

ESPON Seminar - Territorial Policy Framework Bordeaux (France), 10-12 December 2008

Report by ESPON UK Contact Point

The Territorial Cohesion Debate

The international economic crisis seems likely to sharpen the focus in debates about territorial cohesion. The ESPON Seminar in Bordeaux heard that there are increasing demands for indicators and regional benchmarking across Europe.

Philippe Montfort, from DG Regio, emphasised the demands from the European Parliament and the Fourth Cohesion Report. In reviewing the case for territorial cohesion he pointed to concentration, connection and co-operation. Urban and metropolitan concentration provides agglomeration economies, but diseconomies of scale and scope. The latter include poor air quality, traffic congestion and high land costs. In global terms Europe does not have very large urban agglomerations: arguably this is an economic disadvantage, though provides a better quality of life. “The European way of life reflects this economic geography” said M.Montfort.

He argued that Europe needs to foster development in all its regions and overcome the barriers of distance. In this respects the poor quality of road infrastructure in the eastern parts of Europe is a problem. Similarly better connectivity to energy networks is needed. Innovative R&D areas need to be connected to each other and to different types of regions so as to improve the efficiency of Europe as a whole. Equally important for cohesion, there needs to be equitable connections between people and key services such as hospitals and universities. “Efficiency and equity is not really a trade-off” said M.Montfort.

Reflections on the French Presidency

Didier Michal explained how the French Presidency had sought to build a common approach to the concept of territorial cohesion, but also to develop a cohesion policy response to the economic crisis. The result is that territorial cohesion will now be on Europe’s agenda. However, M.Michal introduced two lines of argument that suggested to some that perhaps the case for territorial cohesion had not progressed as far as might have been hoped. Firstly, he noted that there appears to be no strong appetite yet for a definition of territorial cohesion – it is concrete projects and political actions that matter most at present. Secondly he drew a distinction between territorial cohesion and cohesion policy, suggesting that the former is mainly about governance and co-ordination rather than funding.

He rehearsed again the underlying positions on cohesion policy. Should cohesion policy only support “the lagging behind regions” or be a vehicle to help all regions to tackle their development challenges? In neither case, M.Michal emphasised, should cohesion policy replace sector-based policies such as those for agriculture, transport etc. However, argued M.Michal, cohesion policy does need to take better account of “the territorial

dimension of disparities and development”. Similarly, the territorial impact of sector policies needs to be properly considered. “There should be a more precise Territorial Impact Assessment methodology”, he said. He indicated that France will propose that the EU’s Territorial Agenda agreed in 2007 (and the associated Action Programme that is taking the Agenda forward) need to be more focused. “There is now a clear political demand for more efficient territorial analysis and perspectives” he concluded.

The In-coming Czech Presidency

Kamila Matouskova, on behalf of the incoming Czech Presidency, said that the Czechs would continue the debate on cohesion policy, and would like to strengthen integrated regional development approaches. “Quality of life should be at the core of these strategies” she said, adding that territorial co-operation is also a priority. Mrs. Matouskova also emphasised that rural areas are to be a key concern for the Presidency, especially the issues of local services, landscape enhancement and promotion of environmentally-friendly rural activity. Secondary growth poles and urban regeneration are also important matters for the Czechs.