

DOES THE STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOP RURAL MICRO REGIONS?

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Abstract: This text is aimed at critical analysis of the use of one of the most widespread of strategic documents – Strategy / program of the development of rural micro regions, which is used in Czech rural areas and is oriented at socio-economic development of a relatively small rural territory. The article discusses the possibilities of the processing and the use of individual documents and tries to indicate basic errors and issues made by individual processors and which restrict the further use of the document. The main objective of the text is primarily to point out repetitive errors of strategic documents and to stress overestimating of their role in micro regional development.

Key words: strategy, plan, rural micro region, development, errors

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century strategic plans have become to be in great demand and fashionable tool for regional development. Huge increase of intensity of using this type of document is connected with a whole series of phenomena, from which the most important can be considered primarily the preparation for the accession to the EU and expected possibilities the use of the subsidy through structural funds. Individual strategic documents with frequently vague substantiation of the necessity of such material in the connection with the accession to the EU have originated at the latest since the year 1999, in the period of the expected accession on one hand and limited number of often inaccurate information about the conditions of the accession to the EU and exploitation on the other hand.

This text is aimed at critical analysis of the use of one of the most widespread of strategic documents – Strategy/programme of the development of rural micro regions, which is used in Czech rural areas and is oriented at socio-economic development of a relatively small rural territory. The article discusses the possibilities of the processing and the use of individual documents and tries to indicate basic errors and issues made by individual processors and which restrict the further use of the document.

The main objective of the text is primarily to point out repetitive errors of strategic documents and to stress overestimating of their role in micro regional development.

I understand all the types of developmental documents, programmes, integrated projects of development or complex strategies themselves, which have been prepared by rural micro regions and which are being at least partly implemented or there is interest to realize such a document, under the used phrase a strategic document in the following text. The evaluation of a strategic document then is not restricted only to the analysis of the process of the creation a document but it is directed at its implementation as well. Strategic document is complete only then if the prepared text begins to be really fulfilled in particular territory.

2. LEGISLATIVE BASE

Preparation of individual strategic documents doesn't have (unlike physical plans) unambiguous support in laws or other legal rules. Strategic plans or other equivalently understood documents have been mentioned in the law of municipalities¹ since 1990, where the right to approve the programme of the municipality development is one of the basic competences of local authority. Municipalities have started to use this tool until 1999.

Strategic plans are generally adopted into the legislative frame in the law of the support of regional development, that defines basic terms this way in §2²:

- a) region – territorial unit delimited through administrative borders of regions, districts, administrative territory of municipalities with extended power or association of municipalities, development of which is supported according to this law,
- b) strategy of regional development – medium-term document for 3 – 7 years period formulating the approach of the state to the support of regional development, providing necessary outcomes and setting developmental goals and principles for elaborating of regional programmes of development.

The law defines further the Strategy of regional development of the CR and adapt the position of individual bodies at preparation for the debating this type of document. The law doesn't mention explicitly another types of strategic documents.

Specific subsidy title the Programme of municipality renewal has performed undoubtedly initiative support for elaboration of strategic documents of rural micro regions. After the modification and enlargement of the sphere of supported activities (1997), also the subsidy title No. 7 "Integrated projects of rural micro regions" providing subsidy up to 70 % of really expended costs for drawing up of documents has been further involved into the programme. Individual rural municipalities have started work on the origin of tens of strategic documents without any preparation on the basis of this national subsidy title and general expectation of support for the activities, which will be draw as in the pre-accession period as after the accession to the EU in accordance with the EU programming principle.

¹ § 84 Act No. 128/2000 Col.

² §2 Act No. 248/2000 Col.

3. DOCUMENTS DIVISION

Since individual strategic plans are created for territories differing in size and objectives, individual documents can be divided further into several types of documents

- a) Strategic documents for national level arise for needs of national policies; they are prepared by the government and ministries and as department's strategic documents as national complex documents of a type Strategy of development of the CR Regional Development Plan and other documents fall into this category.
- b) Strategic documents for regional level are documents that have arisen after the renewal of regions. Individual documents are arranged by regional authorities. Both narrowly directed strategies (e.g. waste handling) and more widely understood strategies as Regional operating programme.
- c) Strategic documents for urban development have arisen as documents for guiding of socio economic development of cities. Documents are arranged by municipal office and their strategic parts are approved by local authority.
- d) Strategic documents of development of rural micro regions represent the most frequent type of documents, which are drawn up by associations of municipalities or differently delimited micro regions consisting predominantly of rural municipalities.
- e) Strategic documents for development of rural municipalities are represented by local programmes of rural renewal. These documents serve for development of one rural municipality, don't have all features of strategic document and are used rather as a proposal of potential investment in a municipality than the system of measures with inner interconnection.

Only the evaluation of use of strategic documents of rural micro regions will be dealt with in the following part of the contribution. This type of documents is arranged primarily by voluntary unions and associations of municipalities. Unions and associations originate without any regard to current changes of territorially administrative division of Czechia. Some of municipalities participate in two or more different associations

While strategic documents are prepared by associations of municipalities in the first place, narrowly specialised projects of development primarily of one component of technical infrastructure are prepared by unions of municipalities in collaboration with an private administrator of a concrete medium or a provider of a particular service.

4. STRATEGIC DOCUMENTS

Considerable number of critical, analytical and methodical contributions has been dealing lately with strategic documents. In one of the very first practical works Bičík, Perlín a Šefrna tried to delimitate fundamental developmental preconditions of rural area in the exposed southern neighbourhood of Prague metropolitan area on the concrete territory of the river Kocába catchment (Bičík, Perlín, Šefrna, 1999). They already documented very difficult finding of themes for mutual cooperation of local representatives and complicated communication among individual mayors and other participants in local development in this detailed study.

Vozáb (1999) appraises the role of strategic planning itself at the guiding of socio economic development stating that strategic plan is not the process, the objective of which is to prepare a document – strategic plan. Strategic planning is the process, the objective of which is to plan and realise changes, that will influence current situation in the given territory in such a direction, that is defined on the basis of needs and ideas of subjects existing in the territory. Therefore success of the material cannot be measured by evaluating quality of a document preparation but it is necessary to measure success of a document primarily by number of realised activities. Success or effectiveness of really expended means for arranging a document will prove in the course of implementing of individual intentions of a strategic plan.

Strategic planning is orientated towards using inner sources and active partaking of local participants according to Vozáb (1999). This assertion is in accordance with opinions of other experts, e.g. Borja and Castells, Glorioso and Moss or Blakely who Vozáb drew from. Strategic planning is the most effective tool for development of municipalities according to Blakely (1994). Its effectiveness is based on the survey of local needs and using own sources. Main objective then is to increase the competitiveness of the handled territory. Just the stress on using own sources and local community activation should be one of the main objectives of strategic planning.

Spišiak (2004) has brought a new view at characteristics of rural micro region in Slovakia:

- ♦ sleeping thus non-active,
- ♦ dreaming, which have a vision but don't know how to realise it,
- ♦ planning micro regions; those having plan but being not fulfilled are included,
- ♦ realising prepared projects.

The author understands the last most active category as regions newly doing business, that provide new activities comprehensively on the basis of the fulfilled strategic plan. Division according to the length of activity in a region depends on the ability to "measure", quantify the rate of activity in a region and the rate of the influence of strategic documents on individual projects. The category of communicating regions – thus associations of municipalities, where individual municipalities exchange experiences and coordinate individual intentions, cannot be included into classification of micro regions according to Spišiak.

Assessing and methodical procedure of preparation and assent of this type of documents have been dealt with by a series of authors.

Rektořík, Šelešovský a kol. (1999) belongs among the most frequently cited works. The authors tried to indicate the methodical procedure of elaboration on the basis of the analysis of higher number of documents but they didn't aim at its realisation in their work. This work and other texts as well ((Horký, Havrdová, Maier) concentrate at the discussion of the preparation of individual documents and don't pay attention to practical realisation of strategic plan.

Perlín (2001) pursues primarily the discussion of two different types of document elaboration and notes the sense and problems connected to realisation of individual intentions of strategy. The work concentrates above all at the identification of methodologically different approaches to strategic planning and also deals with the preconditions of realisation of individual intentions in less extent.

Markvart a Navrátilová (1999) dealt mainly with formal classification of individual documents from the length of their proposal period point of view among others. The

authors divide documents according to time standpoint into short-term (up to 2 years), medium-term (2 – 5 years), and long-term (over 5 years).

The representatives of the international consulting company Berman Group have dealt with strategic planning of cities in long-term and hence they stressed the importance of sustainable economic development of cities. Berman (1998) argues that at present economic development is supported by programmes and politicians that give the ability to adapt successfully to economic changes to towns (regions or state). This can be reached through improvement of own competitive position in critical production factors as human sources, information and technology or capital and infrastructure. He underlines the necessary cooperation with business environment. Successful strategy of economic development is based on this environment. Just the cooperation with business environment and mutual communication not only among individual members of association of municipalities but primarily among association of municipalities and other economic subjects operating in a micro region, presents one of the fundamental issues of preparation and realisation of successful strategy of development.

In spite of relatively wide spectrum of individual theoretical and methodological studies monitoring possibilities of using strategic planning at development of cities and rural micro regions, single authors use their own methodological procedures, which don't reflect individual gained results.

5. MICRO REGIONS

Micro regions as a specific form of cooperation of rural municipalities develop in accord with the law of municipalities. Already from the year 1990 single rural municipalities have been able to associate for the purpose of providing some activities of public administration. The most frequent types of cooperation were special-purpose unions of municipalities aiming at building or enlargement of single types of technical infrastructure or backing one concrete action of investment in the first period up to the year 1998. Municipalities cooperate for example for the purpose of regional waste dump operating as well.

Rural municipalities have very intensively started to create rural micro regions as associations of municipalities aiming at providing "complex" social economic development only after the change of approach to subsidy policy (1989). This period is characterised by rapid establishing of micro regions and immediately preceded the period of the explosive increase of elaborated documents – strategies of development. Any legislative adjustments leading to more detailed delimitation of territorial extent of individual micro regions or forms of cooperation didn't exist and haven't existed so far. Individual micro regions are arising in totally spontaneous way and the source for their origin has been above all non-verified information about anticipated types of subsidies.

Existing rapid development of cooperation of municipalities has been changing into more formal structure after 2000. The law of municipalities differentiates between the public service corporations comprising only municipalities – associations and micro regional unions where the partakers in cooperation besides municipalities are also other juristic persons. Micro regional union then acts as another physical person and its behaviour isn't performed in a public service system but in a private system.

The Institute of Spatial Development in Brno registers more than 525 – 536 micro regional items at present. The number varies due to the rate of showing and functioning of an association and its orientation. Single associations widely differ in size (number of municipalities involved) and the extent of functioning.

6. SIGNIFICANCE OF STRATEGIC PLAN

Individual micro regions have elaborated fundamental strategic documents from 2000 up to the present. Single documents can be divided into two basic types according to methodologies used. The method of community planning is used for the first type, the expert method of drawing up a document is commonly used for the second type.

6.1. Method of community planning

Method of community planning is based on the dialogue between a processor and potential users of a document and comes out from detailed knowledge of local environments, perceiving of issues by local representatives and partakers of regional development. Relatively low importance is attached to comprehensive analysis and the stress is laid much more on the identification of main issues of regional development. The method of meetings and discussion or brainstorming method with local leaders present very common way and that as for identification of crucial problems as for delimitation of main developmental matters. The method of working depends on the activity of local partakers and the structure of discussion groups and their activity. The stress on general accordance on issues or solving and a good knowledge of a document and thus a high expectation of ability to realise single intentions are typical for a proposal preparation. The limitation of this method lies firstly in the potential of participants in the process of the creation of a document and their ability to identify crucial or important problems, which can be influenced from the position of public administration. The will of single participants of community planning to participate actively in often very broad and seemingly non-concrete debates aiming at formulating individual conclusions is the restricting factor as well.

6.2. Expert method

Expert method of drawing up a document can be characterised by a relatively broadly outlined direction of a document with the effort to maximize the objectification of established pieces of knowledge and their appraisal. Processing procedure comes out from a detailed analysis of the handled territory with a number of much particularised information having frequently no immediate relation to the matter of the work. Synthesis, made usually through the SWOT method, comes out from the overview of problems instead the effort to classify them and an own strategy is based very widely with the aim to remove all the developmental issues if possible. More generally formulated strategy is followed up with a very generally understood proposal part, which only indicates possibilities of solution in the form of measures. The involvement of the public and representatives of public administration in the preparation and debating a document is

restricted to the formal control of the correctness of single data and conclusions and is not aimed at active participation in the process of preparation. Representatives of public administration come out from the thesis that "the order should be provided by a processor and that is also the subject of the financial payment to him" and they are not often interested in partaking in a document preparation beyond the extent of their standard competences. A document is prepared in a very high quality and correctly to the point however the knowledge of it and the will to realise at least some conclusions are due to the absence of knowledge of individual relations relatively low.

Table 1 Differences in formulation of a strategic document of micro region

	Method of community planning	Expert method
Analysis	Based on experience and statement	Comes out from a detailed study
Synthesis	SWOT	SWOT
Strategy	Only partial vision or missing	Formulate in details, comes out from SWOT
Proposal	Detailed from of measures (steps)	Only in a more general form
The role of a processor	Moderator, communication with local activists	A processor of own proposal
The role of local administration	Actively enters the process of preparation	Takes over and controls individual achieved results
The role of the public	Local activists stand in for	Formal debating at public meeting
Orientation	Concrete objectives	"Complex" solution

Both the basic types of formulations of strategic plans have a number of other subtypes and the procedure of preparation differs primarily according to the person of main processor and his experiences with this type of work.

Rural micro regions draw up their developmental documents using both the ways. Most documents are however created by expert method with the effort to involve local representatives into the process firstly, methods close to community way of work are also used in less documents (MR Podlipansko distr. Kolín).

Doubrovová (2005) investigated the dependency on the way of formulation and possibilities of realisation. It is not possible to prove the connection between the form of drawing up and factual realisation of concrete proposed activities in the territory follows from her work based on the examples of 5 different strategic plans of micro regions formulated by various authors in differentiated environments. Doubrovová documents that the realisation of single activities in the territory is much more dependent on local activity and personalities of leading representatives of a municipality than on the way of formulation of a document and points out that single activities realised indeed in the territory are not initiated immediately by a strategic plan but by a personal activity of individual representatives of local authorities.

7. UTILISATION OF A STRATEGIC PLAN

Utilisation of strategic plans at guiding the development of rural micro regions can be monitored only on the example of a detailed study in the selected territory. Complex statistical survey for the whole territory or at least the survey of the way of work with formulated strategies has not been done so far. The territory typical by its relative stability of rural structure without immediate influencing by the greatest metropolitan areas has been selected for the utilisation of strategic plans assessing. Assessing itself has been carried out on the territories of the districts Plzeň – north and district Rakovník. Greater number of relatively small municipalities with a large number of small villages and the absence of dominant centres of settlements are characteristic for the handled territory. The whole territory belongs to marginal/peripheral regions and is crossed by the former boundary of the German settlement. Both the districts are delimited as the territory with the concentrated state assistance. The eastern part of Rakovník district (Jesenicko) and the northern part of Plzeň – north district (Manětínsko, Kralovicko) belong among the regions with extremely low population density.

The different situation was identified at the both joined territories at the beginning of the project. Six small micro region associations, which deal with several activities existed in Rakovník district, tree non active associations existed in Plzeň-north district. An association with the district wide structure that also took part in forming micro regional development worked further all over the whole Rakovník district. This specific association of municipalities with the district wide members drew up its own strategic plan for the whole district independently to other smaller micro regions.

Single associations have strategic documents mostly drawn up. In the Rakovník district strategic documents of small associations of municipalities were elaborated by using expert method always on the initiative of representatives of the leading municipality in a micro region. Later strategic document of a district wide association comes out mostly from the expert method, despite the declared community approach, and it is based on an all-embracing analysis of the territory. The strategic part itself doesn't offer a broader sphere of activities and summarises only some possible plans of development with the stress on the development of cycle tourism. Strategic documents come out from a detailed analysis of the handled territory, which is often substituted by the description of available statistical data without any effort to incorporate some soft data into the study or verify some assertions in the confrontation with the opinions of citizens.

The proposal part is drawn up superficially only with the emphasis on the strategic part of the document and without the identification of clearly defined proposed measures or other executional parts. Indicators of monitoring, which would enable feedback control and possible addition of elaborated strategic documents, are missing entirely.

Representatives of the public administration (interviews with 24 mayors of municipalities in sum) confirmed that the strategy was elaborated nevertheless they weren't able to explain even the main orientation of the strategy and weren't able to describe principles of development or the initiatives proposed in the strategy either. Standard response to the question Could you formulate main goals in your strategy? in the course of conducted interview was the reference to the CD, where the whole strategy is at our disposal.

Differences can be seen primarily between the municipalities with the centre of micro region and other municipalities that only take part in the work of a particular micro

region. In the municipalities, where the most active (founding) municipality of a region performs, the mayor of a municipality is a leading personality of the whole association and is able to give quite complete information about the work of the association. The standard response in other municipalities is the reference to that active mayor. Municipalities though have elaborated strategic document don't utilise it, they are not able or willing to orientate towards future socio economic development according to general conclusions of the strategy and they even don't need the strategy for the planning of investment. If they consider the sense of the strategy, they tell without any restraint that this document is used mainly for the filling in of the respective box in the subsidy application form and somehow automatically suppose that non-existence of such a document would lead to lowering the possibility of municipalities to use as home as European subsidy programmes.

Strategic plans were elaborated in the first period when associations of municipalities arose and at present they are not used even for the formal purposes (filling in the box in the form) in the Plzeň – north district. Representatives of the public administration don't have individual documents at their disposal and mayors and other representatives don't utilise them.

Some conclusions can be formulated on the basis of the analysis of the utilisation of strategic plans for the planning of the socio economic development of rural municipalities:

- ◆ Strategic plans are elaborated for nearly the all micro regions:
- ◆ Individual documents are drawn up primarily through the expert method.
- ◆ Documents are prepared on the impulse given by the representatives of the leading municipality in an association.
- ◆ Other municipalities are not interested; don't have the effort and possibilities to take part in the preparation of documents.
- ◆ Documents are not utilised for the guidance of micro regional development.
- ◆ The objective of the preparation of strategic documents is only to fulfil the expected formal conditions for subsidy.
- ◆ Documents have a very comprehensive analytic part using large amount of the observed data.
- ◆ The content of strategic documents is aimed at generally formulated development, the stress is not put on a clearly delimited sphere of activities that can be provided by municipalities.
- ◆ Individual actions have a character of activities of individual municipalities without integration character.
- ◆ The same types of projects (tourism support) repeated. However they cannot bring significant impulse into the development of the region.
- ◆ Development of the municipality or region is provided by different actions arranged by individual municipalities with less or bigger success.
- ◆ Strategic documents don't propose any concentrated projects of several municipalities for really developmental impulses (the increase of employment and the like) in one place e.g. in the biggest municipality in MR.

Developmental activities and the activities leading to the disposing of old burdens are often confused as in individual strategic documents as in the opinions of representatives of municipalities. Most municipalities emphasise the completing of technical infrastructure or improving of physical appearance of public grounds in a municipality and consider this investment to be developmental impulses. Innovative

projects or projects leading to the strengthening of social cohesion are in considerable minority as in the proposed documents as in factual realisation.

8. CONCLUSION

The preparation and elaboration of strategic documents became one of the important activities arranged by micro regions at the turn of the century. The elaboration was backed also by the endowment title in the scope of the Programme of Municipality Renewal. A series of scientific and methodological literature dealt with the procedure of elaboration and methodological proposals for the use of individual types of documents. The factual utilisation of individual documents by municipalities or associations of municipalities is very restricted. The procedure of elaboration is not crucial for the further use on the contrary to the will of representatives of a municipality first of all to direct socio economic development of a municipality or an association of municipalities according to this document in long-term. Since municipalities in their investment plans are oriented primarily on the investment enabling to dispose old burdens and not on real developmental investment, they cannot provide actually innovative development. The will to cooperate on indeed developmental activities arising as a common action of more municipalities based also on the common financing while placed only in one municipality is still missing. It is very difficult to find and identify the projects, which can be arranged collectively for more municipalities or which can lead to a closer cooperation of municipalities joined in an association of municipalities.

Studied strategic plans don't meet one of the fundamental precondition of strategic planning and that is the effort to use local sources and to support local community at strengthen of socio economic development. The authors as Borja and Castells, Glorioso and Moss or Blakely just stress that strategic planning should serve for the increasing of the activity of local community. On the contrary the stress is put on finding of external financial sources for backing of proposed objectives in home strategic plans. Strategic plan is perceived as a tool for gaining financial means.

Strategic documents of rural micro regions have a very restricted use. Their role should be primarily to serve as a platform for the discussion about the issues and main directions of further development among representatives of municipalities and local enterprisers and other active citizens. Only the documents, arising as from the common will of municipalities to prepare strategic plan as to execute it, have their sense. It is suitable to find other and less expensive variants to back socio economic development or some investment.

This paper has been supported by research program No. MSM 0021620831

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Rozvíjí strategický plán vidiecké mikroregiony?

Resume

Príprava a spracovanie strategických dokumentov sa na prelome storočí stali jednou z významných oblastí aktivity mikroregionov. Vypracovanie dokumentov bolo podpo-
 rené tiež dotačnou položkou v rámci Programu obnovy vidieka. Rad vedeckých a me-
 todologických prác sa zaoberal procedúrou spracovania a metodologickými návrhmi
 využitia jednotlivých typov dokumentov. Fakticky, využitie jednotlivých dokumentov
 obcami alebo združeniami obcí je veľmi obmedzené. Procedúra spracovania pritom nie

je kritickou pre budúce využitie. Naopak, je ňou predovšetkým vôľa reprezentantov obce v dlhodobom horizonte usmerniť socio-ekonomický rozvoj obce alebo združenia obcí na základe tohto dokumentu. Keďže obce sú vo svojom investičnom plánovaní orientované primárne na investície umožňujúce odstrániť staré záťaže a nie na reálne rozvojové investovanie, nemôžu byť realizátormi skutočného inovačného rozvoja. Vôľa spolupracovať na rozvojových aktivitách vychádzajúcich zo spoločnej akcie viacerých obcí, založených tiež na spoločnom financovaní no lokalizovaných len v jednej zo zúčastnených obcí, stále chýba. Je veľmi zložité nájsť a identifikovať vhodné projekty pre viacero obcí alebo projekty, ktoré môžu viesť k bližšej spolupráci obcí spojených v združení.

Preštudované strategické plány nespĺňajú jeden zo základných predpokladov strategického plánovania, ktorým je úsilie využiť lokálne zdroje a podporiť lokálnu komunitu posilnením socio-ekonomického rozvoja. Autori ako Borja a Castells, Glorioso a Moss alebo Blakely zdôrazňujú, že strategické plánovanie by malo slúžiť na pozdvihnutie aktivity lokálnej komunity. V domácich strategických plánoch je naopak dôraz položený na nájdenie externých finančných zdrojov na podporu predkladaných cieľov. Strategický plán je považovaný za nástroj získavania finančných prostriedkov.

Strategické dokumenty vidieckych mikroregiónov majú veľmi obmedzené využitie. Ich primárnou úlohou by malo byť slúžiť ako platforma diskusie o záležitostiach, hlavných smeroch budúceho rozvoja medzi reprezentantmi obcí, miestnymi podnikateľmi a ďalšími aktívnymi občanmi. Len dokumenty vychádzajúce zo spoločnej vôle obcí pripraviť výkonný strategický plán majú svoj zmysel. Je vhodné nájsť aj iný, menej nákladný variant na podporu socio-ekonomického rozvoja a investovania.