

A participatory approach in regional sustainable development of the Slovak Republic: a case study of the Spiš region

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Abstract: In the target region Spiš, we see tensions between incentives of social actors for the nature protection and market interest in the face of growing importance of tourism in biodiversity area as the source of income for local population. There is a need for cooperation, communication and forming of partnerships as an important precondition for innovations in agriculture, and also for inventing alternatives for previous management (top-down approach). This is also necessary for creation of social trust among involved groups of actors and social capital evolution. This paper describes the role of a participatory approach in creation of social capital, with a view to the social trust that leads directly to the rural development of the region.

Keywords: participatory approach; sustainable development; social capital; institutional change; rural innovations; common-pool resources; ecosystem services; scenarios.

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1 Introduction

The most known definition of sustainable development came out from the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development report 'our Common Future' published in 1987, known as Brundtland's report. Sustainable development is defined here as: *development that meets the needs of the present without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their needs* (adapted from Dresner (2002)). However, with reference to Dresner (2002), this definition was often criticised as too vague. Additionally, author points out that the troubles related to bringing about sustainability would depend on creating a rational society, one where people's desire for riches could be subsumed to the need to maintain a habitable world for future generations. And consequently, he warns that there is not much choice about the matter, as the alternative to the pursuit of sustainability is to continue along the present path of unsustainability, leading to disaster.

According to Grosskurth and Rotmans (2005) the sustainability-related processes transgress the time scales, spatial scale-levels and domains, as well as, the boundaries between economic, ecological and social aspects. Based on the research and for the purposes of this paper, we understood sustainability and sustainable development in the regional and local context of particular changes and activities in the region. Martens (2006) noted that it is important for policy-makers – both in politics and in the business community – that specific policy aims, along with their specific time limits, are clearly determined. Furthermore, he points out that the most significant threats to sustainability appear in the regions, with their specific social and ecological characteristics, unsustainable development reflects systemic faults embedded in our society at various levels. In fact, according to the author a sustainable transition will often have to occur within the local surroundings. Tilzey (2000) points out those sustainability objectives must realise local objectives, but can be fulfilled only within the context of a favourable wider policy environment. Lehtonen (2004) argued that the essence of sustainable development lies precisely at the interfaces and trade-offs between the often-conflicting objectives of economic and social development and environmental protection. Moreover, according to van den Hove (2000), the problem-solving processes needed to confront environmental issues should be constructed as dynamic processes of capacity-building, aiming at innovative, flexible and adjustable answers; allowing for progressive integration of information as it becomes available, and of different value judgement and logic; while involving various actors from different backgrounds and levels. According to Tilzey (2000), a change is required, towards environmental (and social) sustainability, in the character of that economic activity itself. Thus, economic activity in the region needs to aim for environmental and social sustainability as well. And consequently, there is a need to enhance the understanding of the links between aspects of sustainable development (economical, environmental and social) among social actors in the region.

This paper points out the role of participatory approach in the future regional development with a view to social trust and reciprocity as a precondition to the cooperation between actors that can stimulate internal forces in the region to promote bottom-up innovative and successful future development-based on sustainability principles.

2 Slovak case study – Spiš region

Slovak Republic (SR) became a member of the European Union from 1 May 2004. EU membership has brought to the SR new responsibilities, and solutions in the field of restructuring of industry and agriculture, approaches to new markets, international cooperation in science, research and innovations. The consequences of the transition process and the EU approximation are the loss of social trust, increasing opportunism and the mistrust in public institutions among citizens in the post-communist society. The specific historical situation resulted in the lack of social capital and trust and was followed by the slow-down of the regional development of the SR. Pašiak (in Ira et al., 2005) pointed out these characteristics as a symptom of the lagging regionalisation in the SR (next to the long-term underdevelopment of the regions due to unfavourable conditions of the 19th century).

The target Spiš region (situated in the East-North part of the SR) could be classified according to its economical characteristics as a marginal region lagging in economical development (Ira et al, 2005). Furthermore, we should also emphasise the role of social development. This is a relevant point especially in the post-communist countries with a view to the characteristics of population (low level of institutional trust, non-active). Altogether, it is obvious that the concept of local partnership is important for the target region, as the level of partnership movement could serve as the 'starting point' for the bottom-up process with a view to the future regional development; as well as, the 'feedback mirror' of the processes in the region. Kárász (2004) draws attention to more sufficient utilisation of the region's growth potential in the present economic development with a view to EU membership regarding the solutions to the current problems, and the creation of better preconditions for future development.

According to the enormous size of the original Spiš region we focused on six municipalities¹ situated in the present Spišská Nová Ves district on the border of the National Park. Due to its unique natural character, Slovenský Raj is the only park in the SR registered as a candidate for the Protected Area Network (PAN) Parks – a prestige European network of the best protected areas. The expected date of verification for the PAN Parks is 2007.

Important issues in the selected research region Spiš are user conflicts and market interests in contradiction to the nature conservation. Nature resources represent the protected area of the National Park as well as protected zone in the surrounding (mostly agricultural landscape and forest). We identified an effort to apply innovative approaches in agricultural activities in the region, especially: biomass production, agro-tourism and ecological agriculture. There is a growing interest in tourism movement with focus on the area of the National Park. Additionally, based on the statistics data and projects carried out in the region,² another critical issue in the Park is the illegal cutting by Romas/Gypsies population. These problems are related to the regional economical situation, above all, to the high unemployment rate level. To sum up, two relevant driving forces existed in the region: firstly market interest and secondly nature conservation. Consequently, the main concerns in the region are on the property rights issues and common-pool resources management.

3 Regional participatory approaches

Participatory and discourse-based approaches in natural resource decision-making are aimed at achieving wider community understanding, social equity and greater legitimacy for policies (Chee, 2004; Proctor and Drechsler, 2003; Wilson and Howarth, 2002). When community members are involved in community planning and the associated development decisions, particularly those believed to benefit the entire community, they are more likely to support and participate in implementation for the long term (Stoep in Gartner and Lime (2000)).

Svensson (2003, in Persson et al. (2003)) pointed out that the prospects of mobilisation (regarding local partnership movement) are often conceived of as being linked to the political and economic characteristics of the region, suggesting that politically strong and economically prosperous regions would have more to gain from mobilisation than regions that score poorly in this respect. Then according to this view, a vulnerable socio-economic base limits a region's political options, which is why social actors tend to formulate defensive rather than offensive strategies in lagging (marginal) regions (Svensson in Persson et al. (2003)). With a view to future development, we understand an active participation of particular social actors, not necessary with decision-making power, as the one of fundamental factors leading towards successful regional development. Participation and genuine dialogue among social actors are among the key prerequisites of sustainable development, but they need to recognise the pervasively unequal distribution of power and thus help to empower the disadvantaged groups (Lehtonen, 2004). In addition, participation of all relevant social actors, together with involvement in community issues and equity are necessary precondition for the movement towards the regional sustainability and sustainable governance (see also UNDP, 1997).

However, there is not the only one common-agreed definition of regional development. Regional development is problematic to define due to its complexity based on economical, institutional, environmental and social aspects of the ongoing developmental-processes in a given region. Regional development could therefore be characterised as the long-term, region bounded and goal oriented process.

Table 1 illustrates several factors important regarding regional sustainable development. These specific issues are based on the aspects relating to successful future development, and were framed into different points of view: environmental, economical, social and institutional. They are also related to particular sustainability criteria: integrity, efficiency and equity. The layer 'participatory approach' was added to the Table 1 as the way towards the successful regional development-based on the innovations and innovative activities those are a result of participatory process.

We decided to use an approach that we named 'semi-participation' of the local actors-based on prepared questionnaire in order to explore the regional characteristics (see also Zajíčková, 2006). We approached the selected social actors³ with the questionnaire on regional development, cooperation, participation and ecosystem services questions. Due to its relatively low implementation costs this approach was useful for reaching out to a wide group of local actors, and this ultimately resulted in a high level of participation. The study was conducted in October 2005. In total we distributed 14 questionnaires to social actors representing groups and received 4 no-responses (2 municipalities, 2 NGO). Although, the total number of social actors presented with questionnaires was not high, it was sufficient due to the small size of the

target region, and the total amount of the relevant social actors of interest to us. Additionally, we were interested in eliciting deeper insights, opinions and preferences of the actors, as well as focusing on the role of particular social actors in the region with respect to decision-making and regional governance. We found that the total number we consulted was sufficient to address the purposes of the case study adequately.

Table 1 Aspects of regional sustainable development

<i>Sustainability</i>			
<i>Integrity</i>	<i>Efficiency</i>		<i>Equity</i>
<i>Environmental</i>	<i>Economical</i>	<i>Social</i>	<i>Institutional</i>
– Biodiversity	– Welfare of inhabitants	– Exclusion	– Cooperation
– Nature conservation	– Investments	– Minorities, ethnic and other groups	– Partnership
– Ecosystem services approach	– Employment	– Trust	– Infrastructure
– Common-pool resources	– Tourism	– Social capital	– EU membership
	– Agriculture land-use	– Unemployment	– EU funds
	– Forestry	– Participation	– Decentralisation
	– Industry, industrial parks		
Participatory approach			

In the analysis of obtained data, we focused on the dynamic interactions among the actors' preferences, interests and activities with regard to the existing institutional settings regarding the institutional changes under the ongoing changes and reforms. Our objective was to capture the 'track' of local knowledge among particular actors through the better understanding of local problems, conflicts and possible ways of solutions in the region. Consequently, we analysed the behaviour of the selected actors, and the character of their interrelations (cooperation, partnership movement), valuing this as an important precondition for the creation of social capital.

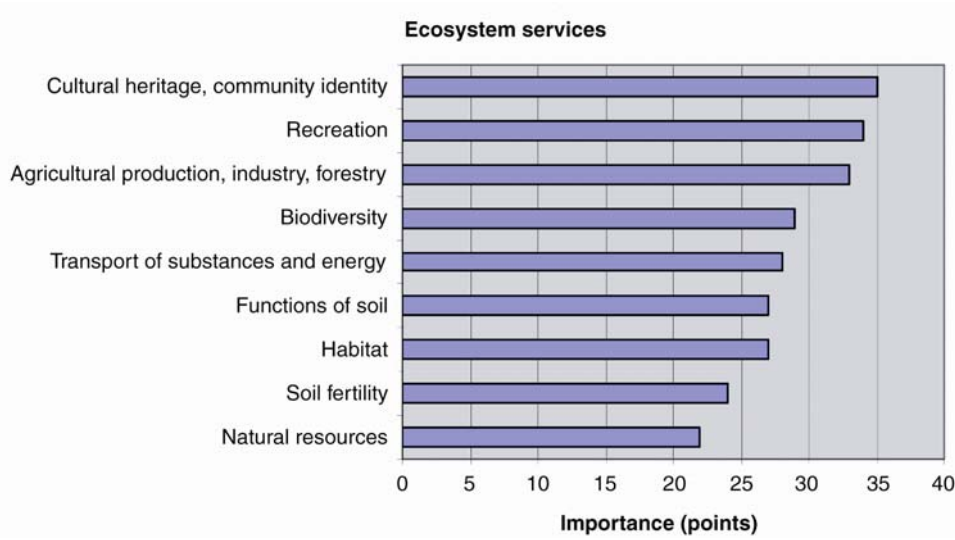
4 Aspects of regional development as seen by social actors

4.1 Environmental aspects of regional development

We assessed the environmental aspects of regional development using an ecosystem approach. Ecosystem approach is based on the evaluation of ecosystem services with a view to functions of the whole ecosystems, and the interaction and relationships between different ecosystems. Consequently, we understood this as an important precondition for environmental protection, especially in the regions as Spiš with presence of the National Park. According to the actors' answers, we could conclude that their perceptions of the importance of the particular ecosystem services are relatively high. As the most important ones were evaluated: biodiversity, recreation and functions of soil (see Figure 1). Additionally, the social actors pointed out non-productive functions of agriculture and forestry, conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, renewable

resources, water and its function in countryside. Some of them did not significantly identify any ecosystem service. This based either on their previous education (they do not work in the field of environment or study it) or the lack of information. One social actor pointed out that it is meaningless to identify particular ecosystem services and assess them, because they function independently to our valuations.

Figure 1 Social actors' valuation of particular ecosystem services in the region



From Figure 1, it is obvious that social actors attached relatively high value to particular ecosystem services. However, this is also related to the bias of 'everybody wants to be a good one' due to the perception that it is judged as a better to express high level of the ecosystems services' valuation; as well as, the willingness to nature conservation.

As major environmental issues in the region the following were identified: firstly, environmental burden from the past, which is related to the previous top-down approach in environmental protection, and also to the un-revitalised surfaces after mining. Secondly, the importance of environmental protection is under-valued according to the economic problems of the region. With reference to Tilzey (1998b in Tilzey (2000)), and based on data collected, we can state that there is a need for policy and management that would replace the previous approach to environmental protection by the ones based on environmental (and also social) sustainability, ones which enable biodiversity conservation to be secured through locally and site-specifically defined objectives.

4.2 Economical aspects of regional development

In the following analysis we focused on the present Spišská Nová Ves district from economical point of view. Table 2 (adapted from Tvrdoň, 2005, in Ira et al., 2005) illustrates the situation in the region, and underlined the role of the industry in the region. However, it is necessary to point out that position of municipalities situated on the border of the National Park is more complicated due to the environmental restrictions. According to this, it is necessary to look for another solution to support successful regional development. Consequently, these lies especially in the tourism movement-

based on sustainability principles. Additionally, with reference to Spáčilová (2005, in Ira et al., 2005), target region is suitable for tourism movement due to already existing tourism centres, as well as, the presence of the National Park (hiking, skiing) and historical monuments. According to the study (Ira et al., 2005), region could be characterised as the one with relatively good economical situation and with average level of environmental infrastructure that suffered with several problems; as well as, unfavourable social situation. However, there are significant differences among particular municipalities.

Table 2 Comparison of strong and weak points of the region

<i>Strong points</i>	<i>Weak points</i>
Tradition of engineering, forestry, food production and tourism; and developing of traditional industry sectors	Lower level of industrial activities diversification
Increasing level of small and middle enterprises	
Presence of key investors in the region	Low level of labour productivity, finalisations and sophisticated production; technologically old-fashioned production
Infrastructure (railway, construction of highway, airports)	
Potential for agriculture, natural resources potentials (tourism, forestry); and existing tourism centres (tourism)	
Educational potential (departments of universities, network of secondary schools); qualified labour sources	High level of unemployment rate; unfavourable qualification structure of unemployed people
Experiences with renewable resources (biomass, wind energy)	
Presence of institutions supporting regional development	

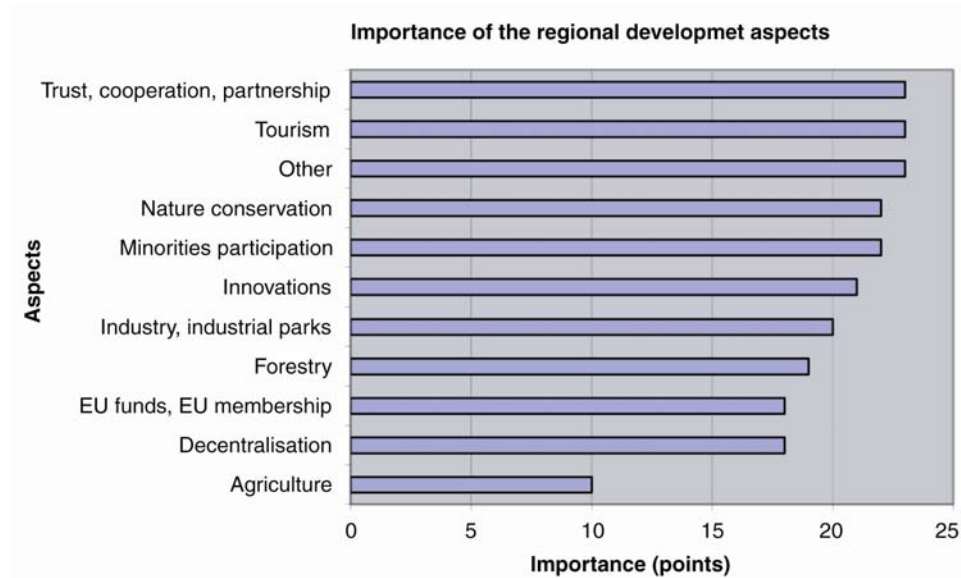
Source: Adapted from Tvrdoň in Ira et al. (2005).

Furthermore, we discussed the possibilities, and preconditions for the future development of the region considering the different aspects of regional development, EU membership, knowledge and cooperation. Social actors were asked to evaluate the selected aspects from their point of view according to their importance for the future regional development of the community. The actors evaluated particular aspects by points (from one to three points). They were also encouraged to add other important aspects if necessary. According to the actors the most important aspects for regional development are trust, cooperation and partnership; tourism; nature conservation and the ongoing process of decentralisation (see Figure 2). Additionally, three of them underlined the role of education, culture and investments in construction in the region (highway, new facilities).

As a consequence of the previous regime, and as it was already mentioned above, trust, cooperation and partnership building were valued as one of the most important among the actors, as well as, the process of transition, in which the internal forces in the region were stimulated through a bottom-up process. Consequently, decentralisation is perceived among the actors as important for regional development, this is due to the institutional changes and related transfer of decision-making to the local level.

These processes are directly linked to the modification of existing institutions and organisations, and also to the establishment of new ones in the region, with a view to stimulate the bottom-up development.

Figure 2 Social actors' assessment of regional development aspects importance



The actors also perceive tourism as an important aspect, as they see it as the solution for almost all problems in the region. This is because of the bankruptcy of industry and decline of agriculture in the transition process, and to the long-term process of industrial revival demanding costly investments. Furthermore, tourism is perceived as 'easy earned money' in short time with low investments. Thus, we could identify an ongoing seeking the ways to diversify regional economy and maintain or increase the quality of life for its residents in the region. For instance, this process is obvious in the social actors' efforts to initiate new (innovative or repeated) activities in the region, especially with a view to the tourism movement.

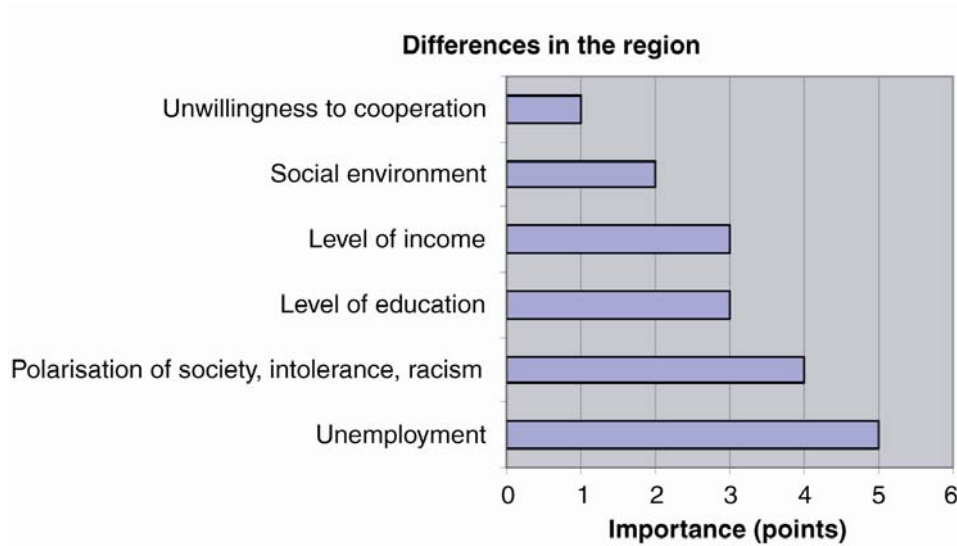
The high values given to the nature conservation communicate the actors understanding of healthy environment that is not only one of the main attractions of the region. But on the other side, it could serve as a valuable source of income for the local population. Due to the importance of nature conservation among actors – regarding their willingness to use nature resources as the attraction to the visitors of the region – this could also be taken as a precondition for the application of an ecosystem services approach to the management of nature resources.

4.3 Social aspects

Furthermore, there are often differences in characteristics between people living in the same region, municipality; as it was identified by the actors, there are differences in the region that cause the problems related especially to the Romas/Gypsies population and based on the unemployment, also cause polarisation of society as well as intolerance

and increasing level of racism, levels of education and income, then social environment and unwillingness to cooperation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 Differences between social actors that cause the problems in the region



As it was expressed in the answers of the social actors, their opinion is that these differences could possibly cause problems with a view to the future development of the community, and region. According to Westlund et al. (in Persson et al. (2003)), we could point out that mistrust and a lack of common values leads to the development of negatively charged links and conflicts; consequently, negatively charged links of this type create fragmented social capital and make joint action on the part of the actors difficult or impossible. This is obvious also from our analysis regarding the problems, differences and conflicts related to the Romas/Gypsies population in the region.

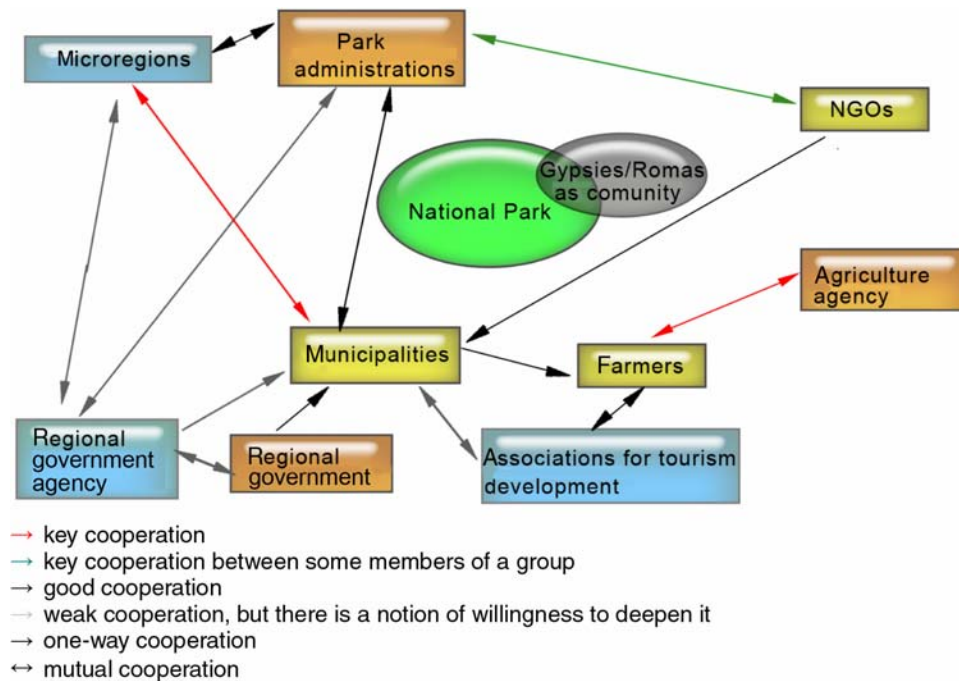
4.4 Institutional aspects

According to Murray (2004), for understanding of the processes of cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) it is important to consider the situation in the region in light of the social context, as well as to how the transition process from a planned to a market-oriented economy has influenced the interactions between citizens. The change in formal institutions in particular legislation relating to property rights and market exchange, reverberated and effected the informal institutions, social relationships and associations that people have (Murray, 2004). Cooperation arises between the social actors according to prior, positive interactions between them and experiences from the past (reputation, credit of actors) that resulted in reciprocal trust. Consequently, there is always a possibility of trust, as well as, mistrust transformation with a view to new information and knowledge sharing among the actors in the learning process.

A cooperation movement between the social actors in the region could be perceived as a shift from previous 'top-down' governance towards governance-based on the

regional and local policy-making and decision-making. Consequently, this is related especially to the public–private partnerships building with a view to implementation of the regional development policies. And moreover, municipalities play a significant role in this decentralisation movement. Based on the actors’ assessment of their mutual cooperation, we have analysed their reciprocal relations (see Figure 4). As it is obvious from Figure 4, the key cooperation is between microregions and municipalities, then between farmers and the agricultural agency; this is based on the close interrelations among these actors. This is as a result of the establishment of the microregions as the voluntary association of municipalities, as well as, the establishment of the agriculture agency by state. Then, the cooperation between the Park administration and environmental NGOs is based on the interest in nature conservation and related issues in the region.

Figure 4 Visual presentation of actors’ relations in the region



A weak level of the cooperation between the regional development agency and other actors is related to the changing circumstances or to the uncertain outcomes of possible cooperation due to the missing long-term history of previous cooperation and related notion of trust, and also on the awareness of the social actors about possibilities and local resources; as well as, the orientation of agency on the small and middle-sized entrepreneurs.

To sum up, the cooperation and local partnerships can be understood as the fundamental precondition to the sustainable governance with a view to deepen community involvement of actors. But, it is important to emphasise that most probably it could lead to the successful future development in the region.

5 Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to identify potential possibilities and preconditions existing in the region for achieving successful sustainable regional development. To sum up the results of the data analysis briefly, firstly, trust, cooperation and partnership were evaluated as the most important aspects of the regional development. Tourism, nature conservation and the ongoing process of decentralisation were evaluated as following on the importance scale. We recognised the tourism movement as the source of conflicts in the region-based on contradictory incentives of actors to environmental protection on one hand, and to intensive economical development on the other. However, the tourism movement suffers from insufficient quality of products and services, inadequate price. Additionally, a common conception of tourism development in the region is missing. Then, the EU membership was perceived in positive way based on the EU funds as the possibility to realise projects in community. On the other hand, according to some actors in the region, there were some doubts regarding the ambiguous perceptions of the EU related to the possibilities of different personal approach (bureaucracy). So, obviously, there existed a motion of mistrust towards European institutions (see also Kluvánková-Oravská, 2005).

Secondly, we would like to point out that there exists a potential to enhance the cooperation and local partnerships due to the increase of community involvement, based on participatory approach in the future. Furthermore, there were identified differences in characteristics between people living in the region due to the presence of the Romas/Gypsies population; as well as, according to the opinion of the approached actors, these differences could lead to problems with a view to the future development of the community and region.

Furthermore, according to our findings, the perceptions of the importance of the ecosystem services among the social actors are relatively high. The following services were evaluated as the most important: biodiversity, recreation and functions of soil. Obviously, this is also related to the bias of 'everybody wanted to be the good one'. Finally, regarding the community identity, an interesting mixture of nature, history and traditions was pointed out as an attraction to the potential visitors. Consequently, this is one of the strongest advantages of the region according to future development, especially with a view to the tourism movement. But, based on the obtained data, it is obvious that citizens are not aware of the region's strengths and possibilities for the future development of the region. We identified the ecosystem approach as an important precondition for the better understanding of dynamic interactions amongst the environment (ecosystems) and human activities (society).

To sum up, there is a need to apply the participatory approach and create interactive dialogue among the actors in the community. Consequently, this could serve as the source of information in the process of decision-making. However, as it was already mentioned above, the participatory methodology has to be modified according to the specific conditions of particular regions regarding the low level of participatory culture in the post-communist countries under transition. According to our findings, we suggested the combination of qualitative questionnaire and participatory methodology-based on consultation and active involvement for actors; as it was used in this research as 'semi-participation'. This approach is generally affordable and inexpensive, especially, in small communities, where particular actors know each other quite closely. Then, in the case, when questionnaire would be distributed directly to

particular respondents regarding the fact that residents are passive when there is a need to 'go somewhere and fulfil something'. Additionally, this approach could also build up opportunities for non-governmental organisations or volunteers to take active part in decision-making processes.

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Notes

¹Spišská Nová Ves, Smižany, Spišské Tomášovce, Letanovce, Hrabušice, Betlanovce.

²See Kluvánková-Oravská (2005), Kluvánková-Oravská and Zajíčková (2004) and Statistics Office of the Slovak Republic (2002).

³Approached social actors were selected on the basis of the selection criteria: location, significance/importance, influence and they are as follows: Regional government representative for the Spišská Nová Ves district, National Park administration, mayors of six municipalities situated on the border of the Park, Regional agriculture agency Spišská Nová Ves, Regional development agency Spiš, Association for rural development, Microregion Slovenský Raj – Sever, local NGO.