



Good governance as a strategic choice in brownfield regeneration: Regional dynamics from the Czech Republic



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ABSTRACT

The application of principles of good governance in brownfield regeneration, for instance through improved transparency and participation of various groups of stakeholders, varies between regions and cities. In this article, we approach good governance as a strategic response of actors in the struggle for creating development opportunities on brownfield land. Good governance has been mostly seen as a normative consideration, but it is not clear why regions with lower development prospects would employ it more than better developed regions, as it recently happened in the Czech Republic. We assume that the public administration at the regional and municipal level plays an active role in devising strategies to attract investors for brownfield redevelopment. This process brings public administrations in interaction with each other and with investors, regulators and civil society groups within a society-wide brownfield redevelopment field. This field is an arena where all these different actors struggle for redeveloping their brownfield land. Regional and municipal administrations from developed regions stand to benefit from their higher economic growth potential and hence have a dominant position within the field. We identify the latter as the incumbents or “power-holders” of the national brownfield regeneration field. Less developed regions have lower attractiveness for brownfield redevelopment, which places them in a subordinate position in the field. They are so-called challengers that are likely to favor alternative strategies for their brownfields, going beyond mere economic attractiveness. By comparing differently developed regions and regional capitals in the Czech Republic, we show how some challengers use good governance, such as responsiveness, participation and transparency, as an alternative strategy to attract investors despite their economic predicament. For regional capitals, however, good governance is practiced both by highly developed and less developed cities. We draw evidence from interviews with key stakeholders and socio-economic data at the regional and municipal level in the Czech Republic. In the conclusion, we show some of the identified limitations in good governance, such as obstacles to participation, responsiveness or transparency, and how they can be recognized and overcome.

1. Introduction

Good governance is a normative concept which describes a good-quality and proper administration of public goods under conditions of modern democratic decision-making based on respect towards the fundamental rights and freedoms of economic actors. Good governance can also be applied to the administration of public “bads”, such as the growing number of brownfields that have emerged with the decline of heavy industries throughout Europe. The concept of good governance has several fundamental characteristics such as accountability,

transparency, responsiveness, equitability and inclusiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, the rule of law, participativeness and consensus building (e.g. [Recommendation CM/Rec, 2007](#); [UNESCAP, 2009](#)). Good governance is also very important for sustainable development and therefore the Council of Europe includes sustainability among the key principles of good governance at the local level ([Valencia Declaration, 2007](#)). In this respect, good governance acts as the motor and political driving force, keeping the different elements of sustainable development in balance ([Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000](#)).

However, the application of good governance principles varies

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significantly between countries, regions and municipalities. In this article, we explain these differences with regard to the management of post-industrial brownfield sites. Our key assumption is that good governance is not only a normative concept, reflecting the historical tendency to open up decision-making process to democratic scrutiny, accountability and the rule of law. Instead, we regard good governance as a strategic response employed by social actors in their competition for promoting development opportunities in urban space. In this approach, social actors are organizations rather than individuals. Public administrations at regional and municipal levels interact among themselves and with investors, regulators and civil society and thus create a society-wide field of strategic action. Such a field is a “meso-level social order where actors [...] interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field [...], and the field’s rules” (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011, p. 3). The purpose of the regeneration action field is for regions and cities to maximize development opportunities on brownfield land, while also protecting their greenfield land.

The main positions in such a field are those of incumbents and challengers. Incumbents are actors positioned in such a way as to benefit from the current distribution of power in the field. Challengers are actors in inferior positions who have difficulty in accessing valued resources and often resort to alternative strategies. In these terms, the incumbents are the regions and regional capitals with high economic potential and economic attractiveness and the challengers are the areas with lower attractiveness for investors. The extent to which governance processes are “good” or less so is shaped by the competition over the stakes of the field, rather than solely by abstract ethical considerations.

This article presents the analysis of how specific principles of good governance have been implemented in relation to brownfield regeneration at the regional and municipal level in the Czech Republic. The research considers two sets of variables: one pertaining to the direction of development of a region (socio-economic potential), which can be either shrinking or growing, and the second one related to the deployment of good governance in dealing with brownfield regeneration (high or low). Hence, the main aim of the paper is to describe strategies of local government authorities towards brownfields regeneration depending on the direction of development of particular territories. The research question is thus: “Why do public administrations in different regions and regional capitals include good governance in their strategies to promote brownfield regeneration?” We assume that good governance is a broad-based and inclusive strategy employed by challenger regions and capitals as a way to compete with economically stronger (incumbent) regions, which have more economic resources to maximize their brownfield redevelopment potential.

The Czech Republic was chosen because it was part of a key industrial hub of the former Soviet economic block. Since the late 1990s, the challenge of managing abandoned or underused industrial land has become a policy priority simultaneously at the national, regional and local levels. Once the redevelopment of brownfields entered the post-socialist development agenda, a multitude of possibilities opened for a variety of actors. Local authorities with brownfield land in prime locations (e.g. inner city areas) could benefit from a regulatory framework that would allow them to capitalize on these highly priced locations (Cook, 2010). Other authorities, however, found themselves in the unenviable situation of having to clean up contaminated sites without the contribution of private sector involvement (Břenek et al., 2014). All these challenges have their indisputable spatial specifics and regional concentrations (Osman et al., 2015).

Brownfields in the Czech Republic are defined as insufficiently used or neglected properties (land, buildings, sites) with potential contamination that originate from previous industrial, agricultural, residential, military or other activities, and which cannot be suitably

used unless they undergo regeneration (National strategy of brownfields regeneration, 2008, p. 3). In line with the overall transformation of society, the public administration went through a complex transition especially through gradual decentralization, which involved transferring authority from the central public administration to the regional or municipal levels. Since the Czech Republic joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, the significance of subsidiarity has increased, according to which all measures should be adopted as close to citizens as possible, at the lowest level of public administration which enables their effective realization (Barnett, 2001).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Brownfield regeneration and public administration

The approach of public administration to brownfields regeneration has been studied at different hierarchic levels of public administration, usually the central, regional and municipal levels. At the central level (individual countries), studies usually compare the situation in various countries (e.g. Rizzo et al., 2015) or they concentrate on the state of brownfields in one country (Osman et al., 2015). For example, the Report on the environment of the Czech Republic in 2013 observes that between 2000 and 2013 the area of built-up and other areas increased by 3.5% (28,700 ha), and these areas, including also recultivated areas after non-agricultural activity, occupied 10.6% of the entire country. Other research uses surveys with various groups of stakeholders, such as state administration and local government to identify the factors of successful brownfields regeneration in the Czech Republic, Germany, Poland and Romania (Frantál et al., 2015b).

At the regional level, data for the regions are used for various supporting instruments that should facilitate the decisions of stakeholders participating in brownfield regeneration. These are the prioritization tools (Cheng et al., 2011; Pizzol et al., 2011, 2016; Zabeo et al., 2011; Agostini et al., 2012), which are created for various groups of end-users including regional planners, regional development agencies, state and regional authorities, grant agencies, etc. Concrete regions are used sometimes as case studies. For instance, the South Moravian Region in the Czech Republic was analysed regarding the occurrence of non-regenerated and regenerated brownfields (Frantál et al., 2013) and regarding the occurrence of agricultural brownfields (Klusáček et al., 2013). Furthermore, the region was explored on the reuse of brownfields for the development of solar energy (Klusáček et al., 2014a) and the data acquired was used to test the TIMBRE prioritization tool (Pizzol et al., 2016), which was modified and tailored according to feedbacks from different groups of end-users, including experts from public administration (Klusáček et al., 2014b).

At the municipal level, analyses for urban and rural municipalities were carried out in the USA (e.g. Chrysochoou et al., 2012; Linn, 2013), Canada (e.g. De Sousa, 2002, 2003), China (e.g. Liu et al., 2014, Ortiz-Moya, 2015), Germany (e.g. Rall and Haase, 2011), Slovenia (Nastran and Regina, 2016), Czech Republic (e.g. Frantál et al., 2015b; Martinát et al., 2017; Navrátil et al., 2017), Poland (Krzysztofik et al., 2016) and Romania (Stezar et al., 2013). For urban municipalities, the issue of brownfields is often linked to the shrinking cities phenomenon (e.g. Rumpel and Slach, 2012; Hackworth, 2014; Martinát et al., 2014; Safransky, 2014) – which are cities that experience decline and depopulation, often accompanied by neglected sites that had lost their original use. Case studies for rural municipalities are less frequent and they often deal with the analysis of one concrete locality in rural space (e.g. Sardinha et al., 2013; Vojvodíková et al., 2013; Klusáček et al., 2014a). Implications about the place-making of urban space by its reuse by urban farming have been widely discussed by Koopmans et al. (2017).

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