Environmental Information in the Regional Development Decision Making
– *abstract* –

Márton Péti
University of Szeged Faculty of Sciences Department of Physical Geography

The initiation of environmental information into the decision making in general and especially into the decision making of regional development is becoming a more and more significant political and professional issue. For instance the temperate but unbroken evolution of the strategic environmental assessment legislation and practice in the European Union can illustrate these tendencies very expressively.

This study endeavours to explore the different mechanisms of these tendencies in the EU and in the EU candidate Central and Eastern European countries. It uses varied tools: interviews with different regional and governmental actors of Hungary (programme operators, beneficiaries, donors) and experts from The European Union; examining the experiences of regional workshops; doing researches in the connected professional literature; analysing text of laws and programmes. The field works were conducted on regional and country level in Hungary in 2001/02.

The environmental thinking slowly infiltrated into the regional development methods from the 70s. In the European Union these innovative processes were recognised by the regional planning experts and the legislation very early. By the end of the 20th century three main forms of the interactions of the environmental information and the regional development decision-making evolved.

The appearance of the sustainability thought resulted in the environmental integrated regional planning in the 80s. This integrated regional planning appeared first on the local level. After the Rio Conference the local level regional planning gained strength by the sustainability approach of the Local Agenda. Later on the integrated approach became a well-known planning element on the higher (regional) levels of the regional development too. But the classic field of the sustainable development is still the local (settlement, small region) level, because of its small, simple, synoptic structures.

The establishment of the evaluation methods and legislation in the regional planning can be considered another form of the environmental decision-making. It introduced certain environmental information first of all into the higher territorial levels of regional development decision making. Especially the compulsory ex ante evaluation of the EU regional plans (Community Support Framework) can take the environmental issues into the earlier stages of regional development decision making. It can deal with the coherence of the programmes to the national and European environmental policies, but also predicts the sustainability and the environmental impacts by indicators.

A third form of the environmental information flow in the regional development of the EU countries can be the strategic environmental assessment (SEA). The SEA, the environment impact assessment of the programmes, plans and policies can initiate the environmental and sustainable way of thinking in a much earlier phase of decision making than the other forms producing an official procedure. The SEA can control the regional programmes (first of all on higher than regional level) and the regional policies from an environmental approach. The

drafting of different environmental linked alternatives introduced by the SEA procedures can be a new, efficient element of the regional planning.

Each of the above three methods appeared at different stages of the decision making. The environmental integrated regional planning has influence mostly on the professional decision. The bottom up approached planning (e.g. the mentioned sustainable local agendas) draws the public into the planning therefore in these cases the decision-making reaches not only the experts but also others.

SEA has the same purposes about the public involvement, but its realisation is not as easy and successful. It rather can reach only the higher decision-makers. Experts prepare the decisions, but beside the professional arguments political issues also influence it.

The evaluation is based on rather a regional partnership (by representatives of the different regional actors) than the public (but the results are often disseminated widely and publicised). It is conducted by evaluator experts, and the decisions about the future life of the development programme are made mostly by the different actors on regional and country level. The influenced decision-making level of the evaluation can be considered as a transition between the SEA practices (not its theories) and the integrated regional planning.

The legal context and the practice and culture of SEA or the evaluation differs from state to state, but the common EU frames have already developed. Therefore the tendencies show toward the convergence of these different practices in the future. The candidate countries have to be able to fit into these frames by the time of the joining to the EU. It is still a question how is possible to conduct this adaptation processes in the most effective way.

In Hungary the EU-conform legislation, methods of the regional development appeared first in the middle of the 90s. Yet the evaluation issues remained ignored. It can be explained by the heritage of the economic policy of communist era: the lack of the evaluation needs and obligations, and assessment methods. It resulted in that the evaluation was still almost unknown in the practice and legislation in the regional development (only one ex ante regional programme evaluation has been conducted, but numerous regional programmes were written). In the meanwhile the other methods of regional development programming and implementation had already functioned since the end of the 90s.

SEA is also still missing from the legislation and the practice. Furthermore the use of SEA in the non-regional development programmes of different sectors only happened several times with pilot purpose, though EIA at project level has existed since the 80s in the Hungarian legislation.

The environment integrated regional development is perceptible mainly on the local levels in Hungary too (only a declared integrated regional programming has been already conducted, as a sample case). This form of appearance of the environmental issue in the regional development is more advanced in Hungary than the above ones. Many samples of making local environmental integrated, sustainable local agendas can be experienced.

Thus in Hungary the lower level of the regional development decision making show better absorbency of the environmental information, mostly because of its bottom-up regional development planning processes. It means that the civil and non-profit sector of the country (which much less developed than the European Union's) can be more environmentally

innovative than the government sector (at least the symptoms show it in these issues). These organisations have less inertia than the higher levels.

This important fact should be implemented in the future legislation and methodology. The extension of the licences of local decision-makers toward higher territorial levels and strengthening the local actors' involvement in the regional development decision making could increase the adaptation of the use the environmental information.

The application of elements of the bottom-up approached regional development should be strengthened on higher territorial level too. It could ensure more efficient initiating of the environmental information (together with propagation of other tools -SEA, evaluation) into the regional development decisions. The adaptation of the other, non-internal regional planning methods (SEA and evaluation) could also be geared up by the involvement of local and lower territorial level actors of the regional development.