear. Also informal communication works when the project team is small, and the people know each other and work well together. Then it is not necessary to fill in forms or write long reports, the feedback can be given during a normal conversation.

With a direct feedback it is then easier to the management to make the necessary changes to the project plan. Through these changes the quality of the project is maintained and the goals are more likely to be achieved.

### 2.2.5 Closing out the project

When the project is about to reach its end date, it is time to start to close out the project. Wysocki (2007, 43) emphasizes that this stage should not be forgotten. In the closing phase, the project should be evaluated because it provides information that can be used in the planning and executing future projects.

Silfverberg (2007, 43) states that the implementer of the project is normally unable to evaluate the project critically enough. He suggests that for projects running over three years should have somebody do an independent evaluation. In a long project a mid-term assessment might also turn out useful, because the results can then be utilized before the end of the project. Silfverberg continues that in a short-term project, the mid-term assessment is not necessary, because there are not enough results to be evaluated. It is enough when the final evaluation is done by the management and not an outside person because for example in a development project the actual results might be seen after years the project has ended.

Wysocki (2007, 44) reminds that it is important to close the project properly and not to rush into the next one. Celebration is the final stage of a project. Not necessarily meaning a party, but recognition of a work well done and acknowledging the people that were involved.

In a development project the results are usually seen after the project has ended. A development project is implemented to gain long-lasting results and to form new working methods. After the closing of a development project it can be seen has the goal been achieved where the developed activities are no longer subject to the project, but can go further on their own. (Silfverberg 2007, 22, 30)

### 2.3 Management of an international development project

Silfverberg (2007, 21, 25) states that in an investment project, which is aiming at increasing efficiency and executing a certain investment has to be managed

with clear schedule, organization and resources. He continues that in a development project, the approach is nearly the opposite. This is because the development projects are not about efficiency, but about the sustainability. So how the beneficiaries take in and make use of the new methods created in the project.

In a non-business like project, the chemistry between people plays a big role. In a purely business project it is of course desirable that the partners get along but the project is not usually abandoned because of poor relationships. That is because of the time and money invested in the project. In the interview with Juha Kolhinen (2011) the executive manager of PoKo ry (the local action group of Upper Pirkanmaa area), it was mentioned how important is the fact that the people involved in a development project find a common ground right in the beginning of the co-operation.

Silverberg (2007, 127) also states that in an international project, one cannot emphasize enough the importance of the common view and methods of the parties. He continues that in the starting phase of the co-operation it is important to reserve enough time to have some leisure time together and to get to know one another. Common views and interests give a good base to the future co-operation and with good personal relationships the project will more likely be a success.

The strategic implementation model (Silfverberg 2007, 87) describes the logic of how the project goes forward. Silfverberg presents the figure as an example of a how could a development project started through a series of pilot trials be implemented. Figure 2 presents the process and the different stages.

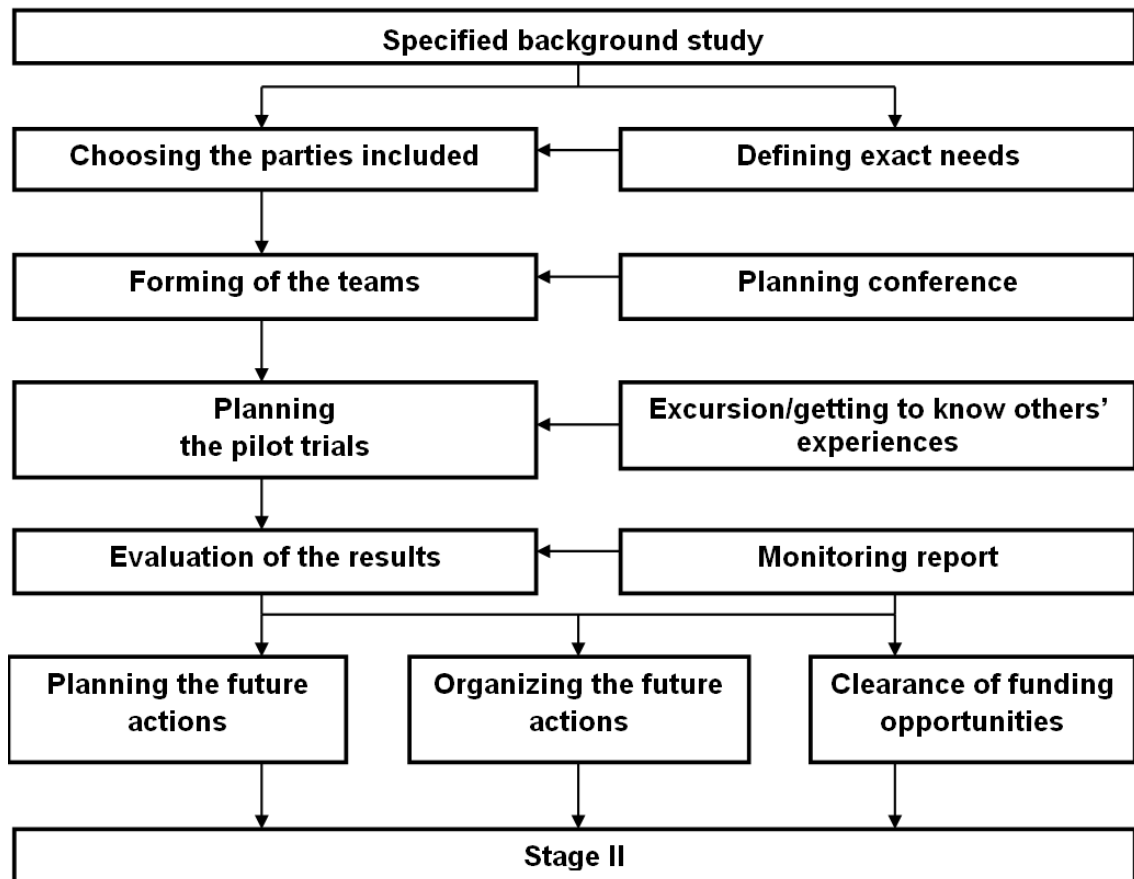


Figure 2 (Translated from Silfverberg, 2007, 87)

As can be seen in the figure, the implementation requires a lot of clarification, planning and meetings. This example also indicates which stages follow each other. For instance the teams are formed in the planning meeting and the pilot trials will be planned during the excursion or other joint meeting. With this kind of a structure, it is easier to make the schedule to the project and see the connection between the different actions. Listing the actions and forming some kind of a graph out of them helps to see which activities can be performed simultaneously.

A development project should result to actions and working methods that can be continued without the project after it has ended. So the project itself works only as a means to an end and the new working methods are already put into action and gotten used to before the project has ended. (Silfverberg 2007, 30) For instance if there is an umbrella project with many sub-projects, the sub-projects should also have a good base between the contacts so it will be made



easy for them to use the relationships built also after the umbrella project has ended and keep on developing their co-operation further.

## 2.4 Communication in a development project

Communication in any kind of project is important and it needs to be fluent and uncomplicated. Wysocki (2007, 24) states that the lack of adequate personal communication is the single most frequent reason for a project to fail. In a larger project, where there are a lot of people involved, the communication should be more planned, but in a smaller project the communication can be more casual.

In a development project the personal relationships of the parties and the trouble-free communication play a big part (Silfverberg 2007, 127). Because like the project assessed in this thesis is not based on financial results the way the people involved get along is crucial for the success of the project. In a purely business project one simply has to get along with the people implementing the project, but development project relies more on peoples' own willingness to execute the project. Through effective communication one goal of a development project, sustainability can be achieved through the personal relationships built during the project.

In an international development project one challenge is that the partners are far away from each other. In international projects the importance of organizing personal face-to-face meeting should not be forgotten just because of the distance. It is crucial for the implementation of the project and tangible results that there is enough personal communication. (Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide 2010, 28-29)

Lientz and Rea (2003, 165) as well as Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide (2010, 29) discuss about the frequency of the meetings. The meetings should be organized when needed. When the project is going on well the teams can have meetings less frequently but when the project is in trouble one should try to solve the problems right away and the management should show interest to

the situation in the project. So the frequency depends on the type of issues and it can vary during the project.

The types of the meetings also vary inside the project. It depends on the distance between the partners and also may refer to the project plan. There may be many ways of communication with the partners, personal meetings being one of them. The types of meetings might for example be seminars, study trips or workshops. These events should be planned well: what should the partners prepare or bring to the meeting, what is the agenda, what is the goal of the meeting and the practicalities, such as accommodation, have to be cleared for the participants. (Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide 2010, 29)

Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide (2010, 29) states that it is important to ensure that the partners are in regular contact with each other. There should be a common communication plan which is stating how the communication takes place and is there for example an interpreter or translation needed. Nowadays there are a lot of possibilities to stay in contact with the partner, for instance phone, e-mail or video-conferences. Every project manager and team member can choose accordingly the channel they want to communicate through.

## 2.5 Challenges of international projects

International projects share some of the same problems with national projects. The issues in international co-operations can be more difficult to solve or manage, because of for example the cultural and geographical distances. It is always possible and likely that the project will encounter some problems along the way. Problems do not mean that the project will automatically fail. Some problems can be foreseen and the management can be prepared to solve them. Other problems can sometimes be avoided with good project design. Silfverberg (2007, 127) states that one of the most challenging issue in international projects is to fit together the different operating cultures. This requires the functionality of the personal relationship between the key persons on the project and also common administrative methods.

According to Lientz & Rea (2003, 229-266) the challenges of international projects divide to project issues, business issues, management issues and external issues. Project issues are those that occur after the project has been started, business issues root from the business cultures and environments in different countries, management issues are often larger than business issues and harder to solve and last the external issues are for instance those arising from legislation or economic issues of the partner country.

From project issues Lientz and Rea (2003, 229-233) use examples such as team members not being committed enough to the project or being pulled away from the co-operation due to domestic needs, communication problems across countries and lack of experience and knowledge of international projects.

International projects need the core persons who are committed to the project throughout the project life cycle. These people also have to be able to find the team members that have enough knowledge, experience and/or interest in international projects. The managers of the co-operation have to inform the team members and others taking part what is expected of them. (Lientz & Rea 2003, 232)

Active communication between the partners and inside the teams is also very important for international co-operation projects. Being able to communicate with the partner requires that they know each other well enough. One cannot emphasize too much the importance of the personal meetings in these projects. During the meetings people get to know each other better and can create the ways of communication suitable for them. One problem with communication could be that only part of the issues, concerns or even positive things are shared with the members of the project. The importance of joint work across locations as well as encouraging the visits among the locations should be emphasized. (Lientz & Rea 2003, 232-233)

Lientz and Rea (2003, 236-237) also recognize the problem when there is too much concentration to the details and the members lose the big picture and the goal of the project. It is really important to keep in mind, where do you want to go with the project and make sure that every subproject is also designed in a

way that this goal is achieved. Even though projects always have a beginning and an end, the sustainability should also be the goal of every project. Sometimes ideas occur that sound really great and doable, but in the end they do not bring any added value to the whole project. Those ideas are then to be thought over. They can either be abandoned or developed further to make them worth executing.

Business and management issues both have a lot to do with the country's own culture, how things are used to be handled inside the different organizations. According to Lientz & Rea (2003, 239-244) there can be problems, when too much responsibility of the project is only on one person or the business needs or processes vary from country to country. One problem that might not be considered in the early thrill of starting a new project is that does the organization have enough resources for it. (Lientz & Rea 2003, 251-252)

In smaller organizations there can be a project manager who is responsible of all the projects in the company. New project ideas may come from the upper management or the project manager himself. When new projects are started it needs a lot of effort from the project manager. These efforts should not harm the already existing projects or co-operations. Also it is not an optimal situation when there is only one person responsible for the whole project and he or she doesn't really have a team as backup. This causes delays in the project if this person is not able to perform the duties that the project requires. (Lientz & Rea 2003, 239-240, 251-252)

Lientz and Rea (2003, 251-252) suggest reviewing all the projects and new project ideas every 3-4 months, that is how you can see the big picture again and have better knowledge of the resources in use. This way the organization is able to keep track on how much resources they have free and what kind of workload the people already have.

The expression taken as an example from medical science: "The operation was a success, but the patient died." (Lientz & Rea 2003, 251) tells us about the importance of the results of the project, rather than the way they were achieved. It is of course wonderful, if a project runs smoothly and in the end there appears

to be even more positive results than expected. But as the quote suggests, it doesn't really matter how well one does his or her job during the project, if there are no sustainable results in the end.

Sometimes all the results from a project cannot be foreseen or listed when the project is launched. Of course there should be a goal in the project plan, but other results are likely to appear as well. When the project has ended it takes time to review the actual outcomes (Wysocki 2007, 458-459). For example two companies develop a new product together. The result of the project is a new product, which is profitable for both companies. The other results the partners didn't necessarily think in the beginning could be for instance new project ideas between the partners or the employers learning a new language because of the international nature of the project.

## 2.6 Features of this Leader-project

Within this international co-operation project, not all of the traditional project management steps and practices are needed to apply. Of course, a project is a project, so all the projects have something in common. It is a project with a beginning, an end and a goal and limited resources, but it is not for making business, instead it is a development project. The parties involved are in the project to achieve tangible and non-tangible results, such as increasing tourism and creating sustainable development in the regions. Hence some of the issues of a purely business or investment projects can be ignored.

The management style in this kind of a project cannot be determined with one certain style. Because of the compact administration team from Germany and Finland, the management styles can be assimilated to the current conditions. There are certain defined frames for the actions, for example during a workshop in Germany the LAG's from Germany are in charge of the arrangements. Inside the team in that country, the actions are less pre-defined and are adjusted every time to the needs of the project. The co-operation project is defined more carefully in chapter 4.

### 3. EUROPEAN UNION'S LEADER-PROGRAM

#### 3.1 General information

Leader is an acronym of the French words "Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale", which in English means "Links between actions for the development of rural economy". The Leader approach is supporting rural areas to develop independently. From the beginning of the new programming period of the European Union for the years 2007-2013 Leader is no longer a separate program, but is integrated to all national or regional rural development programs (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 5). The Leader-approach is now being used in 2200 rural areas in 27 EU member countries (Leader Gateway 2011).

Ideas to the projects that the Leader-program finances are originated and are aimed at the areas themselves. This way the areas can solve the specific problems they are faced with. (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 5, 14) There are seven key features in the Leader approach. These features are used as guidelines through the implementation process of a Leader-project.

The seven key features of the Leader Approach are:

- Area based local development strategies
- Bottom-up approach
- Public-private partnerships: the Local Action Groups (LAGs)
- Facilitating innovation
- Integrated and multi-sectorial actions
- Networking
- Co-operation

(The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 8)

The Leader-approach is encouraging the people of the areas to act themselves and giving them the opportunity and support to implement innovative projects that bring added value to the area. The people living in the rural areas know

what their own region needs. Through the Local Action Groups (LAGs) (LAG is explained more closely in chapter 3.2) serving in the area it is possible to start a Leader-project and get funding and support for it. The bottom-up approach assures that both small and big projects are feasible. It is necessary that the people living in the country side keep on developing their areas to become more attractive to new incomers and also better place to live for themselves. (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 9)

In Leader approach locality and co-operation play a great part. Networking is an important part of the program and that is why it is encouraged to co-operate with other Leader action groups. Co-operation under Leader-program means that the LAG is implementing a joint project with another LAG or group with similar actions and the project can be in another region, Member State or in a third country. The projects implemented as co-operation projects, either territorial or transnational, have to be concrete projects that are managed under a common structure. (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 13, 14)

The controlling and financing of these Leader-projects happens through different committees in different countries. Through Leader-program, the projects aimed to the development of the rural areas can get co-financing. The amount of own financing depends on the nature of the project. The minimum amount of own financing is in most cases 10%, but for example a purely international development project can get a 100% financing from the program. The projects that are financed through Leader must be development projects; already stabilized actions cannot be supported. (PoKo ry 2011)

As an example of the decision making policy and the financing of the projects, the procedures in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany and Pirkanmaa, Finland are now briefly presented. In Germany, in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, the project plans go through the LAG's to the monitoring committee PAUL (Programm Agrarwirtschaft, Umwelt und Landentwicklung) which is established for the development of agriculture, environmental measures and agricultural development in that state. The financing comes from ELER-funds. The project and support funds consist of EU and national co-financing (state, municipality or private). ELER is a German abbreviation of Europäische

Landwirtschaftsfonds zur Entwicklung des ländlichen Raumes and in English it means European agricultural funds for rural development (ELER-PAUL 2011).

In Finland and in Pirkanmaa region the pattern is similar to the one in Germany. The applier of the Leader-funding prepares the project plan and gives it to the local action group, which in this case is PoKo ry. They handle it in their next board meeting and decide, whether the board of the LAG supports the project, and if so, they send it forward to the Pirkanmaa ELY-centre (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment), which acts as the paying authority. (PoKo ry 2011)

The partners (LAGs) usually make their own funding application and budget in a Leader-funded transnational co-operation project. Member states of the European Union have differences in their rural development policies. Each application has to be written according to the rules and procedures in the member state that the local action group is located. (Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide 2010, 19)

### 3.2 Local Action Groups (LAGs)

Local action groups (LAGs) implement the rural development strategy designed for the area in which the LAG functions. The LAG makes the decisions where they want to allocate the funds granted to the development of their region. The LAGs combine the relevant interest groups and financial resources from different sectors. They can search for suitable people and organizations for different projects and encourage synergies and co-operation between the local actors. (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 10)

The local action groups (LAGs) function as a channel to the people living in the rural areas to implement their ideas for the development of their region. It is not only the financial part these associations are helping with. The people working in the LAG offices or the board members can assist developing the initial idea to become a project, to prepare the application and also give support with the



documentation. The boards of the local action groups consist of members from local private/public organizations and private persons. The people wanting to implement their projects as Leader-projects are usually committed with the project but not necessarily experienced with the system, so the LAG's are an important channel, when looking for assistance to the practical issues (PoKo ry 2011)

The LAGs are usually defined and limited inside a specific area that can be towns or geographical areas. There can be several types of LAGs, for example just to access the Leader support or an LAG which is based on previous partnerships. The differences in the structures of the LAGs originate from the differences in regional and national political organization and the distinctions in the project approval and financing systems of Leader-projects. (The Leader Approach: A basic guide 2006, 10) The LAGs in this co-operation are presented in chapter 4.1.

## 4. INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION PROJECT BETWEEN THREE LOCAL ACTION GROUPS

### 4.1 Local action groups in this co-operation

#### 4.1.1 LAG Hunsrück

The Hunsrück area is located in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate, between the rivers Rhine, Moselle and Nahe. It is one of the twelve local action groups in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate. In LAG Hunsrück area lives approximately 120 000 inhabitants in an area the size of about 1300km<sup>2</sup>. The area is a low mountain range area and 40% of its surface is woods. With its density of 93 inhabitants per square kilometer it is a rurally formed area. In the area there are a few small cities and many villages. The biggest city in the area, Simmern has about 8000 inhabitants. (fin-ger-net.eu)

The economy of Hunsrück area is growing fast and for example the unemployment rate in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate is one of the lowest in Germany. The airport of Frankfurt-Hahn is situated in the Hunsrück area and it offers a good connection from the region to all over Europe. (lag-hunsrueck.de)

In the board of LAG Hunsrück are 29 members. The members are mainly from companies and associations from the area. Other members come from representatives of local authorities and other institutions. (lag-hunsrueck.de)  
The development areas of LAG Hunsrück are sustainable energy production, tourism and maintaining and preserving the villages and rural structures. LAG Hunsrück is administered by Regionalrat Wirtschaft Rhein-Hunsrück e.V. (fin-ger-net.eu)

#### 4.1.2 LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal

The LAG WELterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal is with LAG Hunsrück one of the twelve local action groups in the state of Rhineland-Palatinate. It covers nearly the whole UNESCO World Heritage Site, which reaches along the Rhine-river from Bingen to Koblenz. LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal covers a surface area of 370km<sup>2</sup>. In the area of this LAG lives about 70 000 inhabitants and it is a rural area with a residential density of 143 inhabitants per square kilometer. The LAG is located in an area with a lot of culture, castles and vineyards. (fin-ger-net.eu)

LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal has a board which consists of 45 members. Its main areas of action are the recreational activities in the upper part of the Rhine-valley, economy and education, coexistence in the Middle-Rhine area and maintaining the local culture and identity. (fin-ger-net.eu)

#### 4.1.3 LAG PoKo ry

LAG Poko ry is one of the 56 local action groups in Finland. It is operating in the Upper Pirkanmaa area. In the region of PoKo ry there are approximately 27 000 inhabitants. The area of PoKo ry covers altogether approximately 3600km<sup>2</sup> and it has the population density of 7,5 inhabitants per square kilometer. (fin-ger-net.eu)

A major part of the surface in the LAG PoKo ry area is woods (75%) and 15% of it is water areas. In the area there are a couple small cities and many villages. Tampere-Pirkkala airport is located about a hundred kilometers away from the area. There is a direct flight connection between Tampere-Pirkkala and Frankfurt-Hahn airport in Germany. (fin-ger-net.eu)

In the board of PoKo ry are 15 members. PoKo ry is directing its actions to associations and small enterprises. It acts to maintain local services, reduce unemployment and to develop the services and industrial and commercial

activities in the area. One field of action is to improve the comfort of the inhabitants and the visitors in the region. (pokory.fi)

#### 4.2 Time frame and objectives

The very first contacts between the participants in the international Leader-project were made in year 2009 through a tourism-program Visit Upper Tampere. The future partners met each other through this project for the first time and started to discuss about implementing a joint international project together. (Kolhinen 2011)

The project started officially on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 2010 and it is running until the end of March 2012. The three local action groups, LAG Hunsrück, LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal and LAG PoKo ry decided to start a co-operation and within that to implement different co-operation projects between different groups within a variety fields. When thinking of the possible co-operation fields the partners have kept in mind the most important objective of this co-operation and it is the development of the rural areas and the sustainability of the actions. The project will increase the target groups' knowledge of international activities and it will support the networking of the target groups. The goal is to achieve permanent connections and long-term co-operation between the regions and target groups. This project is launched to initiate the co-operations and to guide in the early stages. The purpose of the co-operation is to build contacts and bring together and activate people from different fields. (PoKo ry 2011)

With this co-operation the LAG's wanted to implement their local development plan for rural areas. According to the European council decision of 20 February 2006 on Community strategic guidelines for rural development (programming period 2007 to 2013), every member state should prepare their own national strategy plan for the development of rural areas.

The different fields and concrete project ideas were to be specified in four workshops, two in Germany and two in Finland. There were already some

fundamental suggestions of the fields of action listed in the co-operation contract, which was signed in May 2010 (Kooperationsvereinbarung 2010). These were defined as followed:

- exchange of information, experience and innovations
- increasing the tourism potential of the areas and finding new ways of tourism
- sustainable development of the villages as the living areas of the future and actions to controlling the effects of the demographic change
- promotion of renewable energy and energy efficiency
- reinforcement of the local economic structure and the labour market
- promotion of equal opportunities and creation of barrier-free tourism packages
- preservation of local culture and identity
- reinforcement of the services for the public good
- supporting the economy and education
- development of the adventure and recreational functions in the regions

In addition to the co-operation contract the project partners have written their own project plans and funding applications about this international co-operation project and the LAGs have their own budgets for the project. The partners chose this way of implementing because the authorities demand different documentation in Germany and in Finland, for example about the costs of the project. The financing authorities, ELER in Germany and ELY-centre in Finland have some different methods in implementing and financing the Leader-projects thus the documentation has to be done according to the instructions of the offices. When writing the plans it is good to be aware of the requirements of the proposal and implementation of a transnational co-operation effecting own and partners' actions. (Leader Transnational Cooperation Guide 2010, 19, 40, Regionalrat Wirtschaft 2011)

### 4.3 Administration

LAG Hunsrück is the lead organizer of this co-operation project (Kooperationsvereinbarung 2010). Regionalrat Wirtschaft (ReWi), the economic development center of Rhine-Hunsrück is involved in this subject in the way that it takes care of the administration of the Leader-projects that go through LAG Hunsrück. Regionalrat Wirtschaft has two main functions in the area; the other is the economic development and the other is to take the administrative role in the different kinds of projects. Every project has to have a project carrier and this particular project is ReWi's own project. (Regionalrat Wirtschaft 2011)

All three parties of this co-operation have signed the co-operation contract and they have there also stated the LAG, which has the main responsibility. According to the contract, if not otherwise agreed LAG Hunsrück as the main organizer is responsible of the following: compiling and updating the co-operation contract, organizing feedback meetings between the partners, coordination of the planning phase and the execution of the co-operation projects and supporting as well as accompaniment in the documentation of the expenses (Kooperationsvereinbarung 2010).

The co-operation has two project managers involved, the project manager from Regionalrat Wirtschaft, Germany and the project manager from PoKo ry in Finland. According to Lientz and Rea (2011, 44) having a project manager in both countries brings many benefits to the project. When the project leaders have a different perspective of the project, the problems can be spotted more easily. In addition the use of skills, knowledge and contacts is wider than just with one project manager. These possibilities have been noticed and the project managers work closely together with the project.

PoKo ry has employed a project manager for this particular co-operation. Anu Schuoler began her work as an international coordinator at PoKo ry in September 2010. The project manager of Regionalrat Wirtschaft manages this project in addition to other ongoing activities. (PoKo ry 2011)

#### 4.4 Fields of action

In this chapter the information from the different fields of action and the course of the co-operation is gathered mostly from the interviews with Achim Kistner, the chief executive of Regionalrat Wirtschaft (3.October 2011, Sohren, Germany) and Juha Kolhinen, the chief executive of PoKo ry (31.October 2011, Mänttä-Vilppula, Finland).

This thesis is putting more emphasis on the administrative level and from the fields of action in gastronomy and education. In chapters 4.4.1 Gastronomy and in 4.4.3 Education the additional information is from the personal interviews with the actors of the project in these two fields of action. From gastronomy was interviewed the hotel manager and chef Matthias Klein from the hotel-restaurant Zum Felsenkeller in Sohren, Germany (27. September, 2011) and freelance chef Johannes Jatkola in Mänttä, Finland (15. November, 2011). From the field of education was interviewed the vice principal as a pedagogical coordinator and a teacher Tobias Eiserloh from the co-educational school in Kirchberg (28. September, 2011) and lector Paula Niittyniemi-Mehn from Virrat secondary school (4. November, 2011).

Additional information was gathered by the writer of the thesis during two workshops and from the events organized concerning the co-operation fields, such as Hi!R-fair in Simmern (29.4.-1.5.2011), à la région –gourmet event in Kastellaun (17.6.2011) and local food market in Mänttä-Vilppula, Finland.

##### 4.4.1 Gastronomy

Gastronomy was one of the themes in the workshop in 4.-7. April 2011, in Mänttä-Vilppula Finland. In the workshop were present professional chefs from Germany and Finland. The chefs discussed what kind of co-operation would be possible and interesting for all the parties. The conversation was done mainly in German, also some parts in English. In the discussion table there was present an interpreter with the skills of German, English and Finnish.

In the workshop a so-called chef-exchange was planned. The idea was to bring Finnish food to Germany and vice versa. The chefs wanted to develop their expertise in cooking with learning from the food culture from the partner country. The exchange was planned so that the Finnish chef travels to Germany in October 2011. The chef of the hotel-restaurant Zum Felsenkeller in Sohren organized a dinner-event, where the Finnish chef was preparing Finnish food (Klein 2011). It was something exotic for the Germans to taste elk meat brought from Finland and other dishes made from traditional Finnish ingredients, such as blueberries. The menu was combined with local German wines.

The German chef will visit Finland in January or February 2012. The visit is planned to be implemented in a same way that the visit of the Finnish chef in Germany. The chef will prepare a menu with traditional German ingredients for the Finnish guests.

Through this co-operation project Finnish kitchen was represented in a gourmet event called *à la région*, which was organized on 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2011 in the city of Kastellaun. The event is organized to present local gourmet food from Rhine-Hunsrück and Moselle areas. From abroad there was represented also the local kitchens from Finland and Poland. On the side of tasting Finnish food, the event guests were also interested in Finland altogether. Through the food the Finnish group could also introduce Finnish culture to the event guests.

After the next visit of the German chef in Finland the new actions will be planned. The contacts have been made and the co-operation is going smoothly, despite the occasional language problems. If the straight flight connection from Frankfurt-Hahn to Tampere stays, according to Klein (2011) there should be no obstacles to go forward with this co-operation.

#### 4.4.2 Tourism

Tourism belongs to one of the initial co-operation fields suggested for the project. Tourism was a theme in the first workshop organized in Germany in



13.-14. December 2010. In the first workshop the tourism experts got to know to the opportunities and challenges in the tourism-branch in the partner areas. Tourism was chosen as one of the themes because from the beginning there were entrepreneurs and experts involved from that branch. Also right from the start the partners wanted to make use of the Ryanair air connection between Frankfurt-Hahn and Tampere-Pirkkala. (Kistner 2011)

In the second workshop in Finland organized in 4.-7. April of April 2011, the objective was to work out packaged tours in the partner regions. The participants shared their experiences of what would be interesting in the target countries for the tourists. In Germany were listed topics such as winemaking, sports, active holidays and different culture events. The German tourists would be interested in different winter activities, such as skiing and snowshoeing, fishing and music-events.

The partners agreed to take the ideas further and start implementing a test-round of the travel-packages. In Germany there was already an entrepreneur who was part of the co-operation from the beginning and was thought to be a channel for selling the travel-packages to Finland. In the area of PoKo ry there is not such an entrepreneur. One solution was to use the joint website of the co-operation, [fin-ger-net.eu](http://fin-ger-net.eu) (see chapter 4.4.5) as a platform for the tourism entrepreneurs.

The project manager of PoKo ry, having experience from the tourism sector designed two different travel packages as a test. One was introduced in the Hi!R-fair in Germany (29.4.-1.5.2011) and the other in PoKo ry's website. Here the problem with this sector can be seen, because the tourism entrepreneurs were not planning the travel packages.

Some difficulties were pointed out during the workshop in April 2011 between the participants. In the Hunsrück-area Finland or Pirkanmaa-area are not seen as a target market, so the entrepreneurs did not know would it be useful to market their area in Finland. Also the entrepreneurs could not do co-operation with Ryanair, because it is a low-cost airline and for example the prices of the flights change constantly.

The two main challenges in this field were that in PoKo ry's area wasn't such a tourism entrepreneur who could have taken the responsibility of the co-operation and one partner in Germany did not manage to find his role in this co-operation project. After some discussions in June 2011, the management of this project decided together to leave this field for now because of the problems. (Kistner 2011)

#### 4.4.3 Education

Education was a theme in the first workshop of the co-operation in Germany in 13.-14. December 2010. There the first contacts between the schools in the co-operation regions in Germany and Finland were built. In the workshop were present vocational and secondary school teachers from the co-operation areas. The participants took a look at the different educating systems in both countries and talked about the possibilities for joint projects. In this workshop the idea of "Fin-Ger-Mail", an e-mail correspondence program between the pupils was introduced.

The co-operation in the field of education was started in the workshop in 4.-7. April 2011 in Mänttä-Vilppula Finland. In the workshop were represented teachers from vocational and secondary schools from the partner regions in Finland and in Germany. This was the first encounter between the possible co-operation partners. The language teachers from the secondary schools developed the idea of "Fin-Ger-Mail" further and the vocational school teachers were discovering the different co-operation fields. The language for this meeting was English and also in some cases German.

The vocational school teachers got to know to the school systems in both countries and talked about the possible fields of co-operation. The level of education in both countries was compared and with that information subjects for joint projects were discovered. One idea that suggested was a student exchange between the vocational schools.

The Finnish vocational school teachers from different fields, such as marketing and information technology and health care made a return visit to Germany between 21<sup>st</sup> of September and 23<sup>rd</sup> of September 2011, to the co-operation areas of Rhine-Hunsrück and Upper Middle Rhine.

The teachers from Finland met teachers from the same fields as their own, so they could develop a more specific plan of co-operation. Some fields found common ground easier than others. The marketing teachers developed the idea of a possible common course executed through a learning platform called Moodle. The students would do co-operation in a course in which they would do product marketing together in groups through Moodle. This would be executed in English, so it would also develop the language skills of the students in both countries. The teachers saw that this would be quite a risk-free way to start the co-operation. The course would be an electronic course, so not that much resource has to be put in it. After the course the teachers can get feedback from the students and plan if they want to carry on with the co-operation.

The teachers from other fields decided to develop ideas further and stay in contact concerning the concrete project ideas. After having seen the schools in both countries and gotten to know to the school systems and different departments, it is easier to design the common projects.

During the workshop in April 2011 the secondary school teachers also met for the first time. Even though this was their first meeting with this group there was also an initial idea of “Fin-Ger-Mail”, a co-operation in form of e-mail correspondence between the pupils. The secondary school teachers noticed right away that their plans go well together and that both sides are ready to co-operate together. The teacher responsible for this project from the Finnish side, Niittyniemi-Mehn (2011) also has previous experience of co-operation in German school and she can speak very good German, so the parties knew that the communication would be uncomplicated with the German teachers from the partner school in Kirchberg.

The goal for the “Fin-Ger-Mail” –project is to promote the educational co-operation between the schools in Kirchberg, Germany and in Virrat, Finland, to

familiarize the pupils with the countries and their cultures, the school systems and the every-day life of the young people in those countries. One objective is with the help of social media and electric communication tools to improve the pupils' language skills in several areas. (Niittyniemi-Mehn 2011)

The project idea is that the pupils taking part to the "Fin-Ger-Mail" –project from the schools in Kirchberg and in Virrat have e-mail correspondence with each other about different subjects, such as "my town" or "my hobbies". The teachers have matched the pupils and everyone has a pair from the partner country for the correspondence. The pupils write to each other nearly every month. (Niittyniemi-Mehn 2011)

In the beginning of the school year in the fall of 2012 the class from Finland travels to Germany to meet the partner class. After the visit the writing continues and in the spring of 2013 the German pupils travel to Finland to meet their partners again. The meetings build the friendships and teach every pupil something about the other country's culture. If this project goes on well, it can be repeated with other classes. (Niittyniemi-Mehn 2011)

One challenge in the co-operation between the schools is that the projects cannot be financed through Leader-program. The projects planned do not fit to the frames of a Leader-project, which would be the development of the rural areas. The partners in "Fin-Ger-Mail" –project have now agreed to apply financing from another EU-program intended to educational co-operation projects. Anyhow the first connections and meeting were organized through this international Leader co-operation; hence the base of the co-operation was built through the LAGs in this project.

#### 4.4.4 Rural women

The idea from the co-operation between the rural women in Germany (Landfrauen) and Finland (Maa- ja kotitalousnaiset) was first introduced in the workshop in Finland in April 2011. It was included in the suggestions for the topics for the next workshop. The project managers in the LAG's found quickly the right people for this co-operation from the organizations.

Despite the differences in the administrative style of the organizations, they have a lot in common. The main differences are that in Germany the rural women organization function in a totally voluntary base and in Finland there is also people who work full-time for the organization. This way also the financing in the associations differs from one another.

The rural women are active women from the rural areas. One doesn't necessarily have to be a farm owner or such, it is an organization for women living in the countryside who are eager to develop their own skills and act with one another. Because of the similarities of the area development in the co-operation areas, it is easy to find common subjects. There is also interest among the rural women to learn new things from one another, and bring the knowledge to one's own country.

The rural women had their first meeting in July 2011 in Finland. This workshop was organized to get to know to each other and present the organizations. When knowing the organizations in both countries the people involved could start to think of the themes for the possible co-operation. Also during this time in Finland the German rural women presented the Hunsrück-area and some of its products in local food market in Mänttä. During this visit it was agreed to arrange a workshop in Germany in September and the goal was to define the objectives and gather the concrete ideas and themes for the co-operation.

In the workshop 15.9.-18.9.2011 in Germany the ideas of the themes were gathered and they included the following:

- exchange of employees in the field of agriculture
- exchange of harvest workers
- recipe exchange, idea of making a cookbook together, possible languages: German, Finnish and English
- Regional products (“Regional product –spies”), a group of students or an organization gathers a list of all the regional product providers to a brochure or other joint activities
- combining regional or domestic ingredients with international cuisine
- network of companies, e.g. 10 German and 10 Finnish companies
- Gardenroute (as best-practice example)
- How to get young people interested in the farm work?
- common regional market

(Memo from Workshop 15.-18.9.2011)

Because of the different structures of the rural women associations in Germany and Finland, the possible co-operation project has to be planned well. The associations do not have an example of such an international co-operation. The next step is to find the right people to be responsible of the project. Because there is no former experience of this kind of co-operation between the rural women, the participants need consulting from the local action groups. The LAGs are trying to find functioning solutions for the co-operation in both countries.

In the spring 2012 the Finnish rural women are planning on offering its members a trip to get to know to the gardening-culture in the German co-operation area. This is planned as a study trip for the Finnish rural women.

#### 4.4.5 Fin-Ger-Net

Fin-Ger-Net is an abbreviation from the words “Finnish-German-Network”. It is a website created for the co-operation project between the local action groups. The purpose of this website is to act as an information platform. There one can find information about the Leader-program in general, the three local action groups of the co-operation project and the regions they operate in and also useful links and contact information.

The website is in two languages, in German and in Finnish. Initially the page was built in German, but according to the plans, it was also translated into Finnish and so it serves the users from both countries.

On the Fin-Ger-Net website there are short stories with pictures of the different workshops and events within the project. The articles and reports are kept up to date in both languages. The maintenance of the website can be done easily through a program, and because of the languages the Finnish side is updated by PoKo ry and the German side by Regionalrat Wirtschaft.

In the near future Fin-Ger-Net is also meant to have their own subpages for the subprojects, such as Fin-Ger-Mail and Fin-Ger-Food. There is a possibility that the page would also be used as a communication tool between the actors in the project.

#### 4.5 Summary of the overall progress of the project

The project has gone forward at a good pace throughout its whole duration and has not been on a standstill position. The actions have divided equally between the countries. In appendix 1 is presented the timeline of the actions in the co-operation project from the first contacts until the end of November 2011.

The project plan stated that this project is implemented through four workshops, two in Germany and two in Finland. By the end of the year 2011 there has been three workshops implemented. First was implemented in the LAG Hunsrück area in 12.-15.12.2010, second in LAG PoKo ry area in 5.-6.4.2011 and third in LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal area in 7.-11.9.2011. The fourth workshop is planned to be in February 2012.

The importance of continuity has been well kept in mind during the co-operation project. For example in the end of each workshop the parties have agreed the approximate time of the next workshop and went through the other upcoming happenings. Before and after the workshops and other activities, there has also been weekly contact between the project managers, quite often via Skype. This way the workshops can be organized in co-operation with the partners and the program can be designed so that it pleases all sides. Also the feedback discussions can be arranged within a week from the meeting.

#### 4.6 Project cycle management applied

The progress of this international Leader-project between three LAGs from Germany and Finland can be viewed through the stages of project life cycle (explained in chapter 2.2). The five stages of project life cycle, according to Wysocki, (2007, 35) are:

1. Define the project
2. Develop project plan
3. Launch the plan
4. Monitor/ Control project process
5. Close out the project

In the first stage, defining the project the LAGs got to know to the other areas and it was found out that regardless of the structural differences in the regions in Germany and Finland, they have same kind of themes in their actions, such as village development and demographic change.



From the common themes and challenges in the areas the partners started to define, what kind of a project would be possible to implement and what would be the scope of it. During this time the representatives from the German partner areas visited Finland and the executives and project managers discussed about the project. While defining the project, the partners kept in mind the seven key features in the Leader approach (chapter 3.1.), such as the bottom-up – approach.

After defining the preliminary outlines to the project and already thinking of the possible target groups the partners started to develop the project plan (stage 2. Develop project plan). All partners wrote their own project plan, according to the Leader project regulations in the area. The outlines, such as the objective and the basic actions during the project were the same in all the project plans. The co-operation contract between the partners was signed in May 2010.

The co-operation started officially on 1<sup>st</sup> of June 2010. The partners started to implement the project (stage 3. Launch the plan) according to the project plan. In the project plan was stated that the fields of action were to be defined in four workshops, two in Germany and two in Finland. In these workshops the possible partners from the chosen associations and fields met and discussed their co-operation possibilities and concrete project ideas. By the time of writing this thesis there has been three workshops organized, two in Germany (one in LAG Hunsrück area in 12.-15.12.2010, the other in LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal area in 7.-11.9.2011) and one in Finland (in PoKo ry area in 5.-6.4.2011). The fourth workshop is planned in February 2012.

During and after the workshops the progress of the overall project was monitored by the administration and the project managers (stage 4. Monitor/Control project process). The monitoring stage gives the opportunity to make the required changes to the project and the project plan. In this co-operation after revising the co-operation in the field of tourism, it was decided to leave the subject from the co-operation because of the problems experienced in that field.

Stage 5. Close out the project will be implemented in March 2012. Some of the evaluation has already been done during the discussion in workshops and meetings. In the final workshop, which is planned to be organized in February the partners can evaluate the overall success of the project. The parties write a final report and evaluation of the overall progress of the project in the closing stage. The Leader-program requires its own final report of the project.

#### 4.7 Future of the co-operation

In this chapter the information of the future action concerning the co-operation between the three local action groups was gathered when a German delegation from the co-operation area visited Finland in 14.-16. November 2011. The theme of the meeting was to revise the project and decide about the future of the co-operation.

The current project between the three LAGs will continue until the end of March 2012. The purpose of launching this project was to initiate the co-operations and to guide in the early stages. As explained in the chapter 4.4, many contacts have been made in different fields and some joint projects have already been launched between the partners, for example the "Fin-Ger-Mail", an e-mail correspondence project with the schools.

The LAGs will continue supporting these fields of actions, which have started or are interested in starting a joint co-operation. The partners have decided to implement a new co-operation project from the beginning of April 2012. There are already some preliminary ideas of the themes for the new co-operation project; they will be specified when writing the project plan.

## 5. COURSE OF THE STUDY

### 5.1 Qualitative research

Qualitative research was chosen to be the research method of this thesis because the purpose was to gather personal experiences of the co-operation project in Germany and in Finland (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 1997, 157). Qualitative research for this thesis was implemented through personal, one-to-one interviews where the interviewees had a chance to express their opinions freely about the project (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 200). The objective of the thesis was to assess what kind of advantages this international co-operation between three local action groups from Germany and Finland has brought to the people, associations and areas involved. The progress of the project in different fields and the possible results were also clarified during the research.

The interviews were made between September and November 2011. The interviewees were chosen from the administrative level and from the fields of education and gastronomy. The two specific fields of action were chosen to be the focus points in this thesis by Regionalrat Wirtschaft, the commissioner of the thesis.

Two interviewees were chosen from each chosen focus fields, administration, education and gastronomy. From the two interviewees from each field the other one was from Germany and the other one from Finland. This was done to compare the opinions and experiences of the project in different countries. There were altogether six interviews. Three of the interviews were done in Germany and three interviews in Finland.

The participants to the interviews were from the administrative level Achim Kistner (3.October 2011, Sohren, Germany) and Juha Kolhinen (31.October 2011, Mänttä-Vilppula, Finland). From the field of education took part Tobias Eiserloh (28. September, 2011) and Paula Niittyniemi-Mehn (4. November,

2011). From the field of gastronomy were interviewed Matthias Klein (27. September, 2011) and Johannes Jatkola (4. November, 2011). The pairs were chosen in the basis of that the persons have been involved in the same project in this co-operation, so the experiences are comparable.

The research was implemented with semi-structured interviews (Hirsjärvi et al. 1997, 203). The participants were asked a few basic questions about the project in addition to field-appropriate questions. The interviewees were given a chance to express their opinions and feelings about the project also outside the questions. The language of the interviews was German in Germany and Finnish in Finland. The interviews were recorded for the documentation and translation purposes.

The questions to the interviewees can be seen in Appendix 1. The questions were framed so that the answers would give a broad picture of the participants' experiences of the co-operation project from the overall progress of the project, Leader-program, communication, possible risks and the partner country. In chapter 5.2 the interview questions are grouped under larger entities.

## 5.2 Research results and analysis

Results of the research and their analysis are written in the base of the six personal interviews performed within the different co-operation fields. The participants are listed in the previous chapter 5.1 and more specifically introduced in chapter 4.4. The interview questions can be found in appendix 2.

### 5.2.1 Results and advantages of the co-operation

This project was defined as a preparatory initiative and was launched to build the first contact between the target groups. The role of the LAGs was to find the contacts and bring active people from different fields together and help them to design and launch joint projects between the actors in Germany and Finland. By

comparing the similarities and differences in the partner regions the groups of people and associations for the different development areas were found.

Because this is an ongoing development project, the more concrete results can be seen and evaluated later on, when the project has ended. Nevertheless the interviewees identified already some advantages and named some results of the international Leader-co-operation.

In the administrative level the executive directors, Kistner and Kolhinen implemented this kind of an international Leader-project between the LAGs for the first time. The project has brought the LAGs knowledge of the implementation of a Leader-project in another country. It is valuable information to know the differences in the policies of supporting Leader-projects in different areas.

A result which acts as an advantage in the future is the contacts that have been built during the co-operation project. Every one of the interviewees has emphasized the importance of personal chemistry and the relationships between the participants (cf. chapters 2.3 and 2.4). The good relationships and even friendships bring continuity and certainty to the project. In the future the groups brought together should be able to act without the project between the LAGs. When the contacts are strong, this goal is more likely to be achieved.

Eiserloh, Niittyniemi-Mehn, Klein and Jatkola mentioned that these contacts would not have been made without this co-operation project. This proves that the project has met its goal in these fields of education and gastronomy, to build the connections between the associations and actors in the regions.

Concrete results in the field of gastronomy have been the chef exchange and the event already organized under that. The chefs have not started a common Leader-financed project, but have made use of their contacts that were built through the co-operation between the LAGs. A Finnish chef visited the restaurant Zum Felsenkeller in Sohren and organized a Finnish dinner for the German guests. The next part of the exchange is in the beginning of 2012, when the German chef does a counter-visit to Finland.

The Finnish kitchen was also represented in the gourmet-event à la region in Germany. This event was not organized by the LAGs but the connection to the Finnish chef and his team was made and supported by the help of the LAGs in this German-Finnish co-operation.

As one result the secondary schools in Kirchberg, Germany and in Virrat, Finland have started a common e-mail correspondence project called "Fin-Ger-Mail". The correspondence between the pupils started in November 2011. The connection between the teachers and schools was established through the co-operation between the three LAGs in Germany and in Finland.

Keeping in mind the objective of this co-operation project which was to build connections and help the active people from different fields to build international networks, the project has succeeded so far. In several fields the contacts have been made and common projects are either launched or being planned. More concrete results are expected after the project has ended.

### 5.2.2 Communication between the partners

Functioning communication between the administrative personnel of this project (project managers and executive managers in both countries) enables the success of the actions in this project (cf. chapter 2.4). Kistner and Kolhinen stated that the communication between the partners and the LAGs is straightforward and the parties can express their opinions openly and honestly.

From the interviews came out that there is a mutual trust between the partners. The German LAGs have made co-operation with each other for several years already. The managers from the three LAGs found common ground quickly in the meetings before writing the project agreement. One advantage in the communication between the LAGs is that the project manager in Finland speaks very good German and that made the communication between all the partners trouble-free.

One challenge mentioned when talking about communication was some cultural peculiarities in Finland (Kistner 2011). The German partners visited a seminar about Finnish culture, held by a German professor living in Finland. After the seminar, it was clearer how to interpret the Finnish people right. The knowledge of the partner-culture reduces the risk of misunderstandings between the partners.

In the sub-projects the language used has been German and English. The Finnish entrepreneurs and representatives have been used to do international co-operation in English. German language is not a requirement when taking part to the sub-projects, but it is an advantage. In the workshops, events and meetings there was linguistic support available for the attendants, through for example the practical trainee of Regionalrat Wirtschaft and the project managers.

In the fields of education and gastronomy the communication goes through the LAG-offices rarely. The partners needed more support in the beginning phase, but when the common language and objectives were found, it was easier to communicate straight with the partner.

Communication in an international development project is a crucial issue. It is important that it is functioning and effortless even though there is a long distance between the partners. In this international Leader-project between three local action groups from Germany and Finland the partners in different levels have found suitable communication channels. It has been possible to the partners to choose what kind of communication channels they use and how often it is needed.

After the initial meetings organized through the co-operation the partners in different sub-projects communicate no longer through the LAGs, but straight with each other. This is not in any case a handicap, but it might be difficult for the project management to keep track of the sub-projects. It would be recommended for the project management in Germany and in Finland to contact the people responsible in the sub-projects in a regular basis (cf. chapter

2.2.4). Even though the co-operation in the different fields of action might be going smoothly, there can be a need for support or opinions from the LAG. Regular communication also makes the documentation of the overall project for the LAGs easier.

### 5.2.3 Risks and challenges in the project

One risk for this international co-operation between the three LAGs is financial risk. Because the Leader-support is paid in arrears, there is always a small possibility that the actions have not been in the frames of the regulations and the support cannot be paid (Kolhinen 2011). Concerning this project, the risk is not after all seen as a serious one, but it is acknowledged.

One risk in a development project, like the one as the topic of this thesis, is that the sustainability is not reached. After the project has ended the subprojects created should be able to continue on their own. To minimize this risk, the management keeps in mind that this co-operation project is not made for them but for the different target groups, such as the rural women or teachers to build their co-operation to a level where it is able to be brought forward without the support of the LAGs (Kistner 2011).

One risk mentioned in the interviews with the administrative level and the two focus fields was the ending of the straight flight connection between Frankfurt-Hahn and Tampere. The flight connection has made the whole co-operation possible, and without that the co-operation might not have been started at all. This is not a current risk and until today the connection has been busy between the two destinations. Because the flight connection is operated by a low-cost airline, it is difficult for the partners to predict their future actions.

Because of good planning before launching the project and knowledge of the regulations in the Leader-program in both countries, the partners have succeeded to minimize the risks in this co-operation project.



From the interviews turned up that the people from different levels of this co-operation have not experienced many problems or challenges during this project. Kolhinen mentioned that this project has had less cultural problems than expected. One challenge in the Finnish partner region was to activate the local entrepreneurs. For entrepreneurs it is more difficult to join in to a project in which you can see the benefits only maybe years after the project has been launched. Also the lack of knowledge in German language limited some entrepreneurs or partners in Finland from joining the co-operation.

One challenging theme for all of the partner-LAGs was the field of tourism (chapter 4.4.2). From the beginning tourism was thought as a very important part of this co-operation, because tourism is how you often get to know to foreign countries. According to the interview with Kistner and Kolhinen the co-operation did not function as well as first thought. It was difficult for one partner in Germany to find his role in the project and that brought some tension between the partners. In Finland brought difficulties the fact that the region where LAG PoKo ry is functioning does not have a common tourism entrepreneur that could have taken the responsibility of the co-operation in the field of tourism.

Even though the lack of knowledge in German language might have restricted some of the Finnish entrepreneurs from taking part to this project, the participants in the sub-projects from German and Finnish side have not experienced problems with the language, according to the interviews. Jatkola shared that he doesn't speak foreign languages well, but has still managed to do co-operation with the German partners with the help of the others taking part to the events and meetings.

The management has made the decision to leave out the tourism field, when it was clear that there were difficulties that they were not able to solve. This means that the management is able to recognize the problems and is ready to make changes. (cf. chapter 2.2.4)

#### 5.2.4 Workload of an international co-operation project

According to the interviews the participants from the administrative level as well as from the fields of gastronomy and education knew that international projects and projects in common bring extra work.

Kistner and Kolhinen stated that it takes a lot of normal work time to plan the workshops and meetings. The program has to be planned and the people taking part need accommodation and transportation. Kolhinen mentioned that when there is a workshop organized in Germany or in Finland it takes also the normal working time from the participants. The program lasts from morning until evening and that is why during a workshop one has to break free from the normal daily routine. During the workshops and events the participants also spend their free-time with the project.

According to Niittyniemi-Mehn, the field of education the “Fin-Ger-Mail” –project between the schools has brought extra work for the teachers. E-mail and applications have to be written and meetings planned. Because the project is interesting and the teachers, pupils and their parents are committed to the project, it makes the work interesting and worth doing. During the workshop in Finland in April 2011 and the meeting of the teachers in Germany in June 2011 the planning was made efficiently. That takes away some extra work.

Klein, from the gastronomy field sees the extra work caused from this project as normal activities for an entrepreneur. Organizing events and co-operating with other chefs is seen to bring that kind of advantages personally and to the business that it is worth implementing.

Jatkola, a Finnish freelance chef, who was interviewed for this study, brings a view from person, who is participating to this co-operation as a person, not as a company owner or a representative of an association. All the work he has done for the project, for example participating to the workshop in April 2011 and representing Finnish cuisine at the gourmet-festival à la region has been all extra work for him. The work has paid off and he feels that this co-operation has brought him a lot of courage and experiences from the partner culture and from

his field. Jatkola is interested in continuing the co-operation with other German chefs and he has been invited to an event organized by a chef that he got to know through this co-operation project.

The difference in the workload between Germany and Finland showed mainly in the administrative level. Both, Kistner and Kolhinen agreed that PoKo ry has had more work with this project. This can be explained with the fact that Poko ry has its own project coordinator just for this particular co-operation project with the two German LAGs. LAG Hunsrück and LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal manage this project along with the other project they have going on.

It can be interpreted from the interviews that even though this international co-operation creates extra work, the people taking part are still excited and committed to implement actions through it.

#### 5.2.5 Experiences in Germany and in Finland

According to the interviews the partners in all levels were very pleased with each other. The Germans and the Finns have quite similar approach for working, and that made the co-operation easier in both countries. The partners found many similarities in the areas in Germany and in Finland, for example demographic change is an important topic in all the partner areas.

The interviews were made in Germany and Finland to be able to see if the experiences and opinions differ from each other in different regions. When asked about the partners, every one of the interviewees stated that they felt that they can trust their partner. The personal meetings organized with the partners in both countries help to build reliable relationships between them.

The interviews showed that there are not any big differences in opinions or experiences concerning this project in Germany and in Finland. All of the interviewees expressed that they noticed right from the beginning that it is easy to get along and work with the other party.

Even though the cultural differences have not caused many problems in during the project so far, the cultural exchange is an important part of the co-operation. Developing the cultural knowledge is also a theme in the “Fin-Ger-Mail” – project. To know about the culture and habits of another country shows also one’s own country in a new light. Through the cultural knowledge it is easier to see what is done differently, better or worse in one’s own country and that helps to develop the actions in the own region.

#### 5.2.6 Continuity of the co-operation project

The goal of this co-operation is to achieve sustainability. In the interview with Kolhinen came clear that the only sustainable way in this project for the LAGs is to act as door-openers for the active people in the rural areas and enable the joint projects between them.

When asked about the continuity in the project, the participants from the fields of education (Eiserloh and Niittyniemi-Mehn) and gastronomy (Klein and Jatkola) stated that even if the project with the LAGs ended, they would be interested in continuing co-operation with the contacts in the partner areas. The realization of the continuity of these co-operations can be seen only after the co-operation project between the LAGs has ended.

The e-mail correspondence project with the schools is designed in a way that it can be repeated also later on with other classes and groups of pupils. Eiserloh said that the aim is to always have a continuing English language correspondence project in the school in Kirchberg with the Finnish school. This aim is still under construction, but it is seen to be possible to be implemented.

The both chefs interviewed, Klein and Jatkola also showed interest in continuing the co-operation with each other and also other chefs from the co-operation regions. It is unlikely that the participants in the field of gastronomy will implement a Leader-financed project together, but without this co-operation between the LAGs the parties would have not been brought together.

Within this project, which goes on until March 2012, the LAGs continue to support the target groups and help them to develop their joint actions. The LAGs have decided to write a new project plan for the LAGs beginning from April 2012. (Kistner 2011)

The sustainability has been the basic idea through the whole life line of the project. Because the co-operation between the three LAGs has not yet ended, it is hard to evaluate the continuity of the project, but it can be drawn from the interviews that there is mutual interest in maintaining the connections and projects.

## 6. SUMMARY

The purpose of this thesis was to find out what kind of advantages this international co-operation project between three local action groups from Germany and Finland has brought for the areas, associations and people involved. The research and assessment was done through qualitative methods. Six participants from different levels of this project from Germany and Finland were interviewed personally.

This international co-operation was examined through the practices in traditional and international project management, as well as through the management of a development project. The theory concentrated on the structure, management, communication and the challenges of international development projects.

This Leader-project is still ongoing until end of March 2012 and the assessment was done according to the actions implemented by the end of the year 2011. According to the assessment, the project has been successful so far. The project is a development project, thus the concrete results can be seen after the project has ended.

The project management has worked actively with the co-operation. They have connected different associations to the project and built connections between different actors. It can be seen from the implementation of the project that the goal of the co-operation has been kept in mind through the whole project cycle. The goal was to achieve permanent connections and initiate long-term co-operation between the regions and target groups. From the interviews it came clear that these connections would not have been found and the common projects would have not been started without this co-operation between the LAGs in Germany and Finland. This shows the importance of implementing this kind of development project.

The most important success factors in this project have been the good personal relationships and good and fluent communication. The research showed that because of these good relationships already built, the actors in different fields are interested in continuing with the co-operation.

Things to improve in the future are the communication between the participants in the sub-project and the project management and increasing the participants' knowledge about the whole Leader-program. The interviews showed that the actors in the sub-project had either little or no knowledge of the Leader-program. Leader-program is a tool to implement development projects and strategies in the rural areas, and to be able to use it efficiently the actors have to know about the leading principles of the program.

Through theory and research were discovered the possible and actual challenges in this international development project. The interviews showed the good experiences and advantages already gotten from this co-operation project. Some of the results from this project so far are not yet concrete, but the groundwork done in different fields, gives a good opportunity for achieving results and continue co-operation in the future.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX 1: 1 (2)

## PROGRESS OF THE CO-OPERATION PROJECT TO FINLAND

- 11.12.2009** Mail from Maija Kaijanmäki: Inquiry of co-operations project in 2010
- 16.12.2009** Answer from Achim Kistner: Interest
- 07.03.-10.03.2010** Visit of the German delegation in Mänttä, Finland
- 08.03.2010** First visit at the office of LAG PoKo ry and meeting with the chief executive Juha Kolhinen
- 31.08.-02.09.2010** First visit of delegation from the LAG PoKo ry in Germany
- 10.12.-12.12.2010** The Finns stake part to the Christmas market in Simmern preparing Finnish glowfried salmon
- 13.12.-14.12.2010** Workshop in Germany, themes: tourism and education
- 06.02.-09.02.2011** Visit in Finland, participation to a Finnish nationwide workshop, presenting the LAG and the project
- 04.04.-07.04.2011** Workshop in Finland, themes: tourism, gastronomy, education & training and wine & food
- 30.04.-02.05.2011** Finnish participants at the Hi!R-fair in Simmern, visiting Oberwesel (LAG Welterbe Oberes Mittelrheintal)
- 15.06.-19.06.2011** Participation of the Finns in the gourmet event à la région, a Finnish chef and group serve moose dish
- 15.06.-17.06.2011** Teachers from Finland visit Germany, agreement on a project between secondary schools (Fin-Ger-Mail)
- 11.07.-15.07.2011** A delegation from German rural women organization visit Finland, participation to local food market in Mänttä and presenting some German products. First contact with the Finnish rural women: getting to know to each other and first discussions

Continued

## APPENDIX 1: 2 (2)

- 11.08.-14.08.2011** The “wine-witch“Anna I from Oberwesel visits Finland and takes part to a wick-festival in Ruovesi. Selling and presenting wines from Oberwesel. (Invitation came from Finland, not over the project; the contacts were made during the visit in Oberwesel in April 2011)
- 15.09.-18.09.2011** Workshop in Germany about the rural women co-operation. Visit in Bundesgartenschau in Koblenz presenting the organization and the co-operation at the stage.
- 19.09.-21.09.2011** Coordination discussion in Germany with the project managers and executive chiefs about the situation of the project so far, feedback and the future necessities and possibilities of the project.
- 21.09.-23.09.2011** Vocational school teachers from Finland visit Germany. Concrete agreements on co-operation and development of school projects.
- 14.-16.11.2011** German delegation visits Finland to discuss and decide about the future development of the project.

(Regionalrat Wirtschaft, 2011)

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview: Administration

Interviewees:

Achim Kistner, Executive Manager, Regionalrat Wirtschaft, interviewed on 3.October 2011 in Sohren, Germany, duration 30min

Juha Kolhinen, Executive Manager, PoKo ry, interviewed on 31.October 2011 in Mänttä-Vilppula, Finland, duration 35min

Questions:

1. How did this co-operation between the three LAGs begin?
2. What is the objective of the project?
3. What have you done during this project?
4. Has the project brought a lot of extra work?
5. Has the workload been shared equally?
6. How was the communication during the project?
7. What kind of risks do you see in this project?
8. How did you find the right people for the sub-projects?
9. What kind of problems have you had during this project?
10. What are the good experiences and concrete results of this project so far?
11. What do you think about the Leader-program in general?
12. How were the Finns/Germans as project partners?
13. How important is the cultural exchange?
14. What is the future of this project?
15. Other feedback?

Continued

Interview: Education

Interviewees:

Tobias Eiserloh, vice principal as a pedagogical coordinator/teacher, co-educational school in Kirchberg, 28. September, 2011 in Kirchberg, Germany, duration 30min

Paula Niittyniemi-Mehn, Lector, Virrat secondary school, 4. November, 2011 in Virrat, Finland, duration 35min

Questions:

1. How did you hear about this German-Finnish co-operation project?
2. How did the idea of the co-operation between the schools develop?
3. What have you done during this project?
4. What is the objective of "Fin-Ger-Mail"?
5. Were there problems with different school systems in Germany and Finland?
6. How was the communication during the project?
7. What kind of risks do you see in this project?
8. What kind of problems have you had during this project?
9. How is the pupils' attitude towards the "Fin-Ger-Mail"-project?
10. Have you or your school implemented any other international co-operation projects?
11. What are the good experiences and concrete results of this project so far?
12. How well do you know the Leader-program?
13. How important is the cultural exchange?
14. Has the project brought a lot of extra work?
15. How were the Finnish/Germans as project partners?
16. What is the future of this project?
17. Other feedback?

Continued

Interview: Gastronomy

Interviewees:

Matthias Klein, hotel manager/chef, hotel-restaurant Zum Felsenkeller, Sohren, Germany, interviewed on 27. September, 2011 in Sohren, Germany, duration 30min

Johannes Jatkola, freelance chef, interviewed on 15. November, 2011 in Vilppula, Finland, duration 20min

Questions:

1. How did you hear about this German-Finnish co-operation project?
2. What have you done during this project?
3. What kind of risks do you see in this project? (Personally or for the company)
4. How was the communication during the project?
5. What kind of problems have you had with the language or during the project in general?
6. What are the good experiences and concrete results of this project so far?
7. What have you learned from your own profession during the co-operation?
8. Has the co-operation brought a lot of extra work?
9. How important is the cultural exchange?
10. How were the Finns/Germans as co-operation partners?
11. How well do you know the Leader-program?
12. What is the future of this co-operation?
13. Other feedback?