

## NEW APPROACHES TO THE EXPLANATION OF REGIONAL DISPARITIES AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES – A CRITICAL REFLECTION

Jörg Maier

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University of Bayreuth, e-mail: [ls.wigeo@uni-bayreuth.de](mailto:ls.wigeo@uni-bayreuth.de), [liloundjoerg@gmx.de](mailto:liloundjoerg@gmx.de)

**Abstract:** Comparing the various approaches that have turned up in the last 20 years to complement the then prevailing state of discussion, one has to consider, along with partly imaginative part aspects, above all the greater list of cultural aspects (e.g. Bernreuther), the emphasis on knowledge and education in the smart-concepts and the adoption of experiences from the risk research in the sense of resilience. Though these have not fundamentally changed the concept of the learning region, the resilient regional development appears as an important further development, especially for working out regional development concepts. Thus the discussion could possibly include concepts for an intelligent decline (Maier and Nicolai, 2011), side by side with the still frequently existing growth orientation of the regional development policy.

**Key words:** regional disparities, regional policy, new ideas of theoretical approach

### 1 THE EXISTENCE OF REGIONAL DISPARITIES AS A BASIS FOR REGIONAL POLICY

The regional distribution of locations of population and industry depends (inter alia) on objectives generally preferred by economic and social activities of the respective society and its structures. In the course of time these preferences can change due to, for instance, new models or/and new social systems. This leads to different regional assessments, economic measuring magnitudes and also to real or just imagined differences in standard of living. All these factors, and particularly very general basis conditions which cannot not at all or only insignificantly be influenced by the individual person, respectively the region, are the basis of any regional policy. From all this results the classical discussion claiming equal framework conditions, and also leads to statutory regulations (in Bavaria, for instance, to an alteration of the constitution on September 15, 2013).

Neoliberal globalization, which has begun to develop dynamically since the 1980s and disintegration of the Fordist system in the USA and in the countries of

Western Europe first of all, have introduced a number of fundamental changes in the functioning of the political-economic system. One important aspect of these changes has been recalibration or relativisation of the existing scalar levels, while at the same time the existing dominant nation-state level has been undermined in many different ways. In the assessment of socio-economic development, or competitiveness, attention has been shifted from state level to its individual regions. Neoliberal globalization has contributed to the fact that in relatively short time significant regional disparities between regions appeared.

Moreover, this discussion is highly ambivalent, one group maintaining the obvious disparity of regional conditions in Bavaria, for instance, the other group positivist talking about constant adjustment. The traditional concepts of regional policy emphasize the unequal distribution of income, jobs, supply facilities etc. and consequently see a need for political regulation and action. However, they are aimed at growth, and ex defined, at economic concentration, particularly at investment incentives for concerns and infrastructure measures.

Currently one can recognize a discernible trend in regional research moving away from “large” theories of regional development (such as the regional development cycle, developed by Myrdal and Friedmann etc.) towards research of specific regional development problems, issues, factors, mechanisms, processes etc. The principal regularity of social-geographical systems rests in their specific type of differentiation, which is hierarchical differentiation. This means that the development potential of a particular region or city is predominately related to its position within its respective regional/settlement hierarchy. Moreover, the position of a region or a city within the hierarchy also manifest itself in differences in the needs and “interests” of various actors (Blažek, 2012).

Significant regional research trend is its broader conception, in the sense that regional development is no longer considered solely in economic terms but also in light of social and environment aspects. Consequently, regional research frequently focuses on investigating the role of socio-cultural factors in regional development.

## **2 THE APPROACHES TO THE EXPLANATION OF REGIONAL DISPARITIES AT THE END OF THE 90-TIES OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY WITH THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF THE LEARNING REGION**

The scientific approaches to explain regional disparities and the from those resulting development strategies are far more differentiated and had reached a theoretical and empirical peak above all from the mid-nineties of the last century.

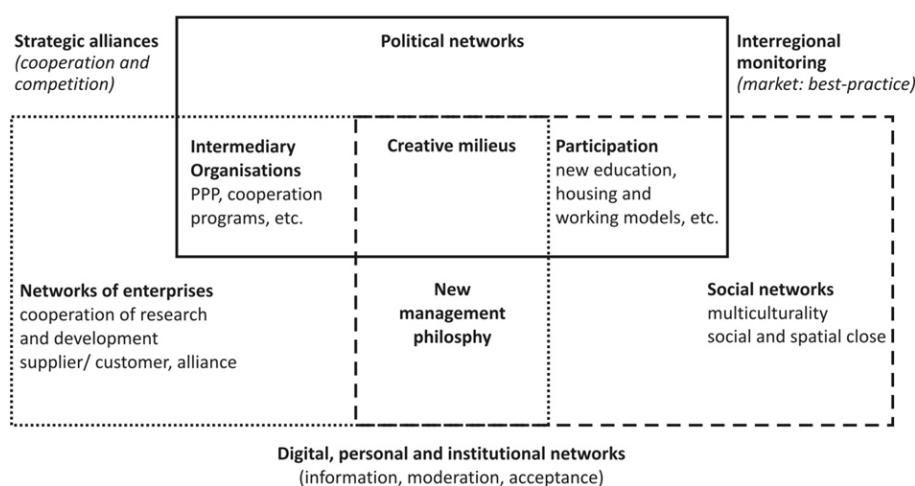
Those approaches can be divided in several groups:

- Approaches based on networks and environment with the concept of industrial districts, the creative milieu, and the economic clusters that we had discussed and put into practice in Bavaria and especially in Upper Franconia (Obermaier, 1999; Peters, 2001; Bodenschatz, 2002 and others). These ap-

proaches place special emphasis on the effort to understand the innovation capability of a region as a result of collective action due to economic and social processes. They are complemented with next group.

- The concept of the spatial and sectional innovation systems. This development strategy was summarized in third one.
- The knowledge-based approaches of the learning economics – in the case of Upper Franconia – in the success strategy of the learning region (Schläger-Zirlik, 2003).

Together with the conceptual development at the University of Bayreuth since the late seventies on the basis of endogenous concepts, the approach of a learning region comprising economic, social and cultural aspects has become the basis of regional development (Fig. 1).

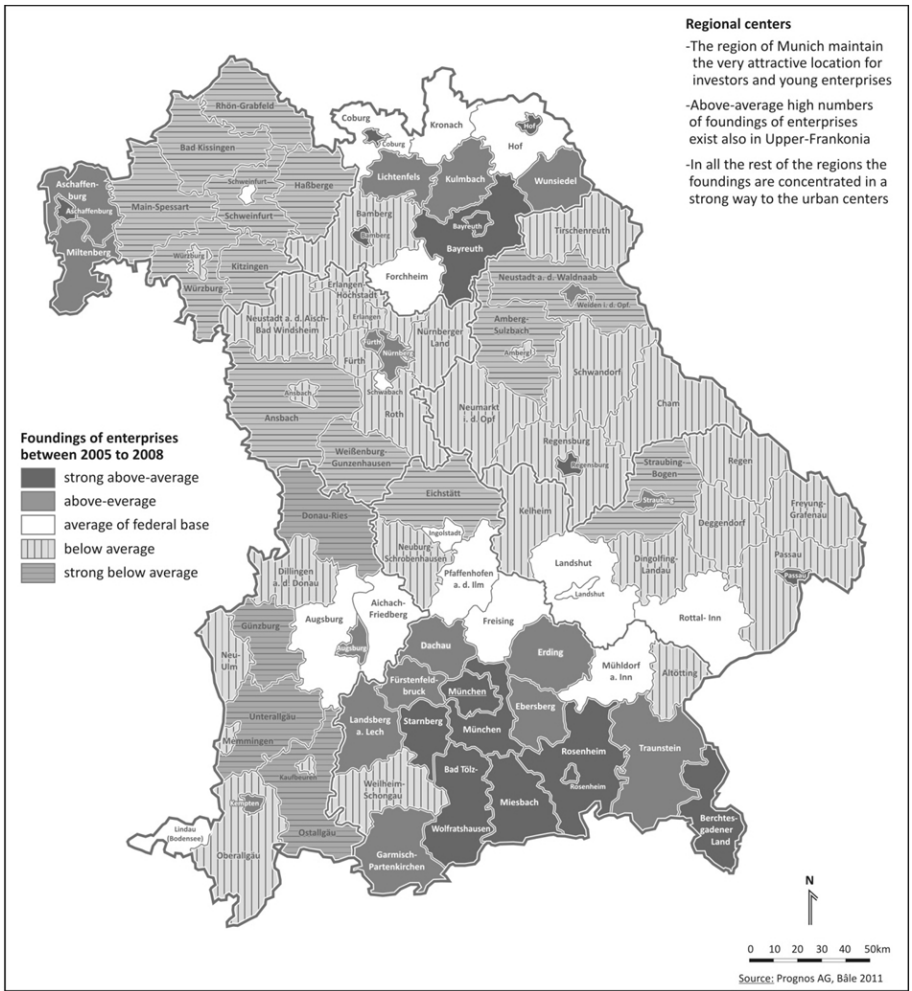


**Figure 1** Network architecture of learning regions. Source: Butzin (1996)

Within the different sectors, the innovation-orientated approach was chosen as a starting-point, with the objective of conserving and strengthening the competitiveness of the region with the competitiveness of the local small and medium-sized companies. The basis thesis is the assumption that regional innovation processes come about solely through a combined action of the various participants, i.e. the basis is the formation of social networks with the goal of collective learning. The number of recently founded concerns in Upper Franconia (as shown by Prognos AG for the year 2005 – 2008) stands for this positive development (Fig. 2).

In current geographic literature, there are great works that are inspired by current institutional theories of regional development (clusters, learning regions, triple helix and others). These approaches are characterized by the belief that the activities of the various actors in the region are influenced by the surrounding environment.

Surrounding environment is now predominantly understood as a man-made socio-economic or socio-cultural environment. Such understanding of the surrounding environment in geographic literature is well understood by terms such as regional roots, institutional density, innovation milieu, atmosphere in the region, networking, human and social capital, and so on.



**Figure 2** Foundings of enterprises. Source: Prognos AG, Bäle (2011)

The emphasis on contemporary approaches to regional development and the emphasis of the authors themselves on studying these so-called soft factors of regional development naturally lead to increased interest in regional specifics and the

focus of research on detailed empirical studies of often unique socio-economic and cultural contexts. It is also worth highlighting the fact that by the decreasing in the hierarchical level of real social-economic systems, the effect of increasing the importance of soft factors occurs, including the role of individual actors, companies as well as individual persons in the region (Blažek, 2012).

### **3 THE COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES OF EMPHASIZING INDIVIDUAL CULTURAL FACTORS AND THOSE SPECIFIC TO A REGION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF A “NEW” URBAN AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

Already at the beginning of the new century, it became obvious that in this century a special development ability is expected from the large centers – as seen, for instance, in the strong emphasis on cities and metropolises within the funding period (2014 – 2020) of the European environmental planning. After the predominant orientation on regions as well as on rural regions in the nineties, there has followed a rebirth of urban strategies, be it concepts for urban development or – as a part aspect – new models that generally are not so much concerning urban planning, but are rather orientated towards economy and marketing. A typical representative of this phase was the American Richard Florida seeing success guarantee in the factors technologies, talents, tolerance, who rose like a fixed star, but is only marginally mentioned today. The town of Hamburg developed a new concept of urban development together with him, which however, failed in practice. Florida (2005) was a fascination consultant, but Hamburg, having to transform some social problem areas, hoped for a successful realization within a short time. This short-sighted view and the political need to consider a four-year life time of a parliament were a hindrance to the expected success, whereas Zürich, planning for a longer term, was successful.

The markedly dominant position of large cities and their regions in the regional structure stems from a combination of several factors. These include, in particular:

- a) a high share of large cities on population and GDP of the country,
- b) effect of so-called gateway functions for foreign capital input, for other regions of the state are the intermediaries of the “new ideas” coming from abroad,
- c) large cities have significant economic and social potential, their economic base is diversified with a strong share of the tertiary and quaternary sectors,
- d) large cities generally have significant university and scientific research capacities, there is also a favorable demographic, especially educational structure of the population,
- e) in large cities are concentrated the state administration, corporate directorates, transactional activities such as finance and insurance, and skilled labor,
- f) the great advantage of large cities is the possibility of “face-to-face” contacts in business,

g) finally, the “image” and reputation of large cities like national and continental metropolis are important.

The concept to convert social problem structures into economically attractive service locations with the help of representatives of the creative class (artists, innovative founders of companies) has to be valued similarly (Maier, 2012; Marrocu and Paci, 2013). As for large dimension, it concentrates predominantly on cities and metropolitan areas, as for small areas, there is a series of development going into the direction of the aim in mind. But again patience and a lot of staying power are needed, and the use of the concept is possible only for some parts of the urban development. Regarding the aim of regional policy to achieve a reduction of the regional disparities, these concepts are fundamentally counterproductive as they are more likely to strengthen the dynamics of the centers.

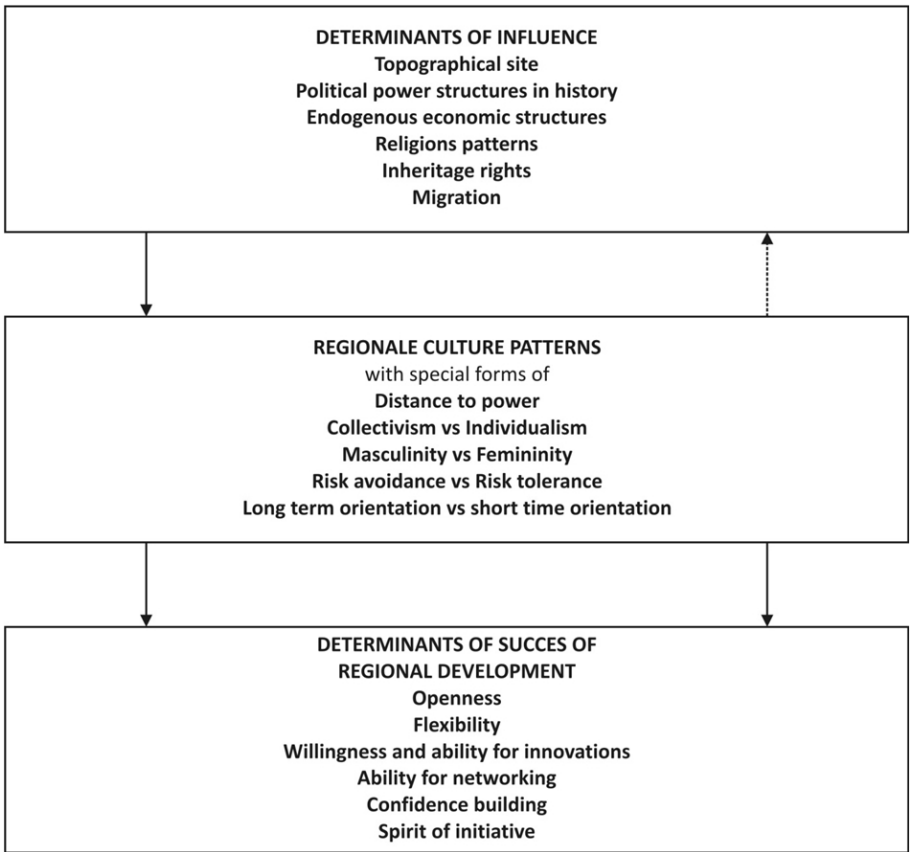
Locational preferences of the creative class, whether residential or working, display a distinct tendency towards spatial concentration. The growth of cities and their regions is based on other factors than in the past. Human creativity is considered to be a key driving force of the economy of cities. Florida’s concept of creative class and creative cities is often discussed both in academia as well as in city development practice. Clusters of the creative class can be found in some specific types of area called creative regions, and their formation, Florida (2005) claims, is facilitated by factors describes as the 3Ts: Technology, Talent and Tolerance. In those regions creative people (such as architects, artists, computer programmers, designers, experts and analysts, scientists etc.) stimulate one another’s ventures, while the outside environment, with its openness, diversity, multiculturalism, tolerance and talent promotion, enhances their work by creating conditions for avant-garde, unconventional patterns of behavior and daring visions of development and planning conceptions. These areas are highly advanced technologically, feature a high quality of life, and attract talent. Usually, such areas are metropolitan regions (Stryjakiewicz, 2010; Asheim et al., 2011 etc.).

The PhD thesis of Berneuther (2005), in its analysis of the influential factors an regional development, equally emphasizes individual as well as area-typical cultural factors, even includes historically-established power structures and religious influences, thus commendably complementing the concept of the learning region with the clearly economy-determined interrelations. When it comes to putting his strategies into practice, however, Bernreuther keeps within the already mentioned canon of innovation willingness and innovation capability, the ability to form networks, flexibility and initiative of the entrepreneurs (Fig. 3).

#### **4 THE RETURN TO INTEGRATED APPROACHES OF A KNOWLEDGE-BASED DEVELOPMENT POLICY**

For a few years colleagues from Austria have been pursuing a clear way to integrated approaches, starting from studies by Rudolf Giffinger and colleagues (Giffinger et al., 2010, p. 7-25) about characteristics and development tendencies of

Smart Cities in Europe. Peer (2012, p. 38-42) has dealt with the question to what extent “smart” can also be “rural”. Thus she has presented a contribution to the question of the existence of regional disparities which is worth reading and knowledge-based. Knowledge, innovation, learning and education play the central role therein, in connection with the concept of the learning region, however – relevantly adjusted – clearly focused on the location factors information and communication technology as well as educational institutions. Her concept is equally concerned with the development aspect of the structural change of the regional economy in the direction of innovative and education-intensive sectors. Thus she aims beyond the classical structural analyses also at potentials particularly within the educational sector which are equally to be found in rural areas. Moreover, she combines this with the EU 2014 – 2020 “Strategy of a smart sustainable and inclusive growth”.



**Figure 3** Determinants of the influence and the success of regional development.  
Source: Bernreuther (2005)

The theory of learning regions as one of the first to be developed by Lundvall (1992), which distinguishes four different kinds of learning: learning by praxis, learning by using, learning by active searching and learning through cooperation. The key to the competitiveness of the regions is, so called Triple Helix, i. creative co-operation between the three key players in the region: the private sector, universities and research institutions and the public sector (government). Typical characteristics of learning regions are considered:

- a) appropriate economic, or sectoral structure of the region,
- b) existence of technological and scientific-research infrastructure and
- c) favorable cultural and institutional configuration of the region.

The favorable cultural and institutional configuration of the region is also known as group 4 I:

common identity of actors (Identification), the availability of informations and the ability to learn (Intelligence), strong business associations, innovation centers, and so on (Institutions) and good inter-linkage and coordination between institutions (Integration).

This practice thus, on the one hand, addresses new issues, on the other hand is growth-orientated in the classic way. The success criteria of a knowledge-based development are the following:

- promotion of entrepreneurial knowledge about the most sustainable and progressive potentials of a region,
- promotion of regional networks (embeddedness),
- adoption of innovative techniques and processes from neighbouring regions (relatedness),
- promotions of connecting the relevant participants,
- cooperation of local participants and political decision-makers (cooperation).

Generally, under the term knowledge-based development can be understood a humanistic perspective and development process uses variety of knowledge management systems and approaches based on a shared vision and value sets to capture new opportunities, advance the economy and society, compete successfully in sustainable and global knowledge economy and achieve progress in the evolution of human civilization.

As is easily seen, these criteria strongly call to mind the endogenous regional development and the already discussed concepts of the nineties, albeit the focus of the development potentials is seen in research, education and innovation. On the whole, however, this is a valuable addition concerning explanation factors and control systems.

## **5 THE INCLUSION OF CRISIS STRATEGIES WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF RESILIENCE RESEARCH**

In general, regional economic resilience describes the development in a region after exogenous shock. Concepts, however, differ when defining which kind of de-



velopment can be identified as “resilient” and reflect different disciplinary references (Wink, 2012). Martin (2010) distinguishes three directions by referring to approaches of “engineered (equilibrium-focused) resilience”(i), “ecological (panarchy-focused) resilience (ii) and adaptive (complexity-focused) resilience” (iii). Engineered resilience is the concept with closest relation to physics and describes resilience as a capability to bounce back to equilibrium. A common approach in this context would be to look at deviations of GDP or unemployment ratios from original trend (equilibrium) development and the time necessary to return to the original pathway. Macroeconomic hysteresis was often closely connected with these observations of deviations from original equilibrium towards a new one (Wink, 2012).

A further idea of completion and simultaneously a new interpretation of the fundamental question has come up in the scientific discussion in the last years, that is the concept of resilience research (Aiginger, 2009, p. 309-316, Christopherson, Michie and Tyler, 2010, p. 3-10; Simmie and Martin, 2010, p. 105-120), originating from Great Britain and promoted by the research into reactions to crises – not only economic ones. The notion of resilience which has been existing in the geo-sciences in the form of Hazard subject matter (Geipel, 1992; Müller-Mahn, 2007) for a long time already, as well as in architecture and environmental planning in the form of the utopia of urban development, currently undergoes a similar hype in the literature as the notion of sustainability in the nineties. It describes how human beings or systems react to disturbances. Resilience describes the capacity to deal with very difficult situations, and can be interpreted as resistance. Thus, not only the previous approaches of regional policy are complemented with an important strategy term, but equally the set of methodical basis involved.

So the notion of resilience of a region is defined as:

- diversity, i.e. as many as possible, not interrelated branches of industry and trade,
- high-quality products (high net-product) and high growth rate,
- competitiveness, for instance high proportion of young, innovative companies,
- building of networks between the various participants.

Competitiveness has become the magic world for explaining or planning economic success for micro-economic (enterprise), medium-economic (region) and macro-economic (national) levels since long, although there have been hot debates about the content and measurement methods and one could not easily apply them while analyzing regional competitiveness. Even the definition of “region” is problematic, and, certainly, regional competitiveness is not a simple sum of competitiveness of firms located in a given region, or a fraction of national competitiveness. Growing interest in Europe for regional competitiveness may be explained, among other things, by the strength of the sub-national territorial units in the European Union cohesion policy (Enyedi, 2009).

Porter, M. E., who has been the most frequently cited in writings about competitive advantages, suggests that the best measure of competitiveness is productivity. “The competitiveness, then, is measured by productivity” (Porter and Ketels, 2003).

The term “competitive region” means, that the region has a number of local factors favourable for successes of firms and institutions, including universities and science institutions (Enyedi, 2009). For our purposes, we follow a widely used general definition that views regional competitiveness as “the ability of regional economies to improve standards of living for their citizens through generating high levels of income and employment, while remaining continually exposed to external competition” (European Commission, 1999).

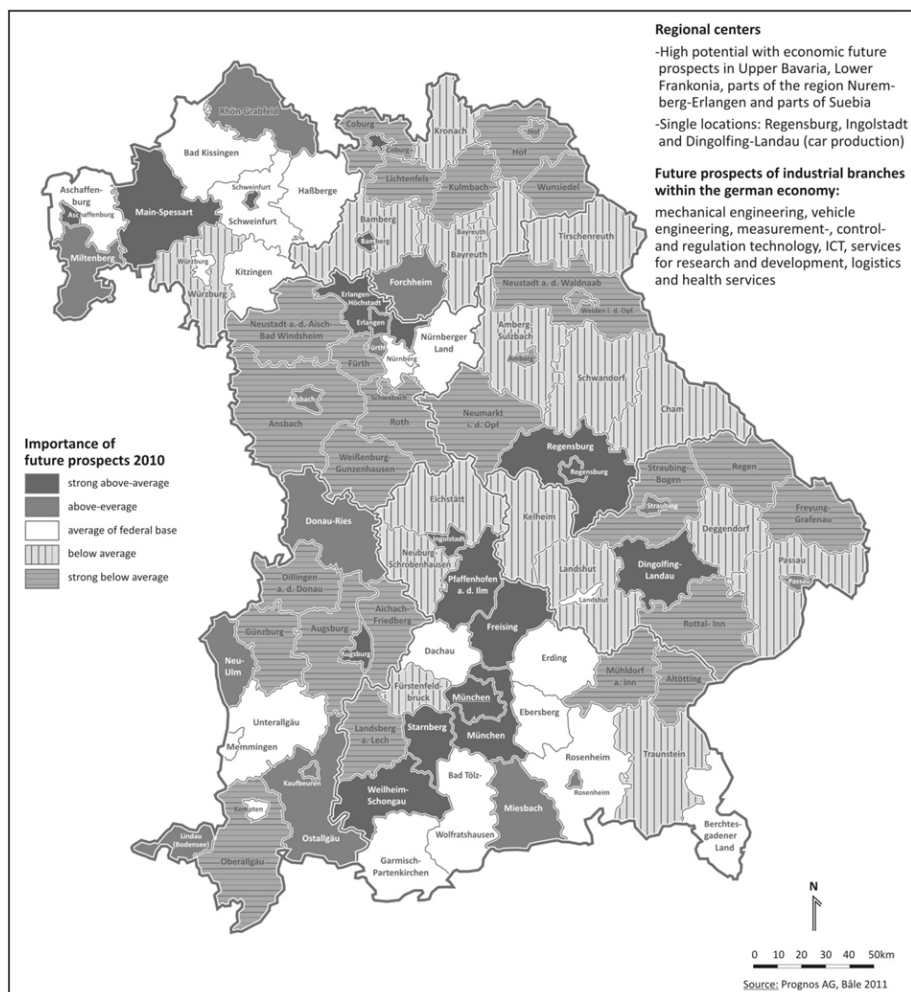
These three aspects are not new in the discussion, if compared with the innovation research or the learning region. But they are newly weighted, respectively complemented through new statistic data. An example of this, among other, is the inclusion of the regionally differentiated appointment with future-orientated economic branches as in Figure 4 of the Prognos Atlas (Bornemann, 2011). Here you do not see the well-known sight of spatial concentration in metropolitan areas, but also in parts of rural areas in Lower Franconia and Swabia, which therefore proves that the division of regional policy strategies into urban and rural areas no longer makes sense and forces a discussion of new concepts.

If one considers all criteria for assessing regional resilience, though, as was done by the Pestel Institute in 2010 (Pestel Institut, 2010) or the ÖAR regional consultancy (ÖAR, 2012), one finds predominantly well-known criteria that had been used in earlier studies as well, criteria complemented with some interesting data (e.g. Hartz IV recipients in the study of the Pestel Institute or, for instance, environmental criteria, costs for culture, life satisfaction, respectively restrictions in institutions as shown in the ÖAR study). The problem of these data lies particularly in the combining of qualitative and quantitative values. Moreover, both approaches rather problematically determine the complex notion of regional resistance in one, albeit weighted criterion. So the ÖAR did not present, as first intended, a valuation for the whole federal state Vorarlberg, but presented separate assessments of resistance for the greatly different areas Rheintal with its high dynamics and the Bregenzer Wald with its more rural structures. Both areas show high resilience, though.

In order to obtain statements about the degree of susceptibility, respectively about the capability to cope with it, Ulf Hahne (Hahne, 2013, p. 159) differentiates between 3 concepts of adaptability:

- short-term adaptability towards catastrophes and crises (e.g. economic fluctuation),
- medium-term resistance to crises owing to structural balance, possibly also a regional capacity for suffering of all participants (e.g. in history, Upper Franconia has proved to be an area extremely adjustable to a variety of crises),
- capacity to learn of the systems in the sense of the learning region.

Thus new ideas are brought into the discussion, even of the realization into concrete political action must still be empirically proved.



**Figure 4** Importance of economic future prospects. Source: Prognos AG, Biele (2011)

## 6 CONCLUSION

Regional disparities are a typical features of regional structure of Germany as well as others European countries. The instruments of EU cohesion policy are one option how regional disparities can be mitigated in individual programming periods. The evaluation and explanation of regional disparities is the key point to the beginning of mitigation of regional disparities.

Already at the beginning of the new century, it became obvious that in this century a special development ability is expected from the large centers – as seen, for

instance, in the strong emphasis on cities and metropolises within the funding period (2014 – 2020) of the European environmental planning. After the predominant orientation on regions as well as on rural regions in the nineties, there has followed a re-birth of urban strategies, be it concepts for urban development or – as a part aspect – new models that generally are not so much concerning urban planning, but are rather orientated towards economy and marketing. The markedly dominant position of large cities and their regions in the regional structure stems from a combination of several significant factors.

The scientific approaches to explain regional disparities and the from those resulting development strategies are far more differentiated and had reached a theoretical and empirical peak above all from the mid-nineties of the last century. Those approaches can be divided in several groups: 1) Approaches based on networks and environment with the concept of industrial districts, the creative milieu, and the economic clusters. These approaches place special emphasis on the effort to understand the innovation capability of a region as a result of collective action due to economic and social processes. 2) The concept of the spatial and sectional innovation systems. 3) The knowledge-based development approaches of the learning economics.

Considering various specifics of many EU regions, is necessary to critically evaluate and compare the relevance of selected concepts of regional developmental strategies. Nölke and Vliegenthart (2009) for example argue that innovation systems and institutional frameworks in the Central European countries, new members of EU are so different from western European countries, old members of EU.

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## **Nové prístupy k objasneniu regionálnych disparít a stratégií rozvoja – kritická reflexia**

### **Súhrn**

Regionálne rozdiely sú typickými znakmi regionálnej štruktúry Nemecka, ako aj iných európskych krajín. Nástroje regionálnej politiky súdržnosti EÚ sú jednou z možností, ako môžu byť regionálne rozdiely zmiernené v jednotlivých programových obdobiach. Hodnotenie a vysvetlenie regionálnych rozdielov je kľúčovým bodom začiatku zmierňovania regionálnych rozdielov.

Už na začiatku nového storočia sa ukázalo, že v tomto storočí sa veľkých sídelných centier a ich regiónov očakáva osobitná schopnosť rozvoja, čo je spôsobené napríklad silným dôrazom na hlavné mestá a metropoly všeobecne v období financovania európskeho environmentálneho plánovania 2014 – 2020.

Po predchádzajúcej prevládajúcej orientácii na menej rozvinuté regióny, ako aj na špeciálne na vidiecke región. V deväťdesiatych rokoch minulého storočia nasledovalo znovuzrodenie mestských stratégií, či už ide o všeobecný rozvoj mesta, alebo čiastočne o nové modely, ktoré sa vo všeobecnosti nezaoberajú primárne mestským plánovaním, ale sú skôr orientované na ekonomiku a marketing. Značne dominantné postavenie veľkých miest a ich regiónov v regionálnej štruktúre vyplýva z kombinácie niekoľkých významných faktorov.

Vedecké prístupy na vysvetlenie regionálnych rozdielov a očakávaných výsledkov vyplývajúcich z rozvojových stratégií sú dnes oveľa diferencovanejšie a možno povedať, že dosiahli teoretický a aj empirický vrchol predovšetkým od polovice deväťdesiatych rokov minulého storočia. Tieto prístupy je možné rozdeliť do niekoľkých skupín:

- 1) Prístupy založené na sieťach a prostredí s konceptmi priemyselných okrskov, tvorivého prostredia a všeobecne ekonomických klastrov. Tieto prístupy kladú osobitný dôraz na snahu pochopiť inovačnú schopnosť regiónu v dôsledku kolektívneho snaženia v kontexte ekonomických a sociálnych procesov.
- 2) Koncepcia priestorových a sektorových inovačných systémov.
- 3) Rozvojové prístupy založené na vedomostiach a znalostnej ekonomike.

Vzhľadom na rôzne špecifikácie jednotlivých regiónov EÚ je potrebné kriticky zhodnotiť a porovnať význam vybraných konceptov regionálnych rozvojových stratégií. Nölke a Vliegenthart (2009) napríklad poznamenávajú, že inovačné systémy a inštitucionálne rámce v stredoeurópskych krajinách, nových členských štátoch EÚ sú výrazne odlišné od západoeurópskych krajín, starých členov EÚ. Túto skutočnosť je potrebné výbere konceptov regionálnych rozvojových stratégií rešpektovať.