



International Centre for Local and
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ESPON: A New and Practical European Research Agenda for Territorial Planning and Development

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LOCAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Brendan Bartley is the Irish Contact Point for ESPON. Over the past fifteen years, he has been directly involved in a number of European collaborative urban research networks in the connected areas of spatial planning, governance and urban regeneration. Having just retired his position as Deputy Director of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, (NIRSA) at NUI Maynooth, Brendan is now a Senior Research Fellow with the International Centre for Local and Regional Development (ICLRD). He is joint editor of *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*, published by Pluto Press in 2007 and co-author of *The Atlas of the Island of Ireland: Mapping Social and Economic Change (2008)* and *Thinking Geographically: Space, Theory and Contemporary Human Geography (2002)*.

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The second European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) programme is under way and will run to 2013. Funding for this programme of ESPON, which is officially referred to as the *European Observation Network on Territorial Development and Cohesion 2007 – 2013*, has more than doubled to €47m. The new terms in the second part of the title (Territorial Development and Cohesion) are important and reflect significant recent advances in the EU policy arena about which we will say more below.

ESPON 2013: A new research programme for a new European policy agenda

ESPON 2013 was launched in January 2008 and builds on the work of ESPON 2006, which ran from 2002-2006 (see Box 1). The outputs and experience of the ESPON 2006 Programme provided a valuable evidence base platform for spatial planning in the form of comparable spatial data and mapping which have informed the ESPON 2013 research programme. The ESPON 2013 research territory has been enlarged to cover the 27 nation states of the European Union, plus Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland; with the overall aim of this latest Programme being to:

“...support policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion and a harmonious development of the European territory by (1) providing comparable information, evidence, analyses and scenarios on territorial dynamics, and (2) revealing territorial capital and potentials for the development of regions and larger territories contributing to European competitiveness, territorial co-operation and sustainable and balanced development”

(ESPON 2013 Programme, November 2006).

Box 1: ESPON 2006

The earlier ESPON 2006 programme involved over 600 researchers and produced 34 studies mapping trends and policy impacts across 27 countries at a regional level, together with information on relationships and potentials within the European territory. They included analyses of transport and accessibility, demography, urban-rural relations, telecommunications and the development of the information society, hazards and the spatial impacts of key European policies such as the structural funds, agriculture, research and development, and the environment. By developing indicators, maps and spatial data on this scale, ESPON has created a valuable platform for those involved in strategic planning and managing the structural funds. Above all, ESPON 2006 highlighted the ways in which policies in sectors such as transport, energy and telecommunications can have significantly uneven spatial impacts. Predicting such impacts is a crucial step towards more integrated planning. The research findings for the ESPON 2006 programme are available to download from www.espon.eu

Ensuring that research is relevant to the needs of spatial planning for territorial development and cohesion is a core objective of the ESPON 2013 programme and it therefore places a greater emphasis than its 2006 predecessor on policy development and dissemination. Research projects selected for funding under the new programme are more focused on applied and practical research than was the case under the first programme. This is to ensure a more immediate relevance to planning needs and to link research more clearly to the priorities and requirements of both policy makers and practitioners in spatial planning and other relevant sectors. The enlarged budget of ESPON 2013 will enable it to further develop the networks of transnational research groups and forge links with policy-makers active at all levels of territorial development.

The Evolution of EU Policy: from spatial planning to territorial development and cohesion

The evolution of EU territorial policy has been incremental but with a clear trajectory. It has traversed a discernible path from tentative initial preparations of the *European Spatial Development Perspective*¹ (ESDP) to the broadening ambitions of the *Territorial Agenda for Europe* (TAEU) with a consolidating mandate for 'Territorial Cohesion' as a new overarching principle of EU policy (see Box 2). The spatial planning goals recommended by the ESDP set the priorities of the subsequent territorial development initiatives across Europe and influenced the adoption of similar spatial development goals in many EU member States. The *Regional Development Strategy* (RDS) in Northern Ireland and the *National Spatial Strategy* (NSS) in Ireland are evident local examples of national and sub-national strategies developed in alignment with the policy orientation and conceptual principles of the ESDP.

Box 2: ESPON and *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP)

The informed critique of the ESPON research findings contributed significantly to the evolution of the territorial dimension in European policy. The ESDP policy agenda was developed without the benefit of comprehensive comparative datasets for the European territory. The research carried out in the ESPON I (2006) programme sought to address these deficiencies and produced evidence and analysis to review, clarify, enhance and advance the policies and conceptual toolbox of the ESDP. Despite the major obstacles of devising a pan-European comparative monitoring system based on robust and comparable spatial data, it is fair to say that the ESPON I programme has produced a sound evidence infrastructure. This in turn has enabled the ESPON research to yield solid informative and useful results that, in turn, have been used to endorse, modify and reject various aspects of the ESDP.

In May 2007 the ESDP was effectively superseded when the ministers responsible for spatial planning of the Member States of the European Union adopted

¹ Published in 1999.

the *Territorial Agenda of the European Union: Towards a More Competitive Europe of Diverse Regions* (Territorial Agenda) and the *Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities* (Leipzig Charter). These documents were followed by the publication in October 2008 of the EU Commission's Green Paper entitled *Territorial Cohesion: Capturing the Diverse Potentials of the European Union*. These three political documents seek to further enhance territorial cohesion in Europe through a balanced development of the European regions and represent the prevailing state of territorial policy making at the European level. The Territorial Agenda addresses the whole territory of the EU and provides recommendations for an integrated spatial development policy, aiming at mobilising the potential of European regions and cities for sustainable economic growth and more jobs. The Leipzig Charter, on the other hand, focuses on a specific type of territorial unit, that of urban areas / cities. Building on this, the Green Paper aims to achieve a better and shared understanding of territorial cohesion and its implications for the future of EU Cohesion Policy. It invites discussion on the proposal to turn regional diversity into a strength by widening the compass of cohesion policy in Europe, beyond social and economic concerns, to include the territorial dimension. Achieving territorial cohesion is particularly important since it is set to become a new objective for the European Union (alongside the existing objectives of economic and social cohesion) if the current European Reform Treaty is adopted.

The increased importance of the territorial dimension

Greater emphasis on territorial cohesion will greatly increase the importance of territorial development policies at all levels of policy-making in Europe – from the European level down to the regional and local level. Although there is no official definition of territorial cohesion, it is already clear that the concept complements economic and social cohesion and that it is primarily concerned with promoting more balanced development and ensuring greater consistency between social, economic and environmental policies (see Box 3). It is also envisaged that the addition of the territorial dimension to the social and economic strands of EU policy will serve to ratchet up the ambition and effectiveness of current policies.

Competitive synergies can be achieved by promoting and combining the diverse territorial capital and potentials that exist in regions across Europe. To this can be allied the cohesion benefits of territorial integration and stabilisation that may be secured through a more balanced development of the European territory. The territorial dimension is also expected to bring to other policies an environmental emphasis and a longer-term co-ordination focus which can make them less risky and more sustainable. Finally, territorial policy is viewed as a unifying domain that can combine and cement multiple sectoral concerns (e.g. transport, energy, urban sprawl, rural change, etc.) more effectively than most other approaches to policy formulation and implementation.

In short, in addition to anchoring its own direct policy issues, the territorial dimension is viewed as an integrative framework for sectoral policies and as a balancing mechanism for reconciling tensions among the social, economic and environmental strands of EU policy.

Box 3: The Territorial Agenda of the EU (TAEU)

The Territorial Agenda of the EU (TAEU) endorses spatial planning and territorial development as a major component of European policy for sustainable growth and employment. Territorial development policies are a key tool for reconciling social, economic and environmental objectives. They are also central to the achievement of territorial cohesion, according to the document *Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union*, the background report to the Territorial Agenda of the European Union agreed in May 2007 by the ministers responsible for spatial planning and development from all EU member states (German Presidency, 2007a: 7). The TAEU has also become increasingly important for the allocation of EU funding. In particular, it helps to channel support for transnational cooperation between EU countries and their regions and cities; with a view to achieving greater integration and competitiveness for the regions themselves and the EU territory as a whole. This is in line with the priorities of the Lisbon, Gothenburg and Rotherdam Accords as well as the Fourth Cohesion Report.

Territorial development policies are needed because, as is increasingly clear from the current world crisis, economic and sectoral policies can have major unintended and undesirable spatial impacts. Market forces alone do not always lead to optimal outcomes in terms of the geographical distribution of population, economic, social and environmental activities. This can lead to the sub-optimal use of human and capital resources. In many cases, spatial development policies deal with resources that are public goods, for which no market exists and where demand signals are weak and the optimal level of supply is difficult to gauge. Government intervention is necessary and desirable in these cases to generate more optimal outcomes. Thus, territorial development policies do not just have the potential to counteract the unintended, undesirable effects of economic and sectoral policies; they can also add value by integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of cross-sectoral policies.

Researching Territorial Cohesion: The role of ESPON 201

The expected consolidation of the policy concept 'Territorial Cohesion' seems likely to strengthen the demand for analytical territorial information in support of this policy process. The ESPON 2013 Programme is expected to contribute to meeting this demand. The role of the Programme is to deliver territorial evidence, knowledge and indicators covering the European territory, its regions and cities. The core interests of ESPON 2013 Programme are, therefore:

- Territorial development and cohesion
- Spatial analysis
- Impact assessment
- Data tools
- Spatial policy, development, and monitoring.

A new series of ESPON reports is being published which aims at giving policy makers and practitioners short and precise information on important new evidence related European territorial dynamics. By publishing several issues of these *Territorial Observations* per year, ESPON 2013 works to fulfil its role as provider of comparable data and evidence in support of EU Cohesion Policy.

It should be pointed out that ESPON 2013 accords priority to projects that aim to meet major challenges facing the EU as a whole; such as ageing and migration, global pressures for economic restructuring, emerging markets, climate change, traffic congestion and rising energy prices. However, the programme also aims to engage practitioners and support experimental actions. It can invite expressions of interest from authorities engaged in development planning. Interested parties have an opportunity to put forward a proposal in outline as part of a transnational network. Regional and city planners, for instance, can bid for ESPON to commission analysis specifically to help their policy development and implementation. If that proposal is accepted then ESPON will work it up, advertise it and invite tenders from research consortia to do the analysis and prepare the relevant reports. Sounding boards to evaluate bids and new calls have been set up; with research and practice experts invited to apply. The programme is also investing in data management, development and communication. Project awards to date have ranged from €200,000 to €1 million. The whole cost of the research is met by ESPON. However, any partners would have to meet their own staff time and travel costs.

Thus, the themes to be explored by ESPON applied research and analysis can be defined by policy makers responsible for the implementation of territorial cohesion within the EU; with policy makers and practitioners better placed than ever before to shape the programme contents and results to ensure that they are targeted to support pragmatic policy demand for territorial evidence.

ESPON 2013 projects approved to date (or in the pipeline)

Some of the research proposals approved to date under the ESPON 2103 Programme are as follows:

- City and urban agglomeration functionality and potential for European competitiveness and co-operation
- Development opportunities in different types of rural areas
- Demographic and migratory flows in European regions and cities
- Climate change and territorial effects on regions and local economies
- Effects of rising energy prices on regional competitiveness
- Territorial impact assessment of policies
- The case for agglomeration economies in Europe.

These will expand in the future and more information can be found at the ESPON EU website <http://www.expon.eu>

ESPON Contact Points

ESPON – Republic of Ireland

The ESPON Ireland Contact Point Network which is centred at by the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) in NUI Maynooth and the Planning School at University College Cork (UCC) links Irish stakeholders with the European Union's ESPON research programme, and acts as a point of dissemination for the results of the ESPON studies. Irish agencies and others with an interest in the potential use of research findings should contact the ESPON Ireland contact point, which is being hosted by NUI Maynooth on behalf of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government. Please contact Brendan Bartley for further details.

ESPON – U.K.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) has been appointed by the Department of Communities and Local Government to act as the ESPON UK Contact Point. An ESPON UK Network has been set up by the Contact Point to act as a mechanism to support dissemination, promote awareness of ESPON activity and outputs, and encourage involvement of the UK research and practitioner communities in ESPON. The Contact Point administers the Network web pages, which are hosted by the RTPI website, and facilitates communications between Network members. This includes the circulation of regular bulletins to Network members. Please contact Prof. Cliff Hague for further details.