

ESPON Workshop on Territorial Indicators and Indices Esch-sur-Alzette (Luxembourg), 2 April 2008

Report by ESPON UK Contact Point

The Lisbon Treaty, once ratified, will make Territorial Cohesion a shared competence of the Commission and Member States. The European Parliament is defining cohesion policy. On 28 February 2008 it adopted 2 reports. One was on economic and social cohesion since the 2004 and 2007 enlargements. It focused cohesion policy on reducing regional disparities. The second was the follow-up to the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig Charter on “the sustainable European city”. This paper is working towards a European Action Plan for spatial development and territorial cohesion. It asks the Council and all Member States to fully involve all stakeholders in action programmes to implement the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig Charter.

The Commission is preparing a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion for presentation in September or October 2008. This paper is intended “to advance and clarify further the definition of territorial cohesion”. A new unit has been created in DG Regio to deal with territorial cohesion and urban development. Meanwhile, the French have indicated that during their presidency in the second half of 2008 one priority will be to clarify the concept of economic, social and territorial cohesion.

It is in this context that ESPON plans to launch one or more projects on territorial indicators and indices. An ESPON workshop was held on 2 April to focus on this issue.

What is territorial cohesion?

“Territorial cohesion” is currently open to differing interpretations. Art. 158 of the Lisbon Treaty says in respect of territorial cohesion:

“Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to rural areas, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.”

This largely equates “territorial cohesion” with remedial actions to address the problems of disadvantaged regions, which are seen as mainly peripheral and rural. It would imply the need for robust methods that would enable such regions to be identified and their progress and the impact of interventions to be measured.

In this perspective, the prime need is for indicators that can demonstrate which regions are eligible: which regions meet the Treaty criteria and so qualify to be the most direct beneficiaries of territorial cohesion actions? Indicators that give a “snapshot” of the region today, without the need for long-term time series data, are largely acceptable, and are likely to be prioritised over ex-post data trying to establish impacts, since the time horizon is relatively short and controlling for other variables is notoriously difficult.

There is some continuity here with traditional regional policy and its use of GDP per capita measures. However, territorial cohesion recognises that regions in affluent member states such as the UK may have many and multi-faceted problems.

A rather different angle on territorial cohesion can be discerned in the Territorial Agenda and its Action Programme 1. Territorial cohesion is equated with desired territorial outcomes:

- Strengthening a polycentric development by networking of city regions and cities.
- Creating new forms of partnership and territorial governance between urban and rural areas.
- Promoting competitive and innovative regional clusters.
- Strengthening and extending the Trans-European Networks.
- Promoting trans-European risk-management including impacts of climate change.
- Strengthening ecological structures and cultural resources.

A key aim of this Territorial Agenda is to build a territorial dimension into sectoral policy-making (e.g. into policies for agriculture, R and D etc.). Furthermore, there is a focus on multi-level governance as a tool to build territorial cohesion.

In this approach the indicators needed are those that stand as proxies for these territorial outcomes, and can be used to measure progress towards them, and/or the impacts of sector policies on these outcomes. There is also emphasis on governance and the policy process, items that are difficult to measure.

A third approach reflects the coming together of territorial concerns and urban policy concerns – or more specifically, the Territorial Agenda and the Leipzig Charter. Thus the ideal of the European sustainable city becomes a key part of territorial cohesion policy. Because the cities are so critical for economic competitiveness and social harmony, this third approach implies that territorial cohesion is primarily the spatial element in economic and social cohesion policy. There is a stronger urban / metropolitan focus in this interpretation of territorial cohesion.

Indicators can influence distribution of Structural Funds, and the pattern of the allocation of such funds would look very different depending on which indicators are used.

A report of the ESPON workshop can be found at www.espon.eu/mmp/online/website/content/programme/1455/1663/index_EN.html. Presentations from most of the speakers are also posted there.