Towards a European Territorial Cohesion Assessment Network

A bright future for ESPON?*

The European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) has been redirected away from the voluntary, intergovernmental process of making and revising the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) towards a new-style EU territorial cohesion policy. The paper discusses the origins of ESPON, its setup and prospects. It shows that, being in the driving seat, the Commission puts pressure on ESPON to produce results as and when needed. With a view to its future role in relation to EU territorial cohesion policy, maybe 'European Territorial Cohesion Assessment Network' (ETCAN) would be a more appropriate designation.

Hundreds of researchers throughout Europe are presently working under the umbrella of the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) (see, www.espon.lu). The 'ESPON family', as it is being described, will continue its efforts until the end of the current Structural Funds programming period in 2006; and since it is hardly conceivable that the investment will be allowed to fall into disuse, it is quite likely that the initiative will go beyond 2006. In an organisational framework reflecting INTERREG projects (indeed, ESPON is instituted under Article 53 of the INTERREG III Community Initiative), ESPON researchers team up around lead partners to form transnational project groups (TPGs). In January 2005, no less than 25 are likely to be exploring topics under the priorities set out in the ESPON programme – 'Thematic Projects', 'Policy Impact Studies', 'Cross Thematic Studies' and two priority areas concerning 'Briefing and Networking' and 'Technical Assistance'. The scope is unprecedented, covering all EU Member States, the accession states of Romania and Bulgaria as well as Norway and Switzerland. These 29 countries are home to over 500 million inhabitants, roughly twice the population of the USA! However, there are vexing questions.

ESPON purports to relate to spatial planning, but the preference has now been for spatial development as in the title of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (CEC, 1999; Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). More importantly, the stated...
purpose of ESPON has been to provide the analytical basis for the ESDP. Thus the First Official Draft of the ESDP adopted at Noordwijk (CSD, 1997a) has already called for the carrying out of

longer-term research on relevant spatial issues as a part of a continuing updating process of the ESDP. ... The European Observatory should concentrate on the technical and the scientific aspects of the drawing-up and the periodic updating of the ESDP. (CSD, 1997a, 90)

Later that year, the Committee on Spatial Development (CSD) responsible for preparing the ESDP presented a ‘Concept on the establishment of the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network’ (CSD, 1997b) detailing the intended arrangements (van Gestel, 2004, 27). However, ESPON did not see the light of day until after the ESDP was finished. Reasonably, therefore, the conclusion was that ESPON findings should serve to revise the ESDP. According to the ESDP, the document was to be revised at the time of enlargement in any case. However, there is no realistic prospect of such a revision. Instead the Directorate-General Regio announced the end of its support to the ESDP process in 2000, and the institutional set-up that has served the ESDP so well has fallen into disuse. Yet ESPON goes from strength to strength, and so one may ask, what is its real purpose?

There are other issues surrounding ESPON. As indicated, its stated purpose is to provide an analytical basis for policy. However, researchers hoping at long last to be able to work systematically on an objective basis for policy development have been disappointed. The Commission puts pressure on them to come up with results as and when needed to suit its purposes, seemingly not caring much for academic concerns. The irony is that the Commission needs ‘objective’ criteria for allocating funds and so forth. The more scientifically based such criteria are seen to be the better. At the same time, the Commission does not want to leave the formulation of such criteria to analysts (whom it sometimes appears to hold in low esteem) but wants to have a strong say and, above all, ‘just-in-time’ results to suit its agenda. Surely though, even if the Commission were to allow researchers to spend sufficient time, they would never come up with truly objective indicators. All such indicators have a political element to them. Our intention is not, therefore, to apportion blame to the Commission. Its role is that of initiating policies. One would merely wish for its concerns to be brought into the open, and for a better understanding of the mutual roles which ESPON researchers and the Commission play. A way of doing this would be to apply the ‘Open Method of Coordination’ (OMC), discussed elsewhere in this issue (see the final paper by Andreas Faludi). It is not only for this reason that the OMC should be applied. The OMC would be a way of involving Member State representatives in the formulation of territorial cohesion policy. Indeed, it is difficult to see how EU territorial cohesion policy could be formulated other than with their cooperation.
What could be the role of ESPON in such a context? This is the last issue to be addressed in this paper.

**ESPON and the ESDP**

Discussion on EU spatial development started in the late 1980s. The need for an analytical base was immediately acknowledged. Thus, in 1988, the European Commission was granted funds for studies on ‘the elements necessary to establish a prospective outline of the utilisation of Community territory’ (BRBS, 1994, 21). The study Europe 2000 (CEC, 1991) and the subsequent report Europe 2000+ (CEC, 1994) count among the outcomes.

An informal ministerial meeting at Nantes in 1989 paved the way for political cooperation in spatial development. The agenda of a 1990 follow-up meeting at Turin already included the proposal for an ‘observatory of the spatial evolution’ (BBR, 2002, 13). This gave ‘the first inkling of the idea of a network of research institutes’, as the Italian hosts also proposed the ‘forming of committees and permanent working groups charged with developing the technical aspects of the topics and proposals, involved in the political decisions’ (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002, 41). Another meeting in 1991 at The Hague discussed Europe 2000 approvingly. Europe 2000 referred to what eventually became ESPON issues. More specifically, it promised that the Commission would look into adapting its existing reporting procedures on the Community’s regions so as to provide more compatible socio-economic information. The ministers at The Hague supported the setting up of a network of study and research centres to gather data needed for spatial planning at the Community level (BBR, 2002, 13), and this found its way into the conclusions of the Dutch Presidency. They specifically mention the backing of the meeting for the proposed organisation of a data network between existing and yet-to-be-established institutes and observatories.

However, ideas of what this all implied were still foggy. A working document presented at a ministerial meeting at Lisbon in 1992 put its finger on one of the issues. Was there to be a European Planning Research Institute or a network of existing scientific institutes? An Institute would have given the Commission a voice. The network was more attractive to existing European research establishments. A first meeting of national spatial research institutes in Brussels soon discussed how between them they could provide the information needed for spatially relevant policies of the Member States and the Commission.

A major step forward was taken during the German Presidency in the second half of 1994. The Germans thought the iron to be hot so they were about to strike it, trying to produce a draft ESDP forthwith. The Leipzig meeting produced ‘Principles for a European Spatial Development Policy’, also known as the Leipzig Principles (BRBS, 1994). They address the status and content of the future ESDP, including
pronouncements about the need not only for a political but also for a scientific framework – a direct reference to the network of research institutes mentioned above. The idea was to create a network of institutions like the Dutch National Spatial Planning Agency. However, few Member States had such institutions. Eventually, a two-pronged approach was taken. Member States should create internal networks of existing research institutes, but these institutes should interact through so-called national contact points established for this purpose. This was to become a constitutive feature of ESPON. The (as from 1995) 15 contact points in turn would form the European-wide network. The CSD was to formulate the work programme and to make proposals for financing the work. Numbers 89 and 90 of the Leipzig Principles, part of the ‘Guidelines for the implementation of spatial development policies in the European context’, reaffirm the need for ‘a permanent system of observation of the European territory’ with a Community character.

The next French Presidency was supposed to continue along these lines. Due to a variety of circumstances (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002, 81–84), the ESDP process stalled and no proposal for an observatory was forthcoming either. The CSD was asked to make fresh proposals by the summer of 1995. The possibility was raised of financing the work using INTERREG. For its part, the Commission doubted whether INTERREG could be the source of finance. A pilot action programme under Article 10 of the Structural Funds was the alternative, yet ESPON would not be a pilot but a long-term initiative.

In 1997, both the ESDP process and the formation of ESPON gained momentum. As indicated, the first official draft of the ESDP was presented in June at a meeting hosted by the Dutch at Noordwijk. As in the Leipzig Principles (on which the Noordwijk document was largely based), part IV of the First Official Draft of the ESDP (CSD, 1997a) discusses how the ESDP should be carried out. Once again the need for a solid analytical base for the ESDP was emphasised. What had become evident were the gaps in comparative, quantified and geo-referenced data. As had already been acknowledged during the informal meeting in 1995 at Madrid (Faludi and Waterhout, 2002, 87–92), there was a need for agreeing on criteria and indicators for establishing typologies of regions and urban areas. Long-term research on relevant spatial issues was needed as part of the continuous updating of the ESDP.

The time seemed ripe to get the observatory up and running. The final ESDP had to wait until the CSD had an adequate technical and scientific base at its disposal. Ministers approved a renewed initiative to set up the observatory as a network of spatial planning research institutions. The CSD was asked to present a ‘Concept on the establishment of the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON)’. The Luxembourg Presidency of the second half of 1997 took it upon itself to pursue

\[^1\] Note the slight difference from the eventual European Spatial Planning ‘Observation’ Network.
the matter. (Eventually, as will become evident, Luxembourg was rewarded by being given the Coordination Unit and the task of being Management Authority for ESPON under the Luxembourg Ministry of the Interior.)

The CSD proposal formulated under the Luxembourg Presidency discussed

- the principles;
- tasks and partnerships;
- organisation and responsibilities; and
- the setting up of the permanent network (CSD, 1997b, 1).

However, there were still loose ends, in particular as regards the financing of ESPON and the role of the CSD. The proposal was instead for a two-year test phase called ‘Study Programme on European Spatial Planning’ (SPESP), with Article 10 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) regulations providing the necessary finance.

From here, the ‘European spatial development caravan’ split. The ESDP part travelled to Glasgow, where a full draft was presented under the UK Presidency, but without the benefit of ESPON results. The Observatory part went to Stockholm, where the Nordic Centre for Spatial Development (Nordregio) coordinated the work on the SPESP. It was of no surprise that Nordregio took the lead. It had been very proactive, hosting for instance an international congress on the ESDP in late 1997. The division of research tasks in the SPESP was strict, so much so that some themes that were ‘contracted out’ to the SPESP were rescinded from the final ESDP presented under the German Presidency at Potsdam (Zonneveld, 1999, 1).

A litmus test

Officially, the SPESP is described as a test phase designed to provide insights as to how to set up ESPON. Had it not been for all the institutional issues though, ESPON would have been established straight away. The continuing struggle was over who was to be in charge and, because of this, where the money should come from. SPESP might be considered as a first step in the application of the ESDP. Even so, on the insistence of Commission officials, it was to provide ‘punchy policy messages’ for policy makers, messages that could be put to use in applying ESDP principles.

SPESP was to focus on ESDP topics. So, in the spring of 1999, and with the approval of the Commission, a coordination team started formulating a work programme, with the key ESDP theme of polycentricity given a prominent place. Soon, however, the Commission began to throw its weight around, and the final themes focused not on polycentricity but on rural–urban partnership, on the criteria (indicators) for spatial development and the use of cartographic illustrations.

There was ambiguity over who was the intended target group. Some participants
needed to be convinced that the outcomes were meant for educated laymen rather than fellow professionals, an issue that was to return later. The official evaluation (compulsory for all efforts financed by the European Community) failed to address this issue, referring to minor problems or challenges instead, and so the case for ESPON as a networking effort was made (BBR, 2001, 12). It is not unlikely though that the Commission continued to have its doubts as to whether a network was the best solution (Zonneveld, 1999, 5). In one of the few papers on ESPON, Williams (1999, 7) also surmises the Commission’s real intention in launching the SPESP to have been ‘… to show that networked research does not work, thus making the case for creating an institution analogous to the European Environment Agency’. As will be remembered, this had been the Commission’s stance from the start and during debates leading up to Leipzig in 1994. Be that as it may, the coordination team responsible for evaluating the SPESP ignored the Commission’s preference.

ESPON kick-off

While the SPESP drew to a close there was mounting support for a permanent research network and not only from the planning community as such. Both the Committee on Regional Policy, Transport and Tourism of the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions were in favour. Nevertheless, once again deadlock threatened over the issue of financing ESPON. The method chosen for SPESP was not suitable. The only alternative was to bring ESPON under the umbrella of INTERREG III after all.

This is what eventually happened, but the shoe pinched. Not only did the Commission gain influence under the regulations governing INTERREG at the expense of the CSD, the management structure generally did not fit, especially as regards financing overheads (a point to be discussed below). The reason is that, although (as the only project alongside with INTERACT) coming under Article 53 of the INTERREG regulations, the operation of ESPON nevertheless resembles that of projects under strands A, B and C of the INTERREG initiative. Esch-sur-Alzette in Luxembourg hosts the Coordination Unit (CU) operating under the Luxembourg Ministry of the Interior, being the managing and paying authority legally responsible for the programme. The Member States have a say by way of the national contact points (or ESPON contact points). The latter act as intermediaries between Member States, the CU and the TPGs. In addition, the Monitoring Committee – with Member States represented on it – is responsible for the quality of the projects and the programme as a whole. On face value, the Monitoring Committee wields considerable influence, whereas the Commission has little formal say; but in practice the Commission has great power of persuasion over both the Monitoring Committee (representing Member States) and the CU.
The most obvious problem of setting up the network under INTERREG is that there is insufficient funding for technical support and for project coordination. The final report on the SPESP emphasised the need for such support, but under regulations applying to the Structural Funds generally (and thus also to INTERREG) a mere 5 per cent of the total expenditure is allowed for overheads. With the overall budget for ESPON being (relatively) small, 12 million euro in total (but see below), the actual amount would be pitiful. So the expert group reviewing the wishes of Member States advised the creation of research projects with the task of coordinating other projects.

The distribution of funds tends not to relate to projects but to the priorities and measures. In these terms, the lion’s share (85 per cent) of the funding goes to ‘Thematic Projects’, ‘Policy Impact Projects’ and ‘Cross-Thematic Projects’ (the latter including projects charged with the task of coordinating the work of other projects). The balance of the budget is divided between measures in the fields of ‘Research Briefing and Networking’ and ‘Technical Assistance’. The budget covers five years (2002–06), with the actual allocation decreasing from almost 2.9 million euro for 2002 to 1.8 million euro budgeted for 2005, and the amount will pick up slightly to almost 2 million euro in the final year in 2006. However, these figures are in the process of being topped up by contributions coming from the new Member States.

An interim conclusion from this whole section is that it was mainly due to the lack of an appropriate financial framework that ESPON was only created after the actual ESDP was finished.

**Current ESPON practices**

After sorting out the problems described above, ESPON started to pursue seven objectives:

- To add value to existing national research by providing a clear transnational focus;
- To specify implications of ESDP policy orientations on a transnational scale;
- To develop orientations for instruments and institutions for application of ESDP policy;
- To contribute to an understanding of the spatial dimension of Structural Funds and policies;
- To improve coordination of territorial decisions at all levels and sectors;
- To bridge the gap between policy makers, administrators and scientists; and
- To create a network of EU scientists in spatial development.

What is the practice of ESPON? Other than having their say on the Monitoring Committee and through the national contact points, generally speaking Member States do not play an active role either in influencing ESPON policies or in applying
the outcomes. An exception is a project developing a new ‘Spatial Vision for North-West Europe’ (an exercise in the framework of the INTERREG IIIB North-West Europe Programme). There it was decided from the start that ESPON results were to be included, and a representative from the ESPON Managing Authority (the Luxembourg Ministry of the Interior) has been attending Spatial Vision Working Group meetings ever since. Controversially, this very Working Group continued the process by calling for proposals for relevant research to support the Spatial Vision process. Apparently, available ESPON project results were considered to be insufficient.

As mentioned in the introduction, the Commission requires researchers to produce the ‘deliverables’ as a precondition of receiving their funding. Thus, when the Commission was gearing up for the Third Cohesion Report (CEC, 2004) in the summer of 2003, it issued a ‘list of urgent demands’ to which all ESPON projects were expected to respond. Despite the fact that these went beyond the respective terms of reference, the Commission got what it wanted, and the Third Cohesion Report (CEC, 2004) bears the mark of ESPON work. Four maps even exhibit the ESPON logo – maps 1.6 and A1.5 to A1.7 (CEC, 2004, 32, 77–79). Furthermore, another publication on Territorial Cohesion (DG Regio, 2004), which has ‘DG Regio’ rather than ‘the Commission’ as its author, consists almost entirely of ESPON material. Apparently, the Commission draws more on ESPON than do the Member States.

This last report gives rise to another comment. It purports to be drawing on ESPON and on other studies done by DG Regio, but (as the title *Interim Territorial Cohesion Report* indicates) it veers away from spatial planning and the ESDP towards the new-style territorial cohesion policy that this special issue is also about. The report even suggests that the ESDP has been adopted to promote territorial cohesion (DG Regio, 2004, 3). Such a comment should be counted as creative interpretation, as the ESDP only once mentions the very term territorial cohesion, where it says that ‘...the promotion of social and territorial cohesion is, within their respective competencies, a Community and Member State task’ (CEC, 1999, 13). On the other hand, it is of course possible, as Faludi does elsewhere in this issue with polycentrism (see also DG Regio, 2004, 9–11), to translate concerns of the ESDP into terms relating to territorial cohesion. Be that as it may, the Commission seems to have opted for territorial cohesion as a new umbrella for everything related to spatial development.

This brings us to our last topic. Now that the focus on territorial cohesion has become clear, and considering what the introduction to this special issue has said about its position in the Constitutional Treaty, it is time to consider the potential of ESPON for pursuing territorial cohesion policy. In this respect, the last paper in this issue by Faludi describes the use of the OMC in facilitating a new-style EU territorial cohesion policy. How would ESPON figure in this?
ESPON indicators

When the need for a European-wide research network was first articulated, this was mainly due to the lack of comparative (spatial) data. Most of the ESPON projects are now busily engaged in gathering such data, transforming them into useful information with the help of innovative indicators. The above-mentioned Interim Territorial Cohesion Report lists three as being of particular importance, namely, accessibility, population density and ‘ranking of FUAs (functional urban areas – TvG/AF) based on functionality’ (DG Regio, 2004, 85). It is this kind of work that makes ESPON worthwhile. In order to make this data accessible, one specific project entitled ‘Data Navigator’ has been launched. Because it is hard to collect reliable primary data for all 29 participating states, a great deal of the output has been created through analysing existing available data. Notwithstanding some limitations (such as the awkwardness of the delineation of NUTS regions), there has already been massive output from ESPON. It is safe to say that most of the analytical gain lies in this combination of data collection and developing matching indicators, rather than the parallel efforts to theorise (new) concepts. The political element we mentioned in the introduction is even more important in theoretical debates on certain concepts than it is in developing indicators.

Considering its work on indicators, one cannot go wrong in concluding that ESPON offers opportunities for developing EU territorial cohesion policy, in particular if we consider (as the last paper in this issue argues) the OMC as an appropriate method for doing so. Working with guidelines and cooperating through benchmarking, peer reviews and the like make for a perfect match between ESPON, the OMC and the EU territorial cohesion policy.

Conclusion

Here we return to the riddles surrounding ESPON in the introduction. Almost six years after Potsdam, ESPON has come a long way. What was to become an observatory based on a Geddesian approach of ‘survey before plan’, has evolved into a dynamic research network. No longer conceived as part of the ESDP process, it has become an effort in its own right. With enlargement, the number of EU Member States being part of ESPON has reached 25. Like the existing members, new EU members will make contributions to be matched as usual by EU funds. In addition, Norway and Switzerland participate fully and contribute financially. The ESPON budget has therefore increased from the 12 million euro mentioned above to 17 million euro, to be spent on approximately 25 projects across the 29 countries covered by ESPON. Other than the project themes mentioned in the ESPON programme, the Monitoring Committee has so far decided to launch European-wide research on the
territorial dimension of the Lisbon/Gothenburg strategy, territorial impacts of European fisheries policies, Europe in the world and integrated spatial analysis zooming in on national and transnational territories. So we surely have not heard the last of ESPON.

The ESDP has been the point of departure. Even though they have no official status, its goals still remain topical. However, in view of the current status of ESPON, and given that its scope is clearly broader than just the ESDP, new perspectives are opening up. Should ESPON aim to articulate fundamental, theoretical issues addressed in the ESDP such as ‘urban–rural relationships’, or should it evaluate existing spatially relevant policies like the Structural Funds and prepare future territorial cohesion policy?

Given its starting point and the limited period that ESPON has been under way, it is safe to say that ESPON has delivered impressive results. The research institutes involved are all showing great enthusiasm, putting in a lot of effort in exchange for modest financial compensation. Indeed, as the mid-term evaluation already indicated, the programme has so far been highly efficient – ‘The analysis by the evaluation team indicates that the projects are meeting and generally exceeding the targets set in the PC’ (MVA, 2003, 14). Rumour has it that participants of other INTERREG programmes sometimes do otherwise, trying to obtain the highest possible financial reward while putting in the lowest possible effort. However, ESPON researchers take a more idealistic view and aim for results rather than financial benefit.

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This special issue describes territorial cohesion as a new start for European spatial planning. It suggests a reconceptualisation of spatial development issues. If ESPON were to be followed through after 2006, then it seems clear that this would happen under the flag of territorial cohesion. It might be appropriate also to reconsider the ‘O’ in ESPON. Initially, it stood for ‘Observatory’ Network which then made room for ‘Observation’ Network. Is this sufficient to indicate the dynamic, participatory set-up of ESPON? Maybe (invoking the term ‘assessment’ as in Environmental Impact Assessment and Strategic Impact Assessment) ‘European Territorial Cohesion Assessment Network (ETCAN)’ would be a more appropriate alternative.

Throughout the ESDP process, Member States have sought to retain control over spatial development. However, the current ESPON arrangements put the Commission in a comfortable position, while the researchers are doing the hard work. Indeed, the Commission is firmly in the driving seat and has no intention of loosening the reins. EU-wide spatial planning has never been a competence of the European Community, but with territorial cohesion on the horizon a role for the EU comes within reach. It may be time, therefore, for Member States and the Commission to join hands and
focus on real challenges such as the recent enlargement and its spatial consequences. All actors should strive to find common ground at the EU level while respecting national differences. Evidently, ESPON can make a worthwhile contribution to achieving this aim.

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