

Groene Woud: Region branding to stimulate multifunctional rural economic development in the Netherlands

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Coalition of multifunctional enterprises

Het Groene Woud ('The Green Woods') is a young initiative in a rural area with valuable nature and landscape features under urban pressure. Farmers in the region are increasingly aware that new societal and urban demands offer opportunities for multifunctional rural enterprises. Members of existing small-scale farmers' initiatives in the field of tourism, direct marketing of quality food and nature & landscape management joined forces to professionalize activities and co-ordinate these under a joint 'region branding' concept. *Groene Woud* closely co-operates with regional knowledge institutions and government agencies. Each year a 'Region Festival' is organized that attracts thousands of visitors and a 'Regional Development Fund' has been established to fund activities. Other commercial activities are still under development.



Three-layered organizational model

Groene Woud has developed an innovative, three-layered organizational model that combines the needs for regional stakeholder co-operation, effective commercial organization and the establishment of distinctive quality criteria. First, a territorial stakeholder platform with representatives of rural entrepreneurs, societal organizations and regional policy bodies is in charge of developing sustainability criteria for activities that fall under the region branding initiative. This platform works in tandem with the second layer, i.e. the *Groene Woud* co-operative, of which rural enterprises that meet these criteria can become member to valorize the region brand. Commercial activities will be organized in business units within the co-operative. This third layer is not yet established, but activities related to regional foods, tourism, nature & landscape management and catering to public institutions are foreseen.

Waiting list for new members

Currently the *Groene Woud* initiative joins around 40 rural enterprises involved in different activities like agriculture, food processing, tourism and handicrafts. These are mostly enterprises that play a leading role in pre-existing farmers' initiatives and who are most advanced in delivering high quality goods & services. Various other enterprises are interested to join, but these are on a waiting list until sustainability criteria and a monitoring system for these are put into place. The rather diverse nature of members poses challenges for *Groene Woud* to define a commonly shared view on sustainable rural development in the region. On the other hand, it offers opportunities to valorize synergies between economic activities through collective entrepreneurship.



Strong territorial network

As a young initiative, the market impact of *Groene Woud* is still limited and positive effects are strongest in the fields of education, policy and the strengthening of regional identity. *Groene Woud* has built a strong network of stakeholder organisations, policy bodies and knowledge institutions for which the role of the chairman of the initiative as 'territorial broker' has been a key success factor. Also the organisation of 'Regional Festivals' has been supportive to create a stronger sense of community and profile enterprises and activities in the region.

Long-term support commitment

To what extent *Groene Woud* will actually develop into a commercial success will depend on the collective capacity to reconstruct regional food chains, strengthen rural-urban partnerships and develop institutional frameworks that are supportive to the provisioning of public goods and services by multifunctional enterprises. For this a long-term support commitment and strong partnerships between actors in practice and policy will be of crucial importance.

