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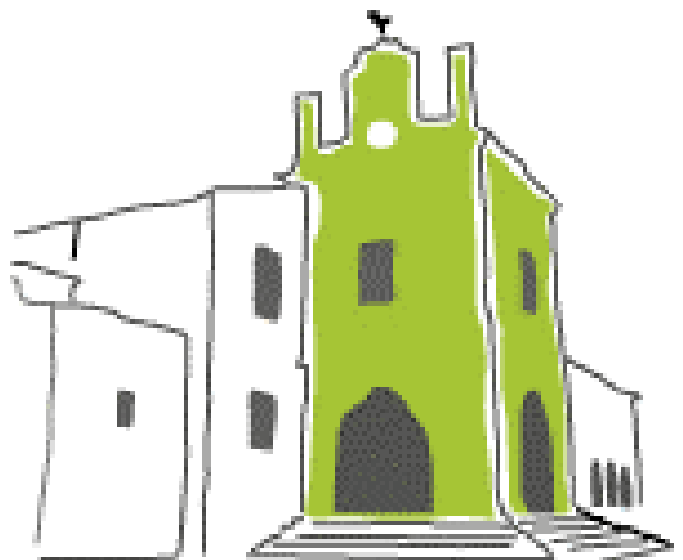Faro – University of Algarve (Campus de Gambelas)

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Portuguese-Spanish Workshop on Integrated Management for Sustainable Development
6th Congress of Nature Management and Conservation

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INSTITUTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY CONSIDERING COOPERATION AND COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

The paper will present empirical data from an exploratory research study of inter-organizational linkages within local development associations. These institutions and the links to other governmental organizations have been explored. The exploratory study describes the inter-organizational concerns and arrangements in the management and governance of these institutions as well as the consideration for learning from inter-organizational communication. The paper also addressed decentralized decision-making process and inter-organizational relationships to benefit rural communities in Portugal. The sample of institutions that responded to a mailed questionnaire are a part of the "Federação Portuguesa de Associaçoes de Desenvolvimento Local - MINHA TERRA". The study also discusses the means to improve cooperation, inter-organizational communication and strengthen linkages to local populations through public action processes and education.
Keywords: governance, inter-organisational relationships, social action processes

INTRODUCTION

The paper addresses inter-organizational communication and relationships considering aspects such as communication, coordination and conflict between regional or local organizations involved with the work of the Local Development Associations. These general aspects are analysed based upon an adapted instrument constructed by [5]. The interest for the exploratory study (case study survey) is to strengthen inter-organizational strategic planning as well as determine how to improve capacity building and administrative competencies in management and governance of rural community territories and their resources.

The improvement in relationships among rural organizations in the same sphere of interest is related to the integrated rural development approach that attempts to permit organization to "mutually reinforce one another" or in other words create synergy among all the institutions in the management of the local community, strengthening of citizenship for all social systems in the community and value local resources. Organizations in the sphere of influence within an integrated system require coordination activities and minimization of conflict [15 and 5]. Position or power imbalances between organizations can permit the stronger to ignore the weaker in strategic negotiations. In addition, distrust by one organization can disrupt communication channels and the sharing of information. The paper discusses ideological and consensus domain in the section that discusses strategic planning.

In this section, the paper will justify aspects attributed to the means and density of communication and cooperation between agencies in the same sphere of interests [14,13 and 5] and identify additional aspects with some duplication of ideas such as the maintenance of linkages to the local level and residents, devolution of authority through institutional overlap, conflict reduction, financial support, administrative support, preoccupation with differences in organizational performance, the relevance of resource management, governance, capacity building, collective action, market forces and clusters of interest. These aspects can be improved through a strategic planning process that increases the participation of stakeholders at all levels of governance, while minimizing decision making inequalities between governmental and non-governmental institutional leaders and local residents concerned with improving their livelihoods [9].

The results and discussion will present information surrounding the 5-point scale ratings by the presidents of the associations and next an interpretation of the information will be discussed. The paper will also identify responses to two open questions concerning organizational objectives and projects implemented in the community. The paper will also describe the strategic planning process and close with a conclusion to identify improvements for the performance of these associations as well as the network.

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METHODOLOGY

The exploratory research study used a case study survey design that has been recommended by [12, 4 and 2]. The purpose of the research was to describe and assess inter-organizational communication and relations by focusing on the answers by the Presidents of the Local Development Associations. The case study questionnaire collected qualitative and quantitative data about organizational objectives, finance, formal and non-formal communication methods and the perspective of the Presidents of these associations on various factors and aspects related to coordination, cooperation and conflict or rivalry.

The presidents of these associations were asked to rate using 5-point scales various aspects of inter-organizational communication and relations by considering the influence of other rural development organizations in the sphere of the management of territories such as the Professional Training and Employment (IEFP), Regional Tourism, Social Services, *Governo Civil* (now does not exist), Municipal and Township Governments and other Local Development Associations (ADL)/Non-profit Entities (ESFL).

The questionnaire was adapted from a survey research study carried out by [5] to understand the factors influencing inter-organizational relations between extension agencies and other agricultural development agencies in Asia. The study assumes that the inter-organizational relationships within spheres of interest are similar to the previous case.

The population for this study are *Presidentes dos Associações de Desenvolvimento Local* or members of the *Federação Portuguesa de Associações de Desenvolvimento Local – Minha Terra.* The study sent a mailed questionnaire to 52 of these associations and 21 responded and returned a questionnaire by June of 2009. The response rate for this study is 40%.

The study identified clues to improve organizational management, strategic planning and decision-making by the actors or stakeholders involved in the management of local organisations. In this endeavour, the paper addresses aspects associated to the following questions rated by the presidents using numerical five-point scales: 1) To what extent are the goals of each of the following agencies compatible or complementary to the goal of your organization? 2) How well does each of the following agencies perform their respective tasks in assisting or in carrying out rural development/local development? 3) How important is it that your organisation coordinates its work with each of the following agencies? In other words, is it important that each of these other agencies coordinate their programs and activities with your organization? 4) How much higher or lower is your position as a director in relation to the position held by the head of each of the following agencies? 5) When your organization meets with highest level representatives of each of the following agencies to discuss issues of mutual concern, how much influence does your agency have on the process and the decisions reached? 6) How often does your organization have contact with each of the following agencies? How are the contacts made - be specific? 7) There may be some competition or even conflicts between your organization and each of the following agencies over possible problem areas such as overlapping responsibilities, competition for the same scarce resources etc. Concerning these competitions or conflicts, answer the following questions? a) When there are overlapping interests between your organization and each of the following agencies, how often does each of the following agencies attempt to interfere with the attainment of your goals or claim credit for the work of your organization? b) The following agencies may distrust your organization when there are opportunities or important reasons for the agencies to work together?

The paper presents the means and weights that these organizations use to communicate formally and informally with other entities and organizations in the sphere of interests. The manner used to finance the association is presented and described, while considering the organizational objectives. To be redundant, the questionnaire permits the respondent to identify other organizations in this sphere of influence outside those listed within the questionnaire.

FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this exploratory study, a preliminary descriptive analysis is discussed, while further thought will be required to elaborate a more sophisticated statistical analysis. The findings are presented by descriptive means and in the open questions a selection of the contextual responses was chosen by the researcher.

The presidents contributed information as to the sources of financial support to carry out their activities involving the governance of community lands. The percentages are the result of calculating from the

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21 returned questionnaires: European Funds 76%, Governmental/National support 20%, Municipal 3%, and others i.e. quotas 1%.

The paper presents a few of the responses to an open question dealing with the identification of organizational objectives by these presidents. The answers are the following: promotion of local development initiatives that contribute to the improvement of the quality of life in conformity to local costumes and traditions; value and give potential to the resources that exist in the territory; promotion, support and making use of potential endogenous regional resources in the counties that integrate in the rural development projects taking into consideration the improvement of the life and conditions for the local populations; preservation and renovation of the social, economic, cultural and patrimonial fabric within local populations and the improvement of local networks and promote local development in the sectors of training, intervention, communication, entrepreneurial spirit, cooperation and investment in projects.

Table 1 shows the percentages using the responses to the questions related to formal and informal communication methods used by these presidents. The questionnaire listed these methods and asked them to give a percentage of time that they used these methods. The predominant formal methods are meetings and telephone conversations. These are the predominate type of methods that they use to communicate with governmental and non-governmental organizations. These organizations in the same sphere of interest need in our opinion to improve communication methods that reflect a social process that associates more strongly to a participative strategic planning process where all stakeholders have an equal footing in decision making. There is a need to strengthen more joint programs and co-planning methods that usually are associated to methods that strengthen networks and partnerships. Further study should probe deeper to confirm if the informal methods are associated more strongly to the local level contacts with the community residents.

We recognize that one-way communication is associated to power, authority and control [18] that can be contributed to meetings and telephone calls. Two-way communication should be "a process in which the participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding" [16:63]. The data show that more work needs to be done using methods such as information exchange, co-planning, joint programs and even partnerships with governmental agencies. Additional research should be undertaken to confirm if the informal methods are strongly associated to the local level contacts with the local population. These informal contacts are important to improve relationships between organizations, but also to make contacts with rural populations.

Table 1: Formal and Informal Communication Methods

Formal:	Percentage:	Informal:	Percentage
Meetings	31	Informal Discussion	41
Telephone calls	21		
Internet	17		
Project partnerships	16	Informal Contacts	59
Information exchange	9		
Co-planning	4		
Joint programs	2		

The presidents were asked to respond to the following: "To what extent are the goals of each of the following agencies compatible or complementary to the goal of your organization?" (1=No, 2=somewhat, 3=Compatible, 4=Very or 5=Very much). In the perspective of these presidents, there is compatibility with the governmental and non-governmental agencies identified for this exploratory study with the exception of the *governo civil* that at this time does not exist. Please see Table 2. The study assumes that these identified entities fall within the sphere of influence.

Table 2:Compatible or Complimentary Objectives

	Mean
IEFP	3,3
Regional Tourism	3,6
Social Security	3
Governo Civil	2,4
Municipal/Township Gov.	4
ADL/ESFL	4,7

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The presidents were asked to respond to the following question: "How well does each of the following agencies perform their respective tasks in assisting or in carrying out rural or local development?" (1=Very Poorly, 2=Poorly, 3=Adequately, 4=Well or 5=Very Well) The local level stakeholders have an adequate opinion concerning the assistance that they share in carrying out task with these governmental and non-governmental agencies (see Table 3). In general, these local associations have a perspective that things are going well within their sphere of interest. There needs to be improvement in the sharing of information with the partial exclusion of the ADL/ESFL and municipal and township governments.

Table 3: Implement the Related Objectives

	Mean
IEFP	2,7
Regional Tourism	2,6
Social Security	2,6
Governo Civil	2,6
Municipal/Township Gov.	3,8
ADL/ESFL	4,2

Another question deals with the following: "How important is it that your organization coordinate its work with each of the following agencies? In other words, is it important that each of these other agencies coordinate their programs and activities with your organization?" (1=Not at all, 2=somewhat, 3=Important, 4=Very or 5=Very much). It is necessary to improve the coordination with other organisations in the sphere of influence with the exception to the ADL/ESFL and municipal governments.

Table 4: Coordination with other Organisations

	Mean
IEFP	3
Regional Tourism	3,4
Social Security	3
Governo Civil	2,1
Municipal/Township Gov.	4
ADL/ESFL	4,3

The next question deals with the following: "How much higher or lower is your position as a director in relation to the position held by the head of each of the following agencies?" (1=Much lower, 2=Somewhat lower, 3=About the same, 4=Somewhat higher or 5=Much higher) In their perspective they believe that they have a somewhat lower footing with all the directors (except ADL/ESFL) in the other agencies. One could suggest that decentralization should place them in a better position to negotiate with the regional and national organizations, as they should reflect the interests of the community residents.

Table 5: The Position with Director

	Mean
IEFP	2
Regional Tourism	2,1
Social Security	1,9
Governo Civil	1,7
Municipal/Township Gov.	2
ADL/ESFL	2,9

The directors or presidents were asked to respond to the following question using a 5-point scale: "When your organization meets with highest level representatives of each of the following agencies to discuss issues of mutual concern, how much influence does your agency have on the process and the decisions reached?" (1=No influence, 2=A little influence, 3=some influence, 4=Much Influence or 5=Very much influence) The directors responded as some influence with the exception of the ADL/ESFL. Are they in a position to cooperate? The response does not reflect a situation where there is a mutual reinforcement with one another.

Table 6: Influence in the Process and the Results with Decisions Reached

	Mean
IEFP	2,7

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Regional Tourism	3,1
Social Security	2,6
Governo Civil	3
Municipal/Township Gov.	3,4
ADL/ESFL	4,2

The directors were asked a specific question related to inter-organizational communication: "How often does your organization have contact with each of the following agencies?" (1=Never, 2=Seldom, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often or 5=Always) The response established that the directors or presidents of these associations often contact the municipal government and local development associations. There was a follow-up question as to the method of contact (see next question). This question was open and forced them to identify the method most used. They made contact most often by meetings and further study needs to be completed to determine the quality or density of these contacts (see Table 8). Do they strongly link to equal negotiation for co-planning, joint programs and partnerships (see Table 7 and 8)? There is a tendency to believe it is not on an equal footing or a participative strategic planning process.

Table 7: Contacts with Organisations

	Mean
IEFP	2,9
Regional Tourism	3,1
Social Security	2,9
Governo Civil	2,1
Municipal/Township Gov.	4,2
ADL/ESFL	4,6

How are the contact(s) made – be specific?

Table 8: Communication Methods

Meetings	61%
Telephone	22%
Personal	5,6%
Letters	5,6%
Internet	5,6%

The next question probes for rivalries between agencies. It was the following: "There may be some competition or even conflicts between your organization and each of the following agencies over possible problem areas such as overlapping responsibilities, competition for the same scarce resources etc. Concerning these competitions or conflicts, answer the following questions? a) When there are overlapping interests between your organization and each of the following agencies, how often does each of the following agencies attempt to interfere with the attainment of your goals or claim credit for the work of your organization?" (1=Never attempt, 2=Seldom attempt, 3=Sometimes attempt, 4=Often attempt or 5=Always attempt) In the perspective of these Presidents that responded to the questionnaire, they believe that these agencies below seldom attempt to interfere with the attainment of their goals (see Table 9).

Table 9: Overlapping Interests

	Mean
IEFP	1,6
Regional Tourism	1,7
Social Security	1,4
Governo Civil	1,4
Municipal/Township Gov.	2,1
ADL/ESFL	2,2

The last question to be presented looks at the question of trust. The following question attempts to understand problems of trust: "There may be some competition or even conflicts between your organization and each of the following agencies over possible problem areas such as overlapping responsibilities, competition for the same scarce resources etc. Concerning these competitions or conflicts, answer the following questions? b) The following agencies may distrust your organization when there are opportunities or important reasons for the agencies to work together?" (1=Never, 2=Seldom, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often or 5=Always) The directors do not perceive problems with distrust. They believe that the other organizations (Table 10) or agencies seldom do not distrust them when working together.

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Table 10: Lack of Trust in the Association

Mean

IEFP	1,7
Regional Tourism	1,9
Social Security	1,5
Governo Civil	1,3
Municipal/Township Gov.	1,9
ADL/ESFL	2

The mean for all the question responses was IEFP=2,4; Rural Tourism=2,6; Social Security=2,3*; Governo Civil*=2; Municipal Gov.=3; ADL/ESFL=3,5. The analysis and discussion of the data show that improvement in communication and organizational relationships should be addressed. The next section discusses the relevance of strategic planning in strengthening organizational relationships and increasing the participation and mobilization of residents as equals interested in governance both at the local association or the county. The process of social action can help to improve co-planning and joint programs.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

The strategic planning or social action process has been recommended as an important tool for rural development since [1]. The interactive steps can be associated to the recent concerns in Portugal to develop social development networks (advisory councils/municipal strategic planning) within rural municipal governments in Portugal [9]. It also has been addressed in other types of local organizations for involving local residents in the decision-making process [11]. In this paper, it is considered an approach to improve inter-organisational communication and planning with organisations in the sphere of interests as suggested by [1 and 8] and others. The planning process can be a tool at the local level, to improve the participation of the resident population in the governance of these organizations/associations using a program of learning and "engagement".

[1, 11 and 7] in the process of social action (strategic planning) described the following steps that should not be considered linear, but open to the possibility of returning to the beginning of the process and also grouping them: 1) analysis of existing social systems and networks, 2) convergence of interest with citizens and stakeholders, 3) analysis of the previous social action in the community, 4) delineate the social systems and relevant networks, 5) start the steps of social action; 6) legitimacy of the process with local leaders and stakeholders; 7) diffusion process with the media and "engagement" (information sharing); 8) strengthening inter-organizational communication, 9) consensual definition of needs and problems with relevant social systems, groups and local organizations; 10) decision for action by relevant social systems and social networks; 11) formulation of objectives, 12) planning decision on the means and education to be used in interventions, 13) building work plan; 14) mobilizing human, financial and material resources; 15) complete the steps of action or intervention and 16) evaluation of the strategic planning process to improve, correct and strengthen the process. This mechanism of community development and organizational communication can be a learning process and mobilize the local population in order to increase capacity for governance and resolution of local problems associated with "empowerment" [6, 9, 11, 10 and 3].

[19, 1 and 7] identified the basic reasons for the use of strategic planning by communities, such as promoting the efficient use of scarce resources by stakeholders and citizens, strengthen coordination work in all organizations; foment consensual decision-making in the community that ensures a more competitive position in rural development, builds a participatory process and mobilizes local people (stakeholders) to improve communication and relationships with other community organizations in their field of interest.

CONCLUSION

Coordination does not happen naturally without some type of planning or effort by all of the organizations in the sphere of interest. The study assumes that strategic planning or a social action process can improve organizational performance of natural resource and forest management. The need for additional capacity building and strengthening of inter-organisational communication can be interpreted from the data collected and thus link to the need for governments to enhance economic growth and stability in this sphere of interests.

The study addresses the importance to maintain and continuously improve linkages to the local organization for decentralized governance. Further study should address the means to hear and

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address the concerns of the residents in these communities. The social action process directed at social groups in these communities is necessary in order to strengthen as well the involvement and active participation of the local residents in the decision-making process in this sphere of interest [17]. The devolution by central government organizations to the collective and local decision-making process does not imply that national governmental leaders use this situation to cut financial support for the management of community territories. It does assume that all organizations cooperate to foster and plan means to strengthen organizational relations.

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