

Strengthening Regional Cohesion: Local Collaboration Networks and Sustainable Development in Swiss Rural Areas

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Abstract

This paper makes both a theoretical and empirical contribution to a better understanding of how actor network structures play a crucial role in enhancing sustainable development in rural areas. From a theoretical perspective, the paper discusses the relational aspects of the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development and focuses particularly on the question, how fragmentation and cohesion of local and regional policy networks may foster or hinder a sustainable development of such regions. Empirically, the paper introduces the new regional park policy in Switzerland in which the federal government aims at a better protection and promotion of rural areas that are of high natural, cultural and scenic value. The policy mainly includes financial support from the federal government to build up and run regional natural parks as an instrument for securing and enhancing a sustainable development of the particular regions, not only in ecological terms, but also with regard to local businesses and socio-economic developments. To get awarded with a 'park label' certified by the federal government, regions have to proof that the different regional interests support such a park project and have been actively involved in the project. The paper explores how such local and regional collaborative network structures have evolved with two park projects in two Swiss cantons and analyzes these structural configurations using tools from Social Network Analysis. Based on two standardized surveys carried out in the two regions, the results show that the projects in both cases mainly strengthened the vertical cooperation between governmental agencies across different administrative levels but horizontal coordination between different societal sectors still remains to be improved and consolidated to meet an important criterion of the concept of sustainable development as defined in the federal government's Sustainable Development Strategy.

Key words: Rural sustainable development, actor cohesion, social network analysis, Switzerland

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