

Master project: a research-action platform on mobility, welcoming new inhabitants and sustainable rural development in France.

Summary

The Master project (from the French, Mobilité, Accueil et Stratégies Territoriales Durables des Espaces Ruraux: for the joint construction of a research-action platform) is a cooperative initiative between civil society stakeholders and researchers to establish research into moving to the countryside and welcoming new inhabitants.

Key words

Citizen's participation in research, Ville Campagne collective, **participatory action research**

Context

The Master project is part of the Repère programme established in 2010 by the French Minister for Ecology, Sustainable Development and Energy. This programme encourages cooperation between stakeholders in civil society and researchers around sustainable development issues.

Partners

The Collectif Ville Campagne is a collection of 22 organisations (non-governmental organisations, regional authorities, teaching centres, media, networks, etc.) and some citizens and researchers in their individual capacity. It makes it easier for city-dwellers, particularly those with business plans, to move to the countryside. It also supports rural areas which wish to adopt policies to welcome new inhabitants, acting as an experimental laboratory for public policies, and is a national resource centre on these issues. In addition, it works on the European level as a partner to the MED Philoxenia Plus project.

The Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon is a training centre for higher education administrators and is an important social science research centre.



Activities

The Collectif Ville Campagne and the Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon have come together to study mobility in the rural environment, particularly how policies to attract new inhabitants can be integrated into a sustainable development strategy.

Initially, local actors met in 2011 to discuss their practices and the difficulties of moving to a rural environment and attracting new inhabitants. Researchers who actively listened during this initial phase, collated the elements which they published in the form of 'discovery reports'.

An international conference was then jointly organised by ENS and the Collectif Ville Campagne on this subject (December 2011). Participative workshops were organised, as well as various activities giving the floor to regional stakeholders.

Finally, an open discussion platform between researchers and stakeholders was created. Its aim is to structure a dialogue around issues defined during the preceding phases: permanent discussion workshops between researchers-stakeholders, planning research work, networking with regions conducting research work on these issues.

Throughout the project, two 'watchpersons' (a researcher and a member of staff from a national local development organisation) contributed to the quality of discussions between stakeholders and researchers.

Results and prospects

The project has worked well on a methodological level. The conference helped turn the issue of rural mobility into a research question of interest to young researchers and teachers. New research questions have been identified by the ENS and the Collectif Ville Campagne has changed its plans to more significantly integrate issues such as sustainable development, ecological transition and regional ecosystems.

The Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations - Marie Conseils organisation, which jointly funded the early stage of the Master project, has also decided to fund the research-stakeholders platform in 2014 in order to promote the participation of civil society in research activities on this subject, to test methods for jointly designing research programmes and to translate research on stakeholders questions about these issues into practical action.

Comments

Initiatives to promote the participation of citizens in research activities exist in a number of countries. See, for example, the European Union project Consider: www.consider-project.eu.

Other participative research projects aim to encourage inhabitants to collect data which is then made available to the researchers, without necessarily meeting them, in contrast to the Master project. These initiatives have developed in several environmental areas: natural inventories, studies of climate change, etc. They are initiated by researchers or local organisations. They do not aim to directly impact upon policy but to raise citizens' awareness, to improve scientific knowledge and to encourage public decision-making to take account of environmental issues.