

Why the ESPON Programme is concerned more with ‘policy implications’ than with ‘good science’

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The recent Helsinki meeting (November 2006) both marked the end of the ESPON Programme for the 2000-2006 period and helped to re-lunch a number of topical scientific questions. In the contested space between these administrative and academic moments lies what Christer Bengs has called in his October 2006 article *ESPON in context*, the ‘alleged policy implications’ of the ESPON project. This notion was extensively if not exhaustively debated, often critically, during the Helsinki meeting. In what follows some of these theses will be further discussed.

A number of recently concluded ESPON projects appear to have forgotten or ignored the basic tenets of what counts as ‘good science’ and, in effect, sought to further obvious and often rather limited results. Projects are often reported in a style moreover that elevates the KISS principle (Keep It Simple and Stupid) to that of the highest order of merit. Pressure to do so undoubtedly comes from the EU policy-making level, filtered through those involved in administrating the ESPON Programme, on the basis that policymakers need to *quickly* understand the project results.

When this does not happen research results are said to lack focus, or are simply defined as being ‘too ambitious’ to be used, or to be useful. This has even occurred when the usefulness of results is demonstrated with regard to issues of territorial development, social and economic trans-national co-operation, cohesion, and polycentrism. Perhaps then Bengs is right when he talks about the self-referential nature of the ESPON programme and the policy-driven nature of its preferred research outcomes as envisaged by those at the European political level working in the spatial policy arena.

In order to discuss the ESPON scientific approach in greater depth and how to reformulate the research problems it deals with the ESPON II Programme intends to stress the territorial dimension of future ESPON projects more fully. Or perhaps it would be better to say in future ESPON projects?

This distinction has to be made if we want to fully understand the ‘alleged policy implications’ of the ESPON programme, i.e. how far ESPON projects are oriented

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towards offering satisfaction and support for the decisions made by European policy-makers.

The issue is not a new one for the European Union which has already attempted a solution by adopting the ‘open method of co-ordination’² (OCM) leaving single countries free to adapt European directives at their own territorial dimension. ESPON is basically now trying to repeat this approach in the scientific field in respect of those themes that it believes would best help the European Commission to decide for us and our future.

As Bengs has already noted, in the context of the origins of the Programme, this perspective does not seem particularly well integrated into the broader ‘ESPON vision’. Moreover, currently at least, it fails even to go beyond the declaratory level.

What then sustains the ESPON philosophical and political approach? The current author is inclined to believe the following: i) several different approaches to regional policy are now more important than the national level; ii) scientifically incoherent indicators; iii) the complexity of modern knowledge system; iv) the lack of a common lexicon.

These basic considerations must have already appeared clear at ESPON Monitoring Committee (EMC) level (i.e. that of EU national policy makers), if they already tasked the Programme with challenging traditional perspectives in respect of the initial goals and to stress the real political weight that different approaches and results can have on the practice of European spatial planning.

Confirmation of this emerged recently when a prominent ESPON researcher remarked how the European political context as well as the European research field needs to change, because both are really very *slow* to adapt and – in spite of Lisbon – neither is particularly innovative.

Many researchers in the ESPON context have noted that scientific research produces better results at the national than at the European level. This is not however the case as in all European countries what counts as ‘good science’ is measured by its

² Introduced by the Lisbon Strategy. Member States co-ordinate their policies to combat poverty and social exclusion on the basis of a process of policy exchanges and mutual learning known as the ‘Open Method of Coordination’ (OMC). From 2006, three policy areas provide the framework for this process:

- Eradicating poverty and social exclusion
- [Adequate and sustainable pensions](#)
- [Accessible, high quality and sustainable health and long-term care](#)

The Open Method of Coordination is based on Five Main Elements:

- Agreeing [common objectives](#) for the Union
- Establishing [common indicators](#) as a means of comparing best practice and measuring progress
- Translating the EU objectives into national/regional policies on the basis of [National Reports on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion](#)
- Publishing [reports](#) analysing and assessing the National Reports
- Establishing a [Community Action Programme](#) to promote policy cooperation and transnational exchange of learning and good practice.

international 'impact factor' while additional project funding is almost entirely based on this international peer-review process. At the national level we often do not see these cultural and scientific power plays become manifest while at the European level they are all too easily apparent.

ESPON initially tried to bridge this gap. Indeed, as far back as the SPESP period (1997-99) significant support was given to the Trans-national Project Groups (TPGs). This proved to be a workable approach until the level of political influence on regional choices became too great. This level of political influence increased markedly in the period 2000-2004, particularly in response to the 'Lisbon push' to be more competitive and was further increased during the re-launching of the revised Lisbon Agenda which, by agreeing to enlargement to 25 members and beyond, ultimately accepted the political pre-eminence of the EU on the organisation of the wider European space.

Policy-makers rather conveniently forgot that *i)* space is not territory; *ii)* the territorial impact of policy recommendations and decisions is stronger than the spatial one; *iii)* while the territorial impact is real the spatial impact is much more nuanced.

Bengs rightly highlights both the role and the influence of globalisation in this EU choice over enlargement. This explains why the *ex ante* enlargement scenarios only looked at polycentrism in ESPON projects, i.e. at their spatial organisation.

In order to move beyond this impasse ESPON now proposes a major new relationship between academics and policy makers, while at the same time suggesting several changes in the ESPON study space. A number of researchers have already unveiled their contributions, promoting e.g., the benefits of changing EU administrative boundaries or of an ever more closely policy-driven research agenda. The impact of some of the changes imposed by such suggestions is however often lost on the authors concerned.

The regional level remains a problem in ESPON projects. Ten years ago (1997), a Dutch geographer, B.M.R. van der Velde wrote in a famous paper³ that the *region* is always a part of a larger entity (economic, territorial, political, etc.); it cannot then be compared to a state. He also wrote about the various types of regions: functional, formal, real, artificial/scientific (this last category coincides with NUTS). In brief: *we are regions, we see regions*.

Some of the researchers in the ESPON community must already know this if they are proposing new territorial divisions such as MAUP (Modified Area Unit Problem) as expressions of realism in the data. In this way, they are looking at how to satisfy both political and research needs.

Nevertheless, in so doing, they act more like regional economists than economic regional geographers and thus confuse:

- the knowledge phase with the decision one, forgetting that, in geographical research an *a-priori* hierarchy of ontological central place (typical of the political behaviour) does not exist

³ *So many regions, so many borders*, Rome, ERSA97 (CD).

- the choice and the place of indicators. E.g., the GDP between the stock indicators
- the use of less detailed cartography to appear less coercive leaving the policy-maker free to decide 'top-down'.

This also explains why, in an attempt to 'support' decision-makers, they continue to assign too great an importance to tools such as the *Hyper Atlas* or web GIS.

Faced by such questions, other ESPON geographers have reconfirmed the importance of linking their statistical (spatial) data choice to that of their geographical scale. Thus they suggest studying regional problems at a real geographical scale using ESPON cartograms to illuminate the basic research questions. In so doing however they forget the central ESPON question, i.e. what should ESPON II really be about? Surely a question of *function over form*?

Some ESPON researchers are convinced that to be better understood, the emergence of EU topics (such as competitiveness) necessarily dictate that new maps and data systems are created. They are however making a real error if they simply propose – often rather un-critically – sing new statistical methods (such as geographically-weighted regression) to study territorial phenomena.

The same question is posed and the same solution given with regard to data systems. Here these ESPON experts propose the use of a hierarchical method, namely 'ESTImate' (Space Source Time Indicator), thus re-introducing the dispute between spatial and territorial sources and indicators. The ESPON Co-ordination Unit (ECU) has already noted that there is a potential problem here though it remains unable to articulate it more clearly than by simple reference to 'data quality issues'.

The main problem here is that the ESPON community as a whole is not equally familiar with such methodological approaches framing such aspects as 'project conceptualisation' and dedicating very little time to them (1 slide in each ESPON project presentation), because – they say – policy makers do not (and by implication, *need* not) understand such complex discussions. The result is however that the ESPON Monitoring Committee (EMC) is basing spatial monitoring on a limited number of indicators while creating: i) lists of thematic indicators for each NUTS level; ii) methodological econometric approaches. This is how they propose to deal with common procedures and standardise study approaches.

This suggestion could be useful if the EMC and the ECU were amenable to opening up a *real* scientific comparison. This would entail real convergence between different territorial realities (e.g., 286 NUTs 2 regions in the EU25 + 2 + 2), calling to discuss scientists by scientific rules.

In the previous programme period ESPON did attempt to launch such a discussion (see the First European Research Conference held in Luxembourg in October 2005), though it was not successful and thus ESPON returned to discussing the territorial diversity of the enlarged European Union by means of the fundamentally incommensurate visions of its individual researchers.

What is the result? E.g. several ESPON projects that study the ‘competitiveness’ question (definitions, Lisbon effects, policy recommendations, instruments, assessment procedures, etc.) but no agreement exists in relation to the appropriate scientific literature and approach (e.g. who is Porter?); the same thing happens in the context of sustainability (what does sustainability mean? Who is Gro Harlem Brundtland? How do we undertake sustainable development?). Perhaps the more important question here however is how ESPON researchers and policy makers use and exchange information. A clear example here can be taken from the experience of the EU assessment procedures question raised at the Manchester Seminar (November 2005).

In reality, the discussion on *Strategic Environmental Assessment* (SEA) and/or *Territorial Impact Assessment* (TIA) was begun in February 2005, in Brussels, during a Lead Partners’ meeting.

The ESPON 3.3 project proposed the use of a particular methodological approach/procedure that, in agreement with current EU directives, measures *both* the regional ability to be sustainably competitive *and* the territorial dimension of this “polycentric” capability in terms of cohesion.

This approach has however opened up a conflict between:

- those who see sustainability only as a technological problem in the use of multi-criteria and quali-quantitative tools,
- top-down and bottom-up approaches, growth and development,
- the spatial and territorial dimensions of competitiveness.

This discussion also highlights the fact that if indeed a strong relationship does exist between innovation and competitiveness (as suggested by the Lisbon Strategy), it does not necessarily have to entail a complete technological change. It can also occur through the choosing of appropriate technologies, behaviours, reference models, etc. In short we can *choose* to be sustainable.

This change in perspective is however probably too strong for the ESPON Programme and its policy makers who prefer to continue to view innovation as an operative and not as a theoretical question, as a simple or complex question of indicator lists, and as a local and not a global question.

How then does the ESPON Programme hope to update its current approach to the introduction of new methodological approaches if each time an innovative methodological proposal is presented it is rejected and the ESPON research community is instead redirected back towards a refocusing on the following key-words:

- administrative-political boundaries
- core-periphery
- central decision makers (top-down)
- nodes and networks
- regionalism
- accessibility
- polycentrism as a political issue
- functional/spatial aspects

- a government concept of governance (social vision)
- SWOT and benchmarking

Recently an attempt has been made to shift attention to the question of 'communication' (something at which ESPON has not thus far excelled) with the proposal to promote a series of trans-national activities to support (or substitute for?) scientific advances. These activities are to be based on the original suggestions of the stakeholders' in connection with the formulation of policy recommendations. This is however probably not the best solution as the communication aspects of any project must surely be the final step in an integrated and complex process of scientific analysis. As such, ESPON should remain a 'decision-maker' providing scientific support, and an organisation that uses innovative bottom-up knowledge and assessment processes to help in the regionalisation of virtuous and appropriate policies for territorial cohesion.

Bengs' paper requires one final remark relating to the political weight given to globalisation in ESPON projects. Globalisation is not of course perceived as having a singular impact across Europe, while a precise geographical limit orients its interpretation in an unequivocal manner given the differences in type and level in the cultural orientation, and origin (nationality), of researchers and by so doing confirming the wish of maintaining unaltered the characteristic of being above all nationalities (the impossible *status quo*) which is implicit in the pact out of which the European Union came about.

The profound changes which marked the growth of the globalisation vision in ESPON projects up to the emergence of a true single market, highlighted this dual level, which on the one hand generates macro-policies concentrating on employment negotiations, while on the other produces local policies for the reinforcement of resource accumulation capacity (i.e. what was defined as *capability* in the ESPON 3.3 project).

While offering long-term trade advantages, the quest for 'ever closer union' in the form of integration based on super-nationalism has effectively substituted the objective of cohesion in the context of the realisation of a united Europe, for the balancing of disadvantages which the periphery bears by importing at prices which are higher than those realistically attainable⁴.

Structural indicators such as the value of inter-EU trade are interpreted by many authors as proof of the level of integration which has been reached, even if the presence of free exchange areas, on the one hand, and their expansion to Eastern European after enlargement on the other does not allow for hypothesising on much more than an initial conflict on internal markets (a new price war) and the repetition of the 'trade-block' model in areas of geographical proximity.

In the new EU27 (2007-2013), countries such as Germany find it difficult to maintain their traditional first place in sectors such as mechanics, high-tech and electronics because of direct foreign competition from countries such as China and India; other countries such as France have reinforced their presence in basic sectors and in transport by diversifying production; others like Britain have lost quota in all sectors

⁴ Several different schools of economic thought exist in respect of regional globalisation blocks.

with the exception of services or have concentrated on high-quality mono-productive specialisation (industrial districts in Italy). It is for this reason that the comparative analysis of competitive regional organisation highlights the divergent but convergent directions of the national anti-trust plan, at least within the limits of the bilateral agreements between countries.

In reality, if the individual stability of each country in global market is to be safeguarded within the European Monetary Union, it is necessary to verify the effects of the process of integration on stability and to the applicability of the principle of subsidiarity. This is the cornerstone both of the common objective of global stability and of the regionalisation model which has been outlined by the EU.

EU participation in global markets does not necessarily reduce the risk of European financial instability in the same way as a process of integration, limited only to those countries which are 'in' might increase it, if those countries which were 'out' were to be excluded from the procedures which regulate the system of payments.

The spatial structure of the Union corresponds only partially to the characteristics of the 'ideal state' as a result of permanent discontinuity which is not only physical (the most significant being the Irish Sea, the Channel, the Alps, and the Otranto Channel), but also economic, like those in opposition (for population density, energy consumption, GDP) the Rhine valley to the British Isles, the Iberian peninsula. It is, moreover, in the periphery that the anti-European culture is most often expressed in strong terms in respect of distrust in the national institutional model, while the central areas (namely the Pentagon) continue to express functional characteristics which are incapable of proposing an alternative to the internationalisation of differences.

The territorial and spatial structure of the European Union, as it stands, is therefore dominated by a profound territorial discontinuity in the face of globalisation, which, given the intensity of historical backgrounds and inherent conditions, has thickened the plot of national identity and state regulations, and in so doing ratified those profound differences:

- The existing disparity between regions with regard to employment and salaries which was already the historic cause of migration of all European peoples, and from which the current choice of the model for the inter-regional development of the traditional peripheral areas of the Mediterranean is derived, and the tendency of the labour market to favour part-time solutions which not all countries can adequately provide (such as Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal).
- A migratory phenomenon which today is still rural in origin, and whose destination lies in the two main European poles: in the English cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester) whose combined populations total more than 32 million inhabitants; and the north-west area (the Rhine estuary, the Ruhr basin, the Dutch Randstat) with more than 30 million inhabitants.
- The concentration of consistent phenomena of the lack of urbanisation in countries of limited territorial space (Iceland and Belgium) or in which the useful territories are concentrated (Sweden). The situation is just the

opposite in Greece, Portugal or Holland where only 4.243 kmq (over a total of 41.864) are uninhabited. This seems to be the result of both the massive presence of population that enjoys a good standard of living and a positive result of immigration that has been overcome as a result not of the incoming of foreign workers but of their family groups.

- An inter-regional migration of a rural nature which changes direction in Holland and Italy (from west to north, north-east and south-west).
- A de-coupling of the responsibility of regional and local agents and their weak integration in the context of more traditional regional policies, that is to say, those who place the institutions in a decision-making centre which also has physical connotations.

In these various contexts each country has tended to react rather differently: Germany, in order to defend the constitutional and federal objective of stability, allowed inflation to increase more than elsewhere, in an attempt to keep unemployment levels below the long-term average; France and Denmark chose to do just the opposite; Italy, the United Kingdom, Spain, Ireland and Portugal ran the risk of accepting exchange rate changes, and in so doing succeeded at least in not aggravating the unemployment level. This highlighted a simple but far from banal concept for the greater plan of a development model in Europe. Namely, whether it was possible to have a different globalised structure for each state. Ultimately it is not possible to accept differing economic policies if the aim is to conserve positive advantages over employment which derive from a single currency. Moreover the realisation of a unitary federation clashes with the need to reconcile nationalism and internationalism precisely on the labour-division level.