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Unpacking legitimacy in regional development: asymmetric justification and the functioning of regional development agencies

Yasmine Willi ^a, Marco Pütz ^b and Joost Jongerden ^{c,d}

ABSTRACT

In recent years, policy-makers and researchers have identified regional development agencies as the most suitable actors to carry out public tasks. One of these tasks has been the coordination of regional development processes. Both practitioners and researchers argue that legitimacy is a prerequisite for these regional actors to function properly. Although legitimacy is a key issue, little is known about the challenges that arise while producing it. Selecting six regional development agencies in Switzerland and applying an interview-based research method, this explorative study analyses how regional development agencies deal with legitimacy issues. The findings indicate that the main problem with which regional development agencies struggle is not procedural rightfulness but means–end coordination. By proposing a clear distinction between legitimacy and justification, we aim to stimulate the debate on how to operationalize legitimacy and further the discussion of the functioning of regional development agencies. Consequently, we introduce the concept of ‘asymmetric justification’ to the debate on regional development processes in order to shed a light on the functioning of regional development agencies.

KEYWORDS


legitimacy; justification; regional development agency; regional governance; regional development processes; Switzerland

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INTRODUCTION

With the growing importance of the regional level for the coordination of development processes (Agnew, 2017; Keating, 2017), regional actors and their behaviour are increasingly gaining the attention of researchers and practitioners. In European countries, regional development agencies play an important role in coordinating regional development processes and are thus understood as key regional actors (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Miles & Tully, 2007; Sotarauta, 2010; Syrett & Silva, 2001). At the same time, both researchers and practitioners identify legitimacy as one of the


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prerequisites for regional development agencies to make decisions that are widely accepted and act upon them (Blatter, 2007; Kraft & Wolf, 2018; OECD, 2018). However, despite the acknowledged importance of legitimacy for effective decision-making and coordination, little is known about what regional development agencies actually do to legitimize themselves, what challenges arise from these efforts and how they can be dealt with.

This paper attempts to further unpack legitimacy in regional development by analysing the legitimacy-producing processes of regional development agencies. To identify and better understand the challenges that arise in the complex regional decision-making process, we introduce the concept of asymmetric justification next to the concept of legitimacy. Asymmetric justification refers to a situation in the decision-making process in which local actors involved in regional development agencies fail to justify their regional engagement to the local authorities and organizations they represent. Unlike legitimacy, which is based on the procedural rightfulness of the mandate of a regional development agency, justification is based on the means–ends coordination and on the results it yields, which can only be measured after the fact. Justification becomes asymmetric when, for some actors, the realization of particular ends becomes more important than for others, and efforts directed at the realization of its success also become different. Moreover, local actors engaged within a regional development agency do not equally need the agency to deliver, because they may be able to reach particular ends by other means. Thus, regional development agencies can be perfectly legitimate but still not realize their ends due to asymmetric justification.

Our understanding of asymmetric justification draws from the combination of two previously unconnected conceptualizations of legitimacy. First, the concepts of input, throughput and output legitimacy (Bäckstrand, 2006; Iusmen & Boswell, 2017; Scharpf, 1999, 2009; Schmidt, 2013) and, second, Arendt's (1970) differentiation of legitimacy and justification, in which legitimacy makes an appeal to the past, and justification takes place on basis of the rightfulness of actions in the present or near future. By identifying key aspects of both concepts and merging them into the concept of asymmetric justification, we are able to address three research questions:

- How do regional development agencies legitimize themselves?
- What challenges arise from these efforts?
- How can these challenges be dealt with?

We address these research questions by analysing decision-making processes in six regional development agencies in Switzerland. For our explorative study, we apply an interview-based research method that helps us understand how decisions are made that lead to the formulation and implementation of regional development strategies. Based on 31 semi-structured and in-depth expert interviews within the selected case studies, we identify several means through which regional development agencies aim at producing legitimacy as well as deal with the arising challenges.

This paper contributes to research and policy-making in several ways. From a scientific perspective, it stimulates the debate on how to operationalize legitimacy and thus to better understand the functioning of regional development agencies. By arguing for a clear distinction between legitimacy and justification, we intend to advance the scientific debate. From a policy-making perspective, the concept of asymmetric justification sheds a light on the functioning of regional development agencies by scrutinizing the challenges that may arise when regional development agencies – often with the aim to ensure legitimate processes – involve local state and non-state actors. A more differentiated understanding of asymmetric justification issues can help to improve legitimacy-producing processes and increase the capacity of regional development agencies for self-reflection and assertiveness.

The region as the mainstay of development processes

In recent years, the regional level has been identified both by practitioners and researchers as the most suitable level to carry out public tasks such as coordinating regional development processes (Coe et al., 2004; OECD, 2016, 2018; Paasi, 2011; Paasi & Metzger, 2017; Storper, 1997; Willi & Pütz, 2018). Correspondingly, the regional level is understood to be more efficient 'in facing the challenges of competition and meeting citizen preferences' (Keating, 2017, p. 10) than the national level, as it is closer to local interests and needs but not as entangled with local issues as the municipal level (Hanssen et al., 2011). Also, regions are understood to be 'key institutional levels' (p. 38) for promoting economic development and implementing regional development policies (Agnew, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Keating, 2014; Morgan, 2004; OECD, 2016).

In this paper, we understand regions as non-bounded and networked entities that stretch beyond single political-administrative or territorial borders and that are constituted through reoccurring social practices (Allen et al., 1998; Amin, 2004; MacLeod & Jones, 2007; Paasi, 2011). The perception of regions as social constructs is based on the understanding that a region is not simply a territorial shape demarked with clearly defined boundaries, but rather an unbounded entity shaped by reoccurring, everyday societal practices (Brenner, 2003; MacLeod & Jones, 2007; Paasi, 1991). Closely related to the understanding of regions as social constructs is the assumption that regions are relational entities. In relational thinking, regions are understood as being embedded in broader power constellations of different institutional structures and processes connecting different regions with each other (Allen et al., 1998). Furthermore, regions are not considered 'isolated, bounded islands' (Paasi, 2011, p. 11) but open entities with diffuse boundaries that are in constant exchange with other entities, thus stretching and networking beyond administrative and territorial borders (Amin, 2004).

The emergence and strengthening of regions and the regional level can be traced back to processes that originated in the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s, as well as in the ongoing globalization (Agnew, 2017; Brenner, 1999; Cox, 1997; Jessop, 2000; Jonas & Pincetl, 2006; Keating, 1998, 2017). The restructuring of the national state and the decentralization of state tasks have led to political rescaling processes in which state tasks and socioeconomic activities are migrated from the national to the supra- or subordinate levels (Jessop, 2016; Keating, 2013, 2014). It is understood that the ongoing regionalization of state power and the decentralization of national policies 'to the political level closest to the citizens, the local or regional level' serve to build legitimacy at the regional level, thereby fostering 'regional democracy' (Hanssen et al., 2011, p. 47). Public authorities add to the legitimacy of the regional level, as they provide the institutional framework for the emergence, maintenance and functioning of regional development agencies.

Due to the growing importance of the regional level, many public authorities in European countries have established regional development agencies with the mandate to initiate, coordinate, control and implement regional development processes (Furmankiewicz et al., 2010; Miles & Tully, 2007; Sotarauta, 2010; Syrett & Silva, 2001). These regional development agencies feature common governance characteristics: they consist of and depend on state and non-state actors, are weakly institutionalized, and lack legislative power (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Bevir, 2011; Willi et al., 2018). In order to adequately represent local interests, local actors representing public authorities or the private economy are often given positions within the strategic and operational bodies of regional development agencies. Thereby, local actors gain influence on the strategic orientation, thematic focus and concrete projects of regional development agencies. In addition to local interests, regional development agencies also depend on formal regulations, guidelines and development programmes issued by superordinate public authorities (e.g., Hanssen et al., 2011; Pearce & Ayres, 2009).

Legitimacy in regional development

The debate on legitimacy in the regional development literature reflects the wider debate on power dynamics, actor constellations and decision-making processes inherent in the long-standing collective action literature. In this paper, we focus on a specific aspect of collective decision-making in regional development processes that has so far been poorly studied: the production of legitimacy by regional development agencies. Legitimacy is regarded both by researchers and practitioners as a prerequisite for the functioning of regional development agencies (Blatter, 2007; Kraft & Wolf, 2018; OECD, 2018; regiosuisse, 2011). As regional development agencies are often understood as actors responsible for coordinating regional development, they need to be legitimate in order to make decisions and implement them. Thus, understanding the challenges that emerge when attempts are made to produce legitimacy are crucial for adequately responding to these challenges, ensuring more effective and self-reflective regional development agencies.

From a scientific point of view, it is understood that regional development agencies as key regional actors need to be legitimized in order to function – that is, to make decisions and act upon them (Blatter, 2007; Foster & Barnes, 2012; Pierre & Peters, 2005). Kraft and Wolf (2018, p. 76) emphasize that ‘without legitimacy, organisations cannot gain necessary resources and, therefore, struggle’. However, it is not only researchers who stress the importance of legitimacy for regional actors. Experts from regional development practices also recognize the importance of legitimacy for the functioning of regional development agencies: ‘regional development agencies can only successfully perform tasks if their members and supporting organizations legitimize them’ (regiosuisse, 2011, p. 12; authors’ own translation). Likewise, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) underlines the importance of legitimacy in building trust across different governmental levels and managing uncertainty in regional development processes (OECD, 2018).

In broad terms, legitimacy relates to the acceptance of a collective decision-making process by those actors who are affected by it (Busscher et al., 2014; Engelen et al., 2008). In other words, legitimacy can be interpreted as ‘the normative belief held by actors that the particular rule, institution or order ought to be obeyed’ (Bäckstrand, 2006, p. 291). However, the concept remains rather elusive, and a distinct definition of legitimacy is lacking (van Meerkerk et al., 2015). Instead, there are a variety of ways to operationalize legitimacy, of which the conceptual framework of input, throughput and output legitimacy is among the best known (Atalay, 2018; Bäckstrand, 2006; Iusmen & Boswell, 2017; Scharpf, 1999, 2009; Schmidt, 2013) and has received widespread attention, particularly in political, environmental and planning studies. Moreover, a growing interest in the conceptual framework has recently become particularly apparent in regional development and regional governance studies (Birnbaum, 2016; Chatzopoulou, 2015; Doberstein & Millar, 2014; Johansson, 2016; van Meerkerk et al., 2015). However, empirical studies that use the conceptual framework to study the functioning of regional development agencies are rare (Airaksinen et al., 2014). In the following, we will outline the concepts of input, throughput and output legitimacy briefly and clarify how we operationalize them for our analysis.

First, input legitimacy relates to an actor’s capability to create participative and inclusive decision-making processes that are accessible to all actors potentially affected by the outcomes of these processes (Bäckstrand, 2006; Scharpf, 1999). In line with this argument, we conclude that regional development agencies produce input legitimacy successfully if they design decision-making processes characterized by a balanced representation and participation of different actors (Birnbaum, 2016; Schmidt, 2013).

Second, throughput legitimacy relates to an actor’s capability to process diverse and rich input in a decision-making process by fostering equal participation and interaction between various actors (Schmidt, 2013; van Meerkerk et al., 2015). In this perspective, we deduce that regional

development agencies produce legitimacy by designing transparent and inclusive decision-making processes with diverse participation opportunities in place (Doberstein & Millar, 2014; Iusmen & Boswell, 2017).

Third, output legitimacy captures an actor's capability to solve problems effectively (Bäckstrand, 2006; Schmidt, 2013). Although output legitimacy is commonly understood to assess the effectiveness of an outcome of a decision-making process, it can also be used to measure 'institutional effectiveness' (Bäckstrand, 2006, p. 295). Institutional effectiveness describes an actor's capability to reach anticipated outcomes. It incorporates a variety of values, such as 'leadership, clear goal formulation and policy coherence' (p. 295). Unlike outcome effectiveness, which can only be measured at the end of decision-making processes, institutional effectiveness can be assessed *during* decision-making processes. Accordingly, we argue that regional development agencies produce output legitimacy when they take clear leadership in decision-making processes and formulate goals purposefully.

Another distinction has been made by Hannah Arendt. Her *On Violence* (1970) distinguishes between legitimacy and justification. In her understanding, legitimacy is not related to outcomes, but justification is. While an authority can be legitimized from the outset by being accepted to carry out certain actions, it must later justify its actions and prove the rightfulness of the means towards an end:

[Legitimacy is derived] from the initial getting together rather than from any action that then may follow. Legitimacy, when challenged, bases itself on an appeal to the past, while justification relates to an end that lies in the future ... justification loses its plausibility the farther its intended end recedes into the future. (p. 52)

According to Arendt, legitimacy is based on the procedural rightfulness of the mandate of a regional development agency and precedes the establishment of the agency. Justification, in contrast, is based on means-ends coordination and on the results it yields, and thus can be measured only after the fact. In different words, a regional development agency that does not deliver on its promises has not a legitimacy problem but a justification problem. By making the distinction between legitimacy and justification, we can make a distinction between the initial establishment of a regional development organization and the actions that may follow from it. In line with Arendt's understanding of legitimacy and justification, we argue that regional development agencies can be legitimated beforehand with their establishment but nevertheless need to justify their activities on a recurring basis.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We place our analysis within the context of regional development processes in Switzerland. Studying the Swiss case is highly instructive because, due to a longstanding tradition of federalism, subsidiarity and decentralization of state tasks to subnational levels (cantonal, regional and municipal), the Swiss political system is highly fragmented (Ladner, 2016). Within the national territory of 41,300 km², the population of 8.4 million inhabitants is dispersed across 26 cantons and more than 2200 municipalities. As a consequence, the demand for coordination is high, and thus a large diversity of regional governance forms can be studied in a comparably confined space. This demand for coordination has been reinforced in recent years by the paradigm shift in regional policy, which has led to today's regional development policy approaches being even more multi-level and multi-actor oriented.

As in other European countries, a paradigm shift in regional development has also changed the priorities in Switzerland regarding incentives, territorial coverage and financing (Blöchliger & Kamal-Chaoui, 2003; OECD, 2006, 2016). Whereas previous regional policies focused on

regional equalization and the reduction of disparities (through top-down-managed infrastructure development programmes within single sectors), newer policies aim to promote bottom-up and local entrepreneurship, innovation and competition among the different Swiss regions (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Mayer & Baumgartner, 2014; Messerli, 2004).

In the course of this paradigm shift, regional development agencies have also gained greater importance in Switzerland and are today seen as key players in coordinating regional development processes (SECO, 2017; Willi & Pütz, 2018). This includes managing decision-making processes, drafting regional development strategies, implementing projects, and organizing the exchange among various regional and local actors in order to jointly promote regional development. The vast majority of regional development agencies in Switzerland are organized as associations, although other legal forms, such as public-sector or private-stock corporations, do exist. As associations, they have no formal legal power and strongly depend on their members, who are local state and non-state actors and include representatives from local municipal councils, cantonal authorities, private sector associations, companies and individuals.

The methodical approach of this paper is based on a qualitative case study design that allows for an exploratory and open-research process. For this purpose, we selected the following six regional development agencies across Switzerland: (1) Développement du Nord Vaudois (ADNV), (2) LuzernPlus, (3) Parc Ela, (4) Regio Frauenfeld, (5) Region Oberrhein and (6) Region Thal/Naturpark Thal (Figure 1). All selected cases are organized as associations and located in different Swiss cantons. They also have publicly accessible regional development strategies available online.

The empirical evidence of this paper is drawn from 31 semi-structured, in-depth expert interviews conducted between April and December 2017 with various state and non-state actors who held various positions within the management centre or the strategic or operational bodies of the selected regional development agencies. The interviewed experts included regional managers, municipal councillors, local businesspeople heading large enterprises, small entrepreneurs and

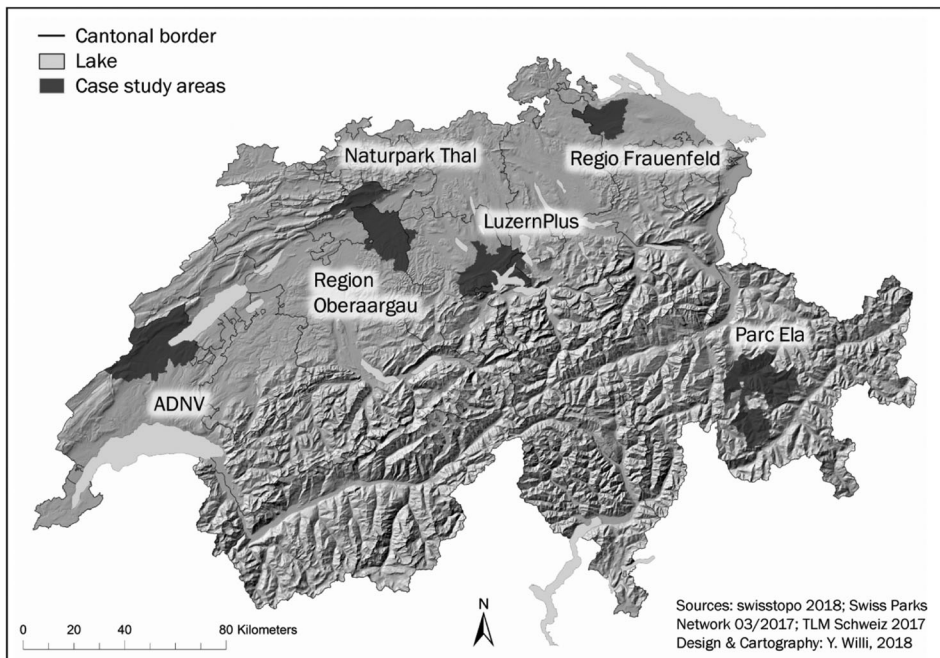


Figure 1. Selected case study areas across Switzerland.

self-employed persons. In total, eight of the interviewed actors were drawn from the management centres of the regional development agencies, of which five were heads and three were in a senior management position. At the strategic level, 10 interviewees were selected, of which five had a state background and were either presidents ($n = 4$) or members of a municipal council ($n = 1$). The other five interviewees on the strategic level were selected from the non-state realm. Four of them represented local private sector associations (e.g., chamber of commerce, tourism association). At the operative level, a total of 13 interviews were conducted. Of these interviewees, four were state actors, who all were members of different municipal councils. Of the interviewed nine non-state actors, four represented a local private sector association, whereas the others were either self-employed ($n = 2$) or managing directors of local small and medium-sized enterprises ($n = 3$).

The interviews were based on a guideline that allowed the interviews to develop into a consistent and structured but open conversation (Valentine, 2005). The interviewees were asked questions about the organization, structures and functioning of regional development agencies; the decision-making processes behind the design and implementation of regional development strategies; and challenges encountered during these processes. In addition, interviewees were asked if and how these challenges were addressed.

In each case study region, the first interview was held with either the head or a senior manager of each regional development agency in order to gain an overview of its organization, structure and decision-making processes. During these initial interviews, further potential interviewees were identified through the snowball system. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours and were conducted in German ($n = 29$) or French ($n = 4$) at the working places ($n = 31$) or homes ($n = 2$) of the interviewees. All interview quotes used for this paper were translated into English by the authors.

Subsequently, the interviews were recorded, transcribed and qualitatively analysed for content using MaxQDA 12.0. The applied coding system in MaxQDA was partly pre-defined by the guiding interview questions and partly created during the coding itself. The interviews were revised several times to ensure that the final coding system was applied to all of them. The codes were grouped into three main categories: (1) measures to produce legitimacy; (2) conflicts arising from producing legitimacy; and (3) measures taken by regional development agencies to address emerging challenges.

RESULTS

How regional development agencies legitimize themselves

Based on the results, we identify several means by which regional development agencies produce input, throughput and output legitimacy. First, to produce input legitimacy and secure a balanced representation of different local actors, regional development agencies apply different membership rules as a means to regulate the inclusion of both local state and non-state actors. In all except one of the studied regional development agencies, the majority of the members are municipal councillors. This means that municipal councillors hold the largest number of votes in both the general assembly and the board of directors. In general, the number of votes held by a single municipal council depends on the number of inhabitants of its municipality. An exception is the ADNV, where every delegate member has one vote each, regardless of whether that member is a state or non-state actor. However, when voting on sensitive issues that affect the municipalities only, such as the amount of the municipal contributions to be paid to the regional development agency, non-state actors are excluded here as well.

Besides local state members, regional development agencies additionally target the inclusion of non-state actors by regulating access to the regional development agencies' main bodies via membership. In three cases (ADNV, Parc Ela, Region Oberrhein), non-state actors are granted full membership and may hold official functions, including voting rights, within the strategic bodies of

the regional development agency (e.g., general assembly, executive board). Although any local non-state actor (i.e., from legal entities such as large companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, associations, and interest groups to private persons and families) can become a member and delegate, the seats on the executive board are distributed strategically among local non-state actors with a certain reputation, either because they represent local private associations (i.e., chamber of commerce, tourism associations) and/or because they are locally committed to promoting the cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental values of the region.

As it 'is relatively rare that someone volunteers' (municipal councillor, Region Thal/Naturpark), regional development agencies often contact potential candidates directly and invite them to take up a seat at the executive board, such as reported by a municipal councillor in the Region Oberrhein: 'The position was not advertised. You could not simply sign up just because you were interested. Instead, you had to be requested by the region, by the management center.' Interestingly, non-state actors often perceive it positive to hold a position within the regional development agency strategic bodies, as it presents an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns directly to municipal councillors:

The president of the [local] economic chamber of commerce is also a member of the executive board [of the regional development agency]. And with this, he has, somehow, a political voice. ... Well, not directly, but he can tell his opinion to the politicians, the municipal councilors, who are members of the same executive board. (economic actor, Region Thal/Naturpark Thal)

In contrast to the regional development agencies that grant membership to non-state actors, there are others who refrain from it (LuzernPlus, Regio Frauenfeld, Region Thal/Naturpark Thal). However, this does not mean that local non-state actors are excluded from the decision-making process; instead, they are often given an advisory role. This is not equally appreciated by everyone. For some, as long as there arise no major problems, they feel satisfied with having no direct influence:

I speak on behalf of my colleagues when I say that I don't think that we need more influence. If there really was something wrong, things would be different; but in general, I find the regional development agency quite well organized and the region prospering. (economic actor, Regio Frauenfeld)

For others, having only an advisory function can be frustrating: 'For six years, I was a member of the executive board. And the only thing I could do was motivate them [the municipal councillors] to be a little bit braver' (economic actor, LuzernPlus). However, frustration can also arise in regional development agencies that grant full membership to non-state actors. Here, non-state members report being outnumbered by state members and their greater voting power: 'It is obvious that it is the municipalities that decide. If they agree on something, we [the non-state actors] do not stand much chance' (economic actor, Region Oberrhein).

Second, to produce throughput legitimacy and ensure a transparent and inclusive decision-making process, regional development agencies try to reach out to the wider public by means of organizing information events and workshops and using local media channels for communication. In three regional development agencies (Region Thal/Naturpark Thal, Parc Ela and Region Oberrhein), public workshops for strategic decision-making were organized, which were open to local inhabitants, visitors and others interested in the region. The workshops were advertised widely, with invitations disseminated via local newspapers and regional newsletters. However, despite this effort, the interest from the local public remained low. The head of the regional development agency Parc Ela reported that the response rate to the workshops was 'relatively modest' and explains that 'activating people on topics concerning the region is difficult because they are very much anchored in their village life'.

To avoid open workshops that attract only small numbers from the local population, the three regional development agencies ADNV, LuzernPlus and Regio Frauenfeld chose a different approach. They directly invite targeted local actors to attend workshops and participate in regional decision-making processes: 'We have specifically selected the innovative actors of our region. Also, we did not target the heads of individual companies but rather representatives of the trade associations or the chamber of commerce and industry' (head of regional development agency, LuzernPlus). However, even when actors are specifically selected, it remains a challenge to motivate local actors to commit themselves to the activities of regional development agencies.

Third, in order to produce output legitimacy and clarify leadership roles and strategic goals, regional development agencies chose to design and implement regional development strategies. A strategic planning approach is now seen as increasingly important for regional development agencies (Sotarauta, 2010). For example, the head of the regional development agency LuzernPlus confirmed that 'without strategy, one is lost'. Relatedly, a municipal president and member of the ADNV highlights the added value of regional development strategies, such as that 'the [regional development] strategy supports cooperation between municipalities – even on issues on which we disagree'.

The six regional development agencies' strategies differ in their degree of detail. Where four of regional development agencies (ADNV, Parc Ela, Regio Frauenfeld and Region Oberrhein) designed detailed and extensive regional development strategies, two (LuzernPlus and Region Thurgau) drafted short and broadly formulated ones. The detailed regional development strategies include comprehensive descriptions of goals, project plans, and measures and identify project-executive actors and potential donors early on. They are not necessarily very long documents but rather condensed and rich texts: 'Everything needs to fit on one page. ... We deliberately do not want to produce too much paper, but rather "bring projects to the ground". That's our motto. In any case, there is still too much paper produced anyway' (head of regional development agency, LuzernPlus). Designing a detailed regional development strategy is time-consuming and resource intensive, as the involved actors must agree on potential conflictual aspects, such as budget plans, the acceptance or rejection of projects and thematic priorities. However, once approved, detailed strategies are a powerful tool for regional development agencies to assume leadership in performing actions towards regional development.

In contrast, broadly formulated regional development strategies comprise general goals, non-binding visions and intended development steps, without attributing responsibility to specific actors or concretizing details such as budget, project plans and project partners. Because potentially conflictual questions (e.g., budget plans, projects) are not discussed beforehand, broadly formulated regional development strategies are rather quickly approved by the different actors involved in the strategic decision-making process. However, as neither leadership roles nor competences have been clarified, implementation is often difficult because no one feels responsible for it. This can cause misunderstandings and frustration:

People thought that the outlined project ideas in the strategy had already been approved as full projects and would be implemented soon. We had to correct that view and explain that the project needed to be developed further and that, additionally, funding had not been secured yet. (head of regional development agency, Region Oberrhein)

Asymmetric justification and the challenges of producing legitimacy

Having identified the several means that regional development agencies apply to produce legitimacy, we now turn to analyse the arising challenges. The results indicate that by attempting to legitimize themselves, regional development agencies create challenges that amplify their malfunctioning, therefore limiting their capacity to make decisions and act upon them. In the following,

we show how these challenges can be attributed to what we call ‘asymmetric justification’. As discussed in the introduction, asymmetric justification refers to a situation in the decision-making process in which local actors involved in regional development agencies fail to justify their regional engagement to the local authorities and organizations they represent. Asymmetric justification can hamper decision-making because the involved actors must justify their commitment at the regional level to different bodies at the local level. However, challenges arise when the level at which actions are aimed (e.g., regional development processes) is not congruent with the level at which the actors involved must justify themselves. This can lead to a situation in which the involved actors become incapable of acting or making decisions on behalf of the regional level. As regional development agencies depend on these actors, they become incapable of acting themselves and ultimately fail to function.

In the following, we identify the challenges that may arise when regional development agencies produce input, throughput or output legitimacy and show how these can be linked to asymmetric justification. First, regional development agencies produce input legitimacy by including a variety of local actors by either granting full membership to everyone or limiting membership to state actors and conferring advisory roles to non-state actors. In both cases, regional development agencies enable local actors to take over certain positions at the strategic or operational level and thus facilitate participation in regional decision-making processes. As these local actors represent local bodies, they need to justify their engagement at the regional level to these local bodies. However, due to the asymmetry in interests, goals and perimeter between the local and the regional level, the appointed members of regional development agencies often find it difficult or even fail to justify their actions to the local bodies they represent – or, as the president of the local chamber of commerce and member of the executive board of the *Regio Frauenfeld* states, ‘because the perimeter of the regional development agency goes beyond ours, I cannot and do not want to commit to activities that go beyond our perimeter’. This dilemma indicates that local interests trump regional interests, preventing local actors from fully participating in regional decision-making processes. In addition, it points to the clashing asymmetry in misconceptions of a region and its border, which, in this case, prevents joint action.

This dilemma is not limited to non-state actors; municipal councillors also frequently reported that they had difficulty justifying the decisions taken at the regional level to their fellow municipal councillors. Although they are officially commissioned to take a seat within the strategic body of a regional development agency, they are often confronted with scepticism by citizens and fellow councillors. Often, it is feared that municipal interests will be undermined. In that vein, an entrepreneur, who is a member of the executive board of *LuzernPlus*, observed: ‘Municipal councilors are repeatedly summoned back and [confronted with questions such as] “Are you out of your mind?” when they try to convince their fellow municipal councilors of the importance of realizing regional interests.’ This results in frequent delays or postponements of decisions, which ultimately prevent regional development agencies from making decisions and acting upon them.

Second, regional development agencies produce throughput legitimacy by reaching out to the wider public. Often, they organize workshops that are open to the general public or target selected local actors. However, mobilizing the local public remains challenging due to the lack of interest in regional activities, which are often perceived as vague, distant and difficult to grasp. A managing director of a large company and chairman of the local trade association, who is involved in the *ADNV*, further notes weakness of regional identity as the reason for the lack of interest in regional issues: ‘It’s a purely administrative region. It has no sense of meaning. ... It is difficult to create a common identity here.’

As the local public is first and foremost interested in meeting local expectations and realizing local needs, justification for engaging on the regional level is often difficult. It is particularly difficult to implement regional measures if the local public and authorities perceive it to have too little benefit for them. For regional development agencies, it is hard to justify why inhabitants of one

municipality should commit themselves to the implementation of regional projects in the next one.

Third, regional development agencies produce output legitimacy by designing and implementing regional development strategies. Although regional development strategies are designed in a joint effort comprising different state and non-state actors, it remains a challenge to implement them. Again, these challenges can be linked to asymmetric justification. Often, local actors resist implementing regional development strategies, even in cases in which they have been involved in the decision-making processes. As an example, a few years ago the regional development agency Parc Ela initiated a collaborative process with local bakers to create a regionally recognized specialty bread. Despite their initial interest and involvement in the decision-making process, however, most of them later lost interest in the project by arguing that they would not attract more attention locally by promoting a regional bread.

Another challenge arises from asymmetric justification because actors who have been appointed by local bodies as representatives (e.g., president of the local chamber of commerce, director of a tourism association) are first and foremost accountable to implement the strategies of these bodies. Even if these local actors are involved in the decision-making behind regional development strategies, they do not fully acknowledge them:

I have always perceived the regional strategy as a non-binding proposal. I would never have signed a [regional] strategy that would be binding and rigorously implemented. ... The strategy that is binding for me is the one approved by the delegates of the tourism association. (director of local tourism association, Parc Ela)

Although regional development strategies have been jointly designed by various state and non-state actors, they still might not be acknowledged by these actors. Also, as these actors often represent institutions that follow their own strategies (e.g., communal strategies, business plans), justifying why additionally a regional development strategy should be implemented can be difficult. This lack of congruency between different regional and local development strategies thus limits the assertiveness of the regional development strategy. As a result, regional development agencies can become incapable of acting.

Addressing the challenges associated with asymmetric justification

In order to better understand the functioning of regional development agencies, it is necessary to tackle the challenges associated with asymmetric justification. In our case studies, we found some examples of how asymmetric justification can be addressed successfully. First, it is important that local actors representing local interests in regional development agencies are given sufficient leverage and capacity to act by their respective local bodies and, in particular, are encouraged to adopt a regional perspective. A good example can be found in the ADNV, in which one of the member municipalities has a legislative programme in which municipal councillors are encouraged to actively participate in the regional development agency. Additionally, they are granted sufficient support to fully commit themselves to a regional perspective. For the president of this municipality, who holds a strategic position within the ADNV, this official document is a crucial source of support and legitimacy that helps him justify his engagement with the regional development agency: 'I have the explicit permission of my colleagues to actively engage myself' (municipal president, ADNV). In contrast, in the case of LuzernPlus, it is the regional development agency itself that requires members to explicitly adopt a regional perspective. The guiding document, 'Strategic Planning for the Period 2014–7' states that '[b]oard members must regard themselves as representatives of the region and argue from a regional point of view. If a member wants to represent a particular interest, it must be declared' (LuzernPlus, 2013, p. 3; authors' own translation). Making the requirement of 'adopting a regional point of view' explicit from the beginning adds to the

transparency of decision-making processes and thus can make justification much easier for the involved actors.

Second, our results highlight the need to clarify the roles and responsibilities of local actors within regional development agencies as early as possible. The head of the Regio Frauenfeld has identified the need for action: 'It is not exactly chaos, but sometimes it's not clear who has what role and which tasks belongs in which process. However, we are currently in the middle of clarifying this.' Also, clarifying the roles of regional development agencies could at least help reduce the fear of some local authorities and private business of losing competences and authority. A senior manager of LuzernPlus states that 'it is important that we avoid taking away anything from the municipalities if they do not agree on that. Instead, we need to provide support, and if that works, it means that we are also accepted'. In addition, the head of Parc Ela points out that it is important that regional development agencies, as quasi-state-backed organizations, do not compete with private organizations and their services. Rather, regional development agencies should confine themselves to providing assistance and guidance to local actors:

I do not think that it is our job to take on a private-sector role because we also live on public funds and thus could compete with private companies. Instead, we should be those who initiate, support, but not necessarily those – or only in selected areas – who implement projects. (head of regional development agency, Parc Ela)

Third, closely related to the need to clarify roles and responsibilities is the need to discuss and reflect on the expectations that local actors have of regional development agencies. More often than not, local actors have high expectations, without being aware of their role in contributing to meeting these expectations. The head of the Region Thal/Naturpark Thal summarizes this dilemma as follows: 'The expectation here in the region is quite strong that we should promote economic development. But in fact, we don't even have an official mandate from the municipalities.' Thus, local actors need to understand that regional development agencies need to be granted sufficient decision-making capacities and resources in order to meet local expectations. Reviewing local expectations on regional development agencies and checking whether they are sufficiently equipped to meet these expectations should therefore become a top priority for local actors and policy-makers on different political levels alike.

CONCLUSIONS

Both practitioners and researchers understand legitimacy as a prerequisite for regional development agencies to function (Blatter, 2007; Kraft & Wolf, 2018; OECD, 2018; regiosuisse, 2011) – that is, to take decisions and act upon them. Taking this understanding as our starting position, this paper aimed at investigating how regional development agencies legitimize themselves, what challenges arise from these efforts, and how these can be addressed. The paper advances existing knowledge on the role of legitimacy in regional development (Bäckstrand, 2006; Keulartz & Leistra, 2008; Raitio & Harkki, 2014) by introducing and unpacking the concept of legitimacy and introducing asymmetric justification. This novel concept can help further push the debate on the functioning of regional development agencies by proposing a clear distinction between legitimacy and justification.

By conducting exploratory case studies in six regional development agencies across Switzerland, we discover a variety of strategies to produce legitimacy but, at the same time, observe that it is precisely these legitimizing strategies that impair decision-making in regional development agencies. Previous studies have associated such difficulties with a lack of financial and personnel resources (Marra, 2014; Pike et al., 2018; Rogge et al., 2013) or with dependency on other public institutions (Hanssen et al., 2011; Wellbrock et al., 2013). In addition, this paper highlights

asymmetric justification as a further limitation that can impair the functioning of regional development agencies. It is well known that actors based in one locality may prevent the implementation of regional actions, especially if these actions were to be manifested in a different locality (Rutgers-Zoet & Hospers, 2018). Our results advance this finding by pointing out that this mechanism does not have to be seen only as a mere prevention strategy of local actors. Instead, we link this mechanism to the realities and scope for action of regional development agencies. Our findings emphasize that this mechanism may be facilitated by the obligation for regional development agencies to legitimize themselves. Because they seek to legitimize their actions by involving local actors, there is a potential risk that local interests undermine regional ones.

Thus, future research should be concerned with the role of regional development agencies, not only in Switzerland but across Europe. Across many countries, development agencies operating on the regional level have been established with the promise of being better able than local governments to deliver public goods and services, thereby increasing the competitiveness of regions (Pearce & Ayres, 2009; Pomeranz & Decker, 2017; Sotarauta, 2010). However, it can be observed that regional development agencies often struggle to 'embrace and encourage more holistic economic development practices' (Miles & Tully, 2007, p. 865).

Besides focusing on the deliverables and tasks regional development agencies could fulfil in the future, further research should aim to answer the question of whether regional development agencies are effectively the best actors for promoting regional development and delivering regional services. More research on this question could also help to reinforce a debate about the current emphasis of many national regional development policies on fostering competitiveness among regions and across countries (Iammarino et al., 2017; Pike et al., 2016). Finally, there is a need for further research on the workings of asymmetric justification and its potential impacts on regional development processes. An improved understanding of the difficulty of regional development agencies to decide and act could help increase their assertiveness and capacity for self-reflection.

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