

Rural Areas are Shaping the Future: Some Experiences with the Regional Action Programme in Germany

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Abstract

The starting point for this paper is the rediscovery of the concept of the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas as a way of adapting to economic pressures and the changing role of agriculture in society. Multifunctionality has always been a key feature of farming. Only over the last decades it has been set aside in favour of the conventional development model for agriculture in order to reduce production costs and to increase competitiveness.

The new development model that is sketched out is illustrated on the basis of the practical experiences gained so far with the *Regionen Aktiv* ('Regional Action - Rural Areas Shaping the Future') pilot programme in Germany. In this programme an integrated and holistic approach is applied to the development of agriculture and rural areas. At the same time it is tried to encourage community participation and action, and to foster local and co-operative initiatives at all levels. A rediscovery and redefinition of rural-urban linkages is a key feature of the projects that are implemented as an integral part of more comprehensive regional development concepts. A key idea is that 'new' farm-related activities are actively reconstructing and revitalizing rural economies in the model regions.

The paper aims at giving an impression on how learning processes and skill building, which are considered integral and vital components of the pilot programme, are taking place in the model regions. Learning processes are examined at the level of individual entrepreneurs and actors, the level of the model region and the programme or policy making level: Making multifunctionality a key issue of agricultural policy programmes requires a mutual learning process between policy makers, research and rural actors.

Introduction

General considerations concerning the paradigm shift towards multifunctionality

Policies regarding the development of rural areas are more and more determined according to the principles of integration, territoriality and sustainability. The multifunctionality of agriculture is increasingly seen as being inextricably linked with the economic, ecological and social dimensions of a sustainable development of rural areas.

Multifunctionality emerges as a redefinition of identities, strategies, practices, interrelations and networks. Sometimes this redefinition rests on an historically rooted but marginalized cultural repertoire. In other situations it is based on highly 'market-oriented' responses that embody a general or partial reconceptualisation of what farming should be in the context of the new ties emerging between town and countryside. Job creation in rural areas is in this respect not so much a function of natural resources, rural amenities or infrastructure, but of local people and entrepreneurship (BRUNORI & ROSSI, 2000; VAN DER PLOEG et al. 2000, 2002).

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In the Amsterdam Treaty of 1999 a concrete form has been given to the so-called *European Model of Agriculture*. In this model explicit reference is made to the *multifunctionality* of rural areas and agriculture. HERVIEU & BERANGER (2000) emphasize that agricultural change cannot be seen without considering its contribution to the preservation of the socio-economic viability of rural areas, as well as its specific cultural and historical role: "*Multifunctionality is an integrative concept that provides a macroeconomic reality and a global coherence to externalities that are often neglected on the microeconomic level.*" The 'Regional Action - Rural Areas Shaping the Future' pilot programme corresponds with these recent shifts in policy at the European level and it trial tests new, trend setting options for action in practice.

The same reorientation in the agricultural and rural economy can be observed in practice in recent years. Departing from the available empirical studies we argue that over Europe as a whole, between 60 and 70% of all farms are functioning and maintained, precisely since they are firmly grounded in 'new' farm-related activities. Starting in the mid 1980s but particularly since the early 1990s there has been a very substantial rise in such activities in most rural areas, which have to some extent compensated the loss of economic significance and employment in the primary production sector. It is telling that over the last years a range of 'atlases' was elaborated that describe these new repertoires and the associated practices (VAN DER PLOEG et al., 2000, 2002; VAN BROEKHUIZEN et al., 1997).

It has become evident - in Germany as well as throughout Europe - that multifunctionality through economic diversification opens up significant prospects for the future of agriculture and rural areas. For farming operations it means developing new sources of income in addition to traditional production, e.g. in the areas of agro-tourism, management of nature and landscape or regenerative sources of energy. Empirical studies like the IMPACT research programme¹ which has just been concluded may well point to new ways of reconciling micro-economic perspectives with environmental and societal goals at large (VAN DER PLOEG et al. 2000, 2002; KNICKEL et al. 2004a).

The situation of agriculture and rural areas in Germany

The share of primary agricultural production in the gross added value of the German economy has decreased from 3.4 percent in the year 1970 to 1.2 percent in the year 1999, thus by more than half. The proportion of the labour force working in this sector dropped from 4.1 percent in the year 1991 to 2.7 percent in 1999. This corresponds with figures for European agriculture: In the six founding EU member states, the number of farms fell by 42% between 1967 and 1997, a loss of 2.7 million farms. Between 1987 and 1997 alone, the number of farms fell by 24% in the EU-12 (Eurostat) (BRYDEN, 2002). The decline in the number of agricultural holdings is matched by an even more pronounced decline in agricultural employment.

A process that has received much less attention while it gained more and more importance is the diversification of agriculture, the development of new farm-based or farming-related services such as landscape management, an increasing quality orientation and the focus on regional products and markets. Diverse patterns of income generation and the focus on regional markets have become more important again. The diversity of agriculture and food traditions can in this respect be seen as a strength. Regional-level processing and marketing, short chains and community supported agriculture provide new opportunities for green and local products in the market-place and an alternative to an increasing standardisation in mainstream production and markets (VAN DER PLOEG et al., 2000, 2002).

¹ The Socio-economic Impact of Rural Development Policies: Realities & Potentials (IMPACT). DG Research - Quality of Life Programme. Contract no. FAIR 6 CT 98-4288. For results see VAN DER PLOEG et al. (2002). A copy can be obtained in the Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS). Cost: 20 Euro plus postage. Email: Knickel@em.uni-frankfurt.de.

Rural areas, however, are characterised by a large range of diversity, a fact to which policy-makers have not always given sufficient consideration in the past. Nature, culture and agriculture in the Allgäu region in southern Bavaria are entirely different from the conditions found in the Emsland region in north-western Germany, for example. The Uckermark-Barnim region in one of the new states in east Germany has a 22 percent unemployment rate, one of the highest in the country. By contrast, the Oberland - a typical rural area in Bavaria - only has a 6 percent rate of unemployment. With respect to the kinds of support required it is important that the particular regional situations are taken into account by local development agencies, national governments and the EU in developing policies designed to support these new activities. As elsewhere in Europe, there are no standard solutions for development in rural areas. Against this background, the Regional Action pilot programme has been implemented in order to trial test a new bottom-up policy approach.

The Regional Action Programme

Objectives and expectations

The pilot programme 'Regional Action - Rural Areas Shaping the Future' was initiated by the Federal Ministry of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture (BMVEL) in Germany in 2001. It follows an integrated approach to regional development acknowledging the need for rural areas to harmonise their various functions in order to be strengthened and create new sources of income. The relevant actors, institutions and stakeholders in individual regions are encouraged to develop visions for the future of their region and to devise integrated development concepts that are geared to the particular regional situation. Policy makers expect the pilot programme to provide best-practice models for sustainable rural development and for connecting rural and urban economies (BMVEL 2002).

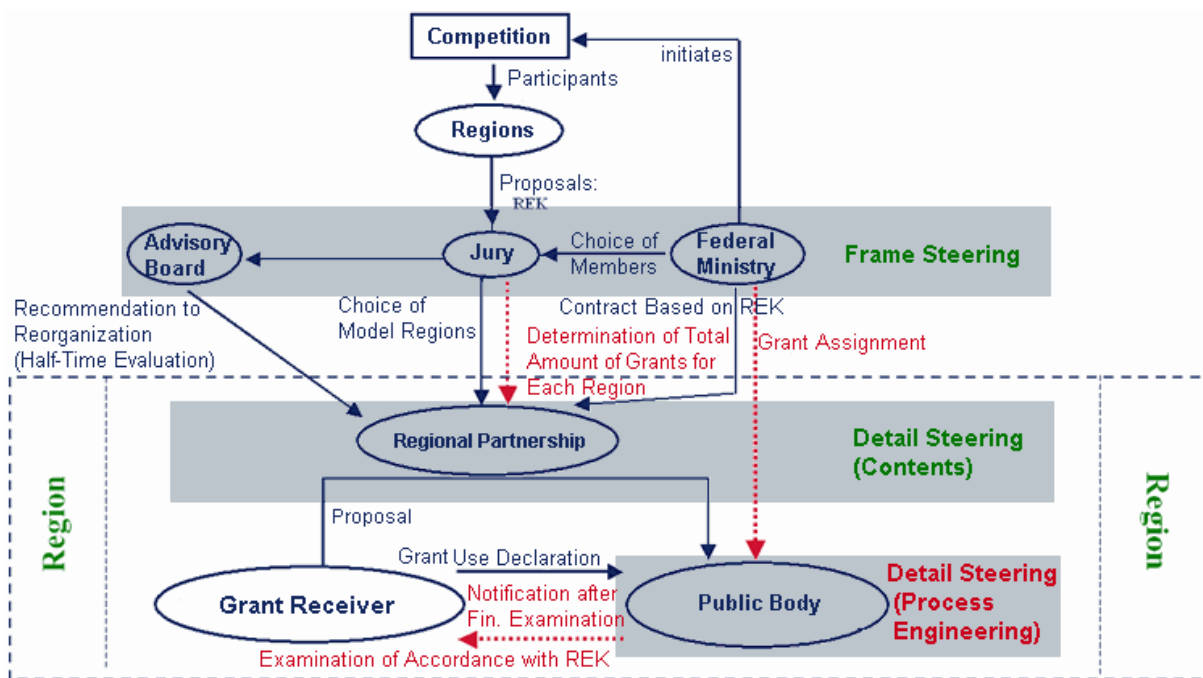
Through the programme support is given to the realisation of these development concepts that aim at quality production and environmental protection in the agricultural sector as well as proximity between producers and consumers and economic stimuli through regional products and direct marketing. Instead of supporting individual sectors, the programme focuses on the region as a whole, aiming to make it a catalyst for innovation. The combination of economic development and social balance with intact nature and environmental protection is a major goal in all model regions participating in the Regional Action programme. The objective is to explore and develop fields of action that will eventually demonstrate the ideal of sustainable development in a clear and comprehensible manner. Interrelationships between different fields of activity are considered important, and projects are conceived in mutually supportive ways. The aim is to create synergies between different developments at farm household, communal/local and regional level.

Implementation

At the beginning of 2002 eighteen regions were chosen by a jury out of over 200 competitors on the basis of the quality of their concepts for an integrated and sustainable development of their region. The presented concepts had to be agreed upon at regional level by those actively involved including the major regional interest groups. The winning regions now receive an annual grant of up to a maximum of 1.5 million Euro. Through the grant the ministry provides a support framework actively backing up regional development activities including in particular a regional management structure and the implementation of particularly innovative core projects. Over the period 2002 to 2005 the regions, which are mirroring

the vast diversity of Germany's rural areas, are supposed to develop innovative ideas and provide useful examples by putting their integrated development plans into practice (BMVEL 2002).

The co-operation structures that had to be conceptualised as a part of the regional development concepts and that, in many regions, are continuously improved, provide the basis for the implementation of the programme. It is expected that these newly-formed co-operation structures - the so-called 'regional partnerships' - will provide the foundation for longer-term joint involvement of regional actors in regional development processes (BMVEL 2002). **Figure 1** provides an overview of organisational structures in a typical model region.



Source: Annual Report of the Regional Partnership Ostfriesland (2003); REK = Regional Development Concept

Fig. 1: Overview of organisational structures

The specific organisation in the individual regions is now handled by a group that is representative of those actively involved. The main idea is to hold decision-making power within the regional partnerships themselves. A public regional body - often the district authorities or the agricultural office - has the responsibility for financial management and budget administration. A regional management team plays a key role in promoting regional networking, supporting project development and interlinking individual projects as well as in preparing decisions in relevant bodies of the regional partnerships (KNICKEL et al. 2004b).

The accompanying research for the pilot programme is carried out by the Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS) at Goethe University Frankfurt. It aims at providing the policy level with comparative analyses and recommendations for further policy formulation and the mainstreaming of bottom-up approaches as well as at supporting regional level learning processes.²

² For further information on the pilot programme and the accompanying research please contact Karlheinz Knickel (Email: knickel@em.uni-frankfurt.de).

Learning processes at different levels

Learning processes at policy and programme level

The basic premise of the approach is that those actively involved regionally have a more precise knowledge of the local situation than people working for a state or federal government ministry, for example. This superior knowledge makes it possible for the regions to organise specific measures more purposefully, to co-ordinate them better and, above all, to motivate and involve relevant actors and stakeholders from within the region. As the experiences with the model regions show, the degree of identification of the population with its own region increases, just as does the motivation to take an active part in this type of grass roots democracy process. The fact that bottom-up processes can provide important impulses for dynamic development in rural areas has already been demonstrated since the early 1990s by the EU LEADER programme. The additional aspect of the Regional Action pilot programme is that this process is now explicitly implemented in favour of a reorientation towards a sustainable agriculture, a quality orientation in production, environmental concerns, and regional resources and markets.

The key to the success of this initiative and the necessary participation processes is a professional regional management team that has sufficient resources at its disposal. Communication competence, organisational skills and the ability to moderate and mediate are prerequisites. The pilot programme allows the regions to finance these 'soft' success factors. The importance of such a support structure and the role of NGOs for skills transfer has been elaborated by OLUKOSI (1996) who is dealing with the issue of participation possibilities for local groups in innovation processes. The experiences gained so far with the Regional Action pilot programme are in line with that.

Programme evaluation and the methods employed

The concept developed for programme evaluation and the methods employed are based on the idea that a dynamic development of rural regions is closely linked with the creativity of local actors and their knowledge of the opportunities and difficulties of their particular geographical location. By allowing regional actors active participation in the development process, the Regional Action programme makes such knowledge accessible. In correspondence with that, the programme involves the model regions themselves in the evaluation process by allowing them to present the effects of the programme implementation on the basis of guidelines developed as part of the accompanying research.

In respect of the specific conditions in the individual model regions, a relatively comprehensive set of criteria for the success of the initiative had to be developed. This has been done on the basis of a comparative analysis of the regional situations, their respective development models and strategies being elaborated as well as the core projects being implemented. A comparative analysis of the regional competition documents helped identify regions with similar conditions and potentials in a first step.

The qualitative methods employed during the first phase of accompanying empirical research involved participant field observation and interviews with regional key actors based again on a common guideline. RÖLING (1996) refers to the issue of integrating farmers' and researchers' knowledge, pointing out that knowledge of the social structures is crucial within the field of research in order to make the right choice of interview partners and assessing the information gained. Further information was available in form of annual reports that had to be delivered by the model regions on the basis of common guidelines and in which the process and progress of the implementation of the regional development concepts is being described (KNICKEL et al. 2004b).

RÖLING (1996) also addresses the problem of generalising local-specific information. The latter poses a challenge for the next phase of the accompanying research, which aims at moving from a more descriptive approach on to general conclusions for best-practice models. In this next phase also the problem of bias will need to be dealt with in a more effective way: Because the Regional Action programme has been conceived as a competition there still is pressure on the regions to 'perform' well. Consequently, the accompanying research has to be aware of interview partners possibly tending to provide information selectively. At the moment it is questioned even by the accompanying researchers whether a pilot programme that aims at models for sustainable development, constructive cooperation at regional level and the necessary learning processes ought to have (significant) competitive elements.

3.2 Learning processes at the level of the individual entrepreneur

Besides the learning processes at policy and programme level that have been examined so far there are also very considerable learning processes at the level of the individual entrepreneur. The conventional development model for agriculture that dictated European agricultural policy, training and advisory systems in the past 30-40 years was focussed on increases in labour productivity through scale-enlargement, specialisation and the intensification of production. As a result in many European regions we now have a highly rationalised, mono-functional agriculture, which is faced with economic, environmental and social limits, and thus increasingly at odds with society's expectations of agriculture and rural areas as well as with the interests and perspectives of an increasing segment of the agrarian community (see for example KNICKEL 1994).

The reorientation in the agricultural and rural economy which can be observed in recent years, however, may well point to new ways of reconciling micro-economic perspectives with environmental and societal goals at large. Agriculture is being redefined by *individual farm households* in terms of its much wider role in a modern society. Obviously agriculture still is the biggest land-user, and - particularly if 'new' farm-related and broader activities are taken into consideration - farming remains the heart of the rural economy.

More and more farm households supplement their incomes with other activities and sources of income. Farmers and other rural entrepreneurs are engaged in the development of new farm-based or farming-related services exploring new ways of using available farm and household resources. Activities such as agro-tourism, quality production, regional-level processing and marketing, care activities, communal services, nature and landscape management or organic farming as well as more innovative activities like wind and bio-energy production are emerging as responses to the ongoing cost/price squeeze in mainstream agricultural production. To a considerable degree these activities are characteristic of the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas (ABLER, 2001; VAN DER PLOEG et al. 2000, 2002).

Particularly dynamic fields of activity are in Germany organic farming, high quality production (often linked with particular regional quality labels), diversification, and nature and landscape management. Agro-tourism and direct marketing have already been popular for decades. The establishment of farmer markets has been particularly important in the past 10-15 years, particularly in southern Germany. Off-farm employment have always been important in most German regions, again particularly in southern Germany where 70-80% of all farm households are pluriactive (KNICKEL et al. 2004a).

3.3 Learning processes related to the multifunctionality of agriculture and rural areas

Agricultural enterprises in the model regions show the potential for diversification, yet further (policy) support is needed in the form of the promotion of processing and marketing facilities and of intersectoral

initiatives. A strengthened regional image and thus stronger identification of consumers with their region and with regional products are crucial. The integrated regional development concepts force actors to develop joint initiatives. Thus, new co-operative structures within agriculture as well as with other sectors such as education or tourism have been achieved (KNICKEL et al. 2004 b).

The fact that 'new' farm-related or farm-based activities require new skills, labour management, support services and networking still has to be realised by relevant institutions. Very often 'new' activities have been developed by individual farm households without assistance from the agricultural support system that still is predominantly geared towards primary production and cost-efficiency. Regional level actors outside the official agricultural system such as the regional management teams and agencies of the LEADER and the Regional Action programme provide some help. It is telling that it is primarily these 'new' actors who refer to the assets of the particular region as core components of the evolution of a multifunctional agriculture and of a sustainable development of the region. The newly-gained awareness of specific regional potentials stated by regional actors can help to discover new possibilities for a multifunctional agriculture.

Learning processes at the regional level: Skill building and knowledge transfer in the model regions

The organisational and technical skills required by individual farm households that are engaged in the development of 'new' activities as well as the organisational and networking skills required by the regional management teams and agencies when providing the necessary support are both products and conditions of successful development initiatives. Ideally, the support programme and the agency implementing it play the role of facilitators. Particular support ought to be given to skill building activities through adequate budgetary provisions. Regional management teams and agencies then primarily play the role of learning agents and regional level catalysts that assist in the translation of overall programme objectives into regional initiatives.

Fundamental to the pilot programme is the idea that regional actors themselves take charge of the development of their region. The support mechanism tries to encourage community participation and action, and to foster local and co-operative initiatives at all levels (geographically and between private, public and community organisations). It attempts to facilitate the creation of new alliances between the relevant groups and joint action (KNICKEL et al. 2004b).

The accompanying research documents that the model regions have already experienced a remarkable learning process relating to the establishment of organisational structures and forms of decision-making as well as creating networks for the implementation of the programme. New relationships between formerly not co-operating actors and sectors have been and continue to be formed, by way of which regional development is transported on a broader basis. The willingness of the model regions to learn becomes evident through examples of organisational restructuring. It becomes evident as well that there are still deficiencies concerning the efficiency of working structures in the model regions to be overcome in an ongoing learning process at the regional level (KNICKEL et al. 2004b). Overall, it can be stated that the Regional Action programme has already contributed to a higher regional self-responsibility, has initiated learning processes as well as raised the motivation for joint action.

At the same time, there is some criticism by regional actors considering the support by the Federal Ministry insufficient. From the point of view of the accompanying researchers the learning process also concerns the ministerial level where a totally new approach towards policy formulation and implementation is being tested. Especially for a participation-oriented approach like the Regional Action programme the promotion of knowledge transfer, skill building and networking is vital as the emphasis of the pro-

gramme rests on exploring development processes carried by newly-involved actors (KNICKEL et al. 2004b).

The exchange of knowledge and experiences takes place through various 'channels', first, at programme level, and second, within the model regions. To mention some concrete examples, the website established in the context of the pilot programme (BMVEL 2001) offers actors possibilities of knowledge exchange e.g. via a so-called competence-development-network (KEN). KEN addresses issues like regional management, regional and direct marketing, networking and co-operation, moderation, evaluation and public relations. Internet-based discussion platforms on critical issues and topics on the website allow an exchange of questions and advice concerning the implementation process among actors of different model regions. Working groups on different issues formed by regional actors involved are an effective way of 'face-to-face' knowledge transfer within the regions (KNICKEL et al. 2004b). Knowledge transfer also takes place via external experts, who function as professional advisers on specific questions. Interregional 'networking seminars' are another example to be mentioned. Press and public relations help make the programme and its progress known to the public, thus also addressing potential customers for newly-established services and products.

As is pointed out in the workshop abstract, identifying critical knowledge and skills and making them accessible to actors is crucial on the way towards a sustainable development of agriculture and rural areas. Communication, organisational, moderation, mediation and networking skills are preconditions in the forming of new co-operations. As opposed to mere investment programmes, the promotional spectrum of Regional Action encompasses such 'soft' measures as well as 'hard' measures like promoting investment and infrastructures. The regional management teams of the model regions function as an important agent of networking and skill building, and at the same time need further training themselves to successfully fulfil this task (KNICKEL et al. 2004b).

Learning from model regions and pilot programmes

From practice to theory

In order to meet future challenges a reorientation of research activities and a corresponding development of research capacities is needed. Agricultural and rural change is a multi-level, multi-actor and multi-domain issue. The global relations between agriculture and society constitute a first level of analysis. Agricultural change can be interpreted as adjustments among farm households to overall societal changes. At the same time, it needs to be understood at the local community level as patterns of agricultural change reflect local community structures. Ultimately, change is enacted by the farmers, that base their decisions on a variety of local level factors that are not always connected to the factors at other levels. Agricultural change also is multi-actor and multi-domain: Increasingly a single land area is used for multiple purposes (agro-tourism, residential areas, leisure and sports activities, etc.) over which multiple actors from multiple domains have influence. The 'rural' is no longer a monopoly of the farmers.

Dealing with multidimensional processes poses a challenge for research. An approach that in the past has not received sufficient attention from the research side, is the systematic exploration and study of practical experiences. Model regions and pilot programmes can be understood as *windows into the future*. An example to be mentioned are the practical experiences gained in biosphere reserves (BSR) where a sustainable economy and a sustainable land use are key ideas being developed and tested. At the EU level, the *Leader* programme running since the beginning of the 1990s provides interesting experiences in terms of a more sustainable development of rural areas and in terms of the institutional forms required to support and implement such developments. The Regional Action pilot programme in

Germany is an excellent national level example. The initiative as a whole can be seen as a new future-oriented policy measure with a very high potential for policy-practice synergies.

What is lacking is a thorough and scientifically sound examination of such experiences. Obviously such research would need to be transdisciplinary, i.e. also involving stakeholders using suitable participatory approaches (focus groups, expert panels, etc.). Stakeholders are the farming sector, consumers, taxpayers, citizens with food safety, environment and animal welfare interests, the food industry as well as regional level decision-makers and administrators. A challenging question is how to combine qualitative and quantitative information systems in the sense of decision and learning tools. A sufficient degree of integration of natural sciences and socio-economic research with policy studies and participatory approaches can be regarded as essential in this respect. Integrated assessment techniques normally relate to specific spatial levels, and a key question is how different levels of analysis can be interlinked (KNICKEL & RENTING, 2000). The aim must be to really bridge different research paradigms and to embed the analyses within a process of stakeholder interactions.

Actively constructing synergies

Creating cohesion between activities, not only at farm level (through the active construction of new multifunctional rural enterprises) but also between different farms or farms and other rural activities is a crucial, strategic element in rural development processes. Particularly important are the (potential) synergies between local and regional eco-systems, specific farm styles, specific goods and services, localised food-chains and relevant social carriers and movements (SACCOMANDI & VAN DER PLOEG 1995).

The centrality of synergy to rural development embodies a model of agricultural development that is fundamentally different to the modernisation paradigm. Whilst modernisation fostered an ongoing specialisation in agricultural production and envisaged a segregation of agriculture from other rural activities, it is the mutual benefits and 'win-win situations' between different activities that in the new multifunctional paradigm appear both strategic and desirable. Agriculture and rural areas may in this respect well lead the way for a more sustainable society. Aspects of this are an increasing quality orientation and a quality economy, the linkages between resource use efficiency, rural income and employment, and the close connections between agricultural land use, societal demands, the provision of public goods and the management of natural resources (KNICKEL et al. 2004a, ALLINSON 2003).

The Regional Action programme in this respect not only makes eighteen innovative concepts for the implementation of integrated rural development possible. The programme will also result in important practical experiences with respect to success factors and obstacles encountered during the realisation process. By means of the results from the model regions, important information will be gained for developing new policy support instruments.

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