

# **ESPON seminar gets progress update on Territorial Cohesion**

## **Cliff Hague reports**

Ideas about the directions that EU Territorial Cohesion policy might take were aired at the ESPON open seminar in Portoroz, Slovenia on 2 and 3 June 2008. Philippe Montfort from DG Regio told an audience of around 130 policy makers and researchers that cohesion policy should contribute to regional competitiveness through mobilising all of a region's resources – economic, environmental, geographical and human. He called for place-based integrated approaches to development, based on a limited number of mutually supportive objectives. He highlighted the need for regions to address the issues of climate change, which in turn create new economic opportunities.

“We need a common understanding of Territorial Cohesion”, said M.Montfort. “National histories shape interpretations. However, the emergent emphasis is on sustainable use of regional resources for competitiveness and cohesion.” He stressed the need to co-ordinate policy across different sectors, in a way that recognises that space is an asset. He called for multi-level and urban-rural co-operation. In this the role of the public sector is vital, since the private sector is not so good at co-ordination, he argued.

Scanning the likely milestones in cohesion policy, Monsieur Montfort looked to the Green Paper that DG Regio will publish this autumn. This is expected to focus on disparities within Europe and different types of regions. It will demonstrate how the concept of territorial cohesion can add value. The fifth Cohesion Report will be in 2010 and that will explore options for cohesion policy after 2015. He called on ESPON to contribute research that will provide policy makers with knowledge about the territorial impacts of EU regulations and policies, as well as deepening understanding of the challenges that regions face.

### **French Presidency plans to move Territorial Cohesion forward**

The seminar heard another important presentation on Territorial Cohesion, this time from Didier Michal on behalf of the impending French Presidency. He said that Territorial Cohesion is now “a very central concept in the European Union”, and “a main issue in the future of cohesion policy.” He referred to the Fourth Cohesion Report, which explains why the concept is important.

Monsieur Michal pointed to three key principles. The first is equity: no citizen should be penalised because of where they live or work. Solidarity is the second principle behind territorial cohesion. There has to be redistribution of financial resources to handicapped regions. The third idea is efficiency – cohesion as a means of boosting regional competitiveness.

“The French Presidency will give central priority to developing the idea of territorial cohesion. It is fundamental to the EU and to tackling issues like climate change. We need to implement the first Action programme of the Territorial Agenda (the document adopted by spatial planning ministers at Leipzig in May 2007). It is the political framework dedicated to the process to advance territorial cohesion. France has proposed to work on a line of action promoting contributions from Ministers on the

cohesion impacts of relevant EU policies.” Examples of such policies were the Common Agricultural Policy and the Lisbon Strategy. Germany will also lead a line of action on Transport policy.

### **A stronger emphasis on Europe’s Neighbourhood and cross-border links**

Monsieur Sinner called on ESPON to extend its analysis to five levels – one seeing Europe in its global or at least Neighbourhood context; then the three “traditional” ESPON scales (Europe, transnational region and then national/regional), but with the further addition of a more local, intra-regional scale. He concluded with a forceful call to address issues of relations within the EU’s Neighbourhood (which mainly encompasses links with countries in North Africa and Eastern Europe.

This latter theme was to resonate throughout the two days of the seminar, which was well attended by persons from Romania, Serbia, Croatia and Kosovo. The issue of the inclusion of the Western Balkans in ESPON analysis was a recurrent theme, forcefully made. There is every likelihood now that future ESPON maps will no longer have a “grey area” over Albania and the former Yugoslavia.

Jean Peyrony, a highly respected French expert in territorial analysis, is moving into DG Regio where he will work in the group involved in preparing the Green Paper on territorial cohesion. In his presentation to the seminar he said stressed the importance of cross-border co-operation. He called for cross-border monitoring at all scales. “We need cross-border housing and transport plans”, he said. He also called for ESPON research to include the municipality as a scale, because “that’s the level that politicians work at.”

Another piece of the emerging jigsaw that is cohesion policy is the European Grouping for Territorial Cohesion (EGTC). Jean-Claude Sinner explained how it had developed out of the European Grouping for Cross-Border Co-operation. It has now been formalised through regulations as part of the arrangements for structural funds. Co-operation within the Grouping can be on the Structural funds programme level, or on the project level, and can also take in projects financed other than by EU money.

As EGTC is a Regulation not a Directive, it is immediately applicable in any member state, though matters of core sovereignty cannot be delegated to the EGTC. In Monsieur Sinner’s words it is “Harmonisation towards the top”. So far two EGTCs have formed: one is Euro-Metropole (focused on Franco-Belgian co-operation) and the other, ISTER-Granum mainly involves Slovakia and Hungary. Others are in the pipeline. At least two member states must participate for an EGTC to be established.

### **But never forget the MAUP...**

In summary it is clear that a head of steam is building behind the territorial cohesion idea and that the next few months under the French Presidency are likely to see a significant consolidation of the concept. However, Mauritz Lennert, one of the leading lights in the major ESPON 2006 project on Territorial Scenarios, sounded a few discordant notes. He pointed to the problems posed by wide discrepancies in the size of NUTS 3 units in different countries. Known in ESPON-speak as the Multiple Area Unit Problem (affectionately abbreviated to MAUP) this means that regional data can be significantly influenced by the degree of aggregation and therefore averaging across a NUTS 3 region. Different scales of units between different countries undermine comparison of regional data and make allocation of resources on the basis of such data somewhat insecure.

Lennert also stressed that key messages from the Scenarios project were that many of the key challenges that Europe will face over the next generation will be more severe in the regions that are already less favoured. In his view, meeting the objectives of the Territorial Agenda will require a lot more money and significant changes in values.