

# REGIONAL GOVERNMENT AND REGIONAL PLANNING IN THE HANOVER REGION

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**ABSTRACT:** The Hanover Region was created in 2001 as a new type of urban regional body. The article deals with the conditions and goals of this administrative reform. It examines factors that contributed to the success of the reform. It is emphasised that above all the region's predecessors' more than three decades of experience with regional tasks were crucial. Also important was the fact that the region was initiated by three 'doers' from the local level, starting a bottom-up process. Crucial for the region's profile is solidarity between the municipalities with their different economic and social structures. This is guaranteed by the contribution that all municipalities pay to the region. The article also deals with the regional planning principles in the Hanover Region, which has attempted to prepare and maintain a comprehensive physical structure. It is pointed out that the main advantage of the Hanover Region is that there is political responsibility at the regional level with directly elected politicians.

**KEY WORDS:** urban region, regional planning, regional reorganisation, regional government, city region

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## **Introduction: the Hanover Region – the centre of Lower Saxony**

The Hanover Region is the most important region in the north German federal state of Lower Saxony. It is a monocentric urban region with the city of Hanover as the capital of Lower Saxony and its economic and cultural centre. The Hanover Region encompasses the city and 20 surrounding municipalities, and covers approximately 2,300 km<sup>2</sup> with about 1.1 million inhabitants. On the one hand, the region is a transport node, an important industrial district, and a leading service location. On the other hand, it offers many leisure and recreational opportunities because more than 47% of its area is covered by landscape and nature conservation districts.

There is a great variety in the character of the landscape – flat areas with moors and Lower Saxony's largest lake (Steinhuder Meer) in the north, mountains in the south, and the Leine valley as a 'blue diagonal' from the region's southern border to its north-western border.

## **Regional approach since 1959**

By the end of the 1950s, some stakeholders in the city of Hanover and its surroundings felt a lack of joint regional planning and development incentives. The commuter area of Greater Hanover was part of three different state districts and contained five counties in addition to the city of Hanover as a county borough. The idea of a Greater Hanover Association was first launched



Fig. 1. Location of the Hanover region.

Source: BBSR Bonn 2010, Raumordnungsregionen 2009, cartographic elaboration by P. Sinuraya.

in 1959, and it took about three years until the parliament of Lower Saxony passed the Greater Hanover law in December 1962 (Priebis 2012). In 1963 the Greater Hanover Association started to operate. It covered nearly the entire commuter area of the city of Hanover with 209 other municipalities. Three of the surrounding counties (Hanover, Burgdorf and Neustadt) were totally incorporated while only a few municipalities

from the two other counties (Schaumburg-Lippe and Springe) became part of the Greater Hanover area.

The primary policy goal of the Greater Hanover Association in the sixties was to strengthen the economic area of central Lower Saxony by overcoming local government and state district borders. Its main responsibility was not just physical planning, but fostering regional devel-

opment. The association also provided coordination and support in the fields of recreation and public transport. The main activities in the sixties were setting up regional planning guidelines, preparing the first regional plan, coordinating public transport, developing industrial sites, and improving recreational areas. As a result of the political debates in the late sixties, in 1970 Greater Hanover Transport was set up, starting as an organisational division of the Greater Hanover Association.

In the sixties and seventies a reorganisation of local governments was a general approach in Germany, and in Lower Saxony most of the municipalities and counties were given a new structure in 1974. In the Greater Hanover area a new county with 20 municipalities around the core city was set up, while Hanover itself remained a county borough and was enlarged by the incorporation of some neighbouring municipalities. The idea of incorporating the city of Hanover into a new county was also considered, but as it was emphasised in the bill, the attempt to form one responsible body for the entire region was postponed to a later stage of the reform.

Although the Greater Hanover Association became very powerful after 1974 and a new law established a regional assembly with directly elected members, after 1978 a new government in the parliament of Lower Saxony attempted to abolish the association. But the new conservative/liberal majority had underestimated the high degree of acceptance of the association and its strong support by local institutions and regional decision makers. Thus, in 1980 a new law was passed abolishing the direct election of the regional assembly, but the Greater Hanover Association survived with restricted powers. The law specified only public transport as a legal task, but the association members, the city and the county of Hanover could delegate further tasks to the association. So in practice the Greater Hanover Association remained responsible for regional planning, economic development and recreational areas (Rühmann 2001). However, the neighbouring region in the east, the Greater Brunswick Association, was abolished by law in 1980.

After 1990 Lower Saxony was ruled by a social democratic/ green government. One of its

initiatives was to strengthen the Greater Hanover Association again and re-establish a Greater Brunswick Association. Already in 1992 new laws were passed and a strengthened Greater Hanover Association and a reborn Greater Brunswick Association could take up their work. In 1994 the Greater Hanover Association was given a new field of activity: the responsibility for the Hanover zoo was transferred from the city of Hanover to the Association. Consequently the zoo's losses were taken over by the association's budget funded by the entire region. This solution was a milestone in shaping regional solidarity, as the visitors to the zoo came from both the city and its surroundings.

The motto of the strengthened Greater Hanover Association in the 1990s became "Region as a strategy". To overcome the political and administrative division between the core city and surrounding municipalities, the Greater Hanover Association developed its profile as a joint institution and as a link between the core city and the surrounding county. The association still had four responsibilities (planning, public transport, economic development and recreation), and had shares in the regional transport companies and some other public companies. More than 30 years of regional cooperation, in particular in the field of public transport, were an important precondition for the further development of regional cooperation after the mid-1990s. It may not be surprising that the association played a leading role in laying the foundations of the new institution, the Hanover Region, between 1996 and 2001.

### **The Hanover Region - a new urban regional body since 2001**

By the middle of the nineties a debate arose about the future role of regions in Germany. The establishment of the Greater Stuttgart Association by the state government of Baden-Württemberg became the signal for a new awakening of the urban regions. The association was established in 1994 for one of the most powerful regions in Germany. It attracted attention all over Germany because its foundation was explained by challenges from 'the new Europe' and the

enhanced competition among regions (Steinacher 2003). Hence a discussion began in Greater Hanover as well on how regional structures could be optimised. A crucial point of criticism about the existing structure was the duplication of work at the regional level and a lack of marketing capacities. Thus the targets of a future organisation were a transparent structure, better profiling, and the equalisation of burdens and benefits. In 1996 a blueprint for a reorganisation of the regional level was presented by the chief executives of the city of Hanover, the county of Hanover and the Greater Hanover Association (Droste et al. 1996). The so-called 'blue paper' was a proposal to establish the Hanover Region as a new regional body and to abolish both the county of Hanover and the Greater Hanover Association. At the time quite a number of identical tasks lay in the hands of the city and the council, and were to be bundled at the regional level. This kind of institution is often called a regional county to express the fact that it is more than a county both in its responsibilities and in its area, which includes the core city of an urban region itself. Additionally, the authority for some tasks had to be transferred from the state district to the new regional body.

Already in 1998 a regional political consensus to create the region was reached. All councils at the local and regional levels agreed to the new structure, and legal procedures were initiated in the parliament of Lower Saxony (Thiele 2000). In 2000 the final draft version of the Hanover Region Act was put before the parliament, which adopted it in 2001. In September 2001 the regional council and the regional president were elected by the inhabitants of the city and its surroundings. On November 1, 2001, the Hanover Region started its work while its two predecessors were abandoned. Since then, the Hanover Region has pooled the tasks of Hanover county and the Greater Hanover Association, combining two authorities in one effective unit. The new administrative unit has also taken over some responsibilities from the city of Hanover and from the state district. It is democratically legitimated, since it has a regional council. Its 85 members, including the president of the Hanover Region, are directly elected by the region's inhabitants. The president of the Region holds this office for

eight years; he is not only the highest representative of the region, but also its chief executive (Priebis 2002).

The local government in Greater Hanover is a clear and transparent two-tier system. Both the regional level and the 21 municipalities have their own tasks. All topics pertaining directly to the inhabitants are the responsibility of the municipalities, while the region is responsible for all infrastructure and public services covering the whole geographical area (see the box). In many cases units from the former county and the city of Hanover have been amalgamated, for instance vocational schools, environmental protection services, and public health authorities.

The region is responsible for the following tasks, among others:

- business and employment promotion,
- regional planning and development,
- public transport and regional roads,
- recreation areas and zoological garden,
- vocational schools ,
- public health services and hospitals,
- nature conservation and environmental protection,
- waste management,
- youth and social welfare,
- public safety.

The political organisation of the Region is similar to that of a county. Members of the regional council are elected for a period of 5 years. There is a regional board whose members are mostly council members, but they also include 5 directors elected by the council for a period of 8 years, though without the right to vote. There are 15 regional sectoral committees (partly because of special legal provisions). There is no municipal chamber, although this was a political demand when the law was under discussion.

Of course, the regional reform also met with criticism. Especially some politicians from the surrounding areas feared that there would be too many exceptions for the city of Hanover in the law. Also the association of German counties was critical because it feared the incorporation of a big city into a regional body similar to the counties (Henneke 2000). But the local newspapers were very friendly towards the reform and when they had the impression that there was a break-

down in the negotiations they took the initiative to push the process (Priebis 2002).

It is often asked why it was possible to reorganise regional government structures in Greater Hanover. What factors contributed to the successful creation of the Hanover Region? First of all, we should emphasise the more than three decades of experience in performing regional tasks. Also crucial was the fact that it was initiated by three 'doers' from the local level, starting a bottom-up process. For many stakeholders in the surrounding areas it was important that no municipalities had been incorporated into the city of Hanover. On the other hand, there had been no fragmentation of the city of Hanover, as was suggested by some politicians. In relation to the other parts of Lower Saxony, an important signal was that no expansion to the neighbouring counties was planned. And last but not least, there was no centralisation of tasks at the regional level – quite the opposite, the goal was to strengthen the municipalities. In fact, they have gained new competences in the form of responsibility for all public schools in their area except vocational schools and some schools for handicapped children. Strengthening the local level must also be seen as a protection for the municipalities against annexation (Krüger 2011: 166).

When the region was established, the next steps for amalgamation were prepared. The law had opened the possibility to postpone the amalgamation of waste management companies and hospitals until 2003. At the beginning of 2003 the hospitals of the city of Hanover were transferred to a region-owned company; in 2005 a new limited company for all hospitals owned by the region was founded. On the same day the two waste disposal services were amalgamated. Additionally, the two public savings banks were converted to a new institution, a regional savings bank. Also in 2003 a promotion agency for economic development (HannoverImpuls GmbH) was founded. In 2006 rescue coordination centres were consolidated. That there is still opportunity and political power to optimise the regional structures is demonstrated by the creation in 2011 of a common public service body for information technology serving municipalities and other public companies (HannIT).

Crucial for the region's profile is solidarity between the municipalities with their different economic and social structures. This is guaranteed by the contribution paid by all municipalities to the region. The Hanover Region pays all social costs of the municipalities. The city of Hanover also benefits from a high-quality living environment with its combination of progressive municipalities and rural areas. In spite of different points of view on some everyday questions, there is close cooperation in general and a good atmosphere between the region and its municipalities, also called a 'family of local authorities'. Every year all 21 mayors, the president of the region and its directors hold a closed two-day meeting outside Greater Hanover to discuss all topics of common interest. When a regional newspaper asked the mayors to judge the region in 2013, most of them were satisfied with its work.

### **The Hanover Region – regional planning tradition since 1963**

Regional planning has had a long tradition in the Hanover Region. Before we delve deeper into this topic, it is necessary to give an outline of the spatial planning system in Germany (see also Turowski 2002 and Priebis 2013). While at the Federal level spatial planning consists mainly in preparing non-binding guidelines and a framework for the federal states, there is compulsory planning at both, the level of the federal states (*Länder*) and the regional level. Planning is organised in various ways in the different federal states, but there is compulsory regional planning in all of them, with the exception of the three city-states of Hamburg, Bremen, and Berlin, as well as the small-sized Saarland. At the regional level, planning associations are usually responsible for spatial planning, but in Lower Saxony it is counties and county boroughs (including the city of Göttingen) that are responsible. There are two exceptions to this rule: the Greater Brunswick Association and the Hanover Region. Regional plans have to be in accordance with state planning (*Landesraumordnungspläne*). Local authorities, other public bodies and in some cases

also private bodies are bound by the rules of a regional plan. As the ‘counter-movement principle’ is crucial for the German planning system, regional planning has to take the municipalities’ planning into account when a new regional plan is set up.

Greater Hanover has had a formal regional planning competence since 1963 (Niebuhr-Ette, Priebis 2001). In 1965 the first planning scheme was developed; two years later the first regional plan was presented. The leading principle for spatial development in Greater Hanover has since been a close connection between transport and settlement planning. Already the first regional plan linked the development of settlements to the extension of the two rail systems, local rail (today the S-Bahn), and – in the core of the region – light rail, which has developed from a tramway system. Projects such as “enhancing the surroundings of railway stations in the Hanover Region” also help to better exploit the creat-

ed infrastructure, attracting more passengers. In the city of Hanover over 70% of the population and over 80% of workplaces are within walking distance of an S-Bahn station and/or a light rail stop. In the suburban areas of the Hanover Region about 40% of the population can walk to their next railway station. The axes of the light rail routes are preferred locations for service enterprises. This has a positive effect on transport operators in that differences in transport demand related to a direction can be evened out and thus the viability of the total system increased.

The latest regional plan, called Regional Plan 2005 (*Regionales Raumordnungsprogramm 2005*, abbr. RROP 2005), was developed in 2005 and approved in 2006. Before work on it started, an agreement had been reached on the guiding principles for the new regional plan. It was emphasised that regional planning was to be done for people in the Hanover Region. What were its main points?

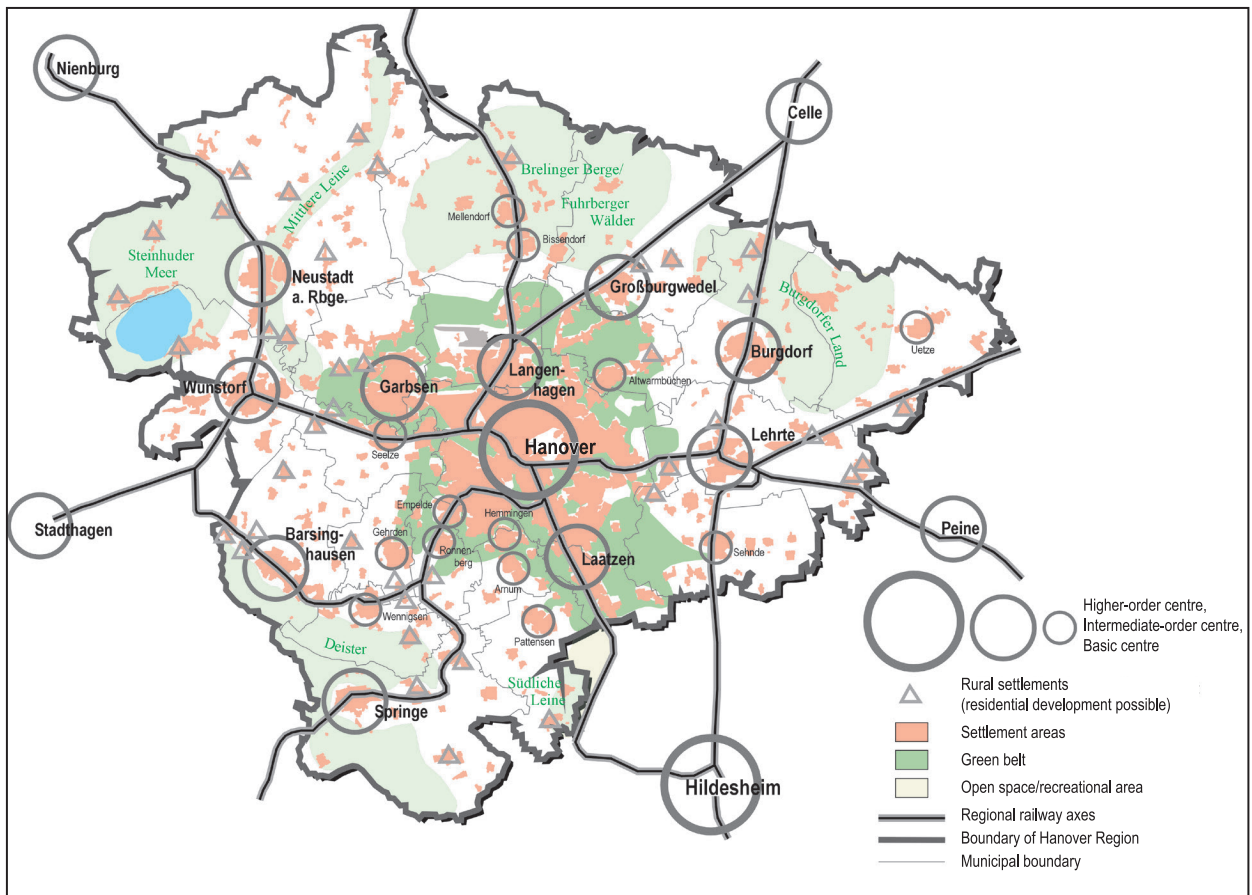


Fig. 2. Outlines of the 2005 spatial development programme (*Regionales Raumordnungsprogramm 2005*)  
 Source: Region Hannover (ed.): *Regionales Raumordnungsprogramm 2005*. Hannover 2005 (legend translated by Axel Priebis).

- The central challenges were identified as demographic change, social cohesion, pressure on space, and a changing economic structure. Additionally, international competition and gender mainstreaming were enhanced.
- On the other hand, the core competences of Hanover Region were identified. A high quality of life, a long tradition of a regional approach in planning, Hanover as a strong capital, competences in climate protection, and sustainable mobility were emphasised.
- Finally, the goals and priorities of regional planning were pinpointed. Mentioned already as a strategy starting in the 1960s, first of all the integration of settlement and transport was stressed. The protection of natural resources and open spaces was also considered crucial. A new strategic approach was to build up a "metropolitan region Hanover-Brunswick-Göttingen".

On the basis of this political commitment, a regional plan was worked out. In RROP 2005 settlement planning has a close connection with public transport. The principle of 'decentralised concentration' means that the regional settlement structure builds on a strong core city, but also strong medium-sized towns in the surroundings. The principle aims to prevent urban sprawl and to concentrate development on infrastructure, but also to keep the quality of a landscape with open spaces. Thus, the plan contains a hierarchy of settlements with strong restrictions for approx. 130 small villages, which are only allowed to expand their area by 5%, in some cases 7%, during the planning period.

Regional planning in Lower Saxony has the possibility and legal competence to lay down priority areas binding for other public (and in some fields also private) plans. Thus "priority areas for settlement development" were identified to secure suitable areas for housing and industrial estates. To hold open development opportunities for the Hanover Airport, restrictions on settlement around it were already prescribed in the state planning programme (LROP), but the regional plan must also adopt these rules as binding for all settlement and building activities. In spite of critical comments from people, this procedure is also reasonable in protecting people from having to live with the noise of the air-

planes. To protect spaces with mineral resources from building activities and to secure the opportunity to exploit those resources, priority areas are laid out. While mineral industries used to demand extensive securing of minerals, such plants are not very popular with the public because of the many inconveniences arising over a period of some decades. Other priority areas specified in the regional plan concern recreation areas, nature protection areas, and water resources. Moreover, protection against flooding has become a priority issue for regional planning.

There are also restrictions on shopping centres to preserve retail functions in the town centres. In 2001 the council approved a retail planning concept which was integrated into the regional plan. The concept identifies areas that are suitable for retail development, also some locations for larger shopping centres. Outside those areas and locations the establishment of new shopping centres is prohibited, for example around motorway junctions. This concept is also binding for the municipalities. If a new development is to take place outside the designated areas, the council has to approve a new location by formally changing the regional plan. There have only been very few cases in which the plan was changed to allow new retail areas (Prieps 2004). The most important case was a second IKEA store on the grounds of the EXPO 2000 world exhibition in 2006.

Finally, a traditional task of regional planning is to secure the routes and locations of technical infrastructure, such as streets, railways, energy and waste management. A newer task for regional planning is to define locations for wind energy plants. The German building codes provide an opportunity for regional plans to make binding locational decisions for those plants and to prohibit wind energy plants outside regional priority areas. In the Hanover Region the regional plan was changed in 1999 to include a concept for wind energy plants. In RROP 2005 the concept was updated and further changes were made. Today there are 31 priority areas for wind energy in the region, housing 245 windmills with a total power of 298 megawatts. They produce about 8% of regional electricity on 0.8% of the region's area. The political goal is to establish a total power of 400 megawatts, but this requires a strong

concept of re-powering or the designation of new locations (Herrmann, Priebes 2010).

By law, the regional plan must be updated every ten years. Hence, the Hanover Region has begun to develop a new regional plan, called RROP 2015. A central theme in this planning procedure is broad public participation. The procedure started already in 2012 with an intensive but informal discussion of future guidelines that was finished in the summer of 2013. It is now up to the regional council to decide the future guidelines that are to become the basis of the formal regional plan to come in the next years. A first draft has been announced for the end of 2014 and the goal is to reach a final decision in the regional council before the end of the council term in 2016. The objective is to harmonise the region's strategic goals with regional planning. While the future guidelines define "what we want", the regional plan has to give answers to the question "how can we reach that goal?" Employing the principles and regional planning themes mentioned above, the political aim of the new regional plan is to optimise climate protection, prevent climate change, and take demographic change into account.

After about five decades of experience with regional planning we need to ask what planning activities can achieve and where there are deficits. First of all, we can affirm that the Hanover Region has a well-established regional planning outfit. It has succeeded in preparing and maintaining a comprehensive physical structure. There is a close connection between settlement and public transport development; thus, urban sprawl and larger developments far from public transport axes have been prevented.

On the other hand, regional planning in the Hanover Region also shows the limitations of spatial planning at this level in the German planning system. This means that it can work as a stable framework for settlement development and retail location, but there are only certain cases, such as wind energy and the securing of minerals, where it has a strong steering function for location. While 'strategic planning' has attracted new attention recently, also at the regional level, the regional plan for the Hanover Region deals with physical rather than strategic planning. There are missing links between regional

planning and some sectoral policies. The public sometimes perceives regional planning primarily as prevention and not as a force for fostering regional development. Furthermore, the implementation of regional planning goals depends mostly on municipal plans, which in most cases are the only binding plans for building projects.

A successful planning process requires intensive linkage between regional planning and implementation. In general, the conditions in the Hanover Region are excellent, as the region itself has many competences in the fields of public transport, environmental protection and economic development. But optimisation is needed and thus RROP 2015 is both an opportunity and a challenge.

## **12 years of the Hanover Region – outcome and future challenges**

The creation of the new institution, "the Hanover Region", has awakened broad interest in urban regions both in Germany and abroad (Priebes 2008). Today the existence of the Hanover Region is not questioned. The regional county functions and can solve problems and conflicts crucial for an urban region. Thus, it is further developed than regional associations in other urban regions and there is one administrative level less. It reveals clear structures of decision-making. The most visible progress compared with the normal situation in urban regions is that the core city and its neighbouring municipalities are 'under one roof', hence a comprehensive bundling of all regional tasks is possible. The political power results from the direct election of the regional council and the regional president.

The main advantage of the Hanover Region as a regional county is that there is political responsibility at the regional level with directly elected politicians who are responsible for the whole urban region. Because all municipalities, including the core city, have to pay their contribution to the regional budget, its height depending on tax revenues, it is possible to equalise profits and burdens. Characteristic of the regional county – in contrast to a regional city like Berlin with its dependent parishes – is that the independence



of the 20 municipalities around Hanover city has been preserved. There are clear synergies through amalgamation of public administration. For both people and business a common image and identification is possible. There are, of course, some challenges that continue to mean hard work for both the council and the administration in the future as summarised in the following topics.

In the future, it will still be necessary to keep the balance between the regional level and the municipalities, and in particular to appreciate the core city's leading role for the whole region. Thus, the core city needs some special rights and responsibilities, and it must be borne in mind that there is some 'duplicate work' between the core city and the region.

A point that is not without irony is that the better the region works, the more it is taken for granted in day-to-day political life. While in the old days it was usual for the 20 municipalities in the surroundings to take a joint position against the city of Hanover, nowadays it can happen that all 21 municipalities have developed a joint position against the region, especially with regard to money that is to be paid to the region.

The region has many responsibilities for maintaining public order, for example in the fields of environmental protection or regional planning. Consequently, the region is often perceived as an institution that primarily prevents and prohibits. On the other hand, there is a lot of creative power in the institution of which the public is not sufficiently aware.

The budget deficit was a real problem in the first years of the region – as was the case in nearly all local authorities in Lower Saxony. In the last three years the region succeeded in presenting a balanced budget. Even so, it will take many years to reduce financial burdens. The region has only one financial source which it can influence: the municipalities' contributions to the regional budget. When there are sudden increases on the cost side, its possibilities to react are limited. The worst case is when there is an economic depression because the municipalities receive less money in taxes while the region's expenditures for social functions increase. It is to be hoped that one day a new system will be created that will give the region its own tax income and make it independent of contributions from the municipalities.

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