

« REGIONAL SIGNAL PANEL » PROCESS

« EXPLORE »

Expérience Liégeoise pour l'Orientation des REconversions

TEF/ULB

Translation : Le FOREM

Methodology

After the compendium of methods used on different territories for the identification of the Key competencies of a Region" as well as principal organisations and institutions holders of key figures, the partners of the project "Regional Key Competencies" decided to concentrate the final phase of the project on elaboration and experimentation of a "Regional signal panel" proper to each Region.

The idea being to constitute a panel of experts able to bring forward a deepened lighting (to emit a signal) on the "Key competencies" of each territory. Each partner of the European project remained free in the choice of the members of the RSP, in the definition of the themes that will be approached with the interviewed persons and practical methods of investigation (frequency, round table, individual discussions,...)

The Belgian partners have first wished to constitute a panel of about ten persons, composed of technicians and of practitioners. The basic criterion being the choice of persons who, through their activity had to have prospects in comparison with the future of the territory. The political representatives were excluded from the panel, the principal objective to use the results of the investigation being an assistance tool to decision.

The realisation of the interviews was to allow the compendium and the treatment of differing interpretations of the principal economical and social actors of the territory in comparison with the key sectors of the Region (Regional Key Competencies), while considering all at once the current position of the employment local basin and its future (prospective approach).

About the methodological approach, we intended to carry out semi-directive interviews, using a grid of questions and provoke reaction from our panel to two types of objective data :

- A grid of dynamic statistical indicators on the socio-economic situation of the LIEGE basin (//WP2)
- Testimonies collected on a series of sets of themes (topics explored by the Danish and English partners) with workers victims of collective redundancies and advisers in professional accompaniment of the reconversion units from Le FOREM (PES) of LIEGE (after transcription of the interviews)

The significant number of reports/ratios and investigations realised in LIEGE concerning the socio-economic future of the employment basin*₁, led us to reduce the number of persons to question and to target the original character of a confrontation between the "first-concerned" (workers laid-off, advisers from the trade unions of the reconversion units and advisers from the Public Employment Service) and a thorough privileged witness of the evolution of the employment territory : Mrs Bernadette MERENNE, professor for economic geography from LIEGE University, involved for many years in the study of strategies related to the economic redeployment of the LIEGE Region.

Approached topics with the consulted persons

We decided to circumscribe our analysis field to a limited number of themes figuring in the interview's grid of the Danish partners. The four key questions were the following ones:

- **LIEGE nowadays** : identification of the "holder sectors" of the area; possible obstacles to inter-sectors mobility, new recruitment conditions and new employment statuses that accompany the economic changes of the employment area, assets of the basin, the appreciation of the effects of the globalisation on the area (seen like an opportunity or a threat for the development of the area and why), possible obstacles for the economic redeployment and opinions on the strategies implemented by local authorities in order to face it;...
- **LIEGE in 10 years** : feeling of people interviewed on the future of the employment pool. Positive, negative and why?
- **What are your personal prospects regarding employment** after the business closure?
- **What are as far as you are concerned the "ingredients" for Wellness?**

Presentation of the sample

- *Social advisers from the trade unions based at the "Eurofoil"¹ reconversion unit (operating from May the 1st 2005 until April the 30th 2006)*

Dorothee : former employee from "Eurofoil", 42 years old, 14 years of seniority in the factory.

Serge : former worker, trade union delegate of Eurofoil, 45 years old, and 13 years with Eurofoil, after 15 years at the "Tubes de la Meuse"²

Franco: former worker at "Eurofoil", 46 years old, 27 years of seniority and a 17 years mandate with the trade union.

- *Workers met at the reconversion unit*

Ignacio : Franco's brother, 41 years old, worked successively 2X6 months for "Eurofoil", 3 months for "Tubes de la Meuse" (end of his temporary contract after an accident) and several unemployment periods before going back to "Eurofoil" where he spent 13 more years.

Jean-Pierre : 48 years old, mechanic at "Eurofoil" for 22 years.

Claude : 44 years old, obtained a Degree in Higher Education(BAC+3) in Engineering and manufacturing technologies. Several jobs (with small and medium enterprises) before joining "Eurofoil" where he has been working for 9 years before its closure.

- *Advisers in professional accompaniment of Le FOREM (Walloon PES)*

Lucien JOHAS : has been advising former workers of several reconversion units (sectors of Chemical industry, Textiles industry, Air transportation and Steel industry³)

Francis HELIAS : (professional position similar to Mr Lucien JOHAS)

Anne JAMAR : she has already been working for the reconversion unit for 18 months

¹ Factory in aluminium extrusion, see the movie "Ou tu vas".

² This factory closed down in 1995 with 2,600 job losses.

³ In total, more than 1,600 workers collectively laid-off since 2002.

The movie “Out u vas” (Where you ´re going)

The production of the movie “*Où tu vas?*”, another product from the project “*Regional Key Competencies*” followed the first interviews from the RSP. Interested by the approach, the film Director has also decided to begin with the personal experience of the dismissed workers to illustrate the thematic of the economical redeployment within the LIEGE Region. Afterward The University contributed to the whole shooting. The movie is therefore in direct link of our contribution to the process of the “Regional signal panel”. The 3 advisers from the trade unions appear as principal characters. The other five workers in the movie (Christophe, Philippe, Alain, Xavier, Joseph) with their own social and professional past, enlarge up to 11 the number of workers who participated to our investigation.

Altogether, we met 14 persons from the reconversion units of LIEGE. Their testimonies are synthesised below by thematic. The interview of Mrs Bernadette MERENNE follows and will allow the reader to put the testimonies into perspective throughout the comparison between the comments.

RESULTS of the investigation

1) Investigation at the reconversion unit

Previously

The Regional Direction of Le FOREM of LIEGE counts today more than 55,900 indemnified job seekers out of an active population of 254,000. 55% among them have reached only the GCSE’s level.

But, the volume of job losses throughout the closure of traditional manufactures is often much higher than the amount of jobs that can be created through replacement activities, as for example the jobs within the service industry or even by the creation of new industrial activities or from technological plants based on old industrial waste lands.

The new jobs of that type are not generally accessible to a part of the dismissed persons who are either too old or too poorly qualified and therefore do not have the right profile to meet the employer’s requirements. Often, workers victims of dismissals have only access to minor jobs, poorly paid, often unstable and part-time without any prospect (temporary contracts, supermarkets, home-help...)

Regarding this context, we wished to study not only the strategies implemented in the territory in order to accompany new industrial changes but also personal and collective prospects of the employment basin inhabitants. According to testimonies of the first being concerned by the economical redeployment process of LIEGE’s employment area: some workers laid-off aged between 40 and 50, with a manual worker’s status, and of advisers in charge of their reorientation.

LIEGE TODAY

- **Holder sectors and obstacles to inter-sectors mobility**

Sectors estimated as “holders” by the interviewed persons are the sectors of construction, logistics and advanced technologies. In that respect, we can say right now that they correspond to some sectors mentioned by the economy and social actors of the territory. TNT (aeronautics) is considered being the main asset of the Region but the labour conditions implied night shifts, up until now. Alain, one of the characters of the film “*Où tu vas*” will inform us about the development prospects in the travelling transport sector (generating 450 jobs) and bonuses linked to his work. As for the autonomous Port of LIEGE, many people wonder about the profitability of the Transport (freight) sector if the local productivity is about to disappear. People questioned during our investigation do not seem aware of these developments.

People we have questioned agree to admit that the heavy industry is condemned to disappear. In that respect, if some jobs opportunities remains in that sector, the workers mention employment instability that characterises it, particularly through the predominant habit of getting short term employment contracts. The workers have to face a double reality, for the less ambivalent: on one hand, after many years spent to work at the factory, for most teamwork (3 shifts with timetable hardly convenient for a family life) and the recent loss of seniority and its associated bonuses, the workers are reluctant to the idea of reintegrate the employment market through precarious and short time contracts. They pin-point employment statuses as well as their will to put an end to what they mention as "sacrifices". On another hand, at the time when the territory has to deal with closures and restructuring companies, the workers are aware of the difficulties of reinstatement on the job market, of the little opportunities offered to their low levels of Education (for the manual workers) and therefore the even less opportunities to be able to fulfil their expectations in term of working conditions. Some also mentioned stereotypes linked to some specific sectors.

Serge: *It is a question of being able. I applied for 2 or 3 jobs, as deliverer for a company which distributes brochures and advertising folders, that seemed to be interesting. It was about to go in the hotels, in the tourist place in Belgium, but I never received any answers... You must have the Degree that leads you towards that function. And when somebody leaves the heavy industry, he would not get it. Not taking into account that the person who receives your resume (CV) has the image of someone who has been working for the steel industry and he will not take what he considers as a rough guy and so on... He would not dare to receive you.*

All of them will pin-point the little amount of new jobs created within the flourishing sector of advanced technologies in LIEGE. Many of them will dream to see a big factory established on the territory, able to engaged thousand workers victims of dismissals. These do however entrust that new businesses start-ups would go through the SME's development, with, for some, the fear linked to the absence of trade-union representation in small firms.

People we have met, altogether workers and agents of the PES, said to have knowledge of training opportunities that step by step set up on the territory in order to respond to skills required for new jobs (notably through the link of new *Centres for competencies* - [LINK](#)). But they pin-point the barriers to access to training sessions caused by delays due to endless waiting lists.

A lot of persons do also prefer to search a work whatever it takes to support needs of their relatives, holding therefore their former level of qualification.

Finally, the advisers from the reconversion units mention that the choice of training is more likely aimed at perfecting a number of skills already acquired before and not to make any substantial changes. The workers wish to be able to transfer their professional experience into a new carrier, being nevertheless aware of the concurrency with younger people.

Some of them orientates their choice to a sector of activity linked to a "passion" (in the movie, it is the case for Christophe, who became first aid trainer).

The "age" is also an issue that seems to influence the workers goals in their choice of reconversion process. One of Le Forem (PES) agent confirms that issue as well as Xavier in his testimony during the shooting.

Anne : *It is what we call the period of "mourning" which varies from one to another, also according to generations. The older people tend to be weaker and fall more easily into alcoholism, nervous brakedown...*

Based on my 18 months experience spent in the reconversion units, I am able to say that the older persons prefer to stay in the same sector of activity, as the younger ones are ready to leave towards a reconversion.

As far as registration to training is concerned, it is largely influenced by the public and the mentality of the firm they worked for. Younger persons tend to change their aims radically. They give us the feeling that they first start to work at the factory to just earn money, to eat. And now, they have the opportunity to think twice about their future and what they really want to do with their lives. At that moment they are ready to make a step forward to new opportunities.

As far as the older persons are concerned, aged between 40 and 50, it is rather more difficult... One of them wished to become a guide for nature, he has trained for it and he is now at work. But most of the time we can hear people's requests about earning the same salary and complaining : "Afterwards, I was not that bad" – To them it is a big step backward and we know perfectly well that they will never find jobs with similar wages.

- **Globalisation – a threat or an opportunity?**

When we questioned our "reconversion unit panel" on opportunities offered by the globalisation process, we have to admit that most of them considered it as a threat to begin with.

Conscious of the dependence of the local companies to the mechanisms of financial strategies, delocalisations and fusion between great multinational groups, seeing there even an opportunity for the "sectors which function" (advanced technologies), the principal regret is the absence of room for manoeuvre of the policy to control these mechanisms when they have an impact on the sectors of production and the successive collective redundancies which they generate. To some of them, another issue is also a faintness of men of power likely to control the investments from abroad.

- **Governance and responsibilities of the economical redeployment**

Trust between the persons we have questioned and their political but also economical and social representatives seems to be very low. The criticism aimed mainly at the lack of transparency, of communication from the authorities charged to co-ordinate the actions of redeployment of the employment basin (notably the GRE). The initiatives seems slow and threatened by the personal goals of the members

***Franco** : Trade unions should reach an agreement, as well as directors and also with the banks... They have the dynamism for, they want to do something but it takes too much time! There are so many safeguard barriers not to meet one another, to avoid one to take more than the other...and that carries damage to the correct operation of tasks. While these people argue, companies close down. I witnessed the closure of X as a member of the Federation for metallurgists. There were many conflicts because of the coalition between three parties, companies directors, trade unions representatives and banks managers and they could not exceed the texts which they had written within the framework of the redeployment strategies. The three of them sat down around a table and there are now so many barriers when one requests to grant a subsidy etc... We cannot make things work because a triangle has been set up and that there is always a side or two that cannot be held. There is always a side which is insulated ! (...)
It is similar to a triangle of fire : it is necessary to have air, fuel and a first spark to light fire. And there is always a missing ingredient!*

LIEGE in ten years

The majority of people we have questioned started to declare being extremely concerned about the future of the LIEGE's basin. They nevertheless foresee some opportunities for young people with a sufficient and adequate education background. Agents from the PES witness the negative atmosphere among the population of LIEGE, mostly among jobs seekers. These last ones remain convinced that the population could change its goals and could be ready to convert their skills to match a carrier opportunity plan for the region if they could only regain hope and feel themselves as actors in participating to the plans thought for the redeployment of the region.

Closures, bankruptcies and successive restructuring are the main factors of that negative atmosphere. Industrial wastelands along the Meuse's riverbank which wait to be rehabilitated, the fear for friends still depending of the giant steel factory ARCELOR under temporary contracts, conscious (concerning factories using the hot steel extrusion and being closed down in 2009) that they are either condemned or threatened (for cold activities) on a short or medium terms.



Regional Key Competencies

- a way to manage structural changes [AT6]

In the movie, the length of time spent to exchanges had allowed us to overcome resentment and let us “dream about LIEGE tomorrow “. Regarding that, many would underline the specific nature of LIEGE’s inhabitant, his happy appearance, persevering and courageous. Culture would also enhanced as a tool for development. We will see for that matter that their purposes meet those of our key witness (Bernadette Mérenne).

Ingredients for Wellness

We have to admit that the panel of people we have interviewed refer to employment and mostly to be able to have a steady job. Ready to make a sacrifice on their previous salary, the most important being to live a structured way of living, “not to fear his job” and being able to get involved in their work.

Serge : “ I cannot get involved if I do not know where I am going”

Franco : “ When a employee works in a healthy environment, there is a greater productivity than an employee who has to work in a dirty disorganised workshops and where there are risks of accidents! My job at the factory was to ensured wellness at work!

If the exercise of working during the day is among the requirements to go back to work, having a steady professional activity is what matters most to be able to make projects and being able to get a balance between their work and their family life. For most , steadiness is therefore the bigger aim. “steadiness and the rest will follow”

Anne : “ As far as I am concerned, wellness is to go to sleep at night knowing what tomorrow will be made of. It is a steadiness in life. When I was a job seeker the hardest was to say to myself, would I receive an answer tomorrow?,... Steadiness in life; is to be able to say “ tonight I will shut the door, tomorrow I will be able to open it back”. But wellness does not come on its own, we have to get it. Life does not give you many gifts, but we can also make our own gifts! About working, it is money, therefore if money is not happiness it does seriously help. And I believe that the consumer society we live in does not improve things, because it is tight! Wellness insures against too many changes, a minimum of steadiness.

Healthcare has also been mentioned by our panel of interlocutors.

2) Interview Bernadette MERENNE

LINK

total, more than 1,600 workers collectively laid-off since 2002

