

# Farmers and Consumers - Establishing close relationships. Results of the international research project ALICERA

Johanna Schockemöhle

University of Vechta, Institute of Spatial Analysis and Planning in Areas of Intensive Agriculture,  
Learning in Rural Areas and Environmental Education Group, Vechta, Germany-  
[jschockemoehle@ispa.uni-vechta.de](mailto:jschockemoehle@ispa.uni-vechta.de)

**Abstract:** ALICERA is an international educational project which is based on out-of-school regional learning. The objective of the concept plan is to strengthen the relationship between the economic actors in the agriculture and food sector and the consumers in rural areas by implementing learning activities on rural enterprises.

All partners of the ALICERA project have worked together to develop the didactical-methodological concept of 'Rural Action Learning' (RAL) and support its implementation in the rural areas of Latvia, Hungary, Austria, France and Germany.

The supported learning activities are aimed at children, young people and adults.

The evaluation of ALICERA pilot actions indicates that RAL enable consumers and economic actors in the agriculture and food sector to engage in a successful dialogue. On the basis of direct and personal experiences of consumers on the farms and in other rural companies more transparency as regards food production is created. Both the consumers and the economic actors get to know each others attitudes and expectations and recognize common objectives. So consumers, who have participated in RAL activities, report that they have gained new and unexpected insights into the food production. Moreover, they have developed a more positive attitude towards the agriculture and food sector than prior to attending the learning activity. Additionally consumers state that they feel more closely connected to their region than prior to the activity and that they can imagine to be actively involved in regional programmes in such a way, for example, as to buy food produced in the region.

Within the questioning of the economic actors the great importance of the regional networks established in the ALICERA project becomes obvious. All economic actors questioned state that an open and continuous dialogue beyond the project will only be possible through this cooperation structures. Beyond this they point out that regional out-of-school learning programmes like RAL needs to be accepted as regional policy tools since these instruments successfully motivate and enable the local population to participate in the sustainable development of the region.

ALICERA is the abbreviation for the project title: Action Learning for Identity and Competence in European Rural Areas. The project started at the beginning of 2005 and the first phase was supported by the EU INTERREG IIIC programme until the middle of 2007.

**Keywords:** education, communication, consumer, rural economic actors, evaluation

## Initial situation

Five significant trends affect the current relationship between farmers and consumers and form the initial situation of the ALICERA project likewise (in keywords):

**Trend 1:** Individualisation - pluralisation, globalisation - regionalisation, there are few things that last, constantly emerging new trends, insecurity and adherence to the old and tried resp. a resurgence of old values (Schmitt-Egner, 2005; Buß, 2002).

**Trend 2:** Public discussion on nutrition, increasing consciousness of healthy nutrition, increasing interest in knowledge about healthy nutrition and in knowledge about the origin of food (Eberle, 2006; Empacher et al., 2005).

**Trend 3:** Food scandals, rising food prices, EU premium payments for farmers as well as a biased and partial media coverage of farming (e. g. in school books) contribute to the situation that the value of food is being questioned (CMA, 2003)

**Trend 4:** Increasing alienation from nature and from food production that is dependent on natural conditions – increasing environment consciousness as a result of the ongoing climate discussion (Kuckartz, 2006; Brämer 2006; Egner, 2007)

**Trend 5:** Progressive abandonment of farms, increasing farm size, rationalisation, mechanisation, automation, livestock farming often takes place behind closed doors (DBV, 2007).

### **Current situation:**

- Personal contacts between farmers and consumers are decreasing,
- consumers rarely have personal experience in food production,
- there is little knowledge about the quality of regional food,
- the trust between the consumer and the farmer is severely damaged,
- lacking consciousness of the influence of consumer behaviour on food production and the cultural landscape (in the region/worldwide),
- ... but increasing interest in the region and in healthy, environment-friendly food!

### **Objectives and content of the project**

ALICERA is an international research project that aims to strengthen the relationship between the economic actors in the agriculture and food sector and the consumers in rural areas. The project wants to create more transparency as regards food production, the attitudes and expectations of both the consumers and the economic actors in this sector, and as regards the respective options for action. The objective is to remove barriers and to build cooperation in an open dialogue and on the basis of personal experience with a view to implementing strategies to achieve common objectives (Filho, 2006). It is intended, moreover, through the use of such a strategy to strengthen regional closed-circuits.

The project provides educational services as an instrument of communication and cooperation between consumers and economic actors in the agriculture and food sector to achieve these objectives. The learning activities, which are held on farms and in food companies in the local area, are effectively structured according to selected didactic methodological principles.

The following sub-objectives and tasks will be reached by implementing regional learning activities:

1. provide consumers an opportunity to gain personal and direct experience of the agriculture and food sector,
2. initiate a dialogue between consumers and regional economic actors in the agriculture and food sector,
3. raise awareness about each others' problems,
4. identify common aims,
5. enable consumers to develop their own view of agriculture as it is in reality and of the quality of the produced food,
6. inform about the links between the consumers' dietary behaviour and the regional food production,
7. offer relevant insights into the complex set of economic, ecological and social factors that influence the work of the economic actors in the agriculture and food sector,
8. build regional networks between consumers and economic actors in the agriculture and food sector to discuss and determine the structure, intensity and contents of the dialogue.

## Methodological approach

Methodologically, the project is based on a six-step process (see figure 1). This “staircase” represents the – successfully tried and tested – way to achieve the project objectives and was implemented in all participating regions (see figure 2). All activities have been and continue to be based on the exchange and transfer of the project partners’ experiences of regional learning on farms and in food companies as well as in the field of creating regional networks. At the beginning of the ALICERA project, the partners jointly developed the Rural Action Learning (RAL) concept – a didactic methodological approach that is specifically designed for action-oriented learning on farms and in food companies (Bekermann et al., 2006). Subsequently, regional actors involved in the agriculture and food sector, in education and advisory services, science and research of the project regions were qualified as RAL multipliers.

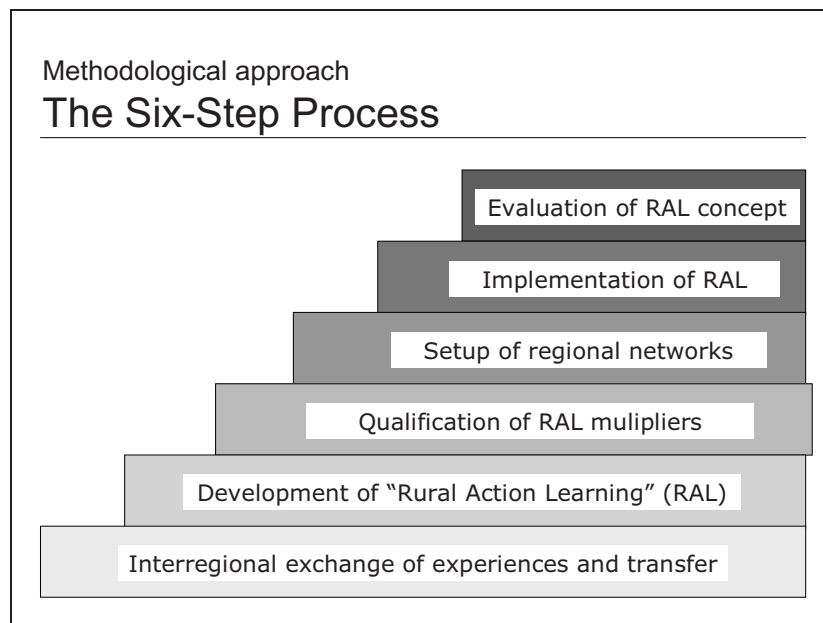


Figure 1. The methodological Six-Step Process of the ALICERA project (Schockemöhle, 2007)

In parallel, the project partners created networks between the multipliers and further cooperation partners in the regions (see figure 3). The cooperative activities in the regions form the indispensable basis of RAL. During project implementation it turned out, that a close cooperation especially between regional actors from the educational sector and agriculture and food sector are essential elements of a successful network. This is why the project partners spent much time and effort in setting up the regional networks. Above all this concerned the project regions with less experience in out-of-school learning programmes in rural areas like Latvia and Western Hungary.

In order to verify the effectiveness of the RAL concept with regard to the project results, an on-the-spot evaluation of the learning activities was carried out in each project region.

A classical pre-post test design is used, based on a triangulation method, in which quantitative and qualitative procedures for data collection are applied (see evaluation design, figure 4). This allows highly significant data with respect to the generality of the findings to be emphasised, as well as bringing out more subtle information giving general statements about background factors and peripheral aspects. An additional advantage of the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods is that there is a real added value because the data from both collecting procedures is not only compiled additively, but also creates cross-references between datasets allowing for new information to be ascertained.

In the case presented here, questionnaires and interview studies are specifically structured as quantitative and qualitative collecting instruments, so that identical aspects regarding contents can be

commented on from different perspectives – from the participants of RAL activities and from the organisers of activities. In this way, comparisons can be made using the data interpretation, and connections or discrepancies between the different perspectives of those questioned can be determined and discussed.

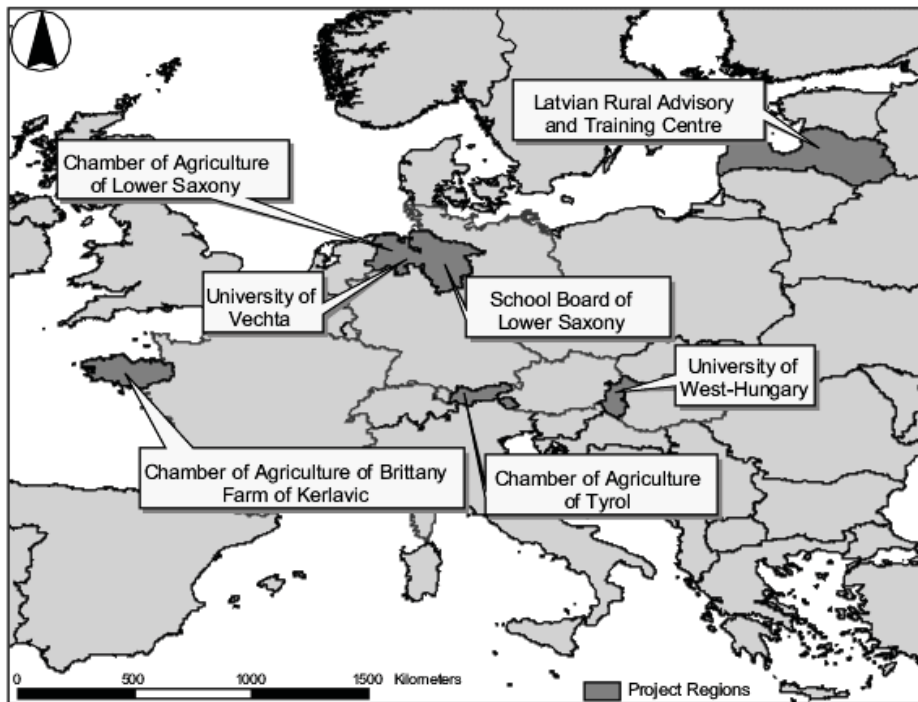


Figure 2. Partner institutions in the ALICERA project (Schockemöhle, 2007)

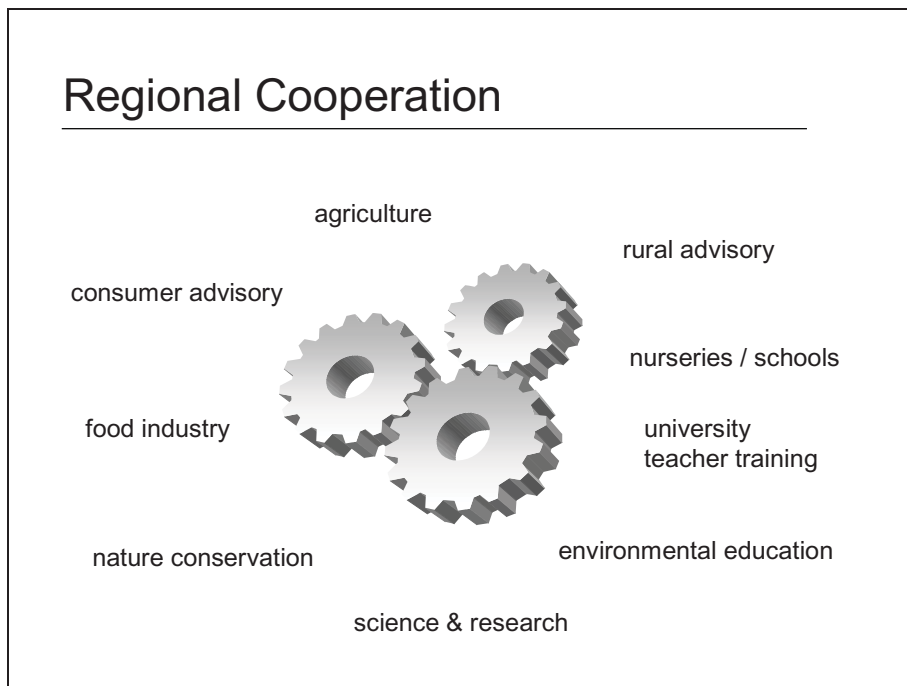


Figure 3. In the regional networks, stakeholders from the different sectors of agriculture, food industry and education work together (Schockemöhle, 2007)

The measuring instrumentation – self-administered questionnaires for the pre-post survey in age-related versions as well as guidelines for the multiplier interviews - were developed especially within the ALICERA project. In doing so, tried and tested instruments from educational research could be applied only to a small extent, as the ALICERA evaluation study focussed on contents which had not until now been the central theme of previous studies on the subject of out-of-school regional learning.

In total, 2,156 persons took part in the survey of participants, and 18 multipliers participated in the interview study.

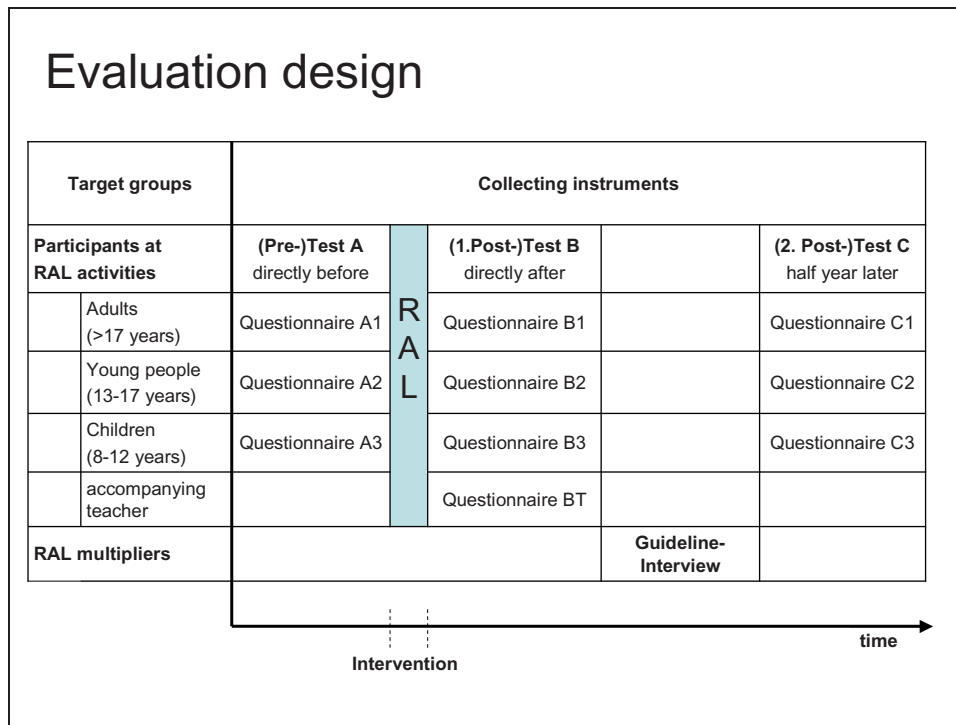


Figure 4. Design of the evaluation study in the ALICERA project (Schockemöhle, 2007)

## Results

The empirical study that was conducted in the framework of ALICERA indicates the successful use of learning activities with regard to the set objectives: The following statements are based on the evaluation results (Schockemöhle, 2007):

1. The learning activities enable consumers and economic actors in the agriculture and food sector to engage in a successful dialogue. Across the age groups, more than 85% of those participating in the learning activities rate the activities “very good” or “rather good” and report that they have gained new insights. Moreover, they have developed a more positive attitude towards the agriculture and food sector than prior to attending the learning activity (see photo 1).
2. The direct and personal experiences on the farms and in other rural companies expand the participants’ emotional open-mindedness. In particular, the contact with animals, the meeting with farmers or other economic actors as well as shared eating and drinking of food produced or processed on the holding play an important role. A majority of participants are concerned of the problems in the agriculture and food sector and, therefore, are willing to critically reflect on their consumer behaviour (see photo 2).
3. Over half of those questioned state that they feel more closely connected to their region than prior to the activity and that they can imagine to actively involve in regional programmes in such a way, for example, as to buy products produced in the region.



4. During the learning activities, the participants have the opportunity to practice the professional, methodological, individual and social skills they need for greater regional involvement.
5. The statements made by the multipliers questioned confirm these conclusions and highlight the key role personal, local experience and learning with all senses play in the learning processes.
6. The multipliers attach great importance to the regional networks. They state that an open and continuous dialogue beyond the project will only be possible through the established cooperation structures.
7. The multipliers support the demand to accept regional out-of-school learning programmes as regional policy tools since they successfully motivate and enable the local population to participate in the sustainable development of the region.



*Photo 1. Farmer and young people in a dialogue during a farm investigation*



*Photo 2. Rural Action Learning offers much space for intensive experiences on farms*

## References

- Bekerman, Z., Burbules, N.C., Silbermann-Keller, D., 2006. *Learning in places: the informal education reader*, New York, Lang.
- Brämer, R., 2006. *Natur obskur: Wie Jugendliche heute Natur erfahren*, München, Oekom-Verlag
- Buß, E., 2002. *Regionale Identitätsbildung: Zwischen globaler Dynamik, fortschreitendes Europäisierung und regionaler Gegenbewegung*, Münster, LIT Verlag.
- Centrale Marketing-Gesellschaft der deutschen Agrarwirtschaft mbH (CMA), 2003. Lebensmittel sind mehr wert, *Food, School & Life*, Sonderheft 1.
- Eberle, U., 2006. *Ernährungswende – eine Herausforderung für Politik, Unternehmen und Gesellschaft*, München, Oekom-Verlag.
- Egner, H., 2007. Überraschender Zufall oder gelungene wissenschaftliche Kommunikation: Wie kam der Klimawandel in die aktuelle Debatte? *Gaia* 16/4, 250-254.
- Filho, W.L., 2006. *Innovation, education and communication for sustainable development*, Frankfurt a.M., Lang.
- Empacher, C., Hayn, D., 2005. Ernährungsstile und Nachhaltigkeit im Alltag, in Empacher, C., Hayn, D. (Eds), *Nachhaltigkeit und Ernährung*, Frankfurt/Main, Campus-Verlag, 222-239.
- Kuckartz, U., 2006. *Umweltbewusstsein in Deutschland 2006. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Bevölkerungsumfrage*, Berlin, Bundesministerium für Umwelt, Naturschutz und Reaktorsicherheit.
- Schmitt-Egner, P., 2005. *Handbuch zur europäischen Regionalismusforschung: theoretisch-methodische Grundlagen, empirische Erscheinungsformen und strategische Optionen des Transnationalen Regionalismus im 21. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Schockemöhle, J., 2007. The effectiveness of the Rural Action Learning concept, in Institute of Spatial Analysis and Planning in Areas of Intensive Agriculture, Univ. Vechta (Ed), *ALICERA – Regional Learning in European rural areas*, Vechta, 43-65.
- Sutherland, P., Crowther, J., 2008. *Lifelong learning: concepts and contexts*, London, Routledge.