

Local development and Local Partnerships: Universities applying pro-active PR in a local systems network logics

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Abstract

Facing turmoil and continuous stunning, local governing bodies, decision makers and local actors, in most of cases found the most stable solution has been the regional cooperation and particularly that of increasing and strengthening local human resources capacities at a regional level. Trying to increase competitiveness, local systems understand more and more the importance of being flexible, on the frame of a sustainable strategic planning.

Local infrastructure and interaction of all local factors and actors, at any time, must consider their development following a wider regional prospective.

Important evolutions in the education area, mainly in higher education, gave breath to outstanding improvements in the capacities to develop qualified human resources, matching needs from local developments. While achieving standardized didactic tools at a Mediterranean and furthermore, EU level, they become able to deliver internationally recognized knowledge and capacities, improving so at a general level. human resources among countries with different socio-economic level. At the same time, these developments spread quickly the culture of interaction and collaboration among local actors. This also makes possible knowledge and expertise transfer from excellence center and universities toward local public administration and other local stake holders or public, and increases cooperation standardizing practices according to EU requirements.

Local issues need local solutions, but this at no case must cause localization or isolation, all those developments must be conceptualized, oriented and managed in a wider prospective, specific needs must have specific answers, and universities are the best in doing this.

Key words: local systems, local development, specific needs, EU standards, universities

1. How to define Region, which prospective to follow

Latest developments delineated an area of commonalities and prospective, same structure, history and strategies in the main sectors of economy and socio-indicators, continuously are pushing toward each other Mediterranean countries, and in most cases, aiming EU integration. They mainly responded in the same way to worldwide economic turmoil, but at the same time, they showed not to be immune to crisis; undoubtedly, their reflected structural weaknesses. Most of them were reflected into the labor market, where part of labor force passed toward the informal sector.

Could the regional partnership support the solution of these problems?

Mediterranean countries are being challenged by how they will address the transformation of their economic model and modify the structural weaknesses. While facing the economic crisis in a regional level, the most important issue remains the diversification of domestic production and export.

The new economic situation is mainly characterized by decrease of worker remittances and capital inflows, in the form of portfolio and FDIs. And this is a common indicator of most Mediterranean countries. Thus, it seems that a region may be sometimes considered a geographic notion referring to a country, it may be a community of bordering countries. What makes the difference, is what kind of strains they face, how much systems geographically or inside an area can have impact on each other's welfare, how much they can support each other by improving their situation.

Academics and researchers need to make those guessing to better define region, and better match regional needs, while orienting them toward a wider prospective.

2. How regionalism and local partnership works

There's a large and continuous argue regarding regionalization. Important outcomes regarding regions are that it is easier to incent innovation through regional networks of innovators in the assistance of leading local institutions, as universities are.

Firm communications, structures and institutional environment create and spread more quickly knowledge, and they all have a local brand. The main argument for this is that the nearness between different actors makes it possible for them to create, acquire, accumulate and utilize knowledge a little faster than firms outside the region. This is because great part of local and regional capacity is based in inter-firm networking, inter-personal connections, local learning processes and special knowledge sourced by social interaction. Adopting doesn't work as adapting, this is valuable for local knowledge and their usage as well.

Referring to Cook, the Regional innovation systems (RIS) is partly a new theoretical construct in order to analyze and grasp important aspects of the working of regional systems as well as a reference to actual development tendencies in the building of networked innovation structures and influential to policy making.

Local systems may be connected in different ways, for example by the use of a common knowledge base, on social values and collective visions that induce trust and reciprocity.

Regional innovation system denotes regional clusters surrounded by 'supporting' organizations.

Regionalism work also because of the support of institutional infrastructure, i.e. research and higher education institutes, agencies, vocational training organizations, etc.

Thus, local know how spreads out among local systems more quickly, and this creates the conditions for a innovation and development spiral.

3. How regional innovations operates

We may define regional innovation in different ways. The first way may be defined as territorially regional innovation network, where firms base their innovation activity mainly on learning processes stimulated by geographical, social and cultural proximity.

Secondly, the innovation networks may be further developed into regional networked innovation systems. However, this works better thanks to local infrastructure, if it has less or more R&D-institutes, training organizations and other local organization involved in the process.

The networked innovation system represents an endogenous development model as an attempt to increase innovation capacity and collaboration through public policy instruments. For SMEs, in particular, to carry out more radical innovations there is often a need to supplement the informal and accomplished basic research and development. In the long run most firms cannot rely only on localized learning, but must also have access to more universal, codified knowledge of - for example - national innovation systems. The creation of regionalized networked innovation systems through increased cooperation with local R&D-institutes (or universities), give firms innovative capacity.

The third type, regionalized national innovation system, represents a "supported by outside" model. This entitles finding firms outside the region to provide knowledge.

In this terms, the collaboration is to a larger extent, as the cooperation mainly involves specific innovation projects to develop deeper innovations and with the use of scientific knowledge. Then, cooperation may be stimulated when people have the same kind of education and sharing the same formal knowledge, rather than belonging to the same local community. Following this model, the logics of considering a wider definition of local and regional, that of an international prospective delineated by geographic, economic and cultural connections, that makes possible the support and transfer of elevated knowledge among systems part of the region.

4. Different shapes and methods of incenting and increasing local development.

There are some distinct cases of how local development has been supported and initially it has been based in the third model. The World Bank case is one of the most relevant in supporting while mapping and networking local institutions.

Different international organizations and institutions, over the last 20 years helped Albania through direct assistance and know how transferring. Perhaps it was why this strategy showed not to be always appropriate and worthy, since it was created elsewhere and was going to be used in totally different environment. This transfer took the form of training and expertise organisations networked with universities and local administrations or systems (e.g 2002-2005).

While transferring its own knowledge developed from generalisation of good practices in an international level and the creation of new ones from regional and local practices. This because the bank itself has recognised that trying to coerce countries into adopting certain policies has not been effective in any case. The actual policy mix advocated has been criticised as generic, inflexible and thus unsuited to the specific context of individual countries. In response to this the W. Bank now emphasises that it seeks to implement and develop its policies in a participative fashion, with governments and broader society involved leading to a sense of ownership of the development strategy.

These principles were given tangible effect through new operating frameworks, most notably the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF).

The basic principle was that countries would formulate through a process of deep consultation, including national civil society and international donors, their own long term development strategies. The W. Bank would then cooperate with the developing country in achieving its objectives, so forming a development partnership. The W. Bank made clear that this partnership would take different forms depending on the situation with each country. Countries could only enjoy a deep partnership with the W. Bank if they pursued sound macro-economic policies and upheld certain standards of good governance, as defined by the bank. Also in some cases the question of whether the partner was in fact capable of developing a long-term development strategy was debatable.

On a limited level the ever more popular sector wide adjustment programmes or SWAPs (adopted by all major donors) have similar features. More modest in scale, these involve the elaboration of comprehensive strategies for specific sectors of the economy (health, agriculture, etc).

EU with its aid policy, gave the first signs of local references by fragmenting in specific schemes and procedures for its aid to different areas. Also the institutional framework has changed over the years as the EU itself and its role in the world have developed. For instance, new types of aid instruments to support accession to the EU or transition in post communist countries has been applied. It is the latter form of aid, such as PHARE to Eastern Europe and TACIS to the ex Soviet block on which MEDA was modeled. It is worthy to say that since the reforms of 2000, policy making and programming is handed by the Development or Relex DG and implementation by Europe aid office and increasingly the country delegations.

Traditional development policy would appear to be more partnership orientated than other aid instruments. The original Lome convention of 1973 was an example of development partnership.

This entailed a strong partnership with local partners, including local governments, institutions, and leaving more decision making a leading role to local institutions and systems.

5. Standardizing and developing: how universities become pro-active in PR for development

Universities represent that part of local infrastructure which not only support - but having all necessary capacities - incent and lead development, by undertaking during all this efforts a unique PR function.

This means that they may elaborate development plans, as well as realize knowledge sharing and networking among local and regional systems.

They also have a great responsibility toward the development of human resources on a local level, as a leverage to local and regional development. Taking in consideration the Mediterranean and EU requirements for all those countries, there are some important developments regarding universities, the European Higher Education Space reflecting specific necessities of the above mentioned areas. Listing some of them: The Tarragona Declaration June 2005, The Catania Declaration January 2006, The Tampere Declaration and the establishment of EPUFI October 2006, The Alexandria Declaration June 2007, The Cairo Declaration June 2007, Union for the Mediterranean Marseille Statement November 2006.

We understand that the concept of region that led all those developments, represents a more extended one, making possible all forms of cooperation for development and innovation in a local level.

The process had some important results with a wide effect.

European universities became able to help and assist countries in less developed shores of the Mediterranean to upgrade capacities of their scientific and educational systems by increasing their capacities to develop human resources in a local level.

In those terms, those universities, by establishing common qualification descriptions, same standards and procedures, are more capable to set up learning processes and enlarge their potential in teaching and training. Local processes are better supported by institutions of excellence in improving and creating the necessary human resources to fit those developments.

In conclusion

Beside outcomes, as further we go with our analysis of best practices, the more we understand the importance to make further research and give considerations about cooperation of local systems and development processes on a Mediterranean prospective.

All this works because the interest of all local components are affected from regional development planning and decision making. Their dependence from a local networking and operation of local and regional systems, are vast and if they are not taken in consideration, the chances for a sustainable local and regional development are diminished. On this philosophy, important programs of international leading organizations, such as ArtGold 2 of the UN, are being developed and applied, but their outcomes are still to be evaluated.

This is calling for a coordinated action in terms of:

- Incent and improve communication among local institutions, administration, private and public.
- Governing bodies and Local administrations must undertake a role of coordinator and moderator in order to restore dialogue and establish participation of local and regional organizations, all this on a Mediterranean prospective and taking in account the bonds existing from national and local boundaries.
- Universities as leading institutions on regard to learning processes and excellence centers must undertake a pro-active role in needs analyses and articulation, development of necessary human resources and dissemination of the process.

- Restore trust and participation by an active inclusion in strategic planning and development decision making of local systems and stakeholders.

All practitioners must understand and acquire the philosophy of collaboration, inclusion of interest and reflect them on local networks of systems starting from the solid bases of the regional and local realities on the frame of a wider prospective, a Mediterranean and European one.

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