

WHY A NATIONAL CONTEST FOR INNOVATIVE LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES?

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Senegal's Ministry for Local Governance, Development and Territorial Planning (MGTDAT) organised the first edition of the National Contest (NC) on innovative practices in local development as part of the project "Connaissance Innovatrice et Développement Local – CIDEL" (Innovative Knowledge and Local Development), funded by the Italian Government. The Unit for Technical Evaluation and Planning of Programmes and Projects (CPETP) of the fore-mentioned Ministry was in charge of the project execution.

The Contest aimed to identify and capitalize innovative experiences concerning local development in Senegal to facilitate their dissemination at a national and international level. It was also a way to establish a strategic partnership between researchers and public institutions promoting the engagement of universities in the development process of their territories.

Senegal is indeed one of the West African countries most marked by the multiplicity and dynamism of interventions in the field of local development led by different kinds of actors: the State, local and international civil society (community organizations, NGOs, etc.), local governments, technical and financial international development partners, decentralised cooperation actors. However, these experiences have not yet led to a critical mass of information that can be capitalised and contribute to defining their structural features, dominant trends, lessons learned, key success factors or major questionings. This explains why territorial innovations introduced by communities remain fragmented, rarely studied by researchers, not disseminated and poorly recognised by public authorities, thus risking their early collapse.

That is why the idea of organizing a national contest about innovative practices of local development was received as a positive initiative that would allow the systemizing of the most significant experiences and increase their visibility through international and national dissemination. Because of its pioneering approach at a national level, the initiative has actually set a good example for other actors, so that today many kinds of contests are being organised in Senegal.

This article recounts the history as well as the dynamics and characteristics of this initiative. The first chapter tracks the process: methodology and approach that were employed and the different stages that have allowed us to reach this publication. The second chapter shows what can be

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considered as the first major innovation of the contest, namely the multiplicity of actors involved in the process. The third and fourth chapter try to make an in-depth analysis addressing respectively the challenges and the strengths of the initiative, with a particular attention to the innovative aspects. Finally, the last chapter draws conclusions and defines future prospects.

A participatory and structured process

The process was broadly divided into three main stages. As part of conceptualizing an orientation note to guide regional committees for pre-selection, a strategy of information and communication was implemented to ensure familiarization with the process by the actors concerned. In a second stage, the pre-selected experiences were documented, allowing them to be ranked by a national scientific committee according to consensually pre-established criteria. Finally, the awards ceremony, the capitalization of award-winning experiences and their dissemination, both in the form of videos and articles, have completed the process.

The scientific committee was coordinated by Professor Sambou Ndiaye of Gaston Berger University (UGB) of Saint-Louis and was comprised by the vast majority of Senegal's universities, in particular: Gaston Berger University (UGB) of Saint-Louis, Assane Seck University of Ziguinchor (UASZ), Alioune Diop University of Bambey (UADB) and Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar (UCAD) through its Advanced School for Applied Economics (ESEA).

A draft orientation note, the first technical document to guide and frame the initiative, was meant to serve as a basis for writing the Terms of Reference (Tor) of the activity and was initiated by the Coordinator of the Scientific Committee. The note was shared, analysed and validated by the other members during a workshop involving regional and national development actors. This represented a première consenting an interaction between practitioners of local development and university researchers. Those moments of sharing took into account the different points of view that were expressed, permitting a finalised version of the note. Among the improvements we can mention the expansion of the activity to all fourteen regions of Senegal, the definition of categories of actors invited to present their innovative practices and major transversal topics the contest would focus on. In the end, the competition was open to Local Authorities (LAs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) who could present their experiences related to three main themes (access to basic social services, local economic development, governance) and / or in three transversal topics (gender, environment and peace and security).

Under the leadership of the Scientific Committee, evaluation, classification and selection of the experiences pre-selected by the regions were carried out in close cooperation with the two representatives of the Ministry in charge of Local Governance, Development and Territorial Planning. At the same time, a team of doctoral and master's students of the partner universities was set up to document, collect additional data and to write capitalization reports of the preselected experiences, together with their supervising professors. The students engaged in the process were first trained by the scientific committee for two days on the methodology and tools necessary for the good execution of their task.

Each student was responsible for documenting two experiences in the regions where their university operates and was supervised by a professor representing the same institution. The

mission lasted about two months and the research assistants were also accompanied by the contest coordinator for short periods of supervision. During the field mission, the students/research assistants interviewed key people and the main protagonists of the respective experiences in order to collect the information needed for a deeper understanding of the dynamics and the added value of each of them (i.e. sustainability, results, challenges, innovative aspects, etc.) It was on the basis of the results of these field missions led by the students, in the form of capitalization reports, that the final selection at the national level was made.

In order to ensure that the selection process was impartial, a double level of evaluation was used. First, two members of the national scientific committee gave an individual grade out of a maximum of ten to each experience; this evaluation was then discussed at plenary sessions which allowed the two evaluators to exchange their opinions and to agree on a final grade for each experience. At the end of the selection workshop, a ranking for each category was established. This exercise determined three winners for CBOs and three winners for LAs.

The official award ceremony for the first six experiences was held in Dakar under the chairmanship of the Minister of Local Governance. It was a moment of celebration and communication about the innovations that exist in the territories of the country.

The process was lengthy and sometimes complex. The scale of the intervention area, the multiplicity and diversity of actors, both due to their different levels of education and their differing roles, required considerable effort in terms of sharing and harmonizing language and approaches, as well as in coordination and organization. Nevertheless, these same aspects represent the added value of this contest.

The importance of plurality

Indeed, beyond the project team, several actors participated at different times and with different roles depending on the needs of the project. Among the main actors, we can count: the professors and students of the universities of Senegal, the deconcentrated technical services of the State, the staff of the MGTDAT.

Each University had appointed a representative to join the Scientific Committee coordinated by Mr Sambou Ndiaye of UGB. The scientific committee participated in the whole process in a variety of ways and to different extents in different moments. Mr Ndiaye provided the interface between the scientific committee and the project coordinator.

Moreover, for the sake of participation and transparency, the validation of the grade, including the admission and evaluation criteria, was submitted not only to the extended scientific committee but also to the representatives of the deconcentrated services of all fourteen regions of Senegal.

The extended scientific committee was also mobilized for the preliminary phase and pre-selection at a regional level. The Regional Selection Committees were made up of representatives of the local authorities and deconcentrated State services and were supported by the coordinator of the scientific committee. The Regional Selection Committees received, reviewed and submitted to the National Scientific Committee the 28 experiences that were subsequently documented.

The scientific committee, in fact, resumed its functions at the time of the documentation of experiences and final selection at the national level. The students who were in charge of the documentation work of the 28 field experiences wrote the quantitative and qualitative reports on each of them as reference document for the work of the scientific committee.

Finally, the coordinator of the committee took care of writing the entire capitalization report of the process and also worked with his UASZ counterpart to revise and produce the final version of the articles published in this issue of Universitas Forum, in cooperation with the Students.

This mechanism, multi actors with variable geometry, was one of the real strengths of this activity that had the merit of bringing together categories of actors who are typically disconnected and compartmentalised.

An obstacle path

Although the competition was enthusiastically received by local stakeholders and the final result was very positive, difficulties arose along the way. As mentioned before, the size of the intervention zone (14 regions), as well as the multiplicity and diversity of the actors, both in terms of their training and the distribution of their respective roles, were constraints to be managed. This is valid both from the point of view of financial and human resources, as well as for the coordination and monitoring of activities.

Another critical aspect is related to the political, institutional and administrative integration of the activity initiated by a “project”. Indeed, the activity suffered, on the one hand, from delays in provision of funds from the financial partner; and on the other, the administrative slowness peculiar to a bureaucracy. These two aspects contributed to slowing down the progress of the competition on several occasions, thus extending the duration of implementation. In the same way, the participation of certain deconcentrated State services was not always regular because of institutional changes that occurred during the process. These changes impacted both the continuity and the smooth flow of information.

It is also important to note the lack of experience of students in conducting such a participatory research process. In some cases, they did not receive all the support and follow-up expected from their professors. These failures impacted negatively on the quality of some capitalization studies.

One last, but not least, constraint is related to the communication that could have contributed to a more massive participation in the contest. Better communication would certainly have resulted in a substantial increase of the number of applications received.

The strength of innovation

By creating conditions for co-production that allowed practitioners and academics to interact in the field of local development, the competition has enabled the decompartmentalisation and active cooperation between researchers and public managers.

Another major innovation regards the highly participatory approach to the conception and execution of the contest, thus establishing a “democratisation” of innovation in the territories.

Various spaces for consultation and validation were set up to involve the actors in co-construction at each stage of the process. The aim was to ensure a good level of involvement of the different actors, as well as the appropriation of the activity and its sustainability.

The good centre-periphery relationship and the way it was structured can also be mentioned among the strengths of the competition. Different levels were involved and each benefited from the same information and the same treatment, knowing that each actor at each level of the chain contributes to the success of the activity. Local actors were empowered in identifying and pre-selecting the best experiences in their territory.

Finally, the contribution and the participation of the academic world, in particular of professors, but also of students, was decisive. This process allowed the students to acquire a field research experience quite different from the typical one of their academic course. The students who took part in the process were able to strengthen their capacities both in research, scientific writing and participatory capitalisation of experiences.

What future for the contest?

The experience of the competition was rewarding, both professionally and personally, for the actors who participated: the highly participatory approach and the final results were appreciated by all participants. Today, after the closing of the CIDEL project, the question is more about the follow-up to the contest and how to perpetuate it.

Certainly, the first edition of the National Competition of Innovative Practices in Local Development was a pioneering and interesting but, also, complex activity. In resolving the challenges mentioned above it is clear that future editions will benefit from the capitalized experience of this first edition, rich in lessons.

To this purpose, empowering the steering and organization mechanism, as well as the National Scientific Committee is a step to be taken in future. However, the composition, organization and functioning of this committee should be reviewed in order to make it more financially independent and more inclusive, also by extending it to other research institutes active in the thematic areas of the contest. The initiative would benefit, also, from being extended to other actors, such as the private sector or NGOs that often carry out positive and interesting initiatives. It remains fundamental to consolidate the role of universities and to enhance the value of students' input in order to provide them with a real and practical training opportunity.

In conclusion, the competition is a positive experience which nevertheless needs to be reviewed and adjusted to be replicated in order to make the most of the development of the territories of Senegal. There is no doubt that territorial innovation remains a major opportunity for local development.