

# The ESDP, Structural Funds and RDAs

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## 1. History of the ESDP

The year 1999 marked the completion of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP - Williams, 1999b). This was a major landmark in the European Spatial Planning, although there is as yet no formal EU competence, and represented a major step forward for those who advocate that the EU should have a Spatial Policy in order to promote greater coherence between its many sectoral policy instruments.

It is possible to view the ESDP as merely the most recent in a series of studies reviewing the spatial structure of the EU as an entity, following the EUROPE 2000 and EUROPE 2000+ studies by DGXVI (CEC, 1991 and 1994; Williams, 1996). It was under a French presidency at Nantes in 1989 that an informal meeting of ministers decided that work should begin on a project to form what came to be known as the ESDP. Therefore, it can be said that 10 years passed from the time of the first agreement to proceed with the idea to the ESDP's completion.

A little before the Maastricht summit of 1991, the Informal Council in the Hague

decided to take up the Dutch proposal and form a committee of senior national officials with responsibility for spatial planning to meet on a regular basis as the Committee of Spatial Development (CSD). This is the body that has since been instrumental in preparing the ESDP.

In a way, the period 1989-93 can be considered to be one of pre-planmaking during which the institutional infrastructure for the ESDP was set up.

The spatial policy community did not agree as to the scope and form of this document and EU competence was missing.

The period for preparation, survey and scoping was between 1993 and 1997. It was necessary to encourage working methods and mutual understanding between all members of the CSD and those involved in procedures over this period of time.

At a meeting in Noordwijk, Netherlands, in June 1997, of the Informal Council of Spatial Planning Ministers the Draft ESDP (CSD, 1997) was adopted.

Under the UK Presidency, the Informal Council was only able to adopt the so-called «Complete Draft» (CSD, 1998), in Glasgow in June 1998. Meanwhile, a number of transnational seminars on the ES-

DP took place between April 1998 and February 1999. It is possible to consider these as a kind of participation by the public; a contribution to the final ESDP adopted at an Informal Council of Ministers in Potsdam in May 1999 (CSD, 1999).

## **2. The ESDP and the Structural Funds**

Since 1997 the ESDP has become well known, despite the fact that many practicing planners do not understand it in the broadest sense. Its basic aim is to play a part in the development of a more «multi-centred European area» with a more equal regional evolution. A fair amount of suspicion exists concerning its real aim, whereas its range and the role it might play concerning more orthodox and statutory procedures of local and regional planning is often misunderstood (Williams, 1999b).

It is intended that urban funding be «mainstreamed» within the Structural Funds for the 2000-06 funding period. Also critical is the question of the relationship with the Structural Funds, as there cannot be a formal relationship during this period (Williams, 1999b).

What is attractive is that the ESDP could provide the means to a greater transparency in the allocation of Structural Funds and the foundations for a rational overall strategy. Some governments express their opposition, because they cannot understand the need for the ESDP, while others see it playing an unwelcome role because existing levels of benefit could be stratinized (Williams, 1999a).

More widely, under Article 7D of the Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997, the EU is committed to «promoting territorial and

social cohesion». The ESDP could be a significant document, aiding DG XVI (Regional Policies and Cohesion) to evaluate specific sectoral policy initiatives from other DGs, from the standpoint of their contribution to the achievement of territorial cohesion.

## **3. The ESDP and the RDAs**

In the meantime, the ESDP will be tested according to the extent to which it encompasses the discussion on spatial strategies for the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), that is the setting up of devolved regional government institutions. RDAs have been instrumental in the rise of regional policy from the roots upwards in Western Europe and the RDA approach is often said to offer an important addition or alternative to the accepted financial incentives of central government (Halkier and Danson, 1997).

The RDA has the responsibility not only to formulate a regional policy, but also to alter the policies of those regional instruments such as the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs-e.g. in Britain), the Chamber of Commerce and Local Authorities, in order to ensure that all the policies move as one. Those that have external responsibilities (such as the TECs in Britain, which answer to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, regarding their contribution to national targets for employment and training - Benneworth, 1998) also need to change the attitudes of their sponsors beyond the region. Those not at present represented need to be encouraged and motivated to put forward their requirements and interests.

Inside this procedure of internal mobilization, external negotiation and regional mediation the RDA's role is, therefore, to drastically transform the existing casual arrangement of common interests and actions in the regions concerned into one regional agenda, policy and operational strategy.

In order to understand this area better, a greatly extended international survey of regionally based development structures would be necessary to give a wider picture. In-depth studies of the development of individual RDAs, in order to identify patterns of interaction with other elements concerned with regional development would also be required.

#### 4. Conclusions

After Potsdam, the issue to be confronted is whether the intergovernmental process has taken the ESDP as far as possible and whether it will be necessary for the new Commission to own more in order to affect policy as much as its supporters would like it to. As the Regional Policy Committee of the European Parliament puts it, «the intergovernmental dynamic has exhausted its opportunities for action» (European Parliament, 1998:6). The stance of the new Parliament and new Commission will be of great importance to the future of the ESDP.

In view of the fact that regional policy in Europe is slowly forming a complex multilevel operation, this type of research could improve our understanding of the possibilities and limitation of initiatives from the roots upwards and the role of the RDA approach within the general framework of regional policy in Western Europe.

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