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Challenging and Interlinking Quality of Life with Social Sustainability in European Cross-Border Suburban Regions: An Empirical Survey in Bratislava-Lower Austria and Burgenland, and Salzburg-Bavaria

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Abstract: The relatively dynamic population growth in suburban municipalities in some European border regions caused by cross-border suburbanization poses challenges for maintaining and promoting the quality of life of residents and the social sustainability of municipalities. The aim of this paper is to provide insights into these issues based on our own empirical research conducted in the border regions of Lower Austria, Burgenland, and Bavaria, which are affected by the cross-border suburbanization of Bratislava and Salzburg. Empirical results illustrate a “cherry-picking strategy” of a high proportion of residents, i.e., choosing selectively the best options of both worlds to improve or maintain their quality of life. These strategies refer to housing decisions, satisfaction with the social neighborhood and the environment, functional patterns of daily activities, and local engagement. Although most respondents rated community relations positively, the coexistence of different social groups would benefit from their deeper integration into the community life. Residential satisfaction in terms of quality of life can foster a sense of belonging and thus contribute to the social sustainability of cross-border suburban regions.

Keywords: quality of life; social sustainability; cross-border suburbanization; border regions; Austria; Germany; Salzburg; Bratislava



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1. Introduction

As far as the notion of “sustainable development” is embedded into capitalist market economies, attempts to define it requires dealing with the fundamental tension given between the two words “sustainable” and “development”. While the latter is associated with change, movement, growth, or progress, sustainability considers preservation, path-dependency, or long-term continuity as its constituent elements. Economic development strongly correlates with growth and is expressed, for example, in measures such as (increasing) GDP, (high) employability of the workforce, or (low) public debts. Similarly, social development is meant to improve social mobility through extensive education, to promote health and housing conditions preferably for all people, or to enhance the inclusion of different minorities. Both domains represent highly dynamic patterns of past and ongoing changes and claim the global validity of their principles.

Thus, development remains prevalent in “sustainable” development, too, and sustainability requirements must align with development goals. Although the framing criteria of development goals—most prominently represented as “targets” in the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals [1]—are diverse and heterogeneous, they determine the coping strategies with sustainability. Developmental core principles encompass the capital accumulation, commodification of marketable goods, and territorial competition (most