

***International Conference Meanings of the Rural – between social representations, consumptions and rural development strategies***

**28-29 September 2015, University of Aveiro, Portugal**

---

***Theme 3***

***BEYOND TRADITIONAL RURAL TOURISM? ANALYZING LEADER IN BASQUE RURAL AREAS.***

**Beatriz Izquierdo<sup>a</sup> and Patricia Campelo<sup>b</sup>**

<sup>a</sup> University of Burgos, Spain. Sociology Area. Hospital del Rey s/n 09001 Burgos

<sup>b</sup> University of the Basque Country. Campus Leioa 48020 Leioa, Bizkaia

**Introduction**

Born as a laboratory experiment 20 years ago, the LEADER approach has been at the heart of European rural development policy (Navarro et al, 2015), trying to add the values of endogenous development, bottom-up, and community empowerment to the projects promoted in rural areas. Within the LEADER context, tourism has been the pivot of rural economy (Izquierdo, 2007) though those activities promoted within tourism have radically been transformed from the last two decades. This scenario is also shared in the Basque country, as is shown through the in-depth revision made by the authors; the results have been taken from the LEADER Evaluations (including the last results coming from a case study carried out last year).

Thus, the theoretical framework develops, firstly, the interesting evolution of rural tourism in rural areas in Spain, which shares the slow process of diversification and innovation in touristic activities comparing to other European areas, apart from tourism focused in rural accommodation (Canoves et al, 2005). As these authors mention, some of the features that characterized rural tourism in Spain are, on one hand, innovation, and secondly, being complementary to main activities (sometimes coming from agriculture or not connected to the rural at all). Consequently, it is presented a scenario of post- industrialized societies where visitors to the rural evades from mass tourism, particularly those like the Basque

Country with coastal area, in a search for quietude, nature, good quality and price, seeking a very positive and, in some way, idyllic image of the rural.

However, we agree with Suvantola (2002) that the academy has hardly focus its interest in the experience of visitors or their motivation, apart from obtaining information regarding commercialization of touristic products, and therefore, there is a lack of evidence in this way. Finally, the paper regards also how last studies focus in the social and economic impact of tourism in rural areas, and the diversification variety of touristic activities in the rural. An innovation and diversification that, in some way, has been imposed from the rural development policies (Campelo et al, 2014)

Thus, after a review of theoretical approach on rural tourism, this paper centers on the outcomes provided by the LEADER Evaluation within the Rural Development Plan for the Basque Country (2007-2013). It analyses, firstly, how innovation and diversification of tourism has been interpreted in the Basque country during the last period. Basically, the evaluation results emphasizes the role of touristic activities in LEADER, representing the sixty six per cent of the total expenditure for the program, The second part of the paper analyses the discourses emerged around tourism and its strength in pivoting rural areas, underlining the vision of those coming from administration and LAGs, from those from the agrarian sector.

For that purpose, twenty-seven in- depth interviews were carried out in Basque rural areas (accordingly to Basque institutions); the interviewed were heads of the LAGs (a total of 10 where interviewed) together with LEADER beneficiaries. This last group of interviewed represents public as well as private beneficiaries (and individual and collective), incorporating mayors of small villages, sectorial representatives or individual beneficiaries amongst other.

One of the main finding shows how most of the touristic projects are quite new and original comparing from previous periods, giving tourism economic activities new possibilities in Basque rural areas. Secondly, it is relevant how tourism has been able to involve a growing number of sectors that have facilitated a renovated vision of touristic activity and its potential for rural areas from very different perspectives (agrarian, public institution or rural inhabitant).

Although the touristic projects promoted are very heterogeneous (some areas are coastal while others are very mountainous), traditional activities in accommodation have decreased

in favor of others connected to sports and leisure, such as horse riding, cycling routes or museum routes. However, despite of the increasing number of projects focused on the practice of sports and leisure, other proposals seem to be also very positive. Connected to the search for new images of the rural and the promotion of material and immaterial cultural heritage, one of the most significant activities area related to gastronomy projects, due to the growing importance of Basque culinary issues at national and international level.

Thus, the paper also refers how even though actors concerned with agricultural matters, still maintain certain adverse vision on tourism, these new experiences in gastronomy, which connect agricultural sector to tourism, has slowly been transforming the discourse. However, the qualitative analysis still presents farmers who offer resistance to tourism and its economic predominance in rural development programs; on one hand, it could be interpreted as a loose of power or representativeness in rural areas. On the other hand, the diversification in agriculture imposed from Europe is observed as very difficult task to assume.

Still, as mentioned, this vision is slowly being transformed as new synergies are raising up. In effect, the results show the potential of this activity, where the production, based on the quality of products such as cheese, cider, wine of meat benefits the producers, “small” agrarians, who sell their products to new restaurants opened in rural areas, increasing, at the same time, the services making more attractive rural areas. However, actually, still the adoption of this orientation differs from one zone to the other, depending on the resources and interest of the different actors involved in rural development.

## **References**

- Bessirère, J. (1998). Local development and heritage: traditional food and cuisine as tourist attractions in rural areas. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 38(1), 21-34.
- Campelo, P. et al (2014). LEADER en el País Vasco. Un estudio de caso. Gobierno Vasco.
- Canoves et al (2005). Turismo rural en España: Un análisis de la evolución en el contexto europeo. *Cuadernos de Geografía*, 77, 41-58.
- Diéguez- Castrillón, M<sup>a</sup>. I. et al (2009). Turismo rural como estrategia de diversificación: factores determinantes y resultados en Galicia. *Cuadernos de Gestión*, 9(2), 31-54.

Izquierdo (2007). Evaluación cualitativa del desarrollo rural. *Cuadernos Sociológicos*, 23  
Presidencia de Gobierno Vasco.

Mazón, T. et al (2012). Turismo gastronómico y turismo de masas. *Revista de investigaciones turísticas*, 6, 122-141.

Navarro, F.A., Woods, M., & Cejudo, E. (2015). The LEADER Initiative has been a victim of its own success. The approach of the bottom- up approach in rural development programmes. *Sociologia Ruralis* (next to be published).