

The impact of cultural differences on regional development

A workshop report of Interreg IIIB project DIAMONT/WP 5.

Martin Boesch

Department of Economic Geography & Regional Policy, University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

The scope of this contribution is to discuss the influence of cultural differences on regional development in the context of a sustainable future in the Alps.

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.

Not quite surprisingly, the results of our research reported in this contribution 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.

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 AC politics: 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.

REFERENCES:

Boesch Martin (forthcoming): Analysing the Influence of Cultural Differences on Regional Development in the Alps. (=Work Package 5 / Interreg IIIB-project DIAMONT - Data Infrastructure for the Alps / Mountain Orientated Network Technology). EURAC: Bozen.