

Social cohesion and quality of life in a rural environment. The contribution of the socio-cultural associations for adults. The case of the Flemish socio-cultural farmers movement 'Rural Guilds' ('Landelijke Gilden').

By Hilde Bevers, Marie Martens and Peter Raymaekers

The topic of social cohesion has received considerable attention in recent years. Theories and literature pertaining to this domain are being developed and it has become a major issue in government policies.

While it appears that research up to now mainly focused on the urban situation and because civil society in general and the socio-cultural adult work sector in particular play a major role in improving social cohesion, this three-year research project is trying to formulate an answer to the following question: "What is the role of socio-cultural organisations in improving social cohesion in a rural environment in order to advance the quality of life?" Next to research, the partners aim at developing and assessing methods and interventions for the local socio-cultural organisations. The involvement of the Flemish socio-cultural farmers movement 'Rural Guilds' ('Landelijke Gilden') will guarantee the relevance of questions and final results. The 'Rural Guilds are a movement of inhabitants of the rural area and their family, united to realise a broad social program and to defend their rights. They support and structure volunteer work.

More specifically, answers to the following research questions are sought:

- How can the concept of social cohesion be refined?
- How can social cohesion in relation to quality of life of a rural municipality be described, how can this be analysed and which factors determine whether social cohesion is strong or weak?
- What role do the socio-cultural associations play in advancing social cohesion in these situations? What are the possibilities, as well as the restrictions and limits of the socio-cultural organisations for adults when developing "community building" in a rural setting? What impact do they have? What is the added value of socio-cultural organisations compared to other activities, such as sports and leisure, with regard to social cohesion?
- Which useful good practices (interventions based on socio-cultural work) may be organised, applied and possibly generalised by socio-cultural organisations to achieve social cohesion?

Initially, the research will focus upon whether and to which extent the existing scientific and theoretical understanding of social cohesion also applies to a rural setting. As a consequence, this research will focus on literature about the concept of social cohesion,

rural environment and socio-cultural adult work sector. The related social evolutions that are linked to the topics of this research will be treated as well. Questions about the status of social cohesion in a rural environment, the methods to analyze it, the search for explanatory factors regarding the level of social cohesion in a rural municipality call for an interdisciplinary approach and therefore this research component is rather theoretical and analytical. This research also comprises an empirical component. We strive to create a tool that maps social cohesion in five Flemish rural municipalities. A survey will be used to assess all aspects of social cohesion with regard to the actual situation and the situation desired by the respondents. The results of the survey will be carried over to the next phase of the research. While reflecting on the role of socio-cultural associations and its implementation in the rural environment, we will examine what impact they currently have on community building in a rural municipality. Linking this research component to a practice-based component will contribute to this research's bearing on the socio-cultural domain and its policies. Furthermore, we add an action component, where interventions will be developed, applied and assessed for the benefit of socio-cultural adult work organisations that try to achieve social cohesion.

The social significance of this proposal and its usefulness for public authorities, socio-cultural sector and education alike is enormous and offers various valorisation options. Thus, a balanced partnership between the socio-cultural sector and the academic world is being established.