
ESPON UK Workshop Summary Report

Bringing a European Perspective into UK Regional Strategies

Hilton - Leeds - Wednesday 23 September 2009

ESPON can be used to provide a way of identifying comparable European regions and then benchmarking UK regions against them.

This was one of the **key messages** from a well-attended ESPON UK Network meeting in Leeds. Participants recognised that what is currently available from ESPON is largely a set of “snapshot” maps, plus supporting indicators and typologies. Causal explanations of the driving forces behind the statistical outcomes are more elusive. Nevertheless, many of those in the workshop found the ESPON maps may help discussion of drivers, highlighting not only regional differences within UK but also setting those differences in a European context.



As the meeting was in Leeds, planners, economists and researchers from the **North of England were particularly well represented**, and noted how the North stands in a somewhat precarious position. While the North-South divide within the UK is well known, the West-East divide across Europe means that a strongly redistributive European cohesion policy could see the North of England losing out post 2013 to regions in the countries of central and eastern Europe.

○ **Key issues for ESPON into the future**

The question of the future of **Cohesion Policy post 2013** was identified as an area of major concern to UK regions. There was recognition that ESPON feeds its findings into DG Regio, and so is highly relevant to future outcomes the kind of issues it looks at and how robust its findings can be. Cliff Hague, from the UK ESPON Contact Point, recognised that there were significant **data limitations** that had been a fundamental aspect of ESPON from the start. In the 2006 programme a lot of effort had been invested in simply getting the basic cover for all the countries. ESPON has relied substantially on EUROSTAT and so has mainly probed data related to competitiveness, and several researchers have recognised that ESPON needs to have a **better balance**, embracing environmental, social and cultural data as well, while holding strong to the methods of territorial analysis and linking data to policy-making.

John Stillwell, from the University of Leeds and one of the key researchers in the ESPON project on demography and migration (DEMIFER) spoke incisively of the data problems which the programme has faced. However, he recognised that part of the challenge is that national statistics offices simply do not have a smooth relationship with EUROSTAT.

This observation confirmed one of the key points to emerge from discussion on the progress in developing Integrated Regional Strategies within the UK. Even at UK regional level, the RDAs responsible for the regional economic strategies and the Regional Assemblies who have taken forward the spatial strategies have often not harmonised their data. Moves **towards integration**, together with the ESPON 2013 focus on new topics like land use, urban attractiveness, climate change and maritime issues suggest that the gap may be less wide in future. Furthermore the ESPON “Targeted Analysis” projects (where local authorities can propose ESPON work that drills down rather than covers all 31 ESPON countries) hold out the **promise of better links with practice**.

- **Data, Policy and Delivery**

The **strengths of ESPON** are its breadth of coverage and its engagement with the territorial dimension. In other words it looks at **place and relations between places**. Accessibility is an example of such a link, but there are many others in a Europe of flows. Given the strong emphasis on agglomeration effects that has emerged from “the new economic geography” in recent years, regional policy makers at European scale and within UK basically are confronted with the same dilemma. Do they “back winners” by facilitating land release and supporting infrastructure investment in places where the market wants to invest? Or do they prioritise regional equity and cohesion by trying to steer development to those areas that the market has shunned?



The problem has become even more pressing in the last year. The **economic slump** has meant that the private sector can no longer be relied upon to deliver necessary development. Now with the threat of cuts in public spending too, **regional strategies will need to become very smart** if they are not to be left to gather dust on the shelf through the next decade. All this and take on board climate change and carbon-reduction through regional development too! We face key questions about how we want the UK and its regions to develop and how much policy makers can do to deliver desired outcomes. **Practitioners, policy-makers and researchers will need to work more closely together and sustain the narrative that place matters**. ESPON, and the ESPON UK Network in particular, can be a focus for such efforts.

ESPON remains a conduit to EU thinking on these issues and on the future of cohesion policy. The “Euro-speak” envisages a Europe that combines, rather than polarises aspirations for competitiveness and cohesion, and that pursues a sustainable development path. It means recognising the **strengths that there are in diversity**, not trying to make every place the same. But it also then means challenging every region to develop its own strategy to maximise its territorial assets, whether they be transport links, landscape quality, renewals potential, cultural heritage or creative clusters. There are no easy answers, but an evidence base and willingness to network and learn from others is a key starting point, and that is a place that ESPON can take you to.

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

Annex

Summary of Notes of Interests and Issues raised by participants

1. The challenge for ESPON is in creating more with what it has. The opportunity to ‘drill down’ to causal links between data and policy analysis will be especially important.
2. Inherent political challenges face ESPON collaborations due to its trans-nationality but it is key to ‘work with what we have’ and make strong linkages between existing spatial/territorial interest groups to explore more collaborative, creative and robust research outputs.
4. There is a lack of socially and culturally themed data analyses and an increasing demand for project indicators that relate to the Territorial Agenda.
5. There is a need for mechanisms to ensure that good quality data collected at the local level is disseminated to regional, national and European levels.

- **Breakout session outputs –**

The breakout session focused on the following key areas:

1: What are the key spatial challenges and uncertainties for regional / area development that we face?

- What are the appropriate scales for interpreting spatial inequalities?
- Data/research alignment between multiple partnerships and confronting disparities between spatial analysis systems, policies or resources.
- Climate change
- Complex terminologies or mismatching terminologies can be a barrier to information sharing.
- Data collection gaps and disparities between standardised forms of data.
- Need for a quality check on data sourcing and assurance that research duplication is avoided.
- The tension between governance and spatial functionality that does not correlate with administrative boundaries. The latter cause difficulties in dealing with more dynamic issues of spatial analysis such as flow and movements.
- The role of functional regions and regional vulnerability e.g. city regions, housing markets and job markets.
- The demand from policy makers for simple indicators.
- The outputs of ESPON 2002-2006 are seen as descriptive patterns and illustrations that indicate past trends, ESPON 2013 can now ask deeper questions of 'why?' and indicate future possibilities.
- Administrative boundaries cause difficulties in dealing with more dynamic issues of spatial analysis such as flows and movements.

2: What can an ESPON perspective tell us about these challenges?

- To influence funding in the future (e.g. Northern periphery, cross-border programmes) and the creation of evidence base that helps influence where EU funding can go.
- ESPON can test or correlate policy in comparable areas acting as a mechanism for benchmarking.
- ESPON can be a trigger for fresh thinking and shared learning.
- ESPON can demonstrate the relevance of the spatial approach.
- ESPON can offer a new relationship between practice and research.
- ESPON can assess the wider impact of policies.
- ESPON fosters information sharing and advocates a more integrated approach.

3. What should ESPON be telling us more about?

- Exchange of experience, best practice and mechanisms for the sharing of new ways of monitoring across Europe.
- Territorial Impact Assessment of sectoral policies.
- The place of UK in Europe and UK in the world.
- Further testing of indicators and methodologies.
- Potential for review of statistical units Europe-wide.
- Cross border/trans national areas with emphasis on marine areas.
- A more creative statistical analysis of data patterns and mapping. There needs to be increased focus on policy recommendations, forecasting and causality.
- Need for comparatively simplified maps and information that will allow for an overlap capability.
- ESPON should aim to tell us more about how the timescales of institutional change and policy change potentially clash or work together.