

RCE ON ESD

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Building RCE Rhine-Meuse

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Abstract

The Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) Rhine-Meuse is one of the first seven pioneer RCEs and the first in Europe. It was established in 2004 after a preparation period that began in 2001. The period 2005–07, which is described and analysed in this article, was when the RCE established a position in the region and proved its added value. The RCE received funding from the European Regional Development Program to start up and from the Province of Dutch Limburg for 2006–07, enabling it to build a regional network with a central office, to set up an Internet-based communication and knowledge distribution system and to initiate its first pilot projects. Evaluation of the first two years of activities showed that serving the complex Euregion, Rhine-Meuse proved to be difficult in practice. This article focuses on stakeholder issues, the maturing of the RCE's management system and its position in the region, and concludes with a perspective for the future.

Keywords: RCEs, sustainable development, regional, education

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INTRODUCTION

In 2001, the Open Universiteit Nederland¹ took the initiative to set up a working group with the assignment of researching the feasibility of establishing a centre of expertise on sustainable development in the Rhine-Meuse region. Representatives from different regional stakeholders² participated. The working group accepted the proposition that education is one of the most powerful instruments to achieve sustainable development (Matsuura 2005). Because learning for sustainable development requires the involvement of stakeholders, the first project identified was to set up a visitor information centre to showcase sustainability projects and to function as a training centre.

At this point, the working group was informed about the emerging concept of United Nations Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs), which it then included in the discussion. During the next phase of development, several models for the centre were studied, discussed and rejected, with a final model drafted in the first part of 2004. However, the originally planned physical training centre was not included.

During a visit by the Rector of the United Nations University (UNU)³ to the Open Universiteit Nederland, in October 2004, a discussion about the blueprint for the centre took place. It was determined that the blueprint would fit the model for a RCE and the application procedure for acknowledgement at the UNU was explained. The application was submitted in December 2004 and RCE Rhine-Meuse⁴ was acknowledged at the UNU/UNESCO International Conference, 'Sustaining the Future: Globalisation and Education for Sustainable Development', in Nagoya, Japan, on 29 June 2005.

The RCE Rhine-Meuse has the ambition of growing into a network that addresses learning for sustainable development in the widest possible definition. The RCE does not intend to add a new organisation in the region but will instead focus on adding a structure to improve the performance of existing organisations. It is, therefore, the region that defines sustainable development for the RCE on the operational level.

The RCE Rhine-Meuse is frequently asked to explain its added value to the region and to individual organisations. The best explanation is that the RCE supports people and organisations in learning for sustainable development. In practice, this means that the RCE does not solely focus on education programs or formal education settings, but works in-depth on individual and organisational learning that takes place in a mixed environment, that is, sometimes in a classroom, but more often outside the classroom.

THE REGION

The home region of the RCE Rhine-Meuse is the Euregion Meuse-Rhine. A Euregion is a transborder area where two or more countries cooperate in areas such as social welfare, economic prosperity and public safety. Euregions are legal entities within the framework of the European Community (EC). The Euregion Meuse-Rhine is one

of the oldest and, at the same time, one of the most complex Euregions in the EC (Euregional Information Service 2007). The partner regions of the Euregion are the:

- Belgian province of Limburg
- Dutch province of Limburg
- Regierungsbezirk Köln (Germany)
- Province of Liège (Belgium)
- German-speaking community (Belgium)

The remains of a long and common history, especially the features of the early industrial period and coal mining activities, are still visible in the landscape. Nowadays, the Euregion is a part of modern Europe experiencing both European integration and globalisation. Cross-border collaboration is seen as an instrument to enable this transformation. The region features a concentration of higher education institutions⁵ and a number of multinational corporations. The region is ready to take its place in international society and has many advantages. The challenge for the RCE is to mainstream sustainable thinking and acting in regional development.

Urbanisation

The Euregion Rhine-Meuse is densely populated (Euregional Information Service 2007). During the development of coal mining and heavy industry following the industrial revolution, the region attracted large numbers of workers. At the same time, agriculture and the food industry were important economic factors. The population is currently close to 4 million, with an urbanisation⁶ rate of 55 per cent. The long history of urbanisation and the economic decline of the past few decades are the basis of severe problems, which have contributed to the degradation of many neighbourhoods. Social inclusion and the reactivation of deprived areas are some of the major challenges for the region.

Demographic Peculiarities

The expected growth rate of population in the RCE's home region is very low. The estimated population in the year 2020 will be only 1.5 per cent above today's level (Euregional Information Service 2007). Many young people leave the region for better career opportunities elsewhere in Europe. Thus, in the Euroregion Rhine-Meuse, two policy lines have to be developed:

1. Policies focusing on an aging Euregional society.
2. Policies designed to attract young people to the region.

Economic Diversity

Because of the decline in heavy industry and a related decline in manufacturing industry suppliers, as well as the closure of the coal mines, the region's economy has suffered from a severe loss of jobs since the end of the 1960s. The Government of

the Province of Dutch Limburg mentions on its website that since the closing of the coal mines, the total loss of jobs has been 75,000 for a population of 800,000. This situation creates the opportunity to change the economic structure of the region from a mono-economy to a more diverse economic structure. Different parts of the region have dealt with the situation in different ways. Some have taken the crisis as an opportunity to build a new economic infrastructure, but others never recovered from the effect of globalisation on the local industries. Where developments were starting to show results, they were brutally disrupted by the global oil crisis in the early 1980s. Only in recent years has the area focused on development, and innovation in the food and health sectors and sustainable development are considered key.

In the region's economic development policy, sustainable development has high priority. The potential for new jobs related to innovative sustainable technologies is regarded as being especially crucial in the Euregion Meuse-Rhine Operational Policy Plan 2007-13, the implementation scheme for the European Regional Development Program (Euregion Meuse Rhine 2007).

BUILDING A NETWORK

The first projects developed by the RCE were selected to display the RCE's added value for the region.

In a region where innovation and sustainable development are considered of key importance for future regional development, it is the role of the RCE to organise the flow of knowledge from knowledge institutions to the private sector and to organise new collaborations. The RCE started by building a network of stakeholders to create a platform for innovation and new ideas. By organising meetings, workshops and other events, the RCE created a neutral ground for potential partners to discuss collaboration, even if the parties involved might otherwise be competitors. In an area where cross-border collaboration is seen as a factor for success, a network that is active across the borders and actively promotes sustainable thinking is of extreme importance.

Stimulating Learning on a Regional Level

Communication is of the utmost importance in stimulating collaboration among stakeholders. When crossing borders geographically as well as mentally, and when connecting formal and nonformal education, special attention to communication facilities is required. It was seen as a part of the learning facilitation function of the RCE to provide information and best practices to stakeholders in the region. Based on a set of basic requirements gathered from a consultation of stakeholders, the RCE Rhine-Meuse has developed a virtual platform that can function as a communication portal.

The project, started in 2006, was launched at the end of 2007. The website (www.euregio-office.eu) provides a set of functionalities integrated into one portal. It is both an information service and a fully functional virtual office supporting project activities

with a high level of flexibility and interactivity. Such a portal, based on cutting edge technology, was not previously available in the region.

In Search of Its Place

The RCE Rhine-Meuse has developed several innovations that have helped distinguish it as having the ability to contribute to learning for sustainable development in the region. As new ideas were launched and the RCE's ability to realise them was demonstrated, regional stakeholders started to accept that the RCE could be complementary to regional partners and help them in reaching their own goals. In the start-up period (2005-07), the RCE was seen as a potential competitor for funding and influence on the regional playing field. To show that the RCE's ambition lay elsewhere, the RCE decided not to operate as a consulting agency or as an organisation that creates learning materials. It prefers to be a broker that connects people and organisations to improve their performance in relation to sustainable development.

The RCE organised help from the region to develop its strategy. The first attempt to find regional support was in establishing a regional advisory board. This board comprised 25 representatives from diverse institutions: universities, governing bodies, private companies, museums and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). However, three intensive meeting sessions showed that the potential of such an advisory board was low because:

- There was no common goal for the partners. The widely varying missions and goals of 25 organisations inhibited the definition of common strategic targets.
- The three-nation region where RCE Rhine-Meuse operates is extremely complex in terms of cultures and languages.

After two years, the RCE had not succeeded in building a network based on firm commitments. Although the network existed officially, there was no financial commitment. An internal evaluation resulted in the decision to change the RCE strategy. It was decided that although the RCE still considers the entire Rhine-Meuse region as its working area, it should focus solely on the Dutch part of the region as its core area, primarily for reasons of funding and institutional support. With this new strategy, support for the continuation of the RCE office has been secured, while the RCE can continue to support collaboration in learning for sustainable development initiatives throughout the Rhine-Meuse area.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT: TAKING INITIATIVE

Finding Synergies

The Euroregion Meuse-Rhine (EMR) has a longstanding history of regional and cross-border collaboration. With the launch of the Euregional Operational Policy Plan 2007-13, RCE Rhine-Meuse was able to connect its own ambitions to those of a large part of its operational area.

Three priorities are described in the Operational Policy Plan:

1. Economic and technological development
2. Sustainable development
3. Social cohesion

Social cohesion is also seen as a matter of sustainable development as it belongs intrinsically to the People–Planet–Profit philosophy (Elkington 1998). In this philosophy, a sustainable future depends on the balance between the wellbeing of people, the protection of the planet and economic profit. Since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, profit has been replaced by prosperity to include not only economic profit but also societal profit. The governing body of the EMR has thus acknowledged the importance of sustainable development in Euregional policy development in the coming years. The total budget for this governing period is 144 million Euros, of which approximately 75 per cent will be provided by European and regional funding.

In the years to come, RCE Rhine-Meuse (van Dam-Mieras and Rikers 2007) aims to be a structural partner for the Euregion in realising priorities two and three. The RCE would like to see partners from every subregion of the EMR join its network with the goals of:

- monitoring new Euregional sustainable development projects;
- giving advice and practical assistance;
- stimulating new developments;
- reinstalling a new Platform Agenda 21; and
- creating synergy between similar project ideas to increase the impact for the region.

Because RCE Rhine-Meuse is operating in a complex cross-border region, it is important that it develops an approach that can handle these complexities successfully. For instance, the issue of language has been addressed by deciding that all formal documentation will be in English. But for decision-making procedures where subregions have to decide on project participation and co-funding, proposals are translated into the three official languages⁷ of the region. In project meetings, the rule is that members can speak in their respective languages because most people in the region have a passive knowledge of the other official languages.

Differences at the political level require special skills in lobbying and negotiation. The RCE has developed good relationships with high-ranking politicians in the region and others playing important roles. The success of the RCE so far, described in the following sections, partly builds on results that were achieved with the lobbying activities.

The RCE Agenda

If the RCE Rhine-Meuse wanted to be of added value to the region, it had to make sure that its activities were supportive of the regional agenda; thus, connecting to the

Euregion Operational Policy Plan was a logical step. The other major tasks for the RCE were to facilitate and coordinate communication among key players and to create communication facilities. Both tasks are discussed later.

The Operational Policy Plan for the Euregion

Connecting to the Operational Plan was relevant because of the prominence of sustainable development in this plan. Moreover, regional governments that take decisions on the political agenda for the Euregion had approved the Operational Plan, making it a leading document for policy making for the next seven years.

Connecting to the regional political agenda required a top-down approach. As a start, the RCE organised personal interviews with the governors of the five partner regions. They were asked to individually indicate priorities within the new plan with a special focus on sustainable development. These personal contacts have provided the RCE with valuable insights and directions for further actions, leading up to the coordinated and structured development of new projects.

Partner Search and Workshops

Based on the priorities indicated by the governors, RCE Rhine-Meuse organised a series of four workshops to identify the active parties in the region and to attempt to match their ambitions to the priorities indicated by political leaders. Sixty-seven people representing 34 regional organisations participated in the workshops. The four workshops led to a flow of project ideas grouped around the following themes: building, energy, neighbourhoods, tourism and mobility.

Development of project proposals started within the framework of these topics. An interested organisation took the lead on each proposal. The RCE office supported the process of proposal development. One project resulting from this process was the 'Sustainable Urban Neighbourhoods' (SUN) project, which aims to stop the degradation of existing urban neighbourhoods and to prevent urban sprawl by reusing built-up areas.

OPEDUCA

'OPEDUCA' is a learning concept developed by KidsLive! Foundation, a core partner of RCE Rhine-Meuse. The concept represents the development and operation of 'Open Educational Regions' for individual and collective future-oriented development. It has been developed to increase the effectiveness of learning for sustainable development through region-based interactive learning processes involving learning institutions and other regional stakeholders.

Several years of grassroots activities and research led to a new vision of human development through formal, informal and nonformal learning, which was formalised in the form of the 'OPEDUCA Project' in 2005. Its backbone is a network of schools, companies, science and public organisations. The project aimed at developing the OPEDUCA concept, where, in a region, stakeholders are united in developing innovative learning materials. The project was launched in mid-2006 and produced initial results in the course of 2007. By then, RCE Rhine-Meuse and the KidsLive! Foundation

had established a partnership, defining OPEDUCA as their joint project and placing the concept at the core of their activities to establish learning for sustainable development.

Building Learning Experiences

The implementation of the OPEDUCA concept required a new set of tools to enable stakeholders to collaborate and produce a new approach to content development and learning activities. One of the tools is the 'Flight for Knowledge[®]', a technique to develop thematically organised learning materials for formal and nonformal learning settings. A number of projects that started late in the year 2007 use Flight for Knowledge[®] to develop learning experiences on several topics, including water, food and financial planning. The project partners consist of more than thirty schools in primary education, seven schools in secondary education, five teacher training institutes, several Universities of Applied Sciences and the Open Universiteit Nederland. In cooperation with private companies, centres of expertise in the field of learning and several municipalities, a learning environment for these themes was established as a physical entity with a virtual presence through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The goal of the project is to present a learning path on these topics for 6–16 year-old pupils, connecting them directly to sources in their own region as well as to distant sources on national and international topics through multimedia.

Every Flight for Knowledge[®] will be open to all learners in the second phase of development. To achieve its goals, the OPEDUCA Project works in an organic way, developing learning by experience from a basic understanding that learning on themes relevant to our sustainable future should be made possible anytime, anywhere, by anyone, through any device, lifelong, free of cost and continuously allowing learners to contribute to their collective learning environment.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Some questions arise when looking back on the start up of RCE Rhine-Meuse's operations. Are the results in line with the requirements for RCEs as formulated by the RCE Service Centre at UNU (Fadeeva et al. 2005)? Are the founding institutions satisfied with the results so far? Are RCE Rhine-Meuse's achievements on the same level as those of other RCEs? These questions will be answered in depth during the evaluation organised by the RCE Service Centre. The answers to the three questions will be used here to give information on the planning of RCE activities in the years to come.

The RCE has created a neutral platform for partners to meet and set up new activities. The most important lesson learned is that most institutions are ready to share knowledge and participate in regional projects on sustainability issues, but a neutral agency was needed to stimulate the formation of projects.

Based on the experience so far, it can be stated that networking skills, in particular, contributed to solutions. Awareness of the different agendas and knowing how to

find a way to deal with different decision-making cycles in the region is an asset of the RCE. The founding institutions found this asset of sufficient value to support a shift in strategy wherein institutions take responsibility for the continuation of the RCE and even use the RCE as a lever to streamline internal processes. This streamlining makes it easier in the end to collaborate with partners within the region.

The region has acknowledged that RCE Rhine-Meuse is an important player in facilitating regional collaboration (Euregio Meuse Rhine 2007). From the perspective of the founding institutions, the type of activities organised by the RCE have resulted in both student participation, through internships or curriculum-based activities, and staff participation in regional projects. This development is in line with the general pedagogical model of problem-based learning used by the institutions (Van Hout et al. 2006). The new element in the problem-based learning approach is that students participate in a form of learning directed at sustainable development rather than at an academic discipline. For the staff, participation in the projects means participation in a region-based multistakeholder setting, which by nature is an inter-disciplinary approach.

In general, it can be concluded that RCE Rhine-Meuse is starting to fulfil the ambitions of the founding institutions. The presence of the institutions through their project activities has improved and will continue to improve. Creating a transfer of knowledge, initiating regional activities to further sustainable development and bridging formal and informal learning are all requirements for an operational RCE (Fadeeva et al. 2005). Initiating regional projects and setting up a regional information exchange (through www.euregio-office.eu) on achievements in sustainable development are the initial results that are in line with these requirements.

A basic requirement for an RCE is collaboration with other RCEs. For the RCE Rhine-Meuse, this means active participation in globally-organised thematic networks and close collaboration with other European RCEs. The first results of collaboration are promising. The RCE meetings at global and regional levels have been organised and actively supported by RCE Rhine-Meuse. The first collaboration projects featuring European RCEs have been submitted, for instance, to the EU Lifelong Learning Program.

How does RCE Rhine-Meuse compare with other RCEs in the network? The RCE Rhine-Meuse belongs to the first generation of RCEs (Fadeeva and Mochizuki 2005) and progress is reported on an almost annual basis. Should its progress be compared with the other six pioneer RCEs? Based on the premise that each RCE is unique because it is set up to service its own region, comparing one RCE with another is not easy. The RCE Service Centre has recognised the need for evaluation tools to provide reliable data for comparison. Setting up an evaluation system has been declared a top priority.

Expanding the RCE's Role in the Euregio

An RCE can only exist if it can fulfil a useful role in its region. The region's needs can be identified by interviewing, field research, desktop research or by organising panel discussions. The coordination team of RCE Rhine-Meuse has used all these means

of research when applying for acceptance. After having been acknowledged by the UNU, stakeholders' interviews and panel discussions have continued. Even now, the RCE coordination team organises discussions with stakeholders to understand the needs of the region.

Based on conclusions from the first years of the RCE, its strategy has been modified to fit the needs of regional stakeholders.

1. The RCE aims to be the communication centre for all sustainability activities in the region.
2. The RCE monitors the needs of the region with regard to learning aspects related to sustainable development.
3. The RCE organises meetings and other forms of information exchange for partners so they will have the opportunity to meet and discuss potential projects in the region.
4. The RCE develops and stimulates the development of new concepts to suit the needs of the region and to enhance education for sustainable development (ESD).
5. The RCE will act as a lead partner on projects only on the request of partners, or if it is considered as being relevant for further development in the region.

CONCLUSION

RCE Rhine-Meuse is looking forward to a sound future. By being open to criticism and learning from mistakes, the RCE can improve its performance and serve the region adequately.

Achievements

In its first few years, the RCE Rhine-Meuse:

- Succeeded in securing EU funding for the first two years, which allowed it to organise the capacity required for the success of the initial projects, thus demonstrating the possible contributions from an RCE to a region.
- Began to build a solid network of interested parties, although it is not yet the preferred partner for everybody interested in organising ESD projects.
- Became known to many of the key players in the Dutch province of Limburg. The RCE representatives hold memberships in about seven advisory boards throughout the province. Quite a few organisations rely on the RCE for expertise.
- Learned from its first projects. The project building/partner search process is well established and the contact with funding sources is in place.
- Involved a large number of students in its work. Almost all projects have had students from the Zuyd University participating through work placements.
- Actively collaborated with other RCEs. Within the RCE community, special relations have been developed or are being developed with RCE Penang, RCE

Greater Nairobi and RCE Skåne. In addition, the RCE was one of the active organisers of the 2008 International RCE Conference. Other acknowledged or emerging RCEs also contact and visit RCE Rhine-Meuse for consultation and support.

Challenges

The RCE has not yet organised its societal commitment and support on a structural basis. The discussion of ESD in the RCE region is still not focused, thus the RCE needs to structure the discussion and to create a higher level of collaboration among the many active parties in the region.

The first OPEDUCA projects are taking off and the enthusiasm among teachers, students and others involved is stimulating. The next challenge will be to anchor OPEDUCA regions within the home region of the RCE Rhine-Meuse and beyond.

Notes

- 1 The Open Universiteit Nederland is the Dutch National Open University and a fully recognised member of the Dutch higher education system, with full degree awarding authority.
- 2 The other stakeholders were: University Maastricht; Zuyd University of Applied Science; the local Zoo; and the city of Kerkrade.
- 3 At the time, Prof. Hans van Ginkel was Rector of UNU.
- 4 Open Univesiteit Nederland and Zuyd University took responsibility to govern the RCE. Other partners were: Technical University Aachen (Germany); Aachen University of Applied Science (Germany); Cologne University of Applied Science (Germany); Wuppertal Institute (Germany); Aachen Foundation Kathy Beys (Germany); University of Leuven (Belgium); Maastricht University (The Netherlands); Province of Limburg (The Netherlands); Chamber of Commerce Limburg (The Netherlands); Employers Organisation Limburg (The Netherlands); City of Kerkrade (The Netherlands); City of Heerlen (The Netherlands); and VEBEGO International.
- 5 Research universities as well as universities of applied sciences.
- 6 Among the largest cities in the region are Liège (Belgium) and Aachen (Germany). Parkstad Limburg (The Netherlands) is a conglomeration of seven communities collaborating in many fields.
- 7 The three official languages for the EMR are Dutch, French and German.

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