

Reciprocal effects between regions and organizations

A study of European regional cultures and corporate embeddedness



This paper presents some main results of a comparative analysis of reciprocal effects between regions and companies. The research was based on expert interviews carried out in 2007-2009 in seven European regions and by their 30-30 companies.

In the frame of theoretical background, the article gives firstly a brief outline of the regional and corporate culture, secondly the open system theory and furthermore the institutional perspective. The following fields of investigation were defined to enable the analysis of engagement: Innovation, Human resources, Sustainability and Quality of life.

Three hypotheses were proven about the interaction between regional and corporate cultures, such as the reasons for or lack of embeddedness, and about the role of enrooted managers.

INTRODUCTION

The external factors on companies (knowledge networks, innovation) and social responsibility (good citizenship) have extensive literature. However, the analysis of commitment and embeddedness of regional companies is missing. How the vital cultural diversity in European regions can enhance corporate competitiveness was the core question of the international three-year research project.

„Within the confines of the project, named „Corporate Culture and Regional Embeddedness^[2]” (CURE), seven regions from six European countries represented by universities and research institutes of the regions co-operated in 2007-2009. The research for the CURE project was conducted in Southeast Netherlands, the Basel area (Switzerland), East Westphalia Lippe (Germany), Brandenburg Southwest (Germany), the Győr region (Hungary), Styria (Austria)

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and Wales. As a member of the cross-border research team, I was involved in this multidisciplinary study spanning seven European regions.

Within the confines of research we intended to get a picture about the interaction between corporate culture and regional culture. The further aim of our research was to identify the indicators of corporate embeddedness, the managerial roles beyond the regional embeddedness of their corporation, as well as the reasons for engagement or lack of engagement.

The main purpose of the research was to explore the reciprocal effects between regions and organisations, as well as the change processes resulting from this interaction, such as corporate embeddedness. We intended to investigate on the one hand how regional development is influenced by company cultures and, on the other hand, how companies are influenced by regional cultures. It became clear that the role of culture is important for the regional quality of life, regional economic location and therewith for regional competitiveness.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Within the confines of theoretical background some core theories are discussed, such as cultural aspects, system theory and the institutional perspective of companies.

Cultural aspects of reciprocal effects between a region and an organization.

There are several concepts regarding culture. One of the most well known of them is as follows: „Culture is the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others^[3]”. This concept is applicable to both the national and the regional culture, as well as to the organisational culture.

Strong regional cultures can help to create conditions under which innovation and prosperity can flourish. Globalization, however, can weaken the links between companies and their surrounding regions. The „footloose” or „homeless” nature of multinational firms means that they have no loyalty to any particular region or country. On the other hand, regional development can also be positively influenced by global corporate cultures, especially in an era of „open innovation”^[4]

[3] <http://geert-hofstede.com/national-culture.html>.

[4] Prud'homme van Reine, P. - Dankbaar, B. (2009): *Comparative empirical report*. Cure project deliverable 31.; Prud'homme van Reine, P. - Dankbaar, B. (2009): *WP4 Deliverable D28, Regional Report, Southeast Netherlands*. Radboud Universiteit: School of Management. Nijmegen.

For centuries management theory can be seen as a „culture free” theoretical approach. In the second half of the last century culture was slowly addressed as an important aspect and the 1980s can be labelled as the “cultural decade”.^[5] In the past years considerable interest has been shown by academic scholars in the role of culture for the economic vitality and innovation dynamics of regional economies.^[6] Cultural, institutional and social factors as crucial assets for regional economic development have been emphasised particularly in the literature on industrial districts^[7] and on innovative milieus.^[8]

The impact of regional culture on the creation of regional systems of innovation is a well-established research area.^[9] The regional cultures are determined from a permanent interchange between the companies and the region. Pekruhl, Minnig and Dörhöfer (2007) used in their paper the wording „staff as vehicle”, which means that the staff functions as an interface between companies and regions. The fact that companies are not solely committed to their shareholders, but must also include the interests of many stakeholders, is of further interest.

The effect of system theory

The term originates from von Bertalanffy's general system theory (GST) (1968). Although von Bertalanffy first presented his idea of a ‘General System Theory’ in a philosophy seminar at the University of Chicago in 1937, it was only after World War II that his first publications appeared on this subject. The GST is used in later efforts in other fields. Neo-functionalists such as Luhmann (1984) have incorporated system theory to describe society and its components (social systems theory).

An open system continuously interacts with its environment. The interaction can take the form of information, energy, or material transfers into or out of the system. Open systems theory refers simply to the concept that organiza-

[5] Cameron, K. - Quinn, R. E. (2006): *Diagnosing and Changing Organisational Culture*. Based on the Competing Values Framework. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

[6] Gertler, M. (2004): *Manufacturing Culture*. The Institutional Geography of Industrial Practice. Oxford University Press, Oxford.; Tura, T. - Harmaakorpi, V. (2005): *Social Capital in Building Regional Innovative Capability*. Regional Studies. 39. 1111-1125.; Ablonczyné Mihályka L. - Nádai J. (2010): Cooperation strategies of multicultural management in Hungary. In: Springer, R. - Chad-raba, P. (eds.): *Marketing and Business Strategies for Central & Eastern Europe*. Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies. Vienna. 3-15.; Szőke, J. - Ablonczyné Mihályka, L. (2011): *Culture's Strategic Role in SMEs' Cross-Border Relations*. Strategic Management: International Journal of Strategic Management and Decision Support System in Strategic Management 16. 4. 23-28.

[7] Asheim, B. (2000): Industrial districts: The contributions of Marshall and beyond. In: Clark, G. - Feldman M. - Gertler M. (eds.): *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Geography*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 413-431.

[8] Kebir, L. - Crevoisier, O. (2007): *Resources development and actors coordination: what role for innovative milieus?* International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation Management. 7. 204-222.

[9] Konczosné Szombathelyi, M. - Losonczi, M. - Józsa, L. (2010): Managerial rules beyond the regional embeddedness: A study of European companies. In: Ogunmokin, G. - Gabbay, R. - Janelle, R. (eds.): *4th Biennial Conference of Academy of World Business, Marketing and Management Development*. Perth, Western Australia. AWBMAMD GPO, 850-866.

tions are strongly influenced by their environment. The environment consists of other organizations that exert various forces of an economic, political, or social nature. The environment also provides key resources that sustain the organization and lead to change and survival.

The institutional perspective

„Postulating that the core research agenda of strategic communication is the analysis and explanation of the intentional and purposeful communicative relationship between organizations and publics, the introduction of institutional theory to strategic communication management offers a detour from a rational-choice or managerial perspective and stresses the influence of institutional frameworks on organizations”.^[10] According to the institutional theories, the „organizations as open-systems should have developed a fine-tuned sensory to pick-up vibrations in their environment. The better the organization is tuned to its environment (using boundary-spanners as bridgeheads), the more legitimate its practises... Nowadays constituents expect organizations not only to communicate the mere legal requirements but also to testify their concern for the environment, human rights and non-discriminating business practices... organizations act upon institutional pressures to implement new roles, procedures and programmes, such as corporate social responsibility... organizations are embedded in and influenced by their environment”.^[11]

Since both culture studies and communications studies consider the good relations between an organization and its public as a crucial element of embeddedness and engagement, we could consider the managers working for the companies as a tool between an organization and its environment. It is explained by the need to align organizations with the demands of the environment^[12] or with the evolutionary dynamics of society.^[13]

RESEARCH METHOD

Methodology: To gather information about the reciprocal cultural effect between companies and regions, the research team essentially applied qualitative methods, especially interviews with CEOs. We conducted 30 interviews in all seven regions

[10] Sandhu (2009): i. m. 75.: *Strategic Communication: An Institutional Perspective*. International Journal of Strategic Communication. 3. 2. 72-92., 72-73.

[11] Sandhu (2009) 75.

[12] Grunig, J. E. - Grunig, L. A. (2008): Excellence theory in public relations. Past, present and future. In: Zerfass, A. - Van Ruyter, B. - Sriramesh, K. (eds.): *Public Relations Research*. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften. Wiesbaden. 327-347.

[13] Holmström, S. (2005): *Reframing public relations: The evaluation of a reflective paradigm for organizational legitimization*. Public Relations Review. 20. 4. 497-504.

(altogether 210 interviews) with companies between April 2008 and October 2008. Companies were questioned about their relationship to the region. The following fields of investigation were defined to enable the analysis of the relationship between corporate and regional culture: Innovation, Human resources, and Sustainability in ecological terms, Quality of life. In order to ensure comparability of the regional studies, the CURE team used the same interview guideline in each case.

The interviews were held in an open and narrative way at the beginning but included follow-up questions on certain key issues. The interviews were supported by participation of at least three interviewers. This is justified by the fact that afterwards, the national teams analysed them – applying text analysis and estimation – and wrote regional reports. The current paper was written on the basis of these regional reports. Three hypotheses were formulated:

H1: The following fields of investigation are enabling the analysis of engagement: Innovation, Human resources, Sustainability and Quality of life. Their high degree could be considered as the measure instrument of strong relations between region and companies.

H2: The local roots of the management working for the investigated companies play determinative roles in the regional embeddedness and regional engagement.

H3: Based on the rate of reciprocal effects between regions and organizations we can create variety of categories for companies.

Sample: Research into the interrelationship between corporate and regional culture was focused on seven regions of Europe from six countries: Southeast Netherlands, the Basel area (Switzerland), East Westphalia Lippe (Germany), Brandenburg Southwest (Germany), the Győr region (Hungary), Styria (Austria) and Wales (UK). More than two-thirds of the companies are family-owned companies, one-third of them are publicly listed and only 22 companies are government involvement. Nearly one-third of the companies surveyed is over 20 years old and have been located in the region for a long time. Younger companies are also represented in the sample, with a roughly equal share. High international orientation, in terms of market orientation, shows the effect of globalisation and the effort of opening towards foreign markets. A high number of the companies are characterized as highly knowledge intensive. In sum, our research was carried out among young, regional, knowledge-intensive family businesses, which are international-market oriented. We formulated two categories for describing the size of the companies: 101 small-medium (less than 250 employees) and 83 large (250-500 employees) and very large (more than 500 employees).

RESULTS

As far as the perception of the importance of the region is concerned (Table 1), the region is most important for innovation, human resources and quality of life to the companies.

Companies settled in the region create a demand for a skilled and motivated labour force. The outstanding importance of innovation is related to the presence of companies with high knowledge intensity. The quality of life is strongly related to the presence of top-management and their families. Both local and foreign residents highly appreciate the natural and cultural environment of the regions, which adds much to their quality of life.

Table 1: **Importance of the region to the company (based on estimation)**

	Highly important	Important	Hardly important	Unimportant
Innovation	29	42	37	37
Human resources	59	48	37	16
Sustainability	28	32	46	
Quality of life	25	52	44	20
Region in sum	32	62	44	4

Source: Cure regional reports. N=210, but there are missing answers, so the N=not always 210

Despite the fact that environmental legal rulings have tended to become increasingly stringent recently and that some external regulatory pressure may have played an important part in the upgrading of sustainability, surprisingly, for the majority of companies surveyed, sustainability is hardly important, or is unimportant.

Looking at the individual fields of investigation we can see that the firms interviewed engaged most strongly in innovation, human resources and quality of life. However, almost half of the firms claim to be hardly or not at all involved in these fields. „Corporate responsibility is now seen in many organizations as all aspects of governance and sustainability: influencing and impacting on all strategic and operational practices”.^[14] Furthermore, these activities influence corporate reputation and are believed to be evidence of good citizenship as well.

Contrary to this fact, a look at the activities focused on promoting sustainability and environmental responsibility in the regions shows that only few firms actively engage in these issues (Table 2). In this regard we have to stress that we explicitly did not count promoting sustainability in the regions: it was estimated on the basis of interviews and any other sources. However, a strong neglect of sustainable activity is clearly visible.

[14] Ridley, J. - D’Silva, K. - Konczos, M. (2011): *Sustainability assurance and internal auditing in emerging markets*. Corporate Governance. 11. 4. 475-488.

Table 2: Estimate of regional engagement

	Highly engaged: initiator and framer	Engaged: sponsor and promoter	Hardly involved: dues-paying member	Not engaged
Innovation	45	50	48	31
Human resources	40	65	46	29
Sustainability	20	55	53	53!
Quality of life	38	72	38	33
Region in sum	35	89	43	13

Source: Cure regional reports. N=210, but there are missing answers, so the N=not always 210

As is depicted in the table 1 and 2, there is a strong relationship between regional importance and regional engagement. The more important the region is for the companies in the four fields of investigation, the more engaged they are for the region.

A typology of companies was created using the following heuristic categories (Table 3). The first category is the **TAKER**. This type of company is not interested in the region where they are located. The **CUSTOMER** companies differ from the **TAKERs**. The self-estimation of this type of companies is that they pay a great amount of tax and therefore they expect some kind of return directly or indirectly. The **VISITOR** type of companies remains in the region for a certain time and behaves in a similar way as **CUSTOMER** ones. The difference between them is that **VISITORS** are more interested in the region and its development than **CUSTOMERS**.

Table 3: Categorisation of companies

TAKER	CUSTOMER	VISITOR	CITIZEN
38	35	38	69

Source: Cure regional reports. N=210, but there are missing answers, so the N=not always 210

The majority of the undertakings of our sample belong to the **CITIZEN** category (69). **CITIZEN** companies feel themselves to be part of the region and take part in regional decision-making. In addition to paying taxes they provide support for many kinds of regional activities, initiatives and institutions. These companies are long-term orientated and do not want to change their location. As a consequence, these companies are highly interested in improving the regional well-being, quality of life, innovation potential and human resources in the long run.

Looking at the number of non-(deeply) integrated companies (Taker, Customer), we can conclude that a significant part of the companies are really “footloose companies” that have no loyalty to any particular region or country, but build facilities in whichever location is most convenient and close them down as better opportunities arise.

The reasons for regional engagement are manifold. Based on the motivation we can distinguish two broad categories: direct and indirect factors. The regional engagement of the companies included in the first group is motivated by direct economic benefits and by clear business considerations, especially in the case of medium-sized and large companies.

The owners and managers of companies feel regional engagement as a moral imperative.

The reasons for the lack of regional engagement are rather diverse. The common ground is economic.

Despite the high presence of foreign capital investments in the case of the companies investigated, generally the management and key staff come from the region. The regionally enrooted leaders (who are brought up within the region) bear at least some of the typical regional mentality and mind-sets, thus enforcing the cultural impact generated by the regional core workforce.^[15] Many further parts of the results have been published since 2009.^[16]

[15] Dörhöfer, S. – Minnig, C. – Pekruhl, U. (2009): Regional Report Basel-Area D29. In: *Regional Report on Empirical Analyses in Switzerland*. University of Applied Sciences: North Western Switzerland. 14–17.

[16] Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2009a): Az interkulturális együttműködés és szerepe a túlélésben. In: Majoros P., – Zimler T. (szerk.): *Világméretű pénzügyi és hitelpolitikai válság és Magyarország*. MTA VEAB. Veszprém. 463–470.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2009b): Egy EU projekt, mint az interkulturális kommunikáció példája. In: Kukorelli K. (szerk.): *Hatékony nyelvi, idegen nyelvi és szakmai kommunikáció interkulturális környezetben*. Dunaujvárosi Főiskola. Dunaujváros. 162–167.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2009c): A kapcsolati marketing szerepe a vállalatok elismertségében egy EU-projekt tapasztalatai alapján. In: Szakály Z. (szerk.): *Új marketing kihívások a XXI. században - Fenntartható fogyasztás*. Kaposvári Egyetem. Kaposvár. 1–8.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2010a): Nemzetközi projekt a régiók együttműködéséért. In: Beszteri B. – Majoros P. – Zimler T. (szerk.): *Magyarország határ menti térségeinek és városainak fejlődése a rendszerváltás és európai uniós tagságunk következtében*. MTA VEAB, BGF, Komárom város, Széchenyi István Egyetem. Veszprém. 225–234.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2010b): Az innováció szerepének vizsgálata egy EU projekt eredményei kapcsán. In: Lőrincz I. (szerk.): *„Kreativitás és innováció” tanulmánykötet*. NYME ACSJK. Győr. 297–304.; Konczosné Szombathelyi M. (2011): Személyes kötődés és szervezeti beágyazódottság. In: Lőrincz I. (szerk.): *Európaiság, magyarság Közép-Európában*. NYME ACSJK. Győr. 484–491.; Konczosné, M. – Losonczi, M. – Józsa L. (2010); Ridley, J. – D’Silva, K. – Konczos, M. (2011).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

All culture studies, open system theory and communications studies consider the good relations between an organization and its public as a crucial element of the embeddedness and engagement. These theories state that organizations are strongly influenced by their environment.

The main purpose of the CURE research was to explore the reciprocal effects between regions and organisations. As indicators of corporate embeddedness, fields of Innovation, Human resources, Sustainability and Quality of life were taken into consideration. It has been proven that there is a strong relationship between regional importance and regional engagement. The more important the region is for the companies in the four fields of investigation, the more engaged they are for the region.

In both foreign/international and domestic companies the management has significant cultural influence on the degree of reciprocal cultural influence between company and region. The local roots of the management play determinative roles in the regional embeddedness and regional engagement. On the one hand, the regional engagement is not visible in the case of domestic enterprises. On the other hand, the en-rootedness is stronger in the case of the local management.

There are plenty of reasons for embeddedness or rather lack of embeddedness (based on ethics and business). Most embedded companies show the highest rate of innovation, responsibility for human resources, sustainability and quality of life. They are the so-called Citizens. Based on the rate of reciprocal effects between regions and organizations we created four categories of companies: citizen, visitor, customer and taker.

Corporate embeddedness can be considered as an indicator of the economic vitality and innovation dynamics of regional economies. Cultural, institutional and social factors as crucial assets for regional economic development have been emphasised. It is underpinned both by theories and by our research data that a unique regional/national culture can be used to create a competitive advantage for companies operating in particular region.

As a key result of CURE, a region's change competence to transform the interaction between regional and corporate cultures' "virtuous circle" depends on the mobilization of regional potentials. But economic potentials are not equally distributed among the European regions. The question therefore has to be asked as to how much interregional distinctiveness can cope with. There might be a need for a new conception of regional development since interregional equality.^[17]

[17] Gärtner, S. (2008): *Final Activity Report*. CURE. Project paper. 27.

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HUNGARIAN SUMMARY

A tanulmány a régiók és a bennük működő vállalatok közti kölcsönhatást elemzi egy nemzetközi kutatás néhány fő eredményének bemutatása alapján. Az elméleti háttérrel a regionális és szervezeti kultúra, a rendszerelmélet és az intézményesült kommunikáció megközelítései adják. A tanulmány összegzi a Corporate Culture and Regional Embeddedness (CURE) (Vállalati kultúra és regionális beágyazódás) project (2007–2009) néhány eredményét, a regionális és a vállalati kultúra közti kölcsönhatása és ennek vállalati versenyképességet növelő hatása szempontjából.

A hat európai ország hét régiójában zajlott (Ausztria, Németország, Magyarország, Hollandia, Svájc, Egyesült Királyság), régióként 30, összesen 210 vállalat vizsgálati módszerei, a vállalatok vezetőivel készített mélyinterjúk, továbbá stakeholderekkel történt fókuszcsoportos interjúk voltak, melyben a tanulmány szerzője is részt vett. Az írás a régiók kutatási jelentéseire épül. Ismerteti, hogy a vizsgált négy területen – innováció, humán erőforrás, gazdasági értelemben vett fenntarthatóság és az életminőség – mennyire mutatható ki a vállalat beágyazódottsága és a régió iránti elkötelezettsége, továbbá kitér az elkötelezettség meg-létének és hiányának okaira is.



Imre Varga: Glider Ikarus