

“Learning regions” – what do we refer to? Two Portuguese examples:  
Marinha Grande and Coimbra  
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<sup>1</sup> The present text is part of the portuguese contribution (coordinated by Fernando Ruivo) to the final report of the international research project “Rencom” (“Facilitating Regional Learning Processes in a Competitive Environment: Regional Socio-Economic and Cultural Developments in Three Accession Countries and Three Member States”), approved and financed by the European Union between 2002 and 2004. The complete report, which includes contributions from Portugal, Belgium, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary and Poland can be find and consulted at <http://www.vub.ac.be/SOCO/tesa/rencom.htm>

## I Introduction

In the first place we must notice that the case studies that will be consecutively presented hold place in a very particular context – the context of the “RENCOM” project - “Facilitating regional learning processes in a competitive environment: regional socio-economic and cultural developments in three accession countries and three member states”, in the ambit of the European Commission Targeted Socio Economic Research programme (5<sup>th</sup> framework, call on “Improving the Human Research Potential and the Socio-economic Knowledge Base”).

In this sense, what it will be at stake here is, then, from the beginning, to find, analyse and compare a set of national based regions where particular and specific processes or initiatives have had some degree of success (no matter its measure), transforming such regions in “learning regions” and, consequently, in “winning”, or potentially “learning” and, therefore, also latent or potentially “winners”. The portuguese cases, Coimbra (“Instituto Pedro Nunes”) and Marinha Grande (“M-Group”), would later and uninterrupted be compared to the other international chosen cases <sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, we must notice that the proper notion of a “region” finds herself some difficulties, some of them even paradoxical or confuse: first, a region can be a concept more driven towards physic geography (for instances, the region of “Serra da Estrela”, the “Beira Baixa” or “Terras do Demo”, giving examples merely from the region “Centro” of Portugal, this latter defined as NUTS II<sup>3</sup>); secondly, it can be a concept appropriated by economics (the wool manufactures of the city of Covilhã or the Serra traditional cheese); thirdly, it can proceed merely from history (the “Montes Hermínios” as the authoritarian social constructed base for the “Lusitanian” nationality); and, finally, it can even be a simply (or not so) administrative concept (the NUTS III<sup>4</sup> of Serra da Estrela).

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<sup>2</sup> Wroclaw, (The Lower Silesian Science Festival) and Lomzynnski (the Lomza Credit Guarantee Fund) in Poland; Anhalt- Zerbst in Germany (direct-sellers network); Heves (Bull’s Blood project in Eger) and Fejér (commercial airport project) in Hungary; Haspengouw (fruit auction co-operatives) and Halle-Vilvoorde (DHL superhub project in Zaventem) in Belgium; Gabrovo (Vidima Ideal-Standard enterprises) and Veliko-Turnovo (Rahovetsgas regional gasification project) in Bulgaria. General results can be find in Schamphleire (2005).

<sup>3</sup> “Nomenclaturas de Unidade Territorial”. NUTS II refers to administrative regions.

<sup>4</sup> NUTS III refers to groups of municipalities.

In this way, it is easy to conclude that the idea of a “learning region” is somewhat diffuse, and perhaps elastic, especially with this last precise sense or meaning. And that who is in a process of learning, much more than the regions, are exactly the agents or actors (individual and, more particularly, collective agents) of this former territory<sup>5</sup> (independently of the meaning that one can give to this idea), allowing that in such regions the wealth created may be much more significant than in the other ones, these more marked by the “fatalism” of the geography or history.

So, the cases that we will be dealing with below have as their basis a precise territory (the geography meddling in), administrative and historically very well delimited – the “municipality”, “Concelho” or “Câmara Municipal” (in one case Coimbra and in the other Marinha Grande).

Both cases are very much specific and distinct, but they also present some similarities. Those specificities and similarities need to be brought in advance to evidence.

How are they distinct?

They are distinct, at once by the nature of the actors or agents – in one of the cases (Coimbra) we are referring to an institutional agent and in another case (Marinha Grande) to an individual agent. They are distinct because of their objectives: in one case (Marinha Grande) the question is “cementing” a strategy of development, that will create employment, for a given administrative context (the Northern part of the District of Leiria), conjugating the public governments (central and local) and private; in the other case (Coimbra) what one aims is to have a “interface” structure between the community and the University (in association), setting out this capacity to “produce” knowledge, in order to solve practical problems of the entrepreneurship world and creating a possibility to “incubate” companies, of a new technological character, as well as offering conditions to professional formation. They are also distinct by the “level” in which the negotiation between agents processes itself: in one case (Coimbra) the negotiation takes place, firstly, in the seat of social organs officially established; in the other (Marinha Grande) the negotiation is done in a more informal (and a bit *ad hoc*) context and where different sensitivities and different “powers” cross themselves (and posing a greater risk to them).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ruivo (2000a; 2000b).

And how are they similar?

They are similar because they evolve in a context of (relative) autonomy and of affirmation, in face of a metropolitan centre (Lisbon) clearly centripetal and in a very strong way attracting the different types of resources (capital, human, technological and so on). They are similar because, at each one's level, they aim at fixing resources (thereupon human and, in one of the cases, highly qualified) in the places (the "regions") where they take place. Yet they are similar because they set out to find "bridges" external to the "regions" and even to the Country (the case of the European Union), as is the Pacto Territorial para o Emprego da Marinha Grande [Territorial Pact for Employment of Marinha Grande], an initiative of the European Union, or participating in I&D projects with partners of other countries (the case of the Instituto Pedro Nunes - IPN). They are similar, because they have the local government (the respective Municipality) as an inestimable partner, capable of solving the "small" issues of daily management, such as those of infrastructures and licences. They are similar, finally, because they aim at the entrepreneurial universe, without exhausting themselves in it.

In the portuguese contribution to this project we shall then analyze, briefly, the main features that characterize each of these cases.

## **II.1. Contributions from the Marinha Grande learning networking**

### **1. The strategic importance of the moulds industry in Marinha Grande**

Marinha Grande is a municipality unequivocally industrial. Traditionally known for its glass and crystal, nowadays, the industry of moulds has become much more predominant. This sector grew in a more substantial way in the last decades of the XXth century, which shows that most of the enterprises began their activity recently. One of the characteristics common to these companies is that they export about 90% of their production (mostly for countries as the USA and Canada). Located, in general, in a high competitive standard, they seem to be particularly attentive to the technological developments (e.g., computer science technology), trying to innovate and to modernize in terms of equipments, and they reveal growing concerns in what matters to the planning of the production and the control of quality, as well as the investment in the formation of human resources.

Besides some fragilities that the sector presents (e.g. lack of skilled labour, resistance to innovation, disorganization of the productive structure) - and that can become worse in a scenery of great competitiveness and international competition -, it is recognized that the moulds manufactured in Marinha Grande continue to demonstrate some associated potentialities, namely, a high technical component and a constant effort on the part of the entrepreneurs to be up to date, innovative and competitive.

### **2. The role of the (key) actors involved in Regional Development**

Considering this (new) scenario, some local entrepreneurs were involved in the implementation of a strategic plan that seeks the promotion of regional economic development. In particular, we have to distinguish the role played by one of them, whose career is profoundly linked to the moulds industry<sup>6</sup>. He is the President of one of

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<sup>6</sup> He began his professional activity in Marinha Grande, at the age of 14, as an apprentice in the industry of wood packing. Two years later, at the age of 16, he gave his first steps in the moulds for plastics industry, sector where he developed an ascending course in the last 51 years, executing functions as an

the biggest moulds enterprises groups in the country (whose head-office is in Marinha Grande), which has grown for almost three decades, until becoming one of the largest world organizations of the sector in terms of the production of moulds for the plastic industry.

We believe we are in the presence of an “innovating actor”, since he is trying to impose a project in the regional development, namely through:

- his political enrolment and the entrepreneurial dynamism, which he helps to promote through the group of enterprises he manages<sup>7</sup>;

- his central role in the process of implementing, in the municipality of Marinha Grande, one Territorial Pact for Employment.

In the following, we shall look, with more detail, at the role he has been playing in both kinds of initiatives, that is:

- a) in the expansion of his own group of enterprises;
- b) in the process of defining other ‘actors’ identities and roles in the context of the implementation of the Territorial Pact for Employment.

### **A) The “MGroup”**

The “MGroup” was founded in 1975 as an enterprise of design and commercialization of moulds for plastics. It developed rather fast, transforming itself in to a group with growing implantation at the production level. By acquiring existing enterprises and creating others of technological root, it delineated its strategic structure in 1978 and consolidated itself in 1986 with the acquisition of Aníbal H. Abrantes – the founding enterprise of the moulding industry in Portugal. By that time, it attained a strong Commercial, Technical and Production structure that allowed to offer a

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angle cutter operator, assembler, drawer, planner, head of the project office and commercial technical director, until achieving the actual position of director-general.

<sup>7</sup> We shall refer to it as “MGroup” in order to preserve the group confidentiality.

flexibility and production capacity with a unique dimension (both at the national and the internationally levels) and that transformed it into a reference in the sector.

The group (with seat in Marinha Grande, located in the Centre region) has followed a strategy of internationalisation, being, in the present, constituted by eleven enterprises in Portugal and six abroad (with presence in Mexico, Tunis, Sweden, Germany, England and Brazil).

Among its main concerns, we evoke the formation of its staff, as well as the development of activities of Research and Development and of new products, which allow it to be in the forefront of production of equipment for, e.g. civil architecture, systems for the automobile sector, appliances.

Although it produces mainly to the automobile sector, it has been trying to diversify its production<sup>8</sup> by supplying large enterprises such as Philips (coffee machines and air purifiers), Electrolux (vacuum cleaners), Samsonite (suitcases) and the aeronautic industry.

#### *The “MGroup” and the development of a new cluster*

The dynamism that characterizes the “MGroup” and, more generally, the moulds sector, associated to the release of innovative products (like the ones mentioned above), is designated by “our entrepreneur” as “a horizontal "cluster" of industrialization of products”, for whom “the companies of this sector, strongly exporter, are to reorient in other senses, taking advantage of the acquired competences in the moulds to enter in other areas of activity, namely product engineering, prototyping, design, investigation and development programs, injection of plastic materials, automobile components, electric material , or packaging”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> One example of this effort made by the group comes from a company of the same area that was in financial difficulties and that the “MGroup” acquired about one year ago. With this acquisition, the group started to count with a company of injection of plastics destined to other areas besides the automobile industry, developing new products, as the recent solar oven, solar panels (still in development) and the formworks in plastic for the building site. Some of these products represent a high investment in innovation and in the patent register, as it is the case of "EcoBox", the formwork made of recycled plastic” (Fonseca, 2003: 70).

<sup>9</sup> Neto *cit in* Fonseca, 2003: 70.

To this respect, the entrepreneur refers the importance of “integrating the production of moulds with other components and other competences in the sense of arising in the chain of value”<sup>10</sup>. In that sense, it is considered that the companies of moulds and of plastic materials have been developing forms of business cooperation, namely, with the subcontracting of the production according to the specialization of each one. This cooperation, unfortunately rare in Portugal, dates from the fifties and is largely due to the geographical concentration of the cluster, located in Marinha Grande and Oliveira de Azeméis<sup>11</sup>. The companies are united in a single association, Cefamol, that possesses a Technological Centre and that promotes regular meetings and business missions with their associates (Fonseca, 2003: 71).

The main idea that lies beside the arguments presented above is that, considering the recent evolution of the main sectors installed in Marinha Grande, the actual chain of value or "cluster" is based on the moulds sector, in the engineering of products, in the transformation of plastics, in the components for automobiles, in the bookbinding and in the graphic computation<sup>12</sup>, and not on the glass sector, which is becoming progressively secondary.

This is (also) the point of view sustained by the moulds entrepreneurs who are trying to delineate some actions in order to consolidate the modernisation and internationalisation of these (new) sectors. In order to accomplish this task, some of them clearly recognise the importance of promoting the cooperation among them, e.g., of working in a coordinated way, so that they can respond in the very short term (and assuring a high quality) to the new demands of the international markets/firms. The growing articulation/partnership that seems to exist between them corresponds to one of the criteria established by the European Commission to the implementation of Territorial Employment Pacts (EC, 1996).

## **B) The Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande**

In the development of the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande we have to recognise the important role assumed by these local entrepreneurs, who

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<sup>10</sup> Neto, *cit in* Fonseca, 2003: 70.

<sup>11</sup> Oliveira de Azemeis is located in the North region.

<sup>12</sup> *O Correio*, November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

proposed some important and relevant initiatives. They were influenced by some studies containing an exhaustive characterization of local environment that allowed them to define a set of strategic lines of intervention. One of the prominent goals was to promote new conditions of competitiveness to the industry of Marinha Grande and, more generally, to the local-regional economy. Their specific aim was to constitute an “excellence pole” at the regional level. The fulfilment of this project was based on two central initiatives:

a) the creation of a Local Development Agency (Agência de Desenvolvimento Local), which should assume the juridical form of a joint stock company, with the mission of promoting the global economic development and of supporting the development of small and medium enterprises (PME’s) favouring the creation and sustentation of jobs<sup>13</sup>;

b) the creation of a Local Development Society (Sociedade de Desenvolvimento Local) that should cover the juridical form of a “venture capital society” with the objective of supporting and promoting investment and technological innovation and, secondarily, assisting the financial administration, administrative and commercial technique of the announced societies<sup>14</sup>.

Both initiatives were included in one of the priority domains of the Territorial Employment Pact for Marinha Grande that consists on the enlargement of the chain of value associated with the local industries (moulds, plastics and glass) and on the strengthening of the competitive plan. Besides these two initiatives there were other projects (under the same domain of intervention), e.g., the creation of an Incubator of Enterprises linked to the Technological Centre for the Industry of Moulds, Special Tools and Plastics (CENTIMFE<sup>15</sup>), and the delimitation of a *Região Delimitada do Vidro da Marinha Grande*<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> PTEMG, s.d., *Pacto Territorial para o Emprego da Marinha Grande. Formulário.*

<sup>14</sup> PTEMG, s.d., *Pacto Territorial para o Emprego da Marinha Grande. Formulário.*

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, we distinguish the role played by CENTIMFE, a Technological Centre that has played an important supportive role to the moulds industry, in particular by organizing training courses for the workers of this kind of industries.

<sup>16</sup> Glass delimited region of Marinha Grande.

We emphasize the economic purpose that emerges from this kind of initiatives and that is strongly linked to the (initial) strategy defined by the Territorial Employment Pact for Marinha Grande. The main defender of this strategy was the local entrepreneur mentioned above, who was particularly interested in the use of the economic and business dynamism of Marinha Grande to capture private investment, both national and foreign, through the implementation of active initiatives for the promotion of the potentialities of the area. With this idea in mind, he considered the manufacture and development of final products as an essential strategic goal that would require the involvement of other regional partners. According to his point of view, the economic strategy was, in fact, linked to a social concern which consisted, precisely, in the creation of jobs in some nearby municipalities<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the Territorial Employment Pact for Marinha Grande should reach, beside the municipality of Marinha Grande, the north communes of the district of Leiria, setting out an “active regional policy of solidarity”.

In other words, it should be a “pact of solidarity between regions”. In this sense, the defined guidelines sought to promote actions whose results would produce the inclusion as well as diffuse territorial effects, and not just be bounded to the territory of emergency of the Pact, in this case, Marinha Grande. Recognising that the Leiria-Marinha Grande region shows some industrial development autonomy and capacity, these capabilities could be used to attract integrating enterprises to the interior of the district.

#### *Other actors involved*

In order to accomplish these ideas, the local entrepreneurs – namely our central actor – recognised the necessity to activate and conquer the (financial) support of the national State.

Or, if the value and the innovative/interesting aspects of the initiative were, in a first moment, recognised and advertised, gradually, however, their need for heavy financial contributions created substantial obstacles.

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<sup>17</sup> e.g. Pombal, Figueiró dos Vinhos, Castanheira de Pêra.

In fact, we think we can see here some contradictory effects since this was meant to be – as it is said by the actors involved - a project where the state should be considered as a (simple) partner – instead of being the central actor responsible for the coordination, definition and management of the initiatives – however, it’s the state (e.g. some members of the government) they blame for not having accomplished the results they desired or, in a more general way, for not having really understood the entire value of the project. These critics were extended to one of the actors territorially involved in the project as the state representative - the Comissão de Coordenação e Desenvolvimento da Região Centro (CCDRC)<sup>18</sup> – whose role became less and less noted. In a first moment it was responsible for the dissemination of the information concerning the Pact and for mediating the relations between the partners. However, in a more advance phase, its role became less relevant. The reasons we can identify are the following:

- (1) it was not the entity designated as coordinator of the project;
- (2) the guide-lines privileged by other partners of the Pact – (more) strictly connected to the economic development strategy already identified - were not seen as crucial to some elements of CCDRC.

In fact, in the case of the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande, it’s interesting to analyse the engagement and the evolution of the roles played by the main partners involved. Beside the CCDRC, the other representative of the state, in this case at the local level, with a prominent role is the Câmara Municipal<sup>19</sup>. In particular its President and Vice-President were, from an early phase of the process of implementation of the Territorial Employment Pact, particularly involved, although their role has changed along the process. In a more substantial way since the re-election of the Socialist Party that took place in 1997 (obtaining the majority of votes), they assumed the management of the entire process<sup>20</sup>, privileging, in the other partners’ view

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<sup>18</sup> Coordination and Development Committee of the Centro Region.

<sup>19</sup> Town-Hall.

<sup>20</sup> It is also important to mention that the Town-Hall Vice-President was designated Coordinator of the Pact. Here we must stress that in the subsequent development of the Pact, the local authority (e.g., Câmara Municipal of Marinha Grande) began to assume the leadership and some of the partners’ initially involved were no longer closely linked to the development of the initiatives (namely the local

(e.g. the CCDRC, the local entrepreneurs and some workers representatives), the aspects of the strategy that best suited their interests.

In what concerns the other partners' role, besides the private sector representatives – that in the case of Marinha Grande assumed, as we tried to sustain above, an important part in the project – we should identify the workers representatives and some local associations.

In both cases, they were involved mostly in the first phase of the constitution of the Pact and, progressively, they're participation diminished. Especially the workers representatives have, in this respect, a very critical position, namely towards the town-hall representatives – who, in their point of view, assumed a role too prominent – and the entrepreneurs – whose intentions do not take in consideration the (real) workers employment difficulties.

#### *The re-positioning of the actors and its effects*

Thus, we remark that the partnership developed, the way each partner perceives each other changed and the (different) actors view had to adjust to the (new) circumstances<sup>21</sup>.

In what concerns the positioning of the actors and the way it developed over time, we can identify the following general trends:

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entrepreneurs). Its involvement, in a first period of time (1993-1997) that coincided with the election of the Socialist Party without the majority of votes, was accompanied by a period of intense negotiation and availability to articulate strategies of action. In the following period (1997-2001), having won with the majority of votes the Town Hall Presidency, the dynamics of cooperation and participation lost some of their strength.

<sup>21</sup> One of the ideas that emerge from the experience of the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande is that local actors appropriate, according to their specific interests, the actions planned and the logic of intervention. In the case of Marinha Grande, we notice that there were different moments in the implementation of the Pact and that the leading strategies were differently appropriated according to the more prominent actor. This is not, necessarily, a negative contribute of partnerships, though, and in the case of Marinha Grande it implied a different approach of the problems. In fact, according to some authors, this idea emphasizes the influence that some actors can exercise through their political power and their capacity to mobilize resources and strategies (Ruivo, 2000a; Ruivo, 2000b). The case of Marinha Grande can, in this matter, turn into a very interesting case study, since we can observe the ways local actors behave according to circumstance, their abilities to manage resources, their capacities of negotiation.

a) in a first phase, the most significant partners were assembled, but soon the collaboration and availability of the several partners for dialogue and negotiation were replaced by the consolidation of individualized courses, marked by strategies and goals rather contradictory;

b) in the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande<sup>22</sup>, we can observe a confrontation between three actors’ perspectives in particular: the one defended by the CCDRC (emphasising the importance of the workers’ qualification); the one sustained by the entrepreneurs (especially the most prominent of them in what concerns the emergency of the Pact); and the institutional one represented by the municipality representatives (who basically saw in it the possibility of doing things that otherwise they could not achieve). At the end, as it is recognised by most of the partners, this was the one that succeed to impose itself.

Considering the way the experience of the Pact developed, namely in what concerns the partners’ enrolment in the project, we can say that this enrolment is strongly related to some circumstantial/environmental conditions (e.g. the political party who is in charge in the local and national governments) as well as to the characteristics of the actors themselves. Therefore, we should assume that there is not a rigid distribution of the roles played by each one. On the contrary, we can clearly detect the interference of factors like (1) the autonomy that the actors possess and use in order to get trough the formal/institutional obstacles that emerge in the “acting scene” and (2) the kind of relations they establish with each other determining not only the strategy

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<sup>22</sup> In the case of the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande, we have to recognize that the Pact had some successful effects, namely:

- a) Improving professional training in the traditional glass industry, with the establishment of an official training centre for the glass-making industry funded by public and private capital;
- b) Restructuring the glass-making industry through the implementation of the “Intervidro” project, consisting on the training of craft workers and the creation of a certification mark and seal to indicate authentic local workmanship;
- c) Increasing networking between businesses in the plastic-molding sector;
- d) Implementing actions in the field of social exclusion.

Some of these initiatives are good examples of how working together can bring benefits to both the public and private sector (EC, 1998). We also have to recognize their impact in the transformation of the council’s image achieved, namely, through the re-qualification of local glass making-industries and a reorganization of the urban space (e.g. enlarging an industrial zone, where enterprises must from now on be located).

they agree to pursue as the success (or unsuccessful) of the initiatives that derive from that same choice (Valadas, 2003: 214).

This leads us to recognise that there could be a tension between the plan of the conception of the strategy and the plan of its implementation, the last one being the one where the different interests of the actors that participate in the process and that (try to) conduct the strategy towards their needs and goals can be more clearly noticed (Valadas, 2003: 214).

### **3. Results of the regional developmental project**

If we turn to the initial strategy elaborated and disseminated by the actor who tried to improve a new regional cluster in the region of Marinha Grande (based on the production of moulds and plastics and in other related activities), and if we take in consideration the reconfiguration of the partnership that should have contribute to its implementation, first of all, we need to say that it had to face some important obstacles.

In this matter, we think that we can distinguish two kinds of main and different obstacles:

a) The ones we can designate as “internal” – related, namely, to the lack of a common interest/purpose of the actors involved and to the lack of autonomy of the local representatives in order to obtain financial support for some of the initiatives designated;

b) The ones whose strength is also to be considered but that derive “from the outside”, in the sense that, for instance, they are related to economic general circumstances and to the pre-conditions for the establishment of the European Union initiatives (in this case, the Territorial Employment Pacts). In fact, we need to consider the general climate of competition at the world scale (e.g. some Asian and Eastern countries produce moulds quite elaborated and by a lower cost) with important effects on the moulds produced in this region. On the other hand, the experimental initiative supported by the European Commission in order to eliminate and/or reduce employment problems at a regional-local level – the Territorial Pacts for Employment - was not

accompanied by some specific financial instruments<sup>23</sup>, therefore requiring an articulation between different levels of governance (that in the Portuguese case, namely with the Territorial Employment Pact of Marinha Grande, seem to have failed) and persisting imaginative plans and proposals on the part of the partners involved.

The practical results of these two types of obstacles interferences show us that some of the concrete initiatives that were planned, so far, have not been put in place: this is the case of the Local Development Agency and of the Local Development Society.

Nevertheless, there are some positive results that we can recognise, e.g., the discussion of local problems (and what can be the best solutions to solve them) by the most representative local actors; the internationalization of the local experience and namely of some of the best practices developed in the territory where the Pact was implemented.

#### **4. How policies are made: some general ideas**

Using Michel Crozier and Erhard Friedberg (1977) words, we recognise the importance of looking at the “actors logic” and we sustain the idea that the understanding and appropriation by the actors, in this case of an initiative established to deal with employment problems, varies in function of the “manoeuvre space” that they dispose and of how they exercise power, of the strategies more or less favourable that they use to sustain their point of view and/or their interests.

As we have tried to show, local and structural contexts and characteristics, for instance the political and economic initiative of some “central” actors, can contribute to determine how local-regional strategies are reoriented and, in a more general way, how are policies implemented at the local-regional scale.

This fact shows us the importance of a local level analysis<sup>24</sup> in the sense that it reveals us the ways actors orient their actions and deal with the different kinds of constraints, and that we can detect the contradictory objectives and interests of the

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<sup>23</sup> These initiatives formulated within those Pacts should have been included in the structural funds pillars.

<sup>24</sup> For the importance of the local level analysis, Ruivo (2000a; 2000b).

actors involved which, in some cases, are responsible for tensions very difficult to surpass. This was the case of the partnership created in Marinha Grande. The way it developed, namely in the context of the Territorial Employment Pact, reveals a great contrast between the strategic aims elected and the instruments and actors designated to pursue them, revealing a remarkable contrast between the plan of the principles and the real implementation and consolidation of partnerships<sup>25</sup>.

In a more general context, the explanation for this should also be searched in some of the specificities of the Portuguese case. In our society the generalisation of this kind of practice (partnership) is still not very frequent, showing, on the contrary, a certain institutional individualism<sup>26</sup>. In particular, our municipal representatives illustrate some strong territorial selfishness that often transforms them in a sort of blocking agents of a strategy for regional qualification conducted behind the borders and the electoral strategy of each municipality<sup>27</sup>.

This is precisely what the European initiative considered is meant to do, that is “move away from a situation where each partner focuses on its own priorities and interests – including private enterprises focusing only on potential benefits to themselves. The partners should achieve an appreciation of “common interest” and they should be pursuing actions which will be exploiting the dynamics of the whole territory, producing benefits for the whole area, its people and businesses” (CE, 1998).

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<sup>25</sup> Representing the contradictions and disparities between something we could represent as “law in the books” and “law in action”. This “bottom up” perspective of the localization of public policies reveals the decisive importance of the game played by the actors involved in.

<sup>26</sup> Costa, 1998: VIII.

<sup>27</sup> This ‘centralism’ of the local authorities in Portugal, its origins and consequences for the political system, is particularly analyzed in Ruivo (2000a). On the contrary, the conditions for the emergency of (initially informal) effective networks supporting and implementing local public policies is presented in Ruivo (2000b).

## II. 2. Coimbra – a learning region? An example: The Pedro Nunes Institute

### 1. Coimbra as a Centre of Knowledge

The initiative that is now going to be analysed (the Pedro Nunes Institute) arose in a specific context, which is territorial, cultural and economic – the city of Coimbra – and this fact is not a matter of chance: the initiative emerged in this precise city and we think that it could not have emerged in any other given the city conditions for framing it.

In fact, the city of Coimbra (a medium-sized city, in national terms, with a population of around 130 thousand inhabitants) is situated between the metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto, in Centro region, and has quite an old university tradition. The University was established in the XIIIth century<sup>28</sup> and today is made up of eight Faculties<sup>29</sup>, as well as having a large number of Research Centres in a very wide range of fields<sup>30</sup> (from Environmental Law to Physics of Radiation and Materials; from the Social Sciences to research into light and image; from Experimental Particle Physics to the investigation of the forest and paper, etc)<sup>31</sup>. It has around twenty five thousand students.

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<sup>28</sup> It was ratified by the Bull of Pope Nicholas IV, on 9/8/1290, with the faculties of Arts, Law, Canon Law and Medicine. Then, in 2005 the University will have seven hundred and fifteen years, belonging to the small group of the oldest universities of Europe.

<sup>29</sup> Law, Letters, Sciences, Medicine, Pharmacy, Economics, Psychology and Sports.

<sup>30</sup> More precisely, there are almost a hundred Research Centres in the University.

<sup>31</sup> With respect to these research centres, we would like to refer the following illustrative data :

“- According to the classification made by the Ministry for Science and Technology, 18% of the 28 research centres in Portugal, in the area of health sciences, are in Coimbra (...).”

“- Around 20% of the research centres in Coimbra, in the area of health sciences, and evaluated by the Ministry for Science and Technology, were classified as “Excellent”, while the remaining 80% were classified as “Good”. The evaluation of all the R&D centres, carried out by the Ministry, showed that at national level around 38% of the centres were classified as “Excellent” or “Very Good”, while in Coimbra the percentage was almost 48%”.

“- According to the Science Citation Index (1995, 1996 and 1997), the R&D centres in Coimbra recorded a total of 474 international citations (15% of all the citations of Portuguese research institutions). (...).”

Data taken from CCRC (1999: 31-32).

More recently, in the closing decades of the 20th century, and following a “model” that emerged in the seventies, a Polytechnic Institute was created, with its various schools<sup>32</sup>.

Thus, as it can be understood, the city has a vast and wide range of facilities, infrastructures, human and material resources which, in terms of both polytechnic and higher education, is of considerable significance.

The city also “polarizes” a vast area, making itself a centre of excellence for services, especially in the contexts of Education and Health.

## **2. Coimbra as a centre of old industries and the restructuring of its territory**

The allusion to “industry” in the city is relatively old and is in accordance with the usual “industry”/“city” logic (a more or less explicit model of urbanization/industrialization).

In fact, as early as the XIXth century we find references to factories, as, for example, the creation, in 1873, of the company “Coimbra&Irmão”, in the field of metallurgy and metalwork; in 1875, the “Companhia de Fiação e Tecidos de Coimbra” was founded, operating in the field of textiles; in 1896, the “Fabrica de Massas Estrela” was created, which focused on flour milling, pastry and compound foodstuffs; in 1922 both “Cerveja de Coimbra, Lda” and “Casa Minerva” were established; and, in 1920, “Coimbra Editora, Lda” (publications and graphic arts).<sup>33</sup>

The behaviour of industry was such that it “constituted one of the main driving forces of the expansion and internal reorganization of the urban area”<sup>34</sup>. Some of these companies are still around today or, at least, clearly live on in the “memory”, that is, as building heritage (industrial archaeology) which, in some cases, is at risk of disappearing.

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<sup>32</sup> Escola Superior Agrária de Coimbra, Escola Superior de Educação de Coimbra, Escola Superior de Tecnologia e Gestão de Oliveira do Hospital, Instituto Superior de Contabilidade e Administração de Coimbra, Instituto Superior de Engenharia de Coimbra.

<sup>33</sup> This information and fuller details can be found in “Coimbra. Uma visão estratégica para o desenvolvimento empresarial do distrito”, published by the ACIC in 2002.

<sup>34</sup> ACIC, 2002: 4.

However, for reasons related to the economic crisis in the early seventies, aggravated by internal influences such as the change of the authoritarian regime in 1974, as well as the fact that industry has become a “neighbour increasingly less well-tolerated by the people, for its acoustic and atmospheric pollution”, and due to “its own technological evolution, both in terms of ancillary production facilities and new products, since it demands a growth in the plants’ infrastructure that urban growth prevents”, the city’s industry has moved to the North (Coselhas, Loreto/Pedrulha, Eiras/Ademia, Fornos/Souselas) and to the South, in the direction of Condeixa-a-Nova, following the N1 highway. Thus, “the city is encouraging tertiarization and, at the same time, industry is moving to suburban and rural areas”<sup>35</sup>.

Nowadays it is usual to say that “Coimbra is the city of the ‘doutores’, graduated people, without the capacity for business initiatives”. This may be so, but from the total “stock” of companies based in the Centro Region<sup>36</sup>, 8% was based in the municipality of Coimbra (the municipality of Leiria had 7.9% - and was the closest to it).

Furthermore, bank deposits (an indirect indicator of regional saving) in the municipality of Coimbra reached a value of 1 685 686 thousand euros – the highest figure in the whole territory of the Centro Region.

Finally, it is worth noting that the municipality of Coimbra has 1.886 of the Country’s Purchasing Power Percentage (one of the highest levels in the Country).

### **3. Coimbra as a centre of decentralized services of Central Administration**

It is a commonplace to claim that the University (of Coimbra) is “divorced” from its surrounding environment, specially from the business world. It is felt that the University is enclosed within its “ivory tower” and pays little heed to the search for solutions to problems of a more or less practical nature, that the various agents may confront it with.

This is not really the case, however, and that claim must be somewhat questioned: the old and firmly fixed constructed image could, perhaps, not correspond

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<sup>35</sup> ACIC, 2002: 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Data reported to December 2001.

to a somehow changing new reality. In fact, in a document written by the Coimbra's Business Association, one may read that "The links between the University and other private or public institutions (...) developed over the last few years, especially since the eighties, and they reveal a capacity for dialogue between the University and the actors in social and economic development". It is also acknowledged that "science is the driving force of modern industry. In this sphere, Coimbra has a University, as well as institutes and laboratories that are important at both national and international level, which allow the university body to take part in industrial research, as well as being engaged in education"<sup>37</sup>.

The city also enjoys a range of public services that have resulted from the process of decentralization of these same services that followed the revolution and the democratic transition in April 1974. The various Delegations/Regional Management Boards of the different sector-based Ministries (that range from issues related to employment, vocational training and social security, to issues related to regional development), as well as the different public Institutes, numbering several dozen, in total. Furthermore, the city also hosts the Coordination and Development Commission of the Centro region, the head of a administrative region and a very important institution of the portuguese deconcentrated central administration<sup>38</sup>.

#### **4. The example of the Pedro Nunes Institute (IPN)<sup>39</sup>**

From what was above mentioned we think that we may conclude the following patterns:

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<sup>37</sup>AC IC, 2002: 33.

<sup>38</sup> It one, and a very active one, of a group of five administrative regions, with a very extensive territory that goes almost from Lisbon to Oporto.

<sup>39</sup> Pedro Nunes was born in 1502 (the era of the Discoveries). He was an eminent Portuguese mathematician (he was a cosmographer and became the chief cosmographer of the kingdom in 1547, and Professor of Mathematics at Coimbra). His main works are:

*Tratado da Esfera*, in 1537, in which he presents the concept of loxodromic curves;

*De crepusculis*, in 1542 where he describes his invention, the vernier (an instrument used in Astronomy, Physics and Engineering to determine the scale, linear or angular, invisible to the direct vision, or a scale that is adapted to another to make a precise measurement of fractions of a smaller division of this latter);

Book on Algebra in Arithmetic and Geometry (of which there is one edition published in Antwerp, in 1567)

- there is a complete “window of opportunities”: the presence in the city and in the territory of the region of the oldest University in the Country and its research centres (as well as other polytechnic and higher education colleges, reinforcing the same window);

- there is a need to be met: it is the result of the existence of a business world which, due to growing economic globalization, is faced with increasing competition. In order for it to survive, it must find technical and technological solutions, “design” new products and new production processes – and it will only be able to do so with the help of the “stock” of knowledge which exists in the University (there is, therefore, a proven need for cooperation between the business world and the world of knowledge “production”).

The Instituto Pedro Nunes has become to find answers for the cooperation issues raised above – an Association for Innovation and Development in Science and Technology.

The initiative was originated in the University, in particular from the Faculty of Science and Technology, challenging local governmental institutions (the City Council, for instances), business associations, institutes, foundations, personalities and individual companies<sup>40</sup>.

The IPN thus emerged in 1991, with the aim of fostering “scientific and technological research guided towards cooperation with organizations, companies and both university and non-university institutions. The Instituto also promotes the training and modernizing of scientific and technical cadres and personnel, the provision of services in the field of innovation and the introduction of new technologies with the view to making companies to become more up to date and capable of transferring technology”<sup>41</sup>.

To attain this goal in the ways indicated in the Article 4 of the Memorandum and Articles of Association, we stress the reference to the promotion of “scientific and

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<sup>40</sup> The current members are about three dozen in number and come from institutions ranging from the University and Coimbra Polytechnic Institute, to large transnational corporations, and small and medium-sized businesses on a local/regional scale, business associations, financial institutions, foundations, public institutes and to local government organizations (Coimbra City Council).

<sup>41</sup> Article 3 of the Memorandum and Articles of the Association.

technologic development” (number 2, sub-paragraph b)) and that of responding to “requests from entities or companies, public or private, in the field of scientific and technological innovation and the rendering of specialised services” (number 2, sub-paragraph d)).

The IPN has thus established itself as an “interface” between the University of Coimbra and the community (especially the business world), in three fundamental ways:

- support and rendering of services of a technological nature to companies and other institutions (through its laboratories);
- incubation of companies of a technological nature;
- training of human resources.

The operating logic for the projects involves the existence of a Scientific Coordinator (a University Professor) and this job is perceived as a university extension<sup>42</sup>.

During a first stage (approximately until the year 2000), we could witness a huge development of a particular laboratory – the LIS (Laboratory for Computer Science and Systems) – given the market’s huge appetite for these activities. It faced a bit of a crisis, however, when the information “bubble” burst.

During this first stage, the laboratories and companies in the incubator followed a fairly competitive logic, which led, for example, to companies searching for qualified staff within the laboratories, which consequently found themselves stripped of the staff that they had trained.

Since this procedure would occasionally lead to dysfunctions, in the transition from the XXth to the XXIst century this working logic was re-thought, in an attempt to articulate the activities of the laboratories and the companies in the incubator. This led to a redirecting of the Laboratories’ activities towards the development of co-financed

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<sup>42</sup> This aspect could be a critical factor: the Professor, influenced by his university activity, might have to choose between this and the meeting of deadlines in the projects that are part of the IPN’s activity (and meeting deadlines, for businesses, is actually a key factor in their success).

As a matter of fact, the protagonism of the personality of the scientific coordinator was very important to lay the foundation and to run the continuity of the project. The coordinator, a woman, we must point out for Portugal, was simultaneously Full Professor of the Faculty of Sciences and Technology (Sciences of Computing Engineering Department) and Vice Principal of the University. Ruivo (2000b) describes the importance of this type of protagonisms for the territorial implementation and localization of all the types of public policies.

projects (and focus less on providing services), and also to the creation of companies from these projects (“spin-offs”). There was thus room for a strategic differentiation between the activities of the laboratories and the companies existing within the incubator.

This structure has suffered from two important problems:

- the leaving of qualified staff;
- the issue of industrial property (and patents)<sup>43</sup>.

At the moment the IPN has the following laboratories:

- LED&MAT: Testing Laboratory for Wear and Tear & Materials
- LABGEO: Geotechnical Laboratory
- LABPHARM: Laboratory for Pharmaceutical Studies
- LAS: Laboratory of Automatic Systems
- LEC: Laboratory for Electroanalysis and Corrosion
- LIS: Laboratory for Computer Science and Systems

These laboratories provide services to the it’s members, as well as to the University of Coimbra and other Universities and Institutes, in the region and the country, and whoever else seeks its services, also developing Technological Research and Development projects.

The activity of the Incubator, in 2003, had an amount of 17<sup>44</sup> companies in it, with an occupation rate of 94% in areas as diverse as Computer Science and Multimedia, Health and Life Sciences, Design and Publishing, Electronics, Automation and Instrumentation, Quality and Environment, Archaeology and Anthropology.

To gain an idea of what is at stake one needs only to mention that the business turnover of the companies installed in the incubator reached, in 2003, 2.9 million euros – a significant figure, given that we are talking of “emerging” companies. Furthermore, since the incubation period is two years (if and when necessary extended to three years), and given that the value of the business turnover in 2002 was similar, one can conclude

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<sup>43</sup> These questions, most especially that of industrial property (and patents) is, moreover, apparently under-estimated in our Country.

<sup>44</sup> A total of 19 companies have already passed through it (and six are in this moment in the virtual incubator).

that the business turnover of the companies that left was offset by the business turnover of those that entered. It is also worth pointing out that we are referring to a period – 2002/2003 – of strong economic crisis in Portugal<sup>45</sup>.

In terms of the impact of this initiative, it is worth mentioning the following points:

- the activity of the IPN has allowed a significant amount of highly qualified staff, especially in the field of computer engineering, to remain in the city. It is estimated that in two of the companies alone, that are or have been in the incubator, there are, at the moment, around eighty people with that training – and this number could rise to around one hundred);

- in the portuguese “Público” newspaper (11/05/2004), a headline ran “A Portuguese company dealing with the estate of George Orwell”. The body of the article stated that: “the series of news articles with flattering references that have been published about this company of software and services for controlling bibliographical information is lengthy and would lead one to suppose greater commercial success. BookMarc was the company selected by the University College of London (UCL) to deal, electronically, with George Orwell’s estate and it produced the software that the National Library used to create the National Bibliographical Database (Porbase) in 1997”.

Further on one could read the following words: “WIT.Software created some of the mobile phone games available to Vodafone customers. Critical Software contributed towards the reliability of the computer systems, for NASA, The European Space Agency and Intel, and has delegations in Lisbon and Silicon Valley. Crioestaminal is a pioneer in Portugal, in the collection of stem cells and CWJ, Electrical and Electronic Components, has customers such as the Jeronimo Martins Group and the multinational Teka” – what does this mean? “As well as their success, these companies share with Bookmarc the fact that they are, or once were, installed in the business incubator at the Pedro Nunes Institute (IPN)”;

- the above-mentioned ACIC document contains the following conclusions: “Business incubators, of which the Pedro Nunes Institute in Coimbra is an example, are

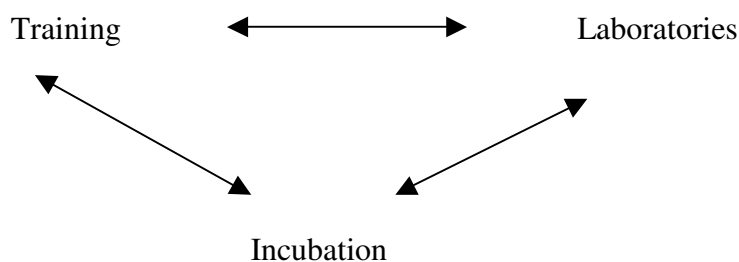
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<sup>45</sup> Evidence of the crisis, regardless of knowing the cause or consequence, is the fact that, in 2001, the number of companies in the incubator was 20 and the business turnover was around €5 million.

structures designed to protect the new development and creation initiatives of young companies, while also constituting an Innovation and Company Centre, since they aim to transfer technology for the creation of innovative companies or for other forms of valuing technology. At the same time, they can harbour nuclei for the research and development of new products – e.g. design new products and even manufacture them (...).”

The success of the IPN experiment enables us to agree and conclude that “In Coimbra, (...) the passage from the phase of *incubation* to the *science* park is gestating (...)” (ACIC, 2002: 34/35).

This type of result is connected with what one would call the “triangle of success”:



Finally, a small remark: all the things we have been describing above do exactly mean that Coimbra is a learning region? Probably yes, but not in the sense as one of the ‘macro-regions’ with profile of ‘*Learning Regions*’ in a global economy marked by the ‘knowledge revolution’ “(DPP, 2003: 14).

### **III. Some conclusions**

As it was referred before, the nature of the two described experiences is very much distinct. This fact, however, does not mean that one can not foresee some conclusions.

The first conclusion is that we are, in both cases, referring to processes that take place in open societies and economies, thus, in which external and uncontrollable influences are felt, originating increased risks to such processes that brings forth a relative and limited success guarantee.

The second conclusion is that we are dealing with a set of different agents and that their relationship, not being regulated by strict, formal and official norms, gives birth to a certain informal unpredictability based on negotiations, cessions and commitments so that certain goals can be attained.

A third conclusion is that the draw of public policies (the structural framework) is important and is a “sustainer” for the building of those policies. But we should also assert that the sustainer is only a mere sustainer and, besides, not totally determining the real local performance of policies. Being so, we should have a necessary supplementary attention to the territory, agency and agents, in short, to local initiative (public and private) in order to understand the complexity of the real processes of building and implementing policies (Ruivo:2002).

A fourth conclusion is that unsuccessful can be “around the corner” and can result of the seeking of more or less conflicting or unnecessary protagonisms.

A fifth conclusion is that the perennial of the experiences is bound not only to the fixed goals, but also to the persuasion capacity of a (some) protagonist (protagonists). These two conclusions derive from the importance of the so called “personal equation” for policies.

“Learning regions” – what do we refer to? Two Portuguese examples:  
Marinha Grande and Coimbra  
Fernando Ruivo, Bernardo Campos e Carla Valadas

A sixth conclusion is that it is continuously necessary to reformulate goals (or identify new ones) and, consequently, to proceed to adjustments and reorganisations under pain of the initiatives wasting away.

A seventh, and last, conclusion is that, if the triangle’s liaison “knowledge” → “innovation” → “competitiveness” is correct, then the experience described in the Coimbra’s case dispose of more success conditions.

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