



# Thematic Action Plan 'Perspective for all people and places'

## Context

European territories are experimenting an ever-transforming pattern of socio-economic features and institutional structures; and while building cohesion and supporting convergence are at the heart of the policies, measures and actions, there is still a great need to understand which and how interacting factors are shaping the territories and impacting the communities. For the ESPON Programme space, the accumulated evidence displays that diversity of development models (as a more comprehensive concept) is still an essential asset for the prosperous, inclusive, harmonious and sustainable growth.

As the 8<sup>th</sup> Cohesion report highlights *that over the past several decades, EU cohesion policy has reduced territorial disparities, boosted economic growth, and improved the quality of life. It has played a central role in promoting the upwards social convergence advocated by the European Pillar of Social Rights. The new 2021–2027 cohesion policy programmes will continue this good work.* Aligning to this vision, the TAP comes to support policymakers in all phases, aiming to identify the best tools and approaches to (continue) delivering a more competitive, prosperous, socially cohesive, territorially balanced and future-proof Union – for the long-term (course of action highlighted in the foreword of the 8<sup>th</sup> Cohesion Report, by commissioners Elisa Ferreira and Nicolas Schmit).

However, as argued in the open consultation on the TAP theme, territorial challenges or opportunities must be addressed with a higher degree of geographical sensitivity, better capturing and understanding of territorial drivers, impacts, flows, or linkages within the local socio-economic context, and better designing territorial-focused policies.

## Challenges specific to the TAP theme

Over the past decade, in the ESPON space, transformations occurred at a faster pace than they used to: new societal challenges have emerged, and people's choices are changing as a result of different crises or shocks, but also as a response to the urgent need to protect and responsibly use resources of all types.

The role that all places are playing is reassessed through different strategical documents (e.g., produced by the Joint Research Centre, Eurostat, OECD, World Bank) unveiling a new path, focused on the improvement or creation of more attractive and people-centred places. The way people interact and use the built and natural environment will come into a new phase, and as it is outlined in the New Leipzig Charter, the principles of good governance incorporate as well good spatial planning and quality design to secure attractive, inclusive, durable and adaptable places, enhancing the quality of life for both individuals and communities.

The consultation process, the screening of relevant documents and internal reasoning, revealed that territories are facing different challenges and are impacted by steady demographic trends (e.g. lower birth rates, in-and outmigration, foreseen depopulation, an ageing population and an increasing life expectancy which impacts both the healthcare and welfare systems etc.), climate change (e.g. socio-economic vulnerability to different types of hazards etc.), by on-going technological transformation or transition towards green or digital economies, where the latter two are accentuating more some of the inequalities or disparities.

The layers of segregation (individuals and households, generations, between and/or within regions or urban-rural areas or even neighbourhoods), which are often a result of inequality, are influenced by different processes. These are linked to accessibility and affordability issues (e.g. access to services of general interest, housing, education or culture, etc.), less diversified economies (e.g. weak or/ less

diversified labour market, low incomes, low demands for the workforce, high unemployment rates, etc.) or low vitality (e.g. youth outmigration or unemployment, ageing population, etc.).

This complex, ever-changing context, becomes the catalyst for revisiting or reassessing the strategic, integrated visions that connect people and places, an approach reinforced within the consultation process for this TAP. From the policymaking perspective, this process revealed a strong demand for further research aiming at strengthening the relationship between people and places, with an emphasis on:

- accessing the particular assets of specific territories: metropolitan areas, rural areas, remote, sparsely populated, cross-border, etc., and channelling/ capitalizing on their local knowledge.
- ensuring the appropriate knowledge transfer, both horizontally and vertically in the policymaking processes and practices: between national/regional/local authorities, between researchers and policymakers, as well as from a bottom-up perspective - from the citizens to decision makers (national or European ones).
- developing policies and tools for efficiently implementing them at the local or regional level, in an integrated manner - from the inception phase through implementation, constantly evaluating their (short and long-term) impact on both people and places.
- addressing multidimensional perspectives of territorial development, more holistically, creating cross-thematic strands for monitoring inequalities and trends across the entire ESPON space.
- collecting and registering people's perceptions on different topics (from the perception of quality of life to the efficiency of policy measures implemented), understanding how people comprehend the role of different government levels and what they expect of them in terms of reducing socio-economic inequalities and territorial disparities (considering the European model of the welfare state and its specificities).

ESPON evidence is built on benchmarking and good practices analyses, showing that the diversity of challenges is met with a variety of innovative policy responses, all relying, most of the time, on the ability and creativity of local public institutions or local communities to achieve or sustain a prosperous territorial development. Consequently, during the consultation process, one of the key challenges has emerged clearly: the need to better understand what is happening at the sub-regional and local level, changing the perspective on the territorial analysis, bringing new, granular, territorial evidence and highlighting more local innovative approaches. This is doubled by the fact that the interdependencies of social and economic systems with the global environment are so high, that sometimes local decisions can have impacts elsewhere and at multiple scales.

Another issue that was highlighted during the consultation process and through the observations for the entire ESPON Programme area, was the one linked to emphasizing citizen participation in the policymaking processes - as citizens and residents are essential partners for turning EU policies and ambitions into reality.

## Purpose and policy use of the TAP

The open consultation revealed high interest among stakeholders, researchers and practitioners to:

- better understand the socio-economic trends and develop new approaches for better capturing the territorial dimensions of social and economic realities and disparities to ensure timely, tailored and responsive policies.
- better understand and address the diversity of territorial development models, and what is the impact of different global and macro-trends / shocks upon socio-economic systems; this will mean that a special attention will be given to the social transformation through digital innovation and the transition towards climate neutrality, as there are different paths to implementing measures, policies and objectives, and assessing how these are impacting the different aspects of the life of the citizens is crucial in every step.

- search for innovation in planning and spatial development and how to shape liveable, attractive and inclusive places for people, turning to citizen-centric/participative and place-based approach.
- support and enhance cooperation, through knowledge and network exchanges, involving knowledge carriers, supporting the emergence of a 'Quadruple Helix' - comprised of the scientific/research community, private companies/ NGOs, public authorities, and citizens.

The main objective of this TAP is to develop the knowledge and evidence base about the territorial patterns of upward economic and social convergence.

Building on the diversity and the potential of European territories as a key determinant to secure sustainable and prosperous territorial development (beyond sole economic growth), altogether, the territorial evidence and knowledge development activities should support strengthening the capacities and skills of policymakers on all levels of governance and across policy sectors.

Integrated within the bigger context, the TAP has been profiled to target policy responses to the challenges named above, and it is built on the premises and acknowledgement of the systemic role that local communities play as actors of large-scale transformative change and enablers in realizing the full potential of places.

Thus, building on this new approach, the TAP will focus its resources on stimulating discussions bringing a new policy perspective, that is aiming to seize the opportunity to stimulate positive transformations, and which will be linked to enhancing the quality of life for both individuals and communities; this will be done while looking at various enablers: from the individual perspective (of good shelter, education and health), from the socio-economic sphere (access to the labour market and consumption choices, social and cultural life in the territory) or the ecological or built environment (like heritage or architectural or spatial planning policies, etc.).

This TAP aims to produce new territorial evidence that will address the socio-economic themes, like demographic change and prospects (from ageing to migration, to labour market), social and economic inclusion, poverty and territorial development, accessibility to affordable housing, services of general interest and culture, participation of all people in all territories, heritage or built environment, etc., all analysed through innovative approaches and the innovation lens.

This TAP aims also to stimulate peer learning to inform countries, looking at coordinated, place-based initiatives to develop adaptive strategies, promoting well-being and building on the diversity and local innovative capacity; therefore, the future work is intended to promote networking and policies that reflect broader collective objectives (prosperous development, inclusion, spatial justice, wellbeing, and that support a just and fair transition, for example), involving all relevant stakeholders in the policy-making processes.

This TAP underpins four out of five Cohesion Policy objectives for 2021-2027: it fosters the objective of a more Social and Inclusive Europe – that promote social inclusion and equal access to all public services; it is also in line with the objective of a Europe closer to citizens – to provide a rationale for the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives; it adheres to the objective of Greener, low-carbon Europe – to sustain policy actions towards energy transition and circular economy, and also to advice climate adaptation and risk prevention; it links to the objective of a more Connected Europe – to help maintain people's mobility and connectedness to smooth functioning of strategic transport and digital connectivity.

This TAP correlates well with the objectives of the Territorial Agenda 2030: it addresses a Just Europe objective by contributing to a better-balanced territorial development and enhancing local resilience potentials; responding to a Green Europe objective, it acts for better safety and resiliency, economic sustainability, and connectivity of all places.

It links to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development providing a shared proposal for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future by ending poverty and other deprivations going hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests.

In addition, this TAP correlates very well with the New Leipzig Charter, the New European Bauhaus and the Urban Agenda.

## Strategic orientation of the TAP

Given the overall backdrop, 'Perspective for all people and places' is a comprehensive and cross-cutting TAP, and cannot be envisaged outside of the bigger picture, but in relation (creating synergies) and taking into consideration different results (methodologies, results, evidence) that are derived and produced within the other TAPs. These synergies are relevant for deepening the understanding of the socio-economic impacts of different policies or measures taken (like the digital transition, the just transition or the transition to climate neutrality, for example), at different territorial levels.

The scope of this TAP has been developed following a comprehensive, stepwise stakeholder consultation process with policymakers/practitioners and scientists/researchers. This process helped identify the evidence and knowledge gaps, as well as the general policy needs, relevant to the specific thematic orientation of the TAP.

The comprehensive stakeholder consultation process combined with a state-of-affairs analysis by the ESPON EGTC allowed for determining the specific thematic orientation of this TAP and due attention has been given to:

- the evidence gaps that ESPON would be suited to fill while avoiding duplication and enhancing synergies with peer providers of territorial evidence and policy advice;
- the identified general policy needs vis-à-vis the stock of territorial evidence accumulated within ESPON – to justify choosing the types of evidence production activities in this TAP to start with;
- the baseline mapping of stakeholders relevant to this TAP (while the more detailed identification of stakeholders will be carried out at a later stage).

In specific terms, the expected results of this TAP shall ensure new territorial evidence production and provide knowledge development activities, looking more specifically, but not limited, to:

- contribute to better capturing the social progress and support the implementation of the upward economic and social convergence policies and measures (aiming at improving working and living conditions);
- contribute to better capturing at the territorial level the socio-economic prospects and challenges of the diverse European regions and communities, moving away from a geography of discontent towards a geography of opportunities; this work will be doubled by qualitative research, meant to collect, register and analyse people's perceptions on different topics;
- evaluate and/or monitor the socio-economic impact and transformation of implementing policies and measures as a result of the twin transition - to a green and digital Europe (mitigating the possible fallouts and capitalizing on the pioneering approaches);
- include (comparative) studies aimed at unlocking the local and regional potential capitalizing on the socio-economic specificities and promoting the different territorial development models and of the welfare states (as a distinctive governance model that can be found only in Europe);
- inform countries, regions and local authorities through peer-learning about best practices, development opportunities, trends, etc., in the search of ensuring a prosperous, inclusive and sustainable future for all people and places;
- strengthen the capacities and skills of policymakers to harness the full potential of local communities and territories; promote exchanges, networking and involvement of different stakeholders.

Given the extensive research available out there, ESPON will focus research on bringing a territorial perspective, and responding to policy needs by gathering new evidence and data that is not available elsewhere. For that purpose, the TAP will be initiated with 3 European research projects (see Section

2) that are relevant to describing the socio-economic context. In addition, following the outcomes of three applied research projects in the ESPON 2020 SO (see Section 5), at the outset of this TAP, some knowledge transfer activities will be offered.

This TAP has the potential to address a wide group of stakeholders, bringing a new territorial dimension to understanding and building socio-economic ties, while acknowledging and capitalising on the diversity of development models. It may contribute to the work and efforts of the European Parliament (REGI Committee) and of European Economic Social Committee (EESC). It may offer the other EU institutions a set of comparable and granular datasets and indicators that help to better shape the future implementation of EU Cohesion Policy and sectoral EU policies with a distinct territorial dimension. It may also provide regional and local stakeholders of the ESPON member countries, the policy guidance or the knowledge base as regards the territorial patterns of social and economic convergence, necessary to promote a prosperous and balanced territorial development.

The tailoring of specific activities under this TAP requires collaboration with other organisations that are analysing the prospects for all people and places in policymaking, such as the Joint Research Centre (JRC), Eurostat or the OECD. Other organisations and groupings, like the Eurofound, that are working on specific sectors relevant to this TAP, are to be included in future interactions. The Scoping Note for each European Research Project under this TAP will set out in more detail how each proposed activity sits within the overall 'state of the art' in research and its wider added value to the policy research field. The TAP relevance aspect will also be considered in initiating evidence production and knowledge development activities following policy support proposals by stakeholders.