RSA Research Network ‘Ecological Regional Development’

Stimulus for the Discussion in the Special Part

‘Towards the Implementation of Ecological Regional Development’

Second workshop organised by the University of Hull, 16-17 May 2011, Hull, UK

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The organisers would appreciate very much if participants could prepare statements as a response to this stimulus-paper for discussion at the workshop: What are the key issues? What are the theoretical factors we need to address? Which areas are not addressed? Are there any other comments?

The workshops of the RSAN ‘Ecological Regional Development’ provide an opportunity to discuss a wide range of current research projects and results. Moreover, they allow systematic discussion of fundamental questions of the research field. While the first workshop in Dresden in this respect dealt with the understanding of the term ‘ecological regional development’, the second workshop tackles the question what policy-makers could or should do to achieve such a development. Given the societal and political aims at the international (Agenda 21), national, regional and local levels, scientists and academics can discuss the policy advice that is needed. The answers to this question will be the basis for discussing future research needs and research policy which will be addressed at the third workshop.

The point of departure for the second workshop is the need for setting priorities. Ecologically sustainable development – in its normative interpretation – is a part of a development which balances economic, social and ecological aims, even globally and in a long-term perspective. This is more than a highly complex challenge. Neither academia nor policy-makers can deal with all aspects at the same time. What would it take to bring about a more ecological politics and coherent policy drive? What should ecological regional development materially look like? How should it be steered? How can the formulation and implementation of local/regional policies and planning be improved? What should be done first and foremost? At least six interrelated questions can be discussed (cf. e.g. Lintz 1997 and 2010; Haughton, Hunter 2003; Rydin 2010).

1. Which environmental problems should be tackled?

There is a wide range of environmental problems which can be understood as a loss of, or threat to, ecosystem services. Which ecological services should be improved or protected? E.g.:

- Stable climate
- Biodiversity, flora and fauna
- Natural landscapes
- Clean air (e.g. fine dust), absence of noise, clean water and clean soil.

2. Tackling the causes of environmental degradation and/or adapting to it?

Adaptive measures to environmental problems have been taken for a long time, as e.g. the installation of special windows to decrease noise emmissions in buildings shows. In particular since a part of the impacts of climate change can not be avoided any more adaptation to climate change has become a significant topic. Against the background of limited politico-administrative capacities the question arises how to balance both approaches?

3. What should ecological regional development materially look like?

As the damage of the environment stems from human economic activity the key to a more ecological development are changes in the production and consumption of goods and services. One can distinguish different economic sectors having different impacts on the environment and people. The impacts depend on the quantities of goods, the technology used, as well as the geographical distribution and the need for space for the activities. These factors are highly interdependent.

There is a wide range of *economic sectors* that cause environmental problems. Which ones are most important here? E.g.:

- Energy production (renewables and non-renewables)
- transport of people and goods (including energy)
- construction, housing
- business development.

Technological Dimension: Technological development is important as it can influence optimal spatial structures. So, for e.g. less emissions allow greater urban density, less emissions from transport allow greater distances between activities. Renewable energy needs different transport structures.

There are many concepts for the *spatial/regional dimension*. Which one is most important? E.g.:

- Localisation and regionalisation of material flows
- Industrial ecology?
- Compact city? Green city?
- Stronger adjustment of settlement structures to valuable soils and habitats?

4. How to steer towards ecological regional development in a market economy?

In most countries the market economy is the main steering mechanism for economic activities and their location. Decisions on production and consumption are coordinated by prices which are themselves determined by the supply and demand from individuals. How should market behaviour be influenced? Interventions can be spatially blind or spatially targeted/ place-based. E.g.:

- Giving Information
- Economic incentives (e.g. subsidies, taxes)
- Establishment of markets (e.g. tradable emission/land use permits)
- Regulation (command and control)
- Provision of goods by the democratic authority (e.g. infrastructures)

Spatial planning in this sense uses spatially targeted regulation and spatially targeted provision of infrastructures.

5. How to design the political and planning system (incl. governance)?

Democratic institutions are expected and legitimised to provide the framework conditions for functioning markets and to intervene if need be. Moreover, these institutions are also in charge of education and other important fields relevant for the whole society. But how do collective decision-making systems such as governments function, and how can they be improved? How can political will and ability be geared towards sustainability (incl. environmental policy integration)? E.g.:

- Which politico-administrative level is important? International, national, regional local?
- Design of political and administrative structures such as ministries etc.; design of units for sectoral and regional coordination
- Design of decision-making and planning procedures (including EIA etc.)
- Involvement of whom? Participation and role of civil society? Learning?

6. How to change society as a whole?

Markets and government are both embedded in society. What people believe to be right or wrong, or what causes them to feel satisfied or happy, depends on fundamental social phenomena such as culture, religion, and education. These phenomena can all differ spatially, and geographic proximity may influence the emergence of environmentally relevant milieus and identities. How can “green” values and aims be promoted? Learning?

References

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