

Regional Resilience and the Global Environment: Multiple Scales of Environmental Discourse in Rural Development Policy

*Michael Woods** (Aberystwyth University), *Joachim Burdack* (Leibniz – Institut für Länderkunde, Leipzig) and *Michael Kriszan* (Leibniz – Institut für Länderkunde, Leipzig)

* Presenting author: Michael Woods, Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, UK; Tel: 01970 622589; Fax: 01970 622659; E-mail: m.woods@aber.ac.uk.

Summary of plenary paper to Regional Studies Association Winter Conference, 'Regions and the Environment', November 2010.

Abstract

Sustainable development is widely regarded as a necessary principle for the resilience of Europe's rural regions. However, formulating a strategy for sustainable development involves the careful negotiation of multiple scales of environmental discourse, from the global down to the local. Global environmental issues such as climate change are instrumental in shaping the parameters of regional development, positing perceived new opportunities for rural regions in fields such as renewable energy production, but also presenting challenges for regions with a traditional economic base in activities such as mining or intensive agriculture. At the same time, regional development strategies need also to respond to local environmental concerns, such as pollution or landscape despoilment, which can either amplify or conflict with global concerns. This paper draws on research undertaken as part of an EU FP7 project, DERREG (Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalisation) to examine how these different environmental perspectives have been negotiated in the formulation of regional development strategies across five case study regions: County Roscommon (Ireland), Pomurska (Slovenia), Jihomoravský kraj (Czech Republic), Direktionsbezirk Dresden (Germany) and Saarland (Germany). The paper combines evidence from the analysis of policy documents and media reports, and from interviews with key actors, to discuss how strategies for sustainable rural development in each of these regions respond to different regional environmental concerns and priorities, and reflect differential responses to common global environmental issues.

Introduction

Sustainable development is widely regarded as a necessary principle for the resilience of Europe's rural regions. However, formulating a strategy for sustainable development involves the careful negotiation of multiple scales of environmental discourse, from the global down to the local. Global environmental issues such as climate change are instrumental in shaping the parameters of regional development, positing perceived new opportunities for rural regions in fields such as renewable energy production, but also presenting challenges for regions with a traditional economic base in activities such as mining or intensive agriculture. At the same time, regional development strategies need also to respond to local environmental concerns, such as pollution or landscape despoilment, which can either amplify or conflict with global concerns.

This paper draws on research conducted as part of a larger EU Framework Programme 7 project on 'Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalization' (DERREG),

and as such focuses on the translation and incorporation of global environmental discourses and concerns into regional development strategies. Although globalization is most commonly associated with the increased mobility of people and commodities, globalization is also experienced in the form of a developing global consciousness, in which people have a greater awareness of the world as a whole and their place in it (Steger, 2003). This global consciousness is articulated in, for example, campaigns about global poverty and inequality, and the promotion of universal human rights, but arguably its strongest expression is in the rise of a global environmental discourse. Appreciation of 'global nature' has been constructed through elements including the famous Apollo 17 'Earthrise' photograph of the planet, the Gaia thesis of James Lovelock, and natural history films, and stoked by perceived crises such as climate change, the impacts of which are spatially unlimited. As Urry (2003) has observed, "what were once many apparently separate activities are now regarded as interconnected components of a single global crisis of the natural world" (p. 6).

From this perspective, 'global nature' is holistic but it is also composite, such that it needs protection at all scales – a rationality encapsulated in the mantra of "think global, act local". Accordingly, global environmental consciousness has led both to the creation of international agencies and treaties aimed at addressing trans-border problems and standardising approaches to nature protection, and to expectations of changes in individual behaviour and regional policies and economic practices in the interest of the global environment. A number of consequences follow for the regional development of rural areas. Firstly, traditional industries such as mining, as well as industrialized productivist agriculture, have come under scrutiny for their wider environmental impact. Secondly, infrastructural projects such as new roads and airports that have formed key parts of top-down development strategies have been similarly discredited for contributing to global carbon emissions. Thirdly, local conflicts over commercial forestry, mining, or oil and gas pipelines have been amplified into global causes, involving transnational environmental campaigners. Yet, fourthly, sustainable development in rural areas has been identified as part of the solution to global environmental crises, especially the development of renewable energy production.

Global environmental discourse therefore plays a part in framing rural regional development, but its impact is mediated by processes of translation, negotiation and contestation involving local, regional, national and supra-national actors. In particular, formulating regional development strategies can require squaring local economic interests with global environmental concerns, or balancing competing claims about local and global environmental impacts (commonly with respect to the landscape impacts of wind turbine power stations – see Woods (2003)), as well as identifying regional resources that have potential for sustainable development.

We see these negotiations as part of the broader way in which globalization works, having adopted a relational understanding of the emergent global countryside (Massey, 2005; Woods, 2007). Globalization, in this view, proceeds not by domination and standardization (as it is often portrayed in popular discourses of globalization impacting on rural regions), but through hybridization and adaptation. Regional actors are engaged

in the process of reproducing globalization, and regional policies and strategies can make a difference to outcomes. Indeed, critically, globalization results not in the homogenization of rural areas, but in new patterns of differentiation:

“Through these entanglements, intersections and entrapments, the experience of globalization changes rural places, but it never eradicates the local. Rather, the networks, flows and actors introduced by globalization processes fuse and combine with extant local entities to produce new hybrid formations. In this way, places in the emergent global countryside retain their local distinctiveness, but they are also different to *how they were before*.”

(Woods, 2007, p 500)

In the remaining sections of this paper, we examine the dissemination of global environmental discourse and the translation of local and global environmental concerns into regional development policy in five rural case study regions in Europe. These range from the periurban and industrialized countryside of Eastern Saxony (Direktionsbezirk Dresden) and Saarland in Germany, to the mixed urban/rural region of South Moravia (Jihomoravský kraj) in the Czech Republic, to the more peripheral and agricultural districts of County Roscommon in Ireland and Pomurska in Slovenia. In each case, the evidence presented derives from content analyses of regional newspaper articles and regional policy documents, statistical analysis and interviews with key actors.¹

Dissemination – Media Reporting

Our first take is to examine the dissemination of local and global environmental discourses through the media in the case study regions. Whilst residents received news and information from a range of media sources, including television, radio, the national press and the internet, we focused on regional newspapers as the medium most closely engaged in setting regional political agendas and as a forum in which the regional dimensions of global environmental discourses are likely to be teased out. There is considerable variation in the form and significance of the regional press between the case study regions, and consequently in the volume of articles carried – large-circulation daily newspapers in Saarland and Saxony contrast with smaller-circulation local weeklies in County Roscommon and Pomurska. Nonetheless, there is a clear overall trend of an increasing volume of articles on environmental issues over the last decade. The number of environment-related articles in the five local weekly newspapers covering County Roscommon, for example, increased from 39 in 2001 to 133 in 2008; yet, as in Pomurska and South Moravia, the majority of these articles concerned local environmental issues, with only a handful of articles about broader global themes such as climate change.

¹ The research forms a work programme, led by Joachim Burdack and Michael Kriszan at IfL, within the DERREG project, coordinated by Michael Woods at Aberystwyth University. The case study research on which this paper draws was undertaken by Michael Kriszan, Agnes Borsig, Tobias Krol, Christian Quinque, Elke Knappe and Annedore Bergfeld at IfL, Leipzig; Maura Farrell and Marie Mahon at the National University of Ireland Galway; Pavel Trnka, Lenka Jakešová, Kristýna Novotná and Antonín Vaishar at Mendel University, Brno; Birte Nienaber and Wioletta Frys at Universität des Saarlandes; and Irena Mrak and Barbara Lampic at the University of Ljubljana.

By contrast, the regional dailies in Saarland and Saxony not only published a far higher volume of articles, but also exhibited a clear shift in emphasis over the decade from more local concerns such as nature protection and landscape conservation to global issues such as climate change. The *Sächsische Zeitung* in Saxony published 23 articles about climate change in 2000, but 413 in 2008; with similar increases in stories about climate protection, energy conservation, biodiversity and renewable energy. In Saarland, the *Saarbrücker Zeitung* published 10 articles about climate change in 2000, but 216 in 2008; with large increases again in stories about climate protection, energy conservation and renewable energy. Interestingly, whereas most articles about climate and energy in the *Sächsische Zeitung* in 2000 were in the international or national news sections, by 2008 these issues were primarily being reported as regional news – in part reflecting the significance of these issues to a region with a large energy industry. Yet, in the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, the balance was still towards reporting climate change as a national or international story, with only renewable energy reported more as regional news.

Thus, whilst there is increased coverage of global environment issues in regional media, the dissemination of global environmental discourses is mediated through regional contexts. The scale and tenor of reporting of issues such as climate change, biodiversity and energy conservation reflects regional economic concerns and the structure of the regional media. In some regions, global environment issues continue to jostle for prominence with more local environmental issues such as landscape protection. These factors each affect perceptions of the environment in regions, and its incorporation into regional development strategies.

Translation – Developing Regional Policies

Our second take examines the translation of global and local environmental discourses in to regional development strategies, focusing in particular on a comparison of development plans published in both the early and late 2000s, supplemented by the views of key stakeholders from the public, private and third sectors.

There is a universal inclusion of sustainability in the regional development strategies examined, as well as a near-consensus among the stakeholders interviewed that sustainability and economic development can be mutually accommodated, and that protecting the environment presents opportunities for the regions concerned. In framing these policies there is often acknowledgment of the context of global challenges such as climate change, but such references tend to be limited and general. In terms of developing actual policies and initiatives, local environment concerns appear to be more important drivers. There is also a trend of movement from more general statements and prescriptions concerning renewable energy and organic agriculture in the early 2000s, towards more focused policies and initiatives in later documents.

Thus, as with the mediation of global environmental discourses through a local lens in the regional media, the global discourse of sustainable development is being translated into regional policies as mediated through an assessment of local problems, opportunities and pressures. Critically, the process of mediation places regional actors at the forefront of shaping regional development strategies. Although there is reference to international

agreements and national policies in several of the plans examined, few of the stakeholders interviewed identified international bodies or even national government department and agencies as key actors in shaping regional strategies. Only one stakeholder, in Ireland, for example, cited the European Commission as a key influence on regional sustainable development policy. Similarly, whilst transnational environmental campaign groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace were only mentioned as an influential actor in County Roscommon, whilst although Greenpeace has been active in protests and campaigns in eastern Saxony it was expressly dismissed by regional stakeholders as having any influence on regional sustainable development. Instead, stakeholders in all the case study regions pointed to local authorities and politicians, national and local conservation groups, local business and the regional media.

Citizens' initiatives or local campaign groups were mentioned as influential actors in Eastern Saxony, Pomurska and County Roscommon. These include groups campaigning for environmental action, but also protests against some aspects of sustainable development. Most notably, anti-windfarm campaign groups have been effective in reshaping approaches to sustainable development in Saxony. In the 2002 regional development plan for the Dresden region, wind power was at the core of an envisaged expansion of renewable energy generation. By the 2009 revision, however, wind power was discussed in entirely negative terms, and policies for renewable energy had been broadened to encompass a far wider range of production methods.

As such, in mediating the translation of sustainable development discourse into policy, regional actors are not only localizing strategies, but may also be contesting elements of the global discourse. Whilst the majority of stakeholders interviewed spoke favorably of the incorporation of sustainability into regional development and compatibility of environmental and economic goals, there were minority dissenting but conflicting voices in Eastern Saxony and Pomurska. In Pomurska a number of stakeholders argued that regional development policy had not gone far enough in incorporating environmental concerns. In Eastern Saxony, meanwhile, some stakeholders suggested that in spite of rhetoric, economic interests were put ahead of environmental issues when it came to actual policy instruments, whilst others contended that environmental protection had already compromised economic development:

“When you are looking at the tasks then I have to say that ... environment is subordinate. Economic efficiency is most important and all things that can be turned for account are realized.”

(Environmental NGO stakeholder, Direktionsbezirk Dresden, interview)

“To my point of view... If someone just mentions nature protection, then everybody will be angry because we have the most dense network of Natura 2000 areas in Saxony and thus – this is the public opinion – economic development is limited.”

(Business stakeholder, Direktionsbezirk Dresden, interview)

These two cases are examined in more detail in the final part of the paper.

Negotiation 1 - Energy and regional development in Eastern Saxony

Mining and power-generation have been central to the economy of eastern Saxony for much of the last century. The Lausitz district, on the border with Poland, was a major source of brown coal – the primary fuel in the German Democratic Republic – which was extracted through strip-mining, causing extensive environmental degradation. At the end of the 1980s, more than 300 tons of brown coal were produced annually from 33 open pits in the GDR, largely for domestic energy producing in highly-polluting power stations, including Boxberg in eastern Saxony. The heavy concentration of air pollution earned the district the nickname ‘the black triangle’.

Following German re-unification, the brown coal industry in Saxony was largely dismantled for both economic and environmental reasons, the latter following a combination of local, national and international pressures, including obligations and regulations resulting from incorporation into the European Union. The 2002 Regional Plan for Lausitz and Lower Silesia (Regionalplan Oberlausitz-Niederschlesien) was based in part on the assumption that brown coal mining and power generation would be phased out, and that economic development would be needed to replace lost jobs. It included recognition that sustainable development could create jobs, but with limited detail beyond general commitments towards sustainable tourism and renewable energy, notably wind power – with plans to establish a transnational ‘Energy Region Lausitz’.

However, the coal industry has proved to be more resilient than anticipated. Open cast mines still produce 60 million tons of brown coal per year, and feed three power stations generating 6,500 MW of electricity. Both the mines and the power stations are operated by a Swedish company, Vattenfall, which with 7,000 workers is the largest single employer in the district. Brown coal makes a significant contribution to Vattenfall’s profits, and the company has been accused of hypocrisy in the regional media, given its high profile investments in renewable energy in Scandinavia.

Moreover, coal has support from local stakeholders. Although most of the stakeholders interviewed could envisage a future without coal, they argued for its continued economic importance at present in a district with 15% unemployment. Planning and regulations were considered able to mitigate local environmental impacts, whilst some stakeholders professed themselves unqualified to assess ‘global’ impacts. There is evidence of increasing local opposition to mining, especially to plans to re-open one mine, with some involvement by international campaigners, including Greenpeace activists who occupied part of Boxberg power station to protest against carbon emissions. Yet, these more global concerns are discursively marginalized.

At the same time, the development of wind-power stations was confronted by local opposition, with concerns about noise, landscape despoilment and impacts on bat and bird populations. Accordingly, the first revision of the Regional Plan in 2009 indicated a clear revision of thinking on wind-power, which was now to be constrained to limited development in designated areas. The plan recognized that wind-power was needed to

contribute towards prescribed targets for renewable energy in the Saxony Programme for Climate Protection, but noted that “the existing designated privileged areas for wind energy are sufficient to implement the Programme for Climate Protection of the Free State of Saxony” (Oberlausitz-Neiderschlesin Regional Plan, 2009, p. 84).

Thus, from an environmental imperative that seemingly also offered opportunities for regional economic development, the global discourse of climate change had been renegotiated through the intervention of regional actors into a more marginal position, subordinate to local economic concerns. The requirements of higher regional, national and international plans for climate protection became obligations to be minimally met, rather than a springboard for sustainable development. Instead, ‘sustainable development’ was reworked to have a stronger economic emphasis, configured around local environmental concerns, and fitted around the continuing prioritization of the traditional but carbon-producing coal industry.

Negotiation 2 – Nature and Development in Pomurska

Pomurska is the poorest region of Slovenia, peripherally located in the north-eastern corner of the country bordering with Austria, Hungary and Croatia, and with poor transport connections and no major urban centres. Its economy has been dominated by small-scale agriculture, food-processing and textile manufacturing, all of which have struggled with economic liberalization and the opening up of markets to international competition. The region’s major employer, a clothing factory, closed in 2009 with the loss of 2,600 jobs.

Pomurska does, however, have an exceptional natural environment. This was recognized in 2004 by the designation of the Goričko Landscape Park on an international IUCN model, covering a third of the region; as well as by numerous Natura 2000 sites (again adhering to international standards), which cover over 43% of the region’s land area. Regional development stakeholders have emphasized the potential for these natural resources to be used as a basis for sustainable development, especially sustainable tourism. In promoting this vision, they are implicitly and explicitly making global connections in two ways. Firstly, there is belief that the regional environment will have an international appeal, attracting foreign tourists. Secondly, they acknowledge the need for sustainable tourism that is not only sensitive to local ecology but also to a lower footprint towards global environmental impacts (although any tourism in Pomurska will inevitably depend on long-distance car or air travel).

However, the realization of the vision is constrained by limited regional capacity to act. Stakeholders expressed frustration both at the restricted engagement of local communities in environmental planning, and a lack of awareness of sustainable development among the public, and at what they perceived to be limited engagement with sustainable development in national and regional policies. In a highly centralized state with no effective regional authority for Pomurska, regional stakeholders have been so far unable to capture, configure and combine global and local elements to drive sustainable development in the way that they would wish.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented preliminary analysis of the ways in which global environmental discourses are converted into regional strategies for sustainable development. Across our five case study regions there clearly a divergence of outcomes that points to the significance of regional differentiation and mediation. Discourses of global environmental problems that appear to call for local action are mediated and adapted to local environment situations and concerns as they are disseminated through regional media. The media in turn influences the development of regional policies and plans in which global discourses are translated into regional strategies and objectives. Finally the implementation of regional initiatives for sustainable development involves negotiation with various local actors, for whom global concerns may feel very different and less important than pressing local economic needs. In these ways, sustainable development is a regionally differentiated outcome of the negotiated and contested reproduction of the global through local place.

References

- Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage.
- Steger, M. B. (2003) *Globalization: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Urry, J. (2003) *Global Complexity*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Woods, M. (2003b) Conflicting environmental visions of the rural: windfarm development in Mid Wales, *Sociologia Ruralis*, 43, 271-288.
- Woods, M. (2007) Engaging the global countryside: globalization, hybridity and the reconstitution of rural place, *Progress in Human Geography*, 31, 485-507.