

Review article

Relative Regional Advantages as a Vehicle for the Prosperity of Regions

Ali AlQahtany

*Assistant Professor, Department of Urban & Regional Planning
College of Architecture & Planning, University of Dammam*

amalqahtany@uod.edu.sa

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Abstract: During the last few decades, there has been an increasing interest in the topic of regions and relative regional advantages and it is in constant mutation across the world. The most important reason for this is that during the last century regions across the world have witnessed numerous environmental, social, economic and urban changes. The aim of this study is to define the concept of relative regional advantages and to give a comprehensive review of the most important key issues that are related to it. Additionally, it is a review of practice of relative regional advantages in some of the developed countries including the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as other countries in different parts of the world. The purpose of this review is to find out the effects of the relative regional advantages and to what extent it needs to be supported. The study employed the review of practice technique as a method of research. Most of the results and findings reached through this study have emphasised the need for supporting relative regional advantages due to the fact that it has a great power to enhance the economies of regions, and thereby promote the social, environmental and urban issues.

Keywords: Regions, Relative Regional Advantages, Developed Countries, the UK, European Union.

Introduction

During the last few decades, there has been an increasing interest in the topic of regions in general and particularly the concept of relative regional advantages and it is in constant mutation across the world. The most important reason for this is that during the last century the world has witnessed numerous changes that are related to the social environment, economy and urban and regional planning. In fact, the urban population of the world increased nearly fourfold, from 732 million in 1950 to 2.8 billion in 2000 and to more than 3.2 billion in 2006 (United Nations, 2006, Redman, 2010). Additionally, the year 2007 marked a turning point in human history where half of the population of the world was living in cities (Cities Alliance, 2007).

In general, relative regional advantages are becoming more prevalent across the world, and have many positive and negative effects that could influence the living conditions of the population, social environment and economy. The main aim of this study is to define the notion of regions in general and particularly the concept of relative regional advantages in order to give an idea of the key points which are related to it such as its principles. Moreover, the study is a review of practice of relative regional advantages in some of the developed countries including the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as other countries in different parts of the world. The study employed the review of practice technique as a method of research in order to achieve the main aim of the study.

Consequently, this study will be divided into

three main sections. It first defines the notion of regions in general and then focuses particularly on the concept and principles of relative regional advantages. The second part will review relative regional advantages in the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as other countries in different parts of the world including the United States, Singapore and Japan. This is followed by a discussion of the prevalence and effect of relative regional advantages and results and findings reached through this study.

Concept of Relative Regional Advantages (RRA)

During the last few years there has been a wide-ranging discussion about the concepts of the regions and relative regional advantages (RRA), which is considered as one of the most hotly debated issues all over the world. Previous studies (e.g. MacKinnon and Phelps, 2001, Paasi, 2002, Paasi, 2003, Paasi, 2011, Sani and Mahasti, 2012, Zimmerbauer and Paasi, 2013) have identified the notion of both region and RRA on both a general level and in the context of particular case studies. Generally, regions have been a particularly complex category in the history of geographical thought (Paasi, 2011). However, in order to clarify ideas, regions can be seen within six key contexts (Hettne, 1994, Smouts, 1998). These contexts are as follow:

- Region as a geographical and ecological unit bordered by natural barriers.
- Region as a relatively social system of cultural, economic, and political interaction.
- Region as an organised co-operation in cultural, political and economic or military fields, established by multilateral regional institutions.
- Region as a civil society developing from culture, social interaction, and meeting of values.
- Region as a historical formation of a distinct identity working as a political player and provided with a specific level of legitimacy.
- Region as an administrative division to manage the national territory, carried out by the central government

The term RRA is considered as one of the most commonly used words and ultimate catchphrases among the scholars of nationalism studies and in the nationalist discourses, where it has a broad scope of meanings on both micro and macro scales that covers personal, ethnic, social, national and many

other realities (Saracevic, 2012). In the same context, Allan Craigie (2010), indicates that RRA is a complicated phenomenon, where it is key to the expression of region itself, but at the same time all the characteristics of RRA are made in the light of the relationship with others. According to Lin (2002), RRA has multiple levels and it is variable depending on several conditions and issues. Sani and Mahasti (2012), point out that there are different forms of RRA which include population characteristics, cultural background, and regional economic base.

Pohl (2001) points out that RRA can be felt somewhere in the middle between local level and national level, and it can be described as the feeling of being at home or belonging to an area at the meso-scale. Indeed, it is seen as an expression and result of social relationships that can be located within the regions but also outside, and can respectively be local, regional, national and global (Paasi, 2011). A number of previous studies (e.g. Paasi, 2002, MacLeod and Jones, 2001, Jones and MacLeod, 2004, Zimmerbauer et al., 2012), indicate that RRA can be understood as a regional consciousness of individuals, which stems from spatial socialisation and has both emotional and cognitive aspects. According to Robert Parkin (1999), RRA could correspondingly cross national boundaries as well as falling within them, and possibly subsequently become divided into what may be called sub-regionalisms in the present context. Since the 1980s Anssi Paasi has been working on a theory of the institutionalization of regions, which suggests that regions should be conceptualized as historical processes (Paasi, 2011). These processes involve four main stages, which can be seen in the following key points:

- Territorial shaping including making of soft but hard boundaries.
- Symbolic shaping, for example through the naming and use of other symbols.
- Institutional shaping such as institutions producing or reproducing other shapes.
- Establishment of the region as part of the regional system and social consciousness, for example, the regional identity.

In the same context, Paasi (2011), notes that RRA can be seen and analysed as a component that contains two fundamental elements: the first one is the regional character and the second one is the regional consciousness of the people who live in the region or beyond it. At the same notion, Wolfgang Knapp (2003), points out that the recognition of regions as continuous historical processes facilitates the understanding of RRA of a specific region. Knapp

also indicates that the concept of RRA connects both the objective and subjective dimensions of a region. Objective dimension includes nature, physical environment, landscape, culture and economic aspects, whereas, subjective dimension involves the individual and collective representations and can be referred to as the images held by the inhabitants and those who live outside the region.

RRA has been realised as a key feature in the building of regions as social, environmental, economic and political spaces (Keating 2001, Paasi, 2003,

Sani and Mahasti, 2012). It is a special type of phenomenon that develops during the historical and territorial socialisation (Raagmaa, 2001). The concept of RRA is grounded in the regional history, surrounding landscape, special language or dialect dominating in a specific region, and also can be seen as a part of self-identity and personal attachment to a region (Pohl, 2001). In short, Meijers and Romein (2003), emphasis the importance of RRA as one of the key factors that determine the feasibility for a regional approach, which can be seen in Figure 1.

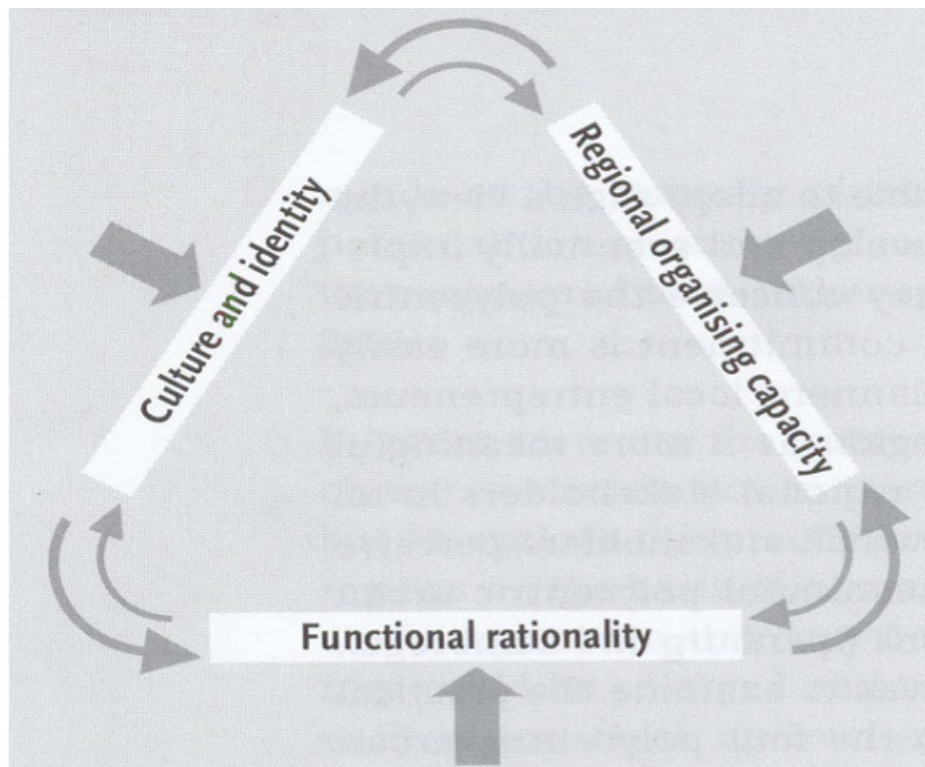


Figure 1. Relevant factors determining the feasibility for a regional approach (Meijers and Romein, 2003).

RRA in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom is comprised of four main nations, which are not fully independent. These four nations are Wales, England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and each one of them has a number of regions and local authorities that are different from each other (see Figure 2).

In the European context, region has been defined as a geographically contiguous area that lies in the scale between a community and the nation state (Parkin, 1999). The nature of the relationship between the national level and regional level varies from one country to another in Europe, which can be seen in figure 3.

In Western Europe, for instance in Germany, Spain and Italy, the establishment of stable boundaries and the facilitating of relationships among European states allows the development of the notion of RRA, which is usually associated with the strengthening of democracy (Le Galès and Lequesne, 1998). Currently, Spanish RRA, for instance, is seen as layers of multiple identities instead of a homogenous identity (Wagstaff, 1999). Similarly in Britain, MacKinnon and Phelps (2001) indicate “national identity is seen as a plural identity based on different ethnic groups and cultures where powers can be shared between national and local governments”.

In the same context, Parkin (1999), points out that “while in western Europe attempts are being made

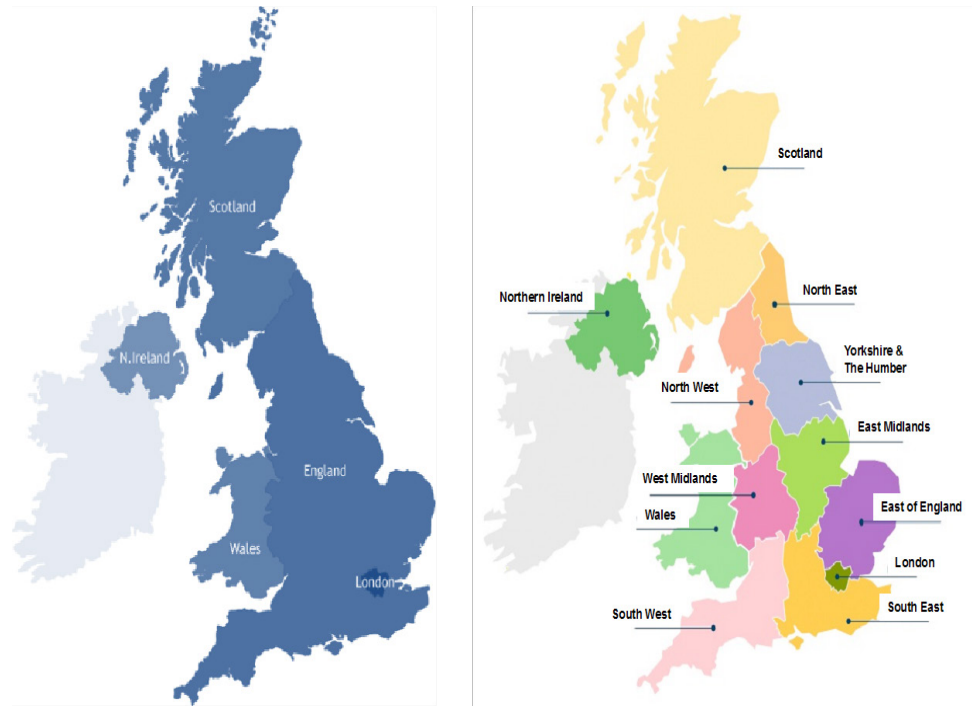


Figure 2. The main four nations and regions located within the United Kingdom (European Resettlement Network, 2010).



Figure 3. The 15 Members of the European Union and the main regions (Wagstaff, 1999).

to institutionalise collaboration between regional and European institutions in challenging the nation state's traditional monopoly of power, in Eastern Europe RRA is tending to change into new nationalisms, as old multi-ethnic states break up into their component parts". In the European Union, the phenomenon of the belief in the existence of a regional consciousness and RRA is strong, which is continually monitored via Eurobarometer surveys that aim to evaluate the European level identification of the citizens (Paasi, 2011). Undoubtedly, RRA commonly located among the ordinary population, which is something not all regions can have, particularly if constructed by the official authorities (Parkin, 1999).

In Germany and England, RRA is not mutually exclusive, where both enjoy a high degree of ethnic

homogeneity as result of the growth of urban immigrant minorities (Parkin, 1999). This is not necessarily the case in France and Italy, where minority ethnic characters exist in some regions and majority sub-characters in others. On the other hand, in Brittany or Catalonia, RRA might be considered mutually exclusive with national identity, where both of them can exist on a scale that is directly comparable (Parkin, 1999). Smith and Wistrich (2007) compare three different regions from different countries in Europe, which are Wales in the United Kingdom, Silesia in Poland and Flanders in Belgium. Their comparison of these regions is based on a number of aspects, including regional identity against national identity, which is illustrated in figure 4.

National vs. Regional Identity		
Wales - United Kingdom	Silesia - Poland	Flanders - Belgium
Identities vary from strongly regional to national depending upon geographical origin and language.	Both Silesians and Germans identified themselves with the region rather than the nation.	The Flemish were strongly Flemish in their orientation, expressing antagonism towards the Belgian state.
Welsh speakers identified very strongly with regional (i.e. Wales) rather than national identity, as did the Pakistani minority.	For the Silesians this took precedence over other origins and was strongly related to the "traditional" family.	Most Moroccans found it easier to identify themselves as Belgian rather than Flemish because being "Belgian" did not impact too strongly upon their other identities, and because they felt excluded by the activities of the Flemish Movement.
The English-speaking Welsh identified strongly with Wales but also saw themselves as British.	German speakers also identified as German, part of the German "volk".	They also identified themselves as Muslim rather than Moroccan.
The English incomers identified themselves as English or British but not Welsh.	For both Silesians and Germans, their predominant identity was regional rather than national.	The Turks' primary identification was with their region of origin in Turkey, even more than with Turkey as such.
	The reverse was true for the Poles, whose identity was primarily Polish.	

Figure 4. The comparison between Wales, Silesia and Flanders in terms of the regional identity against national identity (Smith and Wistrich, 2007).

RRA across the World

As mentioned previously, RRA has emerged as a hugely significant category in academic research and policy discussions around the world (Paasi, 2011). Viewed with a positive and open mind, RRA across the world can be seen as a valuable resource for enhancing social capital, raising investment capital and attracting new entrepreneurs and people to live in the region (Raagmaa, 2001). There is no doubt that relative regional advantages are important, despite the varying degrees of importance of these advantages from one place to another in different parts of the world. Peter Katzenstein (2005) believes that in Asia the civilisation and cultural contents of regions are important, however, it is less important than the combination of local and universal referents, which are mainly employed by political elites for obvious political goals. In contrast, Peter notes that the RRA in Europe are grounded in the civilisation and cultural notions and contents, even if it remains enormously variable across different locales and social levels.

King (2016) indicates that “Southeast Asia is characterised by cultural diversity and openness; it has a long history of cultural connections with other parts of the world demonstrating the importance of physical migrations and cultural flows into, across and out of the region, which have generated cross-cultural encounters and social intercourse”. In Singapore, for instance, the population, categorised into four main groups, disregards the numerous sub-groups within these ethnic communities, which are Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian (Graham et al., 2000). Japan and Germany have taken different positions towards the world after 1945, which resulted from the shaping of national and international identities by the institutions that the United States put in place in Europe and Asia (Katzenstein, 1996). For Japan, the world is a hostile place, and therefore, Japanese actors should cope on their own, while for Germany, the world is a community to which Germany belongs. Undoubtedly, these different stances will subsequently influence the nature and notion of RRA in these countries.

In the United States, Green and Pollard (2003), point out that even though it is almost a century and a half after the Civil War, RRA is still most often defined in words of northern or southern regions. Indeed, there is a clear distinction in the battle between downtown centralisation and suburban sprawl in the North American West which presents a sharply defined contrast between the vast open spaces that define the rural countryside

with a booming growth in centres of urban population where most of its citizens resided (Ashley and Alm, 2016). However, while many geographical regions of the country continue to maintain a distinctive regional culture, the South has somehow become the most regional region (Keating et al., 2003). Fundamentally, RRA in the United States is exposed to a great pressure within the globalising world, where it starts to be seen as a starting point to understand and brand a region and differentiate it from others (Messely et al., 2010).

The Prevalence of RRA

At the present time, RRA has greatly spread around the world in multiple forms and serves many different issues and interests. Scholars often attempt to employ the concept of RRA in order to obtain a better understanding of the relationship between political and social actors, institutions and political structures in the region as well as other important actors (Saracevic, 2012). It is beginning to be seen as an expression of social-institutional capital, which is recognised as a significant component in policy effectiveness (Sabatier, 2005, Balsiger, 2006).

In fact, it is very important to understand the main purposes or motivations of the politicians, academics and civil society actors to support the building of RRA. For instance, an important fact is that the support for the re-emergence of RRA discourse comes from the actors who also support decentralisation of the country (Saracevic, 2012). Recently, RRA seems to have maintained its important roles in the United Kingdom and the European Union as well as other countries in different parts of the world including the United States, Singapore and Japan where it has become crucial element of social and political practice and discourse, and not only typical in abstract academic debates (Keating et al., 2003, Katzenstein, 2005, Paasi, 2011). Powerful RRA is considered as a fundamental source of political opposition, particularly against the creation of protected areas (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001, Bonaiuto et al., 2002, Carrus et al., 2005).

Lately, RRA has emerged as one of the most important matters in urban planning, regional economy and cultural discourse (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 2006, Paasi, 2012). In the same context, it is seen as a significant resource for the success of economy and development of regions at the current time (Cooke and Morgan, 1994). RRA is becoming more prevalent because it contains many expressions related to social and cultural science, which have been

in the headlines since the 1970s and include heritage, past or roots (Paasi, 2011). It is considered as an essential key of social identification, where it has the ability to compete with other powerful issues, such as nationality, ethnicity and religion (Saracevic, 2012). Moreover, it has also become an important issue in governance and planning not only on the regional scale but also in the local and national scale (Paasi, 2011).

Undoubtedly, RRA plays a great role in economic competition and the cultural promotion of regions, where it is recognised as a significant asset (Passi, 2009, Zimmerbauer et al., 2012). RRA as well as other key issues (e.g. the quality of the local living, social environment, cultural resources of a region and international image) is considered as the secret of the competitiveness and success of many economic firms and others institutions (Amin, 2004, Cappellin, 1998, Bristow, 2005). A number of studies (e.g. Paasi, 1986, Amdam, 2000, Raagmaa, 2001) indicate

that RRA with its institutional thickness and support, which is based on local culture forms and common social space, can be used as a tool for change in some institutions and undertaking painful reforms without the risk of social collapse.

Garri Raagmaa (2001), points out that people and investors are attracted to the regions that have good internally supported RRA and reputation. On the other hand, neighbourhoods where citizens have no specific regional identity might grow quickly by the investment created by outsiders interested in the use of location, natural resources or labour force; however, these areas could decline rapidly due to the missing community and rootless people. These two interesting points can be seen in Raagmaa's Model, which is illustrated in Figure 5 and present the hypothetical effect of regional identity on population migratory behaviour.

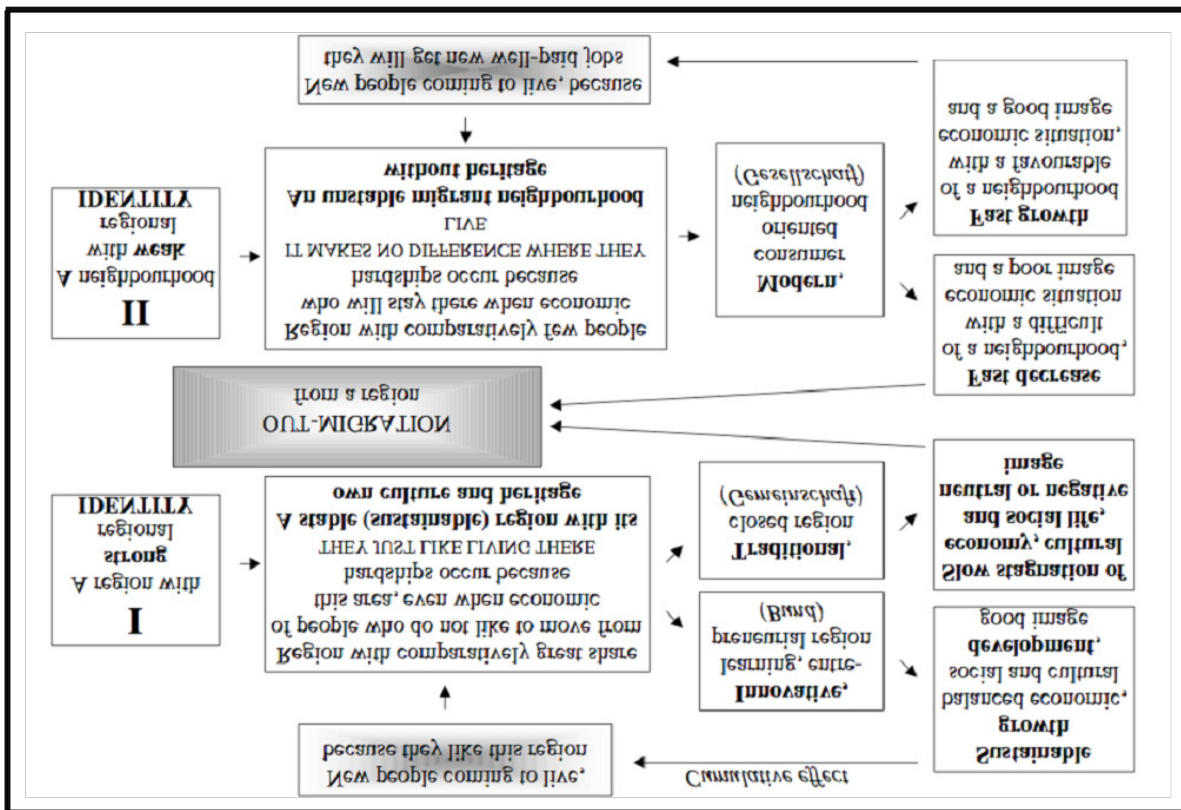


Figure 5. The hypothetical effect of regional identity on population migratory behaviour (Raagmaa, 2001).

The effects of the prevalence of RRA

As it is the case with many different issues, RRA and its prevalence has obvious effects, whether positive or negative, that could influence the living conditions of the population, natural resources, environment and economy in the UK, Europe and across the world. However, based on the literature review included within this study, this research would argue that RRA is an important issue for regions and should be supported in order for these regions to be sustainable regions due to the importance of this key issue in the social, economic, environmental and governance aspects. Regions with strong RRA have the ability for the growth of social capital (e.g. networking, shared trust and values) and co-operation, avoidance of path-dependencies and many of the obstacles in the development process such as the chaotic breaks (Raagmaa, 2001).

“RRA may also cross national boundaries as well as fall within them, perhaps then being divided into what, in the present context, might be called sub-regionalisms” (Parkin, 1999). Sani and Mahasti (2012) point out that RRA links regions and people together; it provides people with more self-confidence and encourages them to understand the regional values and improve the quality of the regional living. This without doubt enhances the position of the region in the struggle with different social, economic and spatial institutions over resources and power. Furthermore, Jovana Saracevic (2012) indicates that RRA has the ability to overcome national differences in the regions that are inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups.

Keeping in mind the significance and importance of RRA and its positive effects that have been highlighted, the negative aspects should not be ignored and must be taken into account, addressed and managed properly, including ethnic and regional intolerance. According to Pohl (2001), RRA is a positive feeling, where people produce and reproduce social cohesion by their practical consciousness and activities and consequently form a regional community. However, this is not always the case; sometimes this process might lead to regionalism as a political movement, where RRA becomes similar to ethnicity, and can be understood as the geographical dimension of exclusion and inclusion within the society (Pohl, 2001). Along the same notion, Saracevic (2012) points out that “in some cases RRA also has the potential for fragmentation of a country precisely because it is territorially based and as such could be the origin of disintegrative political aspirations”.

Therefore, it is very important to understand and realise the main purposes of the politicians, intellectuals and academics as well as civil society who play a role in the building of RRA. Le Galès and Lequesne (1998) point out that the regional power can be analysed based on seven dimensions, which are:

1. Institutions.
2. Policy-making capacity.
3. Powers.
4. The power of integration.
5. Financial resources.
6. The intergovernmental system.
7. Relations with the market.

However, based on the literature review that has been carried out, this research study would also argue that RRA should be added to these seven dimensions as an independent dimension, and the significant effects of RRA on each one of them should also be highlighted. For instance, Balsiger (2006) indicates that RRA offers a venue for expressing distinctiveness that could attract numerous visitors to the region and bring different skilled workers, which will create an improved environment for investments and financial resources.

Kaj Zimmerbauer (2008) points out that RRA can be built by developing the regional image, which is extremely important to note. However, as image cannot be built in the air, Zimmerbauer, claims that in everyday practice good regional image should be based on strong RRA. In other words, Zimmerbauer indicates that “if a region has no place in the awareness of its inhabitants or if the residents do not identify with it, its existence as a social construct can be questioned”. Raagmaa (2001) indicates that RRA is mental product of the interaction of the societies with their environmental, social and physical spaces. Therefore, RRA should be promoted as a comprehensive framework that involves different sorts of cultural, ethnic and religious identifications, recognising that the support for such idea depends on the strength of RRA, which is built based on the relationships between the region and the central government (Saracevic, 2012).

Conclusion

The main aim of this study is to define the notion of regions in general and particularly focus on the concept of relative regional advantages (RRA) in order to give an idea of the key points which are related to it. Moreover, the study gave a general idea of the

obvious reasons for the prevalence of RRA as well as discussed the effects of that prevalence. The literature review undertaken has a great role in shedding light on this subject matter. Through this study, the role and importance of RRA has emerged as one of the most important key concerns that must be taken into account in the modern world. The reason for this is that it has a clear influence on enhancing social prosperity, improving economic performance and many other environmental issues as well as the governance aspect.

In this study it is argued that RRA has a number of positive aspects that need to be supported and has a few negative issues that should be addressed. On one hand, the positive aspects include the ability of the regions with strong RRA to link regions and people together, where it provides the residents with more self-confidence and encourages them to understand regional values. Undoubtedly, this enhances the position of the region in terms of the social, economic, environmental and governance issues. On the other hand, there are a few negative issues that have been touched on in this research. One of the obvious negatives of RRA is that it could be used as a tool for creating political movements, exclusion and inclusion within the society and prevalence of the ethnic and regional intolerance.

Most of the results and findings reached through this study have emphasised the need for supporting RRA due to the fact that it has great power to enhance the economy of the region, and thereby promote the social and environmental issues. During this study, there have been several discussions and investigations made to reach the reality of the power of RRA at the current time in different places across the world, including the United Kingdom, the European Union, United States, Singapore and Japan. For instance, in the United Kingdom, as mentioned previously, there are strong RRA across the country and each region has its own environment, culture, economy and opportunities as well as challenges. Also, the developing economies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland regions show the motivating power of RRA in a remarkable manner.

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مقالة استعراضية

المزايا الإقليمية النسبية كوسيلة لإزدهار الأقاليم

علي مفلح القحطاني

أستاذ مساعد بقسم التخطيط الحضري والإقليمي

كلية العمارة والتخطيط بجامعة الدمام

amalqahntany@uod.edu.sa

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ملخص البحث. في العقود القليلة الماضية كان هناك إهتمام متزايد ومستمر في موضوعات الأقاليم بشكل عام والمزايا الإقليمية النسبية بشكل خاص في جميع أنحاء العالم. برز هذا الإهتمام نتيجة ما شهده ويشهده العالم من تغيرات بيئية وإجتماعية وإقتصادية و عمرانية خلال نهايات القرن الماضي وبدايات القرن الحالي. هذه الدراسة تهدف إلى تعريف مفهوم الأقاليم بشكل عام وتحديد المقصود بالمزايا النسبية الإقليمية بشكل خاص من خلال إعطاء استعراض شامل للقضايا الرئيسية الأكثر أهمية التي ترتبط بها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك هذه الدراسة تسعى إلى إستعراض المزايا الإقليمية النسبية لبعض الدول المتقدمة بما في ذلك المملكة المتحدة وبعض دول الإتحاد الأوروبي وكذلك دول أخرى من مناطق مختلفة من العالم. الغرض من هذا الإستعراض هو دراسة واقع المزايا الإقليمية النسبية في تلك الدول وإلى أي مدى يمكن دعمها بحيث تكون أداة لإزدهار أقاليم تلك الدول. هذه الدراسة قامت بإستخدام أسلوب تحليل المحتوى كأسلوب ومنهج للبحث لتحقيق الهدف المرجو. معظم النتائج والاستنتاجات التي تم التوصل إليها من خلال هذه الدراسة أكدت على ضرورة دعم المزايا الإقليمية النسبية حيث يرجع ذلك إلى حقيقة أن هذه المزايا لديها قدرة كبيرة على تعزيز اقتصادات أقاليمها وبالتالي تعزيز القضايا الاجتماعية والبيئية والحضرية بهذه الأقاليم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأقاليم، المزايا الإقليمية النسبية، الدول المتقدمة، المملكة المتحدة، الإتحاد الأوروبي.