



CENTRE FOR
REGIONAL STUDIES

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Research Programme – the Centre for Regional Studies (CRS)

The Centre for Regional Studies (CRS) is a cross-disciplinary research centre that examines societal and scientific challenges of the past, present and future in regional contexts and from regional perspectives, at the intersection of top-down and bottom-up processes. It is affiliated with a PhD research school and a master's programme.

The CRS brings together senior and junior scientists, including post-doctoral researchers, mostly from social and human sciences such as history, human geography, political science, sociology and social work, but also from multidisciplinary fields such as gender, risk, environmental and tourism studies. Researchers at the CRS participate in various national and international research consortia and networks, and co-operate with external actors and stakeholders.

Research focus and challenges

The main societal challenge addressed by the CRS is regional development in a broad sense, especially uneven regional and sustainable development and asymmetrical power relations. Through cross-disciplinary research, the CRS investigates processes and changes that cause or prevent uneven regional and sustainable development and asymmetrical power relations. This research considers current and historical trends and perspectives for the future.

The main research fields of the CRS are:

- civil society, political order, power structures and social relations in regional contexts
- regionalized organizations, governance, planning and justice
- the roles of mobility, knowledge, resources and innovation in sustainable regional development
- multi-scalar/multi-level spatial relations, ranging from local to global
- urban and rural relations
- the generation and application of theories and methodologies for research on regional conditions and sustainable development in a cross-disciplinary context

The CRS bridges society and science through cross-disciplinary research and stakeholder co-operation to contribute to societal change. Therefore, research communication is an important component of CRS activities.

Understanding regions and regionalization

The CRS specializes in regional studies. Regions are regarded as fluid or network spaces that possess shared identities or other qualities. They appear to be more or less stable entities located at fluctuating spatial levels or at intersections of time and space in material, digital and immaterial terms. In general, regions are identified, constructed and legitimized through aspects such as accessibility, administration, culture, heritage, economy, management, natural environment and resources, physical geography and politics. Regions are of special interest to research as a space where top-down and bottom-up practices and processes meet, and where synergies and conflicts at other societal levels are played out. A regionalized approach to studying societal and scientific challenges is thus important for investigating the staging of competing societal strategies and the everyday interactions of actors and networks.

Research approach

Research in regional contexts is organized according to 14 more or less cross-disciplinary themes under the theoretical and methodological umbrella of the CRS.

Theoretical framework

The hybrid theoretical framework of the CRS departs from trends in the transformation of society identified in regional arenas. First, the logic of liberal democracy is increasingly being replaced by economic logic and reliance on market forces in the context of globalization. Politics and economic and socio-cultural relations have thus become embedded in, and adjusted to, a neo-liberal model based on concepts such as growth, efficiency and managerialism. Second, the interplay between political ordering, civil mobilization and social resistance and alternatives is growing in importance. With escalating globalization and transnational networking, social change is accelerating and access to alternative discourses and action groups is increasing daily. Interestingly, globalization has been accompanied by the regional and transnational mobilization of new social movements. A regionalized approach to power, organization, political practices, economic and socio-cultural relations and mobilization opens up new opportunities for understanding and investigating contexts, including the possibility of hands-on research. At the intersection of top-down and bottom-up practices and processes, the regional perspective opens a window of opportunity to study how established forms of power meet resistance movements, and how different power techniques and dynamics of resistance play out.

There are dominant historical and current narratives on societal progress, in which innovation, resources and carriers of scientific knowledge and behaviour, such as scientists and engineers, are depicted as driving forces. However, knowledge, innovation and resources actively contribute to alternative paths such as bottom-up movements that interact with scientific and alternative knowledge, innovation and resources. Grass-roots innovation and knowledge production often originate from critical, combinatory and versatile perspectives and practices that challenge the neo-liberal growth paradigm. Moreover, in the mainstream agenda on innovation, encompassing global actors such as the OECD, UN and EU, a broader understanding of knowledge and innovation including a wide range of actors and disciplines has come to the fore. Because they offer not only alternative uses but also alternative rights to and distribution of knowledge, grass-roots innovation and resources have impacts from local to global levels. However, regional arenas appear to be of key importance for investigating practices surrounding knowledge, resources and innovation and evaluating competing views.

The increasing calls for civil participation in planning, management and sometimes decision-making create a platform where politics meets civil society. The change from a top-to-bottom to a seemingly bottom-to-top agenda suggests obvious possibilities, such as enhanced democratic involvement, empowerment and development. In reality, participation is most often initiated from the top, as part of new guidelines from authorities, which do not take into account that civil participants do not share the same values, priorities or knowledge, and which do not acknowledge the heterogeneity of civil society. In fact, experience suggests that participation projects often strengthen local hierarchies, as powerful participants emerge as the main beneficiaries. In addition, there has been a shift towards organized participation based on NGOs and selected stakeholders. Other critics point out that participation has become a tool for authorities to manage diminished budgets, and to dodge public responsibility. The platforms where politics meet civil society are often of a regional character. Therefore, analyses of civil society and participatory practices would benefit from regionalized perspectives to bring out the heterogeneity of participatory units, and enable more accurate analyses of asymmetrical power relations within them.

The mobility of people, capital, resources, commodities and knowledge is currently a highly relevant topic. Although mobility has always been important, the proportions, complexity and geographical scale of modern networks make it an issue of concern. Two long-term trends are urbanization and the depletion of rural areas, and the global migration from poor and conflict-affected areas to the global north. Furthermore, mobility has become professionalized and commodified, with tourism as one of the largest industries. Increasing mobility and flows of commodities and new patterns of production and consumption provide both challenges and opportunities for the development of urban as well as rural areas. Of special importance to the CRS is the perception of inequality in mobility and space, especially with strong positive and negative connotations associated not only with different groups of people but also with production units, waste disposal and commodities. This selective appraisal entails regional competition for so-called attractive citizens and assets, and resistance against the undesired; thus it adds to the challenge of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is a distinct hybrid of nature and culture. The field is characterized by a mixture of the material, the immaterial and factors in between, such as ideologies, plans, energy, radiation, landscapes, technology and waste. Sustainable development is partly guided by the dominant discourse of ecological modernization – environmental problems are to be mitigated or solved by the market with the help of new technology that increases growth. However, ecological modernization is challenged both by NGOs in regular civil movements and by less organized activism, promoting alternative resource utilization, competing fields of expertise and the values of those who are critical of growth. With growing awareness that environmental problems are often intertwined with social and global inequalities, the concept of environmental justice has emerged as a new direction for sustainable development, with its three pillars of environmental, social and economic sustainability.

The crucial importance of managing all three pillars of sustainable development is increasingly emphasized, because a sustainable society needs to provide for equal employment and income opportunities, equal justice and an ecologically sound environment. Planning for sustainable development occurs on geographical scales from the local to the global, and involves a variety of actors and networks. The regional arena is the main level at

which planning and management as well as activism and its alternatives occur. A regional perspective adds to the theoretical and practical development of environmental justice, which so far has mostly been applied to conditions in the global south.

A special strength of the CRS is its historical and heritage analyses, which embrace a range of research fields. Regional processes have evolved through specific historical processes and contexts, and are more or less path-dependent, with heritage as an important component of regional identity building. The long-term perspective on regions and regionalization across time and space therefore adds to the hybrid theoretical framework of the CRS. However, regional analyses of the past not only improve understanding of present conditions, but also bring out new perspectives and histories. For instance, historical landscape analyses and microhistories are important theoretical and methodological contributions that offer alternatives to national narratives. They sometimes have the capacity to draw attention to otherwise invisible actors, relationships and activities that have been of crucial importance for both historical and current regionalized processes.

The methodological framework

When studying regions, defined as fluid or network spaces where top-to-bottom and bottom-to-top practices meet and synergies and conflicts play out, it is crucial to cross disciplinary borders, and through reflexive processes create dialogues between scientists from different disciplines, and between scientists and societal actors and stakeholders. The cross-disciplinary methodology of the CRS challenges scientists not only to shoulder a critical, responsible and interrogative role, but also to address problems raised by societal actors and stakeholders.

Within the CRS, cross-disciplinary methodology is understood in a broad sense to incorporate multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. Cross-disciplinarity is seen as an umbrella concept and framework. This means that the CRS provides a context for different types of cross-disciplinary research, and for developing the methodology of such research. Although most research at the CRS is cross-disciplinary, not all projects are of this character. However, all projects based in the CRS research environment are at least influenced and affected by cross-disciplinarity, for example at seminar discussions and workshops. The three types of cross-disciplinary research can be briefly explained as follows. Multidisciplinary research involves scientists from different disciplines, and often has the character of a project where a particular theme is researched from different disciplinary perspectives. A more integrated analysis may be found in the synthesizing or concluding phase of the project. In interdisciplinary research, integration of disciplines is more profound than in multidisciplinary research, and it occurs from the earliest stages. Transdisciplinary research differs from multi- and interdisciplinary research in that it involves non-academic actors. Such research can include actors from industry, authorities and NGOs, or individuals such as patients, customers and local citizens, depending on the particular issues of interest.

Research themes

A total of 14 research themes are included in the research programme. Each research theme involves internally or externally funded projects.

New forms of governance

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The relationships between politics, administration and the market have undergone significant changes in liberal democratic states over the past three decades. These shifts are related to the adoption of New Public Management (NPM) as well as new political rationalities and practices, articulated in different ways on various spatial scales and with varying effects. Scholars have shown how 'political systems slowly and gradually change from hierarchically organized, unitary systems of government that govern by means of law, rule and order, to more horizontally organized and relatively fragmented systems of governance that govern through the regulation of self-regulating networks' (Sorensen 2002). This research aims to scrutinize the implications of these new forms of governance in relation to the processes of politicization and de-politicization, especially in the context of regional governance, as well as processes of inclusion and exclusion of different groups stratified by class, ethnicity/race, gender and sexuality.

Methodological perspectives and methods of cross-disciplinary research

Contact person: Margareta Dahlström (Margareta.Dahlstrom@kau.se)

This research theme addresses various issues in relation to cross-disciplinary research. It aims at discussing and explaining the reasons for cross-disciplinary research as well as the advantages, disadvantages and benefits of such research. It focuses on arguments for cross-disciplinary research, such as the need for different types of knowledge to address global and societal challenges, as well as the barriers to such research. Such barriers may include the organization of academia, where the disciplines and administrative arrangements of faculties may pose challenges to cross-disciplinary research. Different methods of cross-disciplinary research are explored and developed through research projects at the CRS.

Knowledge dynamics and innovation for transition to sustainable development

Contact person: Margareta Dahlström (Margareta.Dahlstrom@kau.se)

The research theme addresses the challenges of a transition to sustainable development. Central to this transition is the need to develop new knowledge, including the innovation of products, services and processes. The knowledge dynamics approach, which is about knowledge exchange, networks and relationships between actors, is useful to this research. The regional level is important for such relationships, but interaction is not constrained to an administrative region. Regions are seen as fluid or network spaces, and knowledge dynamics are multi-scalar. One aim of the theme is to understand how different actors can contribute to transition through a variety of innovations, including new ways of collaborating. Can a broadening of regional innovation to the quadruple helix system contribute to the transition? Another important theme relates to a path-dependency perspective that stresses a historic dimension to processes. Can regional path dependencies of socio-cultural structures, firms, politics, authorities and the higher education sector lead to lock-ins and barriers in relation to transition? Current research at the CRS relates to a transition to bio-based sustainable development.

Marginalization and dynamics at the rural edge

Contact person: Eva Svensson (Eva.Svensson@kau.se)

There is a growing rift between eventful cities and marginalized rural areas, especially sparsely populated forested and montane areas, henceforth called 'the rural edge'. The widening of the rift is supported by asymmetrical development processes in society,

increasing rural marginalization. However, marginalization is not a historically permanent condition, as evidence from bio-cultural heritage has demonstrated the existence of dynamic and innovative communities in the preindustrial past. Moreover, there are counter-marginalization processes in the rural edge today, often revealing alternative economic and social directions in current neoliberal society. These movements are sometimes labelled the 'new ruralities', a term that describes values, practices and networks in transforming rural areas in the globalized and urbanized modern world.

Transregionality

Contact person: Lotta Braunerhielm (Lotta.Braunerhielm@kau.se)

Cross-border research, including studies of the significance and challenges of cross-border regions, has gained increasing international interest from scholars. Cross-border regions often contain dynamic and heterogeneous resources, which may present obstacles to and offer opportunities for achieving mutual aims of growth and sustainability. Our research includes research on cross-border mobility such as cross-border shopping and commuting, regional enlargement, innovation systems and policy and planning issues.

Histories meet histories: civil society, migration and the rural–urban continuum

Contact person: Martin Åberg (Martin.Aberg@kau.se)

This theme addresses civil society processes at the intersection of localism and globalism, with a specific focus on the emergence of new civil society configurations as a result of migration. Hypothetically, these configurations may differ because of local and regional sociocultural variation and the degree of urbanization. Consequently, these processes contribute to local and regional variation with respect to bottom-up strategies, actors and networks that are relevant from perspectives such as governance, social and political organization, and innovation – in other words 'region building'.

Environmental justice: theories and framework for inclusive development and civil society

Contact person: Hilde Ibsen (Hilde.Ibsen@kau.se)

Environmental justice at its core is a vision of the democratic inclusion of people and communities in decision-making that affects their health, well-being and the natural world. Decision-making processes have been criticized for being expert driven and for failing to provide the meaningful participation of those most affected by environmental destruction. Thus, environmental justice demands policies based on people-centred development and bottom-to-top approaches.

Organization and resistance

Contact person: Mona Lilja (Mona.Lilja@kau.se)

Social change is complex and hard to depict. It depends on material circumstances, political subjectivities, processes of hybridity and the actions of ordinary individuals. We organize ourselves in social movements, networks and political campaigns because of the need for change, yet we barely understand how change works or how to study it. What are the political practices that create and have an impact upon change? To remedy this, it is crucial to explore further how resistance and political practices create democracies, conflicts and new political discourses that shape whole regions. This research theme concerns how politics plays out in society, and thereby how societal change comes about. How are political

discourses changed and power relations configured, and how is local activism formulated and resistance created within and between regions?

International regions

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International relations as a subject 'traditionally' belongs at the national level. However, regions are currently more deeply engaged in the international political arena. This may be a result of the decentralization of policy areas or changes in the relationships between political levels. This has opened up new research areas such as processes of Europeanization and sub-state diplomacy/paradiplomacy. The research could focus on the influence of regions on the European Union decision-making process and how they put items on the political agenda. How do regions within the EU collaborate, and in which policy areas?¹ The questions are also applicable to the international political arena: how do regions engage internationally, and what are their motivations?

Immigration and inclusion

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The Swedish welfare state is facing the major challenge of accommodating and integrating a large inflow of asylum seekers from countries outside Europe. This research theme explores how these challenges contribute to reinventing new forms of governance in local and regional arenas. The particular focus is on emerging collaborative partnerships between public and civic actors to achieve alternative post-contractual forms of governance. We explore what collaborative governance values, norms and practices the new form of public-civic partnerships strive to promote in responding to integration challenges. Do the parties achieve the desired change in their relationships, and how? Who governs, based on what principles, and what is in it for both parties?

Tourism

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This research theme critically explores the transforming regional landscapes of tourism and mobility. First, the role of tourism is analysed in relation to regional strategies of growth and development in smart specialization and innovation strategies, place-branding and attractiveness. Second, the research project highlights sustainability and resilience in tourism, including studies of ecotourism in biosphere reserves and the role of tourists in crisis and disaster management and communication. Third, urban and rural interrelations manifested through tourism and mobility are studied in terms of planning for nature- and culture-based activities and new urban and rural experiencescapes.

Resectoralization and commodification of research and higher education

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Any nation or region that aspires to growth and sustainability will turn to policies for higher education (HE) reform and capacity building. When striving to prepare the population for work and employability, HE is a major strategic tool. In this process, we witness a range of developments, including new actors that challenge the university in its role as a privileged

¹ Of course it can be debated whether the EU constitutes an international arena; however, 'international' in this context is crudely defined as being outside national borders.

institution for knowledge production, such as distributed learning, virtual universities, consortia and networks, for-profit HE, certificate programmes and corporate universities. The emergence of new actors in the market for global HE offers fundamental challenges to the understanding of the role and function of a university as a privileged institution for capacity building, including its legitimacy, legal status, values, freedom and relevance. Questions such as 'What is the HE sector and how is it being reshaped in terms of organization, mobility and spatiality?' and 'Who can be a higher education institution (HEI) and where is it located?' become relevant when considering this emergent resectoralization (Robertson et al. 2012) at the national and regional level. Challenges to the HEI sector are commonly attributed to globalization and marketization, both enabled by technological innovation, new media culture and (de)regulation of markets.

History and heritage of innovation, organization and resilience on the rural edges of Europe

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This research theme addresses innovation, strategies and networks in forested and montane landscapes across Europe in the period c. 1900 AD and their heritage. The aim is to study the historical importance of rural edges from a regional and European perspective. It is of central importance to identify historical processes and conditions that promote innovation and resilience or cause marginalization. Another aim of the research is to investigate the use of the heritage of the rural edges, such as neo-traditional organizations, for rural development. The research will contribute to the development of the fields of environmental history/archaeology and rural development.