

Rapid Report IV



Final Workshop of the EU Thematic Network Project REGIONET

“Cross Fertilisation and Integration of Results of REGIONET”

Brussels, 14-16 January 2004

About REGIONET

REGIONET (Strategies for Regional Sustainable Development: An Integrated Approach beyond Best Practice) is a research project funded under the EU's 5th framework programme for research. The main objective of the project is to provide an integrated and interdisciplinary approach to support the implementation of sustainable development in regions across Europe. The project consortium consists of sixteen partners coming from fourteen current and new EU Member States.

The four specific objectives of the project are the following:

1. The improved integration of sustainable development issues in the regional development plans put forward to the EU Structural Funds.
2. An understanding of the relationship between the implementation of regional sustainable development and issues of regional and multi-level governance.
3. An integrated framework for evaluating regional sustainable development (methods, tools, indicators) at the European, national and regional levels.
4. The cross-fertilisation of sustainable development research and the establishment of regional partnerships.

According to these objectives, four international workshop are organized in REGIONET. The first three workshops have been organized and brought together between 50 and 75 participants from all over Europe, including representatives from the European Commission, respectively. These workshops provided the opportunity for a close cooperation between the project team and the workshop participants in order to share experiences in the broad field of regional sustainable development. The first three workshops dealt with the following topics:

- *Workshop I: “Regional Sustainable Development - The Role of the Structural Funds”, 9th – 11th September 2002, Schloss Seggau, Austria.*
- *Workshop II: “Regional Sustainable Development – Strategies for Effective Multi-Level Governance“, 29th – 31st January 2003, Lillehammer, Norway.*
- *Workshop III: “Evaluation of Regional Sustainable Development”, 11th – 13th June 2003, University of Manchester, UK.*

The research results from the workshop contributions were distributed in the form of rapid reports to inform researchers and policy-makers alike and to provide policy recommendations. This is the fourth rapid report following the final workshop of the REGIONET project. For further information, please visit the project’s website at: www.iccr-international.org/regionet.

Profile of the final Workshop

The fourth and final workshop of REGIONET brought together around 100 experts from 22 European countries - *Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Rumania, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK*. The participants of the workshop were not only researchers from a variety of academic disciplines, but also decision-makers and other stakeholders from public, private and civic sectors, from regional, national and European levels.

The workshop had the aim to reflect upon the findings of the previous workshops and put these into the broad context of regional sustainable development policy-making in Europe. For this reason, we confronted the findings of our project with the latest research in the different fields of regional sustainable development (RSD) in Europe.

The summary and the presentation of the results of the previous project activities have been given on the first day of the workshop. These results have been brought together into practical applications for the EU and regional stakeholders.

The following sessions and topics were included in the workshop:

- ***The results of REGIONET: Reflections about Regional Sustainable Development in Europe***

Comprising three circles dealing with the following themes:

- I. The Role of Structural Funds on RSD
- II. Strategies for Multi-level Governance
- III. Evaluation Methods and Tools for RSD

- ***Task ahead - 2006+: A Perspective***

Presentations and extensive discussions on the future of RSD in Europe and the accession countries, in particular from the perspective of Structural Funds.

- ***Getting to know RSD in Europe***

Major outcomes of the National Reports on RSD, prepared by the partners of the REGIONET Network (including a poster exhibition about European countries and their experiences with RSD).

- ***Ways to go: Sustainable Cohesion in an enlarged EU – The Future of RSD***

Concluding Panel discussion

The workshop comprised presentations from researchers and policy-makers alike. Furthermore, a crucial point of this final workshop was the networking opportunity with other stakeholders and various actors, especially in the scope of the poster exhibition and the various discussions, which were included in each session.

This rapid report summarises the most important outcomes from the contributions and discussions, and resumes several of the major policy implications that emerged from the meeting.

Major thematic conclusions

SD in an enlarged Europe –

Time to re-think what the strategic development aim is when it comes to performance on the regional level

One of the core aspects that ran through the discussions at the fourth REGIONET workshop was that there is an extremely varying definition and understanding on what sustainable development means on the regional level. This matter is also reflected throughout all the National Reports that were conducted during the two years of the project.

The individual needs for development on a sub-national level obviously determine the 'shape' of programmes as well as regions when they are translated into action. Where the programmes in their content and form meets the identities of the regions, there will be successful development. Especially from the practitioners side there was a strong emphasis on the need of expertise that helps them shaping Regional Sustainable Development in situ.

REGIONET has underlined that there is a wide gap between the aims of development programmes on the European and national level and the individual Regional Sustainable Development strategies and performances on the regional level.

The discussions in the workshop put emphasis on the need for a translation of the development aims of the European Union when it comes to project-related work within regions.

This could be solved in two ways: on the one hand, there should be a better communication on good examples on how RSD is implemented in situ; on the other hand, in the context of Regional Sustainable Development this goes beyond the well-known best-practices and should more reflect on the management forms and participating share- and stakeholders on the regional level.

SD and its 'translation' into space –

A focus on environmental issues on the regional level and the missing agglomerations

Another important point during the discussions in Brussels picked up on one of the topics mentioned in the preparatory paper 'Recommendations Plus': the ecological dimension of SD is overwhelmingly stressed when regions try to 'perform' Regional Sustainable Development: nearly all National Reports focus on the incorporation of environmental issues into policy making, concerning the regional level.

It is then no wonder that when talking about RSD, sectoral issues that are directly related to the spatial dimension of a region are highlighted in their relation to the environmental dimension of regional development: agriculture, exploitation of resources, water management as well as tourism. The economic and social dimensions of regional development are less quoted.

In this regard it is also worth mentioning that looking at the spatial dimension and the setting of regions, the understanding of Regional Sustainable Development refers overwhelmingly to rural areas. Agglomerations and big European city-regions are missing even though they offer the most critical spatial setting on sustainable development issues like 'urban sprawl', 'traffic' and 'energy', etc.

Equally missing in the discussion is, so far, the connection between agglomerations and their respective hinterland. This points to a necessary refocusing of Regional Sustainable Development on 'city regions', given the fact that many pressing problems in the economic, social as well as environmental arena can neither be solved by agglomerations nor their surrounding rural areas alone.

Integration as a continuous management task –

The institutional side of implementing Regional Sustainable Development

RSD in Europe needs new forms of management on the regional level. The discussions in Brussels highlighted the creation of new management units in order to start and mediate development issues in terms of RSD in an effective way.

This included sub-national management units as well as project related ones in situ. The LEADER action groups are one example of how a policy tool has a direct impact on the formation on new constellation of actors or new development networks.

It is important to stress that these units envisage a great danger: because they are mostly project related the funding for these management units is only guaranteed for the running time of the project. The reality of keeping a RSD-process alive by the constant work of a management body within the region does need time, definitely more time than the usual funding period of a project which is on average three years.

It is, therefore, still open how the new management units in situ that accompany the 'new regions' alongside RSD will sustain themselves in order to establish RSD in the long run, especially before the background of shifting Structural Funds policies.

On top of that, it must also be stressed, that these management units themselves need time (and incentives!) to form. Especially in the light of the European enlargement process it is, therefore, necessary to install appropriate instruments that trigger the formation of such management units on the regional level in order to empower regions to partake in the general drive towards sustainable development in a larger Europe.

Given the fact that such institutions are currently largely missing in the accession countries (as pointed out in the relevant National Reports) such instruments have to be brought to bear before or at least parallel to more conventional Structural Fund interventions.

Furthermore, the empowerment of regional structures in the accession countries has to be supported as a driving force for cohesion as well as RSD. This decentralisation could be realised by the creation of new regional institutions. The building up of these institutions requires the support and funding of qualification possibilities in the regions.

2006+: More regions, more needs for development – but what aim?

RSD as the baseline for development issues in an enlarged Europe

The Bruxelles workshop has highlighted issues on RSD in the context of the enlargement process. It is noteworthy that throughout the REGIONET project - and especially throughout the REGIONET workshops - there has been a very strong input from accession countries on the regional perspectives of the future of European development. The discussions have left no doubt that 'the regional level' will be the stage for realising development aims that are put forward by the European Union.

Nevertheless there were a lot of questions raised concerning more or less the same subject: "Who is the region?". REGIONET has conducted a unique perspective on the state of the art on how this question is answered at present in terms of RSD. One can find the specific national dimensions and "answers" to this question in the National Reports.

Looking at the situation on the regional level in total, the accession countries show a very heterogenous structure when it comes to the question "Who is the region". The range of recipients of EU development aims and programmes reach from regional voluntary groups of actors with specific development aims to national governments themselves.

Parallel to the existing recipient structures of EU funding on the regional level there is no holistic perspective on how different sectoral issues can be interlinked in order to achieve RSD. In this regard it would be of great importance to analyse who is a core group of stake- or shareholders in order to realise RSD. The process of the enlargement can in this context serve as a "discourse of common observation" on who appears on a European scale of the 'Europe of the Regions' in order to perform RSD. The lessons from this discourse would be a good analytical framework in order to structure the future political as well the funding guidelines on regional development in Europe.

Policy recommendations

Introduction

The following 'Policy Recommendations' are based on three different sources:

- the papers presented at the fourth REGIONET-workshop in Brussels in January 2004.
- the discussions of the attending experts alongside the paper presentations as well as the final podium discussion.
- an reflection on the 'Recommendations plus' which were highlighted in the final podium during the workshop.

It was a unique feature of the REGIONET project, that it brought together experts from the practice of Regional Sustainable Development, experts from the European Commission and national administrations as well as scientists in an open and vivid discussion about the future of Regional Sustainable Development in Europe. It is another particular feature of REGIONET that it conducted a thorough comparative review of RSD in most European countries, including those in the process of integrating with the Union. These features lend this recommendations a special weight as they constitute the most up-to-date thinking on this topic in Europe.

This region or that region or even regions within a region –

The shape of a region in the context of Regional Sustainable Development-

The REGIONET project has from the very beginning highlighted that the term 'region' is reshaped within the context of RSD. RSD and the instruments that are aimed at fostering RSD have created a new "type of region" – a dynamic rather than a static understanding of a 'region' that brings new constellations of stakeholders together on the regional level with the explicit goal to shape the common regional future within the framework of the global concept of sustainable development.

As already pointed out in the 'Recommendations plus' which were circulated before the concluding REGIONET workshop in Brussels in January 2004 these 'regions' are

- characterized by a spatial form that is shaped more by cultural identities, economical unique selling points or natural particularities; and
- characterized by a communication process on the shaping of the future between different shareholders making the region a result of social interaction based on qualitative goals.

The territorial form of these new regions may be determined by various dimensions like

- the political-administrative dimension,
- functional dimensions (infrastructure, regional economics, inter-regional economics),
- dimensions of nature (topography and landscape, material-flow- and energy-issues), and
- cultural dimensions (regional identities).

In the connotation of sustainable development on the regional level, the term 'region' has to be a flexible, problem-orientated, geared to the development goals and the complementary constellation of the actors on the level of the particular region.

The “new” European Spatial Development Perspective -

A task for European policies to harmonize the aims of development programmes and instruments on the regional level

From the point of view of the regional level, many “forces” on the European and national level influence the future development of ‘regions’, introduce, stimulate and support, but also hinder RSD .

In this context, the harmonisation of sectoral programmes as well as of instruments and evaluations on the regional level is a top task for a new ‘European Spatial Development Perspective’ which will be taken up by the Dutch presidency later this year. This is especially important in the light of the overarching goal of Regional Sustainable Development.

The new ESDP should look at regions from the “other end”, which is *action and management in situ for shaping regional futures*. REGIONET has shown that the process of shaping regional futures is overwhelmingly taking place somewhere between the NUTS II- and NUTS III-level throughout Europe. No matter which one of the 17 national reports conducted during the REGIONET-project one looks into, it becomes very obvious that the core function on putting top-down regional development aims into action it happens in between those levels.

European policies should, therefore, incorporate the lessons learned from instruments like EQUAL or URBAN. Especially the LEADER programmes have triggered numerous new forms of management constellations of actors in rural areas, bringing sectoral issues (like for example in agriculture and tourism) and their circles of actors into relation to each other and exploiting their “common grounds” as a potential for RSD.

Regional Sustainable Development –

New forms of management for the interplay of existing institutions on the regional level

The dynamic process on searching and finding a regional consensus on how to shape the future needs communication on the regional level, especially between regional actors. It is, therefore, worthwhile to think about the forms of communication on the regional level and, closely related to this question, forms of reaching agreements on how to shape regional futures and attribute responsibilities to actors.

Especially the national reports have shown that the forms of communication on Regional Sustainable Development are very heterogeneous throughout Europe. So are the institutional frameworks for the realisation of European development programmes, especially the structural funds and common initiatives. There is so far no common understanding which new forms of management – not only governmental – on the regional level for RSD in Europe is needed. However, nearly all reports refer to the creation of new management units of some kind in order to start and mediate development issues in terms of RSD.

This includes sub-national management units as well as project related ones *on site*. The LEADER action groups are examples of how a policy tool has had a direct impact on the formation on new constellation of actors, new development networks and the formation of such management units.

It is very important to stress that these units face a great danger: because they are mostly project related, the funding for these management units is only running for the term of the project. The reality of keeping an RSD-process alive by the constant work of a management body within the region does need time, definitively more time than the usual funding period of a project which is on average three years. This implies that the funding mechanisms for these units have to be re-examined and instruments re-shaped like it has been done successfully with the LEADER-instrument.

The importance of these management units for regional action and for RSD in particular has been one of the pervasive topics within REGIONET, re-surfacing time and again in the workshops and mentioned in almost all country reports. It must be stressed that these institutions lay at the heart of regional action and are a precondition for RSD in Europe.

Especially in the light of the European enlargement process it is, therefore, necessary to install appropriate instruments that trigger the formation of such management units on the regional level in order to empower regions to partake in the general drive towards sustainable development in a larger Europe.

Given the fact that such institutions are currently largely missing in the accession countries (as pointed out in the relevant national reports) such instruments have to be brought to bear before or at least parallel to more conventional structural fund

interventions if the sectoral investments on the regional level should have any chance to be harmonized in situ and if RSD should have a chance of taking root there.

A European discourse on how the “perfect Regional Sustainable Development performance” should look like -

The need to talk about more than just sectoral best-practices on the regional level

A closer look into the National Reports of REGIONET brings light into an area that was not so much stressed during the four workshops: in order to highlight European Development Policies and their contribution to Regional Sustainable Development nearly all National Reports refer to case-studies or best-practices known as national examples as a means for explaining and disseminating RSD.

Next to none of these examples shows a holistic understanding of regional sustainable development. The regional cases describe mostly sectoral best-practices as a possible contribution to Regional Sustainable Development.

There is a need for an European discourse on what Regional Sustainable Development should look like when it is brought into action, which management it needs and which threats it has to deal with. During the concluding REGIONET workshop in Brussels the opinion that this discourse should be in the hands of the regions themselves was strongly voiced. An existing player in this field, the ‘Committee of the Regions’ was especially identified as having the responsibility to initiate, support and exploit this discourse. It was also clearly stated in this workshop that this subject has not been picked up so far by any other group of regions, except the ones brought together under the REGIONET project.

Without a holistic understanding of Regional Sustainable Development and a continuous discourse on shaping it on the regional level, the European Union will face increasing problems to create the necessary “traction on the ground” for reaching Sustainable Development in an enlarged Europe. RSD is not only a cornerstone for reaching the overall goal of the Gothenburg Council, but is also instrumental for achieving the ambitious aim of the Lisbon Council and to bring to bear the Cardiff process of increased policy integration on the regional level. The Commission should therefore consider how a continuous discourse on RSD can be facilitated, especially in the light of the necessary learning processes between regions and in relation to the situation in the accession countries.