

Re-Understanding Sustainability on Regional Level¹

Aims of the paper and methods

As the global economic crisis has identified the deficiencies of the dominantly growth- and competition-oriented current development goals of the European Union (EU), sustainability has the chance to become the main paradigm of the EU development policy in the future. However sustainability needs new approaches to be able to be the leading development paradigm (again). This paper aims to define sustainability principles for regional development planning processes, as a re-understanding of sustainability from a territorial aspect.

According to Gibson (2006) sustainability assessment processes must provide means of specifying the sustainability decision criteria and trade-off rules for specific contexts. These specifications are often missing from many European development initiations. The theory of sustainability is too complex and not always unambiguously understandable, therefore it can easily become a cliché (not like the current popular policy term about environmental-integration, the climate change).

In the future, regional development could be the most important platform for enhancing sustainability. The regional dimension is suitable for redefining the meaning of sustainable social, economic and environmental systems in a way which is practical and very close to the people and to the operative public decisions. According to our understanding, the term “*regional sustainability*” means all kinds of territorial dimensions of sustainability (local, regional) under the global level. Understanding sustainability only on global level cannot be tangible enough to provide regional development activities with relevant information.

We present some case studies of defining and enhancing regional sustainability in regional development activities on different levels of decision making. The case studies are about pilot initiations in progress. Therefore the presented experiences are based on impressions of professionals and not on systematic qualitative or quantitative data. This paper deals first of all with methodological matters, it is mainly out of its scope to describe how the principles have been followed in practice, during the implementation.

Conceptual principles of regional sustainability

In Hungary, during the programming for 2007–13 EU financed development cycle, a new method was defined for integrating sustainability considerations into regional development planning. The method had to fulfil certain requirements in order to be used easily and expansively in the practice of Hungarian and European Union (EU) planning procedures. The method shall be able to be used in planning on all public decision making levels, in policies, plans and programmes. Finally a set of principles on regional sustainability was proved to be the optimal baseline for the methodology. These principles could be introduced as horizontal principles of a plan or a programme and ought to be applied in all measures and projects financed by the programme.

According to our understanding, in theory, the regional sustainability is consisted of the following four basic principles:

1. *Harmony*: in a sustainable region all the social, economic and environmental needs have to be satisfied without one regional structure (environmental, social or economic) harming

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another [e.g. housing (as part of social needs) must not consume the protected natural areas; industrial and communal wastewater (as part of social and industrial needs) must be treated properly; the labour force (as part of economical needs) must be ensured by the local society not causing local unemployment; emigration (as part of social needs) must not cause lack of labour force for the local economy)].

2. *Autonomy*: a sustainable region has to keep all the financial, knowledge, energy and material flows inside its territory as long as it is possible. It has to try to close the cycles of these flows inside. The limits of this kind of autonomy have to be decided in any individual cases differently, for instance in the mirror of competitiveness.
3. *Solidarity*: a sustainable region cannot exploit other regions and cannot export its economic, social and environmental problems towards other regions.
4. *Innovation*: a sustainable region is able to renew itself by adapting or creating innovations concerning its ecological and demographic production as well as its knowledge base.

Sustainable spatial planning and regional development has to realise the above principles, and has to push the region under planning towards a more sustainable status described by the principles.

The above basic principles were introduced as “*principles of sustainable use of space*” on policy level (National Territorial Development Concept, NTDC 2005). In NTDC “*regional sustainability*” was also defined in one of its overall aims. The messages of NTDC on regional sustainability could be integrated also into the EU financed development plans and programmes as horizontal principles (See Table 1). Introducing the principles into the European Union (EU) financed development programmes were helped by the current idea of the EU on *territorial cohesion*. (According to the Lisbon Treaty, *territorial cohesion* is a new community level task of the EU.) The *territorial cohesion* was set as a master horizontal principle for the 2007–13 programming period in Hungary, and the “*principles of sustainable use of space*” could be integrated into the *territorial cohesion* phenomena. (The main messages of the principles are presented in the next chapter on project level.)

Table 1: Forms of applying the principles of regional sustainability in Hungarian planning and programming documents on different levels

LEVEL	DOCUMENT	REGIONAL SUSTAINABILITY CONTENT
Policy	National Territorial Development Concept 2005–2030 (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ overall aim of creating a sustainable spatial structure ○ horizontal “principles of sustainable use of space”
Plan	Hungarian National Strategic Reference Framework 2007–2013 (NSRF, 2007, planning for EU financial sources)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “principles of sustainable use of space” as part of the horizontal aim of territorial cohesion
Programme	Sectoral and regional Operative Programmes of NSRF (OPs)	
Project	project selection and project development procedures, (the projects are financed from the OPs of NSRF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Criteria on regional sustainability (and on other territorial cohesion principles) as part of the project selection criteria set (Projects ought to fulfil the expectations described by the criteria in order to get EU subsidies.)

Regional sustainability criteria on project level

In order to translate the horizontal territorial cohesion messages of programmes into project level, a more concrete criteria set were established. Projects funded by a programme have to try to fulfil all criteria. Regional sustainable considerations were also integrated into the territorial cohesion criteria set. The project level regional sustainable criteria are based on the program level “principles of sustainable use of space”.

In order to simplify the programme implementation work on sustainability enhancement, we developed a questionnaire for checking the projects against regional sustainability criteria (and other territorial cohesion criteria). The system must be able to be applied for projects of every sector. However it is recommended to adopt the questionnaire to the specific sector if it is possible (See Table 2).

The application of the regional sustainable criteria set on project level has just started as a pilot initiative in case of several regional development interventions. Therefore there is not too much evidence on its viability and efficiency. However the experiments done so far have some important findings:

- The new approach of regional sustainable criteria is not always unambiguously understandable for project and programme managers. It has to be explained how to incorporate these ideas into project development and project selection procedures. Therefore a Guide and a Handbook (Péti, 2009) were prepared on Territorial Cohesion including also examples and good practices for enhancing regional sustainability.
- In practice, if a project complies with the requirements described by the criteria set, it is only slightly favoured during the project selection and allocation of EU subsidies, because there are many other development interests resulting also preferences or discriminations. The use of principles in some programmes and criteria in some public money supported projects cannot be powerful enough to enhance sustainability in a region by themselves. More general and comprehensive regional development tools should complement the current ones (see next chapter).

Table 2: Principles of regional sustainability on project level (in case of projects developing environmental infrastructure) (based on Péti, 2009)

BASIC PRINCIPLES	PROJECT EVALUATION CRITERIA (If a project meets one of the requirements below it gets 1 point, the projects are ranked according to total number of points during the project selection procedure.)
<i>Strengthening regional autonomy</i> (Sustainable and efficient use of local/ regional resources)	
<i>Strengthening synergy of regional activities</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does the project have any connection to other similar environmental development projects in the settlement, region? Has it been appropriately introduced? ○ Does the project have a connection to strategic objectives accepted for settlement/ regional development? <i>Keeping resources flow inside the region:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The development contributes to the support of the local/ regional economy, cooperation, the purchases and sales of local/ regional service providers and special products, to retention and use of the human, organisational and financial resources in the micro-region? 	There are projects recently implemented or under implementation/preparation that are different from the environmental development subject of the application and that strengthen the development of the applicant, or to the enforcement of which the development of the applicant contributes There are development planning documents of settlements or micro-regions accepted with which the development concepts are in accordance. The project reflects the collaboration of various settlements (e.g. due to partners, location). Is there a private investment that will be implemented as a result of or in direct connection with the development to be implemented? Will the project be contributed by local or regional non-profit partners during its development and production? <i>The development is proved - via adequate supporting factors - to contribute to the following factors:</i> The development contributes to the retention of the social resources of the affected settlement/ micro-region in the area, to utilisation of micro-regional resources (e.g. NGOs, working hours of the local people, local capital). The development contributes to support the local/ regional economy, to the use of local/ regional services and products, to the permanent collaboration of subcontractors or purchases within the settlement, micro-region, to the creation of a local cluster of products
<i>Strengthening harmonious relation in and between regional structures</i>	
<i>Enhancing sustainable use of space:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Does the project promote the implementation of principles for sustainable land use? (e.g. it does not increase built-up density, does not reduce nature areas, improves access to 	<i>As a result of the project, in accordance with the NHDP principles for land use:</i> The built-up density of the affected land will not increase and the extension of the lands open to the public and areas close to nature (in accordance with the Act on Nature Protection, nature areas, forests, planting trees, water surface, reedy area, fruit-garden, vineyard, line of trees, lawn, grassland, pastureland, green area on urban land) will not decrease.

BASIC PRINCIPLES	PROJECT EVALUATION CRITERIA (If a project meets one of the requirements below it gets 1 point, the projects are ranked according to total number of points during the project selection procedure.)
public properties, encourages and enables access and local transport on foot, by bicycle, by public transport and alternative modes of transport, reduces travel and delivery needs, deepens knowledge of the region and increases public responsibility) (If access to public properties decreases, no points can be awarded to this factor.)	As a result of the development, public access to public properties (forests, peaks, viewpoints, waterside, islands, protected areas open to the public, historic buildings and objects that form a part of the cultural heritage, night sky) and events of public interest will be ensured or improved (If access to public properties decreases, no points can be awarded to this factor.).
<i>Positive effects on regional structures (other than environmental infrastructure directed by the project)</i> o As a result of the project, will community life be improved, will the infrastructure for community use be developed (apart from environmental development), will local workforce be employed, will tax revenues increase, will there be donations, settlement marketing, other positive effect?	Access to the mentioned locations and the local sustainable transport will be improved (walking, bicycle, alternative modes of transport and public transport), the rate of individual motorized transport will be reduced.
	Regular travel and delivery needs will be reduced (e.g. those of employees), or these needs can be met by sustainable modes of transport.
	Reputation and knowledge of the local area and responsibility for the public properties of the local community will increase.
	<i>As a result of the project, the following will be implemented in settlement(s) or micro-region(s) where project implementation is located:</i>
	Infrastructural development for public use (e.g. road, stop, car park, etc., other elements apart from the primary objective of the given environmental development project)
	The quality of life of the local people will be improved (access to various services, community life)
	Other positive territorial impact (increase of min. 10% in tax revenues, donations, support for spatial development NGOs, reputation of the settlement, etc.).
	New jobs for workforce living in the settlement area

Using the principles in sustainability assessment of regional planning

According to Pope et al. (2004) sustainability assessment requires a clear vision of what sustainability means, this vision needs to be translated into context specific sustainability criteria. In the case of strategic environmental or sustainability assessment of regional development programmes, we are also experiencing that a set of sustainability values adapted to the given region is needed in order to be able to assess the effects on sustainability of policies, plans and programmes affecting the region.

The aforementioned overall principles of regional sustainability could be used also for defining regional sustainability values tailored to the conditions of a given region (it is very important that the values have to go beyond the usual global way of understanding sustainability). The set of values can be the baseline for sustainable assessments (SA) and strategic environmental assessments (SEA) of programmes affecting the given region.

Regional sustainable values of a given region can deal with the followings:

- solving the problems of regional sustainability, by defining criteria for the region's environmental, social and economic structure (how to avoid or solve the possible or existing problems) and for inter-structure issues,
- setting up sustainable criteria for each sector activity of the region,
- defining the typical regional sustainable principles specific to the given region, based on the basic principles of autonomy, solidarity, innovation.

The definitions could go even beyond principles by setting up exact thresholds and quantitative indicators for regional sustainability (e.g. how heavy traffic can be tolerated?). It requires relevant regional researches that are not available in most of the cases.

The strategic aims of plans or programmes can be evaluated against the principles. We already used this method in the context of strategic environmental assessment (SEA) processes (SEA for the Lake Balaton Region's regional development strategy 2007–13; SEA for seven Hungarian regional development programmes for domestic development sources 2009–10).

Fixing the regional sustainability values in a regional planning document can contribute to a widely known, legitimized common sustainable value set of the regional community. In this

manner all the public and many of the private development initiatives could be based on transparent regional sustainable values. A similar intention can be experienced in case of *regional sustainable development frameworks* of England (SWRA, 2001). (At Lake Balaton Region we tried to develop a policy paper on regional sustainability based on the regional sustainable values defined during the former SEA process. We set up a declaration on the region's sustainability for the different development actors, but it has not been ratified.)

Conclusions

Regional (territorial) sustainable principles could support efficiently the renewal of sound integration of sustainability into development activities. The principles can overcome the difficulty in achieving a common understanding of sustainability and broadcast more concrete and relevant meanings. Three types of regional (territorial) sustainability principles can be distinguished: conceptual principles in programmes; principles as general criteria for project development; SA principles as sustainable values specified for a given region.

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