

## ESPON in context

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*The continuing inability of the academic community to come up with a usable theoretical understanding of globalisation and the lack of corresponding statistical evidence, which is its result, encourages ideological speculation. Moreover, much of what passes for the international discussion on spatial planning is simply liturgical neo-liberalism, which blurs rather than clarifies the overall picture. The EU is tormented by the emergence of conflicting scenarios for European integration, namely, moving towards supranational state formation on the one hand or the intensification of cooperation between sovereign states on the other. This seems to reflect the way in which DG Regio and the other DGs are currently operating (e.g. as self-sufficient players). Much of the European work undertaken on spatial planning has been carried out in the context of intergovernmental co-operation, which is not always promoted by the Commission. The process and results of the ESPON programme can be understood in the context of globalisation and the conflicting scenarios for European integration. The most important question related to future co-operation on European spatial planning, concerns the scientific quality of the results however, not their alleged policy implications.*

### Introduction

The ESPON (*European Spatial Planning Observation Network*) research programme will be concluded by the end of 2006.<sup>2</sup> This programme is part of a larger process actually already initiated in the early 1980s with a major milestone occurring in 1999 when the ESDP (*European Spatial Development Perspective*) was issued. Two ideas underpinned the continued work after 1999, firstly, the idea of establishing a network across Europe among research institutions specialising in spatial development issues, and secondly, the pursuit of reliable statistics in order to elaborate criteria and indicators for the monitoring of spatial development across the continent. In order to test

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)

these ideas, a preliminary phase was initiated in 1998-2000, known as SPESP (*Study Programme on European Spatial Planning*) under the auspices of DG Regio.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, the ESPON programme was initiated as an Interreg III Community initiative.

The various contributions of the ESPON programme as well as the programme as a whole have of course been assessed along the road. Yet it is definitely too early to try to deliver any pertinent overall assessment of the results of the programme. Published material can be assessed, but there is much more to it than that, including all the training and learning aspects as well as all of the contacts and networks established over the years. Leaving this aside, it may be fruitful to discuss ESPON-experiences in terms of the more fundamental matters of European integration and the role of EU institutions, notably the Commission, in relation to Member State co-operation. All this of course takes place in a global context. From a researcher's point of view, 'policy-relevant research' always actualises the blurred borderline between politics and academia, which is a matter of credibility both for the academic and the political world, but sometimes only vaguely understood by those involved. As such, the following comments may be useful as the latest input in a series of previous comments.<sup>4</sup>

### **The global context**

In the medieval process of expanding capitalism, trade was organised through single city-states or leagues of cities in partnership.<sup>5</sup> Such partnerships or families of Town Law were characteristic of the twelfth and thirteenth century Europe: newly founded towns or old settlements raised to urban status, acquired the rights and privileges of an existing mother town.<sup>6</sup> The rise of urban units organising trade was accomplished by risings of townsmen against their ecclesiastical or lay lords. Communal movements are known from northern France, northern Spain, northern Italy, Flanders and some of Rhine towns.<sup>7</sup> What we notice here is a correspondence between the expansion of capitalist conditions and territorial self-rule, which could be labelled an embryonic mode of democratic government. Moreover, even at this early stage these urban societies built their success on the redistribution and reallocation of resources, which was enabled by municipal taxes, fees, etc.

No society known to history existing above the subsistence level has failed to reallocate material resources within its territory with a view to reproducing human resources. Labour has never been entirely reproducible solely based on market mechanisms. Towards the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the early modern age,

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<sup>3</sup> See [www.nordregio.se](http://www.nordregio.se), and Nordregio R2000:4

<sup>4</sup> Bengs 1998, Bengs 1999, Bengs 2002

<sup>5</sup> By *capitalism*, we mean here, 'a social and economic system in which individuals are free to own the means of production and maximize profits and in which resource allocation is determined by the price system'. Bannock, Baxter & Davis 1998, p. 52.

<sup>6</sup> The first, the family of towns with the law of the Norman town of *Breteuil*, was introduced in Britain after the Norman Conquest in 1066 and subsequently spread to Ireland. The law (or *fuero*) of *Cuenca* was a more elaborate example from the Iberian peninsula, where Alfonso VIII of Castile granted a comprehensive code soon after he had conquered the town from the Muslims in 1177. At about the same time a similar code was granted to *Tereul* by Alfonso II of Aragon. The family of *Cuerca-Teruel* law spread across political boundaries in Spain; meanwhile, 'Lübeck law' originated in the twelfth century, and was codified in the thirteenth. It provided the model for over a hundred towns founded along the Baltic shore in the thirteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> Mackay & Ditchburn 1999, p.133-137.

the role of towns and town leagues came to be replaced by that of centralised nation states, a process which is currently still in place today. Again, the centralised control of internal markets has been accomplished by the introduction of self-rule and expanding democracy based on the reallocation of national resources. The advantages of a system of redistribution based on democracy are obvious, pacifying the population and rendering governments a flare of legitimacy.

The concurrent process of globalisation indicates that provision is made for investments and profits to flow freely all around the world, which implies the dismantling of all barriers to the free flow of such monies and assets. Economic globalisation has not, however, been complemented by the development of global democratic institutions, representative of the global community as a whole, which would collect taxes and the like, and reallocate them globally. We seem to live in a world where expanding capitalism is not matched by expanding freedom in terms of a wider territorial coverage of democratic institutions. In this sense, globalisation entails a hitherto unseen phenomenon. The global economic system is not matched by a system for the global reallocation of resources.

The imbalance between global capitalism and national democracy actualises a dilemma: the contradiction between the global and unlimited accumulation of assets on the one hand and the state-based and limited redistribution of assets through taxes on the other. The present day dilemma is that national governments feel compelled to reduce taxes and dismantle reallocation mechanisms for the national reproduction of labour (such as elderly care, health services and education) in order to be appealing to investors. The national welfare regimes however are not, compensated on the global level by any kind of system for the reallocation of assets, as market mechanisms are supposed to generate enough wealth for everyone. As that does not necessarily take place, globalisation is said to generate wealth for the few and poverty for the rest.<sup>8</sup> Nationally anchored democratic institutions also seem to be conceived as obstacles to globalisation to the extent that they persist in collecting taxes and reallocating resources. The present imbalance between the global economy on the one hand and the lack of a globally operating redistribution system for the reproduction of human resources on the other obviously indicates a belief that human resources are abundant enough not to draw our concern except in relation to ensuring that market mechanisms continue to function smoothly. History indicates the futility of such a view.

The deregulation of property markets across Europe during the last quarter of a century or so provides an instructive example of the effects of globalisation. The dismantling of barriers to free investment in real estate has been seen as an urgent task by governments in most European countries. This has been accompanied by the decentralisation of decision-making and the overhauling of national planning systems in favour of less physical restrictions and 'more responsive' development processes. The changing role of public authorities implies a switch from *control* to the *promotion of* development. The direct involvement of elected bodies is being replaced piecemeal by a planning system where 'stakeholders' rather than the democratically elected representatives of the population as a whole hold sway. This change is often labelled 'governance' in contrast to allegedly old-fashioned approach of 'government', and it is

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<sup>8</sup> Chossudovsky, 1999.

propagated as an extension and not as a reduction of democracy. In the ideological justification of a liberalised land regime, planning theory stressing the communication aspect ('bottom-up') as apart from public control ('top-down') has been very influential.<sup>9</sup>

Why less public control in matters relating to land use and the appropriation of land rent should be seen as more 'bottom-up' than previous land regimes is however rarely elucidated. The role of planning theory seems then to have been reduced to that of ideological back up for neo-liberalism as is obvious from the agenda and discourse of international planning associations such as the AESOP. Liberalisation is being pursued by the planning academia using an arsenal of allegedly novel catchwords, but the factual effects such as sharply rising real estate prices and the corresponding exclusion of large parts of the middle class from home ownership is rarely commented on. The concept of *good governance* has spread from institutions promoting globalisation such as the World Bank to other institutions such as the EU, lending itself to promoting a vocabulary that generally blurs more than it clarifies global conditions.

This neo-liberal jargon definitely transcends the various documents on spatial planning, which formed the basis of the ESPON programme as well as the texts of standard academic commentaries on European spatial planning. From the scientific point of view, the problem is not that liberal ideas (rather than e.g. conservative or socialist ones) are pursued, but that ideology is mistaken for evidence and that a particular 'future' is claimed to be inevitable. All this is obviously standard practice in advanced rhetoric, but unacceptable as a point of departure for research. A more analytical approach in view of the challenges that Europe is facing in a globalising world, would encompass an understanding of fundamental structural changes in the economy – the changing relation between fixed and 'footloose' investments and the growing importance of intangible commodities as opposed to tangible ones – and their implications for Europe and its various nations and regions. A question of similar importance concerns demographic change and global migration patterns, issues that are not to be found in the ESDP. When pursuing criteria and indicators that would mirror profound structural changes in Europe and its inert position in the global context, crucial statistics are simply lacking. The collection and design of statistics is arguably always, by necessity, a fairly conservative business; but how then can we grasp the evidences of an emerging brave new world? Ideologies are afforded a free reign when the evidence to discount them is missing.

### **The European Union context**

The EU is designed to expand markets and transcend nationally drawn economic borders. Economic integration was, and is, its primary focus. Economic integration requires, however, a set of administrative instruments for the harmonisation of market conditions. Consequently, a bureaucracy was set up in the form of the Commission and the other institutions of the EU. This machinery took the form of a meritocracy, ideally suited to promoting the economic interests of major actors and (at that time) national monopolies, organised according to the main governmental department sectors. The EU is financially dependent on the national contributions of the Member States, each obtaining, more or less, its money back in return for observing priorities set by the EU. This practice has recently been the subject of a major critique delivered

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<sup>9</sup> Healey 1997

in the form of the Sapir Report and more generally by successive UK governments. The problem is however a structural one, as discussed in the previous section concerning globalisation. As the Union lacks the right to tax people, firms, and/or transactions within its territory, it also lacks the means to undertake the reallocation of resources independently of the Member States. The UK proposal to restrict the reallocation of funds within the EU to direct financial support of, for instance, the new Member States does not really alleviate the structural imbalance inherent in EU funding mechanisms. Moreover, taxation, and social security legislation are not within the competence of the Union.

The status and instrumental means of the EU as a supranational institution is of course constantly contested by its Member States, and the various development options, i.e. *towards a supranational state formation or increased cooperation between sovereign states*, are detrimentally present in the every day running of matters in the EU. By its very nature and history, the Commission seems to promote its own stately influence in every endeavour. The case of promoting spatial planning and development considerations in a concerted way across the European territory is simply but another instructive example. The question is, however, who is the 'owner' of such an endeavour, the Commission or the Member States in intergovernmental co-operation?

Spatial planning is not recognised as a matter within the competence of the EU. This has been contested by representatives of the Commission, putting forward the argument that decisions and policies *should* match the geographical extent of the problems to which they refer. Consequently, the Community is said to have competence in spatial planning since it concerns the co-ordination of Community policies, which affect the use, organisation, and structure of the EU territory.<sup>10</sup> Many other areas of EU policy have been opened up long before they were formalised by including specific titles in the Single European Act. A reasonable conclusion here then is thus that 'competence' is not a legal, but a political issue.<sup>11</sup> The reason for excluding spatial planning from the competence of the EU is thus politically founded, not a legal claim.

Within the areas of assigned EU competence, the Commission has the right to initiate Community legislation for the approval of the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament (the 'Community Method'), which reinforces the character of the EU as a supranational state. Had the treaty establishing a constitution for Europe been ratified by all Member States, 'territorial cohesion' would have been a goal of the Union alongside economic and social cohesion, and a competence shared with the Member States. Consequently, the 'Community Method' would have been applicable in spatial planning matters as well. This is not now likely in the near future, and other instruments are being developed. One such instrument is the so-called 'Open Method of Co-ordination', which is developed for policy areas where the 'Community Method' does not apply. The 'Open Method' is considered to be a 'soft' governance tool, including benchmarking, the dissemination of best practices, mutual learning, and peer pressure. Thus, it may be considered a potential instrument for policy promotion in the interest of stakeholders and investors in a more or less standardised neo-liberal

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<sup>10</sup> Bastrup-Birk & Doucet 1998

<sup>11</sup> Faludi 2006



fashion, with no legally binding rules, and allegedly applicable for the elaboration of a new Community Territorial Cohesion Strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Moving on from the initial preparation of the ESDP, to the SPESP and ESPON, the relationship between the Commission, promoting supranational ambitions, and the Member States, trying to promote improved conditions for spatial planning based on intergovernmental co-operation, has been a tricky one.<sup>13</sup> The author of these sentiments headed the SPESP co-ordination team, which was in operation from December 1998 to February 2000. This experience was transcended by the supranational ambitions of the Commission in all phases of the work, actually raising an anomaly that only received reasonable explanation much later.

In early spring of 1999, a Commission representative present at an SPESP conference held at Nordregio, Stockholm, thoroughly explained the basic issue of the endeavour, that is to say, the *polycentric development* of Europe. Consequently, the co-ordination work was accomplished along this line for half a year, until a huge conference in Rome where most of the research work of the various international research groups was supposed to be completed. At the Rome conference in the autumn of 1999, another Commission representative, now of (formally speaking) a higher dignity, then explained, for public consumption, that the co-ordination team had everything wrong: the issue was not polycentric development at all but *urban-rural partnership* in Europe. (Each provides a main topic for the ESDP.) He also took the trouble to explain for all and sundry, that the whole project was a failure and good for nothing. Later assessments have proved the opposite.

Now, this kind of action, taking place as it did so close to the finalising of the project, seemed to be somewhat dysfunctional with regard to the success of the whole enterprise, and one wondered how responsible people could not sort out different opinions in advance – and not in public. Later, it was suggested that the Commission actually only agreed to finance the SPESP so as to prove that a network of research institutions could not work.<sup>14</sup> Assuming this to be true, from the Commissions' point of view then real success would have been the failure of the project, which indicates a cynical attitude to intergovernmental co-operation in general, and an extreme boldness in the pursuit of its allegedly 'own' interests, whatever those may be, in particular. From a professional's point of view, trying to do one's best whenever possible; such actions naturally erode the legitimacy of the Commission as well as the ambitions of a Supranational Europe. From the point of view of promoting decency and trustworthy co-operation within the European family, the elitist meritocracy of the Commission seems to do its best to sideline itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Faludi 2005

<sup>13</sup> The ESDP was essentially a result of intergovernmental co-operation. The SPESP was set up as a pilot action under Article 10 of the Structural Funds in co-operation with Member States and the Commission, while ESPON was set up under Article 53 of the Regulations of the Structural Funds 2000-2006. A new process, representing intergovernmental co-operation, is the so-called Rotterdam process, initiated in 2004, which has produced a document on the territorial perspectives of the European Union. Territorial cohesion and European spatial and urban development policy is the focus of strategic considerations for the promotion of jobs and growth.

<sup>14</sup> This piece of information was obtained from the late Dick Williams, who was a dignified scrutinizer of European planning affairs with a high degree of integrity.

The case of the SPESP indicates a somewhat crude and simplistic way of the Commission 'playing their cards'. In the arguably ongoing battle between supranational and intergovernmental interests in the EU, as always, meritocracies (without sufficient political backing) seem, by definition, to alienate themselves from any true influence on development. The other side of the coin is however equally sad, namely, that *public interest* is badly articulated as the necessary European *fora* are missing. The lack of a platform for *European democracy* seems obvious. This is not a matter of abstract principles, but a factual dilemma related to the void of democratically credible institutions that could provide for the reallocation of resources for the regeneration of human resources across Europe.

## The ESPON

The aims of the ESPON include the creation of a *network oriented scientific European community* in the field of spatial development as well as the *bridging of the gap* between policy makers, administrators, and scientists. Moreover, the aim was to specify the implications of the *ESDP policy orientations* on trans-national spaces, and to contribute to a better understanding of the *spatial dimension of Community Policies*. The three project priorities of the programme included thematic projects on important spatial developments, policy impact projects and co-ordinating cross-thematic projects.

In order to address the fundamentals of the ESPON, one could ask oneself: Can there be policy-relevant research? In a trivial sense, any research can be policy-relevant as far as it is used for policy purposes. In a more profound sense, probably no piece of research is policy-relevant as such. The reason being that scientific conclusions are always scientifically relevant only in the context of clearly defined conditions, (the context of discovery and the context of justification), while policy-relevance refers to political conditions. A personal experience of the ESPON programme is that representatives of the Commission as well as national commissioners of research tend to request results of general validity, applicable for political endeavours formulated as slogans, while researchers stress the specified context of scientific conclusions, and, generally speaking, refuse to extent the limits of interpretations. There are actually strong arguments in favour of the view that academia and politics are two separate worlds with little in common.<sup>15</sup>

Still the notion of knowledge as power, attributed to Francis Bacon, is valid in two ways. Firstly, those in power are of course genuinely interested in *knowledge as far as it can promote their interests*. The university institutions and the like have developed proceedings and traditions over the centuries (and since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular) in order to safeguard the accumulation of genuinely new knowledge. The aim has been to produce reliable research results. Part of this tradition is precisely not to deliver statements without specifying their field of relevance. Even the most general of scientific laws are conditioned, and an overall trend in the history of science is that what was thought to be of general validity turn out to be phenomena occurring in particular conditions.

Secondly, power means by definition also the power to define *what is accountable as knowledge*. In most countries, research and science are controlled and conducted

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<sup>15</sup> For an elaboration of this argument, see Bengs 2004.

through direct interventions as well as indirect steering for instance by means of funding. In addition, the commissioners of research may demand full control of the research results, including copy right, etc. With regard to all of the various mechanisms of control related to science and research, this activity is probably one of the most controlled as compared to any other sector of society. The other side of the coin is that advanced external control does not necessarily result in good quality results or societal relevance, but most of the time in the opposite.

The ESPON programme is fairly well controlled by those seeing themselves as being politically responsible for it. This includes the Commission, while their representatives have not expressed overwhelming modesty in commenting on the results of individual projects. One of the most interesting results of the whole programme was the finding that the EU support of agriculture tends to be concentrated in centrally located and wealthy areas of the union where agriculture is most productive. When this result was presented at a project conference, the representative of the Commission told the audience that, despite the obvious 'truth value' of the proposition, such results could jeopardize the future of 'territorial cohesion', an aim that the Commission had been fighting for. One conclusion of such incidents is to ask whether there is any point in studying the spatial implications of EU policies if inconvenient research results cannot be presented. The whole exercise seems to lose its rationale. Another conclusion would be that political aims such as 'territorial cohesion' are there to 'flag up' a better future, but remain essentially meaningless with regard to the improvement of factual conditions.

From a researcher's point of view, the most interesting side of the ESPON programme is of course its scientific results. One prerequisite for scientific quality has been the access to harmonised, reliable, and relevant statistics of sufficient coverage. The question of statistics is related to where they are produced and the conditions for access to these statistics. Eurostat is a European institution with the status of a DG, though rarely does it readily seem to lend a helping hand to the other DGs. There has been minimal co-operation between the ESPON programme and Eurostat, despite obvious efforts by the ESPON Co-ordination Unit to rectify this. Moreover, the lack of vital statistics has often proved to be the critical issue when assessing the results of the ESPON programme. Many individuals and institutions across Europe have been involved in improving the situation, but lacking the resources of Eurostat, the results have not always been good enough. Based on the experience of the programme thus far, any further continuation must address the problem of statistics. DG *Regio* has been very keen to correct the various actors of the ESPON programme, but their obvious failure to engage in successful co-operation with other institutions of the Commission when needed is of major concern.

One issue discussed throughout the ESPON process has been the need to develop renderings of spatial development in Europe, which would enable the switch between different levels of scale (European, national, regional, local) in a way that would make these different levels comparable with each other. 'There is no consistent methodology for documenting spatial characteristics that would be appropriate for any level of scale or any part of the European territory.'<sup>16</sup> This somewhat pessimistic statement was the view of the author some years ago, but now the situation has improved. In the

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<sup>16</sup> Bengs 2002, p. 14.



ESPON project on urban-rural relations in Europe (Thematic project 1.1.2), a methodology is developed according to which different geographical levels can be compared in a fairly straightforward and simple manner.<sup>17</sup> Statistics are not classified according to classes, which are always more or less arbitrarily defined, but according to average value (above or below) of the geographical level under scrutiny. The chosen geographical level is suited to a corresponding territorial unit.<sup>18</sup> This means that the European perspective is made evident by applying European averages, the national perspective by applying national averages according to a finer territorial division, and so on down to the local level. Although the expressed values would be different in absolute terms, the various levels are still possible to compare as the logic of the different scales is common, indicating the status of any given territory in relation to average values. This sounds simple enough, but it is actually a result of numerous ‘trial and error’ attempts.

### **A concluding remark**

From a researcher’s point of view, the main lesson to be learned from the ESPON ‘experience’ is not related to the policy relevance of the programme, but is rather a question of the scientific validity of the results. The quality of the various final reports of individual projects is very variable. The reason for this is not that the procedure of institutional checking put in place at the outset is inefficient as such. Everything has, more or less, been done in accordance with scheduled measures. The reason is rather that the final reports (at least in most cases) have not been subjected to academic scrutiny, that is, a system for safeguarding scientific quality that has been developed over the centuries in the academic world. The applied scrutiny of final results, including the comments of peer reviewer and national contact points, has not produced quality control of a sufficient standard. The experience of the author is that the formal title of scrutinisers (e.g. ‘university professor’) does not as such correspond with the degree of pertinence. In academia at its best, scientific scrutiny is a collective effort including double-checking along the road. If the scientific quality of final results cannot be safeguarded, then the exercise will lose its credibility among academics and eventually then among politicians as well.

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.espon.eu/mmp/online/website/content/projects/259/649/file\\_1182/fr-1.1.2\\_revised-full\\_31-03-05.pdf](http://www.espon.eu/mmp/online/website/content/projects/259/649/file_1182/fr-1.1.2_revised-full_31-03-05.pdf) See Maps 2 and 3, pages 29 and 30.

<sup>18</sup> The whole of the EU according to NUTS3 areas, the national level according to NUTS5 areas, and the regional level according to smaller statistical units, etc.

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