

# DEVELOPMENT TRAPS AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY INTERVENTIONS

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## **Abstract.**

Nowadays, development has become a natural part of our lives, the dynamics and types of which are the only things we tend to highlight and compare. This is why it may seem unusual that science has identified an anomaly in certain territorial units where there is a lack of development. This situation has been called the development trap. The development of an area is, of course, dependent on a great many factors, so that the range of development traps seems almost inexhaustible. This paper takes stock of the development traps identified so far, not with the aim of questioning the methods used, but to evaluate the data and indicators used to identify them. The study concludes that macro-level data are not causes but consequences, masking the true root causes of problems, but they play an important role in establishing a diagnosis at the regional level. The study aims to provide a convincing illustration, using concrete examples, of the development policy approach - and its main features - that can help to overcome the various pitfalls.

**Keywords:** development trap, cohesion policy, lagging regions, place-based approach, LEADER

## **INTRODUCTION**

Several disciplines have tried to examine territorial differences with a number of successful or less effective methods. The practical importance of research is confirmed by Article 147 of the Treaty on Union, which aims to mitigate economic, social and territorial disparities (TFEU. Article 147). In examining differences, different disciplines participate to different degrees and intensities, and their conclusions are not always consistent with each other. Perhaps the greatest attention is paid to research on economic growth with essentially economic methodology, whose *ceteris paribus* approach often leads to results contrary to the conclusions of other disciplines (sociology, political science, law, natural sciences) (see Dijkstra 2024, Grover et al 2022). Although research has taken into account changes over time in addition to the territorial factor, it is only in recent years and decades that time – in addition to spatial processes – has become a prominent and primary factor. This changed approach may have led to the detection of various trap situations where the expected or

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desirable changes did not occur over time. Although it is true that the main focus of the studies was on economic growth, or more precisely, on the trap situation resulting from its absence, but still many elements of economic, socio-environmental conditions are present, so the range of trap situations can be quite wide-ranging. More recently, political science research has been examining the relationship between trap situation and EU scepticism (geography of discontent), while in regions facing demographic problems it is talent trap situations that have recently come into focus (EC 2024). Trap situations probably existed before and still exist today, but the question may be what seems to be of paramount importance for decision-makers or individual disciplines, or in which fields there are research results that can be used to identify a trap situation.

It is important to point out that previously the territorial scale of identifying trap situations was the nation-state. (EC 2024) It can be assumed that the nature of the data and indicators, which were almost exclusively macro data, also played a role in this. The regional scale has only been studied in the last decade, although its popularity seems to be stable.

The aim of this study – perhaps unusually – is not to discover current or new trap situations or evaluate the methods used to achieve them, but to show how the root causes of trap situations can be grasped and, based on these, what tools and forms of intervention are offered as solutions for development policy. To this end, it is necessary to review the trap situations identified so far, the indicators used for identification, and those proposals that have been made so far to resolve these trap situations.

## **1. The middle-income trap**

The trap situation in this case basically means that a region is unable to maintain its economic dynamism in terms of income, productivity and employment, while taking the same factors into account, it underperforms compared to its national and European peers. (Diener et al 2022) In other words, it is necessary to look at how a region performs in terms of GDP, productivity, employment compared to its past, its own country and the EU average. (EC 2020) Although there is not a common definition of the middle-income trap which has unanimously been accepted by the literature yet (Csath 2019), the methodology and the indicator system used are still important, as they were also used as the basis for defining regional development traps in the 8th Cohesion Report. The concept of the middle-income trap is used to describe countries that experience a sharp decline in economic dynamism after a successful transition from low-income status to middle-income status and are unable to move to higher income levels. This method has rarely been applied to subnational territories, including regions, although the trap situation was already addressed in the 7th Cohesion Report.

The 8th Cohesion Report on the trap situation concluded that development traps can occur at all income levels:

- Regions trapped in high income levels: These are areas which, despite still being relatively wealthy in terms of GDP per capita, are trapped as a result of the decline of industries that were the main source of wealth in the past.
- Middle-income trapped regions: These are regions which, by the end of the 1990s, had reached a level of GDP per capita between 75% and 100% of the EU average, but whose economic dynamism has stagnated ever since.
- Regions stagnating at low-income level: with GDP per capita below 75% of the EU average. (*EC 2022*)

Trapped regions experienced lower employment growth (compared to other regions) and a lower share of industry and human capital in GDP. In comparison to this, middle-income trapped regions are neither as productive nor innovative as high- and very high-income economies when sandwiched between two worlds, nor are their labour and land prices as low as those of lower-income regions. As these regions reach middle-income status, they lose their comparative advantage in mature, labour-intensive industries, namely those that rely on low-wage labour and standardized technologies. However, they cannot compensate for this by entering new, innovation-intensive sectors that would enable them to catch up with developed regions. (Diener et al 2023)

This approach centred on economic growth, or rather its absence, is measured by data such as GDP, employment and productivity.

## **2. The relationship between lagging regions and the development trap**

Another aspect of the trap, which is more frequently examined at regional level and has practical relevance for development policy, analyses the relationship with regions that have been performing below the average GDP of EU countries for a long time. The Commission's 2017 report 'Competitiveness in low-income and low-growth regions – regions lagging behind' identified two types of regions. One is the so-called low-growth regions, with less than 90% of the EU average GDP per capita and not approaching the EU average between 2000 and 2013. The other category of so-called low-income regions includes all regions whose GDP per capita was less than 50% of the EU average in 2013. Partly as a criticism to this report another report for the European Parliament's Committee on Regional Development in 2020 (EP 2020) titled 'Lagging Regions: Current Situation and Future Challenges' was prepared. This work proposes a new typology including

- regions lagging behind, approaching the average EU GDP per capita but deviating from their national average;
- lagging regions, which are relatively poorer regions but not close-up to the EU average;

- and regions with very low growth, where growth since 2000 has been less than half of the EU's average growth since 2000. (A low-income region is any region whose GDP per capita, measured in purchasing power parity, was less than 50% of the EU average in 2013.)

This report made critical remarks against cohesion policy in addition to the immobility of EU funding. According to the report, it is difficult to determine whether cohesion policy as a whole has been able to focus on lagging or trapped regions and, if so, what impact this has had. They also note that the country reports prepared by the Commission, especially in 2019, are only a few pages long factsheets where general results are reported. The mid-term review of cohesion policy in the years 2014-2020 also contains only very high-level, general analyses that are completely useless from the viewpoint of assessing territorial differences.

The report also contained critical remarks on policies other than cohesion policy. They highlighted that policies remain spatially blind, for example the new recovery instruments foreseen under Next Generation do not take territorial dimensions into account when assessing recovery needs and allocating funds. While national governments are expected to target the most vulnerable areas, this cannot be automatically assumed in the absence of strong EU control and incentives. To reverse the gap and break the trap the report made the following recommendations:

- A successful transition of lagging regions requires certain capacities, skills, know-how, and qualitative governance;
- The Member States' structural reforms by taking into account the European Semester country reports should improve place-based sensitivity;
- Lagging regions facing multiple and complex challenges in their energy, digital and industrial transitions need direct, comprehensive and targeted support.
- Finally, they underline that funding alone cannot reverse the fate of lagging regions. Indeed, issues related to the quality of governance and institutional capacity, as well as to the diversity of structural reform needs, are problematic for most lagging regions, therefore very sophisticated support programmes are needed. (By the latter, the authors may mean differentiated interventions as necessary and adapted to local needs.)

The proposed solutions are certainly remarkable, but, as is usually the case with macro reports, they do not contain any reference to the methods, means or possibilities of implementation.

### **3. The geography of EU discontent and the trap of regional development**

A new – essentially political – approach to the trap situation is addressed in the report published by the Commission in 2023 under the above title.

The main question of the investigations was whether falling into the regional development trap was whether the increasing of discontent and Euroscepticism was its driving force. In the search for answers, the election results of each Member State were mainly examined. The results of study showed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the residents of regions trapped in development are much more likely to be lured by both "hard" and "soft" Eurosceptic political options and support these types of parties in elections. They also found that time spent in the development trap significantly increases the share of Eurosceptic votes. It is a novelty of the research that it concludes that the data set (GDP, employment, wages, industrial production, innovation, and population decline) usually used in the analysis of the – economic type - trap situation –states that decline is often a multifaceted and self-reinforcing process, the causes and consequences of which cannot fully be explored by the above data.

### **4. The talent development trap**

The 9th Cohesion Report identified another trap situation and concluded that, if left unaddressed, it will increase territorial inequalities in the working-age population and skills over time, thereby hampering the resilience and competitiveness of the EU as a whole. According to the report, **a region can be considered trapped in talent development if:**

- the average annual decline in the population aged 25-64 between 2015 and 2020 exceeds 7.5 % per 1 000 inhabitants;
- the share of the population aged 25-64 with tertiary education is below the EU average in 2020; and
- The share of the population aged 25-64 with tertiary education increased by 4.3 percentage between 2015 and 2020 which is less than the EU average.

According to the report, such programmes should be launched that stimulate innovation and create highly skilled job opportunities, as well as develop, retain and attract skilled workers. To this end, the Commission is also launching pilot schemes to develop a talent building mechanism for regions affected by a shrinking working-age population. The objectives set are considered to be achieved through customized, place-based policies that effectively invest in talent development. They also consider it important to develop reforms at national and regional level that can respond to territorial skills gaps based on the needs and capabilities of local actors. The 9th cohesion report also mentions a further trap situation when describing the so-called evolutionary traps. These are defined as regions that are structurally unable to develop new activities because their

capabilities prevent them from embarking on new and more complex activities that could increase their well-being. This definition does not radically differ in content from the conceptual approach of development traps, so it does not seem necessarily important to define it as an independent trap situation.

### **5. Location, productivity and prosperity, rethinking territorially targeted regional development policies**

The report prepared by the World Bank, which has a specific economic point of view, lacking social sensitivity and a holistic approach, highlights new features of the trap situation that have not yet been discussed. Trapped areas can often be described as "lagging behind places, missed opportunities, people left behind," according to the authors. They also note that the internal resources of the territories are largely unexploited, although it is not always possible to change this on the ground. They believe that not all disadvantaged trapped areas have the potential to become rich, so the population should move to more affluent areas instead. In their view, while local-area-based policy seeks to reduce territorial disparities by creating jobs where people live, economic analyses often suggest that the improvement of people's skills and enabling migration to cities – to those agglomerations that are most likely to offer them livelihoods – would be a more effective approach. However, the circumstances underlying the conclusions drawn by World Bank experts do not necessarily exist in the European space. At the same time, the European Union has a system of values and policies (cohesion policy) that does its best to ensure that certain areas are not depopulated for purely economic reasons and that solidarity can provide a chance to stay in place and catch up.

#### **The criticism of macro approaches**

Following the presentation of trap situations with different approaches, it should first of all be pointed out that trap situations were identified by almost exclusively using macro-level data. It is also not a negligible circumstance that some data are considered as calculated data, i.e. they can be regarded as aggregates of many other historical data (e.g. GDP). Although this is not a problem in itself, such data are not able to explore the root of problems, and the conclusions and suggestions drawn solely on the basis of macro data are even less suitable for providing effective solutions for practice instead of cliché type generalities. In concrete terms, this means that the value of proposals to increase productivity, develop innovative solutions and increase employment is – to put it sharply – is identical to the desire for "world peace" from the greeting of a newly elected beauty queen. If it is not examined or presented what constitutes the limits to the realization of desirable results at the level of a given territorial unit, be it a settlement or even a smaller community (whether there is innovation, productivity, etc.), then we can never get to the solution, i.e. the remedy of the

problems or the exploitation of opportunities. (To put it simple, exchanging common wisdom for petty money won't work.)

In addition to macro-level suggestions, the underlying macro data can be stated as effects rather than causes (i.e., originator data). In other words, employment situations are the result of a number of components, both soft and hard, such as education level, job availability, and even the motivation of the individual who makes up the community. As with the proposals, a clear picture and a path to a solution can only be obtained if this information is available reliably and on the right territorial scale. Therefore, in order to discover the real causes, it is necessary to go down to even the most elementary level and actor.

This does not mean, of course, that studies referring to not macro-level, but carried out by using macro methods and data on different territorial units are not of great importance. It is undoubtedly positive that they point out the role of temporality, the dynamics of changes – or their absence – and the importance of added value for changes. These test results represent a kind of territorial diagnosis, the value of which is not diminished by the fact that a given situation – specifically the developmental trap – may have existed for decades, but this situation has only recently been discovered and identified by science. If we want concrete solutions, we must not stop at diagnosis, we must by all means explore the roots of the problems, the starting points of the possibilities and identify the drivers of the relevant processes.

### **The role of development policy**

In most cases, literature sources and policy reports reflect in some form on the role of development policy. In the case of regions trapped in middle income, for example, it is pointed out that cohesion policy is more concerned with less favoured areas or more effective growth poles. However, for almost all policy reports, it may be appropriate to conclude that the studies do not address at all, or only tangentially, the definition of adequate development policy instrument intervention. This can be considered a huge shortcoming. If the goals are generally adequate, and if the resources as a whole are suitable for promoting economic growth and social development, then what could be the reason why there is no meaningful change and the trap situation seems to be permanent? Neither in the formulation of policy nor in research are they really interested in what role the development policy instrument which has been used for decades can play in the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of development policy. It is well known that the sectoral development approach favoured at both EU and Member State level has set up such instruments that are top-down schemed, centrally managed, spatially blind and do not take into account local specificities. In the case of trap situations, the question is whether there is a development method that is able to reach the most elementary level and actors, and whether it is able to offer a kind of problem solving – I would like to emphasise – not to all problems,

and especially not with universal applicability. In order to prove it, it is always worth starting from concrete, workable and, of course, reproducible and adaptable examples. The example below concerns a particular social stratum, the significance of which is given by the fact that so far no development program has really been able to move them out of the trap. (Finta, Pula 2020) In this particular case, the target group was families that were excluded from the primary labour market and did not participate in the public works programme, and any other attempts to integrate them seemed unsuccessful so far.

The organizational framework of the project in our example was a social cooperative, within which an integrator program was implemented. In this case, we are not talking about some kind of social integration, but about a programme that was last applied in this form in the villages of the Hungary before the change of regime. The essence of the program is that there is an integrator that provides the tools and technology necessary for crop farming or even animal husbandry, teaches their application, and then, in the case of the goods produced, organizes transportation, acquires market for the goods and organizes their sales. "Integrated" people provide their workforce, their land, their real estate. The main profile of the social cooperative in question was cucumber growing, which is important because it was able to provide a source of income significantly exceeding the previous standard of subsistence in a relatively short time. It is interesting – or perhaps more – that women were the driving forces of the program within families, although after the successes men also participated in the work with increasing confidence. In two years, the number of families participating in the program has doubled.

After all this, the question is, what is necessary for this type of intervention to be successful? Experience shows that such factors include trust (on the part of all parties), local knowledge (on the part of the leader and manager of the program), local initiative (which can only be sustainable in the long run with a partnership approach, and all this can even be innovative, as at this – territorial – level the goal is not to operate the large hadron collider). In addition to the above, local decision-making competence and resources are also necessary for the success of the intervention. The further development of the program and the increase of added value can be provided by networking, expanding the activity in space and raising it to a higher level (this can be further be expanded by conservation, special regional flavouring as well as by organizing regional sales etc. within the framework of the program.).

The facts thus proved that there exists a solution to problems that have hitherto could not be tackled by conventional means. The question then is whether there is a method in the toolbox of development policy that can meet the above-listed requirements. The answer to this can be given in the affirmative, since the development approach known as the LEADER method dates back some 32 years. The development method, which was initially introduced as a community



initiative, then integrated into the "mainstream" of the EU-level common agricultural policy, and then into the system of cohesion policy (under the title Community-led local development – CLLD), is perhaps the closest to the local level, to the individual actors, in the whole of Europe, but certainly in Hungary. In addition to the indispensable local knowledge, this provides an opportunity to build such trusting relationships that are able to build and maintain that motivational background which forms one of the (soft) conditions for the advancement of trapped individuals and communities. This system of organisations has such a partnership-based decision-making mechanism where the needs of trapped actors can be channelled and enforced. This planning and implementation mechanism is capable of providing differentiated responses to challenges tailored to local needs. This management is tasked with networking the individual actors and activities and with solving the trap and contributing to the strengthening of territorial cohesion through higher added value of products and services and stronger opportunities for advocacy.

Of course, this method of development is not a panacea, but it is an existing model, which also draws attention to the fact that macro-level analyses and diagnoses alone cannot be solutions to problems. Of course, this method is also subject to numerous criticisms (Johansson, Holmquist 2024, ECA 2022)). It is far from being said that this method works perfectly for all Member States. However, a closer look at the roots of the criticisms reveals that most of them stem from such missing conditions that fall outside the LEADER programme and mostly fall within the competence of the Member State or the EU Commission (Finta 2023) (this is especially true in the case of the low availability of development funds). At the same time, the vast majority of various reports or opinions (EC 2021, EESC-2011, 2014, 2015, 2018)) and literature sources highlight the advantages of this development method, its effectiveness (VP 2022) and its ability to respond flexibly to challenges at local level (ECwd 2024) Although the aim and evaluation of the LEADER method is neither the aim nor the object of this study, but in addition to traditional (and in all cases far from effective) sectoral-type development policy interventions, it is certainly appropriate to highlight such a method which is complexity oriented, bottom-up schemed and based on local presence and partnership. It is another matter that this development method is unlikely to play a meaningful role in either EU or Member State development policies as long as such a sectoral logic remains dominant which is based on keeping the allocation of funds at a central level, concentrating on key sectors and individual municipalities, micro and small enterprises providing a greater share of employment instead of recognizing the importance of the knowledge of territorial specificities and the impact of territorial disparities on reducing competitiveness.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is a very important achievement that science has elevated time to an independent dimension during the analysis and evaluation of spatial processes, which helped that the lack of change, its duration and their causes that can be interpreted at macro level could become apparent at least to the regional territorial scale. However, these causes are results in fact which although help to establish a diagnosis on a regional scale, but alone do not offer solutions that lead to triggers that can be linked to a lower territorial scale or even to a certain community of individuals. EU and Member State development policy could play a prominent role in identifying and developing solutions, but this would require tools and development methods that would use a – by know well-known at the level of slogans – place-based, integrated approach instead of the sectorial approach, which has proven to be less effective. Although on a very limited scale appropriate methods are used, especially within the framework of LEADER/CLLD and partly integrated territorial development (ITI), they are not expected to gain ground till national and EU political interests' conflict with them or unless are sufficiently supported. The macro-level good wishes of policy (let GDP, productivity, childbearing grow etc.) are certainly important, but alone may not be enough to solve traps, therefore they may remain part of our lives for a long time to come.

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