

International Cooperation of Local Governments in Programming European Regional Policy for the Circular Economy

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Abstract

The main goal of the research is to identify the level of involvement and effectiveness of the influence of local government units on the transformation towards a circular economy in the framework of European regional policy. The analysis was conducted from three perspectives: European, national and local. This research delves into the potential for local government units (LGUs) to shape the European circular economy model and integrate its core principles into regional policies. It examines the impact of paradiplomacy on development management practices of Polish LGUs involved in the European Committee of the Regions. Additionally, it explores the link between the declared commitment of LGUs towards circular economy goals and the actual scope and intensity of their actions in this domain.

The first chapter establishes the research context for the thesis topic and the rationale behind the chosen area of inquiry. It identifies the key drivers of circular transformation, emphasizing the importance of a territorial approach and the potential for coordinated change at regional and local levels. Additionally, it presents an analysis of relevant theories and concepts that aid in explaining and understanding the mechanisms of local and regional development. Particular focus is placed on theoretical elements that, on one hand, enhance the capacity for creating sustainable development and, on the other hand, securely and flexibly unlock the transformative potential of the economy (particularly at local and regional levels) towards a circular model.

Chapter two delves into the European perspective on the circular economy model, outlining a crucial shift from the traditional linear model ("take-make-waste") towards a regenerative system prioritizing resource efficiency maximization. This transformation necessitates the design of processes that prioritize remanufacturing, reusing, recycling and repairing products throughout their lifecycle. Additionally, business models aligned with the circular economy principles influence the types of businesses, supply chains, and consumer behavior. These models emphasize extending product lifespans, minimizing waste generation, and maximizing resource efficiency. Notably, identified determinants of circular economy implementation encompass diverse factors, including the nature of implemented socio-economic policies, levels of public awareness, and the accessibility of advanced technologies, infrastructure, and financial incentives.

The third chapter focuses on the circular economy's implementation through regional policy instruments. It examines the integration of circular economy principles into the priorities of the European Union's regional development policy, specifically focusing on the potential role of aid instruments in fostering resource-efficient and sustainable economies. The chapter analyzes how the implementation of European regional policy, aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, has demonstrably influenced regional development policy since 2004, leading to a reorientation towards resource management efficiency, waste reduction, and sustainable consumption and production principles. The European Union's regional policy

framework, through its coordinated and integrated approach, aims to promote sustainable and balanced development across the entire Union.

Chapter four investigates the role of subnational governments in shaping regional policy within the European Union. It explores tools employed by local authorities to advocate their interests at the supranational level, analyzing the scope and competences of paradiplomacy institutions within the realm of regional policy. As actors within a multi-level governance system, local government units contribute to the formation of EU regional policy. They act as intermediaries between EU institutions and local communities, representing specific interests and advocating for the alignment of EU policies and financial support programs with the needs and priorities of local stakeholders.

Chapter five delves into the methodology underpinning the thesis, encompassing both theoretical and empirical components. It serves as a justification for the theoretical analyses presented in chapters one to four and introduces the empirical research concepts explored in chapter six. This chapter establishes the rationale for the chosen research area, clearly defining the subject and identifying existing gaps in knowledge. Furthermore, it outlines the research aims, questions, and hypotheses, highlighting the triangulation of diverse research methods employed. Notably, the chapter provides a detailed explanation of the specific methods used throughout the study, emphasizing the utilization of a mixed-methods approach, characterized by triangulation, to effectively achieve research objectives and answer the formulated research questions.

Chapter six serves as the cornerstone of the dissertation, presenting and analyzing the research findings. It specifically focuses on assessing the involvement of local and regional authorities in shaping the European circular economy model. This assessment is conducted through four distinct areas of analysis. Firstly, the chapter evaluates the effectiveness of local and regional government advocacy in the international arena regarding the circular economy. This evaluation delves into the impact and influence of their efforts on promoting circularity principles. Secondly, the chapter examines the extent to which the core elements of the European circular economy model have been integrated into the strategic development policy instruments of local and regional authorities involved in transnational advocacy. Thirdly, the chapter assesses the practical implementation of the European circular economy model's key elements within the activities of local and regional authorities. Finally, the chapter concludes with an analysis of transnational activities undertaken by local and regional authorities in the realm of the circular economy. The research encompasses the period from 2015, when the European Commission adopted the circular economy model, to 2022, providing a comprehensive perspective on its evolution and implementation at the local and regional levels.

The Conclusion and Summary section culminates the dissertation by presenting a comprehensive synthesis of the theoretical, cognitive, and empirical research conducted throughout the study. It consolidates the findings and delivers concise answers to the research questions previously outlined in the dissertation. As agents of development policy, particularly regional policy, local and regional authorities are duty-bound to address challenges with implications for local, national, European, and global communities. In the context of the circular economy transition, their international engagement in developing effective solutions constitutes a key contribution. By doing so, they actively shape technological advancements, promote green infrastructure development, and support sustainable economic and social practices. Notably, Polish local government units possess both investment resources and the capacity to implement regional policy instruments, rendering them well-positioned to tackle this complex challenge. While the transformation towards a circular economy presents significant hurdles, it also holds substantial potential for social, economic, and environmental benefits across the European economy.