

**Case study: Maestrazgo: New means of networking, collaboration and communication
(Aragon, Spain) -- 1998**

This LEADER group action has been experimenting with a number of innovative, electronic communication media in order to enhance collaboration and networking within the area. New communication tools have been introduced in order to tele- and network with local actors and external partners in the development actions being implemented in the area. For example, equipment projects combine with 5 other LEADER areas in the region in order to facilitate relations between LAGs and run operations, especially training, on a cooperative networked basis. The technical assistance of a specialised consultancy firm is being used.

Activities include:

- an electronic newsletter published five days per week since the beginning of 1998, each of which is about 200 lines and is distributed to about 225 recipients:
 - 98 of whom are local actors including about 30 schools and educational centres as well as town councils and main local associations, organisations and businesses
 - the group's main partners outside the area, including government agencies, universities, research centres and the other LEADER groups in the region.The newsletter is a summary of the main information about the area's development and is written by the group's manager on the basis of activities which have taken place or planned, as well as more general information from the regional authorities obtained from their web-sites. Once a week a press review is also published covering reports on the area in the regional and national press.
- a telecentre set up in a village of 600 inhabitants and an initial training course for potential teleworkers
- the telecentre has been equipped with videoconferencing facilities, as has another village about 50 kilometres distant, and several other villages are being equipped during the remainder of 1998.
- contributing to implementation of projects creating an Intranet network for small rural schools, an Intranet network for small local agri-food enterprises, and supporting teleworking in order to create new activities for the rural population.

In terms of project financing, one of the telecentre received 25,100 ECU from LEADER. Another 125,000 ECU was spent on computer equipment for small firms and local organisations. The online daily bulletin represents about 2 hours work per day.

The main achievements of this teleworking initiative are:

- the newsletter is a strong internal and external communications tool. Locally, it supports the collaboration and cohesion of the various rural development projects taking place and promoted or supported by LEADER, and gives a voice to everyone who wishes to be involved. Externally, it provides a favourable image of a dynamic area at the forefront of the exploitation of new technologies
- the direct employment of 8 people. Eventually, the objective is to help existing businesses and organisations by making optimum use of the new technologies for, for example, communication between agri-food enterprises or between tourist firms grouped together within their own associations, and for the purchase of products and making reservations on the Internet
- technological development. By using the opportunities provided by LEADER and other regional, national and European programmes, the LAG is playing a pioneering role in experimenting with the possibilities offered by the new technologies for internal communication, the promotion of local business, and the creation of new activities in a particularly underdeveloped rural area.
- overcoming initial problems, including coordination problems between all the different authorities and interests involved, and the difficulty of being stuck in a no-man's land between the public and the private sectors. The key is to get started and attempt to solve such problems with good will as you go along.