

What are the lessons to learn from a dynamic rural actor to empower farming system food chain start-ups?

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Abstract: The poster will focus on a rural leader and entrepreneur working and living within a low-density mountainous area in northern Portugal. It will document his participation in local level township governance as well as describe the start up and success of the multi-functional family agricultural business. The introduction will discuss the decision-making process and personal motivations to invest into a complimentary agricultural processing business that transforms the family sheep milk production into cheese. The entrepreneur was chosen intentionally (Patton, 1980:105), because of his dual performance as a local governmental leader and as a successful rural entrepreneur. The case study will describe the characteristics, relationships, behaviour and competencies of this dynamic rural actor and also analyse the motivational aspects to diversify and expand in the rural setting. The conclusion will consider recommendations and clues to plan a non-formal educational program to promote and strengthen economic initiatives.

Keywords: entrepreneur, motivation, non-formal education, local leader

Introduction

The case study will describe the profile of a successful rural entrepreneur and local leader. The local leader is involved on a daily basis with market based and non-market based activities. The entrepreneur in his daily life and livelihood is not motivated entirely by economic incentives. The quality of life in this rural setting and his preoccupation with the members of the village and township are also a concern involving both non-market and market social behaviour. "Human beings are and always have been diversely motivated beings. We act instrumentally, but also non-instrumentally. We act for material gain, but also for psychological well being and qualification and for social connectedness" (Benkler, 2006:6). The paper will describe the characteristics and behaviors of a local leader that believes that transactions are not just economic, but also involve sharing and creating relationships and networks with others.

Methodology

The investigation was initiated through a preliminary visit and discussion with the entrepreneur in early 2006. The field trip permitted a visit of the small cheese processing and refrigerated storage unit on the farm that employs eight local people. The flock was viewed in a near by enclosed stable (see photo). During this visit, a rapport was established that led to a degree of trust between the investigator and entrepreneur. Telephone contacts were used to maintain the relationship. These contacts were followed-up with an interview using open questions that reflect a mini-empowerment, entrepreneurial life story. The data analysis will focus on the entrepreneurial spirit and social behaviour that initiated an agricultural processing business that transforms the family sheep milk production (320 head) and other community associates milk into cheese.



Photo: Courtesy Elmarie van Aswegen

Transformation of the Family Farm

As a young farmer, he participated in a young farmer entrepreneurial training program offered by the Regional Directorate of Agriculture in the region. These courses were intensive and based on 400 hours of agricultural production competencies to motivate young farmers to invest in modernizing their farms. He participated in this course and others, with the most recent training program involving the

transport of animals. Since the early 80s, he has taken over the family farm at 40 hectares and today has 140 hectares for sheep, hay and silage production along with the processing and refrigeration unit. He believes in complementing his local knowledge by learning from others and participating in training courses that interest him. He is willing to look for information in the traditional way by asking and exchanging ideas with others as well as using additional sources such as the Internet. His leadership skills were learnt through experience as the president of Sheep Milk Cooperative and at the governmental township level. The developed social capital skills and his capacity to construct and maintain relationships with others improved his management and leadership skills. He is looking for ways to improve cooperation and coordination with others such as business associates and staff.

He is motivated by his business and enjoys his role as a local governmental leader. He relishes working with people and meeting new people. This dynamic local actor is also working hard to connect to knowledge and information that can be useful for market and non-market social activities. He has a storehouse of gumption and perseverance, while always looking for new ideas. He does not have an under utilization of information.

Non-Formal Educational Program (Rural Extension)

In this case, the dynamic local actor participated in training programs. The recommendations for empowering rural start-ups will begin with this aspect in the dynamic actors mini-entrepreneurial life story. The training programs should be non-formal educational programs that run throughout the life of the individual or entrepreneur. These training programs will have a competency-based focus with practical training, problem solving teaching process and also include an individualized supervised occupational experience (SOE) to hone in on skills and knowledge that students learn running their business. This SOE also increases the interaction with others, specifically the supervisor or “co-learning facilitators”, who makes visits to the economic initiative. These interactions will be involved in sharing and exchanging information and knowledge.

The co-learning facilitator needs to assist the participant to increase networking and improve their social capital that was an important characteristic of our dynamic rural leader. The learners need to create local, regional and international networks. This can be done through planned study visits and greater participation in local government as a volunteer, while benefiting from the interaction with a facilitator. Non-economic activities should be a strategy in the training program as well. An additional component would be leadership and civic educational modules to improve social and public leadership skills of the participants to match the skills of the dynamic rural actor.

Final Consideration

The challenge for non-formal educational programs is to promote economic initiatives and non-economic activities with the appropriate “framework conditions” and rural development policies. These policies must empower rural business start-ups in order to strengthen the multi-functionality of farms as well as increase commercialization and transformation of potential farm products through an entrepreneurial, empowerment and market driven educational program.

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