



INVESTIGATION ON NEED FOR CREATION OF SPECIALIZED UNIVERSITY CENTRES FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS PARTNERS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Increasing the capacity of local administration for successful development and implementation of policies for local development is one of the priorities of the operational programmes financed by the EU. Many EU universities have directed their efforts to institutionalize the ongoing cooperation with the local authority for training, information and consultation. So, universities are becoming active stakeholders in the development and implementation of local development policies. In Bulgaria, the capacity of universities in this direction is not used or used at a very limited extent, with very strong positions in NGOs and private consulting firms. The Center for Regional Development, established by the Faculty of Economics at the Trakia University is one of the first in this niche and it may well be developed using the academic potential and teaching facilities of the university. This paper presents: 1) the results from the study associated with expectations about the CRD by the local administration, 2) basic functions set and CRD activities tailored to the needs of local development, 3) the activities of CRD for 2009-2011 .

Keywords: regional development, local government, local administration, implementation of local policies, regional development centers

INTRODUCTION

Increasing the capacity of the local administration for successful development and implementation of local development policies is among the priorities of EC-funded operative programmes. A major part of European universities have focused their efforts for institutionalization of the sustainable cooperation with the local government aimed at training, information and consultation. Thus, universities become active stakeholders in the development and implementation of local policies for development. In Bulgaria, the potential of universities with this respect is not used or used scarcely, at the background of strong positions of NGOs and private consultant companies.

The Centre for Regional Development at the Faculty of Economics, Trakia University is one of the first and the niche could be further developed using the academic potential and the training base of the high education establishment.

The aim of the present investigation is to motivate the need for foundation of university centres of regional development (CRD) that could be partners to the local government in the development and implementation of policies and measures for regional and local development by joint action of local government bodies, the academic university staff and students of the university in the region.

The puipose was realized by:

- Investigation of expectations towards CRD created by the Faculty of Economics at the Trakia University by questionnaire survey carried out among the local government authorities in settlements and municipalities in the Stara Zagora district.

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- Presentation of the main functions and activities of the CRD according to the needs of the local and regional development.
- Presentation of the achievements for the period 2009-2010.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Results from the questionnaire survey

A survey was performed in 26 mayors of municipalities and settlements from the Stara Zagora district. The questionnaire was created by a research team from specialists at the Department of Regional Development, Faculty of economics, Trakia University. The questionnaire included questions about the expectations towards the CRD to the Faculty of Economics from the part of the municipal government. This was the first stage of the working programme. The main questions were

four, with respective prompts. The construction of questions allowed a subsequent formalization but also provided respondents an option for free-text answer. The questions covered three main subjects:

- investigation of the need from CRD
- identification of the commonest problems of the local government
- existing needs of the local administration from: training of the personnel, scientific research on practical issues, consultations on specific topics of the current activities.

The analysis of empirical data has shown that: Almost all mayors that participated in the survey agreed that there was a need for a Center of Regional Development at the Trakia University /**Fig. 1/**.

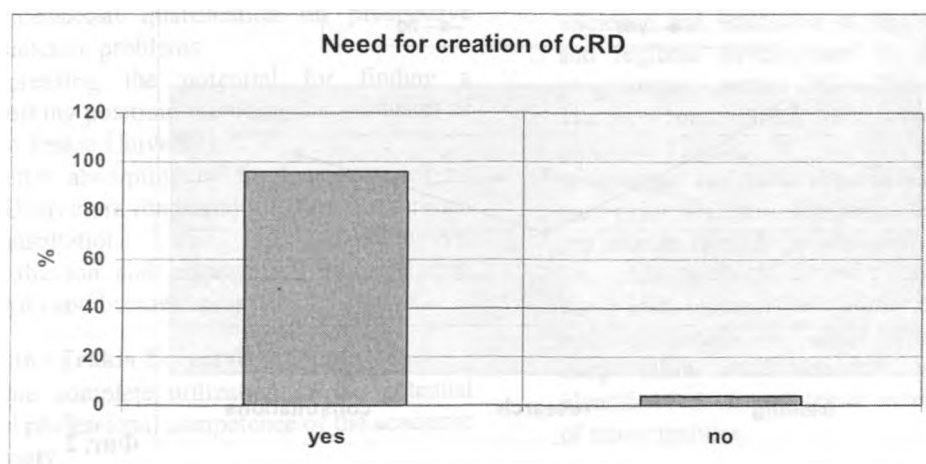


Fig. 1

The most frequently encountered problems by the local government, in the opinion of mayors, could be identified in the following areas:

- Infrastructure - roads, mobile and internet services etc.
- Financial funds - lack of funding for amelioration (green areas, cemeteries, hygiene maintenance of certain regions), repair works (water supply and sewerage, roads etc.).
- Financial independence - delegated budgets for town halls in the municipality, lack of clear criteria for distribution of the state subsidy among the town halls in the municipality.

-Public health - lack of 24-hour access to health care, lack of pharmacies in the larger settlements, insufficient coverage by a general practitioner, lack of prophylaxis, limited access to specialized medical care etc.

- Social problems - unemployment, insufficient employment rates of people at working age, ageing of rural population,
- Public order protection, protection of agricultural production, traffic safety, crime etc.
- Education - training in internet communication, computer labs etc.

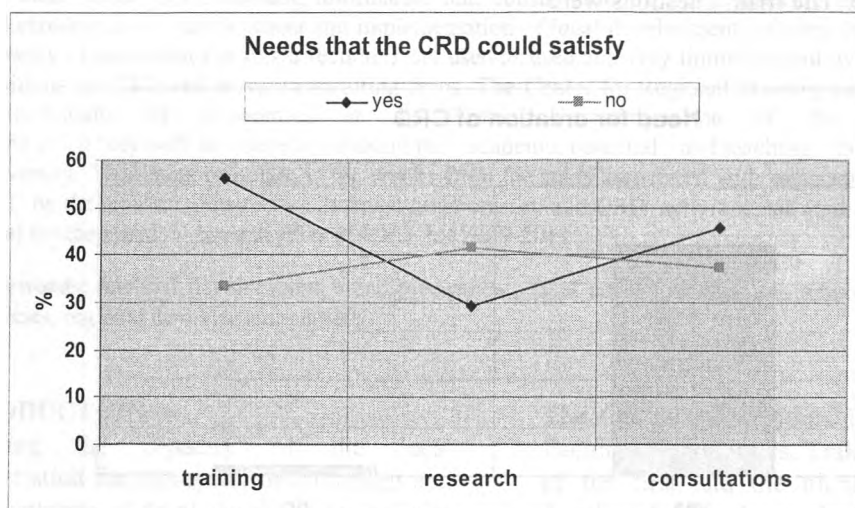
The needs outlined by mayors, which the CRD could meet with its activities, are more

pronounced in the field of training and consultation and relatively few with regard to scientific research /Fig. 2/:

- Training - computer literacy, English language, increase the competence level of the administration with respect to software technologies, development of concepts for settlements, training for development of projects related to national and European programmes, funds and other donor organizations, local self government training; human resources, work with ethnic minorities etc.
- Consultations - timely acquaintance with normative changes in municipal governmental issues; with the programme of rural development; the potential for rural tourism; policy of integration of Roma, the

administrative services offered in the town hall - archive, civil registration and administrative services, notarial services; possibilities for funding initiatives on a local level by joint projects with the business; the interaction of town halls and the municipal administration; juridical consultations; consultation for preservation of cultural monuments; on Natura 2000 initiative etc.

- The needs for scientific research are fewer - attraction of strategic investors; investigations of the needs for amelioration, investigation of the infrastructure and ecology of small settlements that could apply for funding by European projects, investigation on the sources and possibilities for counteracting unemployment etc. /Fig. 2/.



Фиг. 2

Mayors that participated in the study made proposals for the activities of the CRD that could be summarized as follows: field work, closer contacts with the settlement for better acquaintance with problems, local discussions on essential problems etc.

The results provide evidence for the positive attitude of respondents with pointing of specific issues that need the performance of training seminars, specialized information and consultation.

2. Main functions and activities of the CRD at the Trakia University:

The CRD founded by the Faculty of Economics at the Trakia University, makes use of the potential of the academic staff of the faculty for implementation of the EC policy of social economic development based on knowledge.

The principal **activities** of the CRD are aimed at: 1) research meeting the needs of real life and focused on innovations in technologies, products and management; 2) training meeting the needs of the labour market and compliant with the Lisbon strategy for life-long learning; 3) consultation for detection and applications of the best practices for satisfying the specific needs of municipalities, settlements etc; 4) allowing the active participation of undergraduate students by diploma theses, master theses etc. in the identification and solution of real life problems by active participation in the CRD work; 5) assistance in the creation of national and international partnerships; 6) project elaboration and management.

The functioning and the development of the CRD would provide **new possibilities**:

A. For beneficiaries of CRD services:

- Granting of innovations and professional developments to municipalities by accessible and various information channels, practice exchange and networking.
- Discovery and implementation of sources of funding of various initiatives and innovation at a local and regional level, as well as at economic subject level
- Achievement of a constructive dialogue and social agreement on important local issues related to politics, legislation, social and cultural life.
- Close integration along the chain land-food products-man-society according to the requirements for sustainable management of land, food safety, animal welfare and utilization of renewable energy sources
- Informed choice for an appropriate professional qualification compliant with the personal traits and preferences of persons after secondary school graduations or of other social groups
- Professional qualification on prospective economic problems
- Increasing the potential for finding a working position, including for graduates of the Trakia University
- Better absorption of funding provided by EU structure funds and programmes through consultations on the development, evaluation and management of municipal, NGO and business projects

B. For the Trakia University:

- More complete utilization of the potential and professional competence of the academic society
- Utilization of additional possibilities for funding activities related to research, education and consultation services offered by the University
- More complete integration of students in the research and implementation work at the university
- More active involvement of the university in development of policies, strategies and programmes in both the local region and at national level
- Close cooperation between structures, sectors and research centres within the university
- Improving the university image as an innovative research and training centre.

MAIN RESULTS:

The entire activities of the CRD for 2009-2011 is self-funded and realized on the basis of successful project activity

- A number of **working meetings** have been carried out with: the Director of Department of Sustainable Development of Eurointegration in the Stara Zagora Municipality; with the Secretary of the Stara Zagora Municipality' with the mayors within the district of Stara Zagora; meeting of students majoring in Regional planning and rural development and the academic staff of the Department of Regional Development at the Faculty of Economics, Trakia University with the mayor and the secretary of the Asenovgrad municipality. This results in sustainable institutionalization of the joint work with local government and local administration organs and initiates discussions on local self-government and decentralization.

- **Two round tables** were organized for mayors of municipalities of settlements from the district of Stara Zagora entitled «Planning and implementation of projects related to EC structural funds - problems and alternatives for municipalities and town halls» (04.12.2009) and «Science and education in support of the local and regional development in the eve of the programming period 2014-2020» (08.10.2010). The two round tables have identified the main problems facing the development of small settlements and rural regions, have formulated the priorities and options for funding of settlements from rural and town municipalities. Proposals to the Monitoring Committee of the Rural Development Programme have been made and presented. A good **background for cooperation** was founded in relation to identification of real social economic problems of municipalities.

- The authorities of the Stara Zagora municipal administration were **consulted** about the attitude of employers to their professional duties and the sustainability of the professional intentions to keep the present positions.

One of the primary future tasks for the CRD is the organization of training courses for qualification of members of the local administration meeting the needs for increasing of capacity and life-long learning principles

We strongly believe that the functioning of the university centre for regional development is essential for the development of local self-government and could contribute for a more competitive, dynamic, knowledge-based local economy, capable for sustainable growth and offering more and better employment positions and social cohesion.