

Analysis of the behaviour of Bacia do Côa agents (Interior North of Portugal) face to some European experiences pilot of Information Society

45 th Congress of the European Regional Science Association

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ABSTRACT

The Information Society is actually a reality, which the citizens, the organizations, the countries and the regions cannot ignore. The development of Information and Communication Technologies affects our daily life permitting the fast access to the information that allows us to face new challenges and to bring closer the most isolated regions. But not all regions are prepared to actively announce the Information Society. This work intends to find out if the development agents of Bacia do Côa (Interior North of Portugal) gather the essential conditions for the development of the Information Society, starting from the European Union experiences.

Key-words: Information Society; Local Development; European Experiences

The Information Society and the Bacia do Coa's agents

1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary society is characterized by technological innovation and social transformations that affect the production forms, the relationships and the citizens' lives, in result of a group of changes that happened throughout the last decades of the 20th century.

The fast development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) impelled the globalisation and the opening to new markets which request new business structures, a new mentality and culture, as well as new skills that imply the ability to learn how to adapt ourselves and how to develop new abilities.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY IN THE REGIONS

During the nineties, Europe faced problems at the level of the economic growth, of the competitiveness and of the job market. Parallel, the development disparities among the several areas of Europe began to get worse. Due to this, the economic and social cohesion became one of the main objectives of the European Union (E.U.) and the development of the Information Society (IS) a real bet.

The first action plan of the European Union for the Information Society appeared in the Council of Corfu (1994)¹. But the fast evolution of technologies and markets demanded a new dynamic from the community politics regarding the IS, becoming necessary new European politics integrated with new perspectives that could reflect the problems of the actual context. This happened more recently in the transition for the 21st century, with the *eEurope* Integrated Action Plans, capable of answering to the challenges of the development of the IS, with the help of a open coordination that supports the community and national and regional initiatives.

The impacts of the globalisation, of the competition and of the fast technological development are a reality and they can be felt not only at the level of the countries but also of their regions.

¹ "The European road for the Information Society". COM (94) 347 final.

The E.U. recognizes that the regions carry out a key function in the transition for to IS; having this direct implications in the potential development of those constituting, simultaneously, an opportunity and a challenge, in the way that the use of ICT gives an essential contribute for the regional competitiveness and for the social cohesion. The fast diffusion of ICT offers new opportunities and development perspectives for the most isolated and poorer regions if they get closer to the more developed ones, facilitating a more efficient location of the investment

This way, the regions are holders of a structure that facilitates the coordination and the planning of appropriate strategies to the economic and cultural diversity being able to explore their specialization areas and to attract new activities of increased value. Also, it is important to consider the social, cultural and environmental characteristics of the region, their experiences, history, culture, as well as, the accumulated knowledge, that will influence the behaviour of these in relation to competition, to technological progress and institutional changes. According to Bolaño; Melo (2000), the cultural factors should be seen as bearers of competitive advantages and not prohibitive of the development and according to (Maillat, 1986) they are the regions themselves that build their comparative advantages maintaining their autonomy and competitiveness

The regions provide a structure to integrate and to apply tellematic services adopting a regional perspective and becoming sensitive to the importance of the integration; they offer the possibility to manage and to evaluate the impact of the efficiency of the progress of the IS, being at the same time agents of the social change. In this sense, the initiatives originating from the regions are considered to be a potential of development of the European Union in the way that we can use their attractiveness in location terms and intensify contacts with other regions of Europe through the usage of ICT.

It is in this perspective and taking into consideration that IS can better answer to the local needs, considering the conditions of each territory and not assuming an abstract model of the IS, that the first proposals of the participation of the regions in the IS appeared: Inter-Regional Information Society Initiative (IRISI); Regional Information Society Initiative (RISI).

The RISI initiatives intended to help the IS and its applications to turn into an important development factor for regions, through the creation of regional initiatives that increased the citizens' awareness of the IS undertaking pilot demonstrations, preparing the discussion about

the part of ICT and seeking the incorporation of the IS as a clear objective in the action plan and the involvement of the regional authorities. The RISI initiatives were applied in 22 European regions.

The main objective, common to all of the projects, consisted of preparing the region for the IS, motivating the systematic use of ICT in the several sectors and to endow the region of infrastructures that could make ICT accessible to all the citizens, improving their quality of life. The prosecution of this objective implied the elaboration of a strategy and action plan for the development of the IS in the region and the development of action groups, with the intention of developing consensus, partnerships, pledge and cooperation among the regional key agents.

3. METHODOLOGY:

Based in an analysis of the several RISI projects and in a more deepened way *Nokis* (Finland) and *Infodex* (Spain), we tried to know the opinion of the main agents of regional/local development of the region Bacia do Côa (Interior North of Portugal), concerning the behaviour of the region in relation to the IS and in what way could the region gather some success conditions found in the RISI projects.

The region of Bacia do Côa is located in a wider one, the Beira Interior Norte, not including Vila Nova de Foz Côa. The Bacia do Côa, integrates eight councils of Guarda's district: Almeida, Figueira Castelo Rodrigo, Guarda, Mêda, Pinhel, Sabugal, Trancoso and Vila Nova de Foz Côa, that occupy an area of about 4100 Km² in its whole.

It is an area with 110.850 inhabitants (INE, 2001), which has been suffering from population decreases and ageing population with low instruction levels. The economic and social structure has been facing changes in the last decades and the former high weight of the primary sector, characteristic of this region, gave place to the secondary and tertiary sectors. At the industrial level an industrial and non-diversified structure of small dimension prevails. It is, according to Natário et al. (2004), a poor area with limited technological basis, with a weak attitude of administration facing the modernization and a reluctant cooperation among companies, universities and investigation centres.

3.1 SAMPLE

Once defined the population and in the impossibility to do interviews to all the identified agents/actors, it was randomly selected a category sample, that could embrace a diversified group of agents/actors with deep knowledge of the problem in esteem².

In this sense, the sample was built, for a first group of elements (Autarchic Power), using the method of intentional sampling - composed by elements intentionally selected by the investigator who considered that they possessed representative characteristics of the population (Vogt, 1993)³. This choice is justified with the importance of the need to assure the integration of at least one Organism common to each of the eight councils and with the fact that these entities were the best to represent the autarchic power. In addition, they are relevant public entities involved in the problem and in the prosecution of the regional development.

For the second group of elements a mix of methods of intentional sampling was used for our convenience. This way, we begun by privileging the presence of each one of the representative sectors of the alive forces of the region (intentional sample) and, later, a sample for convenience, where the selection depended on the readiness and the accessibility of the elements that constituted the target population (Reis, 1997, p.39). In the choice of this last method the limitations of time were very important for the prosecution of the work and the knowledge of previous experiences made foresee difficulties in the obtaining of interviews.

The sample, delineated like this, indicated twenty-six (26) elements geographically dispersed in the eight councils that constitute the Bacia do Côa, respecting the samples of the qualitative studies, in which more importance is given to the depth of the interview than properly to the width of the sample (Helfer; Orsini, 1996, p.103). From this sample it was only possible to accomplish twenty-four (24) interviews, despite the several attempts (Table 1).

² We tried to include the main areas of the European pilot projects previously analysed.

³ Mentioned by Vicente et al. (2001,p.7)

Table 1- The Development agents of Bacia do Côa

Interview number	The local/regional development agents
E ₁	Direcção Regional Agricultura da Beira Interior – Guarda
E ₂	Associação de Agricultores do Distrito da Guarda- Guarda
E ₃	Instituto de Apoio às Pequenas e Médias Empresas- Guarda
E ₄	Câmara Municipal de Figueira Castelo Rodrigo- Figueira Castelo Rodrigo
E ₅	Associação Jovens Agricultores da Beira Interior- Pinhel
E ₆	Câmara Municipal Vila Nova de Foz Côa- Vila N. Foz Côa
E ₇	Parque Arqueológico do Vale do Côa- Vila N. Foz Côa
E ₈	Instituto Emprego e Formação Profissional- Guarda
E ₉	Associação Desenvolvimento Rural Cidadelhe- Guarda
E ₁₀	Câmara Municipal Pinhel- Pinhel
E ₁₁	Associação Comercial da Guarda- Guarda
E ₁₂	Associação Desenvolvimento Melhoramentos Estrela- Guarda
E ₁₃	Ação Integrada Base Territorial do Côa
E ₁₄	Câmara Municipal Trancoso- Trancoso
E ₁₅	Associação Comercial Trancoso- Trancoso
E ₁₆	Câmara Municipal Meda- Meda
E ₁₇	Comissão Coordenação e Desenvolvimento Região Centro- Coimbra
E ₁₈	Câmara Municipal Almeida
E ₁₉	Câmara Municipal Sabugal- Sabugal
E ₂₀	Núcleo Empresarial Região Guarda- Guarda
E ₂₁	Administração Regional Saúde - Guarda
E ₂₂	Instituto Politécnico da Guarda
E ₂₃	Fundação Divulgação Tecnologias Informação
E ₂₄	Câmara Municipal da Guarda

All interviewees had superior formation, except one, and they possessed an average of ages between the 40 and 50 years old. Almost all of them were used to deal with the new technologies of information and communication and only a tiny part of them didn't feel "comfortable" working with them. Nevertheless they enjoyed the benefits of the ICT through other people.

The data collect was done through semi-structured interviews whose structure resulted of the matrix of critical success factors that were delineated in the previous phase (analysis of the RISI projects) and that was based on the following topics: the region towards the IS; the formation of the human resources in the development of the region; diffusion of ICT project in the region; main development actors/agents in the region; opening to partnerships, cooperation and sharing of experiences; sensitisation and pledge; leadership of the project; success factors of the development strategy based on the ICT.

The fieldwork implicated the accomplishment of a round across the whole region, being the interviews accomplished in the months of February, Mars, April and May (from 12/02/04 to 11/05/04).

The treatment of the collected material in the interviews was done through the techniques of qualitative analysis, namely, the content analysis defined by Bardin (1995, p.42) as "a group of techniques of analysis of the communication, seeking to obtain, through systematic and objective procedures for the description of the content of the messages, indicators (quantitative or not) that allow the inference of knowledge relative according to the production/reception conditions (inferred variables) of these messages" and by Justeau (1976, p.65) as "the selection and the rational organization of categories summarizing the essential content of a text."

4. DATA TREATMENT

After having accomplished the interviews we proceeded to its analysis using the content methodology analysis from which we reached the following categories:

Category A – The Information Society and the region

In this category we intended to know in what extent the interviewees considered that the region was prepared to face the challenges of the IS. In the analysis of the answers we defined three subcategories: “it is prepared”; “it is not prepared” and “it is partly prepared” (answers that were not framed in the previous categories for considering that just some sectors, entities or citizens are prepared) (Table 2).

Table 2 - Counting of frequencies of the units of Category A

Frequency /subcategories	Prepared	Partly prepared	Not prepared	Total
Absolute frequency	5	13	6	24
Relative frequency	21	54	25	100

We can see (Table 2) that seventy five percent of the interviewees affirmed that the region is "prepared" or "partly prepared" to face the challenges of the IS. However, more than half consider that it is not totally prepared in the way that only some sectors of the population possess appropriate formation and open mind for the use of ICT. From those that affirmed that the region is “not prepared” we can underline the Autarchies, maybe because these have a larger contact with a diversity of sectors and citizens and a deeper knowledge of the region’s reality.

Category B - Formation of the Human Resources

Taking into consideration that the formation of the human resources assumes crucial importance in the modern society, we tried to know if the opinion of the interviewees reflected this idea. Although we had initially defined the subcategories: “very important” and “less important”, as the analysis of the answers went moving forward, it was necessary to redefine the subcategories into: “important” and “important + requirements” (for the answers where it is necessary something else, like some complement) (Table 3).

Table 3 - Counting of frequencies of the units of the Category B.

Frequency /subcategories	Important	Important + requirements	Total
Absolute frequency	17	7	24
Relative frequency	71	29	100

We can see (Table 3) that in spite of all the interviewees considering the formation of the human resources essential to the region's development, a part (about 30%) understands that the formation is not enough; it is necessary to have motivation and incentive. More than half of the interviewed Autarchies, an Association and two Other Public Entities⁴ share this opinion. This is an evidence of the difficulties that we can find (for instance, in the concrete case of the Autarchies, these have been investing enough in their employees' formation and in the recruitment of people with superior formation).

Category C - Bets in the Information and Communication Technologies

After gathering the opinions on the region and the importance given to the formation of the human resources, we intended to know if the agents of development selected felt the need of a project of popularisation and formation in the extent of ICT. In the analysis of the answers only two subcategories were defined: "it is necessary"; "it is not necessary", reflecting the positive or negative opinion on the development of the project (Table 4).

Table 4 - Counting of frequencies of the units of the Category C.

Frequency/subcategories	It is necessary	It is not necessary	Total
Absolute frequency	20	4	24
Relative frequency	83	17	100

⁴ For reasons of analysis simplification we adopted the following division for several interviewed agents in: Autarchies (for all of the City halls); Associations (for Associations of local/regional development and other associations representative of the sectors interests, as Commercial Associations, Business Nucleus, etc); and Other Public Entities (including organisms of the Central Administration but with regional delegations, as for instance, DRABI, IAPMEI, ARS, etc).

In Table 4 it is visible that a very significant number (83%) of the interviewees defend the need to invest in a project of popularisation of ICT in the whole region. For the remaining ones the understanding is different, they consider that it lacks, above all, to take advantage or to coordinate the means and/or initiatives already existing. Those who defend this position are two Autarchies, an Entity of the Private Sector, that represents the entrepreneurs of the region, and another Public Entity that represents the youths. This opinion can have two interpretations: on one side, it can be understood in a positive way, meaning that there are and they know several initiatives that they have taken advantage of or they can come to take advantage of with intention of enriching their knowledge; and, on the other hand, it can be understood in a negative way, if they consider that the knowledge that they possess on ICT is enough not having, like this, will to learn something new.

Category D - The region and the partnerships creation

The existence of partnerships is of major importance in the development of projects that involve several entities. In this sense, we tried to know among the interviewees if, in the region, there was a tendency to the work and creation of partnerships. According to the answers four subcategories were defined: “region not open to partnerships”; “practice of partnerships”; “they can grow up” and “it is difficult”. The first and the second try to reflect a situation past/present of what has been happening in the region in general, according to the behaviour of the institution that each interviewee represents. The last two reflect a situation of close future, in which it is tried to know about the possibility of the creation of partnerships in the future (Table 5).

Table 5 - Counting of frequencies of the units of the Category D.

Subcategories	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Region not open to partnerships	9	38
Practice of partnerships	24	100
They can grow up...	14	58
It is difficult	10	42

Although all of the interviewed elements affirm that they practice partnerships, nine consider that the region doesn't have an open spirit to the creation of these. In terms of future perspectives, more than half think that the partnerships are possible to develop in spite of some conditionalisms. This opinion can denote an entrepreneur spirit, enlarged to the Autarchies, to the Associations and Other Public Entities. The remaining ones (42%) can be considered "drop-outs" for they do not believe that partnerships are possible to be developed in the region. These last ones are represented in an identical way by the Autarchies and Associations, as well as Other Public Entities.

Category E - Sensitisation of the intervenients

A good campaign of Information and Sensitisation requests the use of a group of appropriate means accordingly to the characteristics of the region and of its population. With the intention of knowing which were the most favourable to the region in study, it was requested the interviewees to indicate those that are more effective and that they use when they need to publish information relative to the entity that they represent (Table 6). The table clearly shows that the most effective ways of passing information to the population is by doing it through the Priest, the radios and newspapers (local/regional), as well as to use the announcements in the Juntas de Freguesia. The Priest is associated with a high trust level, being maybe the external person to the villages that more connection has with its inhabitants, once we are dealing with an area where the population is very disperse, aged and isolated. However, in the past, this connection to the Priest was more intense than it is today. The mailing distribution through CTT is also an appreciated alternative and in the case of the Autarchies, these take advantage of the water supply invoice to send other information. The explanation sessions in the Juntas de Freguesia are also advisable as well as the informal conversations in the cafes. For the analysis it is denoted that the traditional ways are still the most used.

Table 6 - Means Used in the Sensitisation

Sensitisation forms	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency
Popularisation of information through the Priest of the villages	15	63
Popularisation of information in the newspapers (local/regional)	14	58
Popularisation of information on the radios (local/regional)	14	58
Popularisation of information through announcements in Juntas de Freguesia	13	54
Mailings distribution through CTT	11	46
Cafes, “mouth to mouth”	8	33
Explanation sessions in the Juntas de Freguesia	8	33
Direct contact, associations	8	33
<i>Outdoors/</i> posters	7	29
Explanation sessions at Schools	6	25
Organization of Conferences at regional level/forums	5	21
Explanation sessions in the Companies	3	13
Bulletin cultural municipal/agenda	3	13
Demonstrations of successful experiences	2	8
Waiting Rooms, public places, supporting offices	2	8
Institutional pages	1	4
Through the children	1	4
Animation	1	4
It is not necessary	1	4

Category F-Working Together

Besides knowing what the interviewees think of the opening of the area to the creation of partnerships, we also considered important to know their opinion on the possibility of working together with the several development agents for them identified, taking also into consideration their experiences. We identified three subcategories: “it is possible”; “it is not possible” and “not always” (this translates situations in which sometimes the work can be done together, but not in a general way) (Table 7).

Table 7 - Counting of frequencies of the units of the Category F

Frequency/subcategories	It is possible	Not always	It is not possible	Total
Absolute frequency	17	4	3	24
Relative frequency	71	17	12	100

Only a small part of the interviewees (12%) refer that it is not possible to work together among the several agents of local/regional development. The great majority (71%) is confident that the group work is possible. These include six Autarchies, five Associations and five Public Entities. These opinions are in consonance with the previously verified tendency but more marked in the positive sense, maybe because now they are referring to specific agents identified by them.

Category G - Creation of consensus

When we work with several entities, not always the interests and/or objectives are identical. Team work requests, besides the active participation of all the intervening, the reaching of a consensus and solving of conflicts. In order to know which were the most favourable forms of reaching a consensus, we asked the interviewees, starting from a group of consensus factors presented, to identify the three that they considered more important and effective (Table 8). Four factors clearly stand out, which can help in the obtaining of consensus among the several agents: definition of priorities, permanent meetings, to make the intervening responsible and common sense. The remaining ones were also pointed but not so often.

Table 8 - Creative Factors of consensus for Local /Regional Development Agents

Factors of Consensus	Absolute frequency⁵	Relative frequency
Definition of priorities	14	58
To gather, to speak, to negotiate	15	63
To make the intervening in the projects responsible for them	13	54
Common sense	13	54
Good analysis of the problems and of the future	6	25
Intervening of the private sector	5	21
Permanent discussion	5	21
Strong connections with regional authorities	2	8

Category H - Motivation Factors

To inform and to involve the intervening in a process of development are quite important phases but they are not enough. The participation of the several intervenients should assume an active and motivated attitude to lead the process "to a good end". In this sense, we tried to know from the interviewees which were the strongest factors in incentive and motivation terms that led them to participate in a process on behalf of the development of the region. It was asked them to identify, among a list, the most important five factors (Table 9).

The five main factors of motivation were appointed, in decreasing order: demonstration of the benefits; information on benefits/dangers of joining the Information Society; official acceptance and support of the local/regional authorities; information on the intended objectives in a clear way and the potential beneficiaries' identification.

⁵ There was an interviewee that pointed four factors.

Table 9 - Motivation Factors of Development for Local/Regional Agents

Motivation Factors	Absolute frequency⁶	Relative frequency
To demonstrate the benefits, with real situations	21	88
To inform on the benefits and dangers of ignoring the IS	18	75
Official acceptance and support from local/regional authorities	15	63
To inform the objectives in a clear way	15	63
To identify the potential beneficiaries	11	46
Cooperation + debate among intervening until reaching consensus	8	33
Non existence of costs for the intervening ones	7	29
Well defined parts for each intervening	7	29
Consultings on the strategy to follow	6	25
Net discussions	5	21
Institutional page	3	13
To believe in the project	1	4

Category I - Success Factors

When concluding the encounters it was asked the interviewees that, from of a listing of success factors of a strategy of regional development, they identified the five they considered the most important. An analysis to the answers allows identifying the five following factors, in decreasing order: appropriate strategy to the reality; organizations and local population participation; creation of partnerships; bets in the local resources and compatibility with strategy of local development. These answers translate a feeling of the necessary connection to the local reality, because only like this they will reach the objectives and satisfy the growing and more demanding needs of the populations (Table 10).

⁶ In reality, it happened that two interviewees just pointed three factors; two interviewees pointed four factors and three interviewees pointed six factors

Table 10 - Success Factors of a development strategy

Success Factors of a development strategy	Absolute frequency ⁷	Relative frequency
Appropriate strategy to the local reality	21	88
Organizations and local population participation	18	75
Creation of partnerships among regional actors	14	58
Use of local resources	10	42
Compatibility with strategy, Regional Development	9	38
Contacts with experiences from other regions	7	29
Public and private financing	7	29
Strategy guided for the citizens	6	25
Collective phenomena and not an isolated actor	6	25
Global strategy, including all of the activities	6	25
Flexible strategy	5	21
Participation of the private sector	4	17
Support of the regional authorities	4	17
Specific strategies for some activities	3	13
To copy the strategy of another region adapting it <i>in loco</i>	1	4

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Information Society is already a reality and nobody can ignore its effects. The expansion of the Information Society offers an infinite group of opportunities for the citizens and companies; for the countries and their regions.

Bacia do Côa region is a heterogeneous region that has been facing a process of desertification, its population is disperse and aged, with reduced formation levels. It also has a diversity of lacks and suffers from a development deficit. The systematic use of Information and Communication Technologies is essential to the development of a region, but the region

⁷ Two interviewees identified only four factors and in compensation three interviewees identified six factors.

in study is not still totally prepared to face the challenges of the IS, once there is a big gap between villages and cities. This gap is directly related to the reduced formation of the human resources and of the citizens in general and that it is understood, by the interviewed agents' great majority, as essential and decisive to the development of the region.

The involvement of the main regional actors in an active and motivated way requests a sensitisation campaign, to inform about the Information Society and the Information and Communication Technologies, as well as about their benefits. The popularisation means in the region are linked to the Priest and the Presidente da Junta, (President of Committee) they are seen as reliable entities and the main link to the information by those who live more isolated. The traditional forms of popularisation as the written press and the local/regional radios, mailing distribution through CTT, are also referred to. The support of the official authorities was also considered fundamental and, also, the perfect identification of the objectives and benefits; without forgetting that the fact of "not having costs", or that they can be "minimum", is very important. These factors are possible to gather in the region; it is enough that there is willingness and that people do not live in an isolated manner.

In spite of the unfavourable opinions in what respects the opening of the region to the creation of partnerships, more of half it predicts good perspectives that can be reached in a close future if good will and common sense persist. The main difficulties in the establishment of partnerships are justified, a lot of times, with the lack of the culture of that practice and non-existence of cooperation spirit. However, all have already had experiences in what concerns this subject. A great majority admits the possibility of coming to work together, being necessary and fundamental the "common sense" existence, as well as consideration and coordination capacity.

The main success factor of a development strategy for a region relies on its adaptation to the local reality of where it will be implemented. The confirmation of this factor and of others named by the interviewees (organizations and local population participation, creation of partnerships, use of the local resources, etc.) commits the accomplishment of a good diagnosis of the region in order to define the objectives and more appropriate strategic lines of intervention according to the reality of the region and its needs. At this level there are already some recent studies accomplished on the region. Although they are isolated studies that a lot of times are "in the drawer" or, then, they are just used by those who ordered them.

Another success factor mentioned was the Official support to the strategy and compatibility with the plan of regional development. In spite of agreeing with this presupposition and pointing it as fundamental, some opinions manifested the absence and/or ignorance of a plan of regional development in the region.

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