

# Implementing Sustainable Development on the Regional Level in Belarus

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## Abstract

In accordance with the new agenda adopted by the General Assembly of the UN, methodological and practical approaches to sustainable regional development were prepared in the Republic of Belarus. They were developed during 2015-2016 in the context of international technical help project "The Support of Regional and Local Development in Belarus" financed by the European Union. The main goal is to promote consistent changes in the management of regional and local development based on the strategies for sustainable regional development. The mentioned approaches are a body of principles, methods, methodic, directions, which provide economic efficiency, social justice and ecological security on the republican, regional and local levels through consensus, coherence of interests and coordination of central and local governments, as well as population, business structures, civil society institutions. These approaches considered, there were developed six strategies for sustainable development in the regions of the Republic of Belarus. However, the absence of legal and institutional basis complicates the practical implementation of the mentioned findings. Additionally, the advantages of inclusive management and information technologies while providing public services are not accounted for fully. We suppose that during further planning of sustainable development specific attention should be paid to its key aspects, the specifics of the Belarusian legal system and the broad information campaign. It is relevant in Belarus to develop a set of measures to implement sustainable regional development strategies, which also include access to basic electronic public services to all the sections of the population. It is also important to note that European migration processes influence the Republic of Belarus, therefore for the purpose of promoting ordered, safe and legal mobility we should return to the question of developing multiple nationality institute.

*Keywords: sustainable development, digital public services, digital divide, multiple nationality, local government, Republic of Belarus*

## 1. Introduction

The development of the Republic of Belarus is carried out with due account for world and European standards, which aim at providing the balance between human activities and sustaining the biosphere reproduction capabilities. The named approaches

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are fully implemented in terms of sustainable development. The 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary session of UN General Assembly approved the UN Summit final document “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, concerning the new agenda in the field of sustainable development after 2015. The leaders of major states undertook the commitment to implement the 17 Global Millennium Goals in order to place the world on the orbit of sustainable development. The Government of Belarus became actively involved in implementation of this initiative and on February 10, 2015 approved the National Strategy for Sustainable Social and Economic Development of the Republic of Belarus up to 2030. In order to stimulate the initiative and consider the peculiarities of the country’s regions (the capital city, oblasts, oblast’s units, cities with 50,000 or more inhabitants), the local authorities should have the regional strategies for sustainable development. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a methodology for sustainable regional development of Belarus and implement relevant regional strategies on its basis.

Contemporary innovative approaches to balanced development have shaped new ideas about environment organization, territorial arrangement, population increase, the value of strategic planning, regional planning included. Strategic regional development comes under jurisdiction of regional authorities and aims at defining the objectives, tasks and priorities for the sustainable development of each region. It is an important instrument of assuring population’s living quality, it integrates economic, social and ecological policies, separate industrial efforts and departmental interests for the common interest – sustainable development.

Earlier in scientific literature on sustainable development there were introduced approaches to effective timely distribution of resources when natural capital is adequately considered (Daly, 1992); involvement regional sustainable development agencies into implementation of sustainable development strategies (Gibbs, 1998); increasing region competitiveness on the basis of urban settlements typology (Bogdanovich & Chizh, 2012); ranging Czech regions in terms of sustainable development indicators (Hudrlikova & Petkovova, 2013); interaction on local level for developing regional plans (Mempel-Śnieżyk, 2014); regional sustainable development assessment (Smetana, Tamásy, Mathys, & Heinz, 2015) etc. It is important to note that Belarusian scientists have broadly researched the country sustainable development questions in general, though there are some unresolved matters on the regional level. These include, for example, such issues: introducing unified approaches to planning of sustainable regional development, approval of sustainable development strategies for the regions of Belarus; participation of population, business, civil society institutions in developing of the named strategies; introduction of information and communication technologies for strengthening the feedback among all the stakeholders; creation of additional guarantees for implementing the political rights and freedoms etc.

## **2. Belarusian Methodology for National Planning of Regional Development**

The methodological and practical approached to national planning of regional development in the Republic of Belarus were worked out in the context of international technical help project “The Support of Regional and Local Development in Belarus” ENPI/2013/304-759 financed by the European Union. The project aimed to promote

consistent changes in the management of regional and local development and the making of six strategies for regional sustainable development for the six oblasts of the Republic of Belarus.

**The methodology for national planning of regional development** is a body of principles, methods and approaches, which provide economic efficiency, social justice and ecological security on the republican, regional and local levels through consensus, coherence of interests and coordination of central and local governments, as well as population, business structures, civil society institutions. **The goal** of the mentioned planning is to provide sustainable development and leading positions of the regions, country in general as to global economic competitiveness to achieve a high level of population's life quality.

In terms of the named methodological approaches it is advised to implement the principles of transparency and partnership more broadly on all the level of creation and approval of documents concerning national regional planning in Belarus, as well as to provide additional guarantees to consider the public opinion, starting from the moment of creation of the work group for sustainable development strategies up to the implementation monitoring and assessment. The transparency principle of national regional development means that the methods of forecasting and planning, the reporting documents developed for national planning of regional development, excluding the clauses which contain information related to state secret, are to be officially published and a topic of public discussion. The partnership and common financing principle means the usage of flexible innovative financial instruments (grants, credits, loans, other support forms) along with republican and local budgets. For example, the financial instruments applied in the EU countries - European Regional Development Fund, the Fund for cohesion policy (2014-2020) and European Social Fund, which finance to support regional development initiatives, including economic growth, occupation, competitiveness stimulation, infrastructure investments. In the Republic of Belarus such instruments are represented by Belarusian Innovation Fund, Belarusian Fund for Entrepreneur's Financial Support, International Fund for Agricultural Development. It is essential to introduce the regulatory impact assessment in Belarus, which would allow to predict the impact of state legal regulations, reveal excessive liabilities, prohibitions and restrictions, unreasonable expenditures of economic entities, and on such basis make legal decisions most objective among all the possible alternatives.

In addition to this, it is advised to broaden the list of national planning entities for regional development, to include therein civilians, businesses, non-governmental associations, labor unions, political parties, bodies for territorial public self-government, educational institutions, scientific organization and other stakeholders.

It is recommended that the development of the project for regional sustainable development has the following interrelated stages:

- 1) organization of the drafting the regional development planning documents;
- 2) analysis of regional situation and exposure of current republican and regional problems;
- 3) goal setting for sustainable development of the republican and regional level;
- 4) drafting the regional sustainable development strategy and its implementation plan;
- 5) public hearing of the draft documents for regional sustainable development, its editing

after the hearings;

- 6) approval of the regional sustainable development planning with all the stakeholders;
- 7) approval of the regional sustainable development planning on the level of local authorities;
- 8) implementation of the regional sustainable development strategy and plan;
- 9) monitoring and assessment during implementation of the regional sustainable development strategy and plan.

The aforementioned considered the approaches to national planning of regional development were formulated. It is advised to organize this process in a “bottom-up” manner, engaging a broad range of stakeholders, including population, businesses, civil society institutions. It is recommended to use the algorithm during the sustainable development planning on all the levels of local government. Supposedly, such sustainable regional development strategies should become the key elements in implementing the National sustainable development strategy of Belarus, while the introduction of new principles and instruments would be the basis for consensus, the display of initiative and potential application of everyone concerned about the country’s future.

During the development of the mentioned methodology the European experience was taken into account: European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region, aimed at strengthening cooperation, confronting this large region’s problems, facilitating the balanced development; Europe 2020: A European Strategy for Smart, Sustainable, and Inclusive Growth, which settles the vision for European social market economy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3. Preparation of Sustainable Regional Development Strategies in Belarus**

The named methodology was developed simultaneously with the six regional strategies for sustainable development. The sustainable regional development strategies were developed for the six regions of the Republic of Belarus, Minsk city excluded as it has a special status. The regional strategies were prepared by international experts, representatives of regional and district executive committees, scientific and educational institutions, entrepreneurs unions, non-governmental organizations, active citizens. The information source of the regional strategies are official documents, statistical data, Belarusian research organization materials, work meetings, survey results.

The developers of regional strategies carried out the survey through project internet site and Google resources. The representatives of regional and district executive committees, business, non-governmental organizations, scientific and educational institutions, social institutions, young population were invited to participate in the survey. Information about the survey was spread through mass media, by the participants of the work group. The total of 269 forms were obtained. During the survey the authors of regional strategies noted the passive attitude of the regional population, including the representatives of commercial and non-commercial organizations, which could be explained by lack of confidence towards the mass media, where the survey information was placed, as well as by the doubts of the population about the inclusion of their opinion in the survey final results (Usenkov, 2016).

As a result of regional strategies facts, figures, ideas and propositions of various social

groups were systematized. Local authorities and self-government bodies also experienced the shared work with the population, entrepreneurs, public associations. Regional strategies imply an issue-based approach, when the resources are concentrated on the key issue of regional development, while the system approach has the targets for all the regional activities. It is assumed that the named strategies would be supplemented by the activities programs (plans) on its implementation.

Based on the methodology for national planning of regional development, analysis of its implementation in terms of the six strategies for regional sustainable development there were certain legal, organizational and cultural barriers uncovered.

The process of planning and forecasting on the local level is regulated by the legal acts, which do not include such new forms and methods of regional development as regional sustainable development strategies. This restriction could be overcome with the help of broadening the competencies of local government and self-government bodies, i.e. to include in their competencies the drafting and approval of the regional sustainable development strategies, the same could be done for the Minsk city authorities, district and regional cities' authorities; with the help of amendments to the respective legislation. For example, it is necessary to accelerate the adoption of the State Indicative Planning, Forecasting and National Economy Development Programs of the Republic of Belarus Act, to make amendments to the Local Government and Self-Government in the Republic of Belarus Act in terms of development and approval of the regional sustainable development strategies.

While preparing the regional sustainable development strategies the developers noted the difficulty of engaging various organization representatives into document drafting. The parties often defended their own interests without accounting for the other opinions (Berchenko, 2016). Currently the interaction of local government and self-government with population and legal entities is primarily regulated by legislation on public and legal entities' appeals, on republican and local assemblies. Without underestimating the role of these communication means, we should note that public discussion skills are still in high demand. We suppose that the public opinion, other stakeholders' opinion need to be taken into account while carrying public hearings on regional sustainable development planning, the procedure of such hearings should be legally regulated. It is also important to include in the local authorities' operation procedures the procedure for participation of public and business representatives in the Local assemblies and executive committees' meetings.

The authors discovered that there are certain difficulties in defining the growth points, competitive advantages, key regional issues, regulatory impact assessment implementation. Generally, the proposed methods are largely different from the established planning practices, therefore it is still essential to organize educational forums, seminars, round table discussions and conferences on the issues of regional sustainable development, analysis of the regional situation, regulatory impact assessment implementation.

#### **4. Legal Environment for Further Development of Transparent State Authorities with the Help of Information Technologies**

The developers of regional strategies have repeatedly stressed the importance of transparency principle for strategic planning of regional sustainable development. The necessity of effective, accountable and transparent institutions on all levels is mentioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs points out, the implementation of the named task is possible through “opening” of the state bodies and organizations’ data (United Nations, 2016).

The local government and self-government bodies in Belarus put enormous efforts into creation of electronic databases and databanks, online interaction. According to the decisions of the Head of the state, the web-sites of the state bodies and other governmental organizations, on the local level included, were created. Nevertheless, there are still additional reserves for the application of informational technologies. We consider the publication of machine-readable data (open data), including publication of sustainable development statistics, strategies, decisions, plans and programs in this field on local executive and regulatory bodies’ web-site to be a promising trend.

The publication of open data is complicated by the fact, that Belarusian legislation does not specify the authorities of information owner, the categories of public documents are indistinct. The mentioned issues are often regulated in terms of freedom of information legislation, they were firstly featured in the Swedish Freedom of the Press Act (Granath, Alariksson, & Axelsson, 2004). This Act states, that in case if an organization is not responsible for data collection, but possesses information for technical processing, storing, backup, it has not the right to transfer the data to a third party (The Freedom of the Press Act). Swedish society has the right to access all the official documents with the exception of drafts of supplementary decisions and internal reports (Regeringskansliet, 2009). We suppose that introduction of similar norms into Belarusian legislation would allow to increase legal certainty in this field.

Accordingly, the increase of transparency could be achieved by publication of open data related to sustainable development, as well as strategies, decisions, plans and programs on the web-sites of local executive and regulatory bodies. At the same it is necessary to specify the authorities of the information owners and the public documents categories.

#### **5. Provision of Addition Guarantees for Exercising Civil Right and Liberties on the Basis of Nationality Institute**

Considering current world and regional developments, the relevance of migration policy changes during regional strategic planning in the Republic of Belarus increases. Our country plays the role of a transit country of migrants heading to the European Union and a destination country for migrants from former Soviet Republics. Migration is an effective instrument for economic development in some European countries. The lack of human resources, insufficient cultural and professional development are threats to sustainable regional development of any country. Therefore, the issues of planning the migratory processes, creation of most favorable conditions for early economic, cultural and political migrants’ integration into the host society take on

particular importance.

The man, its rights and liberties are a key factor and basis for sustainable economic development of contemporary democratic state. The nationality institute most fully reflects the complex of rights and liabilities; it provides all political, economic and social rights. In this regard many countries establish their preferences for migrants' conferment of nationality based on the level of their education, industrial and other skills, considering the needs of the national economy, the necessities to develop certain scarcely populated regions. In order to fully satisfy the requirement for sustainable development and to ensure the migrants' integration, as a rule, such countries recognize multiple nationality. They usually take measures to its development through signing international treaties, which sanction, regulate and develop this legal institution helping to resolve the issues of certain citizens, for example, in terms of active duties. In such manner migrants have a chance to define political, economic and other development of the countries of their nationality, thus increasing the interdependence of such countries in exercising of human rights, which affects the planning of sustainable regional development. It stands to mention that in certain cases bipatrim is a forced measure, because a couple of countries prohibit the withdrawal of its nationality, which leads to the increase in the number of multiple nationality cases and to growth of the related issues. In absence of legal procedures for resolving such issues, bipatrim does not stimulate sustainable regional development and creates additional political and economic risks. It is no coincidence that in 19<sup>th</sup> century France granted conferment of nationality to a substantial number of migrant and subsequently faced the impossibility to resolve certain economic and political issues, including military recruitment, since in certain regions foreigners prevailed over citizens.

As a result, the number of bipatrids has risen, as well as has the number of multiple nationality-related issues, comprising multiple loyalty for countries of nationality, fulfilment of rights and obligations related to the countries of nationality, threats of changing political regimes using bipatrids etc.

These problems caused rejection and prohibition of multiple nationality in some countries, for example, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia. This, nevertheless, does not hinder other countries, including Italy, Germany, Spain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Great Britain, to set their own rules and programs for multiple nationality development, taking into account the necessary specifics of regional development and restrictions.

The drafters of the European Convention on Nationality note the countries' different approaches to multiple nationality and admit that every state has the right to decide within its national legislation which would be the consequences of its citizen acquiring or having other nationality, thus the right for multiple nationality is shaped. At the same time the Convention suggests measures to resolve the issues of multiple nationality, including the active duty, which, though, did not lead to some countries' joining the Convention, for example, Russia, Belarus and others.

Considering the specifics of European migration processes, liberty of mobility, needs of regional development we suppose that for Belarus, like for other CIS countries and EU members, it is reasonable to formulate individual as well as coordinated, including European, programs for migrant engaging, adaptation and development, conferment of nationality, defining mutual social responsibility.

At the same time it is desirable to formalize the principle of social responsibility in the international law, including the responsibility towards other EU members while developing the norms for migrant admission on their territory and conferment of nationality. This should not only to stimulate sustainable regional along with development of migration relations, but also ensure the realization of Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in terms of right of a nationality and inadmissibility of its selectable withdrawal.

We believe that the regions which face up to migration intensification should take into account the named processes during the planning of sustainable development. Similarly, the most comprehensive adaptation of migrants which arrive in Belarus for permanent residency, could take place during conferment of nationality. Despite this there is possibility that migrants would prefer to keep the possibility of returning to the origin country. In this relation, it is necessary to reconsider the approaches to multiple nationality in the country.

## **6. Conclusion**

The implementation of sustainable development in Belarus on the regional level allowed to adapt the best international practices, pay attention of the local communities to new planning methods, stimulated the revision of traditional views on drafting the regional-level documents. It is worth noting, that further improvements in planning of sustainable regional development requires legal, organizational and educational measures on republican and local levels. On the republican level it is necessary to make legislative amendments in terms of implementing sustainable regional development, engaging into these processes of population, businesses and civil society institutions. The information and consultative work through organizing consistent advance training courses, round table discussions, seminars on sustainable development issues. The bodies of local government and self-government could autonomously revise their operational procedures; define the procedures for drafting the sustainable regional development strategies and organizing the public hearings. Special attention should be paid to strengthening the transparency principle of local government and self-government bodies by publishing open data and sustainable regional development documents on their web-sites. We suppose that the usage of multiple nationality institute and appointment of special activities on migrant adaptation in terms of sustainable regional development could become the additional guarantee for exercising citizen rights and liberties.

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