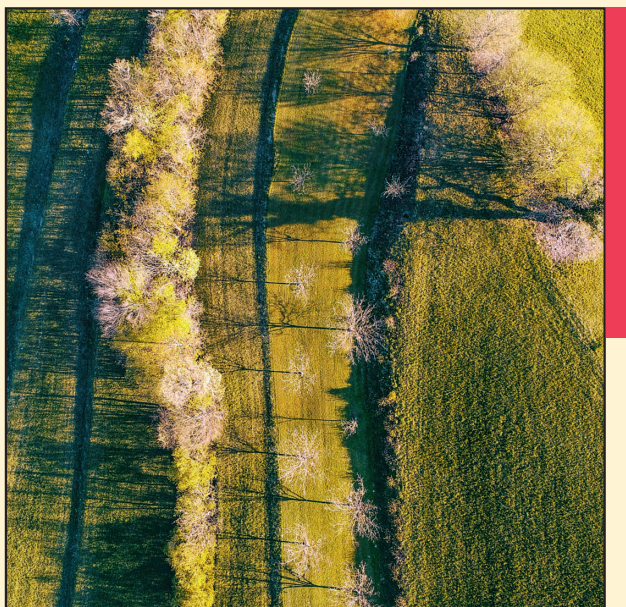


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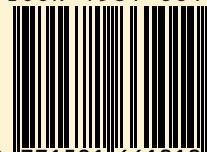
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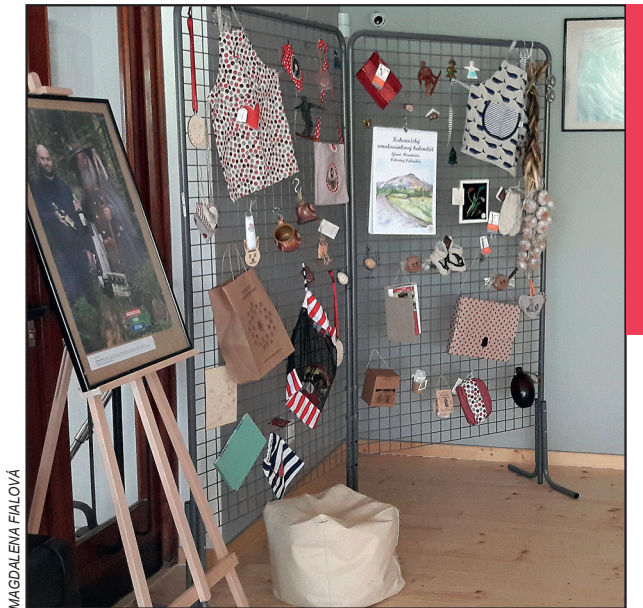
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SPECIAL ISSUE
Branding, labelling and certification

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(IN)VISIBLE AGENTS IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ACTIVE INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR NETWORKS AS A DRIVER OF REGIONAL PRODUCT LABELLING INITIATIVES

Magdalena Fialová, Pavel Chromý



MAGDALENA FIALOVÁ

Figure: Exhibition of regional products accompanied by a public photo competition in one of the Association of Regional Brands regions.

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Magdalena Fialová¹, Pavel Chromý¹

(In)visible agents in regional development: Active individuals and their networks as a driver of regional product labelling initiatives

ABSTRACT: Support for regional production along with its certification and labelling can be understood more broadly as regional development initiatives. Accordingly, the declared objectives of many certification schemes include environmental, economic, social, and cultural aspects. However, to bring benefits for the region, a certification scheme must be used efficiently. Key actor interviews combined with an assessment of the activities of thirty Czech certification schemes, all members of the Association of Regional Brands, helped us identify positive and negative factors affecting the initiatives' success and potential for enhancing regional development. In line with current institutional approaches to regional development, the engagement and creativity of actors as well as creating networks, which help them overcome various constraints, were found to be essential.

KEY WORDS: regional production, labelling schemes, certification, regional development, soft factors, human geography, Czechia

(Ne)vidni dejavniki regionalnega razvoja: Aktivni posamezniki in njihova omrežja kot gonilo regionalnih pobud za označbe izdelkov

POVZETEK: Podpora regionalni proizvodnji, vključno z njenim certificiranjem in označevanjem, je oblika regionalnih razvojnih pobud. Številne certifikacijske sheme vključujejo okoljske, gospodarske, socialne in kulturne vidike, vendar so za regijo koristne le, če so vpeljane učinkovito. Intervjuji s ključnimi akterji in ocena delovanja tridesetih čeških certifikacijskih shem, ki so članice Združenja regionalnih blagovnih znamk, so nam pomagali prepoznati pozitivne in negativne dejavnike, ki vplivajo na uspeh teh pobud, in njihov potencial za krepitev regionalnega razvoja. V skladu z obstoječimi institucionalnimi pristopi k regionalnemu razvoju se je izkazalo, da so bistveni zavzetost ter ustvarjalnost deležnikov in ustvarjanje mrež, ki jim pomagajo pri premagovanju različnih omejitev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: regionalna proizvodnja, označbe, certificiranje, regionalni razvoj, mehki dejavniki, družbena geografija, Češka

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1 Introduction

In recent decades products, especially food, associated with a certain region or place have enjoyed growing interest among consumers, society as a whole, and academia. Social science scholars approach this subject largely in terms of changes in (societal preferences of) food production, distribution, and consumption systems in the context of globalization and of changing values in post-industrial and post-material society (Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003; Watts, Ilbery and Maye 2005; Ilbery et al. 2005; Wiskerke 2009; Fonte 2010a; Marsden, Hebinck and Mathijs 2018; Jehlička et al. 2020). However, local and regional products are not just commodities; they are also a part of the regional milieu, and in the context of regional development strategies, objects of targeted support. Therefore, (re)localization of production is rightly of interest to human geographers.

One strategy for supporting regional production is the use of regional product labels. In addition to traditional »loose« links between product and place through logos or slogans, institutionalized regional product labelling schemes are being developed (Lee et al. 2005; Tregear et al. 2007). These schemes have been created by third parties (from the public, private, and non-profit sectors) and certify the origin of products offered by particular producers (Bottega and de Freitas 2009).

Regional product labels intentionally link products and places (e.g., Zappalaglio 2021). The territory of origin (place, region, country, etc.) and its unique character is becoming a base for constructing a product's quality (Wiskerke 2009). Thus, the support for regional products is also closely connected with the idea of the region, its construction, and with the forming of territorial identities and image. The emphasis on links to place/region allows us to understand product labelling schemes as regional development initiatives too. Current approaches to regional development highlight social, ecological, and cultural dimensions moving from mere economic progress towards the concept of complex sustainable development (Pike, Rodríguez-Pose and Tomaney 2006; Šmid Hribar and Ledinek Lozej 2013). Strengthening of competences of regions (as social constructs) and activating endogenous sources of their development is being emphasized. Critical importance is attributed to soft factors, that is, socially determined and hardly measurable capacities and settings such as informal institutions and norms, trust, relationships, identities or knowledge. Studies largely focus on bottom-up activities that are regionally specific, long running, and based on cooperation between individuals and subjects involved in development (Amin 1999). Key actors in development include administrative authorities both inside and outside the region, the media, educational institutes, companies, and non-profit organizations as well as individual politicians, businesspeople, and organization officials (Komárek and Chromý 2020). However, the roles played by individuals, including their abilities, qualifications, and values, still seem underappreciated (Tovey 2010; Messely et al. 2012), in the discourse of the agency-structure debate, »agency is an essential but understudied factor for regional development« (Grillitsch et al. 2019, 1).

These ideas are also encompassed by the new rural development paradigm (e.g., Jenkins 2000; Ploeg et al. 2000). Supporting regional production, including labelling schemes, appears to be one of the suitable tools for putting this conception of rural and regional development into practice (Ray 1999; Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003; Fonte 2010a; Šmid Hribar, Razpotnik Visković and Bole 2021; Ledinek Lozej 2021). This approach is also reflected in the policies of the European Union (EU). Besides the EU's own certification schemes supporting regional production, the LEADER programme (EU's rural development policy tool) provides an ideological and financial foundation for establishing regional product labelling schemes, chiming in with their principles (Lošťák and Hudečková 2010). Therefore, most labels in the EU are associated with activities of local action groups (LAG), the basic organizational units of the LEADER programme.

Many studies have ascribed several benefits for regional development to the promotion of regional products through labelling schemes. From an economic perspective, regional labels are assumed to support production itself, keep added value within the region (Kvam 2010; Fonte 2010b) and indirectly support employment (Tregear 2003) contributing to social stability in regions (Rodrigo and da Veiga 2010). For tourism trade regionally specific products can be an important draw (Spilková and Fialová 2013). From a social perspective, labelling schemes facilitate the creation of contacts and networks between participants of the certification process (Wiskerke 2009) and strengthen social capital (Malecki 2012). Labelling schemes often provide consulting to producers, support learning and gaining experience (Rodrigo and da Veiga 2010; Fonte 2010a), and promote innovative approaches toward conducting business (Kvam 2010). Furthermore, such labels help protect, (re)discover and even create regional values, especially values associated with landscape

and environment, and cultural and artistic traditions (Fonte 2010b). Drawing attention to regional products strengthens regional identity and image (Rodrigo and da Veiga 2010). In this sense, labelling schemes become a part of not only regional marketing and branding (Pike 2011) but also of region- and place-forming processes (Šifta and Chromý 2017).

The promotion of regional production and its purported positive effects have also been the subject of large criticism. Besides critique on the overuse and high diversity of labelling schemes (Ilbery et al. 2005; Wiskerke 2009), they have been criticized as fabled or inconsistent (Gille 2006; Moor 2011). Labelling schemes face several internal problems that detract from expected benefits too (e.g., Adamski and Gorlach 2010; Arévalo, Pérez and San Antonio 2010).

This paper takes the regional studies approach to examine labelling schemes on the example of the Association of Regional Brands (ARB), which brings together 30 Czech labelling schemes. Our aim is to identify factors determining how sustainable and beneficial for complex regional development labels are. Thus, we address the following questions: What are the critical factors for successful working of labelling schemes (and similar development initiatives)? And conversely, what are the main problems and barriers to their functioning? Insights from previous research (Kašková and Chromý 2014) allow us to assume that existing spatial patterns can explain differences among labelling schemes only to a limited extent and that viability of the schemes is based mainly on »soft factors«.

2 Study area and methods

2.1 Regional product labelling in Czechia

There are several regional product labelling schemes operating on different scale levels and managed by different types of subjects in Czechia. The oldest labels generally refer to the territory of entire Czechia and were developed in the early 1990s. In 2000 the first label focused on a microregion was introduced, soon followed by many others (Figure 1). Today, more than 40 such initiatives exist in Czechia. Three-quarters of them are members of the Association of Regional Brands (ARB).

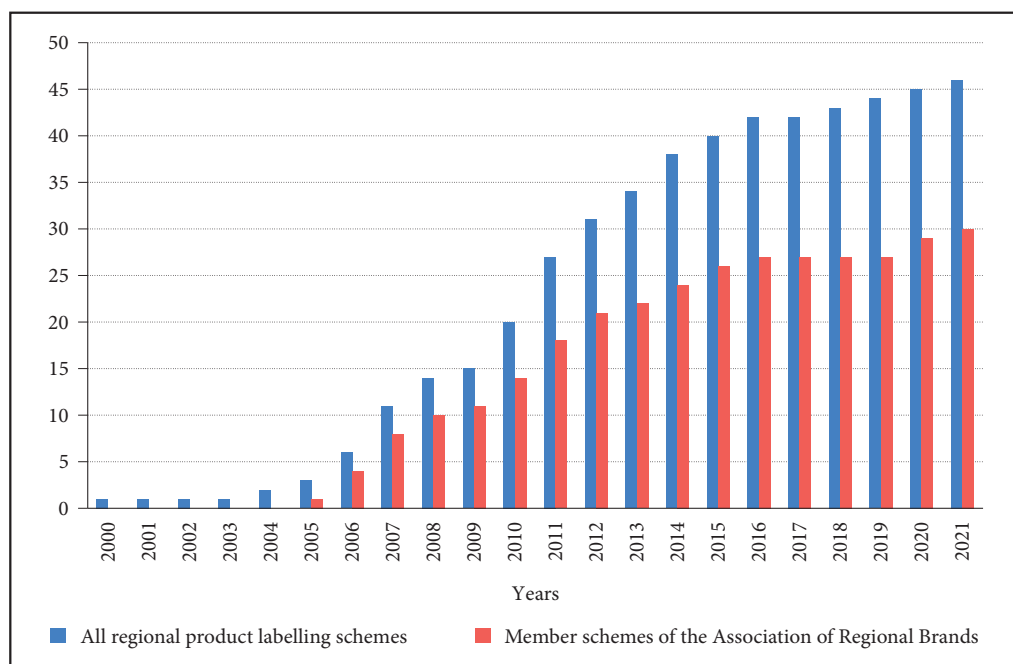


Figure 1: Number of regional product labelling schemes at the microregional level in Czechia, 2000–2021.

The first labels to eventually join the ARB were established in 2005 and 2006 as part of an environmental project operating in protected areas. In the following years, other similar initiatives emerged in other regions. In 2008, 10 existing labelling schemes formed together the Association of Regional Brands – a registered association of (mostly) legal persons, financed from membership fees, subsidies, and provision of consulting (Margarisová et al. 2018). Each labelling system has a coordinating institution, which owns the label, and is represented by a coordinator – a person responsible for managing the scheme. Each label has its own certification board and certification criteria. In addition to food and other agricultural products, consumer goods, artisanal and artistic products, and, in some regions, even services can be certified. Certification is generally subject to an administrative fee and is granted for a limited period, after which renewal may be requested. Coordinating bodies are basically non-profit organisations (funded by fees and diverse subsidies), usually LAGs, furthermore tourist offices, development agencies, environmental organizations, or civic associations. The ARB is headed by a chairperson, who is supported by a small team. The decision-making body is the general assembly. Thus, key actors related to the labels include especially coordinators of the labels and their working teams, producers of certified products, and the team of the ARB chairperson. All member labels work along the same principles; have a collective presentation (website, social media, markets, most recently e-shop); and share the same visual style (applied especially to logos). This unified approach helps overcome the common problem of fragmentation of labels (Ilbery et al. 2005; Wiskerke 2009) and provide better marketing support for producers (Margarisová, Vokáčová and Kuralová 2019). The ARB currently has 30 members (Figure 2).

2.2 Methods

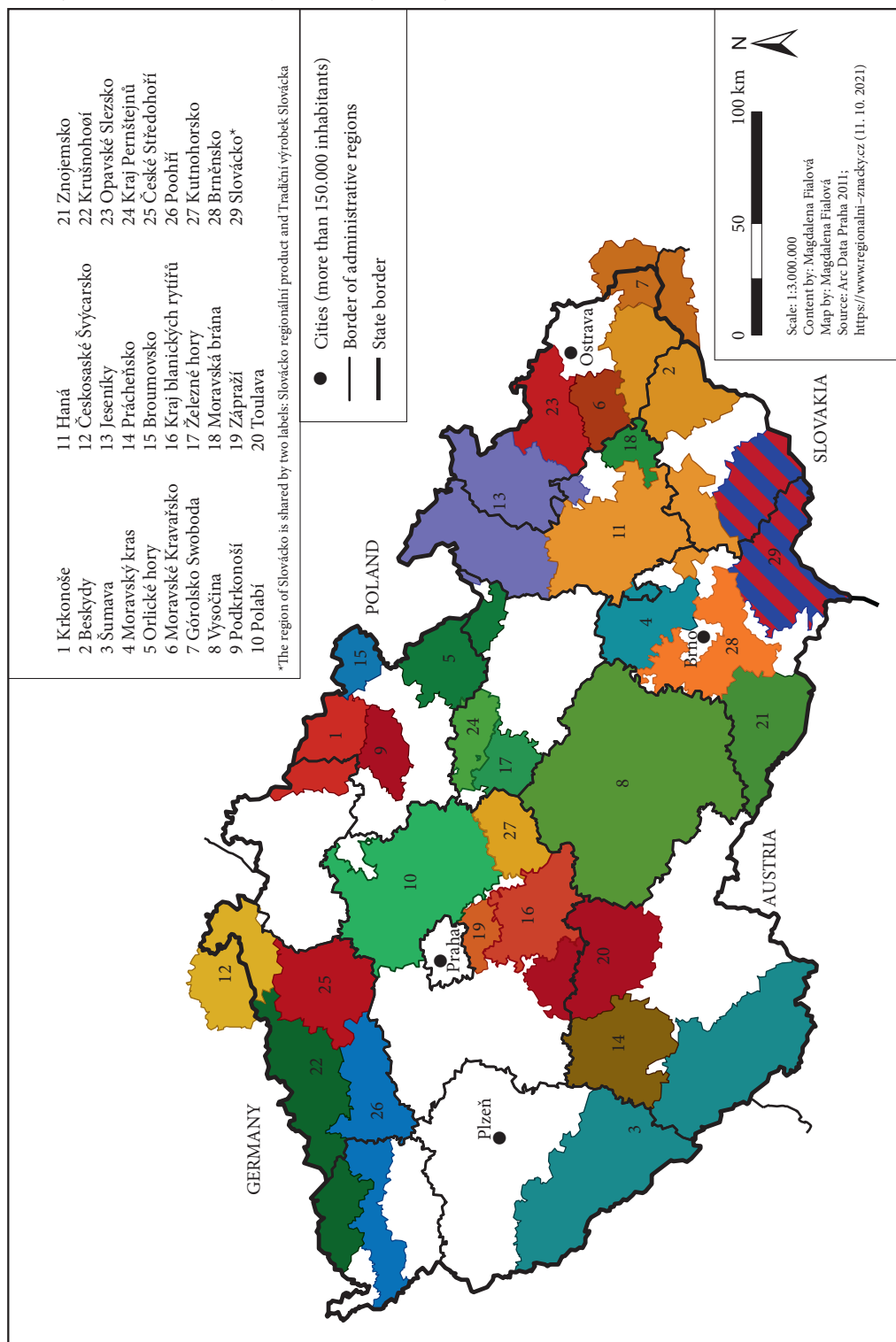
The studied labels are all members of the ARB that can be easily compared and cover different types of regions in Czechia (Figure 2). The largest stage of research was conducted in 2013, with additional research taking place in 2016 and 2021. In all 3 stages, various archival information sources were first analysed to understand the societal context and performance of regions, then semi-structured interviews were held with label coordinators. For quantification of data sources see Table 1.

Archival information sources we analysed included statistical and cartographic data sources, documents produced by the ARB (especially annual reports), individual labelling schemes, coordinating bodies, and local governments; and regional media outlets. We used websites as well as electronic and printed materials. In addition to studying the features of these systems, we monitored their activities (production of promotional materials, organisation of events, realisation of projects, promotion of own activities). To evaluate the data obtained we used spreadsheets helping us to count different types of activities and categorize the schemes into 4 groups from highly active to inactive (Table 2). The same sources we used to monitor the number of certificates granted helping us to benchmark the labelling schemes (Figures 3, 4).

Table 1: Quantification of data used during the research stages in 2013, 2016, and 2021.

	research stages		
	2013	2016	2021
interviews with label coordinators (minutes)	1069 min	216 min	347 min
communication with chairperson	90 min (interview)	2 pages (e-mail communication)	4 pages (e-mail communication)
web pages monitored (number)	47	28	59
internal documents of institutions monitored (number)	23	4	43
printed / pdf promotion materials monitored (number)	71	32	82
statistical and cartographic (socioeconomic) data sources (number of datasets used)	12	5	6

Figure 2: Areas of labelling schemes united by the Association of Regional Brands in Czechia, 2021. ► p. 96



We held in total 30 interviews with label coordinators in person or online (in 6 cases even another member of the coordination team joined the interview). Nearly all of the coordinators work in the position of a project manager (of LAGs or other type of institutions). Neither of the coordinators refused the interview; in general, they were positively disposed. Most meetings were informal in nature, which contributed to the interviewees being open in their responses and willing to share their personal experience including negative aspects, and opinions. In order not to interrupt or restrict our informants we slightly changed the order or formulation of our 18 originally prepared questions. In addition to analysing the interviews, we used a spreadsheet simplifying the evaluation and identification of common themes in the dataset. Inspired by the grounded theory approach (see e.g. Geiselhart, Schlatter and Orłowski 2012) we sought to identify »clusters« of success factors arising from the interview analysis. Simultaneously we emphasized examples illustrating the general features of the dataset while also capturing the particularities of individual regions (Kvam 2010; Table 3). Although coordinators are key components capable of communicating to a certain extent the views of other actors (Frivoll and Rey 2009), conducting interviews with only one type of actors has many limitations. For example, informants can intentionally skew information. To determine if informants were overestimating their own work, we compared their responses with those of other coordinators, with archival information sources, and information provided by the chairperson of the ARB (who was interviewed in 2013 and contacted – due to lack of the informant’s time – per e-mail during the next two research stages). When conducting interviews researchers inevitably introduce their own biases – preferences, experiences, and personal sympathies into the subject being studied (Limb and Dwyer 2001). Thus, we must keep this in mind when considering the findings of this study.

Based on our long-term research and previous findings (Kašková and Chromý 2014), we perceive the beneficiality and success of regional product labels not in terms of (hard to register) financial profit, but in terms of complex support of the regions’ development including social and cultural aspects. Thus, in our research we outline a successful labelling scheme as:

- 1) being viable and long-term sustainable;
- 2) gaining and keeping certified products, i.e. producers interested in receiving the label (indicating the merit of the label for artisans and business);
- 3) being active in promotion (in the region as well as online);
- 4) contributing to social and cultural life in the given region.

3 Results and discussion: Success of regional product labelling schemes

Member labels of the ARB can be described as long-term sustainable. None of the labels ceased to exist, outliving the (sustainability) period of their initial projects. In contrast, new regional labels joined the ARB (most recently in 2020 and 2021) and there is also continued interest from producers in gaining certification for their products.

There are substantial differences between the labelling schemes, however it is difficult to find appropriate criteria for distinguishing between successful and unsuccessful schemes. Financial criteria are missing. According to label coordinators, artisans and small businesses report premium revenue increase as well as premium price increase due to gaining the ARB certification for their products; however, accountings are very poor or none. There is no possibility for the coordinators to receive precise data. Additionally, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of labelling from other tools supporting producers (see Barjolle 2016 for the case of geographical indications). According to the research of Spilková and Fialová (2013) 35% of interrogated certified producers declared a positive effect of certification on consumer interest in their products, and thus on the business’s revenue. Simultaneously, 64% of producers stated that the label significantly improved the promotion of their product. The consumer position was studied by Margarisová et al. (2018). According to their research, ARB labels are doing quite well with respect to the amount of money spent on marketing – the recognition of ARB labels among consumers is approximately 50%. Other authors studying consumer awareness of ARB labels report lower numbers of label recognition (Chalupová, Prokop and Rojík 2016; Rojík et al. 2016; 2019; 2020).

One of the useful indicators for evaluating and comparing labelling schemes is change in number of certified products, but even still, we must keep in mind that this leads to simplification (it ignores, for instance, the different strategies coordinators take toward label exclusivity). In the years we conducted our research

(2013, 2016, 2021), the number of certificates issued by most labels was around the respective average number of ARB (Figure 3). A below-average number of certificates relative to region size indicates either that few producers were certified (likely due to poor coordinator performance or intentional limits on the number of certifications issued) or that there was great instability (i.e., producers were not interested in renewing their certification). In contrast, an above-average number of certifications (see Figure 3 with respect to data approximation – Figure 4) relative to region size can be attributed to the activities of coordinators and constant producer interest.

It would be more accurate to use the number of certified producers instead of products; however, these data are not available for most of the years. The average number of certified products per producer (as for 31.3.2022) is 1.1, thus on average 90% of certified products can be identified with one producer. There is little difference between the numbers (Figure 4), so we approximated the producers by the number of products. It would also be more appropriate to relate the number of products / producers to the total number of economic subjects in the region instead of the region's area. However, these data are only available for the year 2022 (see Figure 4).

Trends in the number of certified products help to indicate how well labelling schemes are functioning. Figure 5 depicts the most significant changes between 2010 and 2021. We can observe four types of trends: labels with a growing number of certified products (*Jeseníky, Haná, Opavské Slezsko*), labels that experienced oscillations but are once again growing (*Krkonoše, Broumovsko*), labels that experienced rapid

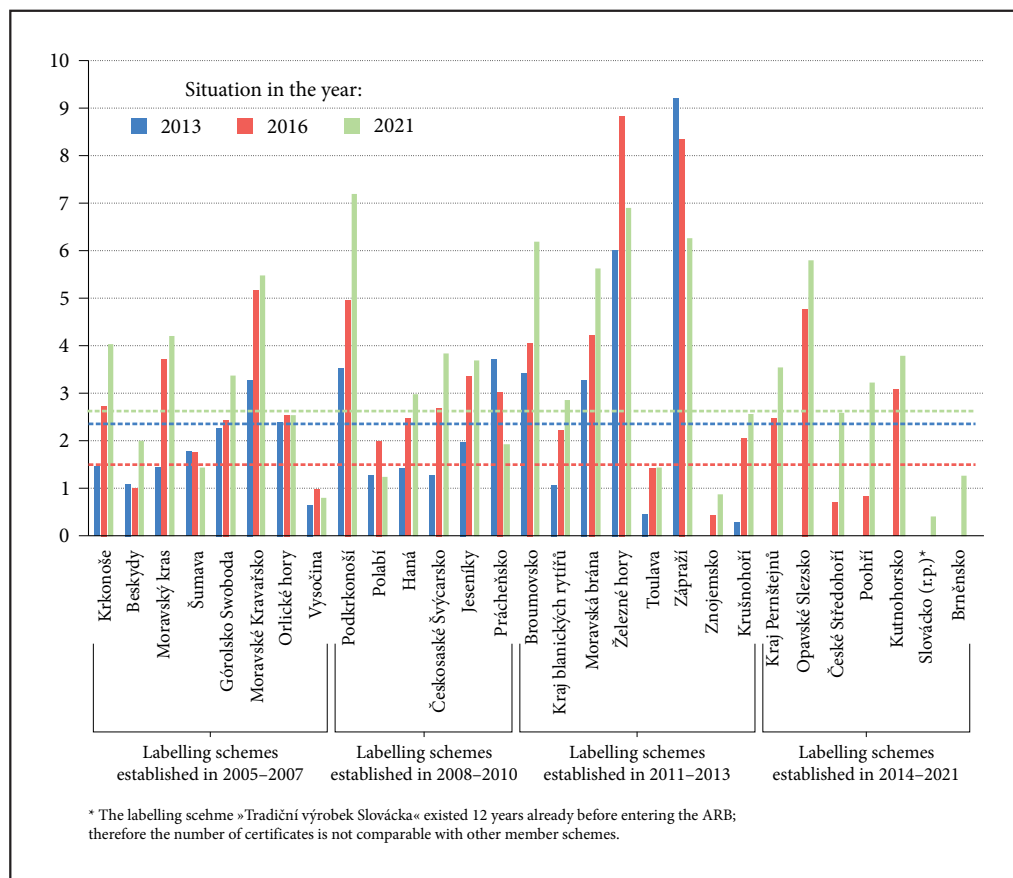


Figure 3: Number of certificates issued per 100 km² of the area of regional product labelling schemes (united by the ARB) in 2013, 2016 and 2021 (average area: 1.940 km²). Horizontal lines represent the average number of certificates per 100 km² of the whole ARB in the respective year.

growth but are now stagnating or even slowly decreasing (*Zápraží, Železné hory, Vysočina, Šumava*), and labels where after initial growth the number of certificates is decreasing roughly to the half of its largest number of certificates (*Prácheňsko, Polabí*).

Labelling schemes can also be evaluated based on their activities. Despite fluctuations, during our research we observed several highly active regions that implemented new projects (with or without public funding, focused on e.g., inventing tourist trails or searching for and supporting local traditions), induced social and cultural events in the region (realising e.g., festivals, regular markets, or public handcraft workshops), and realised promotional activities (see Table 2). In contrast, there were regions that were little active or where it was hard to tell (based on online sources) how active they were.

We also examined how label coordinators evaluate their own successes. Coordinators do not share a uniform procedure for monitoring the success of their labels. In addition to personal assessment, most of them monitor the interest of both producers and consumers in the label and try to gather information about

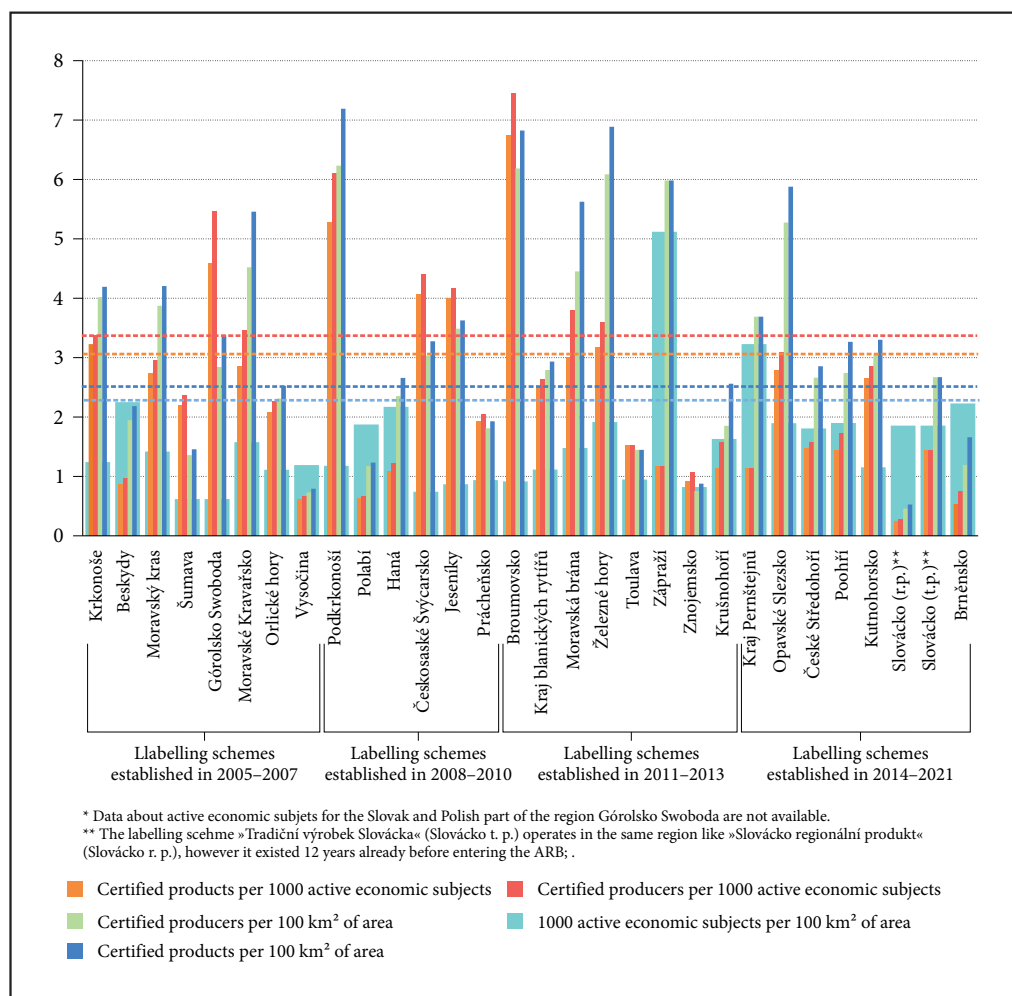


Figure 4: Comparison of the relation of certified producers / products in the region to the number of active economic subjects / area of the region (31. 3. 2022). Horizontal lines represent the average number of the respective dataset. Economic subjects are concentrated in large cities and their immediate background (including foreign businesses and other enterprises not suitable for certification by the ARB) – therefore some regions are at a disadvantage when comparing this indicator.

the financial benefit for producers. Some also make use of surveys carried out within scientific research (e.g., Chalupová, Prokop and Rojik 2016; Rojik et al. 2016; 2019; 2020). The ARB provides internal and public surveys to the coordinators. However, the monitoring of these indicators is inconsistent and unsystematic.

In our first wave of interviews (2013) *Zápraží* and *Šumava* were rated the highest. In the following two stages of research (2016, 2021), the *Jeseníky*, *Krkonoše*, *Opavské Slezsko*, and *Šumava* regions were mentioned as being the most successful. ARB leadership arranged two »good practice« excursions for regional coordinators to the *Jeseníky* (2019) and *Krkonoše* (2020) regions, which reflects (but potentially further bolsters) these labels' leading status.

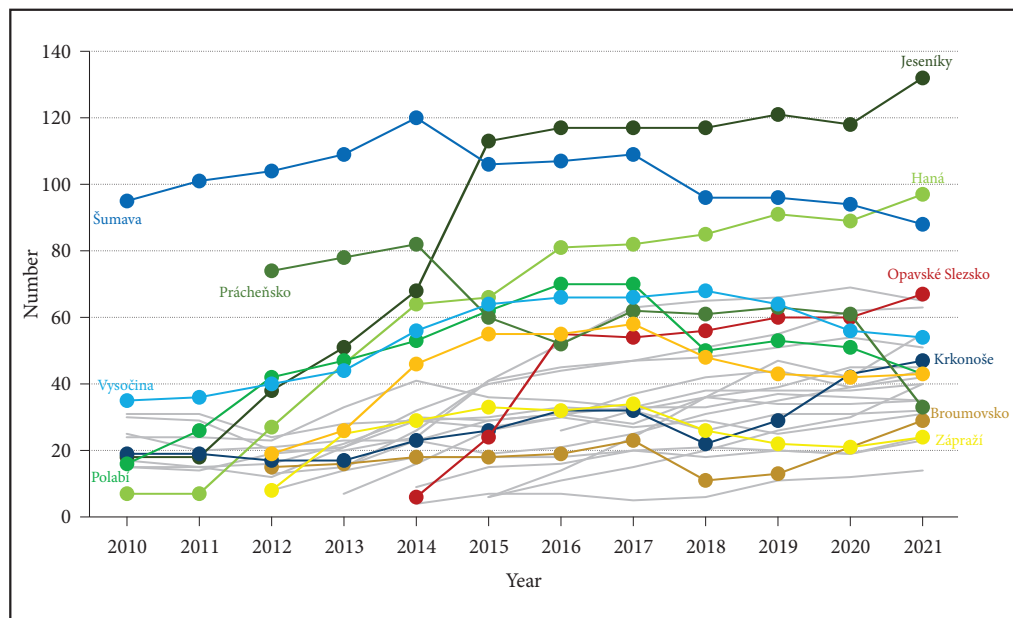


Figure 5: Trends in number of total certified products of selected regional product labelling schemes (members of the ARB), 2010–2021.

Table 2: Activiness of ARB member regions, 2004–2021. ARB regions are assessed as follows: + little activity, ++ middle activity, +++ high activity, ++++ very high activity. Regions missing any sign were not working yet in the given time period.

	Krkonoše	Beskydy	Šumava	Moravský kras	Orlické hory	Moravské Krušnohory	Góroňsko Svoboda	Vysočina	Podkrkonoší	Polabí	Haná	Českosaské Švýcarsko	Jeseníky	Prácheňsko	Broumovsko	Kraj bílancických rytířů	Železné hory	Moravská brána	Zápraží	Toulava	Znojensko	Krušnohoří	Opavské Slezsko	Kraj Pemsšiejnů	České Středohoří	Poohří	Kutnohorsko	Brněnsko	Slovácko	
2004	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	+	+									
-																														
2012	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++	++
2013	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
-																														
2016																														
2017	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+
-																														
2021	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

Margarisová et al. (2018) examining the awareness of labels among consumers confirm the evaluation of labels as mentioned above – most successful are reported *Haná, Krkonoše* and *Jeseníky*. The research of Spilková and Fialová (2016) based on questionnaire survey among certified producers indicates as being most successful the label of *Šumava*.

Based on existing studies (e.g., Renting, Marsden and Banks 2003; Siebert and Laschewski 2010) we expect that label success will replicate existing spatial patterns. Thus, for example, we can expect labelling schemes to meet with difficulty in the Czech borderlands, where development including local production traditions was interrupted by post-World War II population transfers, and in suburban areas, which are similarly classified as regions seeking (new) identities (for typology of regions regarding identity formation see Chromý, Kučerová and Kučera 2009). Structurally affected regions with high unemployment are also problematic as are the persistently economically weak areas of the »inner periphery« (Havlíček et al. 2008; Kučera and Kučerová 2012). However, the differences in label success we observed do not seem to replicate existing spatial patterns concerning regional development in Czechia (see Kašková and Chromý 2014). Therefore, the situation on the ground must be studied in greater detail.

4 Results and discussion II: Success factors

An analysis of the coordinator interviews will allow us to determine factors contributing to the creation of »positive deviations«, that is, to the existence of regional labels that are sustainable and function well regardless of the region's location and problems. We focus mainly on coordinators of those labels which can be described as best working according to the results of the previous chapter (*Jeseníky, Opavské Slezsko, Krkonoše, Zápraží, Podkrkonoší, Haná, Broumovsko, Železné hory, Šumava, Moravské Kravaňsko, Moravská brána, Českosaské Švýcarsko*). The factors that informants mentioned most frequently are contacts and cooperation, activity and creativity, sense of place and regional identity as well as passion and personal motivation. The findings are illustrated by example narratives from concrete labelling schemes based on conducted interviews (Table 3).

4.1 Contacts and cooperation

About two thirds of the interviewees highlighted the role of social capital, communication and willingness to cooperate among actors inside the labelling system (relationships between producers, communication between the coordinator and producers, the certification board, and applicants) and outside it (contacts between the coordinator and local government, politicians, the media, and other coordinators). But having many contacts is not sufficient for the coordinators to manage a successful label – relationships must be good and long lasting (Tovey 2010).

An important criterion for label success is nurturing relationships with certification holders and staying in personal contact – coordinators visit or call producers and organize meetings (Table 3, example 1). Building trust through regular contact is particularly important for artisans and small businesses, as trust helps overcome the hurdles on the way to join a labelling scheme (fear of inspection, bureaucracy, theft of know-how). An overly formal approach can reduce producers' willingness to engage actively and threaten the entire system's functioning. However, the maintenance of personal relationships is limited by the number of certified producers. Therefore, some coordinators (especially in large regions) do not expand the number of certified products deliberately (Figure 3).

A critical function of labelling schemes is the creation of a space where relationships between certification holders can be made (Fonte 2010b). Nearly all coordinators organize or invite producers to markets and similar events, which are not only important for the distribution of products, but even the most frequent occasions for making contacts. Cooperation between producers comes in many forms: they help each other with sales, share experience and marketing tips, create functional supply chains (e.g., a gingerbread maker newly buys honey from a certified beekeeper) or create even new products (e.g., a small jam producer introduced together with a local mill the production of fruit pancakes). In doing so, they create relationships that can be used outside »the label space« (Wiskerke 2009). Coordinators usually act as facilitators creating the first contact, but they rarely contribute e.g., to implementing product innovations. Similarly,

the ARB becomes a communication platform – meetings of the general assembly and more active working groups, excursions, and educational events provide a space for experience-sharing and problem-solving.

Other specific conditions also influence the forming of relationships. Functional links are often created and maintained by an active leader, generally the label coordinator, who is capable of bringing together different actors and fostering synergies between them (Table 3, example 2). Being dependent on a strong figure, who is irreplaceable once they leave, however, threatens the stability of the entire labelling system (see Messely et al. 2012).

Opportunities for cooperation are also influenced by the label's spatial delimitation (Table 3, example 3).

Cooperation, however, is always dependent on specific people, and political changes introduce instability to existing relationships. According to our findings, a labelling scheme must be part of a broader strategy to effectively contribute to regional development. Therefore, relationships with other actors and subjects in the region are crucial (see Messely, Dessein and Lauwers 2010). Failure to cooperate, fragmentation of activities, and outright animosity disrupt the efforts of various subjects and are among the most significant obstacles to successful regional development. When introducing labels (and other similar initiatives) it should be a priority to hold talks with all subjects in the region and eliminate any potential disagreements while strengthening social capital in the region – mutual trust, stakeholders' commitment, and participation.

Table 3: Example narratives based on interviews with labelling scheme coordinators in 2013, 2016, 2021.

- 1 When the *Moravská brána* label was first introduced, the coordinators held regular meetings for producers, where they got to know each other, shared their experiences, discussed problems, made plans, and organized even informal events such as tastings.
- 2 The founding coordinator of the *Orlické hory* label had held many local government positions and led several regional associations. Thanks to the contacts he built up over the years, he has been able to link the activities of several institutions, implement joint projects, and overcome rivalry between these institutions.
- 3 The geographical scope of the *Vysočina* regional label is identical to that of the self-governing administrative region after which it is named. This overlapping makes cooperation with the regional government easier. In other regions, such collaboration can be problematic. Shared borders and symbols, which strengthen regional identity and thus retroactively support the regional government's political goals, make it easier for the coordinator to access subsidies and other forms of support from the regional government (purchasing gift baskets for official guests, holding ceremonies when new producers are inducted attended by the regional governor).
- 4 In the *Jeseníky* region thinking up new project ideas helps overcome financial pressure. It was the 2nd region involved in the ARB to begin issuing the label to services. Working together with businesses, it then came up with the idea of certifying experiences. Other innovative activities and projects include the creation of the »Regional Label Trail«, along which tourists can visit the workshops of 12 producers, and the regional food and drink festival »The Tastes of the Jeseníky«. The most recent campaign, »Jeseníky under the Tree«, is focused on selling certified products as Christmas gifts.
- 5 In the first phase of research, the coordinator of the *Krkonoše* region complained that the difficulties he had working together with producers contributed to his unwillingness to do anything beyond what was absolutely necessary. Since 2018, when he was replaced by a new coordinator, however, new activities have begun to appear in the region (markets, creative promotional campaigns, an exhibit and workshops, a contest for consumers, greater website activity, etc.).
- 6 For example, in the *Železné hory* region certificate holders initiated the »Gourmet Trail« project, which allows tourists to visit certified production facilities and restaurants that offer a variety of visitor services. The coordination team was only a project partner.
- 7 For the coordinator of the cross-border *Górolsko Svoboda* label, lying on the tri-border between Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, sense of place and belonging to the local community is essential. The label coordinator is the chairperson of an association for preserving Goral culture that has very limited financial resources. He devotes much of his free time to working for the label. He sees it as one way for promoting Goral culture and identity.
- 8 The coordinators of the *Haná* and *Moravská brána* labels clashed over the *Záhoří* ethnographic region, which is located in Haná. The *Moravská brána* coordinators, after joining the ARB, demanded that this region be reclassified as belonging to *Moravská brána*, where they believe it rightfully belongs. The *Haná* coordinator, however, considers *Záhoří* to be a specific part of his region. This conflict came to a head when one producer from *Záhoří* rejected the *Haná* label because he does not have a sense of belonging to that region.
- 9 The *Prácheňsko* label was developed with support from a LAG subsidy project. The coordinator heavily and enthusiastically invested himself in the label. One result was growth in the number of certificates. But administrative burdens and difficulties working with regional stakeholders gradually demotivated the coordinator. When the project ended, his position was eliminated due to a lack of money, the label started to stagnate, and limited activity combined with the introduction of participation fees for producers led to a decrease in the number of certifications. Not even with new coordinators has the label been able to recover from this setback.

4.2 Activity and creativity

Activity and creativity of actors (see Borseková et al. 2021) involved in a label are reflected in the success of the label at all levels. Innovation and thinking up new activities are necessary for long-term label sustainability. A proactive approach is also critical for reaching consumers, as the entire labelling concept is dependent upon them.

The label coordinator's activity and agency help overcome structural constraints stemming especially from the grant-based nature of funding such initiatives (Table 3, example 4). Recent COVID-19 restrictions (since 2020) have become the touchstone for assessing the work of coordinators. Everyone was affected by limitations put on public events (markets, festivals, etc.), and tourism, and the heavy (financial) pressure felt by businesses. Some though (Table 2) have managed to seize windows of opportunity even in these difficult circumstances. They have become more active online, on both their websites and social media, and have also engaged in more intense media outreach. They have been working with e-shops, producing electronic materials, organizing online workshops for producers, and so forth.

The sudden introduction of activities requiring constant upkeep, however, could lead to the overall worsening of maintaining labelling systems. Even successful regions run the risk of the coordinator burning out. Many labels (at least one third) have reached a certain »breaking point« associated with an overworked coordinator or with the departure of a coordinator and the subsequent search for a replacement (see Figure 5; Table 3, example 5).

The efforts of the coordinator must be supported by the activity of producers. Most frequently they promote the label among customers and other producers. Some producers (in 4 regions) also contribute organizationally or even generate their own activities (Table 3, example 6).

If certification holders are passive, distrustful, and resistant to committing to the label (for example, by not labelling their products), the label cannot be successful among consumers and at the same time the coordinator can become demotivated. The activities of coordinators and producers are »communicating vessels«, as can be observed in the example from the *Krkonosé* region (Table 3, example 5).

4.3 Sense of place and regional identity

For actors to be active, personal motivation is crucial. Sense of place plays a critical role here. It encourages the coordinator's commitment to improving conditions in the region. Such a coordinator is connected to the local community and knows very well the region, the way of life there, and the population's preferences (Messely, Dessein and Lauwers 2010). The intensity of relationships is not related to where the coordinator is originally from. Those who have moved to the region from elsewhere usually think more about why they live in the region, whereas natives often have an »automatic« relationship to the region (Table 3, example 7).

Regional pride frequently motivates producers to apply for certification, which, once gained, boosts their pride. Sense of place, however, does not generate activity all by itself, but it does help steer activities towards benefiting the region (Messely et al. 2012).

However, excessively identifying with a region (having an »us vs. them« mentality) and being blindly patriotic can detract from labels' success; it can lead to conflicts between coordinators and to producers rejecting the label – we have identified three such conflicts (Table 3, example 8).

4.4 Passion and personal motivation

It is essential that a good coordinator is passionate about the label (see Messely, Dessein and Lauwers 2010). This passion can come from many sources, including having a personal relationship with the region. Enthusiasm enables the overcoming of practical problems including personal educational and professional limits, but especially the problem of low pay. Finances are limited, and salaries often do not correspond with the actual demands of the job (Spilková and Fialová 2016). Coordinators frequently end up »subsidizing« their labelling schemes with their free time, or they have to ensure alternative sources of financing (such problems were mentioned by about two thirds of our informants). If coordinators lose their passion and motivation, they become less active, creative, and innovative and the label stagnates or declines (Table 3, example 9).

In contrary to Spilková and Fialová (2016) we do not assume that coordinators act only in the intention of the label's initiating project. Nearly all of the labels already outlived the sustainability period of these projects. Coordinators of successful labels still seek new contents and development possibilities for their labels.

5 Conclusion

A key focus of geography is to reveal the processes and mechanisms of regional development affecting the success of development activities. The aim of this paper was to contribute to the ongoing debate by examining regional product labelling schemes (as initiatives supporting comprehensive regional development) and to reveal critical factors leading to their success as well as possible constraints.

Studying selected labelling schemes in Czechia revealed several factors that are not obvious at first sight, and which do not correspond with traditionally perceived spatial patterns in terms of spatial polarization, peripherality, or the development of regions. We assume the key role of soft factors, especially the capabilities and motivations of individuals and their abilities to build networks. It is evident that sociocultural factors related to agency – activeness and creativity – of actors help overcome geographical and socioeconomic constraints. Strong contacts and cooperation between (groups of) actors inside and outside the region (again dependent upon their activeness) contribute to the healthy functioning of such initiatives. Actors' sense of belonging to a region and their passion also affect successful development, and when the label is successful these feelings are boosted. We did not deal directly with education, professional experience and (managerial) skills of the coordinators that apparently build another important (success) factor. Spilková and Fialová (2016) state that most of the coordinators do not have sufficient capacity to promote the label and need support. Another problem revealed by our research, is the lack of constructive reflection on the labels's performance, monitoring of results, and setting criteria – potentially informing the label promotion strategy.

Each of the revealed factors has both positives and negatives. Relationships between actors can be threatened by personnel and political changes. Being overly active and overestimating one's capabilities can weaken the entire system. Strong regional identities may lead to competition between regions possibly impeding development efforts. Personal commitment is not a constant variable and may wane over time.

In terms of enhancing regional development our research highlighted social aspects. We argue that the contribution of labelling to regional development do not necessarily consist in increasing sales, but in creating potential for further (development) activities in the region.

This study presents only one type of development initiatives in a specific national context. However, it clearly indicates that the most important factor for the success of such initiatives comprises the individuals that form relationship networks. Very close to what Messely, Dessein and Lauwers (2010) revealed in other national contexts – crucial is the presence of at least a small group of active agents.

Dependence on individuals, and thus high volatility, are also alarming factors. On the other hand, one of the main benefits of regional labelling schemes for regional development – the creation of a space where relationships working beyond the space of the label can be made – does reduce this uncertainty. It supports the embedding of the initiative into broader development strategies and the functional interlinking of activities in the region. Actor commitment plays a fundamental role; the potential of a labelling scheme can be used to the fullest or it can be left unused.

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