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Potentials for Territorial Co-operation with Western Balkans Reflections on the final panel discussion

The conference on 19th and 20th of April 2010 in Maribor, Slovenia, focused on the potentials for territorial co-operation in the Western Balkans. At the conference a wide range of important aspects were addressed, such as territorial development potentials and co-operation as key for regional success, regionalised potentials, opportunities and problems, co-operation needs and perspectives, as well as co-operation experiences and suggestions for the future.

All these aspects were brought together in the final panel discussion which mainly addressed four issues:

- Added value of co-operation
- Barriers for co-operation
- Recommendations for the future
- Future co-operation themes

The following brings together the main points from the panel discussion as well as important points made during the other conference sessions under these headings. This summary aims to transfer important results of the conference into future debates. It is by no means an exclusive summary and cannot catch all the statements and inputs made during the debate. It should therefore be seen as a discussion paper, based on the various debates during the conference.

Added value of co-operation

European territorial co-operation faces the constant challenge of having to prove its added value. Decision makers at regional, national, and European level who are not involved in territorial co-operation activities and who are not naturally convinced seek a clear added value to enable them to provide continued support. This illustration of added value needs to go beyond the success stories of single projects.

Transnational added value: “Themes that exceed local problems or needs, not being relevant to a single region or state only, but focus on problems or needs that demand wider territorial scope and joint solutions or actions.”



The participants underlined that they are strongly convinced of the substantive added value of territorial co-operation. A few of the points made were:

- **European integration (at the grass root level).** In many ways Europe and European integration risks to become a project of a particular group of people. Territorial co-operation ensures that also people who usually are not involved in European business build links and contact networks across Europe, and see how they can better approach their challenges jointly with partners from other countries or with inspiration from solutions practiced in other parts of Europe. This type of co-operation helps European integration take place on the ground – at the grass root level .
- **Partnership.** Evaluations of territorial co-operation show again and again the importance of transnational and cross-border partnerships. Various dimensions of the added value of territorial co-operation are directly or indirectly linked to partnership issues. However, project partnerships need to be carefully designed to suit the project aims. A balance between perceived formal requirements for partnership compositions and actual needs must be found on a case-by-case basis.
- **Bottom-up solutions.** For many cross-border or transnational challenges, solutions are developed and negotiated at national and European policy level. The implementation of these solutions and also practical approaches to challenges not addressed at higher levels require the involvement of people and expertise on the ground. Territorial co-operation offers a platform for the development of bottom-up solutions where these are more appropriate than top-down answers.
- **Better use of resources.** Mutual learning as well as the development of joint solutions is widely perceived to result in a better use of resources. This can be both resources of the public administration as well as our common environmental resources. A challenge to this is that the causal link between territorial co-operation and better use of resources is often difficult to document. Hence, these should be seen as intangible added value. However, there are some cases where public savings due to territorial co-operation are substantial and well documented. This is closely related to administrative capacity building.
- **New experiences and insights.** Many participants also highlighted the need and added value for both new experiences and knowledge generated in territorial co-operation projects. In particular, with regard to transnational and cross-border planning activities, the development of joint analysis going beyond national borders as well as joint strategies or corresponding approaches and instruments has been frequently mentioned. This can also be linked to a number of other aspects such as the creation of economies of scale for some issues which are better approached at a marco-regional level, administrative capacity building, institutionalisation of strategic monitoring processes and the identification of development priorities for particular territories.
- **De-politicising.** In particular in areas (both geographical and thematic) with high Political loading, practical co-operation on the ground can help to depoliticise. This helps to break down barriers and find practical approaches and solutions.



Overall, the participants stressed insistently that territorial co-operation contributes to better policy solutions albeit the added value often remains intangible and cannot be measured with standard indicators and evaluation tools of the EU Cohesion Policy.

Barriers for co-operation

Territorial co-operation meets a wide range of different types of obstacles. Among those most prominent in the debate are:

- **Lack of continuity.** Territorial co-operation builds on trust and understanding among the co-operation partners. Past evaluations have shown that it often takes one project for a project team to establish a common ground in terms of understanding and mutual trust. Thereafter the project team is able to deliver much better quality outcomes. Furthermore, the focus on projects and funding periods often is a major barrier for long-term developments or sustainability of networks, results and activities beyond the funded project. This however does not suggest that territorial co-operation shall overcome the project approach, but rather that the relevant stakeholders and project partners need to think beyond the timeframe of their projects and ensure continuity in one way or the other. To be successful, territorial co-operation should be considered as an activity which goes beyond EU funding mechanisms.
- **Cultural & language differences.** Territorial co-operation brings together people from different countries, i.e. often with different languages and cultures. Furthermore, territorial co-operation projects are often of interdisciplinary nature. As a result, the project teams face a multitude of different approaches and ways of thinking. To learn to handle these and understand the diversity as major assets – rather than barriers – is a challenge for territorial co-operation projects.
- **Different administrative systems.** Similar to the cultural and linguistic barriers, there are differences in the administrative, legal and policy systems among the countries, which need to be understood by a project. This concerns in particular the development of joint strategies, activities and investment. However, also a successful exchange of experience builds on a mutual understanding of the differences in order to see what experience is transferable and how.
- **Limited qualified human resources.** In some regions or countries, there is a feeling that the public administration has only a very limited number of people who are qualified in terms of language skills or thematic knowledge for the participation in territorial co-operation projects, be it because of.
- **Lack of flexibility.** Territorial co-operation requires a lot of flexibility from the individuals participating as well as from their home organisations and the programmes. The lack of flexibility to find practical and manageable solutions for co-operation can put the entire co-operation at risk.
- **Long & complicated procedures.** The formal procedures for territorial co-operation projects can sometimes be frustrating. This regards both the EU programmes and the national and regional procedures for co-funding or approvals to participate in the projects. Also the pre-financing can be a challenge for some partners.



- **Highflying ambitions.** Many projects are very ambitious. This is good but can be unrealistic in terms of achieving the objectives within the framework of a project and within the time period of a project. To be successful and maintain a positive attitude it is necessary that the co-operation programmes and projects set themselves realistic aims.
- **Negative attitude.** Often people complain that territorial co-operation is too complex, either regarding the complexity of the tasks or the administrative framework. The evolving negative attitude is a major co-operation barrier because important stakeholders may not engage in co-operation projects.

Furthermore, some participants stressed the lack of acknowledgement or recognition which helps motivating the project and programme stakeholders to keep up their good work.

Recommendations for the future

The debate also highlighted some issues which need to be improved in future territorial co-operation programmes. The most prominent were:

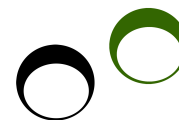
- **Animators.** The introduction of key persons in the regions who stimulate interest in territorial co-operation and programme activities and help potential applicants to get started.
- **Communicate success.** Territorial co-operation needs to better communicate success stories to a wider audience beyond the usual suspects who are convinced of the added value of territorial co-operation already.
- **Simpler administration.** Both for the programmes and the projects, the administrative requirements demand a substantial share of the energy, budgets and workload. Simpler procedures are needed. A simple reporting in conjunction with annual meetings with experts where the progress of the projects and programmes is discussed critically – but in a constructive manner – has been suggested.
- **Joint information sources.** In particular with regard to local and regional statistics, improved comparable data has been requested. References have been made to the Inspire directive, ESPON, URBACT and the KEEP initiative.
- **Macro regions.** A better link to the macro regions and relevant policy aims for them has been requested, this regards e.g. the Danube and the Carpathian Region.
- **Improved political support.** Political background support at all levels has been requested in order to improve the image and status of territorial co-operation.
- **Venture capital.** Not all projects are immediate success stories and there needs to be better willingness to support good project ideas, although they involve a certain risk. Is it possible to view territorial co-operation as risk or venture capital?
- **Cross-programme view.** Also the issue of linking transnational co-operation programmes with cross-border programmes and national programmes has been addressed as an issue to be looked into in future.



Future co-operation themes

A challenging theme for the discussions was the question of future co-operation themes. Most of the reflections were of a more general nature:

- **Strategic approach.** A better focus on strategic approaches including a small number of priority themes and more focussed calls were mentioned by some speakers. This should also target long-term impacts through optimisation of current actions and networks and the capitalisation of past experience.
- **Interdisciplinary approach.** The integrated and interdisciplinary approach has been highlighted by several speakers as an important characteristic of territorial co-operation. This surely should be maintained and strengthened again in the future. Some speakers stressed, that this interdisciplinary approach has become weaker in the present programming period because of a stronger sectoral orientation. As territorial development and spatial planning are - by definition - interdisciplinary tasks, it is important to support projects that bring together stakeholders and ideas from different sectors. There needs to be a return to territorial, rather than sectoral, focus
- **Link to macro regions.** At European level macroregional strategies are currently a topic of debate and for the Danube Area such a strategy is under development. Territorial co-operation should have a clear link to such marco regional approaches. Earlier both the Danube and Carpathian region were mentioned.
- **Harmonised data sets.** The analysis of territorial developments across national borders is still struggling with the limited amount of comparable data. More efforts to harmonise data definitions and sets among the different stakeholder and strengthen European databases such as those provided by Eurostat or ESPON are in demand.
- **Endogenous development capital.** Throughout the debate, the need to focus on endogenous development potentials including the intangible potentials has been stressed. Examples for this highlighted during the conference are agro-food or sustainable tourism.
- **Natural hazards.** Risk management linked to natural hazards and the consequences of climate change were frequently mentioned during the conference. Activities here should also include organisational capacity building.
- **Nature protection and biodiversity.** In the same way as natural hazards are most environmental issues do not respect national borders and thus a natural choice for territorial co-operation. A prominent example is river basins management. Also here organisational capacity building is of importance.
- **Demographic change.** A challenge for large parts of the Western Balkans is the demographic development. Accordingly, multifaceted adaptation processes to demographic change were suggested for territorial co-operation.
- **Urban systems and territorial imbalances.** Polycentric development – also including small and medium sized cities – was frequently addressed. This involved also questions of territorial imbalances and the relation to between urban and rural areas.
- **Integration of urban and territorial policy dimension.** In particular the interplay between territorial or regional development and urban development and the corresponding policies deserves more attention in the future, according to some speakers.



- **Transport corridors.** Various kinds of transport corridors (road, rail, water) and strategies to improve them in terms of accessibility and/or sustainable transport solutions have been addressed at several occasions. This should however be done as part of an integrated territorial approach and not just as a pure transport project.
- **Regional development platforms.** There was a broad agreement that networks between administrations responsible for regional development in the Western Balkans need to be further strengthened. Support to common platforms and action plans for creating added value and synergies between ongoing activities have been mentioned in connection to that.

The above themes for future co-operation are only a selection of topics mentioned during the conference. They largely confirm the topics addressed in the wider debate about territorial co-operation. A strong emphasis should be put on interdisciplinary approaches because most aspects of territorial development cannot be solved in isolation and by purely sectoral approaches.