

On the road to a European spatial planning system?

Do you know about ESDP or ESPON?

If your answer is “yes”, you probably work in the spatial planning department of a university, a research institute in the field or in a Ministry involved with the topic. Among other planning professionals, the 1999 “European Spatial Development Perspective” (ESDP) is not well known. The same applies to the “European Spatial Planning and Observation Network” (ESPON). Yet the European dimension of spatial development is growing in importance.

This low level of awareness is found all over Europe, as the European Council of Town Planners (ECTP) found in a recent survey. One explanation for this might be the fact that the European Union has competences in social, economic and environmental policy, but competence for spatial planning still rests firmly with Member States. Germany, for example, with its long tradition of federalism and decentralisation, strenuously defends that competence.

Nevertheless, decisions by European institutions in various policy fields have consequences for spatial development. DG Regio is the part of the European Commission with responsibility for support of economically and socially underprivileged regions. DG Regio distributes money in various ways: Structural Funds (ERDF with Objective 1 and 2, Interreg III, URBAN II) and Cohesion funds. It is clear that this funding has a bearing on the spatial development of supported regions – and their neighbours.

What is the relation between those developments and the aims of spatial planning and spatial policies expressed by national governments in guidelines, regional plans and other planning instruments?

European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)

European ministers responsible for spatial planning worked on this question for a long time. One of the first results was the “European Spatial Development Perspective” (ESDP). Because of the “competence” issue mentioned above, the ESDP is not an official EU policy, but was agreed at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning in Potsdam, May 1999.

“By adopting the ESDP, the Member States and the Commission reached agreement on common objectives and concepts for the future development of the territory of the European Union. ... ESDP is a suitable policy framework for the sectoral policies of the Community and the Member States that have a spatial impact, as well as for regional and local authorities, aimed as it is at achieving a balanced and sustainable development of the European territory. ... All the participants were agreed that the ESDP does not provide for any new responsibilities at Community level. It will serve as a policy framework for the Member States, their regions and local authorities and the European Commission in their own respective spheres of responsibility“¹

¹ Excerpt from the final conclusions issued by the German Presidency at the close of the Informal Council of EU Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning, Potsdam, 1999

The policy aims and options of the ESDP correspond to the aims of sustainable spatial development, as fixed in the German Law on Spatial Development. They are:

- Polycentric spatial development
 - Polycentric and balanced spatial development in the EU
 - Dynamic, attractive and competitive cities and urbanized regions
 - Indigenous development of diverse and productive rural areas
- Parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge
 - Integrated approach for improved transport links and access to knowledge
 - Polycentric Model: A basis for better accessibility
 - Efficient and sustainable use of infrastructure
- Wise Management of natural and cultural heritage

Conflicts may occur if the various aims are examined at different scales. The aim of “polycentric spatial development” may result in the support of rather small centres in a region with low density of settlements and population. At European level, the support of European Metropolitan regions may be one step on the way to a polycentric European urban network. On the local or regional level, both strategies may lead to difficult contradictions.

European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON)

The input from technical policy advisors and researchers was of considerable benefit in the ESDP process, and it was soon agreed that it should be perpetuated and extended. The ESDP process demonstrated that vital data necessary for the evaluation of spatial impact of EU Funds and of national spatial development strategies was insufficient or not available.

As a result, ESPON was inaugurated as a research network in 2002. With Luxembourg responsible, ESPON was installed as a joint project of all Member States under INTERREG III. Like all INTERREG III projects, it runs until 2006.

The aims of ESPON are to produce:

- A diagnosis of principal territorial trends at EU scale and identification of difficulties and potential within the European territory as a whole;
- A cartographic picture of the major territorial disparities and their intensity;
- Territorial indicators and typologies to assist in setting European priorities for a balanced and polycentric enlarged European territory;
- Some integrated tools and appropriate instruments (databases, indicators, methodologies for territorial impact analysis and systematic spatial analyses) to improve the spatial co-ordination of sector policies.²

In accordance with Point 2 of the ESPON Guidelines 2001-2006, the ESPON follows seven objectives³:

1. To add value to existing national research by taking a clear European and trans-national focus and improving the understanding of the diversity of the European

² www.espon.lu/online/documentation/objective/index.html (8.11.2004)

³ <http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/objective/objectives/index.html> (8.11.2004)

territory and territorial development, including the prospective dimension and sustainable development, and beyond the usually employed statistical units. These would include an analysis of territorial trends in the 13 candidate countries and neighbouring countries as well as in the Member States to draw conclusions for the territorial development of the Union;

2. To specify the implications of the ESDP policy orientations on transnational-national spaces, the interpretation of existing ones (such as Interreg II/III) and eventually evolving ones in the wake of the enlargement of the EU;
3. To develop orientations for instruments and institutions necessary for a better perception and application of the ESDP policy options by policy actors at all levels from the EU to the local level; also including a better co-ordinated application of the ESDP principles;
4. To contribute to a better understanding of the enhancement of the spatial dimension of the Structural Funds, Cohesion policy and other Community policies, and national sector policies;
5. To make concrete contributions and proposals to improve co-ordination of territorially relevant decisions, taken at different levels (at the Community, national, regional and local level) and in different sector policies;
6. To bridge the gap between policy makers, administrators and scientists;
7. To create a network of the scientific European community in the fragmented field of spatial development.

Priorities in ESPON 2006⁴:

- Priority 1: Thematic studies on the territorial effects of major spatial developments (polycentric urban network, urban – rural relations; infrastructure networks, natural and cultural heritage, demography and migration)
- Priority 2: policy impacts studies on the spatial impact of Community sector policies (structural funds...) and Member States' spatial development policy with a focus on the institutional inter-linkages between governmental, regional and local level.
- Priority 3: Coordinating cross-theme studies; Evaluation of the results of the other studies towards integrated results such as indicator systems and data, typologies of territories, spatial development scenarios and conclusions for the territorial development.
- Priority 4: Scientific briefing and networking (projects under Priority 4) in order to explore the synergies between the national and EU sources for research and research capacities.

⁴ <http://www.espon.lu/online/documentation/projects/index.html> (8.11.2004)

ESPON is managed by a Monitoring Committee of delegates from the Member States. Norway and Switzerland have been invited as full participants. The area of research is the "Europe of 29": 25 current Members, Bulgaria and Romania as accession countries, plus Norway and Switzerland.

All Member States have established a "National Contact Point" responsible for decentralised coordination.

Projects are put out to competitive tender and worked on in transnational project groups. At the moment of writing (November 2004), 9 projects have been completed, 14 projects are in progress and three are out to tender. Information concerning tenders can be found on the ESPON web site and in National Contact Points.

With the publication of "ESPON in Progress – Preliminary results by autumn 2003" and the information leaflet "Spatial Development of an Enlarging European Union – New knowledge about European spatial development"⁵, early evaluation of results is being disseminated.

The focal points of the brochure are:

- Analyses of territorial imbalances and interactions (definition of „Functional Urban Areas“ and „Metropolitan European Growth Areas“ (MEGAs) as an attempt to develop criteria to compare European urban systems
- Impact of EU sector policies on territorial cohesion in Europe
- Innovation in spatial analysis
- Outlook on new activities in the ESPON Programme

In addition, BBR - the German contact point - has published a report on the results of transnational cooperation for the German Ministry of Transport, Building and Housing.⁶

Where next?

The interim results of ESPON projects have already been integrated into the Third Report on economic and social Cohesion in Europe.⁷ The European Constitution Treaty (signed by the Heads of States and Governments in Rome on October 29th 2004) will probably renew the discussion on the competence of the EU in spatial development: for the first time, the Constitutional Treaty incorporates territorial cohesion as an aim of the EU, besides the "old" aims of economic and social cohesion.

⁵ "ESPON in progress – Preliminary results by autumn 2003", ESPON, Luxembourg, April 2004, ISBN 2-87996-848-8, available from National Contact Points (and ECTP Secretariat).

⁶ „Ergebnisse der transnationalen Zusammenarbeit zur Raumentwicklung (Interreg III B/ ESPON) unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Wirksamkeit für Deutschland“, BBR, Bonn 2004.

⁷ "A New Partnership for Cohesion: Convergence, Competitiveness, Co-operation – Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion"; European Commission, Luxembourg, 2004. Download from http://europa.eu.int/comm/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/cohesion3/cohesion3_en.htm

Art. 1-3 (3): "... It shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States." ⁸ Among planners at European level, for example in ECTP, some tend to interpret this as a step towards a broader EU competence for a "European Spatial Planning Policy".

The national planning systems in Europe vary widely, especially as regards the relation between centralized and decentralized competences. Germany has the most federalist and decentralized system, maintaining a strong position for local authorities. Spatial planners in states with more centralized planning systems may tend to view the creation of a European planning level as a logical complement of the system. Planners from accession and new Member States may expect support in this respect: in their countries, "planning" does not have a high reputation today. On the contrary, it is often seen as an obstacle to market-based changes.

Spatial planners in this situation may expect support from the development criteria set in the ESDP or the strategies derived from it; as a result, they support an increasing influence of EU institutions on national spatial planning strategies. So at the moment, the follow-up to the ESDP is in discussion.

The process leading to the decision in 1999 had been long and complex as it was in the competence of the national Ministers. The process had to be organized and agreed among themselves and with the Commission. From the professional point of view, a process like this might perhaps be organized in the competence of the EU faster, more efficiently and perhaps even with more professional impact.

On the other hand, a politically diverse and multifaceted Europe may need a variety of national strategies and accesses to spatial development.

The new European aim of territorial cohesion is as important as the promotion of social and economic cohesion. Until now, there has been no decision about instruments and strategies serving this objective, whether their orientation will be more centralized or more decentralized, whether they may be expressed as guidelines (as in the ESDP at present) or as Council Directives (in effect, laws at European level), or what consequences will arise for national planning systems.

Anyone in favour of decentralized spatial planning systems with wide-ranging competences at regional and local level should be a participant in discussion of European spatial development and the shaping of future strategies and instruments. Only discussion with the committed participation of stakeholders at professional, regional and local level will lead to usable European spatial development guidelines developed "on the ground" and not "top down".

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⁸ http://www.europa.eu.int/constitution/constitution_en.htm (8.11.2004)