



Interreg IIIIB Project, Alpine Space Programme, EU

Impact of cultural differences



Work package 5 (WP5): Impact of cultural differences on regional development in the Alps

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Main activities and objectives: Analysis of the influence of cultural differences on the aims and measures of regional policy impacting regional development in the different parts of the Alpine countries.

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The mission of DIAMONT WP5 is to enhance the understanding of the influence of cultural differences on regional development in the context of a sustainable future in the Alps. The purpose is to establish a solid basis for further scientific discussion. Ideally, it could be a starting point of a process to enhance the mutual understanding of the similarities, but also of the differences and particularities of each alpine region, and thereby provide a basis for monitoring the sustainability of regional development in the context of the Alpine Convention (AC).

Background

In a time of sharply increasing influences of modernization and globalization processes in social, economic and also ecological matters, there is growing evidence of a common development strategy of all relevant actors, whereas the original regional differences (partly of cultural, historical and political causes, partly because of diverse location qualities) are diminishing as decisive factors of regional development. Investments (public and private), production and consumer behaviour (especially in tourism) are considered to be the main driving forces of regional development in general, not specific for the Alpine realm. The processes of global competition are bound to an inherent tendency to allow free access of all sorts, thereby eliminating the barriers and frictions (as e.g. local regulations or language patterns) which up to now were a consequence of specific regional identities, and also the root of specific forms of development. In contrast to this evolving mainstream there are some efforts by public and private bodies to improve the often adverse terms of location conditions by implementing specific measures to meet the challenge of global competition – regional policy can be understood as a regional answer to globalization. If at all there are differences in regional development in the future, then they will be caused by specific regional policy measures.

Therefore, this report portrays the influence of cultural factors, values, attitudes and specific goals on regional policy and thereby (indirectly) to the future regional development at large. It describes the different approaches, the structures, tasks and objectives of regional policy in

the Alps. Finally, the report further illustrates measures, tools and institutions of regional policy in the Alpine countries. A comparative analysis across the whole Alpine space tries to portray such a regional policy „landscape“.



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Industrial area in the Inn valley, Austria: Consumer behaviour is considered a main driving force for regional development.

Logic and research design

We understand culture as a very broad concept, encompassing both action and structure (in the sense of Giddens theory of structuration). Culture means the attitudes, visions and behaviour of humans, social groups, regional populations, even nations, etc. to handle their life, to shape their environment, and to making sense of their very existence; but ‘culture’ means also the results of such actions, manifest in (cultural) objects (i.e. artefacts), institutions, economic structures, landscapes, settlements, land use patterns, etc. Such (cultural) structures and (cultural) attitudes and traditions are reciprocally interrelated, and they may re-enforce each other in an

evolutionary (accumulative) process, or they may be linked in a dissipative and destructive way. It follows that culture is an element of a dynamic system, part of a process, which may be called ‚(ac)culturation‘, a continuous adaptive development, of which we can perceive an instant impression between past and future, here and there.

Considering the normative dimensions of this term, it is evident, that ‚culture‘ in itself is an objective and value-free concept – we must be especially careful about this just because of the imminent temptation of scaling different forms of culture, of grading different civilizations or aspects of regional cultures. On the other hand, given the context of this study, we should reflect the relation between culture and sustainability, which of course is a normative proposition. In this sense, sustainability may be interpreted as a culture (or behaviour), which cares for the ecological, social, and economic capitals, even trying to mutually increase them. It follows, that of some interest is the question if traditional forms of Alpine cultures were more oriented towards or committed to sustainability, in contrast to actual modes of living, of production and consumption, caring less about these obligations. And even more interesting will be the question, if the future orientation of Alpine cultures might be borne by sustainability, as the Alpine Convention demands. Certainly, this is a trace to be followed.

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Sustainability can be interpreted as a culture or a certain behaviour like the decision to buy organically grown vegetables.

Gradually, our attention shifted from ‚culture‘ to ‚cultures‘, hereby addressing the differences among them. And of course, given the interrelationship of action and structure as an inherent quality of ‚culture‘ it seems to be obvious that all ‚cultures‘ are related to people (as actors) and to their places (as locations of structures such as settlements or landscapes) - or at least we perceive it that way. And of course we identify different cultures metaphorically in terms of people (nations?) and places (regions?) like ‚French culture‘, ‚Tyrolean culture‘, or ‚Carnia-Friuli culture‘. In this manner, it is tempting to

open an equation of the form <region = people = culture>, much in the way of the well-known 17th century rule „cuius regio - eius religio“. But how homogeneous are such constructs? What about the ‚Inner‘ and ‚Outer‘ Appenzell cultures in Eastern Switzerland, which are much the same or quite different, depending on the scale of scrutiny? And given the task of an Alpine-wide survey, should we rather deal with differences among nations, or with differences within nations? And what about the well-known fact that the (local or regional) culture gradually shifted from a strict traditional pattern, being always influenced by ‚outside‘ forces and ‚strange‘ people, thereby adapting their content and identity in an evolutionary manner. What then exactly are ‚cultural differences‘, one main object of this study? We as well could speak of ‚regional differences‘, meaning that in different regions of the Alps there were and still are different ways of living, still regional (cultural) identities persistent to our days, although strong convergence processes may be reported. And their remains the scale question which will be discussed later.

In other words, we must not assume that there is a common and identical understanding of ‚culture‘ and its most important elements (or dimensions) - language? clothing? settlement structures? land use systems? heritage traditions and rules? administrative practice and fiscal systems? religion? sense of community? diligence? leisure time habits? Some of these might be decisive in one case, and completely irrelevant in others. What could be the scientific gain of a comprehensive (alas encyclopedic) approach? Therefore, from a methodological point of view, and given the extensive and also fuzzy character of this concept of ‚culture‘, it would be absolutely mandatory to precisely and explicitly select those aspects, which are of specific interest in a certain scientific context, and which are part of a scientific hypothesis – ‚culture‘ itself is much too broad to serve such a purpose, it is an almost all-encompassing construct. There is of course abundant literature about Alpine culture in general, and their regions down to local scale, but most of it is of an idiographic character, and there is an obvious lack of thematically focused comparative studies. Therefore, the task of WP 5 was a considerable challenge, and deserved a careful design to achieve. We made some attempts to try to identify some indications as to which cultural dimensions might be of special importance in the context of this study. However, given the resource restrictions, these efforts could not be more than quite modest regarding the complexity and openness of the question. Obviously, to meet this challenge and at the same time avoiding a truly Herculean task, we had to look for some key factors, based on careful systems analysis: What really makes a difference in regional development?

Regional development is a construct as extended and at the same time fuzzy as culture - it's up to everybody's discretion, which dimensions to include and which not. We decidedly chose here a structuralist view, given the context of this research. Furthermore, the focus should be obviously much more to the future strategies and options than to the past changes. Therefore, we interpret regional development as a result of a universe of both private activities, structural restrictions and opportunities, and public (collective) decisions, the cultural context forming a general background of these processes, but without a clearly defined or traceable causality (cp. fig #1). According to the logic of the regulation theory (Bathelt 2002; Liepitz 2000) the relevant private activities are of two kinds, namely economic activities (production, consumption, investments) and socio-cultural attitudes and activities as base and underpinnings of formal public decisions, which influence (both in a supportive or restrictive way) private economic activities. It follows that cultural differences influence regional development (only) in indirect ways, mainly via the implementation of regional policy (in the broadest sense of the meaning). Other ways of influence are nowadays diminishing because of changes in economic attitudes (globalization, elimination of local, regional and even national protective regulations and specialties). Economic behaviour and decisions (e.g. preferences for regional products / producers) are gradually getting streamlined towards a uniform competitive attitude with

only short-term perspectives; in the same manner settlement structures or agriculture are losing their regional uniqueness. Therefore, cultural differences (while still present) are losing their previous importance as a driving force for regional development, giving way to more market-oriented globally unified regional patterns.

Competitive locations for instance are now determined by global headquarters, no longer by regional preferences. However, cultural aspects may be taken into account in the company's strategies (for example in their marketing propositions like „products from the region XYZ for the customers in region XYZ“). Therefore, one can say that cultural differences (or aspects) are about to lose their previous importance as driving forces for regional development in a relative sense, because general competition aspects have a leading role at national or regional levels (at the macro-scale) and they are of strategic importance, while the role of the cultural is more apparent at local levels (at the micro-scale), in the details of everyday life, where the influence of globalization effects may not yet be too determinant.

In this situation, regional policy is understood as a set of goals and measures, which will have effects on regions, to influence the regional development towards desirable directions. Common goals for regional policies are to support the competitive advantages of regions, to correct setbacks and regional or local unbalances, and to give better responses to civil society expectations. Depen-

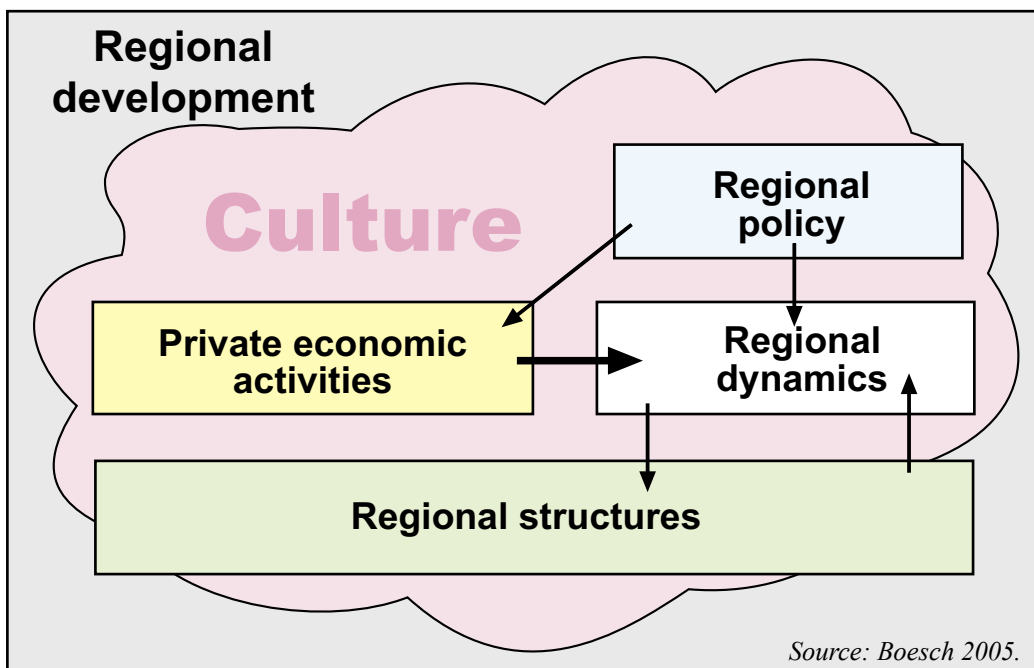
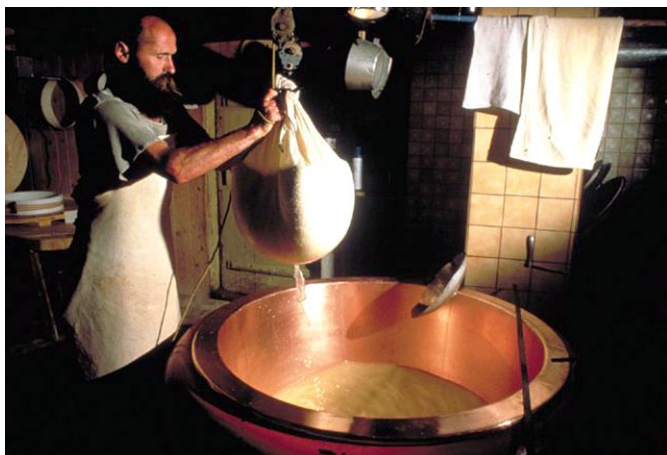


Fig. 1: The influence of cultural factors upon regional development – basic structural set up and relations:

Regional development is a set of regional structures and actions (both private and public), and their change over time. The cultural as a whole is a fuzzy and complex construct forming the general background of these processes. Arrows and their widths are indicating the fact that economic activities (investments; production & consumption) are regarded as the main driving forces of regional development.

ding on the relative importance of such regional policy measures, and the efficiency of their implementation (as compared to the absence of measures or an undifferentiated implementation within a country) they may or may not have a decisive influence on the regional structures. And as has been shown, regional policy is very open for cultural differences, esp. the scopes and ways public decisions are taken and public funds are allocated, the modes and specifications of legislation and administrative procedures, the general socio-political conditions, especially the interrelations of the civil society with the formal structures and bodies of state authorities and the economy. An outstanding example in case is the set of agricultural policies: In comparison with the general trend, (i.e. the EU and national levels), what is the focus of the regional level? Are there specific regional implementations in terms of objects, target subjects, means and measures, amount of funds available, criteria for subsidies, implementation and controlling, adaptation processes? Or in other words: Are there regional differences, which can be accounted to regional policy (which in turn is as an aspect of cultural differences)?

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Cheese production in Kleinwalsertal, Austria: In all Alpine countries there is a common tendency to focus on regional strengths and economic competitiveness.

Main results

Not quite surprisingly, the results of WP 5 research qualify to a certain degree the diversification impact of regional policy measures: In all alpine countries there is a general and common endeavour (however different in details) to reduce regional socio-economic disparities by improving the economic competitiveness; general socio-economic factors such as innovation and productivity are increasingly relevant in regional policy. There is also a common tendency to enhance the focus on regional strengths and potentials. Also common is the pledge for a „sustainable development“ (whatever this should mean in a specific case), normally connected with efforts to increase the impact of participatory and integrative processes, and to searching for an optimal mix of bottom-

up and top-down oriented decision-making in regional policy. But then, looking closer at the institutional aspects of regional policy, we come across some major differences among the alpine countries: Although most often governmental entities or agencies are in charge of implementing regional policy, there are quite marked differences in terms of the „territorial geometry“, i.e. which levels of government are responsible for such measures. Also, in spite of a general tendency at increasing the involvement of civil society, there are relevant differences regarding the degree of participation and the involvement of private partnerships.

Lessons learned

Concluding, we remark that the traditional influences of most cultural factors on regional policy are decreasing (while still intuitively present in our perception), leaving an open trail to a generalized development, which generates its peaks and shallows more from globally determined location qualities (like easy access and urbanization, i.e. along the village- metropolis gradient) than from local or regional culture, which in itself tends to become more uniform. Traditional cultural differences then are more an expression of time lags and bound to diminish on the long run. This in turn is a clear signal to DIAMONT: For monitoring regional development in the Alpine Convention context we must not spend too much efforts on indicators based in traditional cultural differences, but more on indicators measuring sustainable progress in a globalizing world. However, this may well include information on regional identity, provided it means not a mere leftover from times past or folklore, but a conscious profile and strategy to future challenges.



Construction of a new ski lift in France: A generalized development can be observed throughout the Alpine space which highly depends on globally determined location qualities.

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