

# EU Rural Review

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## Creativity and Innovation in EU Rural Development

# Innovation in Germany's Allgäu: a region promoting its Pioneers

**In the very south of Germany, the Allgäu, four Leader areas are actively tracking down innovative ideas and people. An ideas competition, and the active search for 'Regional Pioneers', has helped promote targeted development of innovations in the Allgäu.**

The Leader approach, covering four LAG areas from the Bavarian Allgäu region, has involved running an 'ideas competition' to stimulate new rural development projects. Winners of the competition are awarded the title of 'Regional Pioneers' and over 250 entries were received for the first round of this successful project, which led to some 18 different project awards. Many of these Pioneers project ideas were subsequently integrated into the LAGs' development strategies, and people from the Allgäu region hold their Pioneers in great esteem.

Four LAGs ran a second round of the ideas competition in search of new Pioneers during 2009. In particular, organisers were looking for people who wanted to actively participate in shaping social change with their innovative projects, and contribute to their region remaining multi-faceted and worth living in.

Dr Sabine Weizenegger is the managing director of one of the LAGs involved in the Pioneer initiative. Her Oberallgäu LAG whole-heartedly supports the idea of identifying regional pioneers. According to Dr Weizenegger, agent-oriented approaches – which she encountered

and learned to appreciate in Africa before taking on her current job in the Allgäu – are an essential element of regional development that is fit for the future. Dr Weizenegger believes that bottom-up approaches like 'civic participation' in Europe equate with the international aid programmes that promote 'helping people to help themselves' approaches in developing countries. In her opinion the two concepts are basically the same thing since they are both about focusing on local people's needs and abilities, from the bottom up.

Could you briefly explain how the Regional Pioneers project came about and what the motivation behind it was?

Our Regional Pioneers initiative emerged from a Munich-based foundation association, Anstiftung & Ertomis. The idea was first presented to us during 2006 by one of our cooperation partners in the region, the Allgäu Centre for Self-Supply. We were very enthusiastic about the approach, right from the start, because it provided a relatively simple way to find out about all the initiatives you never hear of, as well as get to meet the many innovative and creative people who lack a platform. The Regional Pioneers project provided us with a straightforward way to remedy that.

How does the actual search for Pioneers work in practice?

The search for Pioneers during 2009 involved a public invitation to tender, where Pioneers were able to be nominated, or nominate themselves. The categories were: Social Networks and Commitment; Trade and Agriculture; Education and Culture; Living and Working; Quality of Life and Leisure; and Nature and Environment.

A jury is used to select the 'best' ideas from Pioneers and winners are presented at the Kempodium in Kempten later on in the year. Winners are also featured online at [www.anstiftung-ertomis.de](http://www.anstiftung-ertomis.de). It's a lot like a talk show or a panel discussion, with the exception that it's not so much of a debate – but rather a stage for the Pioneers to present their concepts by way of answering questions posed by those present, and to get to know each other.

A central objective of your project is to bring innovative people and their ideas to the fore and to raise awareness about the topic of innovation. How do you personally define innovation?

It is difficult to find the right yardstick for assessing innovation, because one region's standard may be another region's innovation. It is important that innovation is always linked to further developing something that already exists. As far as content is concerned, it may be a new product, new product quality or a new service, new processes, new channels and forms of marketing, but also new forms of cooperation and organisation. As regards the quality of an innovation, the first step is certainly to copy ideas from other regions, that is to say, 'import' projects that haven't been implemented in that form in our region. Combining several known elements to form a new idea is more sophisticated. The highest level of innovation is creating or inventing something completely new.

Sabine **Weizenegger**



SABINE WEIZENEGGER



**When you think of the Pioneers in your region, what motivates these people to commit themselves and to implement their own ideas?**

The most important factor is your own conviction! And all that many people need is a tiny little push to become active. A triggering event like an ideas competition, promotional funds, or simply someone saying, "great idea, keep it up", works wonders. It is interesting to note that most of our Pioneers don't consider themselves to be innovators. Instead, they say things like, "But what we're doing here really is nothing special."

Many Pioneers are simply not the kind of people who are used to being in the limelight or in top positions. They are mostly 'ordinary' people, but people who lend a hand, who do what needs to be done! Such as a pub owner with a regional menu, a school pupil with civic commitment or a trader with an ecological agenda. This leads me to another exciting aspect: our Pioneers come from all layers of society and age groups!

**What do you consider to be the most important effects of your project?**

Public recognition strengthens and motivates the Pioneers in our region. Additionally, the joint appearance during the presentation of their innovative projects is often the first step towards an exchange of experience and networking. An important effect is also the media reporting about individual Pioneer project ideas. This and all other publicity measures within the scope of our search for Pioneers contribute to the development of a creative environment in our region in which innovative thinking is both recognised and supported, and not dismissed as nonsense.

**In your opinion, what is needed in European rural development policy to take innovation and creativity to a higher level?**

Dedicated innovation promotion programmes are useful, especially if they focus on social, ecological and rural-economic value added. These need to extend beyond traditional agricultural interests and be relevant for all sorts of rural stakeholders. And, when you really want to promote innovation, you have to do away with perfectionism and accept that some things may go wrong in innovative projects. Because when you are absolutely sure in advance that everything will run smoothly, then your project is probably not bad but in all likelihood it is not particularly innovative.

Innovation needs a testing ground, and innovation support guidelines must not imply that failure can't be permitted. This is an area where I wish that those responsible were more courageous.

It is also important for me that the politics concerned with rural development focuses on variety. That is definitely something that is being promoted by approaches like Leader.

More information about Sabine's work with innovative rural development is available at:

[www.anstiftung-ertomis.de/opencms/opencms/region/pioniere.html](http://www.anstiftung-ertomis.de/opencms/opencms/region/pioniere.html) and [www.regionalentwicklung-oberallgaeu.de](http://www.regionalentwicklung-oberallgaeu.de)

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