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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

TRANSNATIONAL OBSERVATION

# Regional and national spatial planning: new challenges and new opportunities



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## The Policy context in Western Europe

Spatial planning is an ongoing process, punctuated by changes in doctrines, frameworks and practices. These changes are often instigated at a national level, and then applied by regions and municipalities. Western European countries such as Belgium, France, Ireland, Luxembourg and the Netherlands are currently at various stages of spatial planning policy.

The planning system in the **Netherlands** has been going through a phase of fundamental change, notably since the introduction, in 2008, of the “Spatial Planning Act” which decentralised and simplified planning procedures; while the objectives currently being implemented were formulated for the “National Policy Strategy for Infrastructure and Spatial Planning” (2012), a new “Environment and Planning Act” is about to be introduced, to be enforced from 2019. **Luxembourg** is currently reforming its Master programme for spatial planning, and preparing for large-scale citizen participation within the process through working groups in 2018. **Ireland** has just adopted the “Ireland 2040 – Our Plan” strategy, which replaces earlier national development plans that had not been fully implemented by regional authorities; in order to ensure the legitimacy of the new document and compliance with its orientations, the Irish government has carried out wide-scale consultation and has taken the steps to have it voted in as a statute through Parliament. **France** is currently in the process of implementing the 2015 law that requires regions to develop a new comprehensive spatial strategy (the SRADDET) before 2019; the SRADDET is developed through the definition of regional objectives, consultation with local authorities and other key stakeholders, and public consultation before approval. The situation in **Belgium** is more complex, as spatial planning policies are highly decentralised and the legislation evolves separately in each region of the country.

It must also be noted that national spatial planning strategies and methods do not evolve in a vacuum, but in the context of a dialectical relationship with the approaches of the EU and especially of the Cohesion Policy; this is reflected in the many case studies presented in the ESPON project COMPASS. This document focuses on the Western European countries mentioned above and is structured around the methodology and procedures for spatial planning, clearly demonstrating that an appropriate methodology is one of the tools that helps practitioners to address conventional spatial planning issues such as economic development, transport, the environment or rural regeneration. It focuses on the main challenges being faced by the target countries in terms of their current stages of spatial planning policy processes.

## Challenges in Spatial Planning

### Cooperation at the level of functional areas

Local and regional policies are ever more interdependent. Reduced effectiveness, wasteful investment and a weakened global competitiveness arise from a single administrative territory (municipality, region or country) pursuing spatial planning objectives without trying to align strategies or share costs with the surrounding territories that have common functional concerns (transport, the environment or economic development). Consequently, in order to ensure more cohesion in spatial planning policies, static administrative institutions and geographical boundaries must be overcome, and local actors must cooperate politically at the level of functional areas.


This principle is, however, difficult to translate into action. A first obstacle is to **identify relevant cooperation spaces** – and different countries have different answers to this challenge, from the empowerment of already existing entities (the regions in Belgium, for instance) to the creation of looser frameworks (such as the “pôles métropolitains” in France).

Functional areas can be delineated in different ways according to the function concerned, and can shift over time (causing the evolution of cooperation structures themselves). One single place can be part of several

different functional areas, which means that, depending on the nature of the policy issue, cooperation may be sought within cities, regions, across national borders, or in wider transnational or macro-regional contexts. The EU itself can be considered a functional spatial planning area for certain issues (cf. the example of the Trans-European Transport Networks).

Moreover, the efforts to establish a relevant cooperation space are often confronted with the problem of **path dependency** due to the resilience of governance practices and/or the resistance of local elites. In many cases, new forms of cooperation come about as a result of the pooling of pre-existing territories, instead of resulting from an objective evaluation of local needs based on the **collection of reliable territorial evidence**; indeed, such evidence is often missing. The use of hard data to determine the geographical scope of cooperation can, however, also become a trap. A functional area, by its nature, is defined by a project or a policy issue. It might, therefore, be more effective to develop various interacting specialised cooperation frameworks with ad hoc boundaries (for transport, tourism, health) than to try and operate within a single entity that is seemingly homogeneous, in terms of demography or economy, but is not suited to every functional need.

Local actors may also be reluctant to **allocate necessary resources to new institutions**. In such cases, territorial strategy will remain dependent on the decision-making processes and interests of the participating authorities – nullifying the added value of cooperation. As for **cross-border cooperation**, even more difficulties are likely to be encountered, linked to institutional, cultural and linguistic differences.



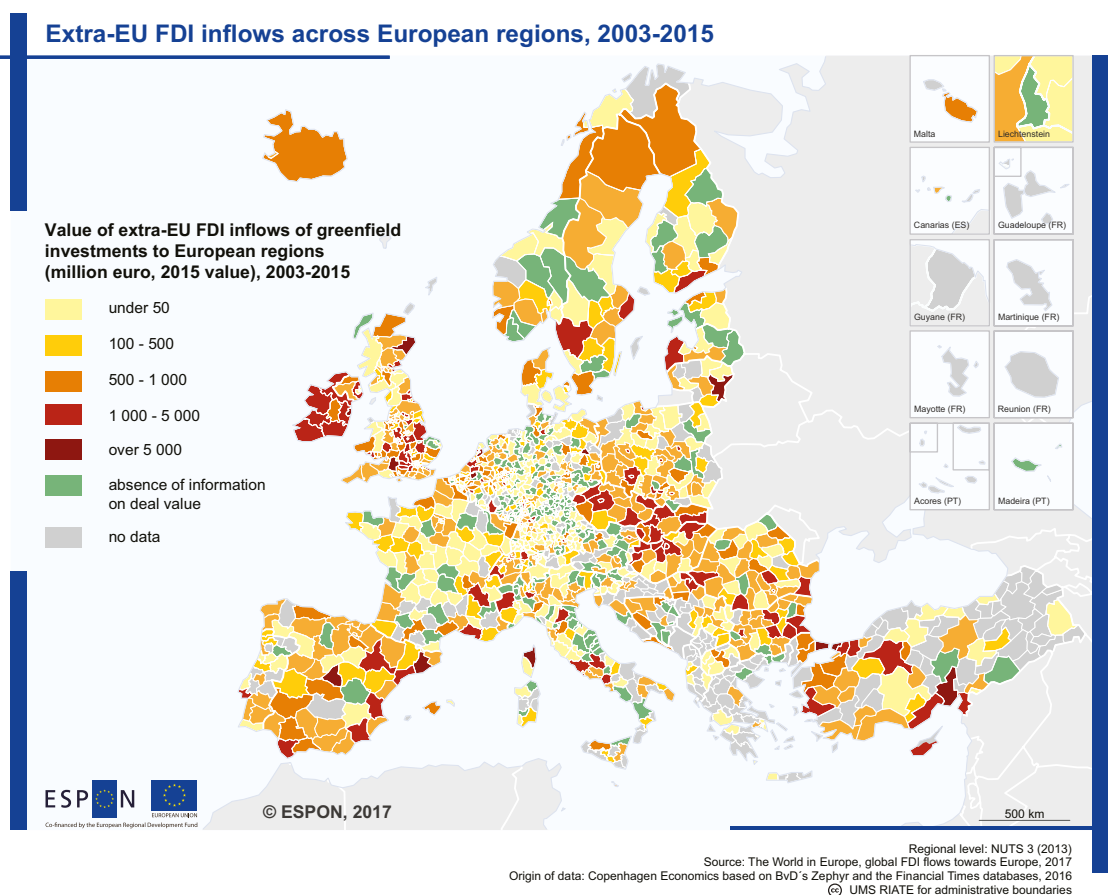
Territorial cooperation in the Coventry Area (UK), one of the case studies for the ESPON ReSSI project, illustrates a major difficulty of territorial cooperation. Coventry belongs to two different bodies in terms of cooperation: the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and the Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership (CWLEP). While combined authorities are voluntary associations between at least two contiguous local governments, in order to address policy issues such as employment and transport jointly, local enterprise partnerships are made up of both local public authorities and businesses and help define economic priorities and monitor economic policies at a territorial level. These two new types of institution have contributed to better geographical alignment between functional policy areas and administrative territories, as well as improving coordination between stakeholders. However, in order to comply with legal categories defined by the central government and to be eligible for funding, local actors have had to build new institutions on the basis of existing administrative boundaries, which may be ill-adapted to actual functional imperatives. ReSSI also highlights the costs of coordinating competition between two entities which have a similar rationale but different competences, boundaries and internal structures. To reiterate, it is helpful for areas to cooperate with one another in a variety of ways and at different geographical levels in order to address separate issues that each encompass distinct territorial realities; but the emergence of a common vision can be hindered where two geographically overlapping organisations exist and focus on the same policy.

## Multi-level coordination

Functional problems are not usually addressed by actors from the same level of authority alone. When it comes to territorial policies, for instance, spatial planning competences and financial resources are usually distributed in a complex manner between municipalities, regions, national governments and the EU. There is often resistance from the actors who implement spatial planning policy when it comes to multi-level decision-making, for example – the ESPON project COMPASS provides evidence of such resistance in Ireland. **Hierarchical coordination is counterproductive**, and research shows that local public bodies and private stakeholders should be associated on an equal footing for the most beneficial cooperation.

The need for efficient **collaboration between different layers of public administration** is well illustrated by the challenge of attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs) in European regions, notably in the form of extra-EU greenfield investments. The values of such investments are highlighted by ESPON evidence (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
Extra-EU FDI flows across European regions 2003-2015



The European Commission usually considers policies related to FDIs to be the responsibility of each member state, but it does have strategies directed at private investment, such as the *Investment plan for Europe* (the “Juncker plan”), and these, along with structural funds, inevitably have an impact on local economies. National governments define priorities, often using targeted instruments such as financial incentives, and also play a major role in creating a positive environment for investment through, for example: stable politics, legal security, low levels of corruption, effective competition policies, labour market flexibility and integration. Ultimately, the flow of FDIs is largely determined by regional policies themselves which use strategies such as supporting technological clusters or international branding to make investment more attractive.

Countries may also face multi-level coordination challenges due to **contexts of increasing decentralisation for spatial planning competences**; this can cause potential **contradictions between territorial strategies**. For example, one of the challenges met by French regions in the development of the SRADDET is in aligning the strategic documents produced by various levels of government often as a result of political deals. In the case of Belgium, the many state reforms adopted in recent years have created a competitive environment that hinders the implementation of European or national policies at a regional level.

Such a situation is described by the ESPON project LOCATE, which examines the territorial patterns of the low carbon economy in Europe: the example of Belgium is, indeed, characterised by a political impasse between national and regional levels of government, and this has delayed the implementation of key low carbon targets; conversely, the top-down transition to a low-carbon economy has been easier in countries with less regional autonomy and fewer local administrative capacities – such as the Czech Republic.

## Cross-sector integration

The integration of sectoral policies is the corollary of territorial cooperation and of multi-level governance. In the context of this particular challenge, however, it should be remembered that **territorial spatial planning is not a separate policy** but one which associates various issues behind a single coherent strategy. The coherence of spatial planning, however, faces two opposing threats. The first results from **having certain sectoral rationales taking precedence over others** – the sectors with a stronger economic profile (for example, tourism, industry, construction, transport infrastructures) tend to dominate at the expense of “softer” goals such as culture or the environment. The second threat arises from the **lack of synergy between implementing agencies**, and sometimes even deliberate disregard of collective goals: regional spatial planning is often thwarted by inter-administration conflicts over competences and resources, organisational inertia and an overall “silo mentality”.

Another condition which promotes fruitful cooperation is the development of a **common understanding of spatial planning** and territorial development objectives. The SRADDET in France or the territories “spatial visions” in the Netherlands both attempt to promote this condition. However, the definition of such a vision or a territorial identity often predominates over local interests.

## Participation of stakeholders and citizens

No spatial planning strategy can be applied without stakeholder involvement. The inclusion of all relevant actors in the decision-making at every level should be regarded and encouraged as an opportunity to strengthen solidarity among relevant actors and territories, motivate stakeholders and facilitate collective learning. Nowadays, the direct participation of the public is also considered to be intrinsically linked to the formulation of spatial planning strategies: notably, its importance is acknowledged by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on “Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters” (1998) and by the EU directive 2003/35/EC of 26 May 2003.

However, principles lauded for increasing accountability are notoriously hard to implement. First of all, even if it is generalised, **information cannot replace participation** in matters of spatial planning: the more complex an issue is, the less likely citizens or entrepreneurs are to visit websites or attend meetings. Ultimately, a **failed exercise in participation is likely to have negative effects**, demotivate interested actors and undermine the legitimacy of the whole process.

The participatory principle is also a challenge from the point of view of spatial planning practitioners. Local and regional institutions often rely on a small circle of interlocutors to collect information and feedback on various policies. This can lead to somewhat **“nested” networks**, since the selection process is based on personal

relations or the “appropriateness” of an individual (e.g. being supportive of the specific territorial development goal at hand). Excluded stakeholders may well ignore or dispute the results of the consultation.

Bearing this in mind, the real challenge then is to ensure that **consultations are as broad as possible** among citizens and stakeholders at all levels, even in the context of **limited resources**. Conversely, the more open the consultation is (in terms of number of participants or topics), the more difficult it becomes to integrate the results into spatial planning strategies; this challenge is currently being faced by Luxembourg in the review of its Master programme for spatial planning.

## ESPON evidence and solutions for spatial planning

### Choosing the optimal scale for spatial planning

Developing spatial planning strategies at a functional level requires both a change in geographical scope and new governance structures with adequate resources that will partially supersede (but never fully replace) traditional administrative entities. This kind of model for **“soft” territorial cooperation** is exemplified by the “Actions Areas” in Switzerland, the “Business Regions” in Denmark or the Euroregions. They are the focus of the ESPON ACTAREA project, featuring “open” or “fuzzy” boundaries, an integrative perspective (through the aggregation of new competences and mission), and an ability to empower and enhance the capacities of those involved (which increases commitment to their implementation).

Soft territorial cooperation tends to rely on light, ad-hoc structures and does not involve a mere addition of public bodies. ACTAREA characterises them as **“communities of intent”**: networked sets of both public and private actors which voluntarily seek to jointly address territory-specific opportunities and challenges.

Soft territorial cooperation is also **flexible in terms of the delegation of competences**. ESPON evidence shows that the issues most frequently addressed by soft territorial cooperation are spatial planning, transport, infrastructure, economic competitiveness & business development, tourism, cultural cooperation, the environment and energy: practically-speaking, almost all local and regional fields of intervention are potentially concerned.

However, despite their flexibility and “openness” in terms of internal organisation and competences, soft cooperation initiatives require **effective and transparent agreements** to gain actual **authority and funding capacities** to achieve a common spatial vision.

**Variable-geometry approaches** are necessary to address the geographical scale of cooperation. Flexibility, regarding geographical and policy scope, must involve diversity or even creativity in terms of territorial cooperation arrangements. The structures which allow cooperation vary from one local context to another; they may involve anything from informal instances of dialogue to the formation of distinct entities entrusted with substantial competencies and resources (whose functioning can be determined by a national statute). Moreover, such structures can change over time, since territorial cooperation serves multiple purposes at different stages of the policy cycle. The concept of “functional areas” does not always refer to associations between contiguous pre-existing territories – a phenomenon which is exemplified by the rise metropolises and inter-city alliances.



The metropolitan pole “Sillon lorrain” (France) is a telling example of a soft, non-contiguous functional cooperation structure. It comprises four intermunicipal bodies around the cities of Epinal, Nancy, Metz and Thionville, all located along the river Moselle which has been a major trade route for centuries. The pole has no exclusive policy competences but acts as a facilitator for members’ projects in the fields of, for example, culture, higher education, mobility. It also promotes the area through lobbying actions. It is not regarded as a new administrative level, but rather as an instrument which allows the representatives of the four areas to discuss shared issues, while remaining free to decide independently which actions to implement. The pole is, however, more structured than a free network: it has a council



(formed of members of each intermunicipal authority), which makes decisions on the basis of unanimous votes, a board, thematic commissions and a “Metropolitan conference” open to civil society and businesses. “Associated territories” (neighbouring local authorities), as well as foreign partners from Luxembourg or Germany, are also represented at this conference. Overall, in the context of the area’s formal institutions, the Sillon Lorrain combines a high degree of both geographical “fuzziness” and thematic openness, and it illustrates how collective functioning can be achieved through deliberation and consensus.

Variable-geometry approaches to cooperation also include **cross-border agreements**, which are, of course, encouraged by European initiatives such as the Interreg programmes.



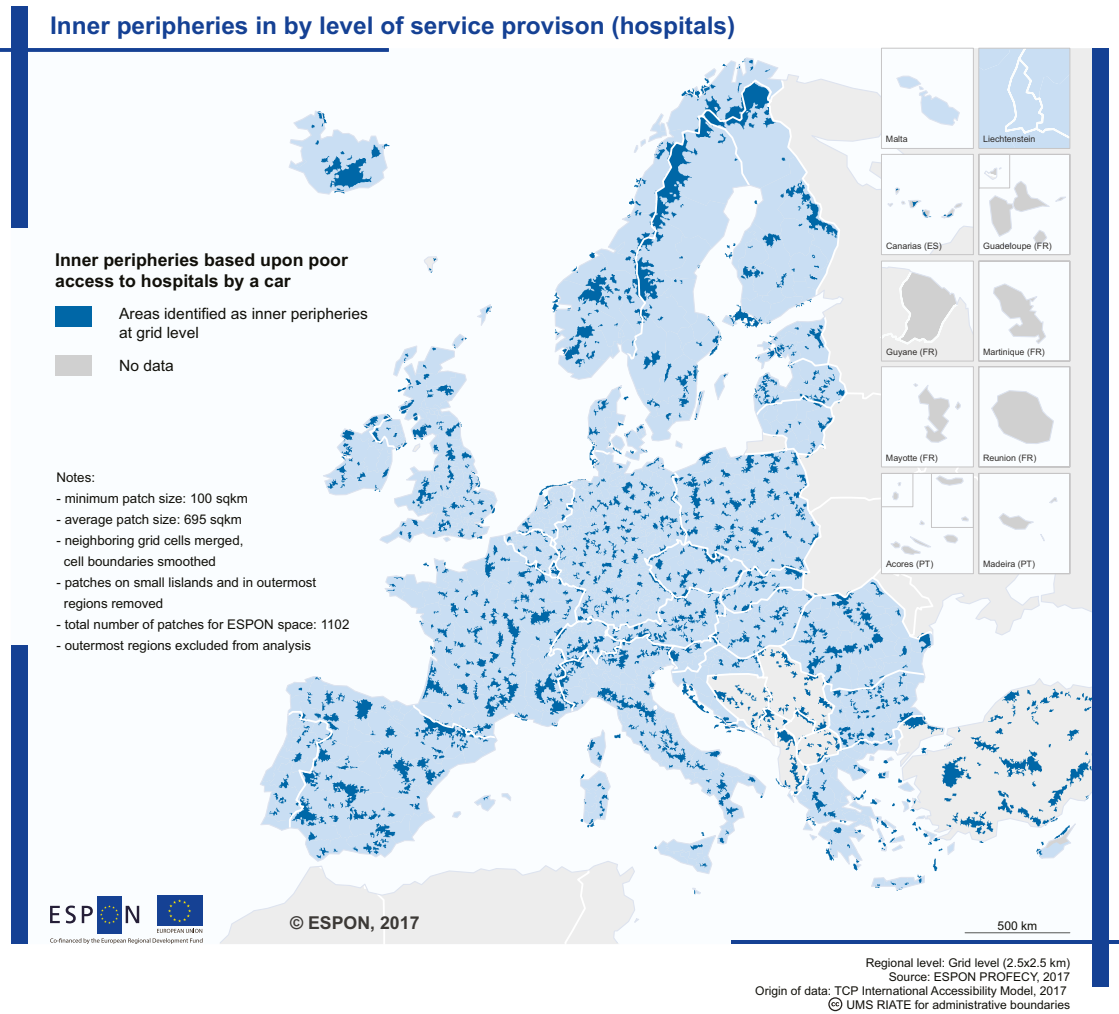
The Euroregion Aquitania-Navarra-Euskadi is a cross-border territory comprising both densely populated coastal cities and rural mountainous areas which suffer from remoteness, lack of services and insufficient communication infrastructure. Spatial planning issues in this context involve national authorities as well as regional and local authorities (Autonomous Communities and Provinces in Spain, Regions and Départements in France). A cooperation body, the Working Community of the Pyrenees (CTP), was created in 1983 to deal with transnational issues; the CTP also manages the POCTEFA 2014-2020 Interreg programme. The CTP has a fairly formal

structure: it is governed by an Executive Committee, chaired by a General Secretary and a Plenary Council, and has a permanent seat in Jaca (Spain). Currently, cooperation is promoted in four main areas: communication and infrastructure, research and training, culture, youth and sports, and sustainable development. Joint support for the economy and for innovation is rather new.

The case of the Euroregion Aquitania-Navarra-Euskadi shows that **cross-border spatial planning helps to tackle the specific needs of “inner peripheries” or areas with geographical specificities**. Inner peripheries are characterised by ESPON research as regions with significantly lower economic potential or access to services of general interest than the surrounding territories; A low number of hospitals, for instance, can be used as an indicator to identify such areas (cf. Fig. 2). In the Pyrenees, all regions are considered peripheral nationally-speaking, but they gain centrality if they are perceived as part of a single integrated Pyrenean space. Cooperation between functional spaces also optimises the impact of investments in terms of accessibility and services of general interests such as specialised hospital care. Consequently, transnational cooperation may be seen as a conduit for alternative spatial planning that takes into account the distinct features of peripheral areas.

The COMPASS study singles out, as an example of best practice, the adoption of the Strategic Development Plan for the Euroregion Aquitania-Navarra-Euskadi. It builds on earlier cooperation experiences and on the guidelines for the strategy Europe 2020 to define a common field for cross-border action and to stimulate new cross-border planning contents and practice: it not only includes new fields of activity such as climate change, but reinforces coordination with private actors and local agencies in the two countries (one of its outcomes is the opening of cross-border bus lines and of an information portal on cross-border transportation in four languages). The Plan was developed within a **framework of open governance and consultation**. During the development of the strategy, a survey was carried out among relevant actors and in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders. In addition, thematic working groups and two open online consultations were organised.

**Figure 1**  
**Inner peripheries by level of service provision (hospitals)**



## Bridging visions of spatial planning across different levels of government

There is no single model for effective multi-level coordination. Clear leadership is certainly a key success factor for projects involving heterogeneous actors in an asymmetrical power relationship. But such leadership can take various forms depending on the issue and area concerned. ESPON evidence suggests that **decision-making in “softer” spaces is often characterised by consensus among actors and transparent leadership**. In other configurations, the actor with the most resources (regulatory, financial or political) tends to take the lead. To ensure an inclusive decision-making process, multi-level cooperation should be brought about through **partnership agreement**, creating a favourable arena for dialogue between administrations, elected officials, NGOs, community groups or associations, as well as the private sector. It should be characterised by trust and mutual recognition of the legitimate role of the actors involved. It should be noted, however, that whilst broad association between stakeholders seems to be necessary to align strategies, it can slow or impede the decision-making process. Appropriate arrangements have to be made depending on the national or regional contexts.






Climate change is a multi-level governance issue requiring both top-down guidance provided by the EU and at a national level and bottom-up measures taken at local and regional levels. This approach is illustrated by the Baltic Sea macro-region's climate change adaptation project Baltadapt, which has been developed through broad stakeholder involvement at all levels. Dialogue with citizens, cross-sectoral workshops with experts and policy forums with high-level officials have been organised in order to integrate all players and policy sectors. This costly effort has been made possible thanks to EU funding.

## Ensuring sectoral policies are better articulated and rationalised

Organisational routines represent major obstacles when trying to convince all stakeholders to dismiss comfortable arrangements and overcome bureaucratic procedures and interests. Integration efforts need to be promoted through shared and strong motivation. Thus, successful integration needs effective dialogue, and is best supported through the **formulation of a vision** and the **definition of specific goals** that justify it. In this respect, ESPON advises that single development strategies should be devised, rather than multiple strategies on specific subjects; a focused approach like this helps to reconcile opposing interests and ensure a holistic view.




Various tools may be used to initiate dialogue, reconcile interests and bring together stakeholders behind a common vision of territorial identity and spatial planning objectives. The ESPON study TANGO describes, for instance, how the development of the “Schémas de Cohérence Territoriale” (SCOTs) of the South Loire Département in France was facilitated by the implementation of measures to support deliberation – for example, thematic boards, working groups, thematic workshops, an annual consultation forum, website – under the monitoring of a local urban planning agency.

ESPON evidence also suggests that **flexible functional territories address cross-sectoral integration more effectively than traditional administrative spaces**, because their loose structure allows them to overcome institutional rivalries more easily and to be more experimental in their approaches. Soft cooperation is, therefore, also useful for bridging contradictory sectoral dynamics.

## Shifting to a more democratic spatial planning process

Participation in spatial planning can be fostered through various degrees of formalisation, from the dissemination of generic information about a specific project to public referenda, through which the output of the political process is (supposedly) shaped by direct democracy. However, none of these approaches is a guarantee of improved decision-making and accountability. The handbook for the ESPON project TANGO highlights some useful principles in this regard, on the basis of 12 case studies carried out across Europe. Identifying the right actors for consultation is, of course, crucial (both in terms of representativeness, impartiality and information), and experience and skills must also inform the selection of actors who will be in charge of the consultation process (for example, private consultants, civil servants, civil society activists). **Timing** is also important, since late involvement has no impact on decision-making. **Transparency is also crucial, and** the standardisation of rules for consultation and an effective communication strategy can promote this. Additionally, of course, **feedback** should be guaranteed in all cases to demonstrate the fairness of the process and to show that participation can improve the outcomes of decision-making.

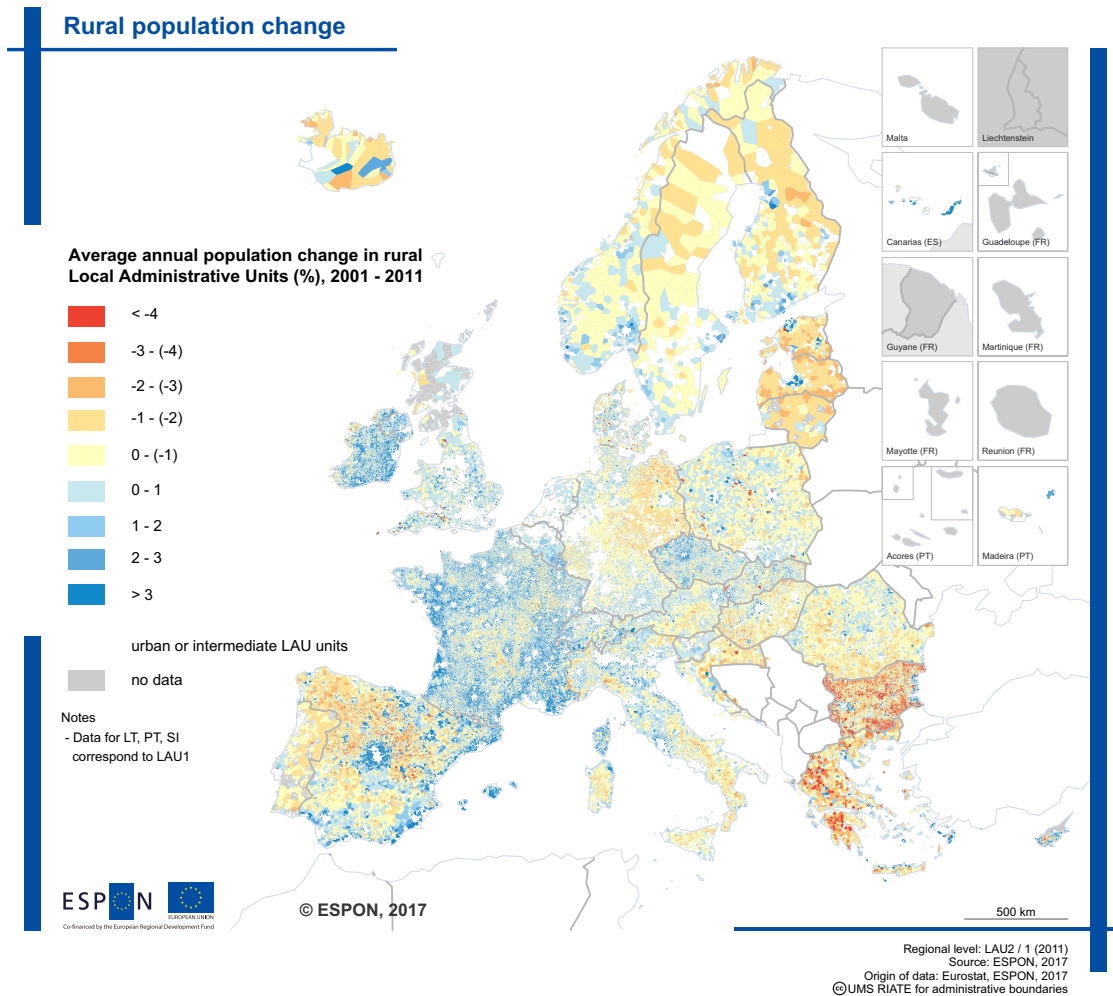
Beyond these recommendations, the participation of stakeholders and the public should be considered not only a requirement but a precious resource for spatial planning. The experience of (Ireland), one of the case studies in the ESPON COMPASS project, illustrates this well.



Ferbane is a small town in Ireland with a population of under 1200 people; it is located in the periphery of the Eastern Midland Region, categorised by the Commission as a “declining rural area”. Like many other rural “inner peripheries”, it suffers from continuing loss of population, low provision of services, an ageing population and an exodus of young skilled workers.

The financial support of the LEADER programme allowed a Local Action Group (LAG), called the “West Offaly Partnership”, and a community development plan, known as the “Ferbane Development Plan 2001”, to be set up with the support of an experienced planner. With support from the LEADER programme, the local authorities and civil society, which are usually heavily dependent on decisions at a national government level, gained the capacity to make choices in terms of, for example, distribution of funding to local services, establishing community networks and setting up training opportunities. The resulting Ferbane Community Plan was, therefore, a purely local effort, led by voluntary organisations. It was considered successful, and its successful negotiation and implementation are an example of best practice in public participation: individual invitations to participate were sent to each household; a questionnaire survey was delivered to and then collected from each home; focus groups were set up to formulate local development objectives; officials and economic actors were involved in the steering group. Enough time was dedicated to the process to allow for a community vision to emerge, thus leading to very concrete results in the form of, for example: an enterprise centre, a child care facility, a new community school, a bus service to nearby sports facilities.

**Figure 3**  
Changes in rural population



The approach of Ferbane is, of course, only possible with a very small population. However, this example shows that, at a “micro” level and in the framework of EU structural funds, public participation can become a powerful instrument for community mobilisation and rural regeneration in regions that are deeply impacted by demographic decline – a trend that is not unknown in many rural places of Western Europe (for instance, the central part of France), even though is more noticeable in the Eastern countries (cf. Fig. 3)



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