

Analysis of Management and Financing of Projects Aimed at Environmental Protection in Slovakia

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Abstract – The literature highlights the crucial role of public financial mechanisms in reducing regional disparities and promoting environmental development. This study examines the relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the intensity of support allocated to Slovak regions through the Operational Programme Quality of the Environment during the 2014–2020 programming period. The analysis tests hypotheses assuming significant relationships between regional development levels, the number of implemented environmental projects, and the volume of approved financial support. The quantitative analysis covers all environmental projects implemented by the end of 2023. The results indicate that more developed regions received both a higher number of projects and a larger share of financial resources, suggesting the persistence of regional inequalities in the distribution of environmental funding.

These findings underline the need for more targeted and territorially sensitive adjustments of financial schemes in future programming periods and provide valuable insights for policymakers aiming to enhance the effectiveness and equity of environmental investment strategies.

Keywords – Environmental quality, management, financing, region, operational program.

1. Introduction

In 2014, a new programming period formally began for the European Structural and Investment Funds of the European Union. Based on ongoing negotiations regarding the setup of the Partnership Agreement – the main document defining the rules and priorities for the funds and individual operational programs – the Government of the Slovak Republic approved the Partnership Agreement for the years 2014–2020.

The Partnership Agreement defines the strategy, priorities, and conditions for utilizing European Union funds within the new programming period [1]. Among the implemented operational programs, the most significant transnational financing schemes for environmental protection projects in the 2014–2020 period included the Operational Program for Environmental Quality. The most significant national source of funding for environmental projects was the Environmental Fund. The evaluation of management and financing also covered projects implemented during the 2014–2020 programming period. In contrast, the evaluation of management and financing of environmental projects does not include support from private sources due to the inability to obtain sufficient relevant data for conducting the analysis. The analyzed regions included the entire territory of the Slovak Republic, individual counties, and districts of Slovakia.

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1.1. Theoretical Foundations

The implementation of economic activities requires natural resources. Unfortunately, the manner and speed at which they are used are unsustainable. The consumption of natural resources exceeds the planet's regenerative capacities and the production of pollutants exceeds the limits that ecosystems can sustain in the long term. The choice between environmental protection and economic development, which may initially seem like a dilemma, is misleading. For long-term economic and social development, sustainable management of natural resources and environmental protection is essential. The cumulative impacts of human activity weaken not only the health of the population but also the health of the entire planet, dulling its (re)productive capacity.

The environment generally includes everything that creates natural conditions for the existence of organisms, including humans, and represents a basic condition for their further development [2]. Environmental pollution consists in introducing physical, chemical or biological substances into the environment as a result of human activity, which are unusual for the given environment in their nature or quantity. Environmental damage means its deterioration as a result of pollution or other human interventions that exceed the limits set by the relevant legal regulations.

Environmental protection is currently considered a fundamental prerequisite for the survival and further development of human society [3]. It encompasses measures focused on preventing environmental pollution and degradation, as well as on reducing or removing existing pollution. This protection covers general components of the environment such as air, soil, and water, includes special protection of protected areas, plant and animal species, and also extends to the preservation of cultural heritage sites.

According to [4] and [5], there is general agreement that the environmental burdens of human activity can be characterized by analyzing the relationships between population growth, levels of human surplus, and the impact of technologies on the natural environment.

Environmental pollution is not a recent issue; however, it continues to represent one of the most serious challenges facing humanity and is a leading environmental factor contributing to illness and death. Human-driven activities such as urban expansion, industrial development, mining, and manufacturing are major sources of pollution worldwide. This problem affects both developed and developing nations, although higher levels of awareness and more stringent regulations in developed countries have led to more effective environmental protection efforts.

Nevertheless, despite the global focus on pollution, its effects persist and remain clearly visible due to the severe and long-term consequences it causes [6], [7].

Recent human interventions in the environment are so significant that they can disrupt the stability of the system, leading to extensive, often negative consequences for the existence, development, and functioning of humans on Earth. Given the broad connections and interdependencies of environmental components, human impacts are not only local or regional but are widespread, and their effects need to be assessed globally [8], [9].

Since the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic, environmental policy has been grounded in the second chapter of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which guarantees every citizen the right to a favorable environment as well as the right to access information about the condition of the environment, whether it is positive or negative [10].

As [11] states, the Ministry of the Environment of the Slovak Republic plays a primary role in the institutional arrangement of environmental policy in Slovakia, followed by local governments, regulatory bodies, civic associations, and non-governmental organizations. In the area of the environment, authorities also cooperate primarily with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Economy of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sports of the Slovak Republic, and the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic. Topics falling under the coordination of various state bodies include land management, forest conservation, sustainable and clean transport, circular economy, energy, climate change, air quality, environmental education and training, public health protection, and more.

Many authors view the issue of financing environmental projects as one of the key problems, given that it is precisely financial resources that drive the project cycle. According to [12], investments in environmental protection have their specifics, as environmental projects are financially demanding and the return on investment is long-term.

An environmental project is one that is related in some way to environmental protection [2]. The activities carried out within the project are either aimed at preventing pollution and environmental damage in the form of preventive measures or focused on eliminating pollution.

The Operational Programme Environmental Quality (OP KŽP) was approved by the European Commission in October 2014 and represents one of the European Union's operational programmes financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF).

Its purpose is to support projects and activities aimed at improving environmental conditions, enhancing energy efficiency, and promoting sustainable development across EU member states and regions. The programme's primary objectives include the efficient management of natural resources, flood prevention, adaptation to climate change, and the promotion of a low-carbon economy, with funding directed toward all major areas of environmental protection.

The Operational Programme Environmental Quality (OP KŽP) was approved by the European Commission in October 2014 and represents one of the key European Union operational programmes financed through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). Its primary aim is to support projects focused on environmental protection, energy efficiency, climate change mitigation and adaptation, and sustainable development across regions. The programme reflects the broader strategic objectives of EU cohesion policy, which seeks to reduce regional disparities while fostering environmentally sustainable economic growth [13], [14].

Environmental investment programmes such as OP KŽP are grounded in the theoretical framework of sustainable development, which integrates environmental protection with economic and social objectives [15]. Scholars emphasize that public environmental funding plays a critical role in addressing market failures related to environmental externalities and underinvestment in public goods [16], [17]. From a regional development perspective, EU-funded environmental projects are expected to contribute not only to ecological improvements but also to long-term territorial competitiveness and resilience [18], [19].

Several studies highlight that the effectiveness of environmental funding largely depends on institutional capacity, governance quality, and regional absorptive capacity [20], [21]. More developed regions often possess stronger administrative structures and project-preparation capabilities, enabling them to attract a higher volume of funding, which may inadvertently reinforce existing regional inequalities [22], [23]. This phenomenon has been widely discussed in the context of EU cohesion policy, where environmental programmes, despite their redistributive intentions, may yield uneven spatial outcomes.

In addition, recent research stresses the growing importance of integrating environmental funding with climate policy objectives, particularly in light of the European Green Deal and the transition towards a low-carbon economy [24], [25].

Programmes such as OP KŽP thus serve as crucial instruments for implementing EU climate and environmental strategies at the regional level, while simultaneously raising questions about efficiency, equity, and policy coherence.

2. Methodology and Research Methods

The formulation of the research hypotheses was based on the assumption that one way to reduce regional disparities is to provide financial support to marginalized areas. Economic development in a region can also result from the activation of local leaders, communities, public administration, local governments, and business circles. A higher level of activation immediately reflects a higher degree of economic development in the region and indirectly also a greater interest in solving existing problems in the region. Regional economic differences are caused by the varying economic performance of regions. It is expected that economically more developed regions will have more developed environmental infrastructure. This means that more developed regions will participate less in environmental projects aimed at reducing regional disparities. Based on this, two research hypotheses are formulated:

H1: It is assumed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of support for regions, measured by the number of projects implemented under the Operational Programme for the Quality of the Environment in the period 2014-2020.

H2: It is assumed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of support for regions, measured by the amount of approved financial support from the Operational Programme for the Quality of the Environment in the programming period 2014-2020.

The sample consisted of a set of 2661 environmental projects. When confirming the hypotheses, the sample must be treated as a selection set on which the individual analyses are applied. The sample was adjusted based on the parameter being analyzed, depending on the nature of the hypothesis being tested.

To verify the validity of the hypotheses, the quality of the environment at the NUTS 3 level was examined based on indicators selected for each environmental component, as well as the level of economic development of the regions at the NUTS 3 level.

In both cases, the data were collected for the years 2014-2020, which corresponds to the analyzed programming period.

Due to the large size of the data sets, nonparametric tests were preferred in the analysis: Kendall's tau-b and Spearman's (rank) correlation coefficient.

These methods are robust to assumptions about data distribution and provide a reliable estimate of relationships between variables.

The regions of Slovakia are characterized by significant mutual heterogeneity. This applies to both environmental and, primarily, economic parameters. In addition to the aforementioned correlation and regression analysis methods, other methods and associated methodological procedures were used in addressing the issue, including Analysis and Evaluation, Cluster Analysis, Synthesis, Comparison, and Mathematical Modelling. Using geographic information systems, a spatial analysis of environmental projects under the selected scheme was performed on the Slovak map base and compared with the environmental regionalization of Slovakia.

3. Results

The Operational Program for Environmental Quality is a program aimed at achieving improvements in the areas of environmental protection and sustainable development in Slovakia. The focus was placed on supporting investments and measures that contribute to the protection and improvement of environmental quality.

This primarily includes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality, protecting water resources, sustainable waste management, safeguarding natural wealth, and increasing energy efficiency.

Table 1 shows the number of projects funded by this program, which meet the attributes of environmental projects, in individual regions of Slovakia, along with the amount of approved funding for these projects.

Table 1. Initial table of the approved number of projects and fundings under the Program for Environmental Quality for the period 2014-2020

Region Name	Number of Approved Projects	Amount of Financial Resources
Banská Bystrica Region	363	219.027.035,00
Bratislava Region	38	9.478.772,00
Košice Region	205	60.245.295,00
Nitra Region	174	234.339.748,00
Prešov Region	204	85.173.844,00
Trnava Region	115	739.89.877,00
Trenčín Region	255	234.339.748,00
Žilina Region	247	96.663.705,00

Table 2 shows how strongly the level of development in each region correlates with the number of environmental projects funded by the program during 2014-2020.

Table 2. Results of the correlation analysis between the level of comprehensive development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the number of implemented projects financed from the Operational Programme Quality of the Environment in the period 2014-2020

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,643*
		Sig (2-tailed)		,026
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,643*	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,026	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,738*
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,037
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,738*	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,037	.
		N	8	8

*Correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (2-tailed)

A statistically significant relationship was found between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the number of projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality. The results of both non-parametric tests indicate a strong correlation between the analyzed parameters, showing a positive correlation.

H1: "It is assumed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of support for regions, measured by the number of projects implemented under the Operational Programme for the Quality of the Environment in the period 2014-2020" is accepted.

The expectation was confirmed, as regions with a higher level of development, as measured by the comprehensive development indicator, received significantly lower support from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality, as measured by the number of projects obtained.

Figure 1 also illustrates a positive relationship between the level of overall regional development and the extent of regional support, as indicated by the number of projects implemented with funding from the Operational Programme Environmental Quality.

This explanation conveys the conclusion of the hypothesis testing, showing a positive relationship between the level of regional development and the number of projects funded by the program. It emphasizes the acceptance of the hypothesis and highlights the correlation, suggesting that more developed regions tend to receive fewer environmental projects despite having higher levels of development.

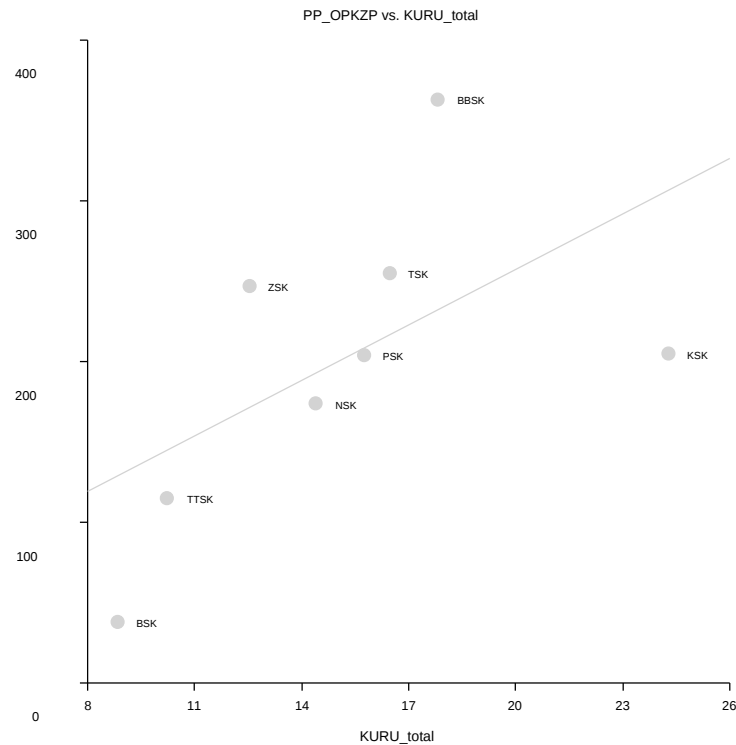


Figure 1. Scatter plot of the relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

Based on the results of the correlation analysis presented in Table 3, it can be concluded that no statistically significant association was identified between the level of overall regional development and the level of regional support, as measured by the volume of Non-Repayable Financial Contributions (NFP) from the Operational Programme Environmental Quality during the 2014–2020 programming period.

The linear regression line (Figure 2) is merely an illustration of the previously mentioned low strength of the relationship between the observed phenomena, i.e., between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the volume of NFP from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period.

Table 3. Results of the correlation analysis between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the volume of NFP from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,265
		Sig (2-tailed)		,383
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,255	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,383	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,311
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,453
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,311	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,453	.
		N	8	8

Although a positive correlation was identified between the level of overall regional development and the level of regional support expressed by the number of implemented projects financed through the Operational Programme Environmental Quality, no statistically significant relationship was confirmed between the level of overall regional development and regional support measured by the number of projects that were awarded funding from this programme.

H2: "It is assumed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of support for regions, measured by the amount of approved financial support from the Operational Programme for the Quality of the Environment in the programming period 2014-2020" is rejected.

The results from Figure 1 also indicate that no apparent relationship exists between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality.

Furthermore, the relationship between the analyzed parameters (number of implemented projects and the total volume of financial contributions that selected support schemes provided to individual regions of Slovakia) was verified separately, at the level of both economic and environmental indicators within the Operational Programme for Environmental Quality in the period 2014-2020.

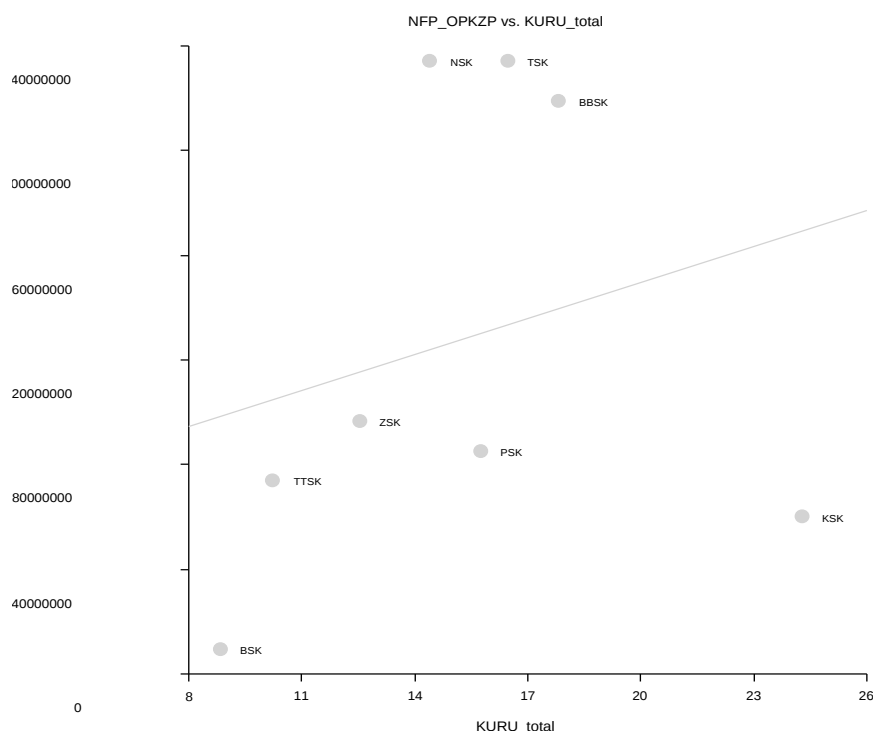


Figure 2. Scatter plot of the relationship between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the volume of non-repayable financial contributions (NFP) from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

Based on the correlation analysis shown in Table 4, it can be concluded that no statistically significant relationship was identified between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support, as measured by the number of implemented projects financed through the Operational Programme Environmental Quality during the 2014–2020 period.

The linear regression line (Figure 3) is included merely to illustrate the previously mentioned weak correlation between the observed variables, i.e., between the level of comprehensive regional development and the level of regional support measured by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period.

Table 4. Results of the correlation analysis between the level of economic development of regions and the level of regional support measured by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,357
		Sig (2-tailed)		,216
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,357	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,216	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,500
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,207
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,500	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,207	.
		N	8	8

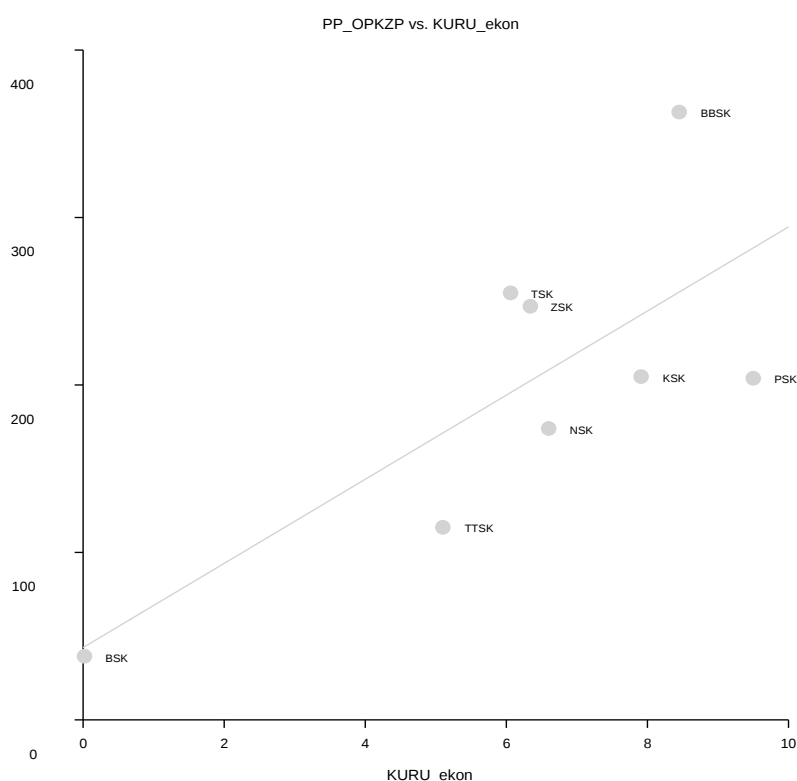


Figure 3. Scatter plot of the relationship between the level of economic development of regions and the level of regional support measured by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

Based on the correlation analysis presented in Table 5, it can be concluded that no statistically significant association exists between the level of regional economic development and the level of regional support, as measured by the volume of non-repayable financial contributions (NFP) from the Operational Programme Environmental Quality during the 2014–2020 period.

The linear regression line (Figure 4) is only used to illustrate the previously mentioned weak correlation between the observed variables, i.e., the level of economic development of regions and the level of regional support measured by the volume of NFP from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period.

Table 5. Results of the correlation analysis between the level of economic development of regions and the level of regional support measured by the number of non-repayable financial contributions (NFP) from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,182
		Sig (2-tailed)		,533
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,182	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,533	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,263
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,528
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,263	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,528	.
		N	8	8

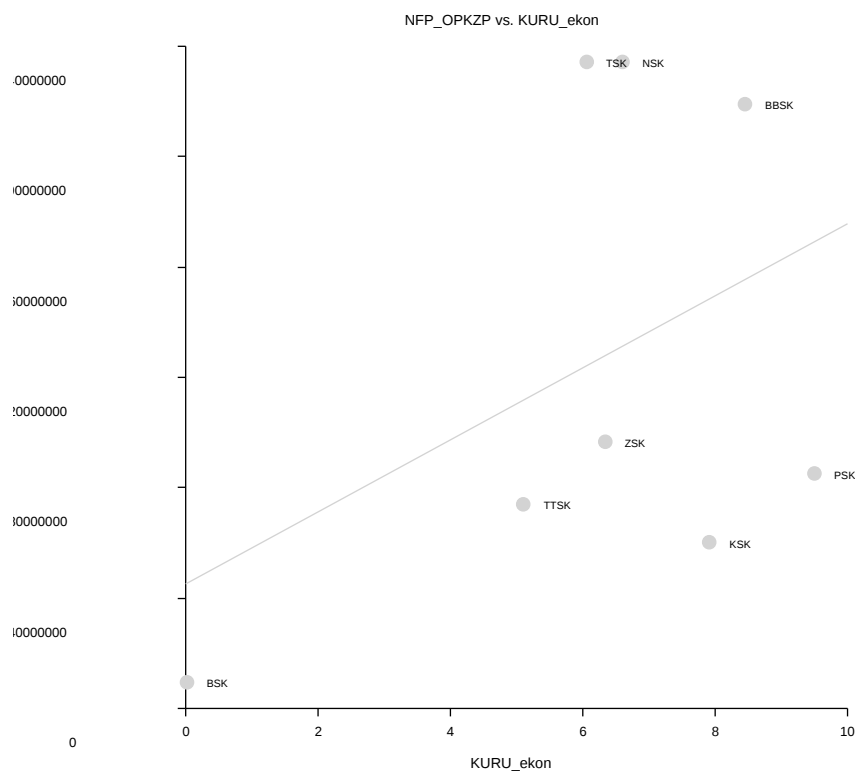


Figure 4. Shows the scatter plot depicting the relationship between the level of economic development of regions and the level of regional support, measured by the volume of non-repayable financial contributions (NFP) from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period. The regression line added serves to highlight the weak correlation between these variables

Based on the correlation analysis presented in Table 6, no statistically significant relationship was identified between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of territorial support, as measured by the number of implemented projects financed through the Operational Programme Environmental Quality during the 2014–2020 period.

The linear regression line shown in Figure 5 serves solely as an illustrative tool, highlighting the weak association between the examined variables, namely the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support expressed by the number of implemented projects funded by the Operational Programme Environmental Quality in the given period.

Table 6. Displays the results of the correlation analysis between the level of environmental development of regions and the level of support measured by the number of implemented projects financed by the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the 2014-2020 period

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,214
		Sig (2-tailed)		,458
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,214	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,458	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,429
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,289
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,429	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,289	.
		N	8	8

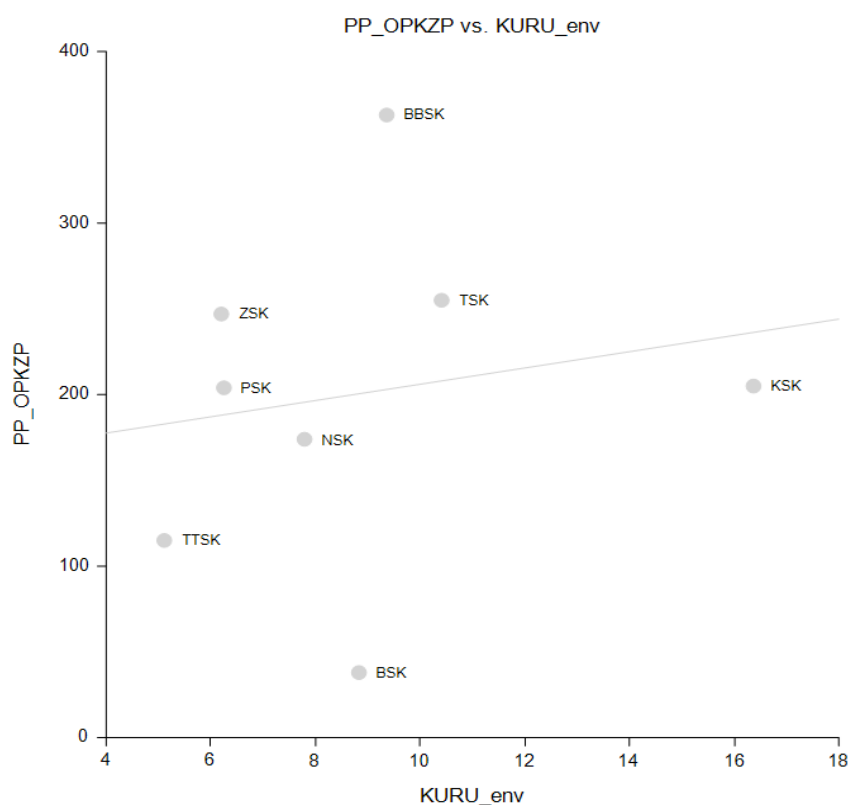


Figure 5. Scatter graph of the relationship between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the number of implemented projects financed from the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the period 2014-2020

Based on the correlation analysis (Table 7), it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant relationship between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the volume of NFP of the Operational Programme Quality of the Environment in the period 2014-2020.

The linear regression line (Figure 6) is only to illustrate the phenomenon of the above-mentioned low tightness of the connection between the monitored phenomena, i.e., between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the volume of NFP of the Operational Programme Quality of the Environment in the period 2014-2020.

Table 7. Results of the correlation analysis between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the volume of NFP of the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the period 2014-2020

			KURU-total	PP:OPKZP
Kendall's tau-b	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,109
		Sig (2-tailed)		,708
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,109	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,708	.
		N	8	8
Spearman's rho	KURU-total	Correlation Coefficient	1,000	,060
		Sig (2-tailed)	.	,888
		N	8	8
	PP:OPKZP	Correlation Coefficient	,060	1,000
		Sig (2-tailed)	,888	.
		N	8	8

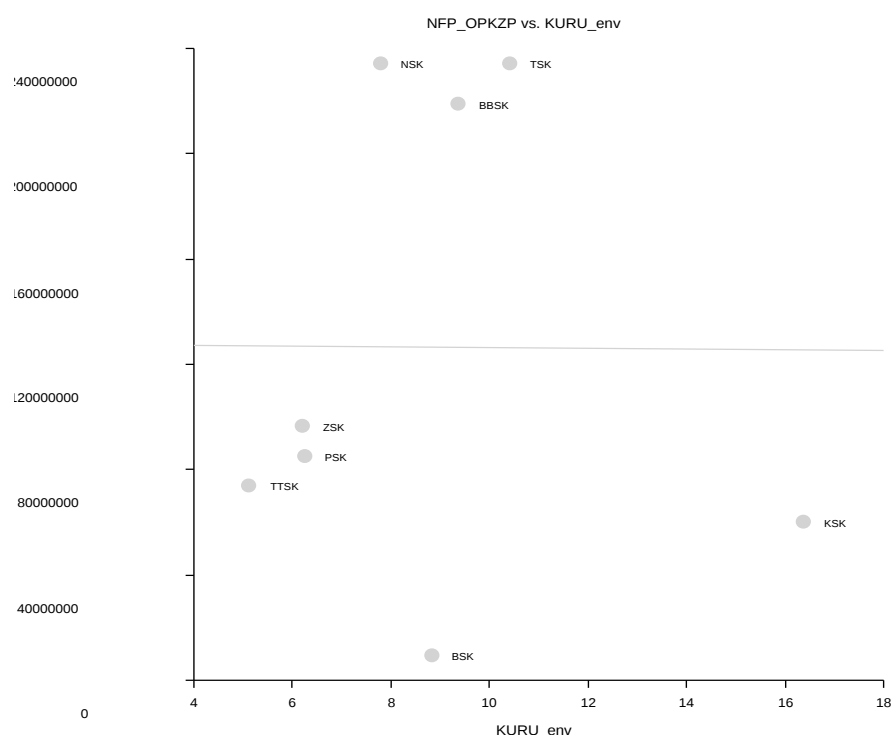


Figure 6. Scatter graph of the relationship between the level of environmental development of territories and the level of support for territories measured by the volume of NFP of the Operational Program for Environmental Quality in the period 2014-2020

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The contribution represents a view of the management and financing of a selected environmental project from public sources. Based on the elaboration of the theoretical and empirical basis, it is possible to propose new trends in the direction of further research, which can bring new knowledge and contribute to the advancement of scientific knowledge. With this aim, the contribution can serve as a starting point for the creation of new scientific and research projects, which will further deepen and expand the state of knowledge in the field of environmental project management.

In scientific and professional works published in Slovakia, there is no publication that would comprehensively address the issue of global assessment of a selected environmental project implemented in a selected programming period.

The issue of environmental quality at the NUTS 3 level was examined according to selected indicators for individual components of the environment, as well as the rate of economic or economic development of regions at the same level. The status of project implementation was pointed out, as well as the use of financial resources in the relevant programming period. The burdened areas of Slovakia that do not reach the required or expected figures of the implemented project were identified. The basis is provided for determining a suitable model of economic and environmental performance of the region, which could be used for further analyses and assessments.

Environmental pollution has many negative economic and environmental impacts and impacts. The costs associated with its revitalization, as well as other equally significant consequences (loss of economic activity of the contaminated area and the associated reduction in the need for jobs, costs of health care caused by environmental pollution, etc.), are included.

The environmental consequences of environmental pollution are now generally known. Predictions of the development of individual scenarios are also known. It is very good that topics such as environmental protection, climate change, saving energy and natural resources, but also sustainable or socially responsible business, eco-innovation, recycling, carbon footprint, greenhouse gases or green economy are appearing more and more frequently in social discussions at professional forums.

There are many ways to prevent further environmental pollution, or to minimize it or mitigate its negative impacts. Some of the most common are investing in clean energy produced from renewable sources, reducing the amount of waste produced, or effective recycling, living in a context of sustainability and in accordance with the principles of the circular economy.

Today, it is no longer enough to rely only on prevention in the form of increasing environmental awareness and education, although it is very important and will certainly play a key role in the future development of life on the planet. Currently, practical implementation of these principles into the life of society is necessary.

Remediation of environmental damage is financially demanding. Resources for the remediation of environmental damage are drawn overwhelmingly from public sources. Their amount is directly proportional to the economic and social development of the country. Since these are public resources, they should be used as efficiently as possible. When assessing the impacts of implementing environmental projects, it would be possible, based on analyses and generally accepted methodologies of donor evaluations, or rather representative institutions, to conclude that the selected environmental project positively contributes to the development, protection and improvement of the state of the environment in Slovakia. It is possible to discuss the extent to which this costly assistance is effective.

The contribution comprehensively assessed the management and financing of the selected project focused on environmental protection from the most significant transnational and national support schemes, which were implemented in Slovakia in the 2014-2020 programming period. Subsequently, the impact on the amendment of regional disparities was analyzed from both an economic and environmental perspective.

Based on the results of the analyses, it can be concluded that no strong or statistically significant relationship exists between the economic and environmental development of a region and the support provided through the selected implemented project.

The success of obtaining environmental projects is influenced by factors different from environmental or economic regional disparities. This conclusion is based solely on the own data analysis. The transparency of the selected data (lack of relevant databases recording environmental projects) and the inclusion of a partially heterogeneous group of subsidy schemes analyzed may be questioned.

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