

SSD

SCIENCE FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT



**MULTIFUNCTIONALITY AND LOCAL IDENTITY AS
PARADIGMS FOR SUSTAINABLE AND COMPETITIVE
AGRICULTURE**

“MUSICAL”

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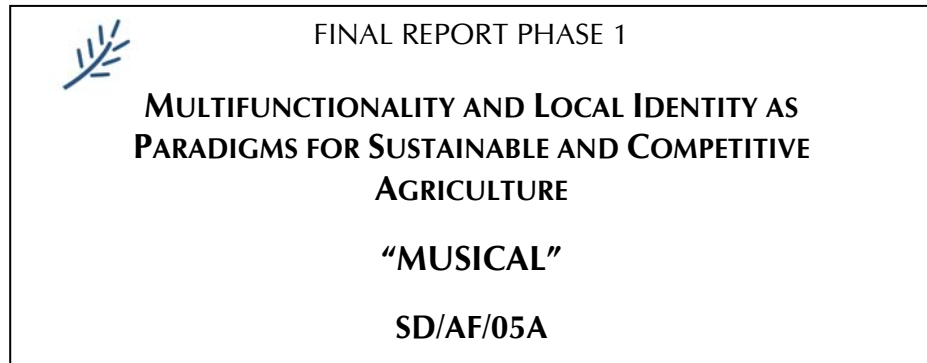
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Introduction

Agriculture has always been multifunctional in the sense that, next to food production, it has always provided some other services to society. Examples of these services are agriculture's contribution to social care and cohesion (yellow services), environment and landscape (green services), water management or flood control (blue services). Because these services often can't be marketed, they are called non-commodities.

The modernization of agriculture however, has put pressure on the deliverance of these extra services, which endangers the ecological and social sustainability of farming. In fact, there are several indications that the modern agricultural model is in crisis and needs to be changed. A basic assumption in this research project is that multifunctionality can be a new unifying paradigm that can bring post-modern agriculture in accordance with new societal demands and as such increases its ecological, social and economic sustainability (Van Huylenbroeck, 2007).

While the ecological and social effects of multifunctionality are obvious, economic effects for farmers are less self-evident because no markets exist for non-commodities. Currently, multifunctional agriculture is stimulated through government payments, and associated with non-competitive forms of agriculture. A better solution would be that the government stimulates the creation of new markets and networks in which the delivery of non-commodity products is valued (Van Huylenbroeck, 2007). The project assumes that these new markets can be linked to multifunctional agriculture's effect on regional identity.

The **main objective** of this project is trying to prove that multifunctional agriculture, despite the fact that it produces more non-commodities, is not completely opposite to competitive agriculture. Multifunctional agriculture's contribution to the development of a regional identity can increase rural competitiveness and as a result of this, also the competitiveness of agriculture. Or in other words, the project is about proving that multifunctional agriculture, through its effect on regional identity, can increase the economic, ecological and social sustainability of rural areas.

Examples can be found in literature which support this hypothesis. According to the literature, multifunctional agriculture has an effect on rural landscapes, and therefore an indirect effect on the value of residential property and prices of rural accommodation. Some best practice examples, like Parmigiano-Reggiano (PR) in Italy, prove that farmers can even brand a region and make it world-famous. Especially nowadays, agriculture's contribution to developing regional identity can be very valuable, because globalization leads to a growing need of individuals for local and regional places with an identity they feel a bond with.

Objectives and expected outcomes

In order to study the main hypothesis, the research is divided into several parts.

The **first part** of the research studies the link between multifunctional agriculture and the identity of regions. Understanding this link involves understanding regional identity and how it is formed. Specific attention is paid to the effect of agriculture on regional identity.

The **second part** of the research starts from regional identity, which can have agricultural aspects, and investigates how it can lead to regional development. Three main topics are studied in this second part:

- 2.1** Understanding how regions are constructed in a broader social context;
- 2.2** Investigating how regional identity can be integrated in rural development through regional branding processes: drawing lessons from best practice examples;
- 2.3** Investigating strategies of actors involved in identity development (in 4 Belgian cases).

The **third part** of the research focuses on how regional development on the basis of an agrarian-regional identity can lead to local welfare, both for farmers as non-farmers, and sustainable regions. Again, this part consists of several elements:

- 3.1** Estimating the effects on and experiences of individual local people;
- 3.2** Estimating the effect on specific economic sectors, like real estate and tourism;
- 3.3** Investigating the effects on farmers: opportunities, threats, and the role of agriculture in governing regional identity;

3.4 Exploring possibilities for alternative financing of multifunctional agriculture, not involving government subsidies.

The **fourth part** of the project finally defines 'windows of opportunity' in Belgium for a successful implementation of local initiatives based on agrarian-regional identity.

Methodology

In order to achieve these different objectives, the project applies several methodologies. Parts 1, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 3.1 and 3.3 of the project mainly have an explorative character, searching for new concepts, typologies, dimensions, contextual consequences, etc. Therefore, the study adopted the method of **Grounded Theory**, which involves a consequential induction from empirically collected data in order to build theoretical frameworks. However, since the study integrates a substantial body of **literature**, a more moderate tradition of Grounded Theory is followed.

Theory building within the method of Grounded Theory occurs through a constant comparative analysis looking for patterns within all data. Therefore, there is a need for a set of carefully but consciously chosen theoretical cases: a collective case study. **Four main case studies** were chosen in Belgium: Meetjesland and Haspengouw in Flanders, and Parc Naturel des Deux Ourthes (PN2O) and the Gaume in the Walloon region. Since some research questions can't be answered within these four cases, additional cases were also selected: Leievallei and Pajottenland, both in Belgium. Pajottenland is also considered as a Belgian best practice case. **Best practice cases** outside Belgium are West Cork in Ireland and Groene Woud in the Netherlands. Finally, part 3.2 and the synthetic part 4 deal with the whole of Belgium.

For each part of the project, the following table provides an overview of the cases in which the study is done and the methodological tools used in each case. For parts 1, 2.3, 3.1 and 3.3 **in depth interviews** are done in the four main Belgian cases with key persons from organizations involved in regional development and farmers with multifunctional strategies. For the case studies of part 2.2, the best practice cases, data were also collected by means of in depth interviews with organizations, farmers and a few other local actors. In the second phase of the project, for parts 2.1, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3, **surveys** with both qualitative and quantitative elements are planned in the four main cases with citizens and farmers. Also in the best practices of part 2.2, surveys are planned to obtain more information. Apart from a couple of questions in the survey for citizens in the four main cases, part 3.2 applies a **hedonic pricing** method to assess the impact of multifunctional agriculture on real estate in Belgium. Part 3.4 obtains its information through **workshops** on alternative financing for multifunctional agriculture in Meetjesland, and an additional case, namely Leievallei. In part 4 the synthesis of the project is made applying the technique of **windows of opportunity mapping**. In addition to this technique, a moment of member checking is foreseen in the form of **focus groups**. Throughout the analysis of the data, several seminars are foreseen for the researchers in order to conduct **peer review** and **triangulation** techniques.

This methodology already produced some interesting results in the first project phase, on the basis of which policy recommendations could be formulated. The description of the results follows the main structure of the project.

	Part 1: Multifunctional agriculture and regional identity		Part 2: Regional development on the basis of (agrarian-) regional identity			Part 3: Local welfare as a result of regional identity development				Part 4: Syn-thesis
			2.1	2.2	2.3	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	
	Literature study									
Haspengouw	Inter-views	Survey			Inter-views	Survey	Survey	Inter-views		Focus group
								Survey		
Meetjesland	Inter-views	Survey			Inter-views	Survey	Survey	Inter-views	Workshop	Focus group
								Survey		
Pays des Deux Ourthes	Inter-views	Survey			Inter-views	Survey	Survey	Inter-views		Focus group
								Survey		
Gaume	Inter-views	Survey			Inter-views	Survey	Survey	Inter-views		Focus group
								Survey		
Leievallei (Menen-Kortrijk)									Workshop	
Pajottenland			Inter-views							
			Survey							
Belgium							Hedonic pricing			Wind. Opp. Mapp.
Best-practice cases outside Belgium (West Cork, Groene Woud, ...)			Inter-views							
			Survey							

Part 1: Multifunctional agriculture and regional identity

To be able to estimate the influence of multifunctional agriculture on regional identity, the first project part focussed on obtaining a better understanding of the concept of identity. It is important to have in mind that places are no soulless objects but are constantly interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the personal preferences. Equally, the identity of an area is not a fixed fact, not equal to the biography or tradition of an area, but has everything to do with feelings, emotions and meanings a particular space can evoke in people. Keeping this in mind, one must understand that a place can have diverse identities, e.g. an agricultural one, which are constantly subjected to changes in the global world. Identity is a **social construct**.

On the basis of this understanding of the concept of identity, some policy recommendations can be formulated on how regional identity can be a basis for regional development. Working on the identity of a place - i.e. building up an attractive and positive image of the place - requires **collaboration** and agreement between diverse stakeholders with different visions, and attention for the needs and images of its **own residents**, in order to not get bogged down in unwished effects.

Part 2: Regional development on the basis of (agrarian-) regional identity

The regional development process itself, based on (agrarian-) regional identity, is the research focus in the second part of the project.

2.1 The formation of regions: agrarian-regional identity within a broader social context

The research learned that the construction of regional identities is closely intertwined with and cannot be detached from the broader social phenomenon of region formation. Regional identities are in fact cause and effect of the region formation.

The in-depth survey in the 'Meetjesland' and 'Pajottenland' regions points out that the shaping (and establishing) processes within the region are to a large extent comparable and that these processes are accompanied by a gradual building up of **social, institutional and symbolic-cultural capital**. Two factors seem important in triggering (and enhancing) the region (and identity) formation processes: **policy-making** at different levels (i.e. the European and the Flemish level), and **practices of regional agents and organizations**. The latter is strongly linked with the amount of social capital (in particular the formal and informal network relations within and between these) accumulated in the region.

2.2 Integrating regional identity in rural development: lessons from best practices of regional branding

In this part of the project lessons can be drawn on the regional branding process and how to integrate regional agrarian identity in rural development, by looking at regions with a strong agricultural identity which is successfully exploited.

A region can have different identities, as mentioned before, but not all of them can or will be chosen to be branded. The first lesson from the best practices is that to prevent the region to get paralyzed, not only historical elements, but also **modern and contemporary elements** should be picked out. This is also important to address young people and keep them involved. Secondly, although the best practices show the need to **focus on the local inhabitants**, they also make clear that the **positive effect of the 'fame' of the region**, induced by the region brand, should not be ignored. When outsiders idolize the region and come to visit it, the inhabitants get more aware of the attractiveness of their regions and are willing to dedicate themselves for their region. Thirdly, the success of the development process seems to be highly dependent on the abilities and motivation of individuals, accentuating the necessity of **enthusiastic and inspiring pioneers**, with an extensive social network. Finally, local actions should indeed be coordinated, although too much **bureaucracy** should be avoided.

2.3 Strategies of actors involved in identity development in the 4 Belgian cases

While a more theoretical study of strategies of actors in identity development will take place in the second project phase, some preliminary insights from the fieldwork in the two Walloon cases have led to policy recommendations on identity development and regional branding. These recommendations complete and confirm those from the former section.

In the regional branding process that should lead to an enhanced rural development, **local inhabitants should be considered allies**. The process should be tailored according to their expectations and interests. Also here, the conclusion could be drawn that **coordinating** all the efforts of organizations can be beneficial for the development process. The presence of an inspiring leader is a positive asset to go ahead with. Once this is in place, a unique, original and high quality **regional product** can be put forward to outsiders. The success of the promotion of the region and its product(s) depends amongst other things on the collaboration of the local population, the visibility of the territory and a well-thought communication strategy. The Walloon cases definitely show that regional branding based on an authentic identity can boost rural development. However, it is a **tool and not an objective in itself**. In this respect, when promoting a region, policy makers should be particularly careful for **polarization** between territories and population groups.

Part 3: Local welfare as a result of regional identity development

It is already clear that a region can have more than one identity, e.g. an agricultural one, and that not all of those identities are pursued in regional branding processes. It is stressed several times that one of the success factors for regional (identity) development and regional branding is focussing on the local people. This part of the project studies the effects of regional development on local welfare more in detail. It tries to find out whether regional development or branding processes can have effects on the economic, ecological and social sustainability of regions. Part 3.1, dealing with experiences of local citizens with regional identity development, will be studied in the second project phase.

3.2 Effect of regional identity development on local economic sectors: the case of real estate

An important question posed in this research is which potential regional development based on an agricultural identity of a region, has on the economy of a region. The analysis shows that agriculture, and more specifically multifunctional agriculture, has an impact on a specific economic sector, namely real estate prices. More arable land usually has a significant negative impact on real estate prices. More grassland on the other hand has a positive impact on house prices but a negative one on development land prices. The impact

of multifunctional agriculture differs according to the type of multifunctional strategy. While nature conservation by farmers generally seems to have a positive effect on prices, on-farm processing and on-farm selling, rather decrease real estate prices.

So it seems that multifunctional agriculture has a potential to contribute to the region's economic sustainability, although this effect depends greatly on the type of agriculture. In regional development or branding processes, it can therefore be interesting to **make use of the agricultural elements of a region**. However, this may require the development of a specific **regional strategy for the development of the agricultural sector**, which has a social basis in the local farming sector and which is adopted by the majority of the farmers in the region.

3.3 Effect of regional identity development on agriculture: the role of the farmer in governing identity

In part 3.3 of the project, the fieldwork indicates that **regional identity can provide opportunities for farmers** to gain an extra income through diversification, and that regional development processes strengthen this effect. Since diversification also usually involves switching to less intensive farming practices, these processes of developing regional identity can evolve in ecologically and socially **more sustainable regions**. However, regional development processes very often seem to cause **inconvenience** for farmers, because of a lack of knowledge on farming on the side of the policy makers. Because of fear for unfavourable developments and lack of understanding for these policies, regional development processes are sometimes hampered because of **counterproductive actions** from farmers.

These observations have led to the conclusion that **involving farmers** in the governance concerning regional identity development can be beneficial. To obtain this, farmers, and farmers' organizations, should be **made aware of the importance of participation**, and organizations should also **make participation possible**. Power relations in a region, and more specifically fear of losing power can prevent this. Higher government levels could design participation structures around regional development. However, these should not be **too rigid**, and attention should also be paid that participation doesn't lead to **complex or inconsistent policies**.

3.4 Linking local farmers and citizens: alternative financing mechanisms for multifunctional agriculture

Finally, the project explores possibilities to link agriculture with other societal groups, in order to obtain more efficient and sustainable (less dependency on government funding) ways to finance multifunctional agriculture, based on its contribution to regional identity. The 'three cluster' approach of alternative ways of financing (voluntary contributions, non-voluntary contributions and fund construction) presents an overall picture of the existing financing mechanisms (and their potentials) and consequently offers to regional development agencies a powerful **framework for the selection of appropriate alternative financing mechanisms**.

From the workshop in the 'Meetjesland'-region it is concluded that there is a broad support for voluntary contributions and fund constructions. Both financing mechanisms require a **close cooperation between diverse regional stakeholders** (farmers, governments, regional organizations, etc.) and are in that way strongly related to the amount of **social capital** in the region.

Conclusion

These results definitely provide an indication that we can **accept our main hypothesis**: multifunctional agriculture can contribute to the development of a regional identity and this can increase the competitiveness and sustainability of agriculture and of other sectors in an area.