

Spatial monitoring: European practice for nations and regions

The workshop held in the ESPON headquarters on 12 November 2008 focused on practice in different European countries by national and regional observatories in monitoring regional change.

National observatories

There is evidence of increasing national government interest in collecting and analysing territorial data, though the approaches can vary significantly. Odile Bovar, from DIACT (*Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement et à la compétitivité des territoires* – www.diact.gouv.fr), explained how France does it. The DIACT observatory was conceived in 2004-05. The idea was that it would provide a website where data could be accessed to help understand and compare territories. Though it only has 4 staff, they are aided by a network of partners, who have a statutory duty to co-operate. They have 350 basic indicators at different levels from local to NUTS 2. The indicators were selected to address 4 key challenges – territorial dynamics, territorial cohesion, public policies with a territorial impact and high priority areas. There is strong demand from local government for information about public policy impacts.

The situation in Germany was discussed by Manfred Sinz, from BMVBS (*Bundesministerium für Verkehr, Bau und Stadtentwicklung*). He described how awareness of major territorial changes had shaped the approach of BMVBS. These included globalization, European integration, and German unification (the West-East divide remains very problematic). There is recognition of the growing importance and scope of metropolitan regions demographic change, and the long-term problems posed by the on-going dispersion of activities.

Germany's 2005 spatial planning report had a chapter on metropolitan areas and functions and tried to classify them against things like decision and control functions, cultural functions, research and innovation, gateways etc – giving a combined index from 18 different indicators. Land prices were seen as an important indicator. What people will pay for a location? The analysis also looked at patent applications and at traffic volumes at the hubs of the broadband science net. "These patterns need to underpin planning for a knowledge society" said Mr.Sinz. "We also processed data for the share of commuters driving medium distance (25-50km) and long distance (50-100km). The results show contrasting areas of influence of metropolitan areas, which are spreading."

Mr.Sinz argued that "We have to translate analytical maps into conceptual maps", citing the example of the success of the "Blue Banana" concept in the early 1990s. Through such synthetic concepts the messages from the data can be communicated much more effectively. The full report can be downloaded in English from www.bmvbs.de in the Spatial Development section.

Diederik Tirry, from the Catholic University of Leuven explained how the Flemish Government has set up Centres of Expertise. These bring together research sections from different universities to carry out integrated research projects with high relevance and applicability for policy makers. One such centre has been set up on space and housing.

The centre aims to get data, do analysis and produce indicators, a space-atlas and scenarios. The indicators will be integrated into the spatial monitoring system, which, together with the scenarios will create a land use forecasting model. The outputs will feed to policy makers. Thus the mission of the centre is to do research in the context of current policy issues; and provide scientific services, including training, to public administration.

The core reference data is on a public database. There is a separate database for information collected and a third database for indicators. In future other stakeholders may develop their own data – they can store it and join in. Looking ahead, Diederik foresees catalogue services with an inventory of indicators; geo-services to set up a web maps service and perhaps allow users to download the actual data. There will be two entrances to this data – desktop GIS for experts; and a Web-GIS with browser for non-experts. There are interactive maps – you can zoom in and out, or combine different indicators.

Despite the exciting possibilities the reality is that the quality of data is not always that good, and it is not always easy to harmonise data from different sources. There are also some privacy issues when the original data comes from a personal level, even if it is being used in an aggregated form. In conclusion Diederik stressed the value of an iterative and incremental approach to building the observatory. Its success will depend on availability of spatial data.

The National Observation Project for Romania, described by Radu Necsuliu, is still in its early days. The aspiration is to develop a system for monitoring of territorial dynamics, and producing Territorial Impact assessments and Scenarios. The development work is being guided by the INSPIRE Directive.

Several institutions collect data, but better co-ordination of data is needed, and better capitalization of collected data – in the form of reports and support for decision-makers. Although the necessary political commitment has been given, it is not yet clear whether there will be a new institution to do the work or part of an existing department. The observatory will encompass housing and real estate, and urban and territorial observation. It will try to forge co-ordination with other institutions and links at national and European levels. They hope to support territorial planning and territorial research and do TIAs of sectoral policies. An Atlas has been produced – www.mdlpl.ro/documente/atlas/index.htm.

Portugal is also setting up a monitoring system with 300 indicators most of which are at regional level. Also a study has been done by research groups that made a synthetic indicator on territorial cohesion using Portuguese data.

European data

REGIOgis is a support service within the Policy Development unit of DG Regio. Hugo Poelman stressed the enduring importance of the NUTS system for implementing cohesion policy. He also spoke enthusiastically about the Urban Audit as a major exercise with regular collection. However, he recognised that trade-offs have to be made between precision of spatial definition and availability of data for analysis. He cited the example

of mountain areas which typically do not fit any administrative areas. Mr. Poelmann saw increasing possibilities from the availability of Raster-based data.

Eurostat remains the main data provider for DG Regio, who also use ESPON. Kopernikus is producing an urban atlas which will have a lot of detail on urban areas – the first data should be available in 2009 on a web site still to be defined.

Mr. Poelmann looked forward to further development of regional typologies in collaboration with other actors; indicator development; use of rasters and better data exchange taking account of the INSPIRE principles, though the practical implications of these are only just emerging.

How to monitor territorial cohesion?

The discussion in the afternoon sought to help ESPON focus on the form that a planned research project on territorial dynamics in relation to territorial policy objectives might take. The project would link into the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion and the Territorial Agenda. Peter Mehlbye noted that a system for monitoring territorial dynamics might have four components – a legal base, technical content, an institutional framework and a commitment to address complex territorial concepts. In the discussion that followed there was general agreement that it was desirable to be able to communicate those territorial concepts – such as “sprawl” or “polycentricity” – to policy makers. The value of the German approach of building up a synthetic indicator from familiar concerns like property prices and commuting distances was noted.

There was also some discussion about the problems of seeking a synthetic indicator covering competitiveness and sustainable development. In crude terms the problem is that regions without a strong economy tend to score highly on environmental indicators – and visa versa. Thus building an overall indicator tends to mask the real differences. There was also recognition that the idea of territorial cohesion remains open to differing interpretations and that this lack of clarity itself is a significant obstacle to monitoring territorial dynamics. There was thus a strong case for using indicators of health and life-expectancy – things that were widely understood, relatively easy to get and a clear indication of quality of life.

Should the approach be top-down or bottom-up? Hans Dufourmont from Kopernikus put a strong argument that it needed to be both. “All monitoring systems and regions need clear rules on how to apply European concepts. Top-down therefore should focus on simple and straightforward indicators and see how the interpretation of it becomes relevant for defending a certain policy. That is where it meets the bottom up”, he said.

Thiemo Eser succinctly identified the basic dilemma – at European level there is greater diversity but less comparable data than within a nation state. Thus we still lack a common European picture of territorial dynamics, and this gap makes it hard to define specific research questions. Basic concepts like “metropolitan areas” or “rural areas” are interpreted differently in different countries.

Vassilys Fourkas from Egnatia Odos, S.A., a Greek “Observatory of spatial impacts”, pointed to a recurrent problem with observatory-style initiatives – they need to be permanent but often turn out to be only temporary. A point was also made that ultimately policy makers are most interested in the city and neighbourhood level, but there is little comparable data on such a fine grain. Policy makers, of course, are also interested in data that will help them to access European funds.

What seemed to emerge from a wide ranging discussion was that the best way forward would be through a few simple, headline indicators that were comprehensible to policy makers and the public.

José Enrique Garcilazo, said that the OECD uses indicators for benchmarking, and to understand why regions perform differently. However, they do not have data on policy implementation. He said that in 2009 a ministerial meeting will look at regional policy. What causes differences and what is the role of policy? OECD has tried to measure distance to market at a national level by using a gravity type model – based on the ESPON study on regional accessibility. However, it was not very reassuring to hear that the model produced some unexpected results – distance to market had a positive, rather than negative effect! Mr. Garcilazo said this was perhaps caused by the choice of NUTS 2 units.

Jochen Jesinghaus (Joint Research Centre) argued that what policy makers need is a dashboard. He argued that politicians were quite able to deal with a plethora of numbers, but can be helped along the way. He illustrated his point with a fascinating demonstration of an interactive “dashboard” for looking at national progress towards the UN’s Millennium Development Goals. It draws from an on-line database of 60 indicators for 200 countries for 15 years. It can be downloaded from <http://esl.jrc.it/envind/dashbrds.htm> . Jochen observed that “Any index project that wants to influence policy must have a long time horizon, be transparent, use simple assumptions and simple methodologies and focus on what people are really interested in.”

It was left to Geoffrey Caruso (University of Luxembourg), part of the team that is doing the ESPON 2013 Database Project to try to pull the workshop together. He drew quotations from the Green paper on Territorial Cohesion and from the Territorial Agenda to argue that territorial cohesion is about **balanced** and **harmonious** development (*p.4 GPTC*); **more even** and **sustainable** use of **assets** (*p.5 GPTC*); and **better** living conditions and quality of life with equal opportunities [...] **irrespective of where people live** (*p.1,§3, Leipzig 25 May 2007, EU Territorial Agenda*).

“If I was to choose only one single index for cohesion, I would certainly opt for a generalised accessibility measure” said Mr. Caruso, adding that this would be a measure of accessibility from all places, for different kind of people, and to different destinations. He further contended that it was not enough to base a monitoring system on basic indicators like density – what matters is the impact of the concentration of activities on cohesion. Similarly, while in principle it is best to have fine scale data, “pragmatism and data availability lead to choosing aggregated spatial units for monitoring and analysis

purposes”. While demographic and economic data is reasonably available, there are more problems with social and environmental data and measures of accessibility to services.

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