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THE CALL FOR PROJECT PROPOSALS « LET'S LIVE MY VILLAGE »:
FREE INTERPRETATIONS AND COMPULSORY READINGS OF INNOVATION AND
CONVIVIAL VILLAGE AMBIANCE IN WALLONIA.

Problems and Context

Because Walloon countryside is easily reachable from the main cities, country people live in close connection with the urban world. The urban people colonize the countryside; the ways of life are less distinctive. The meaning of rural and urban is muddled. The drastic reduction of the number of farms (on one side) and the concern for biodiversity in towns (on the other) including the return of agricultural practices, both increase confusion. Yet, according to a survey (Laplec, 2012), less than 7% of Walloon and Brussels inhabitants hesitate to say that they live in town or on the countryside. However giving arguments for their assertion is more difficult.

The King Boudouin Foundation made two calls for project proposals in 2013 within the framework "Let's live my village". The aim was to stimulate innovation, citizenship, rural identity and as all the calls of the King Baudouin Foundation: "the working together for a better society". Formal organisations and less formal associations from the whole of Wallonia, including from areas usually seen as urban, have claimed their rurality. The Grant of 5000€ was worth the effort to find arguments for both the relevance of the project for the local community and the embeddednes of the project in the countryside. As rural geographer and member of the Jury, I was pleased examining both the call and the types of projects it has collected in order to enlighten the interpretation of rurality and rural innovation in Wallonia.

Methods

The paper scrutinizes 186 rural development projects selected on the short list of the first and second "Lets' live my village!" calls. It examines trends concerning rural community life and the identity of the leaders/brokers. It pays attention to the way that associations define rurality. Question 14 of the application form « Does your association act in rural areas? Explain" is the main source of information for content analysis and contingency tables.

Results

The analysis leads to several observations.
First, we notice the difficulty for village committees to succeed without any help from urban associations or from new comers from the urban world (neorurals). The projects had to be innovative and to include relatively elitist and even urban concepts. Actually, this led to the reinventing of the countryside. For instance, the success of the allotment gardens (in the countryside?) in the first call is more than interesting.
Secondly, we observe the difficulty to define countryside. Most of the groups use simply the maximum population density suggested by the OECD. If the population density exceeds 150 inhabitants per kilometres square, applicants turn to land cover data. Sometimes the living together, the community knowledge and the scarcity of different services were also used.
As for the projects, there is a professionalization of the actors who want to support local interactions. They increasingly substitute the "normal" citizens, the amateurishness of the youth group/events committee who simply wants… to meet together on the church square and take a drink. But this last activity isn't also part of living one's village?