

Territorial Cohesion: From theory to practice

Marjorie JOUEN



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by Marjorie JOUEN



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Summary



With the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union will be endowed with a new mission: that of promoting territorial cohesion in addition to economic and social cohesion. Its implementation has been raising as much hope as apprehension, because it may disrupt certain policies which have a strong territorial impact.

Briefly, it could be said that the “battle” for territorial cohesion consists of having to pass three successive tests, all of which have not yet been fully passed. The first amounts to debating the need to impose specific constraints or benefits in order to restore the balance in favour of certain territories. The second is predicated on justifying the level of policy-making competency required for such intervention, in this case, added value for the European Union or other actors, while also respecting the principle of subsidiarity. The third challenges the validity of a new regulatory or financial framework and the scope of a possible compensation for disadvantaged territories.

This study presents the historic evolution, content and ramifications of this concept. It analyzes the forces at work in, and the three main components of a territorial cohesion approach—reducing geography-related disparities, ensuring coherence between sectoral policies and strengthening ties between territories. Acknowledging the difficulty of introducing new game rules on the European, as well as national, regional and local levels, it proposes to follow a two-stage roadmap: to adopt various specific measures of limited impact early in 2009 and then to speed up the process as from 2014.

Table of Contents

Introduction	P. 1
I - A long maturation process	P. 5
II - Abundant theoretical argumentation	P. 11
III - Constraints and pitfalls of realizing the objective	P. 17
3.1 How should « territorial cohesion » be defined?	P. 19
3.2 Will the Territorial Agenda be sufficient?	P.21
3.3 Will the cohesion policy be sufficient?	P. 23
3.4 On what criteria should a European intervention be based?	P. 25
IV - Remain Fuzzy and move gradually	P. 29
Bibliography	P.35

Introduction

How much additional tax would you be willing to pay to ensure that the postal service works regularly in the small villages of the islands of the Aegean Sea? What extra cost would you be prepared to incur to ensure that cow herds can keep on grazing in the high mountain pastures? How many minutes would you be willing to lose so the high-speed Strasbourg-Paris bullet train can stop twice to allow company managers from the Meuse to quickly reach the capital? Would you abandon a waste processing plant project because it might cause some environmental hazards for schools located a few hundred meters from the other side of the border? These are the types of practical issues that concern all Europeans and for which solutions must soon be found in the name of territorial cohesion.

Indeed, in a few months—if the Treaty of Lisbon’s ratification process is successfully completed, the European Union will find itself assigned a new objective: to promote economic, social and territorial cohesion.¹

¹ Future article 3.3 of the Treaty on European Union.

Therefore, solidarity between individuals and regions based on level of income will soon be supplemented by solidarity based on geography, lending its full significance to the concept of European cohesion, which may be considered one of the contemporary products of the European social model, for the Treaty of Amsterdam signed in 1997 had already linked social and territorial cohesion with Services of General Economic Interest (SGEIs) in the expression of European values.²

The inclusion of territorial cohesion in the Treaty of Lisbon was foreseeable, inasmuch as the formulation adopted is identical with the one used in the draft Constitutional Treaty and stems from an intense and long-standing debate based on in-depth political and academic thinking.

Its implementation, however, has given rise to numerous preventive measures, and the progress made by the European Commission charged with formulating a Green Book by autumn 2008 is raising some doubts. It has been inspiring mixed feelings among stakeholders, national governments, local and regional authorities, and the private sector and civil society, who see in it both opportunities and disadvantages. It should also be mentioned that the current discussions on revising the European budget are taking a tone that does not encourage boldness.

However, on second thought, the inclusion of a geographical component in reasoning traditionally dominated by socio-economic concerns opens a whole new realm of possibilities at a time when the globe is no longer big enough for us, and when we need to reconcile ourselves with our territory to rethink our development model in a more sustainable way.

² Future article 14 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

Consequently, endowing the territorial cohesion objective with a more practical form and rendering it operational constitute a major policy challenge that far exceeds the circle of cohesion policy beneficiaries. That is the issue that this paper proposes to address.

Readers who are thoroughly acquainted with the cohesion policy and the origin of territorial cohesion can begin reading at Part 3, which examines the pitfalls and constraints which are associated with territorial cohesion in the short run, and Part 4, which presents method and content proposals. For those less familiar with the subject, Part 1 reviews the process that led to the recognition of territorial cohesion, and Part 2 explains the theoretical and policy-related bases supporting it.

I – A long maturation process

Since its creation, the European Union has had the mission of promoting the harmonious development of the economies by reducing regional disparities.³ This task, which remained in the background during the first decades of European construction, gained momentum with the 1988 Reform undertaken by Jacques Delors following the adoption of the Single European Act, which expressly established economic and social cohesion.

This policy proved particularly fruitful, both in terms of convergence of the least-developed and the most disadvantaged Member States, and in terms of compensation for the negative effects associated with the enlargement of the Single Market. It can be credited with having substantially contributed to improving the Irish, Spanish, Portuguese and Greek economies,

³ The Preamble of the Treaty of Rome mentions that the European Economic Community (EEC) must “ensure their harmonious development by reducing the differences existing between the various regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions.” Article 158 (formerly 130A) of the Treaty of Nice stipulates that “...the Community shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions or islands, including rural areas.”

though the latter was the last one to catch up. It was also responsible for the first successful reconversion of older industrial regions in the United Kingdom, Italy, Netherlands, Germany and France.

It also played a significant role in modernizing administrative functions on the regional and local levels, and in the progress made by multi-level governance within the States. Inasmuch as its interventions had a practical and visible impact on Europeans' living and working conditions, it has been experienced as a popular policy, including in the new Member States, since 2004.

However, among geographers, spatial planning specialists, and, to a certain extent, experts in regional development, the economic and social cohesion policy was rather soon considered incomplete. The issue of natural and structural handicaps had undoubtedly been raised in the context of identifying sparsely populated rural areas suffering from a demographic decline, and specific regions located in the ultra-periphery of Europe, islands and the Arctic Zone. But the initiatives that had been planned for them appeared to be temporary as well as exceptional, since it was the outcome of programme-specific negotiations, and by definition was of limited duration. The acknowledgement of territorial problems unquestionably lacked coherence, because it was the result of case-by-base decisions that were added to the general plan. It proved to be a source of confusion and additional complications.

The institutionalization of the territorial dimension has long met with **opposition from certain countries or certain key actors** of the cohesion policy. In fact, in a traditional and somewhat characterful way, the spatial planning policy was considered to be the product of a planning and centralizing perspective. It was therefore rejected by those who favoured the principle of subsidiarity, either because they themselves applied it on a sub-national

level, or because of an automatic mistrust of any new supranational and European authority. Furthermore, it did not find much support in countries or regions with weak financial resources and institutional capacities.

For many years, proponents of territorial cohesion thus opted for a didactic strategy toward their most recalcitrant partners. A dual approach—practical and conceptual—was followed to persuade them. On the one hand, a transnational cooperation component was created in the Community Initiative Programme INTERREG to help solve spatial problems shared by several regions (floods, mountain ranges, coastal area management, etc.). On the other hand, efforts were made to carry out a joint assessment that would lead to a “common vision of the European territory.” Thus a succession of quasi-academic works ensued: the “Europe 2000” paper in 1991, followed by the “Europe 2000+” report in 1994, then came the “European Spatial Development Perspective” (ESDP) in 1997, on which was grafted an “enlarged ESDP” model, in anticipation of the accession of 12 new members. These documents were examined and occasionally approved during informal meetings of the Ministers responsible for regional policies in the Member States, the irregular occurrence of which reflected, until 2001, the varying degree of commitment on the part of the EU Presidency countries, while carefully avoiding use of the term “territorial planning” (Doucet).

As from the mid-1990s, a “wait-and-see” policy had given way to a “can-do” policy. First a change occurred with the accession of the two Nordic countries, which had a rather long tradition of state intervention in favour of the northernmost areas. The arrival of the new German Länders, which had experienced spatial planning and its benefits and shortcomings, reinforced this trend. The entry of Central and Eastern European countries into the European Union then had a two-fold positive impact. As with East German Länders, the spatial policy was not an alien concept. Most importantly, the

collapse of the Soviet empire and the economic transition had confronted them with the necessity of rethinking every facet of flows, infrastructures and productive investment locations.

It can thus be considered that, at the end of the 1990s, the initial barriers and those encountered while concluding the Treaty of Maastricht—which, however, had been an additional milestone in creating the Committee of the Regions and in ratifying the principle of subsidiarity—were no longer the same. The fact is **that progress became possible immediately after the first large-scale institutional review**. Assuming that the sole aim of the Treaty of Nice—which it did not fully attain—was to solve the problems left unsolved by the Treaty of Amsterdam, we may conclude that the Constitutional Treaty provided the first opportunity. Its failure to be approved naturally led to the Treaty of Lisbon.

To some extent, there is nothing extraordinary about the fifteen-year delay between the formulation of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon.

Despite the major consequences it objectively entails, the territorial issue rarely constitutes a priority concern for political leaders. Thus, the introduction of the territorial cohesion concept was only made possible by the intense lobbying efforts of the networks of local and regional authorities (AER - Assembly of European Regions, CPMR - Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions of Europe, AEM - European Association of Elected Representatives from Mountain Areas, AEBR - Association of European Border Regions, CCRE - European Communes and Regions Council, etc.). The Convention which paved the way for the Constitutional Treaty turned out to be a particularly useful forum for them. They benefited from several representatives or observers, notably those from the Committee of the Regions, and from a powerful ally in the person of Michel Barnier, European

Commissioner for Regional Policy and Institutional Reform, whose French nationality and mountain origin made him particularly responsive to this issue.

The Territorial Agenda⁴ adopted in May 2007 during an informal meeting of the EU Ministers responsible for Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, also illustrates the policy change that occurred. Taking advantage of the momentum spearheaded in 2004 by the Dutch government, German Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee, the former mayor of Leipzig, masterfully presided over its formulation and fine-tuning. In a few months, the 27 Ministers reached an agreement on this document, which set out a general framework until 2011. The Member States agreed to cooperate with each other, with the Commission, and with other European institutions *“to promote a polycentric territorial development of the EU, with a view to making better use of available resources in European regions.”*

⁴ *Towards a More Competitive and Sustainable Europe with Diverse Regions, Territorial Agenda of the European Union, Informal Council Meeting of the Ministers of Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, Leipzig, 25 May 2007.*

II – Abundant theoretical argumentation

While the launching of the economic and social cohesion policy resulted from a unique offensive led by Jacques Delors, President of the European Commission, within the framework of a global budgetary negotiation—which earned it the nickname of the “Delors I Package”—the notion of territorial cohesion was the subject of a slower discussion process inquiring into the legitimacy of the concept and its practical translation.

Empirical and theoretical analyses have been accumulating for the last fifteen years demonstrating how well-founded efforts to promote territorial cohesion really are. If we were to consolidate them, they would provide ample material for a sort of “Report on the Cost of Non-Territorial Cohesion” (see Bibliography).

In short, **such demonstration revolved around five assertions**. First, European territorial cohesion will not automatically happen by giving free rein to market forces. Second, existing tools—whether related or unrelated

to the economic and social cohesion policy—have only a limited impact on reducing territorial differences. Third, territorial disparities are assuming new forms; they are being produced on a constantly smaller scale and are accumulative. Fourth, territorial cohesion weaknesses are very costly and will become even more so in the future. Fifth, the population remains attached to the European territorial model of a balanced occupation of space and broad diversity, despite evolving practices; it is becoming increasingly aware of this issue.

Among the major studies conducted, those produced by the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON) are outstanding. Indeed, their purpose is to summarize the status of opinions at a given moment of time and to announce future policy reorientations.

Building on the conclusions of the Informal Council Meetings of the Ministers for Regional Policy, and on the evaluation studies of the programmes co-financed by Structural Funds, the European Commission took the opportunity of its last three Reports on the Economic and Social Cohesion of the EU to undertake a global review, propose some policy options, and open some avenues of discussion on the subject.

The Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion (2001)⁵ contains, for the first time, a chapter devoted to territorial cohesion. It merely describes the type of problems encountered by certain areas by following a classic geographical typology: rural areas, border areas, coastal areas, mountains and more or less peripheral islands. Three key policy messages should be highlighted: 1) the gap between core and periphery cannot be reduced by the sole differential of production costs; 2) a policy aimed at strengthening the links between core and peripheral areas is preferable to a positive dis

⁵ *Second Report on Economic and Social Cohesion: Unity, Solidarity, Diversity for Europe, Its People and Its Territory*, European Commission, Brussels, 2001.

crimination policy; 3) programmes must be designed to foster networking and experience-sharing with areas confronting similar problems.

Such awareness occurred while the Structural Funds programme and the Single Market were beginning to produce some effects. Recognizing market failures, or, as concerns the European Union, the Single Market's limited capacity to equalize the terms of competition between countries, and above all between regions, it integrated the theories of the "new economic geography" school (Krugman, Fujita et al., Martin). According to these economists who study the contemporary causes of the polarization of development, geography still matters, even in an era of advanced communication technologies. If the determinants of the localization of activities, and therefore of sources of wealth, have changed since the mid-20th century, certain areas are encountering new difficulties and others are still handicapped. Competitiveness naturally promotes the concentration of activities as a result of the search for economies of scale in the industrial sectors, or economies of agglomeration in services (Tewdwr-Jones). In short, globalization and the increasing mobility of production factors have changed the situation for the regions and cities, but not all of them are winners (Venables, Martin).

The Third and Fourth Reports on Economic and Social Cohesion⁶ feature more in-depth analyses of the cost of regional disparities for the Union as a whole by including some precise and updated data on the Central and Eastern Europe's situation. They highlight new territorial dynamics, with the emergence of peripheral growth centres (Helsinki, Dublin), or in the new Member States (Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava, Budapest), as well as the vigour of certain cross-border regions within the EU. They point out two contrasting evolutionary phenomena on an infra-regional scale: first, subur

⁶ Third Report on Economic and Social Cohesion. A New Partnership for Cohesion: Convergence, Competitiveness, Cooperation, European Commission, Brussels, 2004.

Fourth Report on Economic and Social Cohesion: Growing Regions, Growing Europe, European Commission, Brussels, 2007.

banization, which restores a certain vitality to countrysides, with negative impacts on the environment and on social cohesion for abandoned urban districts, and second, the continuing decline of predominantly agricultural rural areas.

The Third Report underscores the cumulative nature of the economic, technological and social (as well as cultural) weaknesses, which coincide with certain geographical handicaps. For its part, the Fourth Report stresses the negative externalities linked with the phenomena of agglomeration or urban sprawl attributable to a poor command of European territorial development, such as environmental degradation through the destruction of natural areas, or transport-related air pollution, the loss of time in traffic jams, damage to public health, the growing cost of land, etc.

Furthermore, at the end of the 1990s, as the result of an inter-governmental impetus, ESPON was created to capitalize on information derived from academic research on the socio-economic and physical transformations of the European space. It made it possible to compile, in the course of its early years of existence, a particularly rich and diverse amount of research. Most of these studies justify the relevance of a territorial cohesion policy by pointing out the uneven impacts of past and future sectoral policies on the territory (Melbye).

As such, **the prospective paper, “Scenarios on the Territorial Future of Europe,”**⁷ finalized in the spring of 2007, constitutes an invaluable and unifying teaching tool. In order to come up with a series of particularly impressive maps on what the future of Europe might look like in 2030, three integrated scenarios were formulated: the first is trend-oriented, the second is guided by competitiveness-oriented public policies, and the third is the outcome of a policy aimed at strengthening economic, social and territorial cohesion. Several conclusions emerge from these scenarios,

⁷ *Scenarios on the territorial future of Europe / Territorial Futures* (<http://www.espon.eu>)

which confirm findings drawn up by the Commission and occasionally point to even more pronounced trends.

For example, according to ESPON, while new constraints such as migratory pressures, aging populations, climate change, globalization and increasing mobility affect the EU as a whole, all regions are not affected in the same way. In the medium-to-long term, not only will the repercussions of these changes be geographically concentrated, but risk exposure and fragility will vary considerably from one city or region to the other. Moreover, our development model creates territorialized inequalities, leading to an increased polarization of the urban structure, and even to spatial segregation phenomena when dealing with smaller scales. In the future, growth will be attained at the cost of increased disparities and of a marginalization of certain primarily rural areas, both of which may result in additional global costs related to environmental degradation and/or the worsening of internal social tensions.

Although some policies have corrective capacities, others, such as the promotion of technological innovations, have destabilizing effects. Failure to coordinate sectoral policies also has a negative impact (Lennert). Ultimately, territorial cohesion requires, more than a single remedial regional policy, preliminary arbitrations for all sectoral policies and the various levels of governance, from the local to the EU level.

These analyses and the conclusions to which they lead cannot be ignored inasmuch as they challenge certain components of the Lisbon Strategy and of the competition policy (Prezioso). However, they are not the product of an ideological bias, and are indeed supported by a comprehensive body of statistics collected, among others, within the framework of Structural Fund assessments. In the past fifteen years, the discourse has obviously taken on a more incisive tone due to awareness of the trend towards increasing inequalities that is fuelling Europeans' scepticism with respect to the

European construction. This situation does not bode well for any compromise which the European Commission first, and the Member States next, will have to make if they choose to take the objective of territorial cohesion seriously.

III – Constraints and pitfalls of realizing the objective

Currently, the practical implementation of the territorial cohesion objective may confront numerous obstacles (CPMR). Indeed, the Structural Funds programme for the next seven years has just gotten underway (Polverari). From now until 2013, **there is very little manoeuvring room left** in budgetary terms, inasmuch as the heads of state are rather inclined to favour the status quo based on a strict computation of the new budget appropriations aimed at leaving their national “net balances” unchanged. Legally speaking, the broad support for the slogan “better regulation” calls for restraint, because it barely conceals a frank hostility toward any new constraint or any new project originating from the European Commission, which would be viewed as a bureaucratic offensive. Lastly, from a political standpoint, local, regional and national authorities have a highly scrupulous idea of what respecting the principle of subsidiarity actually entails.

In other words, any proposal to define a framework for promoting territorial cohesion on a European level must be formulated in such a way as to avoid the risk of:- over-regulation, which could lead to a stalemate or paralyze the implementation of other policies, if the preliminary territorial impact analyses were too strictly applied with suspensive effects;

- funds being spread too thinly, which would result in bargaining between countries anxious to reap new revenue without increasing their contribution;
- an overbid, which would be bound to happen if too many beneficiaries were permitted to claim specific handicaps: mountains, coastal areas, islands, borders, etc.;
- Member States being induced to focus on their “fair return,” and therefore to translate each criteria into a budgetary amount that could easily be imputed *a priori* to a territory or types of territories, and thus to a country.

It must also anticipate having to answer to latent accusations of:

- diverting the regions and countries from their efforts in favour of competitiveness and innovation, and from misappropriating the Community funds allocated by the Lisbon Strategy;
- reducing the European intervention’s efficiency by targeting beneficiaries with a lesser leverage effect, rather than focusing on the most prosperous regions.

In view of the current debates on budgetary reviews, as well as the progress made last year with the adoption of the Territorial Agenda, four questions need to be asked as a matter of priority:

3.1. How should “territorial cohesion” be defined?

Most European institutions and local authority networks have developed their own analyses. In view of the inability to arrive at an indisputable definition of the concept, the policy to be pursued, and its method of implementation, their contributions constitute a nebulous body of nuanced opinions rather than any fundamental disagreements.

All of them agree on the necessity of not being confined to the Treaty of Lisbon’s list, namely *“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 mountainous regions.”*⁸

In the Third Report, the Commission offers several definitions which relate to complementary approaches. The first follows the line of thought of the third dimension of cohesion: *“... the objective is to help achieve a more balanced development by reducing existing disparities, avoiding territorial imbalances and by making both sectoral policies which have a spatial impact and regional policy more coherent. The concern is also to improve territorial integration and encourage cooperation between regions.”* The second definition focuses more on Europeans’ activities and lives, in reference to the Treaty of Amsterdam *“Despite the difficulties of some regions, equality of access to basic facilities, essential services and knowledge—to what are termed ‘Services of General Economic Interest’—for everyone wherever they happen to live....”*

⁸ Future Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

The European Parliament⁹ seems to favour this second definition by advocating an “*integrated approach to territorial cohesion*,” and by emphasizing its contribution to European integration because of the restoration of equal opportunity for all European citizens, regardless of where they reside. As it is open to a positive discrimination approach, it pleads for the allocation of sufficient budgetary means.

The Committee of the Regions tends to focus on territorial aspects on the grounds that “the territorial cohesion objective is horizontal in nature,” and that it constitutes an indispensable complement that is indissociable from the two other cohesion components. However, it would favourably consider a specific mechanism for regions with permanent handicaps, outermost regions, fragile rural areas and others.¹⁰ In such a framework, territorial cohesion would be presented as the advent of a solidarity between territories following the assertion of solidarity among individuals at the European level.¹¹

The European Economic and Social Committee is of a similar opinion, stressing the importance of introducing a common vision of the European territory and of committing Member States to better coordinate their territorial strategies by means of an open coordination method.¹² As part of the project to grant “*genuine equal opportunity among the territories*,” it also advocates adopting a specific policy for the regions with permanent handicaps, based on the principles of permanence, positive discrimination and proportionality in order to take into account the diverse situations.¹³

9 Resolution PE 396.678 of 29/1/2008 (Report by A. Guellec) on the Fourth Report on Cohesion.

10 CdR Draft opinion 140/2005 of 16/11/2005 on the Communication from the Commission on Community Strategic Guidelines, 2007-2013.

11 Speech by Michel Delebarre: “The Lisbon Strategy and Territorial Cohesion: Towards a New Kind of European Governance,” in Amsterdam on 28/6/2006.

12 EESC Opinion 601/2007 of 20/3/2007 on the Territorial Agenda.

13 EESC Opinion 140/2005 of 19/1/2005 on “How to assure a better integration of regions suffering from permanent natural and structural handicaps

The Council of Ministers, through the Territorial Agenda, would rather focus on certain aspects of the first definition, stressing the need for cooperation between the various actors and for improving the coherence of sectoral policies which have a territorial impact.

Thus, an array of presumptions emerges on how territorial cohesion and its scope might be defined: territorial cohesion designates a state of the European space in which the differences between territories are reduced or are at least made acceptable, in order for all Europeans to be able to enjoy comparable lifestyles and sustainable development, and in which ties between territories are likely to create a sense of belonging to the Community.

As for its scope, there seems to be no opposition—at least in this preliminary stage of the debate—to the fact that the principle of territorial cohesion should be generally enforceable (Tödtling-Schönhofer et al., 2008). In other words, all public policies should aim to reduce territorial disparities, or at least maintain existing balances on the EU territory. This is tantamount to assessing the territorial impact of all sectoral policies, and at all levels of governance.

3.2. Will the Territorial Agenda be sufficient?

The text, which was adopted by the 27 Ministers responsible for territorial issues¹⁴ presents the promotion of territorial cohesion as “*a continuous process of policy cooperation by all territorial development actors and stakeholders on a political, administrative and technical level,*” which it describes as “*territorial governance.*” For each of the territorial development priorities—urban polycentrism, coordination between the cities and

¹⁴ *Towards a More Competitive and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions*, Territorial Agenda of the European Union, Informal Council Meeting of the Ministers Responsible for Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion, Leipzig, 25 May 2007.

rural areas, regional “clusters” for competition and innovation, strengthening and extension of trans-European networks, trans-European risk management, including the effects of climate change, and the enhancement of environmental and cultural resources—it formulates recommendations by way of policy guidelines.

The Territorial Agenda denotes progress in several directions, by recognizing the necessity of integrating territorial concerns into the main policy decisions made at the European, national and regional levels, of coordinating public and private actors’ activities, and to reach a consensus on the practical measures that best exemplify the meaning of “territorial cohesion.” In practical terms, it is the first step of an intergovernmental coordination to compel interaction between the territorial and the sectoral. Its aim is to make Ministers responsible for territorial issues, and their regional correspondents, emissaries who will influence their peers responsible for sectoral projects.

The aim of the First Action Programme,¹⁵ adopted under a Portuguese Presidency at the end of 2007, is to immediately implement the Territorial Agenda. It contains a rather long and still vague series of recommendations and the commitment—based on the major European projects’ timetable to be debated over the next three years—to ensure consideration (or even approval) of a territorial approach to these issues.

At this stage, it illustrates the limitations of an exercise that depends on the good will of peers and an extensive coordination effort, knowing that the manoeuvring room is still narrow between, on the one hand, the various levels’ prerogatives, and on the other, the sectoral rationales ill-disposed towards a transversal approach (CPMR). Regardless, the process will take time and now more closely resembles an attempt to create a “community”

¹⁵ *First Action Programme for the Implementation of the EU Territorial Agenda*, Informal Council Meeting of the Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning and Regional Development, Ponta Delgada - Azores, 23-24 November 2007.

in the contemporary sense of the term applied to Internet users, than a binding work programme configuration.

Moreover, and as might be expected, the Territorial Agenda carefully avoids advocating or committing itself as to the best way to reduce territorial disparities, leaving this task to the cohesion policy or to other high-budget policies.

3.3. Will the cohesion policy be sufficient?

As far as the European level is concerned, a rapid assessment shows that the current Structural Funds programme supports the promotion of territorial cohesion (Hallgeir) by means of an increase in the EU's co-financing rate for certain regions suffering from permanent natural handicaps. The same applies to specific programmes for the outermost regions and for the territorial cooperation objective's cross-border strand (Polverari). Furthermore, in the past, among the methods associated with Structural Funds, networking regions or areas encountering the same type of structural or natural problems on a European scale were certainly the most productive in terms of social and policy innovation. The limited budgets allocated to these Community initiative programmes or to the thematic pilot projects have not prevented them from stimulating the regions concerned. However, the emphasis placed since 2007 on technological innovation as a unifying theme of the transnational and interregional cooperation strands may cause these networks to be to distance themselves from territorial cohesion concerns.

The territorial dimension was apparently included in the convergence and regional competitiveness objectives,¹⁶ but the programmes' impact on improving territorial cohesion is not readily perceptible (Zonneveld). Indeed, the purpose of these programmes is to help the regions make up for their socio-economic lag, or recover from a crisis, without distinguishing between those which are also suffering from physical constraints, and the others.

Lastly, it may be noted to the credit of the cohesion policy that its rules of operation, such as the multi-annual strategic programming and the partnership amplify, on a national and regional level, the beneficial impact of the Structural Funds on territorial cohesion (Lennert, Tödttling-Schönhofer et al., 2007, Batchler).

Aside from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF), territorial cohesion is explicitly taken into account in the interventions of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and of the European Fisheries Fund (EFF). It is also considered by the competition policy within the framework of aid for purposes of regional development.

However, many sectoral policies whose territorial impact is certain often prove to be ambivalent. A good example of that is the Common Agricultural Policy (Schucksmith): its “second pillar,” devoted to rural development, includes diverse mechanisms aimed at spatial rebalancing, particularly EAFRD's Axes 3 and 4, which are for the most part oriented towards support for the development of activities in rural areas and a compensatory allowance scheme for areas with natural handicaps. Conversely, its “first pillar,” exclusively devoted to direct subsidies to agriculture, does not take this into account, and may even have an aggravating impact. In fact,

¹⁶ *La prise en compte de la dimension territoriale et urbaine dans les CRSN and OP 2007-2013*, a Working Paper for the European Commission, May 2007.

the 2003 Reform of direct subsidies, and the introduction of decoupling weakened certain regions characterized by small farms or by structure-intensive crops whose activity is subject to multi-annual production cycles, such as livestock production, or horticulture. A somewhat similar dichotomic analysis could be made for the transport policy, the energy policy or the trade policy.

Not only is the cohesion policy incapable on its own of reducing all territorial disparities, but it will never manage to compensate for all of the imbalances caused by other sectoral policies (OECD). As has already been pointed out, territorial cohesion could be substantially improved by ensuring sectoral policy cohesion and by streamlining programmes (Hallgeir). It is therefore necessary to combine regulatory and budgetary resources, without omitting to provide the measures' specific details (Lennert, Meijers et al.).

3.4. On what criteria should a European intervention be based?

From the beginning, the territorial aspect was taken into account by the economic and social cohesion policy through eligibility criteria, such as the level of regional wealth or remoteness for the convergence objective, the low population density, the latitude, the demographic decline, socio-economic fragility for rural areas or those undergoing conversion, or derelicted urban districts for the other objectives, and the proximity of a border for the cross-border cooperation objective. Furthermore, historically the cohesion policy was not the only one, since, as they were initially conceived, agricultural measures for less-favoured areas depended exclusively on natural handicap criteria related to altitude and latitude.¹⁷

¹⁷ At present, socio-economic criteria predominately dictate the classification of these areas.

At the current stage of the debate, the formulation of specific indicators raises a technical problem compounded by a policy problem (Grasland and Hamez). Technically speaking, historic series should be available with the assurance that they can define homogenous groups of territories. Without trying to forecast future decisions on what criteria will be adopted in the future, it is clear that permanent territorial components are emerging which, overall, correspond to physical data (altitude, latitude, remoteness, isolation, etc.), and temporary components which may sometimes be required to last and coincide rather with socio-economic data (demography, population density, fragility of the economic fabric, etc.) (Spiekermann et al., Briggulio et al.). This categorization is not absolute, since certain components deemed permanent can prove to be temporary, as was the case with the border regions behind the Iron Curtain, or on the EU's external border, which is now located in the centre (the Austrian state of Burgenland, the Øresund region including Copenhagen and Malmo, and the German Land of Braunschwig). Conversely, climate change can turn temporary problems encountered by regions—until now considered as privileged—into one with permanent constraints (a dry area becomes arid, repeated floods caused by a rise in sea level, etc.).

Past experience has shown that the criteria issue also entails several policy pitfalls, in that it is likely to automatically give rise to a right to compensation or a privileged status. It is very easy to imagine all the abuses that might ensue, such as using clientelism to become eligible for aid, or assistance-seeking behaviours, to which the recognition of a permanent right might lead. Such a case would lead to the contradiction of the cohesion policy's founding philosophy, which favours a development approach rather than one based on compensation or redistribution. Another shortcoming, if territorial cohesion were to lead to the introduction of new zoning, would be that boundary decisions are most often viewed as arbitrary at the local level.

Considering the contradictory recommendations made by institutional or non-governmental stakeholders, and the repeated requests addressed to the European Commission to more thoroughly process the data and to constitute relevant indicators, the field is far from having been cleared. Furthermore, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, and to the extent that the European intervention will fall within a competence framework shared with the national authorities, the European level is particularly qualified to play a watchdog role.

In view of the issues at stake, prudence is called for, and solutions should be sought first in methodology. It would therefore seem advisable to distinguish between the definition of “fragility” (identify pertinent indicators and their level) and the decision to take action.

IV – Remain fuzzy and move gradually



As seen in Part 2, although the promotion of territorial cohesion looks bright with the trend towards deeper inequalities, its first steps may well prove difficult. Opposition will certainly arise in an attempt to reduce this new objective to insignificance, while all possible abuses will be lying in wait for it and, along with those, the risk of a long-lasting disqualification.

Rendering the principle of territorial cohesion operational amounts to defining the instruments and methods of intervention by proposing a timetable. Indeed, in Community practice, the **roadmap** technique has always shown itself to be highly effective. The obstacles will be that much easier to overcome if proposals are put back into a more general medium-term framework and staggered over time. Furthermore, to maintain some leeway in budgetary negotiations and so as not to encourage excessive lengthening of the list of potential beneficiaries, it is vital to remain vague by capitalizing on **the possibility of combining the temporary, proportio**

nal and conditional nature of certain compensations and on implementation flexibility.

As for the content of a possible policy, all experts and practitioners are of the opinion that it is not a question of creating a policy *ex-nihilo*, but rather of initiating a process to streamline, strengthen, organize and develop the consistency of all existing mechanisms (Tödting-Schönhofer et al. 2008). This exercise should be carried out on the various geographical scales to reduce territorial disparities of any sort, from the European level to the urban district, for reasons of common sense as well as efficiency.

According to a draft formulated by the Commission in 2004, we see that **the policy was to comprise three dimensions**, with no single component superseding any of the two others:¹⁸ the first was to be corrective and aimed at “*reducing existing disparities*,” the second was to be preventive and to “*improve the coherence of sectoral policies having a territorial impact*,” and the third was to be an incentive, “*strengthening territorial integration by fostering cooperation*.”

With respect to the reduction of disparities, the anticipated innovation will probably result from **a more systematic assertion of positive discrimination**.¹⁹ Indeed, the set of measures likely to stimulate the development of handicapped or weakened regions is already available in regional development programmes and certain sectoral programmes (transportation, energy, education, SMEs, new communication technologies, etc.). Some improvements would, however, be possible if there were an inventory of the most effective and efficient existing measures for redressing territorial imbalances. On the other hand, what is lacking is **a compensation mechanism for handicaps** linked with remoteness, low population density,

18 These three components were stated in the Third Report on Cohesion, and since then, no consensus has emerged to either decide between them or to disqualify one of them.

19 Statement no. 30 of the Treaty of Amsterdam provided for the option of having recourse, for the benefit of the outermost regions, to “*specific measures when that can be justified*.”

relief or climate, which make economic activities, investments, building infrastructures, organizing population services, and even daily living, more costly, less profitable and more complex. Therefore, by combining financial aid and legal mechanisms, territorial disparities should be able to be reduced either by compensatory measures to lower the profitability threshold in these areas, or by dissuasive and disadvantageous measures addressing other areas.

So far, the Ministers responsible for territorial issues, and the experts, have focused their attention on the preventive approach, as shown by the content of the Territorial Agenda. For the moment, the recommendations remain within the realm of voluntarism, but they may well lead to a more binding mechanism based on the model of **the open coordination method**. The debate on this issue has been ongoing for several years in academic circles (Faludi, Jouen). No official government position has been recorded along these lines, but such a prospect cannot be excluded in the medium term.

In terms of this same preventive approach aimed at creating a non-discriminating policy framework at the European level, one of the first tasks to accomplish will be to put into effect the principle according to which territorial cohesion must be a part of all policies. For the sake of moderation, however, consideration might be given to **submit to an assessment of any potentially distorting effects only policies exclusive to the EU** (competition, fisheries, trade, customs union, currency) **and those involving shared competence** (internal market, social affairs, agriculture, environment, consumer protection, transportation, trans-European networks, energy, justice, freedom and security, public health, research, cooperation and development). Certain policies clearly seem much more promising, because they are likely to be modified: competition, trade, fisheries, internal market, social affairs, agriculture, environment, transportation, trans-European networks, energy, public health and research.

Lastly, the final range of actions to be broadened concerns the incentives aimed at territories with handicaps. Such regions must be encouraged to optimize their assets, to formulate a territorial strategy in which the various actors and sectoral policies can be synergized, and commit to experimenting while sharing good practices through networking. In view of the limited budgetary means, it is essential to reinstate the role of cooperation as a learning tool. In the short term, that would imply taking advantage of the next mid-term review to radically **reorientate** the interregional cooperation **INTERREG IVC** component **towards territorial, social and policy innovation, and to strengthen Axis 4 of the EAFRD devoted to the LEADER method.**

As for the overall framework, a profiling should be made of **the future economic, social and territorial policy after 2013.** This medium-term perspective will allow for a better understanding of what direction the promotion of territorial cohesion is likely to take and the role that it will play in the 2014-2020 budgetary framework.

Without going into detail, one might conceive of a future cohesion policy comprised of three main blocks: a convergence objective that functions according to a GDP per capita eligibility criterion, a cooperation objective that includes cooperation with external borders, and a territorial cohesion objective that takes into account geographical handicaps and socio-economic handicaps (reconversion, low population density, rural). To the extent that there is often an accumulation of handicaps for a given territory, it should be possible to consider that this objective does not correspond to a resource envelope strictly pre-allocated among beneficiaries, but includes supplementary allowances, for example with an increased EU co-financing rate or overriding aid schemes.

Moreover, the acknowledgement of a territorial handicap could render the region or the area eligible for specific thematic programmes based on

the model of former Community initiative programmes, as is now the case for border regions, the goal being to offer compensation by means of a dynamic, rather than a static, method.

As for implementation, it would seem both crucial not to differ it and wise not to rush into it, but to proceed with it gradually. In view of the European Agenda, the roadmap might consist of two stages:

Immediately, i.e. **by 2009**, it would be proposed:

- **to extend enforceability of the territorial cohesion principle** to the Services of General Interest and to some European sectoral policies, selected in order of priority among those currently being reformed, particularly those that concern competition, trade, fishing, the internal market, social affairs, agriculture, the environment, transportation, trans-European networks, energy, public health and research;
- **to initiate voluntary national policy coordination** and sectoral policy integration, in accordance with Territorial Agenda commitments, and **to encourage regional and local authorities to identify such practices at their level;**
- to prepare the future in a practical way, **by taking stock of the most effective territorial cohesion measures** in the existing regional programmes and **by accumulating good practices** via specific funds provided by INTERREG IVC and Axis 4 of the EAFRD;
- to expand the body of analytical work being done on territorial dynamics in order to devise **some relevant indicators** at more refined levels than exist at this time (NUTS III).

As from 2014, it will be necessary to speed up the process by:

- **extending principle enforceability** to new sectoral policies;
- making coordination mandatory and gradually introducing **an open coordination method for the cohesion** of the European territory;
- **providing adequate funding** of the policy for reduction of territorial

disparities within the framework of the new cohesion policy architecture by including a rural development policy component.

A good portion of the obstacles encountered in the past was due to policy-makers' and the public's lack of awareness on the issues raised by territorial cohesion. It can already be anticipated that introducing compensatory measures based on positive discrimination will be difficult to achieve, both because they will be costly and because they will thwart natural market trends and certain socio-economic behaviours. Therefore such an outcome should be anticipated on the European level by a **vast communication, training and information policy involving local and regional networks.**

Territorial cohesion was not a surprising development; it refers to numerous concepts which specialists have used for years, such as polycentrism, territorial cooperation, multi-level governance and the integrated approach. However, the issue of extending the enforceability of this principle to sectoral policies *a priori* by means of territorial impact studies, and at all levels of governance, is akin to a revolution. It might one day culminate in making all economic actors and public policy-makers accountable for their choices in the name of territorial responsibility, as is already the case with social and environmental responsibility. We have not yet reached that point, but it is high time that we prepare ourselves for it.

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