
Project:	ESPON ACTAREA
Title:	Policy brief Soft territorial cooperation areas: Renewed territorial governance through the promotion of communities of intent
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What is soft territorial cooperation?

Soft territorial cooperation areas are initiatives that have the following main characteristics:

- They have a medium to long term integrative perspective (i.e. not limited to the implementation of a single project);
- They seek to enhance the capacities of involved players, making them actors of their own development;
- They seek to enhance cooperation to support functional relations and capitalise on a convergence of interests;
- They ambition to renew relations between institutional levels, sectors of activity and types of actors (e.g. NGOs, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies...).

They tend to have 'open' and 'fuzzy' boundaries. They may for example imply that boundaries vary depending on the topic that is addressed or that actors are prepared to change the boundaries over time. However, this is not the most central characteristic of soft cooperation.

Soft territorial cooperation is primarily established to address issues which established 'hard' structures may have difficulties dealing with for different reasons, e.g.:

- They don't have a sufficient organisational flexibility;



- The scales at which they operate do not correspond to the one at which the issue would need to be addressed;
- The identification of issues, objectives and possible measures profits from being dissociated from formal planning procedures, to take on board new perspectives.

Soft territorial cooperation frameworks are therefore **not alternatives, but complements** to 'hard' structures. Handling some aspects of territorial development through 'hard' structures provides the stability that makes it possible to apply 'soft' cooperation approaches to other aspects.

They may operate at the level of functional areas. However, in many cases, the focus is on generating functional integration, rather than on adapting to a 'functional area'. In other words, **'functional areas' are approached as products of policy design and implementation** rather than as external variables.

The starting point is in most cases an informed assumption regarding the existence of a **latent 'community of intent'**. Proponents of soft cooperation identify a convergence of interests among actors that is embedded in the territory to which they belong. Soft territorial cooperation initiatives seek to capitalise on this convergence of interests, typically by identifying potential win-win situations. From the perspective of public authorities, the outcome can be enhanced well-being and prosperity and territorial cohesion.

Soft territorial cohesion is not an appropriate solution when dealing with conflictual issues, or issues with a potentially asymmetric outcome (e.g. in terms of resource allocation).

Why are policies to promote soft territorial cooperation needed?

Cooperation is not an end in itself. It is generally a process driven by the identification of issues that are either not addressed, or which are dealt with in a sub-optimal way by established 'hard' structures. Soft forms of cooperation help to design and implement result-oriented solutions to which relevant actors have developed a sense of ownership and commitment. One avoids the creation of additional administrative layers. Furthermore, it often makes it possible to act outside of traditional frameworks, e.g. through joint actions of private and public actors at different levels. However, soft forms of cooperation only remain active as long as involved actors considers it is of added-value to them. Soft territorial cooperation over a limited time span may for example address measures to accompany new infrastructure development and reuse of derelict industrial areas.

A number of different aspects may justify top-down policies to promote soft territorial cooperation:

- (1) Soft territorial cooperation is generally about thinking outside of the box and about challenging established relations between actors. Regional and local authorities spontaneously engage in such practices to variable degrees, and an external point of view can often help to identify their potential added value. Top-down measures may first help to promote soft territorial cooperation by establishing that such practices are called for under certain circumstances.



- (2) Local and regional authorities do not necessarily possess the required competencies and resources needed to facilitate soft territorial cooperation processes involving diverse actors. Organising a participative consensus-building process requires specific know-hows. Top-down policies may therefore provide training that enables local and regional authorities to facilitate soft territorial cooperation practices. They can also support self-conscious collective efforts to define the goals of cooperation, and their complementarity in relation to established 'hard' structures.
- (3) European and national authorities can help local and regional actors to compile and disseminate evidence needed to develop soft territorial cooperation. Mapshots and institutional mappings are example of tools that may be useful for this purpose (see boxes 1 and 2 below).
- (4) Exchanges of good practice constitute a significant source of inspiration. Such exchanges can be facilitated by providing databases and reports that compile cooperation practices.
- (5) Soft territorial cooperation often requires dialogues between levels. Typically, cooperation partners position themselves in relation to national and European policies. European, national or regional funding sources may need to be mobilised. Top-down policies to promote soft forms of territorial cooperation may help to establish soft territorial cooperation bodies as valid dialogue partners of authorities responsible for the design and implementation of sectoral or territorial policies at the national and European levels.

Box 1 Example of a Mapshot: Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area

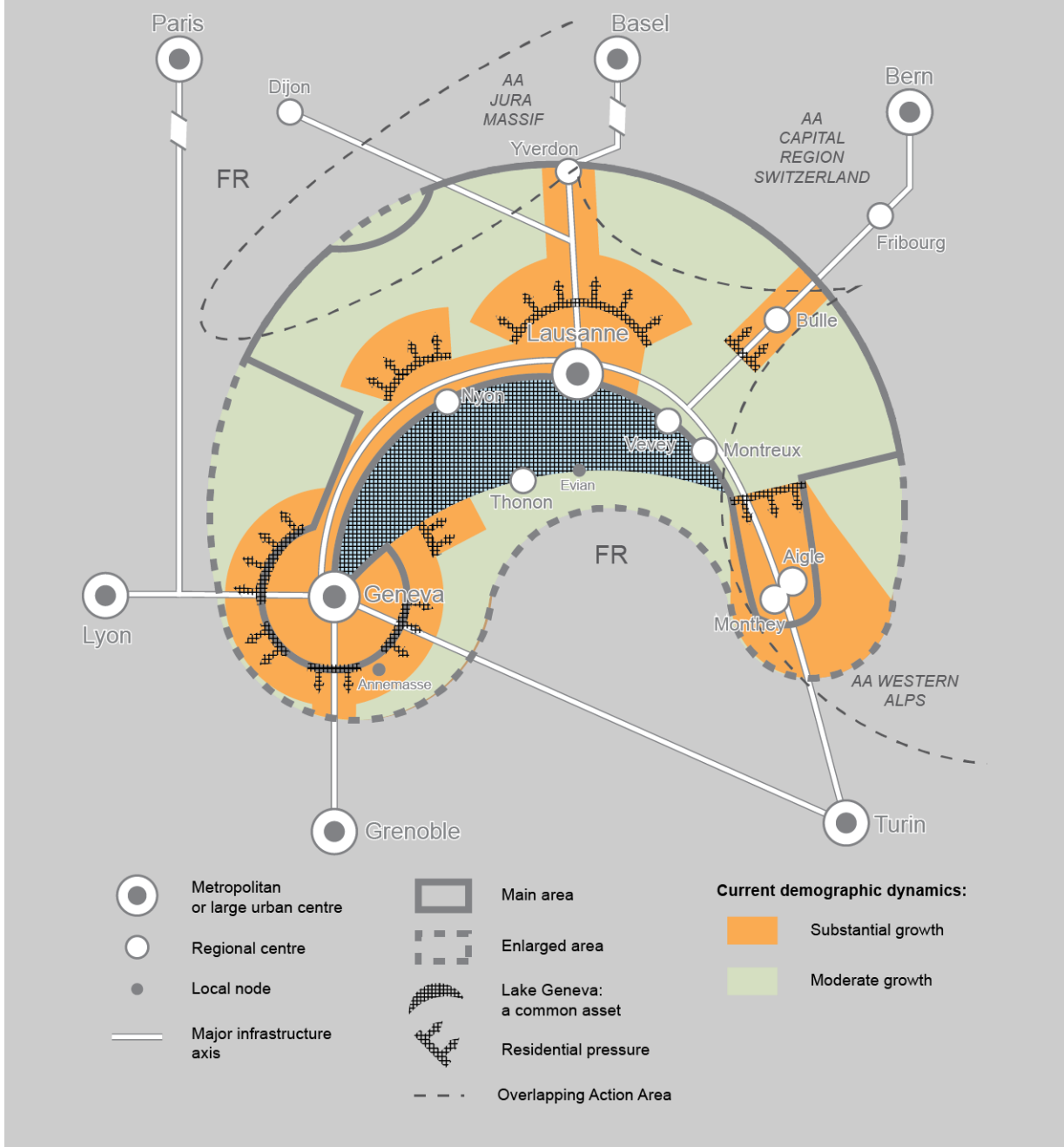
Most actors that engage in soft territorial cooperation have a mental representation of the cooperation territory. This representation may for example include defining features, social and economic dividing lines and main axes of cooperation and exchange. In many cases, different actors will have different mental representation. The mapshot can help to identify the diversity of prevailing mental representations among cooperation partners. As part of its production, their perceptions are also confronted to patterns and trends derived from available statistics. This helps to stimulate a dialogue, either challenging preconceived views or identifying deficiencies in commonly used data.

Mapshot are built on the basis of exchanges between stakeholders and experts. The first task is to graphically synthesise the **cooperation rationale**, based on the arguments brought forward to justify the cooperation initiative. In the case of the Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area, this is the shared lake and the need to manage residential pressures. Second, the **cooperation landscape** is described: what sub-entities have a tradition of cooperation, what inherited 'dividing lines' need to be considered. Third, **socio-economic patterns and trends** considered relevant by cooperation partners and those emerging from available data are compared and combined. Finally, this information is combined in a consistent way. The objective in all steps remove all unnecessary 'noise', i.e. keep only features and patterns that have a structuring effect.

Mapshots are a basis for joint reflection and dialogue. They are not designed to be immediately readable without an accompanying text.



The mapshot of the Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area shows that development in the cooperation area is unbalanced. Population and economic activities as well as transport infrastructure concentrates on the northern (Swiss) shore of the Lake. In the core metropolitan area, a continuous linear agglomeration is emerging between Lausanne and Geneva that generates sprawl in their rural hinterlands and put neighbouring regions under pressure. Main cooperation issues are therefore to manage and channel growth and to contain urban sprawl. Around the city of Geneva, proximity to the French border creates specific challenges. The functional agglomeration extends far beyond this border. Differences in employment opportunities, purchasing power and property prices generate substantial commuter flows, tensions on housing markets and traffic congestion.

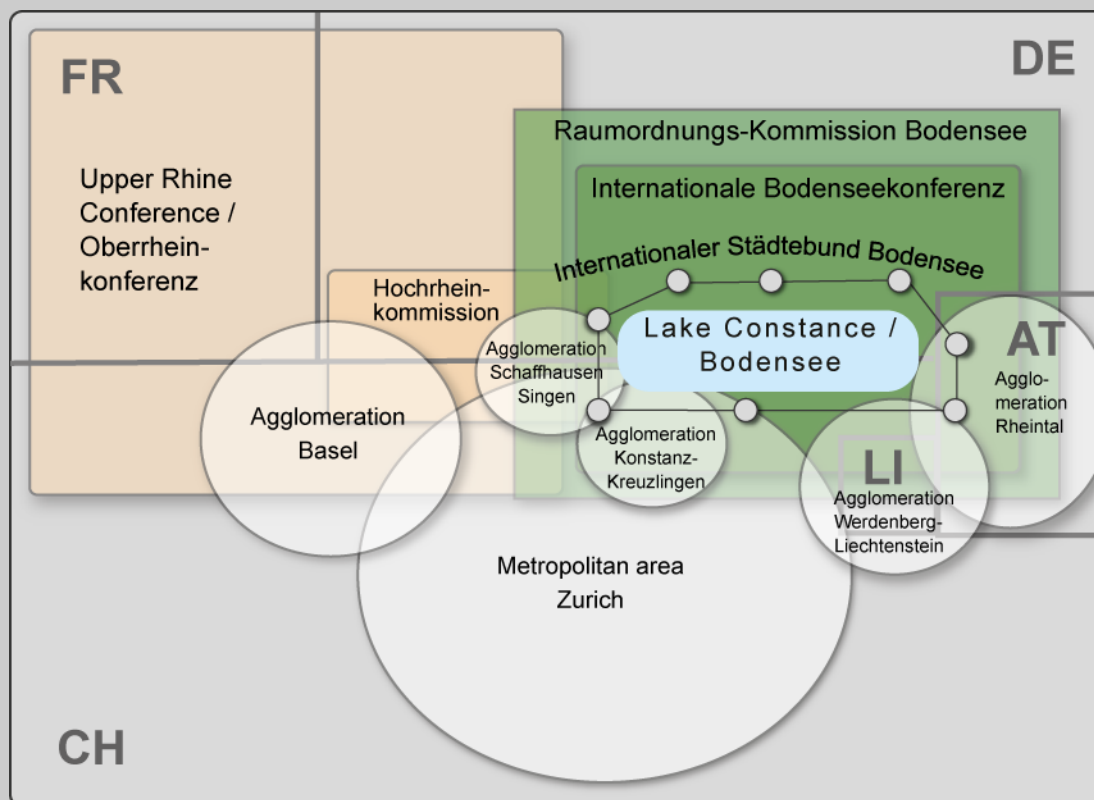




Box 2 Example of an institutional map: Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance

Institutional mappings synthesise geographic overlaps of administrative units and cooperation areas of relevance for the targeted cooperation instance. They are an important element of the case study analysis and a tool for stakeholders to capitalize on existing cooperation. They help to understand the institutional context and cooperation setting that has been established so far and synthesises how cooperation instances may overlap (in geographic terms), are implemented in parallel in adjacent areas or are embedded in each other at different scales.

In the case of the Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance (Raumordnungskonferenz Bodensee - ROK-B), the institutional map first shows the proximity with the International Lake Constance Conference which covers almost the same area. ROK-B also interacts with the city network 'Städtebund Bodensee', which is a platform for exchanges between cities situated directly at the lake. The cooperation are also overlaps with the Upper Rhine conference and the Trinational Metropolitan Region of the Upper Rhine which are congruent cooperation perimeters.





Soft territorial cooperation as a main building block in the European pursuit of territorial cohesion

The 2011, Territorial State and Perspectives of the European Union, which is the background document for the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020, considers that “*progress towards territorial cohesion entails a permanent and cooperative process involving the various actors and stakeholders of territorial development at political, administrative and technical levels*” and states that “*this process of cooperation is called territorial governance*”. It further mentions that “*territorial governance should be able to manage different functional territories and ensure the balanced and coordinated contribution of the local, regional, national, and European actors*”.

Soft territorial cooperation instances can be described as attempts to implement these principles of the State and perspectives report. They widen the range of actors involved in policy design and implementation, and seek to promote functional integration at levels at which regional and national authorities may find it difficult to operate.

The European principle of territorial cohesion could be pursued through the systematic promotion of soft territorial cooperation at all geographic levels. This makes it possible to take the focus away from the defining features ‘harmonious territorial development’, on which it has been difficult to find a consensus since the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon. Instead, policies that systematically encourage public and private actors to identify and strengthen “communities of intent”, and to act on the basis of the consensual options they elaborate, could constitute one of the pillars of a European territorial cohesion policy. This would imply **reframing territorial cohesion with a focus on policy design and implementation methods, rather than on specific policy objectives**.

Soft territorial cooperation can develop at all levels generating new perspectives and challenges

The ESPON ACTAREA project has mainly analysed soft cooperation at a geographical level that stretches beyond functional urban areas and in many cases includes multiple cities and their hinterlands. This choice was based on the example of Swiss Action Areas, which constituted the starting point for the study. However, there are striking resemblances between processes of dialogue and consensus-seeking observed in these fuzzy cooperation areas, and those described at the level of macro-regional strategies or local action groups in other projects.

At all these levels, soft cooperation develops on the basis of involved stakeholders’ conviction regarding its added value in relation to established ‘hard structures’. They observe issues that are not addressed in a satisfactory way, and try to establish the partnerships needed to find alternative solutions. Geographic boundaries can then be specified on the basis of actors that need to be involved in the cooperation to develop better strategies and implement them. The cooperation territory is not a predefined geographic unit within which sustainable development is promoted, but dynamically agreed upon on the basis of ‘functional areas’ of relevance when addressing issues identified by stakeholders.



This opens perspectives for a more result-oriented territorial policy. Cooperation territories may emerge and disappear as framework conditions and goals evolve. Multiple cooperation territories may co-exist, with overlaps when necessary, each of which following a geographic logic that is adapted to the issues it addresses. However, overall consistency is not guaranteed, neither at the level of individual territories nor when considering relations between different levels. Cooperation initiatives, may as well harden and become part of the institutional landscape after having reached their initial objectives. Active consideration of these initiatives as part of wider policy implementation may help to uncover potentials of 'sleeping but persistent' cooperation initiatives. A constant renewal and re-orientation of soft cooperation forms needs an active policy process, which in turn may help to define, redefine and amend the regional identities and joint objectives.

A territorial policy that embraces and encourages cooperation is therefore necessarily complemented by arrangements to monitor the geographic and thematic focus of cooperation instances and to compensate for potential imbalances. This may entail a challenging co-existence of different logics. On the one hand, it presupposes a laissez-faire attitude seeking to capitalise on cooperation dynamics initiated by actors with capacities and resource-mobilisation skills required to set them up. On the other hand, pro-active interventions may be needed in other areas, either to stimulate cooperation that does not emerge spontaneously or to support development through other types of incentives.

Swiss Action Areas attempt to overcome this challenge, by developing a national framework for cooperation across the entire territory based on a dialogue involving national authorities and key territorial stakeholders. Experience shows that major communication efforts would be needed to convey the added-value of such a framework to actors at the regional and sub-regional level. Many of these actors develop their cooperation initiatives independently of the national framework. A dynamic, cooperation based approach to balanced territorial development requires that extensive resources are allocated to dialogues and exchanges.

Soft territorial cooperation as a component of future Cohesion Policy

There have been debates on the future of transnational ETC programmes in areas where macro-regional strategies have been adopted. Some argue that it is not purposeful to have parallel sets of strategies. It has been suggested that ETC programmes could become mere 'funding streams' supporting the implementation of macro-regional strategies. Others propose to transfer the responsibility for transnational cooperation from ETC programmes to regional and national 'mainstream' ESIF programmes. Activities implemented to pursue macro-regional strategies would then need to combine funding from different such programmes, depending on the issue they address and on involved cooperation partners. In either case, the logic of 'thematic concentration' of Operation Programmes needs to be revised, as the guiding principle for funding would be compliance with the macro-regional strategy.

There is a parallel between these discussions at the macro-regional level and perspectives that emerge when considering possible roles for soft territorial cooperation at the sub- and inter-regional levels in the forthcoming programming periods. The ESPON ACTAREA review of soft territorial cooperation instances has shown that they are consistent with Cohesion Policy principles of 'partnership' and



'subsidiarity'. Furthermore, they are generally examples of pragmatic and result-oriented frameworks for dialogue and joint action of public and private actors. They seek to overcome limitations of established 'hard structures' by developing renewed and improved governance approaches. They are therefore in a number of respects consistent with ambitions associated to Cohesion Policy. It therefore may seem purposeful to make it possible for ESIF to provide funding for soft territorial cooperation initiatives that have developed consistent strategic plans and have designed corresponding concrete measures.

However, soft territorial cooperation instances in many cases cross boundaries of programming areas. Their thematic focus is defined by the partnerships; they are not necessarily consistent with the thematic objectives of operational programmes operating in their area. A Cohesion Policy that would focus on supporting the implementation of policy options developed in the framework of soft territorial cooperation instances may therefore need to revise its perspective on the concentration of resources, with criteria focusing decision-making processes rather than on areas and themes. This may presuppose frameworks inspired by the Swiss Action Areas, to specify European principles for soft territorial cooperation. On this basis, existing solutions to combine financial instruments with ESIF could be further developed to facilitate the implementation of strategic options identified by soft territorial cooperation instances. While opening ESIF to soft territorial cooperation could allow Cohesion Policy to be less constrained by administrative boundaries and closer to the needs of European citizens and businesses, it therefore presupposes new approaches to its design and implementation principles.