



ESPON UK Contact Point Report Commentary New ESPON Synthesis Report focuses on Europe in a global context

The First ESPON 2013 Synthesis Report looks at Europe in the context of the economic crisis and roads to recovery. Its tone is strikingly different from similar reports in the previous ESPON 2006 programme. Not only does *New Evidence on Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive Territories* draw heavily on the EU's recovery strategy *Europe 2020*, but it also emphasises the global connections that shape territorial development within Europe.

The central theme of the report is the need to translate the aspirations in *Europe 2020* into the implementation of place-based policies nationally, regionally and locally. The report argues that “While macro-economic challenges are broadly common across Europe, place-based approaches are needed to connect and mobilise local assets.” However, it notes that too often decisions about the development of urban agglomerations, for example, “are made on the basis of very limited information about whether agglomerations are increasing or reducing efficiency and should be encouraged or constrained.” This line of argument is developed further to question the idea of balanced and polycentric growth that has underpinned EU territorial thinking for the past 15 years. While the polycentric idea carries a presumption against concentration, “the clear message from the analysis of urban agglomerations and the competitive advantages they offer is that the inherent dynamism of the market economy works precisely towards such concentrations.”

Urban advantages and new technologies

Thus, more than previous ESPON Synthesis Reports, this one stresses the economic advantages of urban centres. However, the complex relation between agglomeration advantages and territorial development patterns is sketched by the use of the Manchester conurbation as an example. The conurbation is described as one of Europe's major urban areas. The report says “Global economic development trends have impacted on the economic development of Greater Manchester in two ways. The urban region tends to be functionally divided between a growing core and south, and a northern part in decline.” It says that the challenge is how to find a governance model that can enable the unemployed in the north to benefit from the dynamics in the core and in the south.”

NBIC – Nanotechnology, Biotechnology, Information Technology and Cognitive sciences are expected to drive the next wave of innovation. The likely territorial effects of these sectors have been researched. London is recognised as having a strategic position in some of the networks, with the potential to control the circulation of knowledge spill-overs between European cities. However, Glasgow



and Edinburgh are also recognised as specialised nodes with potential to anchor further technological developments.

There is also analysis of the networks that connect cities for one-day business trips. This highlights the vulnerability to places between the core and the periphery such as Belfast, which rely heavily on a limited number of air connections. Service disruption or the escalation of fares could mean that businesses in these places would no longer reach nor be reached by businesses located in the EU's core regions. However, there is also recognition that there are some economically successful regions where accessibility is actually below the European average. While the Nordic countries stand out in this respect, Scotland is also picked out. Meanwhile, for small and remote places, good accessibility matters. North Yorkshire is cited as an example of a “connected rural region”. Similarly, Skye and Lochalsh is used as an example of how landscape and culture can be the basis for a rural development strategy.

Despite the emphasis on cities, the report also points to the importance of rural business networks and the capacity of rural regions to innovate. Rural business clusters are seen as a step towards bottom-up competitiveness. The report suggests that part of the delivery of the *Europe 2020* strategy should be through local and regional governments and development agencies looking at their specific situations and potential partners in the development of rural business clusters.

Sustainable Europe

Europe 2020 called for a more resource efficient and greener economy. The Synthesis Report points to the fact that the EU has 7.7% of the world's population but accounts for 16% of the world's ecological footprint. Climate change also presents a major challenge. In Europe, 70% of the largest cities have areas less than 10 metres above sea level. Increased flood risk potentially could be very economically and socially damaging in countries in the north west of Europe, such as the UK. However, manufacturing and service industries are less likely to be affected by climate change than are primary producers. This could mean more pressures on regions where agriculture is still a key sector of the economy, though in the UK it could mean that the growing seasons becomes longer.

It is also notable that cities undergoing very rapid and diffuse growth have relatively low use of public transport. The report makes the case for incentives and controls to steer development to brownfield sites. Dependence on commuting is also seen as increasing regional vulnerability to “energy shocks”. There is a warning that cuts and fare rises in urban public transport are likely to have deleterious impacts.



Invitation to debate

The report concludes with an invitation to use and debate the ESPON results. The first opportunity to do so within the UK will be at an ESPON UK Network meeting that is being held in Manchester at the start of December. A call is made for understanding of the European and global context of regional and local development, e.g. through benchmarking using ESPON data and typologies. This needs to be combined with local measures tailored to local circumstances.