

**Case study: La Manchuela – Paralelo 40: Marketing rural tourism
(Castilla La Mancha, Spain) - 1998**

Paralelo 40 is a project carried out across 14 Spanish LEADER territories, coordinated by one Local Action Group. An Intranet rural tourism system has been developed which features rural accommodation and other local activities/events, and which will shortly be integrated in travel agents' systems at national and international levels on the Internet. Each of the 14 areas is responsible for collecting and updating data, training local people in system use and flexible and teleworking, and providing monitoring and assistance. The main aim is to make rural tourism information more readily available to the agencies and the customers, so as to be less reliant upon traditional marketing, e.g. at regional and national fairs.

The networking takes place along latitude 40 where 14 Spanish LEADER territories are situated. Similarly located territories in Portugal, Italy and Greece also cooperate with joint promotion and brochures. The project started as a grass roots initiative and has now become a more or less official form of networking, both using traditional means of communication as well as ICT. The initiative originally came from local community workers. Various professional bodies in the catering field were contacted and the project soon took on a business dimension. Paralelo 40 as such appeared in 1994 as a common project between 9 LEADER groups (6 from Spain and 3 from Portugal). Since 1996, more areas have joined the project, with La Manchuela acting as the coordinating body. Representatives from all the Local Action Groups involved participate in decision-making, convinced that they must reach the market directly in order to enhance the competitiveness of their rural tourism business, and that collaboration rather than direct competition was the way to achieve this. The project has received support for 70% of its just over 500,000 ECU budget from the Objective 1 regional scheme promoting telecommunications for SMEs.

The rural tourism networked system relies mainly upon the 14 local development agents acting as links with 147 accommodation places (mainly small hotels and bed-and-breakfast establishments. Another 667 firms are also using the system to market their products. A non profit association has been created, a new software application developed based upon existing software released by the Ministry of Tourism, and sub-contracts made for technical implementation to an ICT service provider. Each local development agent is in charge of collecting the data, training the operatives in computer use and teleworking, and in providing monitoring and assistance. The main problems have, in fact, been the low level of computing skills, marketing and management among the networking groups. A steering committee is in charge of the financial flows and a project manager coordinates operations.

Overall, this is a very good example of beneficial tele- and networking between a large number of LEADER groups. Considerable value-added has been created for all in a win-win situation which would not have been possible had the areas acted alone, or in very small numbers, and competed. The advantages of ICT networking, both in terms of the collaboration between the LEADER groups and in the tourism services provided for the end-users, are clearly shown.