

2010-03-29

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Learning Regions in Hungary: From Theories to Realities

The LeaRn Project

Aims. LeaRn as a research project aims to:

- discover and analyse the economic, political and cultural factors in a given territorial and social unit that contribute to the emergence of a 'learning region' (LR).
- identify, describe and compare territorial units in Hungary as 'learning communities', (LC) and their cooperations as future LRs.
- study one or more of those LCs as cases of the emergence of alternative LRs.

The Problem. The LeaRn project intends to meet the following problem.

- Transnational structures (development agencies) initiate the emergence of LRs in Europe as in other parts of the world (CERI 2000, Cedefop 2003). LR is, however, a loosely defined concept for communication rather than for analysis and policy building. The developmental agencies referred use this concept as an umbrella for their various policy initiatives.
- As transnational structures, developmental agencies apply top-down strategies. They use LR as a benchmark of (regional) development, and invite competitors to meet the the benchmark. Competitors then show their developed regions (usually *the* most developed) to meet the benchmark. (see LRs in selected EU member states: <http://www.noema.fi/go.cfm?PageID=3020>).
- Applied as a benchmark—rather than an analytic concept--LRs and LR forming processes are not studied empirically. Because studying the elements of LRs and the processes of LR forming may lead to the definition of alternative LRs and the initiation of bottom-up strategies.

The LeaRn project intends to meet this challenge from the research side. On the background of the elements of LR and LCs a regional statistical analysis would be conducted. On the basis of its findings, types of LCs would be described and a typology of LCs would be suggested. By studying one or more cases alternative processes of LR forming could also be discovered.

Backgrounds. The LeaRn project has four backgrounds. They are: (a) the concept of 'LR' and the R&D activities related; (b) the concept of 'lifelong / lifewide learning' (LLL) and its relation to LR; (c) the concept of 'urban centres of culture and education' as an alternative strategy of regional development; and (d) minority (higher) education and related initiatives as political movements in the political transition of Hungary and East-Central Europe.

LR as a R&D&T (research, development and training) concept. The concept and the word 'LR' has first been used by Florida (Florida 1995). He suggests the LRs „as collectors and repositories of knowledge and ideas” which „provide the underlying environment or infrastructure which facilitates the flow of knowledge, ideas and learning” (Florida 1995:

527). Right from that beginning, the concept of LR emerged and formulated as an umbrella concept for various meanings and thoughts. The typical ones has been:

- *LR as a concept in the economic geography* (human or social geography) which may apply the economic importance of education, science and knowledge industry to the processes of regional developments (Morgan 1997). To revitalize stagnating (monostructured) regions of heavy industry, mining etc. by the help of educational and cultural institutions came from the turn of the 1970-1980s. To integrate these endeavours into a new development strategy (LR), however, has been the result of the late 1990s and the early 2000s (Hudson 1999, Hassink 2004).
- *LR as an LLL concept*. LR as an alternative strategy for regional development—heavily depended on knowledge production, learning and culture (in a broad sense)—is closely connected to the concept of LLL. In some cases and publications, LR seems as the optimum territorial unit for the „education and training agencies taking a leading role in promoting innovation on a regional basis” (Cedefop 2003: 1). LLL activities can better be coordinated at regional (territorial, local) levels than national levels. „This refers to social and organisational learning that arises in the course of cooperation between different bodies and interest groups . technological and social research/development agencies, educational institutes, companies, social partners, community bodies (civil society) . working together in project teams or in dynamic networks to achieve a common goal.” (Cedefop 2003: 3). It is a new understanding and application of the known term of LLL.
- *LR as a political concept*. Some of the contributors and forerunners of the LR concept stress the importance of political initiations, actors and processes which lead to LR as an objective (a political target). Lukesch and Payer (2009) connect LR as a development concept with the process of governmental renewal. To them, LR is a political slogan (or it can be formulated as such) and can and should be applied for a new understanding of local (regional) governance. („the literature upon regional governance focuses on conscious and purposive collective action”, Lukesch, Payer 2009: 5). The same is stressed heavily by the editors of the paper collection referred (Cedefop 2003). According to them, LR is a political rather than just a developmental concept. LR is especially a concept which organises local/regional political actors of knowledge production, innovation, learning etc. for regional development.

LLL and its actors for development. LLL is also an umbrella concept. It collects various activities which can be classified as 'learning' or can be connected with it (from workplace learning to leisure-time cultural activities and from formal to non-formal and informal learning). Traditionally, LLL has three main dimensions. (a) formal LLL means adult education, mostly in school settings; (b) non-formal LLL points to workplace (in-service) education and training; while (c) informal LLL can be understood as social and political processes within a polity (be it a habitat, a community or an organisation). LLL in the connection with the 'LR' concept is mainly used as a political term. It means that LLL activists and their activities may contribute—or play a critical role—in creating LRs /LCs. LLL as a collection of various cultural activities for local / regional development can only be emerged if the necessary infrastructure is given or can be built (capacity); if a human potential for LLL is existing or can be created; and if a political will is there. (Geenhuizen, Nijkamp 2002).

Urban centres of education and culture: the heritage. LeaRn as it is understood and defined by its team has a long research heritage going back to the late 1970s in Hungary. At the turn of that decade (1970s—1980s) developmental strategies had been formed out and suggested to the political centre as alternatives for their rigid regional planning. Those alternatives stressed the importance of culture and education in regional developments and initiated the creation of 'urban centres of education and culture' besides industrial centres (Kozma 1988). LeaRn can be defined as a descendant of that early initiative. Its closest ancestor is our study of the nationwide distribution of the 'adult learning potential' (Kozma et al 2004).

TERD: Tertiary education and regional development. Studying the regional impacts of education and education policies in a cross-border area (the 'Partium'), the outstanding importance of civic initiatives became visible. These civic initiatives were especially vivid at the political turn of 1989-90, and characterised the (educational) policymaking all over the East-Central European region. Studying the emergence of new LCs and alternative LRs, the LeaRn project goes back to this political tradition of bottom-up policy formation. (See the website of the TERD research project: <http://terd.unideb.hu>).

A Regional Analysis. The LeaRn project will define LR as an objective for territorial development. As an objective it should be formulated (dimensions) and assessed (values for measurement). A regional analysis would be conducted in the LeaRn project to define developmental areas of Hungary against the objective (LR). It consists of the following steps:

The dimensions of LR. Based on the background literature the LR can be operationalised in three dimensions.

- *Dimension A* consists of the existing infrastructure of formal, non-formal and informal learning (including the possible infrastructure of knowledge production and innovation)). It can be called the 'human development capacity' (HDC) of a given territorial unit.
- *Dimension B* means the learning side. That is the chances and possibilities that the people living in the given territorial unit (habitat, community, local society) are able to learn and to develop. It may be called the 'learning potential' (lifelong /lifewide learning, LLLP) of the area under investigation.
- *Dimension C* is the political dimension. In this dimension the political actors and actions might be studied by which the HDC and the LLLP is coming into existence. Two subdimensions of dimension C can be differentiated: top-down and bottom-up political actions for a growing LR (see: Cedefop 2003: 1-8).

Indicators of LR dimensions. For an LR analysis of the Hungarian territorial units indicators of the above mentioned dimensions would be formulated and their statistical values collected. The following steps would be necessary:

- Dimension A would be characterised by statistical indicators of formal, non-formal and informal educational organisations (like schools, organisations of adult education, VET organisations, leisure-time organisations etc.)
- Dimension B would be operationalised on the basis of population statistics (indicators like the demographic structure, schooling level, employability and occupational structure, civic activities etc.)

- Dimension C (political dimension) may not be operationalised for a regional analysis. Rather it would be studied by cases of LRs/LCs having been indicated by the regional analysis.

Units for regional analysis would be the NUTS 2 in Hungary. Although it is not sufficient for an LR analysis, it may be sufficient for investigating emerging LCs. It is expected on the theoretical backgrounds that the regional analysis would indicate clusters of LCs where LCs would be in territorial contact and would, therefore create emerging LRs.

Sources of regional analysis may be the institutional as well as the census data of the Central Statistical Office of Hungary. Additional data might be thrown or calculated on the basis of the forerunners of the LeaRn project.

Data analysis might be conducted by descriptive as well as multi-dimensional methods.

Expected results of the regional analysis are those areas where LCs would connect to each others and show therefore kinds of emerging LRs. Various types of those development areas might be identified and can be investigated as cases for future LRs.

Field Studies. A regional analysis is the condition for further studies of the acts and processes of LRs as they are increasing in Hungary. Some clusters of LCs as cases of emerging LRs would be studied. The aim of these case studies is to be acquainted with and to understand the political actions and processes which may or may not lead to the emergence of LCs and LRs.

Models of local policy actions. Four hypothetical types of local politics can be described on the basis of the relevant literature (Etzioni 1968, Lukesch, Payer 2009). Type A is a situation where LR (its dimensions) is not the policy target of the local actors (neither for top-down nor for bottom-up actions). Type B is a situation in which top-down policies are working for the creation of LC. Type C is the situation in which bottom-up policies and their forces fights for the creation of LC. Type D is the situation in which both forces are acting together. This hypothetical model may be applied for the description of the cases.

Cases for field studies. Various developmental cases might be studied and typified by the help of the above suggested 'model'. Two cases are suggested for detailed studies. They would be identified on the basis of the regional analysis and cannot, therefore, be indicated more precisely as yet. Referring to our previous studies of NUTS 2 clusters from the eastern part of the country (*Tiszántúl*) and an other one in the northern part (*Dunántúl*) might be appropriate. A third case for possible international comparison might be a cross border region in Hungary, Romania and Ukraine ('*Partium*'). A significant amount of initial information has already been collected in the region on the basis of which the area can be qualified as a future LR. (For other European CB regions see: Lang 2005; for a somewhat similar approach of a CB region see: Ehlers 2008).

Methods of field studies. Studying the political forces—actors, actions, objectives and ideologies—we apply the method that proved to be the most useful in our former research (see: <http://terd.unideb.hu/index.php?o=10>). Key figures of the local policy arenas, their stories and story-tellings would create the material for further analysis of their roles, functions and self-definitions (see especially: <http://terd.unideb.hu/doc/modszertan/>

[A_narrativ_vizsgalodas.pdf](#)). The studies of those narratives (cases of acting for developing the community as a future LC) might be completed by additional information gathering like local discourse analysis as well as the realities reflected by the statistical indicators of the regional analysis etc.

The *expected result* of the field studies is to understand the structure and dynamics of the local policy making that would or would not lead to the creation of future LCs. Given the relatively high HDCs and LLLPs, the future of an LC / LR might still be in question. The local political forces, their local games and power dynamics are crucial for the future of the emergence of LR in Hungary.

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