CURRENT CHALLENGES AND INNOVATIVE APPROACHES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERIPHERAL REGIONS IN BULGARIA (THE CASE OF IVAYLOVGRAD MUNICIPALITY)

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The paper approaches territorial cohesion in SEE from the perspective of social equity with regard to the opportunity to choose to live in one’s native place without compromising the quality of life. It is interested in border areas – both physical and virtual; in real life situations as meeting points of theories and policies influencing human lives; and in the emerging challenges there that often make us question once and again our concepts and actions as experts. Based on the Bulgarian case-study analysis, the authors discuss the effectiveness and current challenges of real-life implementation of EU and national policies aimed at sustainable development of peripheral regions. The rural peripheral municipality of Ivaylovgrad is an indicative case study for the ongoing processes in the peripheral regions of Bulgaria and the efforts to overcome a continuing loss of working places, services, markets and further isolation from the rest of the country since the early 1990s. The paper presents a critical view of initiatives and projects undertaken by interest and local groups in the period 2006–2010. Possible innovative approaches for regional revival are considered and conclusions are drawn about the importance of creating development strategies sensitive to the existing and emerging socio-cultural patterns.

Key words: SEE, EU cohesion policy, sustainable regional development, socio-spatial networks.

INTRODUCTION

In the context of an increasingly urbanized world with decreasing and scarce resources, a question inevitably emerges that has to be answered – whether we should consider peripheries a problem or an opportunity to find a better way for a balanced urban-rural relationship (RSA, 2009). The topic of rural regions in Europe is nowadays being researched with a growing awareness about the complexity of issues and interacting factors. Recent research studies are increasingly focused on process-oriented aspects: (a) rural development continuity (Vergunst et al, 2009); (b) co-operation between actors within rural development projects and emerging power relations (Csurgó et al, 2008); (c) the role of knowledge in reconnecting social and natural systems and in the development of indicator systems capable of supporting joint learning by resource users (Parkins et al, 2001; Reed et al, 2006; Bruckmeier and Tovey, 2008); (d) multiple factors influencing the dynamics of sustaining activities (Pantic and Miljkovic, 2010); (e) potential effects and challenges of interaction by socio-spatial networks in remote rural regions (Mulder et al, 2006).

The paper discusses regional policy issues as traced in the particular context of a Bulgarian peripheral municipality, but also situated at the meeting point of several broader topics: sustainable regional development and its peculiar dimensions under the dynamic peripheral/border conditions in Europe, real-life implementation and effectiveness of EU pre-accession and cohesion policies, as well as broader issues of the ‘continuity-change’ dichotomy in regional development and the challenge of developing as a rural region in an increasingly globalized and urbanized world. The paper provides arguments stating the need to formulate policies in a way more persistently sensitive to ‘life on the ground’ processes and in measuring and estimating policy success and failure in the long term and from multiple perspectives. In accordance with EU cohesion policy priorities (Davoudi, 2010), it is focused on people and processes in space as determined by a particular cultural context;

The paper is partially based on analyses undertaken within a university research project (UACEG, contract BN 103/2009)
on social equity with respect to opportunities created in living places; and on the emergence of value-based identities and communities in peripheral regions as an important factor for enhancing social capital — mentioned in all official documents on sustainable development and territorial cohesion, but in many cases still strongly underestimated or misunderstood.

The case study discussed the municipality of Ivaylovgrad, located in a border region in the south-eastern periphery of Bulgaria. Varying regional policies applied from the mid-1980s to the present day at different levels of governance and under different political systems have attempted with no significant effect to stop and reverse the unmanageable and unsustainable trends of socio-economic decline and depopulation of the region. Based on an analysis of available scientific references about the region and personal experience gained through contacts with local authorities, educational and cultural institutions through academic research (1988–1989), NGO activity (2005–2010) and educational field trips (2008–2009), the paper discusses the need to re-conceptualize regional policy efforts with a stronger focus on bottom-up processes, local capacity-building and partnerships in long-term initiatives designed with the purpose of achieving a higher level of regional and local independence. The need for a new regional development policy is asserted, which should be based on integrated approaches, supported by deeper interdisciplinary research and evaluated through specific sets of indicators sensitive to the local and regional socio-cultural context. The role and potential of rural peripheries are finally discussed in the context of more global spatial interactions and environmental impacts.

**BULGARIAN BORDER REGIONS: REGIONAL POLICY CONTEXT**


Regional policy came into focus of the Bulgarian national government in the 1970s, when the consequences of the broad industrialization processes undertaken in the country since the early 1960s became clearly visible — fast urbanization changing the ratio of urban–rural population in the country, population concentrated in large industrial centers, and — despite the approved subsidies for agriculture—diminishing and aging population, and settlements with fading functions in rural and peripheral regions. The Integral National Plan for Territorial Development was adopted in 1979, the problems of the south-eastern peripheral region of the country being already clearly visible and addressed by state policy in the early 1980s. In 1981 the region was already strongly lagging behind the rest of the country in both industry and agriculture, with resulting serious demographic tendencies of depopulation. In the period 1965–1985 the Strandzha-Sakar region lost about 45 000 inhabitants, while at the same time the population of large industrial centers in the region increased. There were also considerable inner migrations inside municipalities, from villages to municipal or secondary centres. The key political document providing policy measures for regenerating the Strandzha-Sakar and Ivaylovgrad regions was adopted in 1982 (Statement No. 22/12.05.1982 of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers). The targeted region was later on communicated and known as The Republic of Youth. The Statement prescribed a set of strategic measures to slow down and reverse the negative tendencies: support for small and medium size enterprises, development of agri-industrial complexes to provide employment all year round, securing technical, transport and communication infrastructure, better housing and social services, upgrading social care and educational infrastructure, promotion of cultural heritage and tourism; and measures to stimulate people with secondary and higher education from all over the country to settle in the region.

A National Research Programme for the Strandzha-Sakar Region was funded and a series of symposia were organized to discuss its findings and policy implementation results. Although the region saw general development tendencies of depopulation, in 1985 Ivaylovgrad was considered a region with comparatively favourable conditions, and the demographic structure was expected to be balanced by the year 2000 through measures that were to be implemented. Part of a field research, undertaken within the National Research Programme, focused on the effective operation of the educational network (primary and secondary schools) and tried to outline the opportunities provided by integrated facilities for education and culture in smaller settlements to increase investment efficiency in social infrastructure (Dragiev et al, 1989). However, no effective action was undertaken by state administration and a year later the overall problems the municipality is facing political changes brought additional challenges to the region and required completely different approaches to meet them.

**Regional policy in the period 1990–2010**

After the democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe during the 1990s, planning activities were generally abandoned and neglected for almost a decade — partly because of the extreme shifts in social and economic life and partly due to a general misunderstanding about the liberalization of society after the shift from a centralized economy. Planning practice was then restored thanks to both external and internal encouragements and was based on a decentralized approach (Regional Development Act, 1999). The need for harmonization between socio-economic and spatial planning at all levels was confirmed.

A National Regional Development Plan and district development plans were elaborated. According to the Spatial Planning Act (2001), a National Integrated Development Scheme is to be elaborated. Work has started by developing a Methodology for the elaboration of the National Scheme (to be bound with the National Regional Development Plan).

The Spatial Planning Act envisages the elaboration of regional development schemes, yet work in this field has hardly begun. A second generation of district development plans is in the implementation phase. It is recommended that they should be coordinated with district development schemes, but there has been no substantial evidence of such harmonization yet.

The elaboration of municipal master plans was continually hampered by financial deficit, however, in the period 1999–2000 a number of Municipal Development Strategies and relevant Action Plans were prepared in all Bulgarian municipalities, the updating of which should take into account future municipal master plans, to define a territorial basis for economic and social planning.

Rural multisectoral policies in support of agriculture were a typical approach in the 1990s, although actual subsidies were very low (due to budget limitations) compared to the levels agreed on with the WTO. There were also annual campaigns for targeted subsidizing of production costs. Later on, through the support of EU pre-accession instruments, an enhanced correspondence between the state, SAPARD and CAP measures was achieved. Nevertheless, the implementation of these measures was considered rather weak and
ineffective because of the general low quality of projects, suspected/reported corruption and patronage of intermediaries (UNDP, 2004). The integrated rural development policy with a territorial emphasis on economic diversification, provision of infrastructure and services, and environmental protection was introduced though the National Plan for the Development of Agriculture and Rural Regions in the early 2000s, mostly supported by SAPARD programme.

Estimated policy results: impacts and shortcomings

The first policy steps were marked by rather contradictory practices. There were some good examples and satisfactory results, but also numerous common shortcomings due to misunderstanding the priorities, low quality of project concepts or their implementation, poor institutional capacity and a lack of experience. Although some municipalities prepared their own local sustainable development strategies (Local Agenda 21), supported by international and national NGOs and UNDP in particular, these did not develop as practical instruments beyond the provided time-limited grants, as observed elsewhere (Petarakos, 2001).

It is important to mention the GEF/UNDP ambitious and large-scale Rhodope Project (2004–2009), aimed at alternative livelihoods related to the protection of the globally important biodiversity in the Rhodope Mountains. Along with numerous positive results in many of the target settlements, the published project SWOT analysis outlined the shortcomings of the process (Stavreva, 2007). The main strengths mentioned comprise existing tourist traditions in some of the settlements, local enthusiasm and successful local initiatives at the beginning of the project. The list of weaknesses is, however, much longer and includes the uneven distribution of Tourist Information Centres (TIC) in the region, a lack of network approach and national coordination, poor motivation of TICs for collaboration with other institutions, strong reliance on outer funding. Recommendations were put forward to keep the initiative in the hands of local people, providing them with additional qualification and organisational capacity, diversification of services and building new partnerships.

The EU’s PHARE pre-accession programme focused on various underdeveloped public services and assets in the country – it supported the inventory and access to tourist attractions, development of tourist products, etc. On-site observations confirm that once the projects are completed, products are not effectively utilized and the constructed infrastructure is not properly maintained and used. Comparatively low interest by local producers is visible in the reported project submissions in the Rhodope Programme (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 2005).

A general estimate of the regional policy implementation could be the following: that the process is slow and difficult, with insufficient coordination and lacking truly effective indicators to support policy decisions. The top-down initiatives lack flexibility and sensitivity to the particular local context and the bottom-up ones most often demonstrate a lack of capacity and continuity. This raises the crucial issue of enhancing social capital and inventing possible ways to carry it out in order to guarantee sustainability in the region.

THE CASE STUDY OF IVAYLOVGRAD MUNICIPALITY

Being one of the 263 municipalities in the country, with an area of 818 sq. km and the population of 6,800 in December 2009 (13,000 in 1979), the municipality of Ivaylovgrad belongs to a region that can nowadays be classified as border, mountainous, underdeveloped and rural one – the proportion of agricultural to forest to urbanised land use in the municipality is 37:60:1 (compared to mean national values 59:34:5); population density is 9 inhabitants per sq km (70 for the country); and the ratio of population over 65 years old to the one under 14 years is 2 (1.3 for the country).

There are two main reasons for choosing this case study: (a) its location, natural and cultural characteristics, socio-economic development tendencies – both its current situation and long-term development could be considered indicative of the broader processes taking place in the new EU south-eastern border regions in the Balkans; and (b) a chance to gain continual personal research experience and establish contact with the changing local authorities over a longer period of time, and from different positions and points of view – research, NGO activities, an educational project – which provided an opportunity for a deeper insight into the continuities and discontinuities in local traditions and culture, the local authorities’ estimates of implemented regional policies in different periods and the local people’s attitude to life perspectives, governance and participation.

Location, natural characteristics and cultural heritage

The municipality of Ivaylovgrad is located in the transitional zone between the western part of the Thracian Valley and the easternmost parts of the Rhodope Mountains, in south-eastern Bulgaria, which is now a south-eastern border region of the EU. The municipality is at the Bulgarian-Greek border and close to the Bulgarian-Turkish one, although the main railways and roads, part of the pan-European Transport Corridors 4 and 9, are bypassing it.
The region has diverse natural features and resources. Various landscapes are spread among smooth weaving ridges, steep foots of the slopes and narrow river valleys in-between. Biodiversity is well preserved in its natural mosaic pattern, with some of the top concentrations for Europe, including plenty of endemic and rare species (BSPB, 2002). This variety has been enriched by pastoral and cultivation patterns, some of them maintained for several thousand years. The region is an important part of the European Green Belt with its high natural conservation value of preserved and regenerated habitats due to almost 50 years of political and military division along the Iron Curtain. There is good potential for diversified agricultural development due to the transitional temperate Mediterranean agro-climatic conditions. There are considerable possibilities for accommodating the demands of cultural, rural and ecological tourism (Fig. 1), provided by the unique cultural monuments from a historical span of three thousand years, various agricultural traditions and local celebrations and the preserved wilderness with its scenic setting. Along with these values and potential, there are new troubling processes challenging the present resource use practices and culture — the patterns of drought and fires, intensive rainfalls in combination with fast snow melting, soil erosion, accelerated succession of abandoned agricultural land, the spread of invasive species, etc. (Fig. 2).

**Historical development context**

The territory could be considered a typical example of a periphery artificially created through continual military confrontation and political decisions, as observed in many other places in Europe (Armstrong, 2004).

In the historical retrospective, despite the varying ethnic composition and conflicts appearing all around, the Ivaylovgrad region has been prosperous and engaged in active exchange with settlements downstream the Maritsa River (Hebros, Evros, Meric) for centuries. It has been bound with today’s Edirne (Adrianopolis, Odrin), which has remained a very important urban centre in the south-eastern Balkans from antiquity until today. During the first half of the 20th century, after the Russian-Turkish War (1877–1878), which brought independence to Bulgaria, the region remained at the periphery of the Ottoman Empire. The area joined the Bulgarian state after the Balkan War (in 1912), while its neighbouring regions were assigned to Greece, and the town of Edirne remained in Turkey. The ethnic map of the region is a complex result of the historical events from the early 20th century, generating waves of refugees — settling down and moving away. Today’s mixed ethnic composition includes mostly Bulgarian Orthodox Christians and Muslims, the ancestors of whom have lived here since before the Balkan War, and the vast majority of whom came from Southern Thrace and Asia Minor after the War. Some of these refugees came in place of Greek communities moving out at the same time. There are also Turkish, Roma and old Albanian communities.

With the establishment of the new political order in Europe after WWII (1945), the permeability of the border strongly decreased and the region practically remained a closed area at the periphery of the Eastern Bloc for over four decades. More than ten years of transition after the collapse of the ‘Iron Curtain’ in 1989 were marked by constraints in trans-border movements because of the EU’s stricter regulations (on border safety, trade and other technical standards) and the Greek national policy, while the border regime with Turkey provided better mobility of people and goods. The pre-accession process and Bulgaria’s EU accession in 2007 gradually improved the trans-border movement of people and goods between Bulgaria and Greece; however, the restrictions were now relocated to the Bulgarian-Turkish border. During this period there was a growing number of active trans-border co-operation programmes and available funds with both neighbouring countries (EU pre-accession instruments and a regional development fund). The municipality of Ivaylovgrad participated in a number of joint initiatives, projects and actions mainly with Greek partner municipalities. In addition to the existing two border crossings between the two countries, five more were planned and a bilateral memorandum was signed in 1995.
which was included in the agenda on several occasions. There was, however, a considerable time lag in the implementation of all projects due to underlying political inertia and mistrust, among other technical and financial reasons. Three new border crossings are now in use in the region, the first from 2005 and the other two from this year. The one between the towns of Ivaylovgrad and Kyprinos opened in September 2010.

**Demographic, socio-economic and cultural processes**

The demographic development in the region has a lot in common with other rural areas in Eastern Europe. It is defined by speedy transformation and migration patterns in less than 50 years from the agriculture-based, predominantly rural society before WWII into an industrialized and urbanized one, structured around the capital city of Sofia and 26 larger and medium-sized administrative and economic centres. The intensive depopulation in the Ivaylovgrad municipality, like in other border regions in South-eastern Bulgaria in the 1950s–1970s, took place alongside a natural border regions in South-eastern Bulgaria in the 1950s–1970s. The municipality from the rest of the country. During the last five years, the municipality — especially its eastern part (including the municipal centre and a few more villages) — experienced increased inner and outer investment interest. Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises appeared in traditional and new sectors and branches (building materials extraction, farming, winery, light industries, tourist services, photovoltaic energy parks, etc.). However, most of these were seriously affected by the global economic recession and positive expectations of stabilization were very soon replaced by anxiety over a possible next wave of labour and poverty-driven migration. Poor access to education (only one secondary school in the town and three primary schools on fifty villages) and health care (ongoing discussions for closing down small municipal hospitals in the whole of the country, the one in Ivaylovgrad being on top of the list), ineffective organization of utility services (waste collection available only in the municipal town and three nearby villages) and insufficient maintenance of infrastructure and the built environment are the result of a lack of a critical mass of users, inadequate state support and very limited local financial resources. A number of settlements have been abandoned over the last 20 years, while one half of 48 villages in all are rapidly diminishing and are at the point of disappearing, with few elderly people left and no residents of reproductive age.

All of these factors have led to a lack of community spirit and cohesion, where fragmented individual efforts and separate livelihood strategies come in place. The strength and value of the regional cultural identity (various forms of heritage and relations, local knowledge and collective memory) are nowadays jeopardized because of the negative trends of depopulation, aging, intergenerational discontinuity, marginalization, poverty and social exclusion in vast parts of the region. At the beginning of the transition period there were certain optimistic expectations about the benefits of openness, but now there is only widespread mistrust and scepticism accumulated among citizens living in poverty and downcast entrepreneurs in the municipalities which suffer from the still ongoing isolation (results of an inquiry, interviews, discussions and content analysis of local published materials during an educational project will be discussed later on).

A Municipal Development Plan was adopted in 2006 and a number of measures and projects were undertaken — predominantly the ones representing fragmented physical rehabilitation of buildings and infrastructure. One of these is the local TIC, accommodated in a restored building (a listed heritage site) — unfortunately with no financial or organisational resource committed. The next challenge is the implementation of the Local Development...
Strategy – to be prepared and managed by the Local Action Group “Zaenko”, organized after the regulations of the Leader+ approach in co-operation with administration, the business and civil sectors in the three municipalities – Ivaylovgrad, Madzarovo and Stambolovo.

At this stage of development, the region is exposed to the utmost level of vulnerability. The future role and contribution of the recently opened and long awaited border crossing need to be observed. The challenges of the proper management of local resources need to be adequately met and the local potential well utilized. Therefore, urgent initiatives for revitalization have to include an ambitious enhancement of the local capacity for maintenance and development on the one hand, and on the other an encouragement for the colonization of disappearing settlements. (Fig. 4).

BUILDING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

The NGO sector—activities and concepts

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been emerging all over the country since the early 1990s with a lot of EU, international and national support. Recent regional policy documents have great expectations from them. The Ivaylovgrad region with its distinctive values is a suitable field for comprehensive exploration. Acquisition of proficiency in life ‘on the edge’ and entering into deeper interactions has stimulated a lot of NGOs with various scales of work and declared priorities. Some of them are active on the national scale; others are regionally based or focused. There are already numerous examples of organizations which undertook important first steps and innovations for the region, trying to reconnect the regional potential through networking and supplementing efforts – sometimes functioning in real synergy and continuity.

The Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation promotes the ‘Green Belt’ concept on a national scale and organizes events to raise awareness about conservation opportunities and challenges in the border regions of Bulgaria. It has conducted biodiversity investigations in the region within the Rhodope project and acts strategically by purchasing land of high natural value. Together with the BSPB it organizes the Kartali annual training in field investigations, monitoring and practical activities.

The ARK Nature and Avalon Foundation (Dutch organizations) initiated the region-focused New Thracian Gold Project with an accent on education, consultation and project preparation related to natural grazing, organic agriculture and eco-tourism.

The Bikearea Association is on a mission to bring people closer to nature, continually developing responsible and sustainable tourism and recreation across the Rhodope Mountains, by organising education and consultation for local guides and small scale accommodation alongside the promotion of sustainable forest use (Rhodopia product).

The Green School Village (GSV) Association is a youth value-based community of people from different places, with varied experience and professional interests. The Association actively searches contacts with local communities, the municipality and the region. The GSV has focused on the revival of the shrinking Kostlikovo village in the municipality, one of its main projects being the development of a Non-formal Education Centre, planned to be a multifunctional and self-sustaining centre which will become a local enterprise, a research and culture centre developing commercial and non-commercial services. Several youth exchange initiatives were organised with a special emphasis on spreading the knowledge about natural building and permaculture. A number of projects (some of which were supported by the Municipality and the Cultural Centre) were very beneficial in terms of valuable experience and networking.

Estimation of the NGO driven process

Despite often not fully reaching their genuine objectives while adapting to grant requirements and failing to attract additional resources, NGOs in the region have succeeded in initiating a truly innovative process of enhancing and integrating social capital to support a re-conceptualization of life in the border area. Several aspects of their activity can be considered as being of particular importance:

- The enthusiasm of young people involved in various value-based activities;
- The synergy created by linking different levels – from international through national and regional to local;
- The active search for and initiation of partnerships with a large variety of actors from both the public and private sectors;
- The impressive variety of ideas, priorities and practices coming into contact and mutually fertilizing each other;
- The capacity to link into a truly holistic way all the aspects of life (natural to technological to cultural and agricultural) by placing the focus on life values and respect for nature, and searching for alternative ways of life.

NGOs have thus been acting as effective agents of change and, being sensitive to real life on the ground, they have initiated the development of micro communities and networks of a new identity and culture.
The University as a partner in the process

A partnership officially established between the UACG and GSV Association on the occasion of the For One Common Space and a Better Place for Living Project provided a chance to explore the development opportunities for both actors, as well as for the capacity-building process at the local level in the municipality of Ivaylovgrad. In accordance with its educational concept (Dimitrova, 2009), the university team searched for a real-life case-study to focus on within the Sustainable Development teaching module of the BSc in Urbanism Programme (winter semester 2009/2010). The NGO was in need of potential allies and partners, but also methodological support to carry out a public dialogue with the local people on the issues of mobility, waste management and local cultural identity. Throughout the teaching process students were actively involved in analyses of local potential and best practices, in preparing questionnaires and carrying out a survey envisaged by the Project, in presenting both good practices and their own development ideas to the local community, and organizing a creative art workshop with local children.

The analysis of the outcome proved the existence of considerable benefits for all partners in the project. From an academic standpoint, the process was valuable with regard to creating an expert point of view sensitive to local processes and challenges and stimulating the students’ personal and professional responsibilities to real-life people and institutions.

At the same time, the involvement of students and teachers in the process helped to introduce awareness about a broader scale of considerations and points of view in the local debate; situating the municipality within a regional and EU context of current dynamic changes and emerging challenges; stimulating the search for alternatives, questioning the status quo, looking for innovative solutions. It gave rise to an important impetus for opening an intergenerational dialogue with a broader and a long-term perspective, linking past to present to future, respecting continuity (Fig. 5).

CONCLUSION: A NEED TO RE-CONCEPTUALIZE REGIONAL POLICY

Having in mind the complexity of the process and the context in SEE rural peripheries within a broader framework of upcoming challenges and regional development challenges (SEC, 2008), there is an obvious need for further professional debate on the strategies to provide and communicate at both the EU and national levels. There is also an urgency to counteract the negative tendencies of depopulation and marginalization in SEE peripheral regions, which requires innovative approaches sensitive to local institutional capacity, as well as to the peculiar needs and life-styles, priorities and culture of the people – those who have stayed and those who would be interested in inhabiting and reviving peripheries. Several considerations resulting from the analysis of real-life processes in the Ivaylovgrad municipality could be particularly relevant and helpful on the way:

Despite numerous reported results and many positive changes, a general low effectiveness of current practices and activities has been observed and communicated up to the present day. The major shortcoming clearly visible in many situations is the discontinuity of initiatives (due to a lack of financial support, adequate maintenance of products and results, training services), which results in the disappearance of public trust in the possibility to change the status quo.

A shift in the focus of capacity building seems necessary. Most of the efforts have been aimed at the administrative and expert project management capacity. Capacity is however equally needed in the real-life management of local and shared regional resources where local people have their stakes – seemingly small but very important in the long run. Capacity building should address a much broader variety of actors at a community level.

Creating flexible socio-spatial networks could be considered an effective way to attain long-term sustainability in peripheral regions. These are networks providing synergy at work between the outside and local groups, and the local administration; broader opportunities for interaction inside the Local Action Groups (LAG) and parallel initiatives based on coordination and cooperation between adherent actors with the help of voluntary activities. There are threats to take into consideration in this process (overlapping interests, personal conflicts), but it is a chance for balanced integration of these regions with a relative level of social and economic autonomy in the national economy and for the conservation and/or maintenance of natural and cultural resources. Synergies between the diverse actors could be built on common priorities and understanding of shared values and targets.

Developing process-based strategies should be strongly focused on in continuity. The Strategic Choice Approach could be particularly useful (Friend and Hickling, 2005). It is important within the process-oriented framework to provide monitoring and evaluation with a time scope beyond the framework of a particular project. Transparency of processes requires indicator systems that have to be scientifically based, but also transparently communicable and designed with all groups active at the local level. Comprehensible demonstrations and educational efforts explaining alternative approaches and their expected results could induce change in activities and practices, an intensified exchange and a common learning process. Stimulating measures should be clearly aimed at key actors and aspects of the processes.

A long list of policy research issues should surely include critical preconditions for setting into motion gradual social interaction, innovative entrepreneurship, balanced commodification and successful assessment methods of development and transformation provided by top-down and bottom-up approaches. Co-ordinated research will guarantee the effectiveness of efforts.

To conclude, it seems vital to a successful regional policy in a period of a dynamically evolving world and uncertainty of future development challenges to continually keep in mind that all people matter.

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