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Transnational Territorial Research in Europe: A review of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network and the opportunities it offers to researchers in planning.

Cliff Hague (UK ESPON Contact Point) – C.B.Hague@sbe.hw.ac.uk

Abstract

The European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) is a major research programme set up by the European Union in 2002. In its first phase (2002-2006) it carried through 34 studies, each of which was undertaken by a Transnational Project Group made up of researchers from at least 3 different European countries. The results have been the mapping of numerous key territorial development indicators, discussion of their implications for policy at European, macro-regional and regional scales, and innovative work on developing and applying methods to assess the territorial impacts of policies. ESPON's findings have been used in developing Europe's cohesion policies and territorial agenda. The new ESPON programme (2007-2013) covers 31 countries and will attempt to forge new links between planning researchers and planning practitioners.

The paper will review ESPON 2002-2006 in a manner that addresses its significance for planning education and research in both Europe and North America. It will do this by drawing on a paper (Hague and Hachmann, 2008) from a Lincoln Institute book. It will then highlight some key territorial development challenges and explore opportunities in the ESPON 2008-2013 programme for planning researchers from different EU countries to get involved.

The paper will link the research in ESPON to the overall conference theme of "Bridging the Divide" by highlighting the European concept of Territorial Cohesion, and critically reviewing the contribution that the research has made to operationalising this concept at a transnational scale. In particular the role of cities will be highlighted and the issue of urban-rural relations.

The aims of the paper are a) to create a dialogue between European and North American planning educators / researchers about the relation between policy making and research in an transnational context; and b) to use this international gathering to promote new transnational collaborations of researchers who would look to work together through programmes like ESPON.

Transatlantic chat

Although ACSP and AESOP have been meeting together since 1991, there still appears to be relatively little interest from North Americans in the “European project” and from Europeans in looking outside of their continental boundaries. One impact of the growth of the European Union (EU) and its engagement with territorial concerns has been an increasing interest amongst European planning researchers and educators in other European countries, and with European Union initiatives. However, with a few notable exceptions, such as those supported by the Lincoln Foundation (e.g. Faludi, 2002; 2007; 2008) there is little evidence of a transatlantic discourse about what has been happening in Europe. Thus on this matter there is indeed a need for “Bridging the Divide”.

The main aim of the paper is to create a dialogue between European and North American planning educators / researchers about the relation between policy making and research in a transnational context. As a step towards this purpose, the paper tells the story of ESPON, a major European territorial research programme that continues to feed into emergent European policy-making. However, the paper tries to do this in a way that makes the account accessible to people from outside Europe. To this end it attempts some reflections on the differences and similarities with North America. A further hope is that this international gathering may be an opportunity to promote new transnational collaborations of researchers who would look to work together on issues of metropolitan and mega-region scale planning.

A changing Europe

Europe has been transformed in less than a generation. Until the end of 1989 it was divided by the “Iron Curtain”. The EU at that time consisted only of 12 countries, the most recent entrants Spain and Portugal, which themselves had until the 1970s been Fascist dictatorships. Today there are 27 member states – a growth achieved not by military means but by voluntary accession. However, in a changing world, the EU has been “running to stand still”. Since its origin in 1950, when there were only 6 members, until today the EU has basically maintained a level 6% of world population. It is successive enlargements that have made this seeming “steady state” possible. The EU’s share of world GDP shows a similar pattern with a ratio of 20% since the UK joined in 1973 (Grasland and Beckouche, 2008). There is an interesting comparison with the USA and Canada, both of which have experienced a decline in shares of population and GDP globally over this period, notwithstanding strong international migration at some periods.

The increase in members together with the move to a Single Market created greater diversity between different parts of the expanding EU. Some 20 years had elapsed from 1957 when the Treaty of Rome established the European Community before a European Regional Development Fund was set up to tackle regional disparities. Furthermore, as Robert (2007) argued, the bureaucracy that runs the EU project, the European Commission, has a strong culture of sectoral specialisation. However, Robert argues that “two logics” forced a territorial dimension into EU thinking and practices. These were “a strong structuring of territories... throughout the whole EU that mobilises not only the public and semi-public structures, but also all the dynamic forces of society” (27). It is certainly true that the move to remove the barriers that international borders had

constituted triggered spontaneous market-led changes (e.g. people commuting between different member states). But the EU, in “hollowing out” nation states from above, was willing to assist a complementary process from below through support for forms of regional representation and co-operation internationally. Not surprisingly, this was most notably the case for the Directorate concerned with Regional Policy. In a sectorialised set of institutional power relations, an agency whose role was about horizontal integration had to promote its own “sector” if it were to have any chance of denting the mentality of the big sectoral agencies concerned with agriculture, transport, etc.

Williams (1996) and Faludi and Waterhout (2002) described the how the building blocks for EU-wide territorial analysis were built up in the early 1990s. *Europe 2000: Outlook for the Development of the Community's Territory* (CEC, 1991) took the 12-member state Community as its reference point. It was followed by *Europe 2000+* which extended the geographical analysis and added some case studies. It looked at pressures on Europe's territory arising and pointed to the need for more comparable data. Faludi and Waterhout (2002, 52) argued that *Europe 2000* demonstrated that a policy for economic and social cohesion “needed to be based on an overall view of the Community territory.”

Through this period, when Jacques Delors was President of the European Commission (1985-95), there was a strong political commitment at the highest level in the EU to the notion that competitiveness could and should be reconciled with equity. The momentum that had been built up carried through to the publication of the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) (CEC, 1999) which proved to be a landmark document. Politically it sought to reconcile the calls for competitiveness, which mainly came from the UK and other countries in the north of Europe, with the case for reducing regional disparities, mainly led by Spain and Mediterranean Europe. The solution to this search for “balanced development” would be through a spatial pattern – polycentricity. In other words Europe should seek to develop a number of “global economic integration zones” so as to compete with the USA and the Pacific economies. However, by growing such zones beyond the “core” area – the so-called pentagon demarcated by London-Paris-Milan-Munich-Hamburg – disparities within Europe could be contained or even reduced.

Perhaps we should pause at this point – before discussing ESPON as such – and ask what does this necessarily abbreviated and selective history mean for North American planners – or others outside of the European Spatial Planning “club”? The story sketched above roughly overlaps with developing awareness in the USA over the sunbelt / rustbelt phenomenon. Territorial divides and a strongly sectoral institutional culture are not uniquely a prerogative of Europe. While the era was marked by trade liberalisation, increasing global market competition, and the formation of international trading alliances, nowhere else does there appear to have been so highly articulated a concern for equity between places as was the case in the EU.

Perhaps this is not surprising. As Europe rebuilt after the savagery of the 1939-45 war (that's 1941-45 for Americans) unity and cohesion were at the heart of the project. Peyrony (2007) goes so far as to invoke the ambition of Napoleon I to *cohésionner l'Europe*, while the contributors to Faludi's (2007) edited volume connect the notion that people should not be disadvantaged by where they live or work to the idea of “the

European Model of Society". Certainly one can agree with Davoudi (2007) when she argues that aspects of the French planning tradition concerned with equity and the German tradition of seeking a "holistic approach" can be detected in the way EU territorial policy has developed. But over and above all these vital explanatory attitudes and values, there remain two key institutional facts. Firstly, the existence of the EU Commission's Directorate for Regional Policy; and secondly the political necessity for the member states to do deals and negotiate mutually acceptable solutions. Neither of these conditions is replicated in the USA, for example, and nor, of course, is there much empathy in the "Land of the Free" for something with the ethos of the claimed "European Model of Society".

Of course there are demarcation disputes in American and Canadian politics between states/provinces and the federal level. However, to an outside observer, the issues seem more fought on sectoral and ideological lines than on issues of territorial development and equity. Similarly, the conflicts so regularly played out between US cities and their suburban counties are clearly territorial stand-offs about equity, but the narratives seem to be primarily locally driven, perhaps because the voice of the cities has been more marginalised politically.

ESPON 2006: The European Spatial Planning Observation Network

The ESDP lacked a solid analytical base and could not be described as an exercise in making policy on the basis of evidence. There were few maps, and these were hardly controversial or providing significant new data. Böhme and Schön, (2006, 68) argued that more maps had been planned but consensus could be reached about them. One of the maps that did appear showed annual days with mean temperatures above +5 degrees Centigrade (at the insistence of the Swedes, so anecdotes say).

The original intention had been to set up an ESPON so that it could feed data into the ESDP process (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). However, wrangles over a suitable legal framework for the ESPON programme delayed things and the ESDP went ahead. Once ESPON was set up and began to operate in 2002, funded by a combination of money from the EU and from member states, its initial orientation was very close to that of the ESDP (Hague and Hachmann, 2008).

The programme began before the 2004 EU enlargement, when 10 countries joined the Union. Thus the number of countries in ESPON 2006 increased during the period that the programme was running. However, the focus had always been on 29 countries. These were the 27 countries now in the EU plus Norway and Switzerland who are not EU members, but co-operate with the Union on many matters. ESPON's scale of systematic and comparative collection and analysis of territorial data down to a regional level (called "NUTS 3") was unprecedented. However, there were still some parts of Europe excluded. While the definition of Europe is, of course, socially and politically constructed, most would agree that the Balkan states are part of Europe, but they were not in the ESPON 2006 space. With this exception, the coverage stretches from the shores of the Atlantic in the west to the border with Russia in the East, and from the Arctic north of Scandinavia to the Mediterranean islands of Malta and Cyprus.

Decisions on what research to commission were taken by the ESPON Monitoring Committee, on which the Regional Policy Directorate of the EU (DG REGIO) was represented along with the countries contributing funding to ESPON. In all 34 projects were commissioned. They divided into four streams. The first were called “Thematic” projects and included obvious topics like demography and transport. The second group, “Policy Impact Studies”, were about assessing the territorial impacts of a range of EU sectoral policies, such as agriculture, research and development etc. The third grouping were generally large, “co-ordinating and integrative” projects, that often had a strong methodological or data management aspect. The final grouping comprised a series of shorter, exploratory studies that were undertaken later in the programme and seen in many ways as a bridge to what became the ESPON 2013 programme. Table 1 summarises the listing – for full details of all projects see www.espon.eu.

Priority 1: Thematic Projects	Polycentricity; Urban-Rural Relations; Enlargement and Polycentrism; Demographic Trends; Transport Trends; Telecom Trends; Information Society; Natural Heritage; Cultural Heritage.
Priority 2: Policy Impact Projects	Transport Policy; R&D Policy; Common Agricultural Policy; Energy Policy; Fisheries Policy; Structural Funds; Pre-accession aid; Structural Funds in Urban Areas; ESDP impact; Governance; Environment; “Zoom-in”.
Priority 3 Co-ordinating, Cross-thematic Projects	Co-ordination; Spatial Scenarios; Lisbon Strategy; Europe in the World; Economy.
Priority 4 Studies and Scientific Support Projects	Small and Medium-Sized Towns; Social Dimensions; Urban Functions; Flows; Tourism; MAUP (Modifiable Areas Unit Problem); Monitoring Territorial Development.

Table 1: The ESPON 2006 Projects

In each case the research was undertaken by a “Transnational Project Group” (TPG). One of the rules applied in the tendering process was that any TPG had to have within it universities/research institutes from at least three different countries within the ESPON programme. The language of the programme though was only English. Even before 2004 special encouragement was given to involve researchers from the countries that were about to become new members of the EU. Most of the main projects ran 18-24 months. So these were large, multi-partner and multi-national studies, and quite often there was some disciplinary mix within a team as well.

Although the topics vary widely, a distinctive style of ESPON research emerged quite quickly, partly because of the influence of various “Guidance papers” produced through the Co-ordination Project under the steering hand of the ESPON Co-ordination Unit that oversaw the day to day work of the programme. Thus ESPON was overwhelmingly an exercise in collecting, analyzing and mapping statistical data down to NUTS 3 level. There was a strong emphasis on developing databases and deriving and applying indicators. The analysis was primarily focused at the continental level - the 29 countries together; what trends, impacts, policy options did the data reveal at this European scale?

However, two other levels were always recognised – the level of European regions – e.g. North-West Europe; the Baltic Sea Region etc; and then the national/intra-national scale.

ESPON was always intended to be an exercise in applied research – providing data on time that was primarily intended to be of benefit to policy-makers. The tensions in this model became apparent quite quickly. DG REGIO had a timetable to publish its Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion. It wanted ESPON data to use in this report, and that meant the data had to be ready by September 2003. However, the first round of projects had only been commissioned at the earliest in mid-2002 (some later still) and were not due to complete their work until the end of 2003 or later. Furthermore many of the projects were going where no researchers had gone before in the attempt to find truly comparable data for 29 different countries. Screams of anguish could be heard. Great demands were placed on the TPGs to accelerate the process of producing results. While not a satisfactory way to do research, the pressure was entirely understandable. ESPON was but a fledgling. Not everybody even within DG REGIO was convinced about its necessity – for example, the EU has its specialist statistical empire, called “EUROSTAT”. If ESPON had just said “Sorry, no can do” it would have almost certainly lost credibility and support.

This incident, perhaps more than any other, highlights a fundamental issue that is not restricted to Europe. The model of applied research undertaken on contract to a client is significantly different than the model of the researcher pursuing her/his own research interest with a view to publication via a peer review process. The two are not necessarily diametrically opposed – findings from the contract research may be turned into a peer-reviewed article, while there was certainly scope for some individuality and creative approaches within ESPON projects. However, in signing a contract the researcher loses some measure of freedom.

The researcher also needs to appreciate the needs of the client and the risks that findings will be interpreted in a way that suits the client’s interests. While the idea of evidence-based policy-making is seductive, especially in an era of managerial rather than ideological politics, even managers have some messages they want to hear and some they prefer to let pass by. More specifically in respect of ESPON there have been some critical comments. For example, Bengs has been a consistent critic of the gap between assertion and evidence in the development of territorial policy in Europe. He has argued that notions like “balanced competition” are an oxymoron (Bengs 2002), and that in the Third Cohesion Report (CEC 2004) the rhetoric was stronger than the scientific base (Bengs 2005). Bengs (2006) and Hague (2006) also argued that the success of ESPON in getting results out quickly came at a price in terms of critical academic enquiry. The midterm evaluation of ESPON 2006 noted that ESPON’s budget would allow it only to “pose new questions” but not to “provide the depth of study required” (MVA 2003, 42).

Against these constraints ESPON offered researchers many opportunities. There was the chance to work with leading researchers from other countries. This amounts to a lot more than just being able to visit foreign places. There are skills involved that are developed by practice – e.g. language skills and skills in team working. The fact that these were European-backed programmes also carried some kudos – though not so much as the more “blue-skies” European research programmes.

Furthermore, though ESPON is operating at a level that many practicing planners will consider very general and “abstract”, nevertheless it is linked strongly into a developing process of European and national policy-making. Thus involvement in this kind of research can also provide teaching materials that can be linked directly to key issues in practice, particularly but not exclusively, for those teaching about territorial development and planning in Europe.

Territorial challenges

The main findings from ESPON 2006 are summarized in the Final Synthesis Report (Böhme, K., S. Davoudi, C. Hague, P. Mehlbye, J. Robert, and P. Schön, 2006) and the ESPON Atlas (Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung 2006). These were further summarized by Hague and Hachmann (2008) as follows:

- The “core” is spreading along a number of corridors. There are several strong urban areas outside the core, mainly the capital cities—Madrid, Stockholm, Oslo, Athens, Dublin, Helsinki, Warsaw, and Budapest—but also include Barcelona and Gothenburg. These findings imply important issues for competitiveness and cohesion and for inter-scalar policy integration (i.e. aligning EU, national and regional development policies).
- The strong performance of the capital city regions of countries outside the core helps to narrow gaps at European scale and thus contributes to both competitiveness and cohesion. However, within a nation-state the further growth of the capital is likely to widen the gap between it and the more peripheral regions, undermining cohesion policy. The pattern is especially noticeable in some of the states that became members in 2004.
- There are “holes within the pentagon”—places that, although central in European terms, have profiles of disadvantage commonly associated with the periphery. The legacy of deindustrialization still hangs over some of the former manufacturing and coal-mining areas, for example. There are obvious parallels with the US “Rustbelt” here.
- Urban areas are critical for Europe’s competitiveness, though small and medium-sized towns are also important, especially in sustaining rural areas. There is serious ageing and depopulation of less accessible rural areas.
- The Common Agricultural Policy – EU’s main spend that largely subsidises farmers – benefits rich areas more than poor regions.

Reports arising from two of the reports are particularly interesting and have been published. One of these concerned “Europe in the World” (Grasland and Beckouche, 2008). This was the one ESPON study that shifted the gaze beyond the EU – the others were all about differentiation within the ESPON space. Grasland and Beckouche’s work, while still viewing international relations through a European prism, should be of interest to those from other continents also. It looks at geo-political and economic structures and networks that demarcate the world today. It also provides some innovative mapping of where the most severe spatial disparities lie.

The other particularly interesting output was from the study of spatial scenarios. Lennert and Robert et.al. (2007) were able to synthesise a huge amount of findings from other ESPON projects and create a number of scenarios to 2030 for territorial change within Europe as defined by the 29 ESPON countries. They integrated these into three main ones – a baseline scenario, a scenario where priority would be given to competitiveness and one where the priority would be cohesion. The results should provide food for thought for policy makers. It is one of the ESPON studies used by DG REGIO in the Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (CEC, 2007). It also makes excellent discussion and debate materials for use in teaching.

The findings from ESPON also helped to sustain work in the European spatial planning field. Political changes, in part associated with the accession of new members in 2004 and 2007, and political changes in some other countries, saw the notion of “spatial planning” fall out of fashion. It was increasingly seen as a regulatory process that worked against the ascendant “jobs and growth” agenda. Ideas that the ESDP would be updated were sidelined. However, the ethos of the ESDP was carried forward through a number of sympathetic civil servants in a fortuitous sequence of EU presidencies that had historically had some empathy with the creation of the ESDP - Netherlands, Luxembourg, UK, Austria, Finland and then Germany. ESPON findings informed the “background paper,” *The Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union* that was produced through this process. People directly involved in ESPON played a key role during the drafting stage. For more detail see Eser and Schmeitz (2008). The background paper identified topics for further ESPON research. More significantly, the Informal Ministerial Meeting in Leipzig agreed the Territorial Agenda, which put the spotlight strongly on the notion of territorial cohesion.

ESPON 2013 – The European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion

So spatial planning is dead – long live territorial cohesion! ESPON has deftly negotiated the transition – the acronym stays but the strapline has changed. ESPON is now the “European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion”. The concept of “territorial cohesion” as yet is ill-defined – indeed this has probably helped its political acceptance. Camagni (2007) has sought to provide a definition underpinned by theoretical argument. His proposition is that territorial cohesion should be seen as the territorial dimension of sustainability, a view he also advanced in the ESPON Spatial Scenarios project. However, moves are afoot to secure an agreed definition. DG Regio is to publish a Green Paper on territorial cohesion in September 2008. This paper is intended “to advance and clarify further the definition of territorial cohesion” (ESPON 2008a). A new unit has been created in DG Region to deal with territorial cohesion and urban development. The French Presidency (July-December 2008) will prioritise the clarification of the concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion. ESPON will also produce work on territorial indicators.

While the definition of territorial cohesion will be shaped by power, there are currently discernable differences in approach. Article 158 of the Lisbon Treaty says in respect of territorial cohesion:

“Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.”

This can be seen as consistent in many ways with traditional regional policy approaches that focused on “problem regions”. It favours the specific regional typology set out in the above quotation. In terms of member states it has a distinctly Scandinavian ring to it.

A rather different angle on territorial cohesion can be discerned in the Territorial Agenda and its Action Programme 1. Here desired territorial outcomes were elaborated:

- Strengthening a polycentric development by networking of city regions and cities.
- Creating new forms of partnership and territorial governance between urban and rural areas.
- Promoting competitive and innovative regional clusters.
- Strengthening and extending the Trans-European Networks.
- Promoting trans-European risk-management including impacts of climate change.
- Strengthening ecological structures and cultural resources.

This second perspective is perhaps the purest “spatial planning” interpretation and the one most closely aligned to the ESDP. Last, but by no means least, there is a discourse that views territorial cohesion as the spatial element in social and economic cohesion policy. This reflects the coming together of territorial concerns and urban policy concerns – or more specifically, the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig Charter. Thus the ideal of the European sustainable city becomes a key part of territorial cohesion policy. This view is more in the interest of urban territories, and closest to the EU’s “jobs and growth” agenda.

With such an emergent and contestable policy arena, there is clear scope for research. The concept of territorial cohesion is sure to be a key reference point for research within ESPON. The first round of new projects was announced in January 2008 and tenders were invited from Trans-national Project Groups for:

- Cities and urban agglomerations: their functionality and potentials for European competitiveness and cooperation
- Development opportunities in different types of rural areas
- Demographic and migratory flows affecting 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, and
- ESPON Database.

These demonstrate strong continuities with projects in the ESPON 2006 programme, not surprisingly. The most notable point is the new emphasis on climate change and on energy prices. However, there was a significant change in the new programme. As well as these “traditional ESPON” projects, there was the invitation to national governments and regional and local authorities, or public agencies involved in regional development and regeneration, to put forward proposals for new projects. This new type of project, called “Targeted Analysis” includes an explicit intention to support experimental and innovative actions and to use the ESPON findings in a way customised to needs from practitioners. As ever, where the spending of European money is concerned, the procedures are somewhat exacting, but nevertheless, the early indications are that this call was met with an enthusiastic response. Over 30 proposals were submitted despite the deadline being only 8 weeks after the announcement of the call.

At the time of writing the decisions on the call for proposals (and on the awarding of contracts for the more traditional projects listed above) have still to be announced. However, because of the author’s involvement in assisting potential partners to prepare their proposals, it is possible to give examples of the kind of projects that were proposed through this new “bottom up” approach.

A grouping of rural local authorities from Scotland, England, Norway and Estonia, along with the Department for Rural Affairs from the Welsh Assembly Government proposed a study that would explore the notion of territorial potential by using relevant ESPON data for their regions. Meanwhile, some major cities, led by Manchester Enterprises, have proposed a study about agglomeration effects. In both cases the “stakeholders” submitting the proposal will act as partners and testbeds for the analysis, if their proposal is accepted by ESPON and then tendered as a new project.

These new “stakeholder-proposed” studies promise to be a significant opportunity for universities to build effective research links with practice. The money allocated to this part of the new programme is 6.5M Euros. The partners who proposed the idea will have to commit to using the research results. Once the selected proposals for projects have been agreed by ESPON, full project specifications will be produced and tendered. However, ESPON is stressing that co-operation between the research team and the stakeholders who proposed the project is the key factor: “The results must be scientifically solid and the stakeholders must feel confidence in the accuracy of project results. Conclusions must be expressed in non-technical language, and delivered in time to be fed into policy-development processes.” (ESPON 2008b, 15).

As in ESPON 2006, there will be opportunities for ESPON Contact Points to put forward proposals for their own transnational networking activities. These again are likely to have a strong emphasis on outreach to practitioners and dissemination of ESPON findings. There is explicit provision in the scheme for activities targeted at students and even at schools. An example of such activity in the ESPON 2006 programme was the Youngstars seminars. The first was held in Ljubljana, and attended by 68 participants from 16 countries, and roughly a third of them were students. Its aim was to give young

professionals and students of spatial planning and related disciplines an introduction to the work being done within ESPON, and the challenges of European spatial planning and territorial development (Bundesamt für Bauwesen und Raumordnung, Germany, and the Ministry of the Environment and Spatial Planning, Slovenia, 2005). The success of this led to a follow-up event, this time led by a Hungarian institute and held in Budapest in 2006, with a focus on issues of accessibility.

Such transnational ECP networking activities offer clear opportunities to reach and motivate students and young researchers and to give them direct experience of transnational working and research. There is a good chance of similar seminars being run during ESPON 2013.

Bridging the Divides

The theme of the conference should really be cast in the plural. There is not just one (transatlantic) divide, there are several. This short review of ESPON has alluded to national divides within Europe and to divides between research and practice, but there are also, of course, divides linked to disciplinary backgrounds. ESPON has been very successful in overcoming divides between researchers from different ESPON countries. Over 600 researchers from 130 institutions were involved in ESPON 2006. There were project partners from all but 5 ESPON countries, and two of these were Bulgaria and Romania who only became EU members after the 2006 programme had ended (the other 3 were 2004 entrants to the EU). Nevertheless, there was a preponderance of large institutes and universities in the projects (Rambøll Management 2006, 14) and several were partners in five or more projects. The financial arrangements and accounting bureaucracy made ESPON work unattractive to many researchers in the private sector. Even with these caveats, ESPON represents a significant mobilisation of talent in the territorial research field, and the process of being part of a Transnational Project will have strengthened networks and exposure to working across boundaries.

The disciplinary spread is also wide across the ESPON 2006 programme. While geographers, spatial planners and regional scientists probably dominated numerically, there were significant inputs from natural scientists, notably to the work on hazards which was led by the Geological Survey of Finland. Through ESPON territorial concepts have been disseminated across disciplinary boundaries.

The practitioner / researcher divide was more difficult to surmount. The Rambøll Management report (2006) argued that ESPON had value to policy makers at the regional level, but for planning practitioners working at the local level, the information was simply too coarse to be helpful. Certainly it is difficult to disagree with the Rambøll view that the technical nature of the project reports and their sheer length (ESPON 2006 produced more than 25,000 pages!) meant that the prime beneficiaries in terms of added value were scientists, followed at some distance by policy makers, with mainstream planning practitioners getting less benefit still. The reports are all in English, so non-English readers need translations or at least summaries in their own language to access them.

These are challenges that the new, better-funded ESPON 2013 (45.378M Euros for the programme until the end of 2013) aims to address. The national ESPON Contact Points have a role to play here. In the UK, for example, the decision to appoint the Royal Town Planning Institute as the contact point has led to the formation of an ESPON UK Network, with an advisory group that is chaired by a practitioner and has a majority of practitioners on it. Membership of this Network is open to everyone – you do not have to be an RTPI member or even British. For details go to www.rtpi.org.uk/espon/. Over 40 people have joined the Network in the first 4 weeks of operation, and the overview paper that is posted on the site has been read 144 times. These early figures suggest an encouraging level of interest. The hope is that as the ESPON 2013 programme rolls out, the ESPON UK Network will grow and become an active means for using and commenting upon ESPON findings. It will be possible for members to “chat” to each on the site, and the Network also provides the Contact Point with a means to target updates and dissemination of information.

Finally, what are the implications of ESPON for transatlantic co-operation? There is evidence of some US interest in this European “adventure”. The Lincoln Institute for Land Affairs has actively engaged in colloquia and publications fostering a dialogue on European spatial planning (Faludi, ed. 2002, 2007, 2008). It is also a driver in the Regional Plan Association’s America 2050 project. This study focuses on the need for national planning of infrastructure across the USA. The context is seen as being the need to remain competitive internationally; to create “fairness and opportunity” by regenerating “vast regions of America” that lag in terms of jobs and incomes; to tackle climate change and energy security; and to secure infrastructure investment.

The advocates for America 2050 stress the importance of mega-regions, and the need to organise governance and planning at this scale. Mega-regions are defined as “networks of metropolitan areas, connected by travel patterns, economic links, shared natural resources, and social and historical commonalities... America’s gateways to the global economy where our global ports, airports, communication centers, financial and marketing centers are located” (America 2050, 2008, 8). They are the regions that will take most of the population growth through to 2050.

There would seem to be the basis for a transatlantic research agenda here. Of course zoning dominates planning practice in the USA. Though comprehensive planning is mandatory in many states, such approaches are weak in some of the major metropolitan areas such as Chicago and New York City. However, in a rapidly urbanizing world, the metropolitan challenge will be of the greatest importance to humanity in the coming generation. The metropolitan areas are the drivers of the global economy, and the magnets of hope for migrants (national and international). How we plan and manage such areas is crucial to aspirations for carbon reductions and the management of climate change. They are also fundamental to concerns for equity as the world witnesses the urbanization of poverty. There is an urgent need for more understanding of mega-regions and metropolitan growth and planning internationally. Such regions will be the definitive 21st century urban form. Planning education both in Europe and in North America typically has a local focus, with little project work being done on metropolitan issues, let

alone mega-regions. Knowledge networks need to be fashioned, research shared and curricula re-oriented. Hopefully ESPON, and AESOP/ACSP collaboration may be able to help this process.

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