

SPATIAL PLANNING AT THE HEART OF TERRITORIAL COHESION

Paper prepared at the preparation of the ECTP-CEU/RTPI/ESPO Conference

How Can European Spatial Planners Assess Territorial Cohesion?

21/05/2010,

The City Chambers, Edinburgh

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1 Introduction

At the European level, as a result of many experiences in the policy fields of regional, environmental and social developments, the need for less segregated, less sectoral, more integrated, better coordinated, and more specific, place-based development policy grew. The Barca Report¹ plead for a place-based approach instead of the dominating sector approach. So, simply said, spatial planning is increasingly needed.

But since *Spatial planning* is considered the competence of Member States, the relevant Directorate General, DG Regio, had to “frame”² its considerations in different wording. DG Regio applied the “naming”³ *Territorial planning*.

In accordance with the policy objectives of social and economic Cohesion, the objective of Territorial Cohesion was added to complete the general Cohesion Policy as its third pillar in the Lisbon Treaty⁴.

In order to consider the implications of the concept of Territorial Cohesion for spatial planning practice, paragraph 2 discusses some aspects of the content of this new objective of the European Cohesion Policy.

In paragraph 3 Territorial Cohesion is considered in relation to modern Spatial Planning. If spatial planning is a tool to achieve cohesion of territories of different scales, it is relevant to examine how progress on the way to achieve this objective can be established. Therefore the way to assess achievements of spatial planning in general is discussed in paragraph 4.

Finally some concluding remarks are made.

¹ Barca Report (2009), An Agenda for a Reformed Cohesion Policy: A Place-based Approach to Meeting European Challenges and Expectations.

² Schön, D. A. & Rein, M. (1994) Frame Reflection: toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies. New York: Basic books

³ id

⁴ EC, Lisbon Treaty (in force 01/12/2009)

2. What is Territorial Cohesion?

The term Territorial Cohesion appeared in the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1994, was repeated in several documents thereafter, but did only gain the attention for elaboration into an applicable concept until 2004 in the Rotterdam Acquis.⁵

Territorial Cohesion is to be considered as the new, officially agreed policy objective for the development of Europe's territory.

Europe's territory consists of the territories of its regions.

Since the term *region* is a non-defined term, Territorial Cohesion can be considered on all spatial scales: from cohesion between a grouping of towns up to the supra national cohesion of large European regions.(like the Baltic Sea Area)

In its Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion⁶, DGRegio intentionally did not attempt to provide a definition of Territorial Cohesion.

DGRegio gave clarifications and descriptions which were clearly summarized in the sub-title of the document: *Turning diversity into strength*.

Although this has been perceived as disappointing by many, the resulting ambiguity should be considered advantageous.

Like other concepts in modern management and governance processes, such ambiguity indicates a direction of thinking. During a period such direction is sufficient to make progress into the indicated direction, while allowing at the same time interpretations and understandings which are relevant for various stakeholders.

The search for understanding that ambiguous objective and the translation to different fields of interest, is as such helpful for expanding the ownership of the concept and to widen the support to contribute to meeting the goal.

Territorial Cohesion can anyhow be understood as striving for the mutual supportive and synergetic connectivity of important aspects of a territory.

The ambiguity of the term Territorial Cohesion allowed also for planning practitioners to formulate their own interpretations. This helps to create applicable tools and processes for ways to contribute to this development objective by spatial planning.

The ECTP-CEU working group on Strategic Planning towards Territorial Cohesion⁷ attempted a definition and formulated:

“The Reinforcing Power of a Territory's Spatial Qualities and Synergies.”

This definition focuses on the uniting force of endogenous assets.

This definition indicates that planners should identify those spatial qualities and synergies which reinforce the territories' potentials for future developments, and enhance that power in plans.

Another ECTP-CEU definition, relating Territorial Cohesion to the vision in the New Charter of Athens 2003⁸ might be:

⁵ Informal meeting of Ministers for Spatial Development and Planning, Rotterdam Urban Acquis (2004), principles of effective urban policy making

⁶ Communication from the Commission...;Brussels 6.10.2008; COM (2008) 616 final; Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, Turning territorial diversity into strength; (SEC (2008) 2550)

⁷ Vogelij, J, Definition of Territorial Cohesion;(18/04/2008) ECTP-CEU; not published

⁸ Correia, Bussadori, Griffith, Papayannis & Vogelij (2003), New Charter of Athens 2003, The European Council of Town Planners' Vision for Cities in the 21st century, ECTP-CEU, Lisbon 20 Nov 2003;

“The Connectivity of, and among Economic, Social and Physical Systems, which enhances their overall Effectiveness for innovative Sustainable Development”.

It is quite obvious that spatial planners, confronted with the demand to contribute to Europe’s Cohesion policy, should consider the implications for spatial planning practice.

Spatial planning at the **local** level focuses in broad terms on city regeneration, city expansions and planning regulations. Territorial Cohesion on the local level can be regarded as a rather commonly pursued objective in urban planning and design: aiming at restoring and expanding the urban fabric.

Acknowledging that the territorial cohesion policy concentrates on the spatial levels **beyond** the local level, the implications for planning practice influence more specifically the processes of preparing plans for **regional** developments, which is the field of strategic spatial planning.

3. Strategic Spatial Planning

Spatial planning, being the responsibility of public bodies for larger and longer term developments, generally keeps a strained relation with private interests. In our liberal and competitive societies, public interventions are justified for addressing the imperfections of the market. This applies especially where effective functioning of economic exchanges is obstructed, where social equity is at stake, and where sustainable development is endangered. Strategic spatial planning therefore broadly aims at effective functioning of systems, equity and sustainability.

The orientation of strategic planning on **future** developments also creates strained relations especially with public and private bodies representing sector interests.

Those public and private bodies generally defend and protect actual, often short term sector interests, whereas the needed place-based strategic approaches demand for integrated planning for long term developments.

So, strategic spatial planning requires methods which co-ordinate sectors, levels of governance and consider long term effects.

Since sectors hold autonomous responsibilities, sector competencies, and maintain own legal procedures, the spatial coordination aiming at positive over-all outcomes, requires more than an equal position among sector policy fields.

And also the fact that in many EU countries higher level public bodies must approve plans of lower public bodies, creates the problem that territorial plans, integrating all aspects, are examined by the sectors applying their sector criteria.

Strategic spatial planning cannot be seen separate from modern governance.

Modern strategic planning implies an orientation on functional relations (rather than on administrative boundaries), intensive involvement of public and private stakeholders (mediating towards balanced interests) and public participation (shared ownership and support).

In Strategic Planning towards Territorial Cohesion, the ECTP-CEU⁹ proposed a stepwise approach based on these principles: organise informal processes aiming at agreement among stakeholders on objectives for future development.

⁹ Vogelij, J, Strategic Planning towards Territorial Cohesion (2008) ECTP-CEU (not published)

In short: prepare a spatial development vision, before thinking about conventional planning tools.

The proposed approach includes:

- to define a territory for the vision on basis of functional relations,
- the search for endogenous distinctiveness on basis of a SWOT-analysis and benchmarking,
- the selection of most promising integrated scenarios.
- The document emphasizes to analyse SWOT and to consider the scenario's by and together with the stakeholders, although (foreign) experts may provide information and (fresh) views.

4. How to Assess Planning Achievements?

If a process of strategic planning really succeeded in achieving substantial agreement on integrated development objectives, as described earlier, all relevant sector interests are taken into consideration.

That is to say, that the eventual assessment of a spatial development vision based on promising opportunities and high, but realistic ambitions, which are supported by diverse groupings of society, will probably produce hardly surprises.

That is inherent to integrative spatial planning approaches.

(Assessments are most needed of non-comprehensive planning achievements because they might discover neglected issues and impacts.)

The earlier assessments are carried out in a planning process, the more effective measures for mitigating assessed impacts can be.

Therefore, assessments of considerations during plan preparation (for instance when considering advantages and disadvantages of scenarios) are preferable above assessments later in the process.

Assessments which are positioned after publishing plans or development visions, will always, for those responsible for the plan, evoke the perception similar to an examination: "let's (publicly) judge what has been done wrongly".

This is counteractive to an integrative approach, which requires an open, welcoming and consensus seeking attitude.

Experiences with impact assessment practices bring considerations to the fore in relation to the use of indicators: social and economic cohesion are measured according to very simplifying quantitative indicators. Those indicators do only partly cover qualities which are felt to be important for quality of life or feelings of happiness.

Environmental assessments, embedded in strict regulations and quantitative indicators, do hardly allow for balancing with other important qualities. Environmental impact assessment may take spatial quality aspects into consideration, but those aspects will be treated as of secondary or derived importance, anyhow not equal to environmental aspects.

As a result environmental sector aspects dominate the weighing of interests in spatial plans.

Many planners in many countries experienced those negative assessments of their plans even when clearly aiming at (overall) sustainable developments.

That practice counteracts the widely expressed wish to apply integrated approaches and integrate sector policies in spatial plans.

Real place based planning requires place based assessments.
That is to say: sector interests in an area should be considered in combination to each other, and impacts of proposed interventions on the territory should be assessed comprehensively.

The general impact assessment seems to be more neutral, but anyhow a focus on the impacts on and around a **territory** is important.

Therefore, Territorial Impact Assessment preferably combined in one simple procedure, should come in place of different sector impact assessments.

So, not only from the viewpoint of sound integrated spatial planning, but especially for the sake of Territorial Cohesion, we plea for Territorial Impact Assessment, coming in stead of sector impact assessments.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The policy objective Territorial Cohesion is regarded to address the negative effects for efficient functioning (and innovation), social equity and sustainable development of the actual fragmented governmental structures.

5.2 Since Territorial Cohesion is about the over-all effectiveness (and the uniting forces) of network relations, systems and flows, in and around territories, spatial planning towards territorial cohesion should be of a strategic, integrated character. Preparing spatial development visions in an informal, interactive setting is promoted to be the way forward.

5.3 Assessments which do not focus on all aspects in and around a territory, but which concentrate on sector indicators, will support the continuation of the many problems created by actual sector segregation.

5.4 Territorial Impact Assessment should be the modern governance tool for weighing all relevant interests. This tool is preferably applied when comparing different integrated scenarios in the process towards an agreed spatial vision.

5.5 Territorial Impact Assessment regulation should not be composed by adding-up sector requirements of sector impact assessments. A new, simply applicable procedure must be created, checking overall impacts with cross-cutting criteria, many of which being qualitative. The procedure should be based on the acknowledgement that spatial planning seeks for sustainable territorial cohesion (and is not the environments enemy!)

For the sake of Territorial Cohesion, Territorial Impact Assessment should replace actual impact assessment regulations.

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18/05/2010

