

# **Constructing a Social Network and Implementing a Development Process within a Portuguese Rural County**

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## **Abstract**

In Portugal, an experimental Social Network (SN) programme has been promoted at the national level by the Social Development Institute. The major operational objective of the SN is to construct county level advisory councils and local level commissions to increase participation and shared decision making in the development process. The advisory council is made up of local development stakeholders from governmental and non-governmental institutions. These stakeholders determine the actions to be taken for the social development agenda in the county.

An assessment and/or evaluation is being carried out by staff at a higher educational institution. The external evaluators using observation, interviews and questionnaires will assess the performance and composition of the advisory council and the local commissions as it relates to participation, social planning and capacity building. The paper depicts the participatory achievements and inadequacies of this network. In general, the case-study evaluation will determine if the network strengthens the social action process in a rural area faced by populational constraints, for example, poverty, aging and low educational levels. In addition, the case-study evaluation will identify and portray key characteristics of a leadership style that facilitates a democratic, dynamic and active involvement of the network's participants.

## **The Rural Area: Macedo de Cavaleiros**

The "Social Development Network" addressed in this paper refers to the county of Macedo de Cavaleiros, located in the interior north of Portugal, in the district of Bragança. It is a rural county with a population of 17,449 people, according to the 2001 Census. Like most counties in the region, agriculture is the major economic activity, the population has been decreasing and ageing, and the educational levels are low, with an illiteracy rate close to 16% (Rede Social, 2003).

The demographic changes have been affecting the villages in particular, where the number of inhabitants is more and more scarce. Lack of social equipment to support the elderly as well as the handicapped, insufficient job creation, poor dissemination of information on social programs and measures, lack of specialised human resources (i.e. nurses and medical doctors), and high rates of school drop outs are among the major problems of the county (Rede Social, nd).

## **Introduction to the Social Development Network**

This section will introduce the Social Development Network (SDN) and the social action process with questions and concepts pertinent for development. Development has been defined, "as the process of social change which has as its goal the improvement in the quality of life of all or the majority of the people without doing violence to the natural and cultural environment in which they exist and which seeks to involve the generality of the people as closely as possible in this enterprise, making them the masters of their destiny" (Dissanayake, 1981:217).

The Social Development Institute (SDI), an external organization, has promoted the idea of the SDN and social action process. Beals and Hobbs describe the results of

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social action process in these terms: “planned, purposeful social action attempts to bring about social change which (if assumed) maximizes satisfaction for the members of a particular social system or systems. Instigated social action may be thought of as a process of deciding objectives, making choices concerning methods and involving people in carrying out the objectives. In this respect, social action is a collective action – although it does not deny the importance of individual or family decision-making units” (1964:2).

The major operational objective of the SDN was to construct a county level advisory council and local level commissions to stimulate the social action process, increase county-wide participation and expand decision making in the development process. The council and five inter-township commissions were constituted to establish the social network and a platform to plan and co-ordinate social action process. The project involves the organization of the local human resources without contributing to the material or financial aspects for development. The SDN has two levels of organization, the advisory council and the five inter-township commissions.

The advisory council is made up of local development stakeholders and actors from governmental and non-governmental institutions. The membership represents the entities within the county such as parents associations, secondary schools, higher educational institutes, government employment and training centre, hospital and health care agencies, social services, continuing education, development associations, township commissions, regional agricultural directorate, social and municipal government organization. These stakeholders, both men and women, help determine the actions to be taken for the social development agenda in the county as equal partners.

The five inter-township commissions are made up of all 38 male township commissioners. The commissions have been established in parallel with the advisory council. There is an on-going process to identify additional members for these local commissions. The creation of these commissions at this level shows the preoccupation of the SDI to the local identity. The commissioners are the political representatives of the township, but unfortunately, these stakeholders are not representative of the local population according to their social characteristics and attributes. And, in some cases, the commissioner does not live in the township that he is working.

The SDN social action process activities involved the following steps: situational analysis, preparation of the social development plan, organization of information system, meetings, training and other activities. These activities were implemented for a target group defined as families and individuals in marginalized and poverty situations.

The philosophy of the SDI concerning the SDN can be represented by strategic and specific objectives. The SDN in general will fight against poverty and social exclusion, while promoting local development. The strategic objectives of the SDN programme presented by the SDI (IDS, 2001;13), includes the following:

1. to develop a strategic and dynamic partnership that articulates to social interventions with the different local agents;
2. to promote integrated and systematic planning to take advantage of the potential synergies, competencies and resources at the local level;
3. to guarantee a greater efficiency in the collective results for the county and townships.

The SDI (IDS, 2001;13) formulated the following list of specific objectives for the Network:

1. to instigate a participatory situational analysis and planning;
2. to promote and coordinate interventions at the county and township levels;

3. to find solutions to poverty and exclusion problems for these families and individuals;
4. to train and qualify the agents involved in the local development process, within the SDN;
5. to promote an adequate coverage of the county with equipment and services; and
6. to involve and disseminate knowledge about the realities of the county.

Considering these objectives, how do values influence the social action process in the social network? NORAD (1989), LEADER (1997), Kindervatter (1979) and Vachon (1993) identified some values associated to development such as justice, sustainability, participation and social interaction. The SDN target group are the poor, marginalized and excluded social groups. The SDN justifies the promotion of equal opportunities for all members of the community and also assist in resolving problems and break down the barriers that these groups encounter. The council and commissions work for these groups in the social action process, while endeavoring to promote dialogue with them.

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process or the organization and mobilization of the target population? Is sustainability linked to developing capacities for self-reliance in the marginalized populations? Do the marginalized populations contribute ideas and perspectives to the activities? Does the project share information about the activities and the programme with stakeholders, the community and specifically the target group? The paper will assess aspects of sustainability for this project from the activities initiated.

Is participation a method or an objective in the SDN social action process? The evaluation will address these issues at the various levels of stakeholders. The assessment also needs to consider how the social action activities are associated to the needs and priorities of target group. The evaluation will identify the cooperative or conflictual relationships with the target population as well. These relationships will be contrasted at the two levels (council and commissions).

What are the implications for the social action process when the target group plays a passive role as it relates to the implemented activities by the council and commissions? Pretty and Voduchê (1997) established that the lack of sustainability of many projects studied was associated to passive participation by the target group (Table 1). How do the stakeholders view the participation of the target group in the process?

Table 1: A typology of participation: How people participate in development programmes and projects.

Typology	Characterisitcs of Each Type
1.Passive Participation	People participate by being told what is going to happen or has already happened . It is a unilateral announcement by an administration or project management without any listening to people’s responses. The information being shared belongs only to external professionals.
2.Participation in Information Giving	People participate by answering questions posed by extractive researches using questionnaire surveys or similar approaches, People do not have the opportunity to influence proceedings, as the findings of the research are neither shared nor checked for accuracy.
3.Participation by Consultation.	People participate by being consulted, and external agents listen to views. Thes external agents define both problems and solutions and may modify these in the light of people’s

	responses. Such a consultative process does not concede any share in decision making, and professionals are under no obligation to take on board people's view.
4. Participation for Material Incentive	People participate by providing resources, for example labour, in return for food, cash, or other material incentives. Much on-farm labour research falls in this category, as farmers provide the fields but are not involved in the experimentation or the process of learning. It is very common to see this called participation, yet people have no stake in prolonging activities when the incentives end.
5. Functional Participation	People participate by forming groups to meet predetermined objectives related to the project, which can involve the development or promotion of externally initiated social organization. Such involvement does not tend to be a early stages of project cycles or planning, but rather after major decisions have been made. These instructions tend to dependent on external initiators and facilitators, but may become self-dependent.
6. Interactive Participation	People participate in joint analysis, which leads to action plans and the formation of new local institutions or the strengthening of existing ones. It tends to involve interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systemic and structured learning process. These groups take control over local decisions, and so people have a stake in maintaining structures or practices.
7. Self-Mobilization	People participate by taking initiative independent of external institutions to change systems. They develop contacts with external institutions for resources and technical advice they need, but retain control over how resources are used. Such self-initiated mobilization and collective action may or may not challenge existing inequitable distribution of wealth and power.

Source: Pretty, J. and Voduchê, S. 1997:49

Does the leadership have the necessary trust to allow for a experiential learning? Easterby-Smith *et al.* (1999) identify a social perspective to learning that favors social interaction, sharing and learning by doing. Is there a common view of trust as it relates to the participation of the target group in the social action process? More importantly, do the stakeholders have different perspectives about a democratic, dynamic and active involvement of the target group? Leadership styles will be contrasted at both operational levels in the analysis.

Cavazzani and Mosely, (2001), Westholm *et al.* (1999) and Esparcia *et al.* (2000) have indicated the increasing emphasis on the local partnership approach to rural development in Europe. The development of networks and partnerships in Europe such as LEADER and INTERREG has strengthened the local identity and rural development. The impact of local partnerships has been documented as strengthening initiatives such as consensus building, the promotion of local development strategies, the facilitation of co-ordination and open communication between the partners in the network. These aspects will be reported and considered in the evaluation of the SDN and social action process. The questions presented in this section will be discussed in upcoming sections involving the analysis, interpretations and judgments of the qualitative evidence.

## **Purposes, Methods and Challenges for the Evaluation**

In general, the case-study evaluation will determine if the network strengthens the social action process in a rural area faced by populational constraints, for example, poverty, aging and low educational levels. The evaluation has been on-going since October of 2002.

External evaluators using observation, interviews and questionnaires assessed the performance and composition of the advisory council and the local commissions as it relates to participation, social planning, learning and capacity building. The range of evidence, often qualitative, was utilized to construct a picture of the SDN and the social action process. The analysis and interpretation of the qualitative evidence will lead to the evaluators judgments, perspectives and conclusions of the social action process.

Hart (2003) uses the term “illuminative evaluation” to describe some aspects of case-study evaluation. The challenge for the evaluators was to analyze and describe the qualitative evidence in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the process. These interpretations will also illuminate mechanisms to improve the social action process. The interpretations will arise from the behaviors and attitudes observed in meetings and interviews. The following definition of illuminative evaluation is presented, “to make key behaviors or attitudes in a given context visible for contemplation. The aim is to enlighten policy makers or practitioners to the dynamics of behaviors in comparable situations in order that those behaviors can be understood and attended to in a more appropriate way” (Hart, 2003:46).

The concepts, formulated questions and observations will be addressed in the analysis and interpretation.

## **The Strengths and Weaknesses of the SDN and Social Action Process: Analysis and Interpretation**

This section will depict the participatory achievements and weaknesses of this network; perceptions and attitudes of the stakeholders concerning the social action process will be proposed. The section will be organized around the concepts such as justice; participation; sustainability, and social interaction, and the related questions linked to the vision of the SDI and the cited authors. For each of the concepts and related question, the network will be analysed separately and defined by the two levels of operationalability: the advisory council and the five inter-township commissions. The stakeholders are the members of the council and commissions. The interpretation of successes in the social action process relates to the advisory council and five inter-township commissions. The concepts and questions will be used as guidelines for an “illuminative evaluation”. The location of the questions in only one of the value domains, does not necessarily imply exclusiveness to other domains, but for this analysis, interpretation and judgment, the questions will be treated as inclusive.

### Justice Value Domain

Do the marginalized populations contribute ideas and perspectives to the activities? The social systems or groups struck by poverty and social exclusion deserve to be integrated into the development process, allowed equal opportunities and given greater access and distribution to the national resources available. The SDN needs to promote dialogue with these groups and change the participatory culture to include them in the network. The evidence points out that these groups have not contributed ideas and perspectives to the activities established by the social action process. However, the

stakeholders at the advisory council level, social services and other county entities are quite aware of the situation and our working on their behalf. They have identified the felt and unfelt needs of these excluded groups. The evidence from the inter-township commissions is less favorable.

Does the project share information about the activities and the programme with stakeholders, the community and specifically the target group? The coordinators of the SDN have done a very good job in sharing information at the advisory council level and to a lesser extent, inter-township commissions. The communication weaknesses with the community and the target group about the SDN and the activities initiated in the social action process are obvious.

Are there cooperative or conflictual relationships with the target population by the council and commissions? We have found no evidence in the interviews or observations with the advisory council members of a conflictual relationship with the target group. On the other hand, the comments observed at the inter-township commissions concerning the possible involvement of local actors and the ideas expressed about voluntary labour in the SDN has been perplexing. The perplexity lies in the fact that these commissioners consider the community as potential volunteer workers instead of equal partners. They consider useless any efforts to stimulate local participation or have a negative view about the possibility of involving the community.

#### Participation Value Domain

Is participation a method or an objective in the SDN social action process? The evidence at the advisory council level is quite encouraging. The evidence demonstrates that the stakeholders carried out assigned tasks to complete the social development plan, open dialogue occurred with all members to perform the situational analysis, the meetings had an interactive exchange of ideas, there was participation in decision-making, shared leadership evolved and interactive learning was achieved. At the inter-township commission meetings, the commission members were more dependent on the change agents and could be defined as less participatory and dynamic. At both levels, participation has been established, however there needs to have maintenance considerations for the SDN. The maintenance aspects are the implementation of a selection committee, expansion of leadership roles and a process identified for the rotation of stakeholders. These aspects establish a capacity and organizational culture within the SDN. In the case of the target population, it is clear that participation is an objective in the SDN social action process.

Are the social action activities associated to the needs and priorities of target group? The SDN has identified the needs and priorities of the target group. The strategy adopted to assist the target group has been one of responding to their needs through services and programmes. The decision-making and control of the assistance to the target group lies at a centralized governmental level. The identification of needs and priorities has not been decentralized.

What are the implications for the social action process when the target group plays a passive role as it relates to the implemented activities by the council and commissions? The advisory council initiated the social action process for the target group and not with them. The inter-township commissions have at this time not initiated a social action process for the marginalized groups in their locality. It is clear that activities initiated at the advisory level will have positive consequences for the social groups struck by poverty and social exclusion. The passive role by the target group will need to be considered for the potential future of this process. The stakeholders have worked well in advancing the development agenda through the activities completed, but strengthening the process at the inter-township commissions might permit more active participation of the local communities and target group.

### Sustainability Value Domain

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process? It has not guaranteed the sustainability of the social action process. It has created synergies and partnerships with the governmental and non-governmental organizations. This legitimation can serve as the stepping stone for long term development change. It has created dialogue within and between the entities found in the county. The decision-making process has been expanded to many more stakeholders within the partnership. The network has strengthened the potential for participatory development.

Has the operationalization of the network guaranteed the organization and mobilization of the target population? At either level of the SDN, the operational implementation does not imply the mobilization of the target population in the social action process. Beal and Hobbs (1964) have identified legitimation as a form of sanction, justification and "license to act". In reality the SDN has legitimated the social action process, in order to analyse the situation, delineate the relevant social systems to be involved and thus complete the necessary activities for the target group. There has not been a bottom up process or mobilization or empowerment of the target population. Gayanayake and Gayanayake (1993) have developed a strategy using non-formal educational programs to assist change agents to empower the community members to be critical partners in the development process. This strategy of community empowerment has not been operationalized by the network.

Is sustainability linked to developing capacities for self-reliance in the marginalized populations? According to Pretty and Voduchê (1997), project sustainability is associated to active participation and self-reliance of the target group and in this case the marginalized populations. The social groups emerged in poverty need to participate by taking initiative independent of the SDN which is an external organizational structure. In order to self-mobilize, they will contact external institutions for resources and technical advice that they will need, while retaining control over how resources are used. This type of collective action and self-reliant activities will strengthen the sustainability of the project.

Do the stakeholders have different perspectives about a democratic, dynamic and active involvement of the target group? At the advisory council level, there are in general positive opinions about the importance of increasing the role of the target group over the long term. It is recognized that the social action process is dynamic and represents democratic ideals. The majority believe that the educational process will strengthen these capabilities for the target group. In contrast, a majority of the members or stakeholders at the inter-township commissions have a more pessimistic perspective concerning the involvement of the target group.

### Social Interaction Value Domain

Does the leadership have the necessary trust to allow for a experiential learning (social interaction, sharing and learning by doing)? If one analyses this at the two levels of the SDN, a clear contrast exist between the social environment and capabilities of the stakeholders in the advisory council and the inter-township commissions. We clearly see partnerships and synergies between the entities that the stakeholders represent at the advisory council. The meetings and interviews demonstrate an increase sharing and social interaction by the members. Key members are involved in tasks and it is assumed learning by doing. The stakeholders have identified aspects of trust which has benefited and strengthened the partnership. In contrast, the inter-township commissions have been less oriented to the task. It appears that the commissions have been attributed a less important role by the organizational process. In any case, more effort and time has been devoted to the creation and animation of the advisory council.

Was there a common view of trust as it relates to the participation of the target group in the social action process? At one interactive meeting of the members of the advisory council, it was suggested that the target group should be made aware of the SDN project. Interestingly, there was concern by some of the stakeholders in the event communication was implemented. It was believed that the target group would interpret the project as a material project instead of a non-material project.

What were the leadership styles at both operational levels? The leadership styles were basically democratic or activator, as depicted by Robinson and Clifford, (1975). The co-ordinator introduced ideas and the activities to be carried out in the social action process and encouraged all the stakeholders to participate in the process. The potential of every member was used to create a dynamic and interactive communication flow. The style is appropriate to involve the stakeholders in decision-making process. The other style that was observed was the autocratic or controller leadership style by the co-ordinator. In some of the social situations or meetings, the delegation of tasks was appropriate. The mix or alternation of styles was effective.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This section will list some of the conclusions and recommendations from the first year and half of the project. These conclusions and recommendations are attributed to the evaluation observations (Cristóvão and Koehnen, 2003).

1. The stakeholders at the advisory council level had a clearer view of the network/social action process than the representatives of the inter-township commissions. The stakeholders at the advisory level did not diverge in their definition of the concept which was available in the SDI documentation. These stakeholders also spoke the language of the coordinators or change agents of this programme.
2. The motivation for the stakeholders at the advisory level was diverse, but for the majority of these stakeholders that represented areas or sectors such as agriculture, education, health, municipal government organizations, poverty elimination, the basic reason was to develop their community and they felt they had the competencies necessary to assist in the social intervention for those excluded in the county.
3. The stakeholders at the advisory council level noted that they felt less isolated within their institution, greater sharing of experiences and a creation of real partnerships in order to make changes and improve the development outlook of the county.
4. The difficulties or obstacles pointed out by the stakeholders were various such as limitations concerning participation; lack of financial and human resources; a the lack of understanding of how the social action process should proceed.
5. The advisory council and inter-township commissions were establish within the same time period. However, the entities or representatives of the advisory council at the county level have been involved in information sharing, on-going learning, negotiation and consultation during much of the process. The commissions which are to represent the local populations within the county have not been as dynamic and lack representativity social characteristics of the local populations.
6. The major concern of the stakeholders was the possibility of non-sustainability of the process for lack of participation and motivation resulting

in the break-up of the partnerships and not continuing the social action process objectives and activities.

The short list of conclusions concerning the first year and a half of activities opens the door for future challenges, in particular as it relates to the coordination and organization of the social action process at the two levels of the network. In order to assist the policy makers and change agents to attend in a more appropriate way to the crucial issues, we suggest by way of our analysis and interpretation the following recommendations (Cristóvão and Koehnen, 2003):

1. There needs to be more intense work with the inter-township commissions and a greater preoccupation to be more representative of the local community. This appears to be the weakest link in the network. The mechanisms that could be used to alter this situation might include: non-formal educational programmes and organized debate about advisory councils, the social action process, participation, citizenship, conflict management, social responsibility among other themes with potential stakeholders, the general community and the target population. The style of leadership by the change agents might require a mix of leadership styles to strengthen interactions and involvement of other stakeholders in these communities.
2. The SDN activities need to be more visible and transparent not only among the stakeholders, but the general population in the county, particularly the target group. The general population needs to be made aware of the objectives, activities implemented such as the situational analysis, social development plan, organization of information system, meetings, and training that have emerged because of the interactions and synergies among the various entities in the county. The visibility of the SDN must be strengthened for the following reasons: 1) the stakeholders need information on a regular basis about the activities of the social action process in order to be stimulated to participate more actively and share among themselves pertinent data to facilitate development. Recently, the organization of the information system creates a data base which facilitates the stakeholders access to information by electronic mail. 2) the general population should be aware of the collective efforts put forward by the SDN to improve the performance and services of the governmental and non-governmental institutions represented by the stakeholders. 3) the social systems or groups struck by poverty and social exclusion should be aware of the initiatives and directed activities on their behalf to permit them to be more actively involved in the social action process. For each of these groups, the change agents should consider the appropriate means to communicate with them. The stakeholders can be supplemented by the information system with a county newsletter, while the general population can be informed through the local and regional press and radio. In case of the excluded social groups, the traditional community informational networks need to be used and more direct relationship contacts by social services and change agents.
3. The SDN must continually identify, select and invite additional stakeholders to participate at the two levels. This can be done by establishing a selection committee to identify potential members. In addition, the sustainability of the SDN depends on establishing a culture of continuous participation through a rotational membership process. This process guarantees new membership, while experienced and older members teach the new members the ropes.

4. The SDN must be more involved in the mobilization and organization of these excluded populations. The mobilization can have positive effects by increasing the learning process of the group, giving them more control over local decisions, and strengthening the maintenance and sustainability of the SDN. An organized group forms a dynamic interest group that has more power to negotiate at the county governmental level.

5. The SDN must begin to plan and implement non-formal educational activities to steadily increase the target group responsibility and control for future development activities. The mechanisms can be group learning processes such as focus group interviews, workshops, animation and demonstrations. In addition, non-formal educational programming can assist the stakeholders, community and excluded groups to become more active in participation and acquire capacities to be decision-makers in the development activities of the county.

The evaluation process should be considered as a means to illuminate both the strengths and weaknesses of SDN in a rural county in Portugal. The active participation of the stakeholders at the advisory level certainly shows the advantages for local partnerships in the development process. These participatory changes in comparison to the traditional decision-making process at the county level are still, unfortunately, innovative. Policy makers must attend to these changes and continue to promote others in order to sustain and expand local level participation.

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