



Journal
of Danubian
Studies
and Research

Exploring Innovations and Sustainable Growth in the Danube Region

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Abstract: Objectives: This study aims to investigate the innovative practices and strategies that foster sustainable growth within the Danube Region. The primary objectives are to identify key innovations contributing to economic, social, and environmental sustainability, evaluate the effectiveness of these innovations, and propose recommendations for enhancing sustainable growth in the region. **Prior Work:** Previous research has explored various aspects of sustainable development in the Danube Region, focusing on environmental protection, economic growth, and social cohesion. Studies have highlighted the importance of cross-border cooperation, policy frameworks, and technological advancements in promoting sustainability. However, there is a gap in comprehensive analyses that integrate these elements and provide a holistic view of sustainable innovations in the region. **Approach:** The study used a documentary analysis approach, collecting and analyzing official documents, government reports, academic studies and journal articles related to sustainable growth in the Danube region. SWOT analysis will be used to assess the effectiveness of sustainable growth strategies and policies, helping to identify critical success factors and areas that need to grow. **Implications:** The findings of this study are expected to have significant implications for policymakers, businesses, and civil society organizations in the Danube Region. By identifying successful innovations and strategies, the study will provide actionable insights for enhancing sustainable development initiatives. It will also contribute to the broader discourse on regional sustainability by offering a model that can be adapted and applied in other contexts. **Value:** This research adds value by bridging the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application of sustainable innovations. It highlights the interconnectedness of economic, social, and environmental factors in driving sustainable growth. The study's comprehensive approach ensures that it addresses the multi-faceted nature of sustainability challenges and offers holistic solutions that can be implemented to achieve long-term prosperity in the Danube Region.

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Keywords: Danube Region; sustainable development; financial barriers; innovation solutions

JEL Classification: O13; Q56; M13

1. Introduction

1.1. The Economic and Social Context of the Danube Regions

The Danube Region, which spans parts of 19 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, is a critical area for both ecological diversity and economic development. It is home to over 100 million people and serves as a vital artery for commerce, culture, and biodiversity. However, the region also faces numerous challenges, including environmental degradation, economic inequality, and political fragmentation. Addressing these challenges requires innovative solutions that promote sustainable growth and harness the unique strengths of the region.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of sustainability in the Danube Region, focusing on aspects such as environmental protection, economic development, and social cohesion. For example, research has highlighted the role of green finance and renewable energy in reducing carbon emissions and promoting sustainable economic growth (Feng, 2022). Addressing these challenges demands innovative approaches that not only promote economic growth but also ensure sustainability and resilience. In recent years, the focus on sustainable development has intensified, with particular emphasis on integrating innovative solutions into traditional economic and social frameworks. One of the key areas of innovation is the development of smart sustainable cities. These cities utilize advanced technologies and data analytics to optimize urban infrastructure, improve resource efficiency, and enhance the quality of life for residents. Bibri and Krogstie (2019) discuss how the integration of smart technologies with sustainability principles can lead to the creation of smart sustainable cities, which are better equipped to handle the complexities of urbanization while promoting environmental stewardship (Bibri, 2019). The transition to renewable energy and the implementation of green finance mechanisms are essential for achieving sustainable growth and reducing the carbon footprint of the Danube Region. Feng (2022) highlight the significant role of green finance and renewable energy in driving down CO₂ emissions and fostering sustainable economic growth. Their study underscores the importance of supportive policy frameworks that encourage investments in renewable energy and the development of green financial instruments (Feng, 2022). Technological innovation plays a crucial role in enhancing sustainability across various sectors. For example, the adoption of circular economy principles, which emphasize the reuse and recycling of materials, can lead to significant environmental and economic benefits.

Sarpong et. al. (2020) discuss how technological innovations in industrial processes, such as the utilization of waste heat for energy production, can improve resource efficiency and reduce environmental degradation. These innovations also foster new forms of economic collaboration between industries, enhancing overall sustainability (Sarpong, 2023). Community engagement is another critical component of sustainable development. Effective urban planning requires the active involvement of local communities to ensure that development projects meet the needs and aspirations of residents. Leclercq and Rijshouwer (2022) emphasize the importance of community engagement in fostering urban innovation and sustainability. They argue that inclusive approaches that integrate the perspectives of diverse stakeholders lead to more resilient and adaptable urban environments (Leclercq, 2022). Future research and policy efforts should focus on developing integrated strategies that combine technological innovation with social and economic policies to create holistic solutions for sustainable development. The exploration of innovations and sustainable growth in the Danube Region reveals a complex yet promising landscape. Through the integration of advanced technologies, renewable energy, green finance, and active community engagement, the region can overcome its challenges and pave the way for a sustainable future. By leveraging these innovations and fostering cross-border cooperation, the Danube Region can serve as a model for sustainable development in other parts of the world.

1.2. Regional Cooperation Programs and Initiatives

Regional cooperation in the Danube region is supported by various programs and initiatives that aim to promote economic, social and environmental development. These initiatives are essential for addressing common challenges and capitalizing on regional opportunities. One of the most significant regional cooperation programs is the INTERREG Program, which supports cross-border, transnational and interregional projects in Europe. Within this program, the Danube region benefits from funds for infrastructure development, environmental protection and innovation promotion. According to the study by Meyer and Schmid (2019), the INTERREG Program had a significant positive impact on regional development in the Danube area, contributing to the increase of investments and the development of cross-border cooperation (Meyer & Schmid, 2019). The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is another important initiative aimed at strengthening cooperation between the countries bordering the Danube. This strategy aims to address common challenges such as pollution, climate change and insufficient infrastructure by promoting sustainable and balanced development in the region. According to the study by Kousis and Goulias (2020), the EUSDR played a crucial role in creating policy

coordination and collaboration between countries in the Danube region, contributing to the achievement of sustainable development goals (Kousis, 2020). Danube Transnational Program is an initiative that supports transnational projects in the Danube region, with the aim of promoting innovation, competitiveness and sustainability. This program facilitates cooperation between governments, institutions and non-governmental organizations to address common challenges and capitalize on regional opportunities.

1.3. The Role of the European Union and Macro-Regional Strategies

The European Union plays an essential role in promoting cross-border cooperation and sustainable development in the Danube region. EU macro-regional strategies such as the EUSDR are key tools for coordinating policies and resources to address common challenges and capitalize on regional opportunities. According to the study by Müller (2020), EU macro-regional strategies had a significant impact on sustainable development in the Danube region, contributing to economic growth and environmental protection (Müller, 2020). The European Union provides financial and technical support for the implementation of cross-border cooperation projects in the Danube region. European funds, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund, are essential for financing infrastructure, environmental protection and innovation projects. According to the Roberts and Roberts (2017) study, the financial and technical support provided by the EU was crucial for the success of cross-border cooperation projects in the Danube region, contributing to the realization of infrastructure and the protection of natural resources (Roberts, 2017).

1.4. The Benefits and Obstacles of Cross-Border Collaboration

Cross-border collaboration brings numerous economic, social and environmental benefits for the Danube region. Among the main benefits are: economic growth, infrastructure improvement, protection of the environment, consolidation of social and cultural relations. Cross-border cooperation projects stimulate economic growth by attracting investment and creating jobs. The study by Meyer and Schmid (2019) highlights the positive impact of INTERREG projects on economic development in the Danube region (Meyer, 2019). Cross-border cooperation contributes to the creation of regional infrastructure, facilitating transport and connectivity between riparian countries. According to the study by Müller (2020), EU-funded infrastructure projects had a significant impact on mobility and connectivity in the Danube region (Müller, 2020). Cross-border projects contribute to the protection of the environment by implementing measures to reduce pollution and conserve

biodiversity. The study by Schwartz and Böttcher (2018) underlines the importance of cross-border cooperation in the sustainable management of water resources in the Danube region (Schwartz, 2018). Despite their many benefits, cross-border collaboration in the Danube region faces various obstacles that can prevent the successful implementation of projects. Among the main obstacles are: legislative and administrative differences, lack of financial resources, cultural and linguistic differences, lack of coordination and cooperation. Variability of legislation and administrative regulations between different countries in the Danube region can create barriers to cross-border cooperation. According to the study by Csizmadia (2019), the harmonization of legislation and administrative regulations is essential to facilitate cross-border cooperation. Insufficient funding can be a significant obstacle to the implementation of cross-border projects. The study by Csizmadia (2019) highlights the need for adequate financial resources for the success of cross-border cooperation projects. Cultural and linguistic differences can create difficulties in communication and collaboration between partners from different countries. The study by Vasiliev (2018) emphasizes the importance of cultural sensitivity and the promotion of intercultural development in cross-border cooperation projects (Vasiliev, 2018).

1.5. Barriers to Innovation

The Danube region, with its vast potential and cultural diversity, is a territory conducive to innovation and economic development. However, innovation in this region is hindered by several significant barriers, including lack of infrastructure and financial resources, legislative and bureaucratic obstacles, resistance to change and cultural issues. Thus, we will explore each of these aspects and propose solutions to overcome these barriers.

Underdeveloped infrastructure and lack of adequate financial resources represent a major impediment to innovation in the Danube region. According to Popescu et. al. (2018), in their study in the “European Transport Research Review” Journal, poor infrastructure negatively affects mobility and connectivity in the Danube region, which hampers transport and trade. Also, the lack of sufficient financial investment limits the ability to develop and implement new and innovative technologies (Smith, 2019). Excessive bureaucracy and complicated legislative processes are other barriers to innovation in the Danube region. According to Ivanov et. al. (2019), in the paper from the journal “Journal of East European Management Studies”, the bureaucracy in some countries in the Danube region limits the flexibility and adaptability of companies, which can discourage investment in innovation. Long and complicated processes for obtaining authorizations and approvals can delay the implementation of new ideas and reduce the economic competitiveness of the region (Gheorghiu, 2020). Resistance to change and conservative mentality and other important

obstacles to innovation in the Danube region. According to the research of Ionescu and Popescu (2020), published in the journal “Eastern European Economics”, organizational culture and regional traditions can negatively influence the receptivity to change and innovation in certain communities in the Danube region. It is essential to address these issues and foster a culture of openness and adaptability to change to drive innovation and economic development in the region. To overcome these barriers and stimulate innovation in the Danube region, an integrated and collaborative approach between governments, the private sector and civil society is needed. Investments in infrastructure, including transport and telecommunications networks, should be a priority for regional and national authorities (Popescu, et. al, 2018). It is also crucial to simplify legislative and bureaucratic processes, to facilitate access to finance and to reduce the time needed to implement innovative projects (Ivanov, et. al, 2019). In addition, it is important to promote a culture of innovation and change, through training and awareness programs among employees and local communities (Ionescu & Popescu, 2020).

Innovation in the Danube region is essential for sustainable economic and social development. However, this is hampered by several barriers, including lack of infrastructure and financial resources, legislative and bureaucratic obstacles, resistance to change and cultural issues. In order to stimulate innovation in the region, a coordinated and collaborative approach between the various stakeholders is needed, together with the implementation of concrete and effective solutions.

2. Research Methodology

The purpose of this research is to explore innovations and sustainable growth in the Danube region, identifying good practices and existing challenges, and to propose recommendations for policies and economic strategies for sustainable regional development. To carry out this study we will consider documentary analysis, in which official documents, government reports, academic studies and magazine articles related to sustainable growth in the Danube region will be collected and analyzed. Data sources include European Union publications, national governments of the countries in the Danube region and international organizations involved in sustainability initiatives. A SWOT analysis will be conducted to assess the effectiveness of sustainable growth strategies and policies. SWOT analysis will help identify critical success factors and areas for improvement.

3. Results

The Danube region, one of the most diverse and significant geographical areas in Europe, faces multiple challenges on its way to sustainable development. Sustainable growth in this region implies a balance between economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as the implementation of effective policies and strategies to support these objectives. In this article I will refer to the principles and pillars of sustainable growth, relevant national and regional strategies and policies, as well as the role of local communities and the private sector in supporting sustainable development in the Danube region.

3.1. The Principles and Pillars of Sustainable Growth

The economic dimension of sustainable growth in the Danube region focuses on the development of a networked and competitive economy capable of creating jobs and ensuring long-term prosperity. This involves investing in infrastructure, innovation and technology, as well as supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (Meyer, 2019). Regional economies must face global challenges such as climate change and digitalisation, which require a high degree of adaptation and innovation. According to the study by Meyer and Schmid (2019), funding innovation and technological development plays a key role in sustainable economic growth. Investments and the contribution of technology in the infrastructure of the economic competitiveness of the region and the creation of quality jobs (Meyer, 2019). Also, according to the study by Andreas Müller, economic growth and environmental sustainability are interdependent and require policies that promote investments in green technology and sustainable practices in the management of natural resources (Müller, 2020).

The social dimension refers to the creation of quality of life for all communities in the region. These include access to education, health and social services, reducing inequalities and promoting social inclusion. An important aspect is also the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of regional identity. Equitable access to education and health is essential for sustainable development. The study by Roberts and Roberts (2017) emphasizes the importance of social inclusion and equal access to resources for all social groups. Likewise, the preservation of cultural heritage and the promotion of sustainable tourism contribute to economic development and the strengthening of regional identity.

The environmental dimension focuses on protecting and conserving natural resources, reducing pollution and promoting the sustainable use of resources. These include sustainable water management, protecting biodiversity and combating climate change. Sustainable management of water resources is crucial for the Danube region, given the

importance of the Danube River as a water source and natural habitat. Schwartz and Böttcher (2018) emphasize the importance of sustainable water management policies to ensure the protection of aquatic ecosystems and drinking water resources. In addition, biodiversity conservation strategies, such as those in the Danube Delta, are essential to protect unique species and habitats (Novak, 2021). Markus Tschopp (2020) also highlights the need to develop renewable energies in the region to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and contribute to environmental protection.

3.2. Strategies and Policies for Sustainable Growth

In the Danube region, various policies and strategies are implemented to support sustainable growth. These include both national initiatives and cross-border collaborations. The EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) is an example of an integrated approach aimed at cooperation between riparian countries to address common challenges and capitalize on regional opportunities (Petrov, 2019). The study by Petrov and Ionescu (2019) emphasizes the importance of public-private partnerships in promoting sustainable development. These partnerships can bring resources and expertise needed to achieve sustainability goals. The sector can play an important role in financing and implementing sustainable development projects, contributing to economic growth and environmental protection (Petrov & Ionescu, 2019). The implementation of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region involves collaboration between governments, the private sector and local communities. Papescu and Constantin (2019) emphasize the importance of policy coherence for the efficiency and impact of sustainable development measures. Coherent and coordinated policies can contribute to achieving sustainability objectives and increasing the quality of life in the region (Papescu, 2019). Effective implementation of sustainability strategies requires collaboration between governments, the private sector and local communities. Periodic monitoring and evaluation of progress is essential for adjusting policies and achieving stability objectives. Performance indicators and progress reports are crucial tools in this process (Zimmermann, 2021). Periodic monitoring and evaluation of progress is essential for adjusting policies and achieving stability objectives. The study by Zimmermann (2021) highlights the need for a robust system for monitoring progress in the implementation of sustainability strategies. Performance indicators and progress reports are crucial tools in this process (Zimmermann, 2021).

3.3. SWOT Analysis

(Strengths): financial and technical support from the EU, strong regional cooperation, rich natural and cultural potential. The European Union provides substantial financial support through funds such as the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund. These funds are essential for financing infrastructure, environmental protection and innovation projects. Interreg programs, for example, facilitated major investments in renewable energy and innovation in the Danube region (Voiculescu, 2022). The European Union provides substantial financial support Programs such as INTERREG and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR) facilitate solid cross-border cooperation, stimulating economic development and infrastructure development. These initiatives have considerably created collaboration between the countries bordering the Danube (Csizmadia, 2019). The Danube region has a vast natural and cultural heritage, which offers opportunities for sustainable tourism and biodiversity conservation. This contributes to economic development and the strengthening of regional identity (Boz, et. al, 2020).

(Weaknesses): legislative and administrative differences, insufficient funding, cultural and linguistic differences. The variability of legislation and administrative regulations between countries in the Danube region creates barriers to cross-border cooperation. This aspect complicates the uniform implementation of sustainable development strategies and policies (Csizmadia, 2019). Although there are funds available, financial resources may be insufficient to cover all the needs of the region, which may prevent the full implementation of projects. This problem is compounded by the need for financing large infrastructure and environmental protection projects (Boz, et. al, 2020). Cultural and linguistic differences can create difficulties in communication and collaboration between partners from different countries, affecting the effectiveness of cross-border projects. Promoting intercultural understanding is essential to the success of cooperation (Voiculescu, 2022).

(Opportunities): investment in renewable energy and innovation, sustainable tourism and heritage conservation, enhanced cross-border cooperation. Projects funded by programs such as INTERREG and EUSDR promote articles in renewable energy and innovation, contributing to sustainable development and reducing dependence on fossil fuels. These initiatives support the green transition of the region (Voiculescu, 2022). The Danube region has a significant potential for the development of sustainable tourism, which can contribute to economic growth and the preservation of cultural heritage. Sustainable tourism can boost the local economy and protect natural resources (Boz, et. al, 2020). Continuing and expanding cross-border cooperation through regional programs can lead to more integrated economic development and the creation of social relations between countries in the region. This can create a more resilient and competitive region (Tserkovna, 2020).

(Threats): political and economic instability, climate change, bureaucratic barriers. Political and economic instability in some countries in the region may adversely affect the implementation and success of cross-border cooperation projects. These risks can compromise regional stability and progress (Csizmadia, 2019). Climate change is a significant threat to the Danube region, affecting water resources, biodiversity and agriculture. These can compromise sustainable development efforts and require costly adaptations (Boz, et. al, 2020). Complex bureaucratic procedures and administrative inefficiencies can delay or prevent project implementation, thus reducing the effectiveness of sustainable development strategies. Simplifying these procedures is essential to ensure the success of projects (Tserkovna, 2020).

The SWOT analysis highlights that sustainable growth strategies and policies in the Danube region benefit from significant support from the European Union and solid regional cooperation. However, legislative, cultural and financial differences, along with political instability and climate change, are major challenges. It is essential that strategies are adaptable and include risk mitigation measures to ensure sustainable development and regional integration.

4. Conclusions

Exploring innovations and sustainable growth in the Danube region is a complex endeavor involving multiple economic, social and political dimensions. The economic and social context of the Danube region is characterized by diversity, with varied economies and different levels of social development, which requires strategies adapted to each individual area. Regional cooperation programs and initiatives, such as the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (SUERD), have the role of stimulating collaboration between riparian states to address common challenges and capitalize on development opportunities. The European Union plays a crucial role by financing projects and facilitating dialogue between the parties involved, and macro-regional strategies become essential tools in this process. The benefits of cross-border collaboration include improving infrastructure, increasing economic competitiveness and promoting innovation, but these benefits come with significant obstacles. Barriers to innovation, such as lack of adequate funding, legislative and cultural differences, as well as reluctance to change, are major challenges to overcome. The principles and pillars of sustainable growth focus on balancing economic development with environmental protection and social inclusion. Strategies and policies for sustainable growth in the Danube region must effectively integrate the use of natural resources, the promotion of green energy and the support of circular economies. SWOT analysis of the

effectiveness of sustainable growth strategies and policies highlights strengths, such as rich natural resources and advantageous geostrategic position, and opportunities, such as access to European funds and potential for innovation. On the other hand, weaknesses include underdeveloped infrastructure and economic inequalities, and threats are climate change and political instability.

In conclusion, to achieve sustainable growth in the Danube region, it is essential to strengthen cross-border cooperation, address barriers to innovation and implement integrated and adaptive policies. Successful strategies will require the active involvement of all stakeholders, the efficient use of available resources and a shared vision oriented towards sustainability and progress.

5. Recommendation

Cooperation between riparian countries could become even closer, boosted by joint infrastructure and environmental protection projects. Cross-border initiatives to manage water resources, combat pollution and conserve biodiversity could lead to a more integrated region better prepared to face global challenges. As global and regional policy continues to favor renewable energy sources, the Danube region could become a leader in the adoption and production of green energy. Investments in solar, wind and hydropower infrastructure could transform the region into a sustainable energy hub, significantly reducing dependence on fossil fuels and contributing to carbon neutrality goals. Cities in the Danube region could adopt smart technologies to build urban infrastructure, energy efficiency and quality of life. The implementation of intelligent traffic management systems, green buildings and smart energy distribution networks could create resilient urban communities capable of responding rapidly to climate and economic challenges.

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