

Training as a tool for community development: 25 years of experience in sparsely populated rural areas in Cuenca, Spain

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Training is a key tool for community development processes in rural areas. This training is made difficult by the characteristics of the rural areas and their population. Furthermore, the methods used by traditional training bodies are not adapted to the peculiarities of these areas. This article analyses the training methodology used by the Institute of Community Development, Cuenca (IDC Cuenca). For 25 years, this association has been applying a training method specifically conceived and designed for sparsely populated rural areas. This methodology, known as 'training/development' is characterised by the implementation of a professional project, the creation of work groups, adaptation and flexibility. The results show that this type of training is a tool for promoting and developing human resources; a catalyst for starting economic and personal promotion projects; and a means for involving the rural population in community development processes.

Keywords: training/development tool; education; endogenous development; rural development; Spain

Introduction

The failure of the exogenous development model in generating even and sustainable development in rural regions (Hammer, 2001; González & García, 1998) led to the implementation of endogenous development approaches in Europe's rural development policies during the 1980s and early 1990s (Lowe, Ray, Ward, Wood & Woodward, 1999; Ray, 2000). These approaches are based on promoting local resources and encouraging local human capital to participate as active agents in a development process (Lowe et al., 1999; Rooij, Milone, Tvrdňová & Keating, 2010) that involves a change which should be adopted at a pace that is in line with the population's needs (Caride, 1992; Eloff & Ebersohn, 2001).

In order to enhance the most important endogenous resource, human capital, comprehensive education programmes should be carried out (Orduna, 2000; Razeto, 1990) in such a way that the educational process of developing local human resource becomes an active agent in the development process (Calvin, 1992; Orduna, 2003). This process requires active and organised participation among the community (Díaz-Puente, Cazorla & De los Ríos, 2009) with real content (Roodt & Stuurman, 2011) in order to foster a process of learning by doing (Bentley, 2011) and be able to create a network of associates available to the community (Díaz-González, 2000; Muthukrishna & Sader, 2004). However, in many cases, disadvantaged communities may need an external stimulus, planned by an external agent that encourages the population to begin this development process (Fragoso & Lucio-Villegas, 2010; Melo, 2000).

Studies carried out in rural areas show that individuals with a higher level of education demonstrate more participative behaviours and show leadership in social, economic and cultural aspects (Gasparini & Maguire, 2002; Kuenzi, 2000). These people make better use of information, sense the need for change, anticipate measures for solving problems, have better forward vision, and are in favour of participating in government programmes (Gasson, 1998). However, the majority of rural areas are outside of the normal

scope of training. This is partly due to the fact that, although rural areas have similar characteristics, each is different and has distinct problems that must be considered individually. These features restrict the effectiveness of the training in rural areas. On the one hand, there are determining factors of the environment itself, namely the dispersal of the population, which makes it difficult to participate in face-to-face sessions; the scarce implementation of new technologies, which makes communication difficult; and insufficient training resources and infrastructure (Tena, 2004). On the other hand, there is the social situation, with significant unemployment problems, widespread exodus and a lack of participation (Andrés, 1996). In addition, there can also be situations of personal hardship which, in many cases, presents serious training and educational shortfalls (Caride, 1992; Chosson & Loupias, 1981).

Furthermore, the methodology and structure that the traditional training bodies offer (vocational training, occupational training and continuous training) suffer from a series of implementation problems in rural areas. The training content responds to a given syllabus and not to an analysis of the training needs and socioeconomic context. This results in training activity that does not facilitate finding a job in the area. The training programmes are not coordinated; are independent from one another; and do not follow a common path that connects the various agents involved. This leads to a lack of coordination between training activities and other tools for supporting the development process. In many cases, the profile of the technical teams is insufficient for carrying out training activities (European Commission, 1997; Tena, 2004).

In order to compensate for these problems, different authors have suggested a number of methodological indications aimed at bodies that provide training in rural territories. We will highlight the main four: 1) Carry out a permanent analysis of the context and training needs in order to respond to the needs of the population (De Groof & Lauwers 2001; Escarbajal, 1992; Tena, 2004); 2) plan training activity and relate it to a development project or programme (Escarbajal, 1992; LEADER European Observatory, 1999; Melo, 2000); 3) promote participation and involvement of the population with regard to training activity (Caride, 1992; Hubbard & Spencer, 2009; Van Riezen, 1996); and 4) seek a multi-agent focus that aims for synergies between objectives, targeted groups and training providers (Tena, 2004) and the incorporation of training within the wider set of development processes (Mokubung, Weber & Amsterdam, 2009).

This article analyses the training methodology used by the Institute of Community Development (IDC Cuenca), which has been acting as an external development agent in rural areas in the province of Cuenca, Spain, for 25 years. In this province Spain's economic development during the second half of the 20th century led to the depopulation of its rural areas due to rural-urban migration. This halved Cuenca's population (Collantes, 2007). In this context the IDC's training methodology, known as training/development, is especially designed for sparsely populated rural areas. It takes into account the problems and individual characteristics of rural areas and responds specifically to the needs and abilities of the audience as well as their lifestyle potential. During these 25 years the training/development processes have become tools for promoting and training the rural population. These programmes have become a catalyst for personal and economic projects that have promoted associationism and participation of the rural population in the development of their local areas.

The IDC Cuenca - serving the area

The IDC Cuenca started its work in the province of Cuenca in 1985. It was created as a charitable association with the objective of contributing to the comprehensive development and promotion of the most disadvantaged rural areas in the province of Cuenca. Its principles are endogenous development, through the practice of social animation, promoting participation of the population with regard to improving their lifestyles and favouring these actions over sensed or requested needs. Its strategy is based on four pillars: 1) to guarantee access to information for the rural population; 2) to improve training of human resources; 3) to help create a dynamic network of associates; and 4) to help all of these processes through animation strategies.

The main objectives of the IDC Cuenca can be divided into three major lines of action. The first is the revaluation and promotion of human resources and the social framework which allows top-down,

endogenous rural development. The second line is the preservation and promotion of the area's identity; the culture of its population; the conservation of natural resources; and the promotion of quality, ecological agriculture. The third is to strive for innovation and the introduction of quality criteria in the production processes of rural companies, and to boost computer literacy and the socialisation of new technologies.

To achieve this, the IDC Cuenca has a multidiscipline team of professionals consisting of 19 members who are highly qualified in different areas. The association is structured under two large areas of operation: development services and internal services. Each area is also divided into departments and each department has a coordinator who is responsible for the department's resources. The technicians receive tasks and instructions from the association's management body. At the same time, they enjoy a certain level of autonomy to carry out the tasks in which they specialise. This allows them to achieve a more flexible and fluid structure.

The geographical scope of the association's activity is the province of Cuenca, which is located in the northeast of the autonomous community of Castilla-La Mancha, towards the centre of the Iberian Peninsula. It is one of the most sparsely populated regions in Europe with a population density of 12.7 people per square kilometre, well below the national average of 90.6 and the European Union average of 113.5 (Spanish National Institute of Statistics [SNIS], 2008). The population is spread across 338 population centres covering 238 municipalities. Eighty per cent of these areas have a population density of less than ten people per square kilometre, and 46% have less than four people per square kilometre (SNIS, 2010).

The area shows a clear tendency towards dominance in agricultural activity; a shortage of services and training; shortfalls in communication (with regard to the road infrastructure and currently linked to problems with information and communication technology); and social deconstruction. These tendencies are reflected in the programme for sustainable rural development for the period 2010-2014 in which three of the five areas of Cuenca are classified by the Spanish national authorities as rural areas that need to be regenerated due to their low population density, the dominance in agricultural activity, low salaries, their geographic isolation, and difficulties with territorial structuring (Spanish Ministry of Environment, Rural and Marine Issues, 2010).

The training/development methodology used by IDC Cuenca

The technical team of professionals at IDC Cuenca carries out two types of training activity: specialist training activity (conferences, seminars) for awareness and animation to cover specific subjects with particular groups; and training/development programmes focused on equipping the rural population with the technical and personal skills they need in order to be active agents who are responsible for the development processes in their areas.

The association channels public resources and expands on the relevant training content of the rural development programmes' framework by running the courses which are promoted by the civil service within employment programmes or formalising direct agreements with local or provincial authorities. Therefore, the training activity is free-of-charge or has a minimal cost for participants.

Training/development programmes are formed, taking into consideration the initial difficult conditions in the rural areas. Traditional training systems (vocational training, occupational training and continuous training) are not the most suitable. This is due to the lack of flexibility of their content and the fact that they focus on specific activities with objectives defined by the training body which makes them ineffective in the rural context. In view of the need to improve on these models, the training/development model surfaces because it combines people's needs or interests with the needs of the labour market (Tena, 2004). In the last 25 years the IDC Cuenca has configured the training/development programmes in order to avoid the problems associated with training in rural areas. These programmes have four main characteristics: 1) creating work groups as training, motivation and participation units; 2) carrying out projects as structured training elements; 3) adapting training content so that it is more relevant to participants and the environment; and 4) flexibility with regard to content.

The creation of work groups as a unit for training is a characteristic that encourages active participation from people during the training process; promotes the participants' involvement in the objectives that are being pursued; and motivates people to continue and complete each of the proposed phases.

The formation and stages that work groups go through are closely linked to the project. This element is the catalyst and key objective of the activity that the work group will carry out throughout the training/development process, from the initial idea to its implementation. Without an idea there is no project and training wouldn't make sense.

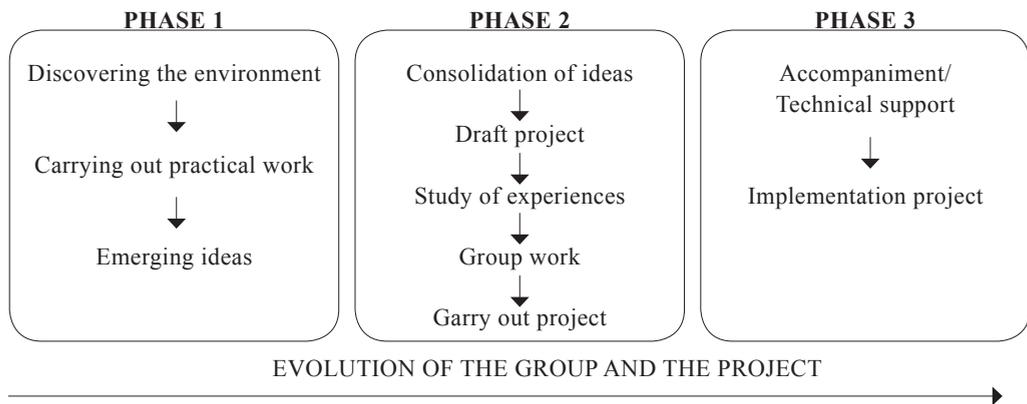
The adaptation characteristic has a double meaning: adaptation to the environment and to the people. With regard to the environment, a thorough understanding of the area enables detection of real possibilities for taking action. An understanding of the people facilitates the design of training content in line with their previous knowledge (Chosson, 1994). As a result, this facilitates an understanding of the content without compromising on the breadth or depth.

The final characteristic is the flexibility of the content. This does not correspond to previously established programmes. Instead it relates to the possibilities of promoting people, the project objectives and the needs of the area or local community. Training that is based on an unrealistic approach for the environment – or has objectives that are not wanted by the participants – serves no purpose (Champetier, 1995).

The training/development methodology is a gradual process that is not simply based on training. Active participation from people, motivation and self-esteem must also be considered (Wallace, 2008).

It starts with a thorough and genuine understanding of the area. To achieve this IDC Cuenca analyses the needs, interests, abilities and expectations of the rural population and develops ideas to propose for intervention. Subsequently, it captures these ideas in professional or personal promotion projects; analyses other similar successful experiences; provides training in collective and individual techniques and skills; and encourages teamwork for carrying out feasible projects. Finally, it supports work groups and project instigators by accompanying them and providing technical support to them when projects begin (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Methodology of the training/development process



Source: IDC Cuenca.

In the first phase working as a group is used as a way of facilitating people's mutual understanding and establishing a teamwork ethic. The first task that the group carries out is a reality check, which allows the participants to discover their strengths and those of their environment. This is a fundamental activity on which a large part of the training process is based.

Project ideas emerge following a study of the environment. In the second phase stable groups are formed of people who will work on a common project. In this phase other projects are also analysed.

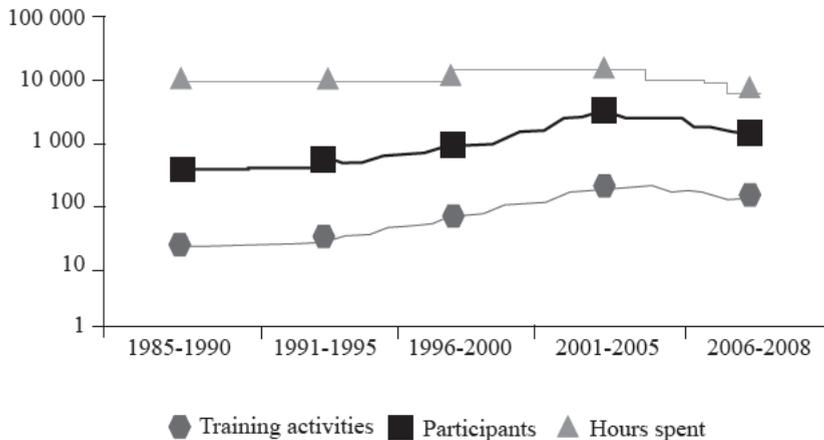
Training activity is carried out at the same time. This training provides participants with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities (both technical and personal) to implement the project.

The last step is the actual implementation of the professional projects. The groups can rely on specialised technical support provided by the principal trainer and other local trainers and professionals. Training is offered by means of accompaniment through the procedures or completing all the necessary steps prior to the implementation of the project. Once up and running the groups will receive technical advice regarding business management. In this phase the group members themselves will set the pace for carrying out their project with support from the trainer.

Results

During these 25 years IDC Cuenca has carried out 425 training programmes, with a total of 6 314 participants and 49 122 hours of training. If we analyse the training activity including three variables – training activity, participants and hours spent – from 1985 to 2008 it is evident that the training activity has increased gradually throughout the years (see Figure 2). Only between 2006 and 2008 have the figures decreased at a significant rate. This decrease coincides with a period of activity that included a change in headquarters for the facilities and an end to carrying out development programmes.

Figure 2: Training activity by five-year periods



Source: IDC Cuenca.

Four practical experiences are now presented to analyse the training/development process. They have been selected because each of them specifically demonstrates one of the characteristics of the aforementioned methodology. The characteristics that define the training/development processes are not as intense in all of the experiences. It is the training team at IDC Cuenca that adapts the processes to each individual case.

The professional project: a commitment to the local area

During the mid-1980s the migration of rural youngsters to cities – due to a lack of opportunities in their local area – was decreasing the rural population. In 1986 the IDC Cuenca carried out a training/development programme in eight towns. It was called Promotion of Local Employment Initiatives (PILE). These training activities were designed for young people who wanted to create a particular professional project. The participants carried out the complete cycle of the training/development methodology: a study of the surroundings and evaluation of ideas; selection of initiatives; and carrying out the relevant projects

(UNCEAR, 1988). As a result each project was adapted to the individual's potential as well as the area's potential.

It is important that the participants take ownership of the project in order to avoid a lack of motivation or giving up on training (Wallace, 2008). The biggest threats for an individual or group when undertaking a project include becoming pessimistic and not believing in their own abilities. The vast majority of the solutions to these problems come from within the group or through external relationships. Active participation in practical activities – such as carrying out studies of their environment; site visits to similar projects; participation in informal discussions; or communication with experts – encourages reflection, analysis and decision making, and has a motivational and stimulating effect.

The results that were obtained indicate both social and economic impact (UNCEAR, 1988). The creation of economic projects in disadvantaged areas helps to establish the population; create new services and improve existing services; and strengthen self-confidence among rural residents who begin to see the possibility of improving their standard of living.

One example of the participants of PILE activity stands out. Since the age of 15, this individual was responsible for selling cheese from the family farm. This young person had to temporarily stop selling cheese while the PILE training activity was being carried out. This was due to stricter health rules that prevented selling unless the facilities are approved by the government authorities. The end result of their participation in the training activity was a development of a project to build and implement a cheese dairy. The implementation of the project required full commitment to the town and local area.

Once the first challenge was overcome, new ones arose. As economic activity increased and production expanded, the transportation of milk and distribution of the cheese slowed down the company's profitability. The key was to increase direct sales. Once again, as an exercise to analyse the environment, the individual designed and supplied contents to an ethnological museum in the cheese dairy, with technical support from IDC Cuenca. The idea of creating a museum was to attract visitors and tourists to the factory. The result was an increase in direct sales which, in turn, increased the company's profitability (M Saiz Guijarro, company director, personal communication).

The improvements in communication, the increase in local services and the developments in rural tourism in the area allowed this person to undertake a new project aimed at providing rural accommodation. Once again, by means of a project, he built a series of rural apartments that provide the town with a new service that was previously not available. These projects now involve his wife and three children and provide work for four people.

The work group: together, we can

Another of the threats to the rural environment is the lack of organisation within the population and the deconstruction of their society (Lowe et al., 1999). The IDC Cuenca promotes participation and the organisation of students to improve living standards as a result of the knowledge they acquire. In the local development process the responsibility lies with the community. Therefore, it is necessary to have organised groups of individuals who act as one team (Sanderson & Polson, 1939).

Ongoing work with a group of people enables activities to be carried out parallel to training/development programmes. This is the case in specialised, informative training activity (conferences, seminars). The intention is that participants truly recognise the possibility of establishing themselves as a stable group; are aware of the reality; and analyse their living environment. The objective is that the organised group proposes project ideas to meet its needs and then carries them out. In this context the IDC Cuenca adapts the rhythm of the activities to the rhythm of the group's work because it is the group that really leads the project. As a result the group members are able to acquire a good teamwork ethic.

Consolidation and group work in the rural world is very difficult to achieve. Several factors can lead to the group not working: distrust between members; personal interests; apathy of its members; tiredness of the executive boards; lack of team spirit; or activities outside of the group.

The case we are going to focus on took place in El Picazo, one of the few horticulture production areas in the province of Cuenca. In the 1980s horticultural farming was suffering from a lack of modernisation,

and was typically a family-run farming model with low qualification levels among producers. Between 1988 and 1992 the IDC Cuenca delivered a course in cut flowers, a course in growing indoor plants and a course in business management in cooperatives. Fifteen producers took part. The objective of these courses was to technically train the farmers. This training resulted in an increase in the modernisation of production; the construction of greenhouses; and the introduction of drip irrigation. However, the real added value of the training and parallel activity was the consolidation of a group of professionals as a stable team with common interests; thus, eliminating the distrust among them and equipping them with the necessary tools to take on a future project together.

After overcoming the first challenge of modernising production, the group of farmers – having faced up to reality – identified the need to differentiate their high quality products and improve marketing channels. The IDC Cuenca collaborated on a project to “Design a quality brand for horticultural production in the municipality of El Picazo”, by providing assistance and technical support. The first step was the creation of the Association of Horticultural Companies in El Picazo, “Huerta El Picazo”, in 2003. The group included nine producers. Following the creation of the association, the members set the pace for the design and subsequent registration of their brand and, in 2005, the community brand, “Huerta El Picazo”, was born.

Adapting the content: a necessity

The adaptation of training content to suit the participants is a universal concept that IDC Cuenca prioritises in order to achieve objectives. It is important to use content that is adapted to the needs and practicalities of everyday life. This adaptation enables participants to be constantly involved in the training process and encourages an active attitude for acquiring new knowledge.

However, adaptation towards a specific group can lead to a reduction in the number of participants in relation to the planned objectives, which is restrictive in a sparsely populated area. On the other hand, the strict nature of examinations – with the aim to target training activity at a specific industry – can exclude other groups who are interested in that training activity.

The case that is being presented is an experience of computer literacy in the agricultural sector in which over 200 farmers spread across 21 municipalities participated. It is vital that agricultural companies adapt to technological changes. After analysing the environment the IDC Cuenca proposed a training programme aimed at exposing the farmers to new technologies. The programme is based on “Fermin”, a farmer from the area. It involves helping him to search for information on the internet; send e-mails to suppliers; write letters using a word processor; look for information on the cartography of his land; create invoices using a spreadsheet; and organise clients’ addresses in a database. As a result participants discover how using new technology can make their day-to-day tasks easier. Participants are constantly involved in the training process. Solving these practical cases fosters a proactive attitude for learning new skills. In addition to solving practical case studies, participants also learn to relate their training to their real-life situations, incorporating the use of new technologies into their day-to-day business management.

Flexibility of content: à la carte training

In addition to adaptation, flexibility is an important universal characteristic that the IDC Cuenca applies to its training processes. It is very useful in different situations. One of these situations is when the majority of the course’s participants have roles that prevent them from attending courses during normal hours. For this reason, the sessions are scheduled at convenient times for the participants and take place at locations that require minimal travel. Another situation arises when the distrust among people from a particular sector limits participation in training activities or leads to falsifying information. Flexibility is also crucial when training is provided to groups of people or organisations that carry out the same professional activity, but who possess different levels of knowledge of the training content.

A situation where flexibility is particularly needed is for so-called ‘à la carte training’. The methodology that IDC Cuenca uses is based on two factors: 1) personalised service at the participant’s workplace or home, including agreed-upon session dates based on their availability; and 2) tailored training content focusing

on the needs of each participant. In these programmes the general training content established to meet the objectives is divided into flexible modules that are adapted to the participant's knowledge and needs.

One of these à la carte training experiences is included in the "Homogenization of quality in small and medium rural tourism enterprises (SMEs)" project, in which 13 promoters across ten municipalities participated. The IDC Cuenca designed an à la carte training programme, divided into five modules, to provide technical consultancy to the promoters and support them with the creation and implementation of the initiative. Each of the promoters received personalised training, consisting of four modules, adapted considerably with regard to content and length of training in accordance with the promoter's previous experience. The other module was delivered as a group session for all of the participants. The result was that the SMEs from the tourism industry acquired a standard for offering a quality image; thus, differentiating them from other areas and positioning rural tourism as an industry capable of generating an alternative income for the rural economy.

Conclusion

Training activities have been strongly linked to the results of the endogenous development that the IDC Cuenca pursues and to the characteristics of the province's rural areas and their population. Training/development has been an important tool for promoting and up-skilling the workforce in rural areas. This revaluation of human resources has been a catalyst for professional projects and for projects that promote people who have helped to preserve a sense of cultural identity, associationism, and the involvement of the rural population in their development. Other results of the training activity allowed the introduction of quality criteria and innovative techniques in production processes among rural companies, and the implementation of new communication and information technologies.

The training/development methodology has enabled the training activity carried out by IDC Cuenca to be effective in sparsely populated rural areas. The analysis of these 25 years of experience suggests that we consider training in these areas as a universal concept which serves as a support tool and fits in with the other development tools. Before training, an analysis of the area should be carried out in order to understand the needs of the population. The training that is delivered should be adapted to the needs of the population and should be applied practically by considering day-to-day life. It should be flexible in content, timing and training locations.

Structuring this training around a project and a stable work group was crucial to the success achieved by this methodology. Both methodological characteristics complement each other during their evolution and promote the involvement of participants in the approach and the objectives being pursued. This activity should not move too fast or too slow, but it should be adjusted to the pace set by the participants during each training process. Once the training/development programme has finished, it is important to adjust to the pace of assimilation of the change in each circumstance.

In general, training needs change as the training/development programme evolves. During the first stages general training content prevails, along with reinforcement activities to create a trusting environment and consolidation of personal skills, as well as the new initiatives' animation activities. Subsequently, training needs become more precise, technical and personalised, and training tends to confuse itself with accompaniment and technical support. In any of these stages, training needs must be structured. A good way of doing this is to incorporate them around a project or development programme in which participants assume a high level of involvement.

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