Analysing and mobilising regional economic potentials as a chance for rural development - Interim results of the EU-Interreg IIB project Parks & Economy

Abstract: Rural areas, which are declared as Nature or National Parks, often find themselves in a dilemma - on the one hand they are featured with unique natural conditions and landscapes, but on the other hand they are confronted with substantial problems in economic and demographic development. The Interreg IIB project “Parks&Economy” tackles these discrepancies and aims at the appreciation of Nature Parks in rural areas and their sustainable development in natural, social and economic conditions using synergies between nature protection and the regional economy. For these purposes the project applies a common framework of methods consisting of analyses of regional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), success factors, and stakeholders. Based on the results Development and Marketing Plans (DEMAP) are developed, which will be implemented in each of the eight involved project regions. The paper provides insights into the methods used and shows their application and results of three selected project regions in Hungary, Greece, and Italy. The emphasis of the paper concentrates on the methods of assessing the current status of a region and therefrom derived management plans, which can be useful for other regions interested in sustainable development in nature conservation areas as sign posts.

Keywords: nature parks, cross-sectoral planning, sustainable development, regional analyses
Introduction

Rural regions of the CADSES (Central Adriatic Danubian South East European Space) area often lag behind in their economic development while their landscapes and habitats are considered as natural heritages at the same time. Their conservation and day-to-day management is in many cases likely to be too costly to be done only to the pure merits of environmental protection. Nevertheless, these natural conditions hold promising potentials for the development of the regional economy, especially for recreational purposes. The Interreg III B CADSES project “Parks&Economy” (duration 2006–2008) targets at the support of sensitive Nature Park areas to overcome weaknesses in regional economic development. Preservation and sustainable usage of existing natural potentials within a Nature Park offer marketing chances especially for sustainable tourism and environmentally friendly products. Additionally, the development of regional management strategies can strengthen regional identities of the inhabitants as well as relations among regional stakeholders (administration, businesses, communities). “Parks&Economy” is coordinated by the Italian Province of Teramo and comprises eight pilot areas with different levels of protection in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia. Scientific guidance comes from three partners in Austria and Hungary. Within the project an innovative approach is developed and applied, which drafts interdisciplinary integrated Development and Marketing Plans (DEMAPs) based on regional analyses of current situations. The common methodological frame as well as the results of the pilot regions can serve as sign posts for other regions interested in exploring and activating their potentials.

In the following, the paper focuses on describing the methodology of the identification of regional potentials and on the results of three project regions in Hungary, Greece and Italy.

Terminology of Nature Parks

A broad range of different types of protected areas exists on national levels. In general the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Nature Resources (IUCN) defines a protected area as “an area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means” (UNEP-WCMC, 2007).

Two different types of protection areas can be differentiated: First, areas with their main focus on conservation, development and/or re-establishment of biocenoses, biotops and species with no or only slight anthropogenic influences and prohibition of changes in general (nature conservation areas). Second, protection areas exist, where changes are possible, with emphasis on preservation of scenery and conservation, development and re-establishment of natural balances with recreational usage (landscape protection areas). Nature Parks can
involve nature or landscape protection areas and mainly aim at the support of sustainable regional development and specifically of recreation and sustainable tourism.

Since all project regions involved target the main aim of stimulating regional economy in accordance with sustainable management of natural resources, our understanding of the term “Nature Park” is reduced to this common denominator. Therefore “Nature Park” in the context of our project means a natural area of outstanding beauty and characteristic landscape, serving regional/territorial marketing purposes to boost the regional economy under consideration of nature conservation needs. Thus, the term “Nature Park” in our understanding can comprise National Parks and other protection areas or areas, which plan to establish a protection site in future as well.

Methods and data used

For this project, adapted analyses of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT), success factors and stakeholders as well as Development and Marketing Plans (DEMAP) to explore and activate the potential of regions were applied. The common framework of methods and analyses (see fig. 1) offers the regions involved on the one hand the implementation of scientific supported methods, and on the other hand benchmarking and networking opportunities with other international partners.

![Diagram](Fig. 1. Methodological frame of Parks&Economy project. Source: Wagner et al. 2006)

The methodological approach has been developed by an interdisciplinary team of experts and enables deduction of objectives, strategies, and concrete actions for regional development in a comprehensible way. Required information has been provided by the project partners in the pilot regions and stem from statistical data, qualitative estimations and expert knowledge. The next sub-chapters describe the methods used.
Method and data of SWOT-analysis

A SWOT analysis as an instrument for strategic management serves to define the main goals of development strategies and alternatives as well as to define and evaluate main development factors. The SWOT analysis describes current conditions and tries to comprise the regional situation in terms of internal and external factors. Internal factors can be changed by the region and include strengths, which shall be stabilized and weaknesses, which shall be reduced. External factors mostly can not be changed by the region and comprise opportunities, which shall be used and threats, which shall be fought against. The main purposes of this analysis are the isolation of key issues and facilitated deduction of implementation strategies (see Jekel, 1998; Bergs, 2002; Veres, 2006).

The object of the SWOT analysis in „Parks&Economy” is the pilot region. An extension of the SWOT analysis was conducted by ranking the factors due to their strength of influence in a scale between +3 (weighty strength or opportunity) and –3 (weighty weakness or threat). Thus, more differentiated results of the existing development potentials as well as more meaningful bases for regional development strategies are available. Another extension of the SWOT-analysis includes estimations about the future development of external factors (opportunities and threats), which was carried out by project partners in collaboration with regional experts (see Gályász et al. 2007).

As each indicator has two related values mirroring its internal and external importance for the regional conditions, a SWOT-matrix can be generated. This matrix consists of four quadrants which can be linked to different kinds of strategies (see figures 2,3,4) (Antal et al. 2007):
- In sector 1 (SO, strengths and opportunities, right upper sector) the so called break points are situated and call for an offensive strategy.
- Factors in sector 2 (ST, strengths combined with threats, right lower sector) call for a diversified strategy.
- Factors in sector 3 (WO, weaknesses combined with opportunities, left upper sector) result in instability and necessitate a strategy that requires changes in the region.
- Factors in sector 4 (WT, weaknesses and threats, left lower sector) need for emergency or crisis management.

The estimations about the future development of external factors are pictured as arrows within the SWOT-matrix. The direction of the arrows provides indication of further development: when the arrow shows up, then the future development will be positive, if the arrow shows down, then a negative development is estimated.

The extensive SWOT analysis includes 148 quantitative and qualitative indicators concerning the following main topics: topology and structure of settlement, population, nature and environment, economy, technical infrastructure, social
infrastructure, and governance. Required data came from regional, national and international statistics, experts, legal plans, and literature.

Method and data of success factor analysis

The method of success factor analysis was developed in the Interreg IIIC project MAREMA (Bogner and Mohl, 2005) and helps to clarify the main factors of development in a region. For this purpose, a list of ten success factors exist, which includes: highly engaged key actors, reasonable involvement of the public, powerful partners in the region, good relationships to partners outside the region, adequate resources, suitable region, regional standards, plans and basic data, high quality products, professional communication, and efficient controlling. Regional experts start with evaluating the importance of these success factors for the region with a scale from 0 (not relevant) to 3 (high importance). Afterwards the regional experts evaluate the level of achievement of these success factors in the region with a scale from 0 (not achieved) to 3 (fully achieved). The gap between importance and achievement of each success factor allows conclusions regarding the endangerment or success of a project.

Method and data of stakeholder analysis

Stakeholder analysis is a tool of project management. In this case it evaluates and visualises the involved people and institutions of the decision making process in regional development. On the basis of regional experts’ knowledge the power of impact (from 0, no impact to 3, strong impact) and the quality of impact (from —, threat to the project success to ++, strong support of the project) is evaluated (see Wagner et al., 2006).

Method and data of deduction of Development and Marketing Plans

After implementation of the three analysis tools mentioned above it is possible to arrange a list of objectives, which could strengthen regional development. Beside the description of the objectives indicators to measure the achievement, risk factors and measures to reduce the risk factors should be considered as well. The objectives lead to strategies, which should be checked on their relation to the objectives, on their realization potential, on their time frame, on the responsible persons/institutions, the necessary budget and their priority. Thus, detailed action plans comprising a list of concrete measures can be elaborated. The measures are structured by related objectives and strategies, responsibilities, timeframe, milestones, risks, detailed budget, funding and interests of stakeholders as concrete as possible to ease efficient implementation.
Results of the project “Parks&Economy”

The results of regional SWOT-analyses show a clustering of project regions into three groups regarding their basic structure and position. The Italian regions Rimini and Teramo show the most positive basic conditions while Kysuce (SK), Lidoriki (GR), Muldenland (G) and Vratchanski Balkan Nature Park (BG) are more ambivalent in their evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The regions Popovo Polje (BH) and Tisza microregion (HU) show mostly negative basic positions. From each group one region was selected exemplarily, which will be presented in the following chapters.

Results of the project region “Tisza Microregion”/Hungary

Tisza Microregion is located in Heves country, in the region of Northern Great Plain along the western bank of Lake Tisza. Six municipalities belong to this flatland area with an average altitude of 86 m, situated in the west of river Tisza. Lake Tisza and the neighbouring Grasslands of Heves represent significant natural values in the region. Lake Tisza - Hungary’s second largest lake - is characterised by a mosaic patchwork of backwaters, sandbanks, islands, dead-channels, reed fields and gallery forests with rich flora and fauna. The Grasslands of Heves consists of protected patches of saline and salinating areas, which are surrounded by cultivated fields. Both ecosystems are of great importance for various bird populations. According to the plans, during the first phase an eco-trade-mark is going to be registered and later in the second phase the Nature Park is going to be established in Tisza Microregion.

According to the SWOT analysis Tisza Microregion has primarily negative basic position in the regional comparison (see Annex 1, left picture). Nevertheless in several fields the target area is in an advantageous situation; most of the entire region offers good potential for the development of eco-tourism, traditional crafts and farming techniques, since perhaps the most significant resource there is unspoiled nature.

Concerning the state of the elements of environment, water quality of Lake Tisza is good or excellent; the air quality is good in the region; only moderate wind erosion and occasional acidification affect soil. Public transport system is satisfactory in the project area. The local social life is rather active.

Drawbacks appear in demography, economy, technical and social infrastructure and governance. The age structure is unfavourable in the area and life expectancy is lower than the national average. The educational level is similarly unfavourable; approximately 75% of the population in the region finished their studies after elementary school. In spite of the proximity of the M3 highway the region might be considered as an area of inner periphery with insufficient infrastructure, high unemployment rate, and unfavourable structure of economy. The farm structure is very unfavourable, 92% of the farms are less than 10 hectares in size. Organic agriculture is undeveloped yet. Co-operations are not common
among farmers. The state of the local roads is poor. Integration of local population in the decision making process is not satisfactory. The activities of non-governmental organizations are supported properly.

However, there are signs of steady improving in the field of eco-tourism: path networks and leisure activity areas are starting to emerge in the region: elevated boardwalk on Lake Tisza (eco-touristic thematic path), hiking trails, a cycle path around Lake Tisza. In addition, the future prospective concerning each topic is positive.

Among the success factors the highest importance is given to key actors, public involvement, powerful partners in the region, high quality of products, suitable region, and adequate resources (see Annex 1, right picture). The most significant deficiency in achievement can be observed concerning high quality products; the number of typical regional products and services in the area are rather modest. Controlling and evaluation also needs to be improved, public involvement must be further encouraged.

Municipalities, providers of accomodation and local NGOs are the most important stakeholders, which may contribute to the success of the Parks&Economy project. The cooperation of these three groups could start the process of establishing the Nature Park. Farmers and and the small number of craftsmen are more reluctant are expected to join later the initiative, when the first results are achieved. The local National Park Authorities already have a positive attitude towards the project. The neighbouring municipalities might be a source for certain conflicts as they compete for tourists with Tisza Microregion.

According to the analysis results objectives for Tisza Microregion concentrate on the participation of key actors and stakeholders in realization of the project, the reviving of local products and promoting production of healthy foods, the improvement of the relationship between local suppliers and customers and contribution to the improvement of controlling and evaluating of regional trademark. The long-term objective of the project is the realization of the Nature Park initiative in the micro-region.

In the strategy the emphasis is put on the establishment of the Nature Park, therefore the emphasis of the action plan deals with Nature Park development.

The action plan comprises two main parts according to the time-scale:

- Action plan regarding project period: introduction of the local eco-trademark (economic and environmental study on the trademark, determination of quality requirements, elaboration of a uniform design, registration and promotion of the official eco-trademark), preparation for the establishment of the Nature Park (economic and environmental study on the Nature Park), elaboration of communication tools (local workshops for stakeholders, press contacts, brochure on the Parks&Economy project results);
- Action plan regarding the period following project closure: establishment of the Nature Park (creation of the legal framework, official homepage, Nature
Park brochure, unified frame for local programs, integration of the eco-trade-mark into the Nature Park, training on traditional crafts, establishing bee-keepers’ co-operation), technical background of the Nature Park (sign-posting, creation of study paths, thematic hiking routes, and of information points, establishment of a Visitor Center, summer school and eco-farms for demonstration).

Results of the project region “Lidoriki”/Greece

The area of Lake Mornos belongs to the Municipality of Lidoriki and is situated in the Prefecture of Fokida (Region of Central Greece) in the north of the Bay of Korinthos. According to the plans a Nature Park will be established around Lake Mornos in the years to come. The Municipality of Lidoriki comprises a territory of 410 km². The target area is a mountainous region with an average altitude of 460 m above sea level. The proposed Nature Park area where the Nature Park will be created is of unique natural value characterised by the Lake of Mornos, the surrounding mountainous landscape, climbing mountain Giona, and a rich flora and fauna. One of the biggest aqueducts in Europe with the length of 192 km originates at Lake Mornos, as the lake serves as a water reservoir for Athens. This area serves as an example for regions with ambivalent basic conditions.

The SWOT analysis shows that in the Greek project region topology respec-tively structure of settlement, technical and social infrastructure, nature and environment as well as governance are well developed (see Annex 2, left pic-ture). No pollution burden exists in the region and the situation of the environ-mental elements is satisfactory. Transport connections as well as public supply situations are good. Due to the existence of a regional non-profit initiative, which fosters sustainable development in Fokida region, improves the quality of life and boosts socially responsible economic development for the benefit of the local communities, social infrastructure is well developed. Social life and regional identities are strong and the residents are sympathetic to nature conser-vation activities. Situation of governance is good because of an operational pro-ject for the development of the region, the existence of development plans for the regional mountainous areas and potential supporters of the neighbouring municipalities. While social infrastructure, topology and governance are expected to level off, technical infrastrucutre will improve and the situation of nature and environment will deteriorate in future.

Regional problems concern population and economy, but they are expected to improve in the future. The reasons for a weak basic position are an unfavourable age distribution, a decrease of population, a very low share of adults with medium or high education (23%). Agriculture is dominated by livestock farming without organic production and without agri-environmental support. Supply of tourism facilities is in an initial state: Low number of bed places for tourists with a low level of utilisation and a short average duration of stay. No coordi-nated efforts for the networking of tourist facilities and attractions have been
done in the region so far except for the publication of a tourist map and a leaflet of the area, in which the local attractions are presented - subsidized by the Operation Program “Rural Growth – Reconstruction of countryside 2000–2006”.

Highest importance within the success factor analysis is given to key actors, public involvement, powerful regional partners, good relationships outside the region, suitable region, high quality of products, communication and public relations (see Annex 2, right picture). Due to the big gaps of importance and achievement, improvements in good relationships outside the region, communication and public relations seem to be necessary for project success. Quite big differences also exist in key actors and public involvement. Regional strengths are stated in the very suitable region for the establishment of a Nature Park and the high quality of regional products and services.

The results of stakeholder analyses show that the municipality of Lidoriki and the prefecture of Fokida positively influence project success. Additionally, local tourism suppliers and travel agents as well as the local residents show positive attitudes to the establishment of a Nature Park. Threat for the implementation of the Nature Park arise from regional usage restrictions by Athens Water Supply and Sewerage Company due to the fact, that lake Mornos functions as main water source for the Greece capitol.

Due to the specific results of the analyses, the objectives and strategies for Lidoriki focus prior on negotiations with Athens Water Supply and Sewerage Company, as the further development of the planned Nature Park and its supply of tourist facilities depend highly on the embodiment of usage restrictions. Further objectives aim at raising awareness of stakeholders and at the enrichment of tourism offers. Implementation of a communication strategy and of a pilot project has high priority, too. The concrete action plan is divided into five categories:

- Preparatory phase: actions to raise awareness, negotiations with Athens Water Supply and Sewerage Company;
- Development of infrastructure: creation of hiking paths and signposting;
- Human Resource Development: trainings seminars with thematic emphasis on managing a Nature Park;
- Communication tools: design of a web page, newsletter, workshops for local tourism providers, advertisements and participation in tourism exhibitions;
- Development of supporting services and products: publication of a book with local recipes, elaboration of visitors’ packages, development of a quality trademark for regional products.

**Results of the project region “Rimini”/Italy**

“Onferno Natural Reserve” is located in the southern part of the Province of Rimini territory, which is located close to the border to Marche Region, between the valleys of the Conca River and Ventena River. This well-preserved land-
The landscape of southern Romagna has become one of the points of excellence of the regional system of the protected areas since 1992. The size of the natural reserve is 272 ha. Its altitude ranges between 107 and 551 m above sea level. The territory of the Reserve consists of a mosaic of environmental typologies dominated by clayey hilly slopes, calcareous walls with cacti and a small chalk breakthrough. A cave in the reserve is of geomorphological interest and houses a rich fauna, particularly a valuable community of bats.

As the results of the SWOT-analysis show, the present situation of the project region is excellent. Referring to the SWOT matrix (see Annex 3, left picture), all of the main topics are situated in the best quadrant of strengths and opportunities due to good reachability of the region, positive demographic development, attractive and multifaceted nature, and satisfactory state of environmental elements without significant pollution. The economic situation is dominated by the tertiary sector and characterised by quite high unemployment rates (12%). The majority of agricultural land is used for forage production. Around 50% of the farms manage less than 3 hectares, 92% of the farms have less than 20 hectares agricultural land. Organic farming is established only by 4% of the farms. The main food-products of the area include oil, wine, flour and dairy products. Forests cover around 20% of the total area, but they do not have economic functions. Only the educational level of regional population means a weakness and threat at the same time. The main emphasis in tourist offers is on caves, museums and concerts. The number of tourist accommodation is low (0.03 bed places per inhabitant), but average duration of stay is more than 5 days.

Road connection, public transport, water supply, and waste situation are well developed. The social infrastructure is also satisfactory, by reason of the existence of educational facilities, associations and clubs and the absence of serious conflicts between the population and the administration of the natural reserve. Emilia Romagna Region possesses regional territorial and landscape plans as well as plans for hydro-geological management and rural development.

Estimations of the future development of the main topics of SWOT-analysis show positive future trends for the population and the economy but negative ones for structure of settlement, governance, technical infrastructure, and for the situation of nature and environment.

Rimini’s success factor analysis gives highest importance to the key actors and the public involvement in which the achievement is relatively good but could be improved (see Annex 3, right picture). Partnerships in the region and outside the region are estimated as good and seen as strengths of the region, which also seems to be very suitable for the project. Lacks in the achievement of success factors are seen in adequate resources, high quality products, in communication and PR as well as in controlling and evaluation.

The most important stakeholders with impact on Onferno Natural Reserve are regional politicians, the regional administration and associations as well as the
local stakeholders like the Municipality of Gemmano, the association of Grotte dell’Inferno, agricultural stakeholders and NGOs, all of them with a positive impact on the project and interests in raising income possibilities and also protection standards. Essential seems to be the initial financing of development activities by the EU. Lower impact power comes from higher level administrations (Italian Ministries) and some local touristic and marketing stakeholders. Very positive aspects for future development are the different already existing associations with positive interests in the natural reserve and the fact that no negative impacts are stated from the side of the stakeholders. Agriculture, tourism and nature protection seem to pull together.

According to the results, objectives for Rimini mainly focus on the elaboration of a communication strategy, standards for labelling and trademarks, enlargement of the protected area, marketing and promotion of regional heritage and products as well as job creation and job safety.

The strategies of the pilot region Rimini concentrate on expenditures of the Province of Rimini and the Municipality of Gemmano. Highest priority is given to the elaboration of a communication strategy, to regional product labelling standards and to pilot projects, which seem to be the most concrete and promising achievements. Due to the relatively good economic situation in the Province of Rimini the job creation and safety is given low priority.

As starting point of development, the emphasis of concrete actions concentrates on the promotion of the already existing local trademark “La Valle della Riserva”, which has not yet been successful in market launch.

Conclusions

The Interreg III B project “Parks&Economy” aims at the appreciation of Nature Parks in rural areas and their sustainable development by using synergies between nature protection and the regional economy. First, the eight regions involved of Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Slovakia conducted SWOT-analyses, which stated the basic regional conditions. Afterwards, DEMAPs were carried out in each region including further regional analyses. Common conclusions of all regions involved point out that the SWOT results do not only show the impartial situation in the development of the region but also mirror the regional atmosphere and the basic position and mood of the involved experts. To summarise, it becomes obvious that for regions with a mainly negative estimated current situation the future trends are estimated mostly good while in other regions future trends are seen more differentiated. Another evident aspect seems to be the fact that if economy, infrastructure and/or population are estimated to improve, nature and environmental future prospects are estimated to decline and vice versa. This negative relation should be a central matter of further considerations.
Referring to the results of the three selected exemplary project regions in Hungary, Greece and Italy, it can be concluded that even if the basic regional conditions are completely different and range from unfavourable to very good the existence of key actors and the involvement of the public is of prior importance for each region. In addition, high demands in improving the involvement of inhabitants in regional processes and plans as well as in supporting regional key actors can be stated in each of the three regions, too. The most frequently listed stakeholders in the three exemplary regions, which are affected by the implementation of the Parks&Economy Project, are actors in environment and nature protection, tourism and financial support. Each of these stakeholder groups has positive attitudes towards regional sustainable development activities. Therefore, the consideration and inclusion of these stakeholder groups seems to be very important for successful implementation of development activities in Nature Parks.

Recapitulatory, the results suggest that even though natural, political, and technical conditions are likely to be not ideal, success of a project concentrating on establishment or sustainable development of Nature Parks mostly depends on qualitative factors and soft skills. Strong partners, motivators, innovators, supra-regional networks and backing from regional inhabitants can overcome unfavourable basic conditions and frames. Therefore, the key for a successful implementation of regional projects supposably seems to be situated in internal and external communication, collaboration and tolerance guided by clearly defined objectives, strategies and actions. However, the monitoring of the further development of activities and their progress in the project regions of Parks&Economy will be able to verify our conclusions.

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Annex 1: Results of SWOT analysis and success factor analysis in Tisza Microregion

Matrix of SWOT analysis

- 1. TOPOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF SETTLEMENT
- 2. POPULATION
- 3. NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT
- 4. ECONOMY
- 5. TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- 6. SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- 7. GOVERNANCE

Analysis by success factors

Source: Own calculation
Annex 2: Results of SWOT-analysis and success factor analysis of Lidoriki

Matrix of SWOT analysis

- 1. TOPOLOGY AND STRUCTURE OF SETTLEMENT
- 2. POPULATION
- 3. NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT
- 4. ECONOMY
- 5. TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- 6. SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE
- 7. GOVERNANCE

Analysis by success factors

Source: Own calculation
Annex 3: Results of SWOT analysis and success factor analysis in Rimini

Matrix of SWOT analysis

Analysis by success factors

Source: Own calculation