Abstract

Theme: Regional Development Agencies

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Changing aspects of the strategic role and institutional position of Regional Development Agencies.

The paper examines some changing aspects of strategy-making and institutional design in regional development. We will focus on the role of regional development agencies in plan-making and decision-making about spatial organisation and regional development, in particular in Flanders (Belgium).

Regional development agencies played an influential role in formulating the key concepts of the spatial organisation and development programmes for their (sub-) regions. This traditional role was related with the conception of regional development policy, an instrumental and functional view on spatial planning and the (formal and factual) institutional design of regional development agencies. Regional development agencies gained influential positions in terms of strategy-making, decision-making and implementation in the domains of regional (economical) development and (sectoral aspects) of spatial planning. Embedded in a broad social, economical and political network this enfavored the political legitimacy and social-economic cohesion in and around regional development strategies.

The trend towards a more integrated approach in the field of spatial planning and the rise of new subregional and local initiatives in regional policy have important
consequences on the conception and implementation of regional development policy in general and the role of regional development agencies in particular.

The paper examines the changing patterns of the political and institutional relationship of a individual regional development agency and its environment. The decrease of the impact of their traditional formal and institutional stronghold position forced regional development agencies to pay attention for the re-design of policy-making in their region concerning key issues and projects of regional development. Attentions shifts towards the formation of new alliances, in particular the cooperation with relevant public and private stake-holders and the practice of consensus-building in and around the issues of spatial organisation and regional development.

Within this changing practical work of regional development we take a critical look at the further agenda of regional development policy, in particular the role of regional development agencies. The re-design of policy interactions and institutional frameworks is explicitly aimed at the reconstruction of regional social and political cohesion that characterised the legitimacy of regional development strategies. Implicitly these new practices shows a more open regional arena and questions the institutional accountability of regional development agencies.