

Regional Environmental Governance: Interdisciplinary Perspectives, Theoretical Issues,
Comparative Designs (REGov)

Regional environmental governance in Europe: old and new
challenges yet to take up

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a set of reflections presented at the REGov Workshop. These reflections were offered as part of a panel discussion around the topic “What is a region?” Additional presentations provided in the context of this panel discussion include those of Anssi Paasi, University of Oulu (this volume), Anthony Lehmann, University of Geneva, and John Allen, Open University (UK). Webcasts of all presentations are available at <http://www.reg-observatory.org/outputs.html>.

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What I would like to share with you is what my daily reality is really. I am a civil servant of the European Union but I am neither a policy maker nor a scientist. I am an analyst with one foot in politics and one in science, and my job is to help policy making with the most up-to-date and relevant knowledge. When you have to do that in the field of environmental policies, today you are talking about what is really at the heart of society: you are talking about growth, development, economic and financial crises, and the energy crisis. You are not just talking about the birds in the forest. You are very much at the heart of what is the fabric of society.

When you are in this situation, particularly at the European Union scale, the difficulty is to understand who is doing what in this politics of scale, for EU politics is very much a politics of interacting levels. These levels of politics reflect in turn the interests of particular communities, which you will find either in a region or in interest groups. Since these interest groups extend across business, science, and government, defining what can be an entity that might correspond to the most adequate stewardship of a particular set of assets gets very complicated at the European scale.

Why is this so? One of the reasons relates to the complexity of defining increasingly recognized mutual interdependence across government levels against the background of Europe’s so-called internal market. Today you can have local markets for fish in, say, the Netherlands, yet the conditioning of a species may have been done in the South of Spain, the fish was caught next to the harbor in the Netherlands, and in between you have EU subsidies

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supporting the transport from the Dutch fishing grounds to the Spanish conditioning factory and back to the consumption market in the Netherlands.

This is called a trans-European network. When you look at the realities, you have around 200 million Euro per year for the next six years earmarked for these so-called trans-European networks. What does it boil down to? When we look at the dynamics at work in Europe, they are profoundly business-oriented, but they are also rooted in European territorial dependencies. The irony of it is that for the first 45 years of EU politics, these territorial dynamics were nowhere to be found in EU government structures, not even the EU treaty.

Socio-economic cohesion was at the heart of the previous EU treaty. Since the adoption of the new treaty the notion of territorial cohesion has been brought in and put on an equal footing. I am calling on the scientific community today to come and study the realities of this territorial cohesion principle in the European Union. Because this is the principle that is going to help us bring the currently virtual understanding of European dynamics into governance reality in the context of what we can call socio-ecological systems. Of course, the boundaries of these socio-ecological systems are extremely complicated to delineate.

But it is imperative, since when you consider the realities of Europe from a policy science standpoint, you will notice that 75 percent of the EU budget is used for some form of territorial development, be it through regional policies or agricultural policies. This is an absolutely enormous share, and yet the irony is that the only policy that is not under the competence of the EU is physical planning. What you find are realities that are amazingly contrasting when you try to bring them into the context of managing all these dynamics. The European Union finances but does not control; it subsidizes but does not hold people accountable.

These are the realities I confront on a daily basis, because as an analyst of the European Environmental Agency, I am not spending most of my time in dialogue with non-governmental organizations in charge of nature conservation. On the contrary, I spend most of my time trying to work together with colleagues in the European Commission and member states, who are dealing with regional policies and interregional projects, trying to define EU cohesion policy and finding ways to translate all these dynamics.

The only mechanism we have at our disposal for the time being is to take units of administrative regions, the so-called NUTS. Yet this is far from optimal since it is only an administrative representation, not a political reality, of how we need to manage all these developments and dynamics at the European scale. There are currently more than 300 highly administrative NUTS regions in Europe. These regions themselves are coming to realize that their dependency on European dynamics is so high that they need to be involved in the political structures and policy-making processes at the European level. Indeed, a look at some statistics of the past 7-8 years shows that in terms of lobbying structures, Brussels is approaching Washington D.C. This is not lobbying by business. Instead, the highest rate in terms of lobbying comes from regional authorities. Bavaria, the province of Milan, all of them are investing in staff in Brussels to lobby EU politics. And this reality is very important because this is where you realize that something is changing.

Regions are coming to the fore. So much so that today you have the Committee of Regions in the EU governing system. What does this Committee do? Its role is largely consultative and advisory, hence much smaller than that of the European Parliament, the European Council, and national governments. However, you come to realize as well that the Committee's voice is being heard more and more. I have spent over the recent years more and more time with the Committee of Regions, trying to understand really what is its main motivation. Is it really an issue of this politics of scale, of regions saying we want our share of the cake; we want to be in control? Of course there is this aspect, but there is also a huge demand for understanding what is happening to entities that are purely administrative, that are facing many new developments, and that recognize that they are in a difficult situation.

Let me give you the example of climate change adaptation. Many local and regional authorities in Europe today are affected by some impacts of climate change such as flooding, heat waves, droughts, or coastal erosion. The cost of damages is much beyond what they can afford. Climate change adaptation relates to what politics hates: the long-

term and uncertainty. Yet local and regional authorities are not only asking for better knowledge, they are asking for solidarity. In this context, the research project Espace examined local-regional realities of organizing regional responses to climate change adaptation. The first conclusion of that project, after a survey, many consultations, and participatory processes with many stakeholders at the regional level, was that our current government structures are completely obsolete and inadequate to tackle the issue of adaptation.

I conclude by suggesting that this is not only a great topic for research studies, it also serves as a perfect example of what we are confronted with in the context of regional environmental governance.