

Summary of roundtable discussion on bridging the gap between research and policy in European spatial planning

Held at the Planning Research Conference, University of Newcastle, 3 April 2009.

The Roundtable explored the opportunities offered by the European Observation Network on Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) 2008-2013 and asked

- What do UK policy-makers most urgently want to know about spatial development and what are its European dimensions?
- What can/should ESPON offer researchers and planners in the UK?

The Roundtable was led by Jenny Crawford ESPON UK Contact Point; Grant Duncan, Spatial Plan Wales; Simin Davoudi, University of Newcastle; Gordon Dabinett, University of Sheffield; Olivier Sykes, University of Liverpool; and Andreas Schulze Baing, University of Manchester

The ESPON 2013 programme is seeking to identify and analyse the spatial issues, relationships and trends that affect the European Union's territory. This information is a vital input to informed policy-making. At the same time, the programme aims to develop much stronger links and dialogue between researchers and policy-makers. This was shown to be a weakness in the ESPON 2006 programme.

We need to understand what these stronger links will mean in practice, what the priorities for policy-relevant research are and what levels of policy are affected and how. This is being explored specifically through the ESPON initiative on 'targeted analyses', which invites public bodies to put forward proposals for specific analyses of ESPON data for their jurisdictions. Successful proposals form the basis of ESPON-funded research projects, involving the stakeholders in assessing the relevance of outputs and demonstrating their use. A number of UK stakeholders have been successful in bidding for such analyses in the first round of these projects and a further call is expected later in 2009.

ESPON 2006 was especially focused on infrastructure and economic aspects of regional development, with a weak focus on environmental issues. In the current programme, we can expect to see a much stronger focus on both environmental and social aspects of development. The University of Newcastle is a partner in the recently launched project on climate change impacts.

ESPON research offers policymakers:

- Challenge
- New and innovative ideas
- Trends information
- Accessible material
- Spatial analysis techniques and data
- Opportunities for benchmarking and comparison

The focus of spatial planning is the joining up of complex issues. This has allowed the Wales Spatial Plan, for instance, to drive the allocation of European Structural Funds. ESPON reports need to be available to all relevant policymakers, not just spatial planners. Issues of particular interest at the moment in Wales, for instance, are understanding population changes and why places are successful and attractive; the potential for up-skilling processes through, for example, higher and further education; the nature of cultural distinctiveness; and 'futures thinking'.

ESPON can help to 'network' regions, highlighting similar challenges and characteristics, providing the basis for information exchange and helping 'benchmarking' processes.

Work on scenarios is of particular interest to practitioners as it can directly input to the critical early policy formulation. They provide 'rich pictures' that support and inform scoping and involvement and discussion. The assessment of the impacts of both climate change and development is going to be of central importance for planners, driving the search for new models of economic development and citizen services. The focus of the ESPON programme should be on people and it should exploit its potential to reach out to young people in particular.

It is important to recognize that ESPON has been data-driven, rather than problem-driven, not least because of the scientific challenge of gathering data of acceptably consistent quality across the jurisdictions involved. There has also been pressure for the programme to demonstrate results, under very short time-frames, to inform EU regional policy. The issues of evidence availability, and diverse national ideologies, norms and cultures also influence the nature and direction of the programme.

ESPON emphasizes and demonstrates that territory and places matter to effective policy-making. Some of its most powerful impacts will be the development of the concepts of territory and place relations, the elucidation of causal relationships and the impacts of global trends and policy interventions on different territories.

Institutional and management challenges threaten the policy/research interface. The UK has more barriers to research-practice partnerships than in some other European regions, for instance, in Germany or Scandinavia. In the recent Research Assessment Exercise for university research in the UK, European research has not counted for much and it seems likely that this is not going to be addressed under its proposed replacement, the Research Excellence Framework.

The concept of the 'impact' of research is, however, being promoted by the UK Research Councils and ESPON could provide important models for demonstrating policy impacts. Design of complex spatial analysis, incorporating social and environmental factors, remains a major challenge and is one reason why the programme has had an economic bias. This intensifies issues of language and transferability. The needs of people (the ultimate test of policy) can get lost in research methodologies and evaluation. In addition, the emphasis on indicators and mapping risks the distorting power of 'lines on maps'. There is a major challenge for interdisciplinary working and ESPON will create and explore new relationships. The ESPON programme is therefore a valuable subject, in its own right, for research into process and policy-making.

Responses from regional policymakers to the recent Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion suggest that they have a positive view of ESPON and what it can, and should be able to, offer to regional development processes. However, issues of scale affect data availability and analysis and its usefulness. A meaningful relationship between research and policy will depend on iterative and longitudinal processes of analysis and response. There was concern that researchers should not be 'punished' by the REF for involvement in this work. At the same time, ESPON can seek to raise its value to researchers through publication and dissemination.

The underexplored opportunities for learning and policy development from comparing spatial planning systems across Europe were also highlighted. There is important potential to develop research links between regions around particular issues e.g. the role of regional airports in demographic changes. The challenge of translating such research into a shared language that is accessible to all policymakers must be an important focus for the ESPON programme.

The ESPON UK Contact Point and Network aims to support maximum involvement of UK researchers and practitioners in the programme and to highlight the availability and relevance of the programme's outputs to a broad audience. See www.espon.org.uk