



EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



DERREG - Developing Europe's Rural Regions in the Era of Globalization

This policy brief reports on emerging findings and policy recommendations from the Framework Programme 7 project DERREG, coordinated by Aberystwyth University with partners from 8 countries.

Ongoing project

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INTRODUCTION

Policy context

Globalization increasingly frames the challenges for regional development in rural Europe. As the European Commission has observed, “globalization is seen to touch every walk of life – opening doors, creating opportunities, raising apprehensions”, such that “our response to globalization has moved to the heart of the EU policy agenda” (*The European Interest: Succeeding in the age of globalization*, 2007).

Although academic research on globalization has tended to focus on cities to the neglect of rural areas, the delicate balance of threats and opportunities presented by globalization is arguably particularly significant for rural areas. Yet, popular discourses of rural aspects of globalization are overly simplistic and polarized: on the one hand, globalization is portrayed as a homogenizing force that threatens distinctive rural cultures; on the other hand the global networking of information and communications technologies is described as promising to erode economic inequalities between urban and rural regions.

In the DERREG project we instead draw on concepts that recognize the complex and multi-dimensional nature of globalization, and which hold that globalization proceeds through the engagement and negotiation of local and global actors and forces in particular regional settings. Globalization consequently changes rural localities, but it does not make them all the same.

This observation has a number of implications for rural regional development. First, regional actors have the opportunity to intervene in globalization processes and to shape outcomes in their locality. Second, experiences and outcomes of globalization will be different in different rural regions, with some ‘winners’ and some ‘losers’.

Third, we need to understand how globalization works at the local scale in order to better equip regional actors to respond effectively.

In order to examine the operation and impact of globalization in EU rural regions, DERREG has focused on three specific dimensions that have significant policy relevance.

Firstly, *the engagement of rural SMEs in transnational business networks*. The promotion of entrepreneurship is a common element in rural regional development strategies and globalization potentially offers opportunities for rural businesses to develop international markets. We wanted to assess the importance of international links for rural SMEs, and to examine the factors that enable or limit their involvement in transnational networks.

Secondly, *international migration into rural regions*. Although immigration is commonly associated with urban areas, rural regions are increasingly destinations for migrant workers, amenity migrants and cross-border commuters, as well as return migrants. We wanted to find out how regions have managed the social integration of migrant communities, and whether international migration is contributing to economic development.

Thirdly, *the significance of global factors in rural sustainable development*. Sustainable development is a guiding principle for contemporary rural development, with many regions emphasizing renewable energy production or sustainable tourism as economic drivers. We wanted to know whether global environmental concerns and pressure from transnational campaign groups and international treaties has influenced regional sustainable development strategies, and whether international markets are important in the exploitation of regional environmental capital.

Additionally, we have also studied institutional structures and initiatives to support rural regional development, in order to understand how regions build capacity to engage effectively with globalization.

These themes have been explored through research in 10 case study regions – selected to illustrate different geographical and socio-economic contexts – using a mixed-methods approach including statistical analysis, surveys, interviews, focus groups and analysis of documents. More details of the research design and methods are provided towards the end of this document.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

RURAL BUSINESSES ENGAGE IN TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS TO EXPAND MARKETS

International transactions by SMEs vary considerably between regions

Analysis of 187 rural SMEs in 5 case study regions revealed that, in aggregate, more than two-fifths of businesses traded internationally through sales and/or purchases, with nearly a fifth reporting that significant proportion of their transactions were international. Yet, the degree of internationalisation of SMEs varied considerably between the regions.

In **Slovenia**, 35% of businesses surveyed were 'fully internationalised', as were over 20% of businesses in the **Czech** and **Swedish** case study regions. In contrast, fewer than one in five of SMEs surveyed in our **Dutch** and **Lithuanian** case studies were 'fully internationalised', with most businesses in these areas trading largely within their own region, but for different reasons. In the Netherlands, spatial planning policy encourages the clustering of expanding firms with international ambitions in urban business parks, such that companies remaining in more rural districts tend to be more oriented towards local markets.

In **Lithuania**, however, the low degree of internationalisation is associated with obstacles including limited financial capital, geographical position and language. Levels of international engagement therefore reflect a combination of appropriate opportunities, motivation and available support.

Many rural businesses collaborate with both local and international partners

Most inter-firm collaborations reported in the survey occur within the home region, reflecting the importance placed on informal and face-to-face networking. However, around a third of reported collaborations were international, primarily within Europe. Collaborations with other SMEs tend to be preferred to links with multi-national corporations, with the exception of businesses in the **Lithuanian** case study region who have limited networks with other SMEs, but more substantial links to multi-national companies.

Most rural businesses still rely on regional and national support networks

Even SMEs with a high degree of internationalised transactions and collaborations tend to rely primarily on regional and national support networks for business advice, professional services and research. Key support actors include trade organizations and public agencies, with national research institutes and business consultants also playing an important role for some enterprises. This indicates the significance of regional structures and institutions in supporting rural businesses in developing international opportunities.

International networking can help to develop opportunities for endogenous rural resources

International networking is predictably important for high technology manufacturing and engineering firms, but significantly, there is also a relatively high degree of international networking by enterprises involved in niche production and marketing based on local resources. In our case study regions, this included wine in **Slovenia** and the **Czech Republic**, wood- and fish-based products in **Sweden**, and specialty foods (e.g. berries and wild mushrooms) in **Lithuania** and **Sweden**. In **Slovenia** and **Sweden**, in particular, international networking and trading is perceived as a strategy for overcoming the market limitations of remote and sparsely populated regions.

Obstacles to international networking can be overcome

The most frequently cited obstacles to international networking include geographical location, language difficulties, a poor understanding of remote market conditions, and a lack of financial capital. These challenges were also identified by firms with relatively high degrees of international connections, who by definition had found ways of overcoming these problems in developing international networks and transactions.

INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION TO RURAL REGIONS BRINGS SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

International migrants are present across rural Europe, but reflect differing regional dynamics

In spite of the common association of immigration with urban areas, notable communities of international migrants are present in all of our rural case study regions, including migrant workers and other immigrants from outside the European Union. However, most international migration into rural regions is from within Europe. This includes cross-border migration in regions such as Saarland; flows of migrant labour between source countries such as Poland and **Lithuania** and destination regions in Ireland and **Sweden**; and foreign home owners in regions such as our case studies in Slovenia, who include amenity migrants, seasonal residents, and individuals moving for economic, family or other reasons. Even in regions primarily characterized by out-migration, such as Alytus in **Lithuania**, there is a presence of migrants from states in the former **Soviet Union**.

Migration is driven by multiple, inter-connected motivations

International migration into rural regions reflects multiple motivations at the personal level. The primary pull factors are economic, including jobs (in the case of migrant workers) and differential property prices (in the case of cross-border migrants and some foreign home owners).

However, the attraction of living in a rural environment is also significant for migrants of all types, with value placed on the natural setting, lifestyle and perceived health benefits. Different individual migrants will also have different intentions about the permanency of their move – some amenity migrants are seasonal residents and

some labour migration is short-term, but many migrants intend to stay indefinitely.

Much migration is cyclical, with returned international migrants a notable group in countries such as Ireland and **Lithuania**, but many return migrants remain for only a short period, thus contributing to a pattern of repeated emigration.

Experiences of integration vary between individual migrants and between regions

Our research revealed varying expectations and experiences of integration into local communities by international migrants. Some perceived smaller rural communities as easier places to integrate into than larger urban populations, but others pointed to the absence of ethnic support networks and difficulties of gaining acceptance in tight-knit communities. Foreign home owners and return migrants appear to be more successfully integrated with local communities than migrant workers, and integrated appears to be more successful in our case study regions in **Slovenia** and **Sweden** than in eastern **Germany**, where cases of discrimination and marginalization were reported.

International migrants can make valuable contributions to the economy and society of rural regions

International migrants can bring a wealth of skills and resources to a rural region. Migrants often have technical skills and professional experience that can contribute to regional specialty industries, such as mining (as in northern **Sweden**) or pharmaceuticals (as in western **Ireland**). Migrants can also be entrepreneurial. Foreign home owners, in particular, tend to be primarily drawn from professional middle classes, and many establish businesses to fund their new lifestyles. In regions with historical patterns of depopulation, such as Pomurska in **Slovenia**, international migration can stimulate the rejuvenation of villages; whilst international migrants more generally introduce new cultural experiences and consumption needs, which may be filled by new businesses (e.g. culturally-oriented shops and restaurants).

However, appropriate structures and opportunities are required for regions to take full advantage of migrants' skills and resources. For example, whereas return migrants in western Ireland often occupied relatively senior positions in local companies and institutions; return migrants in **Lithuania** tended to be unemployed or in lower-paid jobs than they had held abroad, as the regional economy had not developed sufficiently to provide better opportunities and migrants struggled to replicate entrepreneurial activity in a different regulatory environment.

Informal networks and individual actions can be as important as official initiatives in facilitating integration

Formal initiatives to support international migrants and promote integration are present in a number of our case study regions, including, for example, a scheme to support entrepreneurship by immigrants in **Sweden**, and the 'Integration Centre' advice service in **Ireland**. Associations for specific migrant groups are also found in several of the regions, and play an important support role for migrants.

Yet, evidence from **Slovenia**, in particular, emphasizes the importance of informal networks and individual action, especially where formal institutions are weak. Individual property agents can

Economic recession has impacted on patterns of migration

not only be important catalysts in facilitating migration, but can also play a role in making connections and smoothing integration; whilst community facilities such as schools are important as sites of integration, even without formal programmes.

International migration into Europe's rural regions intensified with economic growth. The economic recession since 2008 has had an impact in slowing, and in some cases reversing, migration patterns. Labour migration flows from east to west have slowed, although our evidence from Ireland suggests that some migrant workers have remained, and evidence from **Lithuania** indicates that the economy of its rural regions is not sufficiently developed to accommodate large-scale return migration.

There is also evidence that some foreign home-owners (especially seasonal residents) are selling properties and returning home, although most amenity migrants interviewed in **Slovenia** and **Sweden** stated that they intended to stay in the region.

Awareness of global environmental issues is growing, but may be mediated through a regional lens

SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMBINES LOCAL AND GLOBAL INTERESTS

Analysis of the regional media in five case study regions identified a significant increase in coverage of global environmental issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss over the last decade, reflecting growing public awareness. At the same time, the relative prominence of reports on local environmental concerns, such as pollution and waste management, has decreased.

However, in countries with strong regional media, such as **Germany**, stories on global environmental issues are often framed through a regional perspective, thus more clearly identifying connections to regional-scale action than in countries where the regional media is weaker, including Ireland and **Slovenia**.

Regional strategies for sustainable development reflect local, national and international concerns

Regional development strategies implicitly reflect global concerns such as climate change, but commonly do not refer to them directly. Moreover, local pressures and priorities can serve to modify and moderate policies aimed at tackling global concerns. For example, in Saxony the centrality of wind energy production to sustainable development was downgraded following local opposition to windfarms and support for the traditional mining industry.

Regional actors, including politicians, newspapers, business leaders and campaign groups, are perceived to be more influential than national or international actors in shaping regional sustainable development policies.

Regional environmental resources can be exploited sustainably to tap niche markets

Although the development of renewable energy production, organic farming and sustainable tourism are commonly emphasized in sustainable development strategies across the rural regions studied, more regionally specific forms of sustainable development also feature. There is increasing emphasis on the sustainable management of natural resources such as forest, both for environmental benefits, and to produce regionally-distinctive natural products, or to attract tourism. Such strategies can tap into both national and international markets.

Protected landscape designations can help regional promotion

The designation of protected landscapes has been used in the regions studied both for conservation and to stimulate and support sustainable development. International designations such as UNESCO Biosphere Reserves can promote rural regions on the world stage, attracting tourists and investors. However, residents are often suspicious of the regulations associated with protected areas, which may restrict traditional activities and land uses, and new designations need to be carefully managed to build public support.

REGIONAL LEARNING BUILDS CAPACITY FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Knowledge resources are important in building capacity for regional development

Regions can identify the challenges and opportunities facing them, and develop appropriate responses, by combining external knowledge resources – such as the expertise offered by universities and research institutions – with endogenous local knowledge and resources. The ‘rural learning regions’ model describes the interaction between knowledge actors, public administration and regional civil society groups required to achieve this (Figure 1).

Knowledge actors may provide specialist technical support or training, but their most important role in the model is to facilitate learning and reflection by local people in the region in order to identify threats and opportunities, decide on strategies for future development, set up projects and initiatives, and acquire new skills and capacities.

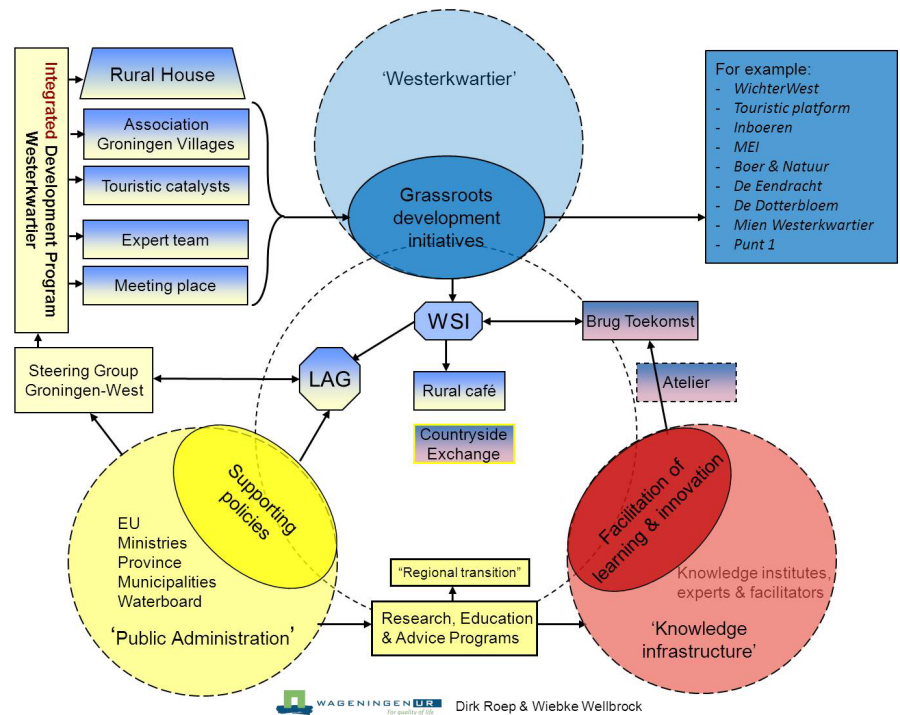


Figure 1 - Example of the 'rural learning region' model for Westerkwartier, the Netherlands.

Government institutions are most effective when facilitating rather than controlling regional development

Strong regional government can be an important factor in enabling rural regions to respond to the challenges and opportunities of globalization. Regions in countries with more centralized government structures, such as **Slovenia**, have found their capacity to articulate distinctive regional strategies and make best use of regional resources constrained.

However, if government has too much control over regional development, it can stifle regional learning and private initiative. The most effective role for government institutions is to formulate policies and funding programmes that facilitate regional learning and stimulate endogenous development initiatives.

A strong civil society is important for effective regional development

The 'rural learning region' model relies on the presence of a strong infrastructure of civil society organizations, including community groups and business associations, who can articulate regional interests, engage local residents, and lead grassroots development initiatives. Civil society organizations are also important for supporting business development, integrating international migrants, and implementing environmental initiatives.

This presents a challenge for parts of central and eastern Europe where civil society organizations in rural regions are significantly less well developed, impacting on the capacity of such regions to respond to globalization.

LEADER local action groups play a pivotal role in coordinating regional learning

Although the precise configuration of organizations and institutions involved in the ‘rural learning region’ model varies across the regions studied, a consistent feature is the pivotal role played by LEADER local action groups (LAGs) in coordinating activity and facilitating joint initiatives. The partnership structure of LAGs and the programme’s emphasis on endogenous development make them ideally suited for operationalizing the rural learning region model, but their contribution is most effective when lead and administered from outside the government sector.

The outcomes of regional learning will differ depending on regional priorities and resources

Regional learning involved local people and organizations reflecting on the challenges and opportunities facing their region and developing grassroots responses that are tailored to their situation. This means that the outcomes from regional learning will vary between regions, in terms of the types of initiative development; the relative emphasis on social, economic and environmental goals; the economic sectors prioritized; and the markets targeted. Regional learning can lead to engagement in international networks, but may equally produce a focus on more localized markets, especially in peri-urban regions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY-MAKERS

Supporting rural businesses

- 1) Rural development policy should emphasize support for endogenous businesses seeking to engage in transnational networks and develop international markets, whilst recognizing that opportunities for international engagement vary between regions, as do obstacles to engagement.
- 2) Emphasis should be placed on assisting local business to develop international networks rather than on attracting inward investment by transnational corporations, which increases exposure to external decision-making and events. There is a need to support high-quality products using regional resources that can be targeted at international niche markets.
- 3) Local embeddedness increases resilience and the return of benefits to the region from global engagement. Firms trading internationally should be encouraged to source materials locally, and to participate in regional support networks.
- 4) Access to financial capital is a major obstacle for companies seeking to develop international markets and collaborations, especially since the banking crisis. The EU and national governments need to work with financial institutions to ensure the availability of finance to support international expansion by rural businesses, particularly firms based in states of central and eastern Europe.
- 5) Regional governments and rural development initiatives should consider funding 'network brokers' to develop networks between rural SMEs and assist with finding international partners.

Integrating international migrants

- 1) Public authorities at all levels should promote the positive benefits of international migration to rural regions, including economic, cultural and social contributions, and develop policies and initiatives to support integration and counter discrimination.
- 2) Formal and informal structures and networks are required to build connections between in-migrants and long-term residents, to provide support for ethnic and cultural minorities, and to induct and include migrants in local cultural traditions and practices. Such initiatives should not be regarded as easy targets for public funding cuts.
- 3) Regions should seek to use the skills, expertise and connections of international migrants in economic development. Initiatives such as that run by the Strukturum agency in Jokkmokk, northern Sweden, can help to unlock the entrepreneurial potential of international migrants and contribute to business development.

- 4) Regulations on property ownership should be locally determined to reflect regional circumstances. In some cases, property transactions may require regulation to prevent the displacement of local residents by international buyers able to pay higher prices. In many regions, however, international migration might be encouraged as a means of countering depopulation and the loss of local services. Policies to attract international migrants should include measures to facilitate integration.
 - 5) Rural regions in central and eastern Europe need to prepare for the return of migrant workers from western Europe, and may consider proactively seeking to attract high-skilled return migrants to stimulate economic development. Preparations should include appropriate support networks and the targeted development of economic sectors that can provide attractive employment opportunities for return migrants.
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Promoting sustainable development

- 1) Regional development strategies should encompass economic, social and environmental objectives, and need to reflect both global and local concerns. The inclusive development of strategies through public consultation and appropriate regional scaling can help to achieve public support.
 - 2) Policies for sustainable development should emphasize the sustainable use of endogenous rural resources and the development of niche products, rather than generic ideas such as industrial-scale renewable energy production, organic agriculture and sustainable tourism, which may not be appropriate to regional circumstances.
 - 3) Rural regions should aim to promote eco-economy activities that can tap into international markets, including the sale of high quality and sustainably sourced products (e.g. wine, craft products), and sustainable tourism that promotes a region's natural environment to attract international tourists.
 - 4) Policies should support the development of renewable energy resources that reflect the region's natural resources and environmental pressures as an investment in securing future resilience and energy security, which deliver an economic advantage over less energy-sufficient regions.
 - 5) Protected area designations can help to enhance a region's international visibility and stimulate tourism, but need to be appropriately managed. Governance structures should be inclusive and public authorities need to be proactive in explaining the economic, cultural and environmental benefits to local residents.
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Facilitating regional learning and capacity building

- 1) The 'rural learning regions' model can be used by public authorities and other actors as a mechanism to develop appropriate partnerships and initiatives to stimulate regional learning and social and economic development. Public authorities should support regional learning by providing funding for collaborative studies and projects, and for resulting initiatives and ventures. The role of government bodies should be to facilitate the engagement of civil society groups and to stimulate grassroots initiatives, not to control the development agenda.
 - 2) Physical infrastructure is important to facilitate informal networking for regional learning, and should be supported through the provision of public meeting rooms, local advice and drop-in centres, and events such as 'rural cafés' where people can meet in an informal setting and information can be disseminated through accessible talks and discussions.
 - 3) Residents in rural regions need to be prepared to engage with opportunities for regional learning and to take responsibility for developing their own responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by globalization. Regions should be alert to the lessons that can be learned from other regions in similar situations, including the replication of examples of good practice. The EU has a key role to play in continuing to facilitate inter-regional learning across Europe.
 - 4) LEADER local action groups have played a pivotal role in supporting regional learning and partnership working for endogenous development in rural regions. The LEADER approach and local groups should continue to be supported in future rural development policies and programmes.
 - 5) Funding programmes need to be sufficiently flexible to enable networking around themes and shared objectives that are not necessarily constrained by administrative geography. Modifications to EU funding regulations should be considered to facilitate cross-territorial collaboration where appropriate, by permitting some funding to be spent outside designated territories if related to collaboration for regional development.
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RESEARCH PARAMETERS

Objectives

DERREG seeks to develop understanding of rural development in the era of globalization by examining globalization processes, local effects and experiences, and regional development responses in ten case study regions.

The specific **project objectives** are to:

- (1) enrich the scientific evidence base for understanding globalization-led restructuring in rural regions by developing an integrated analysis of multiple forms of global engagement;
- (2) promote best practice in regional development responses to challenges associated with globalization-led restructuring;
- (3) provide new insights into the challenges associated with particular processes of change, including the global engagement of rural enterprises, international migration, and the globalization of environmental discourses;
- (4) develop understanding of the different challenges facing different types of rural regions; and
- (5) establish a web-based resource centre to facilitate and coordinate the dissemination and accessibility of information to researchers and regional development agents.

The **intended final outcome** of the project is the development of an *interpretative model* that will identify challenges and opportunities associated with globalization for different types of rural region with different degrees of exposure to globalization processes.

This will be accessible on a web-site and linked to a *database of best practice examples*, assembled from our case study research.

Project structure and case studies

The DERREG research is organized into four empirical work packages, focused on a specific aspect of globalization or regional development:

- Global engagement and local embeddedness of rural businesses (WP1);
- International mobility and migration of rural populations (WP2);
- Environmental capital and sustainable rural development (WP3);
- Capacity building, governance and knowledge systems (WP4).

There is also a synoptic work package that will integrate the findings from WP1-WP4 in a holistic analysis, and work packages for dissemination (WP6) and project management (WP7).

Research has been focused on ten case study regions in eight EU countries, which were selected to illustrate a range of socio-economic and political contexts and geographical settings, from remote and peripheral regions to peri-urban locations.

The empirical work packages each involved research in 5 or 6 of the regions.

Figure 2 shows the location of the case study regions, identified by the following key:

1. Övre Norrland, Sweden (WP1, WP2)
2. County Roscommon, Ireland (WP2, WP3, WP4)
3. Alytus county, Lithuania (WP1, WP2, WP4)
4. Comarca de Verin, Spain (WP4)
5. Goriška, Slovenia (WP1)
6. Pomurska, Slovenia (WP2, WP3)
7. Jihomoravský kraj, Czech Republic (WP1, WP3)
8. Westerkwartier, the Netherlands (WP1, WP4)
9. Direktionsbezirk Dresden, Germany (WP2, WP3, WP4)
10. Saarland, Germany (WP2, WP3, WP4)



Figure 2 – Location of case study regions

Research methods

DERREG has employed a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data. The principal features of the research methods used for data collection and analysis in each of the component work packages are as follows:

WP1 Business Engagement: (i) Electronic survey of rural SMEs to collect data on international transactions and networks, support networks and the impact of the recession. Surveys were e-mailed in 'smart pdf' format to a sample of businesses in 5 regions, selected to represent the profile of industries in the targeted regions. Over 1500 firms were contacted, and with follow-up by telephone and personal

visits, 212 completed surveys were returned (20-55 per region). The data collected in the surveys was analysed according to a methodology developed by Nordregio to map the transactional space, collaborative space and support space of firms. (ii) Interviews with representatives of a sample of firms responding to the survey, including use of an 'actor map' to identify the most important interactions for firms. A total of 67 interviews were conducted across the regions studied.

WP2 International Migration: (i) Collation and analysis of statistical data relating to migration and population characteristics in 6 regions. (ii) 50 semi-structured interviews with migrant workers in 3 regions, exploring migration histories, motivations, experiences and intentions. (iii) 39 biographical interviews with foreign home owners (amenity migrants and seasonal residents) in 4 regions. (iv) 24 semi-structured interviews with return migrants in 2 regions. (v) Interviews with municipal leaders in Lithuania and Slovenia to discuss the dynamics and impact of out-migration. (vi) Analysis of regional media reports and official documents relating to migration and its impacts.

WP3 Sustainable Development: (i) Content analysis of articles on environmental issues published in selected regional newspapers in 5 regions between 2000 and 2008. (ii) Content analysis of regional development strategy documents for 5 regions, to identify approaches to sustainable development. (iii) Interviews with key actors engaged in policy-making in the regions studied (including government officials, business representatives and community and campaign group representatives) to discuss influences on sustainable development policy. (iv) Interviews and document analysis to inform in-depth illustrative case studies of policy issues or initiatives in each of the regions studied.

WP4 Rural Learning Regions: (i) Document analysis and interviews with key informants to document, map and analyse strategies to support regional learning and innovation in 6 regions. (ii) Development of an inventory and typology of grassroots initiatives in the regions studied. (iii) Interviews and further documentary analysis to inform in-depth case studies of initiatives in each of the 6 regions. (iv) Comparison of initiatives and approaches across the 6 regions.

In addition, examples of good practice have been collated for each of the themes covered by work packages 1-4, using a standard template; and wide-ranging statistical data has been collated and analysed for all 10 case study regions to contextualize research results and facilitate comparative analysis.

Stakeholder involvement

Stakeholder panels were established in each of the ten case study regions to engage representatives of national and regional organizations and agencies in providing advice and feedback on the research design, implementation and results. Stakeholder workshops were organized in all of the case study regions during the first six months of the project, with follow-up meetings held periodically and stakeholder engagement maintained through e-mail contact and individual meetings.

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Website

www.derreg.eu

Further reading

Research papers and reports are available at www.derreg.eu

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