

A COMPARISON OF METHODOLOGICAL GUIDES FOR CREATING MICROREGIONAL STRATEGIES OF CENTRAL EUROPEAN RURAL AREAS. CASE STUDY: CZECH REPUBLIC

Jakub Trojan

Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic

Abstract: This paper discusses the complementarity of methodological guides dealing with microregional development in Central Europe. As an example, the Czech Republic framework has been selected. This study compares seven common methodologies written in Czech, which the author has divided into three groups, namely manual-like methodologies, semi-scientific texts and hybrid texts dealing with other complementary aspects. The result is a comparison of methodologies, their usage and implications for the practices of regional development. The paper also includes a brief analysis of sustainable development elements incorporated into the methodological texts. The final part outlines links to the four-capital model of regional development.

Key words: Microregion, Rural area, Regional development, Strategy, Sustainability, Czech Republic.

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Introduction

Czech Act No. 128/2000 Coll. concerning municipalities has not precisely defined the term “microregions”. Close to one of the accepted definitions of “microregion” is the concept of optional alliances of municipalities. Chiriboga (1993) defines microregion “as the smallest unit of society where the various social players – individual and social – relate to a certain agroecological space, and establish economic, social, political and cultural ties that either permit or impede the reproduction of rural families.” The alliances play one of the main roles in (micro) regional development especially in rural areas with fewer opportunities for economic development. Creating regional or local strategies to reach sustainable (economic, ecologic and social) development is one of the main prerequisites. It is required not only by European regional policy from macroeconomic perspectives (Puga, 2002) or regional practice (Husák, 2010), but also from local actors and inhabitants of the regions to reach the common

public interests and demands (Blažek and Uhlíř, 2002 or Wokoun et al., 2008). Municipalities grouped into optional alliances are not fully equipped with the expert knowledge that is essential for developing a successful strategy and development plan that will enable municipalities to reach their visions. This lack of expertise is the most common source of planning mistakes and the misuse of conceptual documents as can be generally seen in the Czech countryside (Perlín, 2006).

The reasons described above have motivated many researchers/experts to create methodological texts (manuals, guides, instructions) dealing with the composition of strategies as key conceptual documents. Recent Czech bibliography consists of several methodologies. Seven of them have been chosen as for comparison and deeper analysis in this paper. Methodologies are mostly written to help municipalities in the process of creating their strategies and development programs. Some of them have scientific aspects dealing with the theory of regional development and some are broadly written with other purposes in mind, but still connected to microregional strategies. All seven texts have been explored and the resulting analysis describes the differences, common parts, criticism and connection to sustainable development while discussing the framework of four-model capital (Blažek et al., 2006).

* Correspondence address:

Address: Department of Geography, Faculty of Science, Masaryk University Brno, Kotlářská 2, 602 00 Brno, Czech Republic
Telephone: +420.774.252817

Email: trojan@geogr.muni.cz

Objectives and Methods

This paper deals with the Czech Republic as an example of a part of the Central European space. Seven methodological texts from the Czech Republic have been chosen for further analysis. Table 1 shows the original name of the text, the respective area covered (the target region for which the methodological documents were created). These texts represent the main stream of currently active methodologies which are accessible for municipalities. As can be seen from the table, most texts cover a general area and could be used practically anywhere. Even texts with generally intended target regions could be implemented in other regions. For clear orientation in the text code names are used for the analyzed publications which are also presented in Table 1.

This unique comparative study does not include foreign texts because of the clear focus on local perspectives of the Czech countryside as a model example of Central European country. International comparison of strategies used e.g. in tourism is drawn by J. Vystoupil et al (2007). Vystoupil's publication (2007) is also one of the core sources which compares and analyzes strategies and programs of development focusing on sustainable tourism, but it lacks reviews of methodological texts for creating these documents.

Therefore, this paper suggests a new methodology for the comparison and analysis of methodological texts. The analysis compares the thematic content in a predetermined structure. If the analyzed document shows elements from the predetermined content structure, YES is marked. If there is only a brief comment of some elements, PARTLY is marked, and if no elements are present in the analyzed publication, NO is marked. The elements of structure which have been analyzed were also briefly described earlier by Trojan (2011):

1. Theoretical part

- (a) definition of used terms or terms connected to (micro)regional development
- (b) purposes of strategic documents in regional development (e.g. legislative framework)
- (c) broader context (The European Union practice, examples of use)
- (d) description of methods used
- (e) new trends and approaches in regional development
- (f) links to further reading, references

2. Practical part

- (a) process of creating the strategy (step-by-step guide)
- (b) financial framework

Table 1. The analyzed methodological texts in alphabetical order by authors (translated into English) with target regions

Publication/text	Author(s)	Target region	Abbreviation [code]
System and methodological aspects of regional development strategies (VUSC) in the Czech Republic (methodological handbook)	Czekaj, P., Hellmich, M., Hučka, M., Kutscherauer, A., Vozáb, J.	Czech Republic	[1 - Czekaj]
Manual of processing and use of a set of indicators for development in small municipalities	Hřebík, Š., Třebický, V.	Ústí Region (primarily)	[2 - Hrebik]
Methodology of creating local development strategies	Kučera, J.	Ústí Region (primarily)	[3 - Kucera]
Methodological guide for creation of strategic development documents of microregions	Labounková, V., Půček, M., Rohrerová, L.	South Moravia region (primarily)	[4 - Labounkova]
Problems of microregions during the joint project creations	Pápol, T., Šilhánková, V., Kučerová, Z., Pavlas, M., Šimka, M.	Czech Republic (case study of The Hradec Králové Region)	[5 - Papol]
Methodological guide for those interested in strategic planning in rural microregions and municipalities	Perlín, R., Bičík, I.	Central Bohemia Region	[6 - Perlin]
Implementation methodology in management of microregional development	Škrabal, I., Nunvářová, S., Novák, J., Třebický, V.	Czech Republic	[7 - Skrabal]

Source: Original documents, author's analysis

- (c) social framework and management of regional development
- (d) guide to creating analytical parts of strategies
- (e) guide to creating proposals
- (f) action plan
- (g) implementation of strategy
- (h) evaluation of strategy
- (i) examples from case study
- (j) annexes
- (k) on-line availability

The Results chapter discusses the impact of documents on empowering the sustainability elements in strategies and programs. Sustainability is not exactly measured but authors uses methods of ESPECTD/TODS approach emphasizing relations among six main poles of hexagon: E(economy) - S(ociety) - P(olitics) - E(cology) - C(ulture) - T(echnology) - see Figure 1. [Hynek and Hynek (2007)].

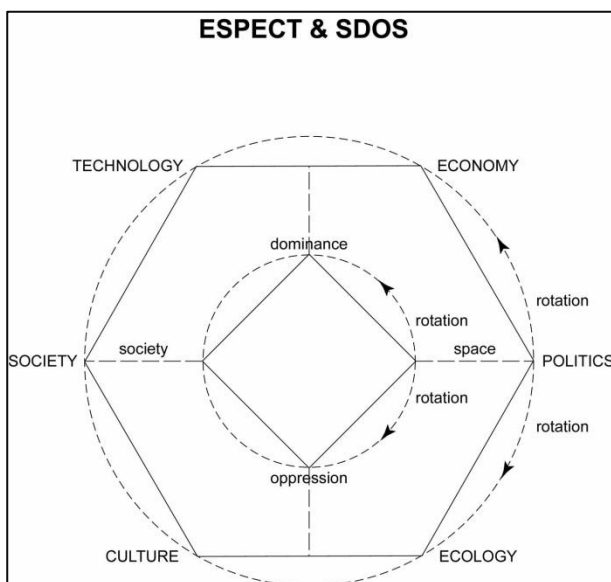


Figure 1. ESPECT & TODS mechanism, scheme drawn by Hynek and Hynek (2007)

Source: Hynek, A., Hynek, N. (2007): Bridging the gap between the theory and practice of regional sustainability: a political-conceptual analysis. *Geografický časopis*, Geografický ústav SAV : Bratislava, 59

Inner rhombus with nodes T(emporality) - O(ppression) - D(ominance) - S(patiality) explores simultaneously the spatial and temporal effects of the power/knowledge nexus. Ultimately, the inclusion of both the hexagon and rhombus into a single framework reflects the necessity for the researcher to investigate ESPECT and TODS as parallel, complementary and interconnected systems since it is not only through the synthesis of nodes, but also through an examination of the processes which coproduce these geometric arrangements. Hence we can get a better grip on the physical, social, and

imagined “reality” (Hynek and Hynek, 2007). This concept is supplemented by the approach taken by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which views ecosystems (not only natural but also cultural) as capital which should be rationally maintained and deals with several scales – local, regional and global (Alcamo et al., 2003).

Results

All methodological publications have been analyzed and the results are written in Table 2. From the content analysis the orientation of the publication is clear together with aspects of both strong and weak points of the methodologies. Generally speaking, the theoretical background of the documents is well prepared. This is important when transferring such expert knowledge to ensure that the strategy creators have a deeper awareness of these issues.

Weaker points in the theoretical parts of the evaluation were framed within the broader relationship and new trends in regional development were suggested. A Broader context (e.g. the European Union approach, legislative frame, cohesion to regional policy, etc.) is rare in a detailed description. This could be irrelevant for most documents. New trends were accentuated in the texts written by teams of authors including universities ([1 – Czekaj], [4 – Labounkova], [5 – Papol], [6 – Perlin]) with access to recent research on this topic. The practical background of the methodologies depends on the purpose of each document. Whereas the analysis also combined texts primarily oriented to specific parts of the microregional strategy (e.g. management, indicators, selected issues in the cooperation), these publications could not meet the criteria set for the general evaluation. Despite this, the weakest points of the practical parts are a lack of discussion under the financial framework, missing significant purposes for action plans and a lack of information about evaluation and the monitoring of the strategies. Discussions concerning the financial framework dealt with the financial support of strategies, links to municipalities’ budgets, rules for distributing money to local projects etc. These are important especially in the creation of tactical documents for short and medium term planning. The lack of action plans is more critical in the documents that are meant to serve as step-by-step guides for creating complete conceptual documents. An action plan is one of the important parts of each strategy and must specify a roadmap for the implementation of the strategy (especially the proposals). Its absence is also apparent in current strategies and the role of methodological guides should be to eliminate this lack. Analogously, the same problem appears in the lack of evaluation

and monitoring. Without monitoring the strategy (ex-ante, interim, ex-post) and evaluating the impacts of the strategy, we are not able to continue with additional plans based on the priorities of the strategy because their effectiveness and feasibility are not monitored.

Table 2 shows the content presented in each publication. Further analysis reveals more information about the documents and therefore we can identify the common parts and differences. All documents have a theoretical introduction. Broader theoretical parts following the introduction are missing in [1 - Czekaj], other publications have at least a terminological framework and a brief introduction to the purpose of the strategies. The Functional parts of the methodological documents are similar and all relevant methodologies deal with analytical and practical parts of strategic documents. Operational action plan is not as common as mentioned above. All documents highlight the risk related to writing extensive analytical parts of strategies which are of little relevance to the functional parts. Implementation of the concepts is also presented as the final common standard of each assessed methodological publication. Furthermore, documents also have technical similarities – they are all available online in PDF form for public use. The differences and uniqueness of the documents resulted

mainly from a different purpose of each publication. Only one methodological text is concerned with the higher level of regional policy strongly connected to the financial framework [1 - Czekaj]. Focusing on microregional management, participatory and community planning with discussion of key problems is offered by [7 - Skrabal]. A university approach with accenting scientific methods can be seen in [6 - Perlin]. Authors focus on data collection and methods of creation strategies (brainstorming, guided interviews, data mining). Similar principles are also in [4 - Labounkova], which are reminiscent of modern methods of strategic planning and innovative approaches. Scientific approach is characteristic for [5 - Papol] as well. As a research report, it is concerned with compact theories that use case studies as proofs. Methodologies from The Ústí Region are complementary to each other - [2 - Hrebik] focuses on indicators in the regional development and could be added to [3 - Kucera].

Aggregated with Table 2 it is possible to group the publications according to their complete content and main purpose. The first group called "methodological step-by-step guides" includes methodologies which have strong applicable parts in which instructions for creating strategies/programs are present. This group could be used directly by mayors of municipalities or planners of the local development in rural areas.

Table 2. Analysis of publications structure according to predetermined elements (codes are used instead of the abbreviation of publication and instead of the examined element)

	[1-Czekaj]	[2-Hrebik]	[3-Kucera]	[4-Labounkova]	[5-Papol]	[6-Perlin]	[7-Skrabal]
1a	YES	YES	YES	PARTLY	YES	YES	YES
1b	PARTLY	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
1c	YES	NO	PARTLY	PARTLY	YES	YES	NO
1d	PARTLY	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
1e	NO	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	PARTLY
1f	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	PARTLY	YES
2a	YES	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
2b	YES	NO	NO	PARTLY	YES	PARTLY	PARTLY
2c	YES	PARTLY	PARTLY	YES	YES	YES	YES
2d	PARTLY	NO	YES	YES	PARTLY	YES	NO
2e	PARTLY	NO	YES	YES	PARTLY	YES	PARTLY
2f	NO	NO	PARTLY	YES	NO	YES	NO
2g	YES	NO	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO
2h	NO	NO	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
2i	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	PARTLY
2j	YES	NO	NO	YES	YES	YES	YES
2k	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

Source: Original documents, author's analysis

Publications from this groups include [3 – Kucera], [4 – Labounkova] and [6 – Perlin]. These texts are readable, compact and functional. The second group is called "semi-scientific texts" and there is only one text - [5 – Papol]. This publication is full of compact theories written in difficult scientific language. Texts [4 – Labounkova] and [6 – Perlin] could also be assigned to the second group. However, these publications have different primary purposes and hence implied usage. The third group is represented by documents which have other main purpose and the discussion of strategies is a minor topic. These publications are complementary to methodologies from the first group and they expand the topic. The publications from this group are specialized to partial theses related to micro-regional documents such as indicators [2 – Hrebik], financial framework [1 – Czekaj] or management issues [7 – Skrabal]. The third group is called "hybrid forms" and it consists of texts by [1 – Czekaj], [2 – Hrebik] and [7 – Skrabal]. This completely new typology could bring a synthetic view to existing methodological texts.

Sustainable development of rural areas is necessary with regard to the creation of local planning. If we consider sustainability research in six-pillar hexagon with inner rhombus ESPECT/TODS (Hynek and Hynek, 2007) or if we focus on local ecosystems from the perspective of investable capital (Alcamo et al., 2003), the results from the analysis of methodological documents would not reveal relevant values/data. This is due to the methods used while writing these publications. ESPECT/TODS approaches should be adopted during the implementation of the strategies while the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment could be considered during an evaluation of strategy implementation. However, we can identify some elements of the ESPECT hexagon in the methodologies, especially the social pillar in [7 – Skrabal]. Accentuation of community planning, bottom-up principles and local power/potential is implied also in texts [4 – Labounkova] and [6 – Perlin]. This social pillar of sustainability is accompanied by an economic pillar manifested by [1 – Czekaj]. The weakest points of examined publications are the environmental parts. Ecological indicators are mentioned except in [2 – Hrebik], only partly in [4 – Labounkova] and [7 – Skrabal]. A key tool for evaluating the impact of the conceptual documents (SEA – strategic environmental assessment) is mentioned only in [3 – Kucera]. Larger concepts with a potentially higher impact on the ecological pillar of sustainable development must pass SEA process and this fact should be listed in the methodological guides. Multi-criterial analysis (MCA) or cost-benefit analysis (CBA) are not mentioned at all.

Discussion

The findings obtained from the comprehensive analysis allowed distribution of methodological guides into the three groups. Working with these groups could facilitate the creation of development documents. If the sustainability elements are incorporated well in the strategies, the implementation could be successful. The implementation phase of the strategy must have a precisely prepared action plan and real indicators for monitoring and evaluating the implementation process. The issue of ex-ante evaluation is dealt with in the EU SRDTOOLS project (Blažek et al., 2006, Brink et al., 2008, Ekins et al., 2008) which developed a model of regional sustainable development evaluation based on the "four-capital model". This model originally comes from economy and includes pillars of sustainable development transformed to the four capitals: Manufactured capital (man-made production), Natural capital (traditional natural sources like water, energy), Human capital (health and well-being of individuals) and Social capital (societal level of human well-being). Each capital has its own indicators and the EU SRDTOOLS project deals with the moment of changing the quality/quantity among capitals by public interventions and its consequences (trade-off). Trajectories of negative consequences of these changes are defined as critical trends and irreversible changes among capitals which cause negative impacts are called critical threshold. This model is not incorporated in any methodological texts. However, its value is also important during the implementation phase which is why the goal is to take it into account. The four-capital model should be perceived while working with [2 – Hrebik] and dealing with indicators definition/distribution. Spatial processes, in which capitals are being changed, are precisely described by ESPECT/TODS approach (Hynek and Hynek, 2007). The Four-capital model could also be seen as an operational example of Millennium Ecosystem Assessment results (Alcamo et al., 2003) which also views ecosystems as capitals. These principles are not mentioned in the methodological texts under investigation (not even in the scientific parts and new trends from regional development), which is not an a priori mistake. The problem could stem from the general concept of sustainability as used in methodological texts – the missing environmental links and classifying economic and social pillars diversified (not as capital) could lead to the non-complex strategies with plain or weak indicators of sustainable microregional development.

Conclusion

Analysis of methodological documents allowed the construction of a new typology of methodological guides focusing on microregional development. Rural areas dealing with local development under the optional alliances of municipalities (microregions) should develop their own strategies and programs such as strategies for long-term planning and programs as a tactical mid- or short-term conceptual document. If community-based and bottom-up principles are used, the right guides are from the first group "methodological step-by-step guides". However, it is desirable to extend the strategy with further details such as indicators of implementation (for better monitoring) with reference to four-capital model or similar concepts (like Millennium Ecosystem Assessment or ESPECT/TODS) of sustainability. If using expert-based top-down principles, it seems more beneficial to use documents from all groups and try to indicate new approaches from recent scientific findings, local knowledge and community planning. However, the incorporation of sustainability elements in the strategies appears to be rare. Strategic environmental assessment is included only in one document and pillars of sustainable development are not equally used.

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