



# **Institutional and Enterprise cross-border Activities within a Euregio: Case study of “Hochfranken”, Germany**

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**Inhaltsverzeichnis**

- 1. Introduction.....5**
- 2. Background of the Region “Hochfranken” .....5**
- 3. Examples of cross-border activities in the region “Hochfranken” .....8**
  - 3.1 Institutional activities and partnerships .....8
  - 3.2 Examples of enterprise cross-border partnerships and supporting activities ...12
- 4. Conclusions from the region “Hochfranken” .....16**
  - 4.1 Experiences with cross-border partnerships .....16
  - 4.2 The future of cross-border partnerships in “Hochfranken” .....17
- References .....19**

**List of Figures and Tables**

Figure 1: Hochfranken .....6

Figure 2: Major transport infrastructure in Hochfranken.....7

Figure 3: Area of the Euregio “Egrensis” .....10

Table 1: Examples of enterprise cross-border partnerships .....14

## 1. Introduction

This report discusses the results of a regional case study, conducted within the framework of a research project supported by INTAS from 2005-2007. The objectives of this task were to investigate the characteristics of enterprises and institutions in Germany involved in co-operation across borders in one of the Euregios, i.e., Egrensis, which unites periphery regions in Bavaria, Thuringia and Saxonia with regions in the Czech Republic, in order to empirically identify elements of good practice of institutionally-led and enterprise-led partnership within such a region. The results are based on a combination of multiple sources: an internet search and a thorough analysis of internet pages of initiatives, a literature review of reports, articles and internet documents, and interviews with institutions and enterprises, conducted by Kai Althoff and Nadezhda Veleva in September 2006 and by Frédérique Schweitzer, Nadezhda Veleva and Friederike Welter in January 2007.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 gives a brief overview about the economic, cultural and historical background of the case study region. Section 3 presents examples of institutional and enterprise cross-border activities, while in section 4 we will ask for lessons to be learned from this particular region.

## 2. Background of the Region “Hochfranken”

Hochfranken is situated at the Bavarian – Czech border, in North Bavaria, covering around 1,500 sqkm and 250,000 inhabitants. It consists of 45 communities and it is a regional association of the two rural districts Hof and Wunsiedel as well as the district free city of Hof. Administratively, it belongs to the district “Upper Franconia”. The region is situated approximately 240 km north of Munich and around 240 km west of Prague. There is a joint border with the Czech Republic of approx. 25 km.

The region “Hochfranken” is not an administrative district, but a regional voluntary association initiated by local development agencies and the University of Applied Sciences in Hof. The so-called “**Curatorship Hochfranken**” which is behind this regional ‘creation’ was established in 1997, in order to solve economic problems con-

nected to the structural changes in the traditional sectors of textile and ceramics. The Curatorship actively promotes the region as a trademark to foster new enterprise settlements into the region.

**Figure 1: Hochfranken**



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Source: <http://www.hochfranken-hiergehtwas.de>

Historically, the regions on both the German and Czech side of the border have a turbulent common history (Pykel 2004). Sudeten Germans began settling in Bohemia and Moravia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. After the First World War, the Sudetenland fell to the newly created Czechoslovakia. Hitler used the persistent call of the Sudeten minority for self-determination to justify his occupation of the Czechoslovakia in 1938. All over Eastern Europe, his policy included expulsion, resettlement and the forced ‘Germanisation’ of non-Germans (Prauser and Rees 2004). After the Second World War, (Sudeten) Germans living in the border regions of Czechoslovakia were forced from the country, and their property was confiscated by the Czechoslovakian state (for a detailed overview cf. Pykel 2004). At the same time, Czechs and Slovaks as well as other minorities were resettled into the border regions, thus probably impeding the creation of a consistent border identity on the Czech side. Those Germans who fled

the country after 1945 still uphold their tradition as becomes visible in the yearly “Day of the Sudeten Germans” which until now was regularly attended by high-level Bavarian politicians.

After World War II all of the Bavarian regions bordering Czechoslovakia were social and economical neglected regions – they can be regarded as typical border regions. After the abolition of the Iron Curtain, the connection between the former Eastern Block and their western neighbours changed fundamentally. Hand in hand with the changing political and historical situation, long-standing relations were revived and completely new relations emerged.

In terms of economic development, the region has been facing severe structural changes which resulted in an increase in unemployment. Overall, the industry structure of Hochfranken where textile, glass and porcelain industries dominated is characteristic for an old industrial region (Maier et al. 2002). EU enlargement speeded the structural change, as Bohemia in the Czech Republic had a similar industry structure, but lower production and labour costs.

**Figure 2: Major transport infrastructure in Hochfranken**



Source: <http://www.landkreis-hof.de/strasse.htm>

Today, the border region status is still visible in some of the infrastructural arrangements. In terms of transport infrastructure, the region has its own regional airport, where three daily flights to Frankfurt leave, and it is situated near two large international airports (Nuremberg, Munich). Three major motorways connect Hochfranken to large cities in Southern Bavaria and Eastern Germany. Interestingly, however, there is no major road connection to the Czech Republic. Figure 2 illustrates a typical situation of a region that previously bordered socialist countries: Direct train connections run to Regensburg, Nuremberg and Munich in Southern Bavaria or Dresden, Leipzig and Zwickau in Saxony, but only one from Bayreuth to Cheb (Eger) in the Czech Republic.

### **3. Examples of cross-border activities in the region “Hochfranken”**

From 1994 until 2000 the whole Bavarian border region realised 383 cross-border activities, most of them in the area of youth / education and social activities (145) and in culture / sports / leisure (139), followed by economic activities (40), regional marketing (22), environment (11), municipal cooperation (10), transport (9) and tourism (7) (cf. Troeger-Weiß and Spannowsky, 2002: 15). This chapter reports on some examples of these activities in the border region.

#### **3.1 Institutional activities and partnerships**

The overall picture emerging from interviews with key experts and institutions is one of a large interest in institutional cross-border partnerships on behalf of the German side, often resulting from and in longstanding relationships, albeit not without problems. The following examples present a small part of socio-cultural and administrative activities in the region. They have been selected to illustrate the variety of institutional partnerships.

Institutional cooperation at regional level appear to go back to the early 1990s, when in 1994 the Bavarian *Landesentwicklung*<sup>1</sup> of the Bavarian Ministry of Economic Affairs, Infrastructure, Transport and Technology (=BayStMWIVT) initiated regional cross-border development concepts ([http://www.uni-kl.de/FG-RuR/gn/01\\_projekt/Karte.pdf](http://www.uni-kl.de/FG-RuR/gn/01_projekt/Karte.pdf)). In Hochfranken, this covered the Bavarian border region, Thuringia and the Czech border region.

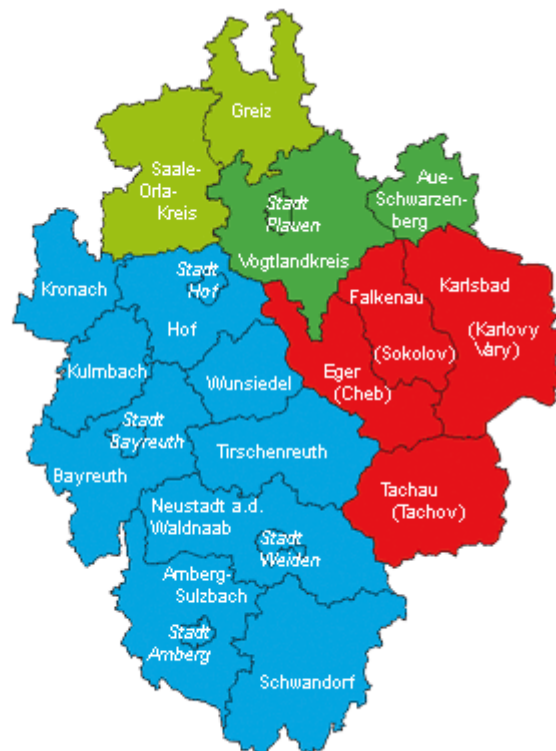
An interesting and recent example of a municipal cross-border partnership refers to CLARA. The acronym stands for “**C**ooperation of **L**ocal and **R**egional **A**uthorities **A**T the moment of **E**nlarging the **U**nion ([www.clara-eu.info](http://www.clara-eu.info))” and has been supported by the EU in 2004 to 2006. CLARA is a trilateral project of the regions of Chemnitz, Oberfranken and Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad), in which the Euregio Egrensis as well as the cities of Karlsbad and Bayreuth and the Vogtlandkreis are involved as partners. The project aimed at establishing a transnational network of competence of public administration in the involved regions, in order to help administrations to build up their know-how and competencies. The project partners worked together in seven areas: citizen administration, health and tourism, youth, education and culture, spatial law and planning, environmental protection, transport, civil and disaster management.

**Euregio Egrensis** ([www.euregio-egrensis.de](http://www.euregio-egrensis.de)) is an association of nearly all groups of the society, local authorities, policy and industry as well as interested individuals. Euregio Egrensis covers around 20,000 sqkm and 2 million inhabitants. 50% of the territories are situated in Bavaria, 30% in Thuringia-Saxonia and 20% in the Czech Republic. It has been created in 1993. It is a cooperation not only across borders, but also between three German states, namely Bavaria, Thuringia and Saxonia, and the Czech Republic.

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<sup>1</sup> The Landesentwicklung refers to the competencies and coordination of in spatial planning (Raumordnung) at state level (cf. § 6 ROG). Its main task is the development of a programme for state development; cf. <http://www.stmwivt.bayern.de/landesentwicklung/bereiche/organisa/landesen.htm>

**Figure 3: Area of the Euregio “Egrensis”**



Source: <http://www.euregio-egrensis.de/euregio/euregio.php>

Euregio Egrensis fosters cultural cooperation, in order to establish a mutual understanding across border as well as to support the awareness towards the neighbouring population and culture. Euregio Egrensis is the main driver for socio-cultural cross-border cooperation, both on regional level (examples include the recently established “Language initiative”) and the level of single projects. Its aims are therefore: to support and to revive existing relationship and networking, to reduce mental and linguistical barriers, to contribute to the integration of the Czech Republic in the European Union. Interview partners from the Bavarian organisation emphasised that they have been able to build up a successful cross-border partnership because of long-standing personal relationships and reliable partners in all three regional Egrensis associations.

Other cultural cooperation involve the “Border cinema days” or the cross-border state gardening exhibition set up in 2006, which proved to be a huge success in tempting

the Bavarian and Czech population in the border regions to visit their neighbouring countries. IDOR ([www.idor.org](http://www.idor.org)) offers information. It is a German-Czech centre for documentation and information about regional cooperation. The webpage includes information on how to select partners and how to start cooperation. IDOR also offers seminars to train the intercultural competencies of partners in cross-border partnerships. The project operates as registered membership association. IDOR is connected to the German-Czech soccer school. Other educational partnerships include joint schools where Czech pupils attend secondary school in Weiden and live in German families.

Information on legal issues, an overview of projects in the border region, a short guideline on cultural differences etc. are also available through the webpage of the project on '**Good neighbourhood in the Bavarian-Czech border region**' (<http://www.uni-kl.de/FG-RuR/gn/index.html>). This activity, which is supported by the Bavarian *Landesentwicklung*, is specifically aimed at developing positive neighbourly relationships between Bavarians and Czechs. This happens through collecting information and studies, seminars and workshops, networking amongst different actors involved in cross-border activities and through fostering model projects (such as a multicultural kindergarten).

**Twinning partnerships** which exist between the cities of Hof and Cheb (Eger) and between the University of Applied Sciences (FH) Hof and University of West Bohemia in Plzen are another example aimed at developing the 'softer' elements required for successful cross-border activities. The latter case represents a good example of the importance of personal linkages even in institutional cross-border partnerships:

The cooperation was originally initiated in 1995, and a cooperation agreement was signed, only to be “re-discovered” in 2006. The person responsible for initiating the agreement in 1995 obviously had left the FH Hof, which resulted in the partnership being stalled.

Regarding the case of the twinning partnership between Hof and Cheb, this can be used to illustrate a frequently mentioned dilemma of institutional partnerships with the Czech Republic, namely the impulsive decisions of Czech partners which render political decision-making processes difficult. Marktredwitz, a small town in Hochfranken, had started talks to finalise a twinning agreement with Cheb, as both cities have joint historical roots: Marktredwitz belonged to Cheb for 450 years. The agreements were ready for signing, when all of a sudden the Czech side decided to go ahead with Hof. This was mentioned as ‘typical Czech behaviour’ by some interview partners.

### **3.2 Examples of enterprise cross-border partnerships and supporting activities**

Due to its situation in the middle of Europe as well as its proximity to the Czech Republic (approx. 25 km), Upper Franconia plays an important role within the process of the east-european market development. Cross-border orientated businesses value its advantage of location; and several initiatives work on topics how to improve communication and logistics between east and west. For example, this includes a centre for logistics (Logistik-Agentur Oberfranken e.V.). In this regard, interview partners emphasized that the extension of the transeuropean infrastructure and the eastern enlargement could provide a basis for future cross-border cooperation, but they also stressed that on enterprise level this is not restricted to cross-border activities with the neighbouring Czech region.

Enterprises within the region can draw on several institutions in order to set up cross-border partnerships. One of them is the **Chamber of Crafts** ([www.hwk-oberfranken.de](http://www.hwk-oberfranken.de)), an obligatory association for craft enterprises in Germany. The Chamber of Crafts is the main contact for over 15,000 crafts enterprises in the region of Upper Franconia. It offers assistance for German craft enterprises in finding business partners in Czech Republic. This includes information visits to Czech Republic,

information days at both sides of border. Moreover, they have initiated an institutional partnership with the regional economic chamber “Egerland“ in Sokolov.

Built in 2000/2001 within an INTERREG II project , the “**East-West Competence Centrum**” ([www.o-w-k.de](http://www.o-w-k.de)) is an institution for international economic exchange of experience and know-how – in particular with the Czech Republic Cross-border services are offered in many fields such as legal advice; marketing; taxes; PR; finance; language service; system development; facility and project management, etc. Its core competencies are in economic and legal consulting services, business consultancy.

**Business Development Hof** is part of the rural district of Hof and provides customised business support.<sup>2</sup> The broad service distinguishes between different target groups, namely existing businesses, businesses willing to settle in the region and founders of new businesses. Its main duty is to foster entrepreneurial development as well as cooperation activities. The Business Development Hof also is stakeholder of „igz Hof“, an Innovation and Business Start Centre.<sup>3</sup> One activity of particular importance for entrepreneurs is CORIS – a data base supported by the Bavarian government (<http://www.coris-online.de/app/index0.html>), which enables and facilitates partner search as it lists firms, craftsmen and freelancers located in the region of the two districts of Hof and Wunsiedel and of the district free city of Hof.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Most German municipalities (districts or cities) have their own business development agency. *Local governments*, i.e., municipalities and districts, are interested in local economic development through fostering investments in their regions. This might include some support for new and existing small firms, but it is not restricted to this group of businesses. Main actors at the local level are business and economic development corporations, (partly) owned by municipalities<sup>2</sup>. They offer a variety of services such as company-related information and consulting services, advice regarding public support programmes or for establishing new ventures, generally acting as an intermediary between local administration and investors. However, although many business development corporations now offer orientation services for new businesses, their main focus is on established firms. According to a verdict of the district court Trier (25.5. 2000, cf. DST et al. [2001]), business development corporations are not allowed to offer individual consultancy for nascent and young entrepreneurs, assistance in developing a business plan and in finding risk and venture capital.

<sup>3</sup> The interview partner stressed that his cross-border contacts are based on friendships with Czech administrative personnel. His agency has no own cross-border cooperation, but they work on small projects jointly with the Czech Republic.

<sup>4</sup> CORIS also is a cluster-oriented regional information system.

**Table 1: Examples of enterprise cross-border partnerships**

**Firm 1:** Family firm, set up in 1983, currently 20 employees. Main business field: supplier for automotive industries. Cross-border partnership: supplier-relations, early on some arm-length partnerships. This company started supplying Czech firms already in 1989. Part of their cross-border partnerships result from a following-customer strategy. In this regard, the Czech Republic appears to be an 'accidental' choice of country and not related to the location of the domestic firm, as most of their large customers keep moving eastwards.

**Firm 2:** Family firm, set up in 1932, producing steam machinery, currently 56 employees. Main business fields today: tools for belts, customised machinery. Main markets: worldwide. Cross-border partnerships: initially supplier-relations, today both buying and selling. The company hired a Czech employee after the border opening, in order to have a contact within the firm who knew the Czech language. Already in 1986, the company followed a customer into then Czechoslovakia, supplying machinery. Contacts are exclusively made by the German side, while the Czech partners are passive.

**Firm 3:** Family firm, set up in 1817 as a furniture maker, specialising on school furniture; 20 employees. Main field today: customised furniture, e.g., for doctors, bars, etc. Cross-border partnership: framework contract and later on cooperation contract with largest furniture firm in Czech Republic. The cooperation was initiated by the German entrepreneur. In 2002 he joined a business trip organised by the local chamber of crafts, which triggered further travels and searches across the border for possible business partners. The entrepreneur emphasized that he would not have started looking for cross-border partnerships hadn't it been for the initial support by the chamber. His recent cooperation contract foresaw that the German firm would design and produce the furniture while the Czech side would search for offers and assemble the furniture. Contract negotiations took a long time to be finalised, and there has been no contact from the Czech side so far.

**Firm 4:** Family firm, set up in 1950, currently 15 full-time employees, and 10 employees working at arm's length. Main business field: sanitary and heating installations, since 16 years also consultancy, design and implementation of wellness and spa installations. Cross-border partnership: contract with Franzensbad AG (spa in Czech Republic) to plan and implement new wellness installations. Contract negotiations took a year with more than 25 meetings. Problems with the contractual behaviour of the Czech side are one of the main barriers in this particular partnership as they prolong planning of the project: Even after contracts have been signed, the Czech partner keeps demanding changes and amendments such as certificates of an institute situated in Prague, threatening to withhold payments in case of non-fulfilment.

**Firm 5:** set up ca. 100 years ago, owned by two entrepreneurs, eight employees. Main business field: optician. Cross-border partnership: since 2004 cooperation with German and Czech tourism partner to offer glasses to tourists travelling with this particular tourism agency. The cooperation now appears to work efficiently, although the optician emphasized starting problems, which he saw resulting from the unreliability of the Czech partners: "If they say a month, it means at least 1/4 years." At the beginning this resulted in him having to take tourists across the border back to Germany to customise their glasses.

Source: Own interviews.

Interviewees from institutions emphasized that motivations for enterprise partnerships differ on the Bavarian and Czech side. Especially in the early 1990s, German enterprises were looking for cheaper labour, while now new markets are gaining importance. Czech enterprises are interested in knowledge, customer orientation and marketing know-how. This might result in different forms of enterprise partnerships. Moreover, it might also partly explain the (early) dominance of arms-length relationships.

Interestingly, in recent years partnerships also failed because of a gap in quality standards on the Czech side, which is a common complaint of entrepreneurs who ventured into cross-border partnerships. For example, firm 1 mentioned the creativity of Czech employees in dealing with machinery problems as a serious restriction for their cross-border partnerships, as this consistently lowers quality standards and keeps raising personnel costs for such an undertaking.

Other main constraints refer to soft barriers such as language and mentality. Entrepreneurs frequently mentioned language barriers. For example, the Czech side keeps talking in Czech during business meetings even when interpreters are present, which often has resulted in unpleasant situations. Different mentalities render business meetings and enterprise cross-border partnerships difficult. For example, Czech people tend to create a familiar atmosphere even in business relationships, while Germans tend to see this as waste of time. German “punctuality” and agreements are interpreted in a different way by Czech partners, while for them connections play an important role. Another issue raised in many interviews referred to an apparent lack of interest of the Czech business partners, who were said to show less initiative in making the first move towards cross-border partnerships. In particular these soft constraints appear to hinder trust-building in business relationships.

## **4. Conclusions from the region “Hochfranken”**

### **4.1 Experiences with cross-border partnerships**

Main barriers or problems are obvious at the socio-cultural level, at administrative-political level due to differences in the administrative structures and at the level of personal interest and engagement. Regarding socio-cultural barriers, Ehm (2002: 110) states as main problems in developing cross-border activities in Hochfranken the language barrier, differing mentalities and diverging socialisations as well as the historical background of both nations (see chapter 2). For example, only few Germans make an effort to learn the Czech language, which is only partly due to the difficult linguistic and grammatical structure of the Czech language. “As German I do not need to know the Czech language. Czechs speak German...” portrays a typical attitude of the Bavarian population in the border region we researched (Weigl and Zöhrer 2005: 13). Most German interview partners openly recognise this as a possible deficit regarding further cross-border activities.

Moreover, cross-border partnerships often are hampered, at least initially, by differences in mentalities, rendering trust-building a long trial and error process. On the other hand, Czech partners consider trust an important requirement in co-operations, which is reflected in the importance attached to personal face-to-face contacts. German interview partners emphasized a role for mutual learning in cross-border relationships, but they also stressed the perceived negative attitude of Czech partners towards this, which is best illustrated by a quote ascribed by one of our interview partners: “You show us how things work and we do them the way we want to.”

The language barrier and a lack of cultural competencies add to an often negative (or at least neutral) attitude of wide parts of the population in the region Hochfranken regarding the Czech neighbour. Although the state gardening exhibition boosted cross-border contacts of the Bavarian and Czech population, prejudices against the Czech population continue to prevail. This is partly due to the historical developments mentioned in chapter 2 such as the expulsion of Germans after the Second World War. On the whole, this contributes to persistent prejudices on behalf of parts of the regional population towards the Czechs across the border. The regional media in

Hochfranken apparently aggravates this. There exist two newspapers, and interview partners consistently pointed out to the negative and discriminating reporting in one of them, which is widely read throughout the region. This newspaper portrays the Czech Republic more often in connection with criminality, drugs, prostitution than with positive reports about cross-border activities.

#### **4.2 The future of cross-border partnerships in “Hochfranken”**

In looking into the future of cross-border partnerships in the region “Hochfranken”, the interviews illustrate that the potential of cross-border partnerships apparently have not been fully realised. This becomes apparent in long processes of building up trust or one-sided learning processes.

Institutional partnerships are mainly driven by the initiative and enthusiasm of single persons or groups, although the initial kick-off could have been established top-down, as for example in the case of the Euregio Egrensis. Especially partnerships on administrative level appear to be mainly initiated by the German side both because of a lack of capacity of Czech administration and fewer interest, or, as one interviewee put it: “They [the Czech administration] need to be able to realise a personal advantage from a cross-border project, otherwise they are not interested in these relations.” One factor emerging from this which has a great influence on cross-border activities in the analysed region refers to the enthusiasm and energy of the participants, regardless of whether they are involved in institutional or enterprise cross-border partnerships.

Institutional partnerships, especially on the level of local administrations, are also rendered difficult because the administrative reforms in the Czech Republic, in particular the regional reforms, are not finished.

From a political point of view, local administrations in Hochfranken appear to acknowledge the potential of cross-border partnerships as well as the necessity and their importance in further developing their region. This differs with regard to the local development agencies which are mainly interested in developing the economic base

of their district, often excluding or neglecting the potential of cross-border partnerships in boosting economic development. At the moment, there exists no regional strategy for cross-border partnerships of the different municipalities. On the contrary, cross-border activities are frequently restricted to project-based short-term partnerships. Interview partners named lacking financial resources and a lack of interest both of large parts of the population in the Bavarian border region as well as of the Czech population and administration as major reasons (also cf. Troeger-Weiß and Spannowsky 2002: 20). Overall, this results in a lack of sustainability concerning cross-border partnerships.

However, there also appears to be a gap regarding regional politics in Bavaria which do not recognise the importance of the Czech Republic for Bavarian border regions. The problem mentioned by some interview partners was one of an arrogant attitude of the Bavarian state towards the Czech Republic (“We know what they need and want”), but also one of less interest in cooperating with the Czech state. Therefore, local administrations in border regions such as Hochfranken are on their own in developing a strategy for cross-border partnerships, but this is hampered by their limited resources. Only recently, the Bavarian state has started negotiating a state contract with the Czech Republic, which also might facilitate the manifold cross-border partnerships in Hochfranken and its neighbouring region in the Czech Republic.

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