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Territorial issues must be at the heart of public policies

Lisbon, 16 June 2021

Its time to act! – that was the message **João Pedro Matos Fernandes**, Minister of Environment and Climate Action delivered in his message to the ESPON online debate on the transition and transformation of rural areas.

The event, titled “**Transition and transformation for rural areas**” was part of the [ESPON week](#) that is organized together with the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the EU and was held in a hybrid form -with some participants online and others in the studio in Lisbon.

Mr. Fernandes recognized that it is a huge challenge to have a vision for all European territories today. Yet, this is exactly why we need to reply now and address both the deep economic and social crisis that we are facing with knowledge and direct involvement of the citizens.

The minister described the efforts of Portugal to address these challenges as one of the countries where climate change has the greatest impact -as ESPON studies also shown (map attached).

Mr. Fernandes made a direct link of the National Spatial Planning Policy Program with the Recovery and Resilience Program of Portugal, that have both a territorial approach -as “**territory issue must be at the heart of public policies**”.

The vice president of the European Commission, Ms. **Dubravka Suica**, in her message, focused on the need to “ensure the high quality and quick roll-out of the national Plans so that investment financed under the NextGeneration EU starts supporting the recovery” as climate-related measures and digital transformation are key objectives of the Facility.

The Long-term vision for rural areas complements Europe’s growth strategy, according to **Ms. Suica**, as green and just recovery cannot be achieved without the 137 million people that live in rural areas.

But according to the recent public consultation, 40% of the participants feel rural areas and their people are left behind by society and policymakers. And discontent leaves room for populism to grow. “Our democracy must be fit for all,” said Ms. Suica. The same applies to the designed development policies. **We should not plan “for the rural areas”, but “together with them”** to ensure they maintain their essential rural character. That is for the **European Commission’s Vice President** the genuine value-added of the Long-Term Vision: To create new momentum for rural areas, use all the resources available to support their social and economic development and make them vibrant, dynamic and attractive.

ESPON, together with the **Portuguese presidency** presented at the beginning of the week an [influential joint policy paper](#) on the future of rural areas that summarizes the challenges and the opportunities of rural areas and provides useful recommendations on policy actions.

In the studio, the director of ESPON, **Wiktor Szydarowski**, moderated a debate with the First Vice President of the Committee of the Regions (CoR), **Vasco Cordeiro** and the Deputy Director for Territories (DG Territorio) **Ana Seixas**. They discussed how these political messages can be implemented and what the role of regional and local authorities can be.

Ms. Seixas emphasised the need for citizens to engage and take ownership of any development strategy decided. **“We cannot implement any strategy if we do not all feel we are part of it”** she said, adding that Portugal’s National Spatial Planning Policy programme considers territories in the heart of its policies.

The **Vice president of the CoR**, identified 3 main areas that are crucial to ensure just and green recovery for rural areas: **knowledge** at the subnational level, **empowerment** of all levels of governance and **sensible legislators** to put in place the right decisions. ESPON, he noted, plays, and will continue to play a decisive role in these three areas by providing data at the European, national, and subnational level. **“There it no political decision without data,”** said Mr. Cordeiro.

He also emphasised the need to ensure statements and actions are aligned, referring to the examples of the CAP reform and the structure of the Multiannual Financial Frameworks that according to him do not ensure participation of the regions in the decision-making process.

“If you do not have territorial leaders, you do not have communities” underlined **Mr. Cordeiro**. But we also need national leaders to understand that the better way to achieve our common goals is a bottom-up approach, to help us better understand the needs of the citizens, he added.

The **deputy director of DG Territorio** recognized the need for leadership that can mobilize people and help them understand the policies designed but also stressed the need for technical capacities that are equally important to ensure deliverables and results.

Using the maps of the recently published ESPON policy paper as a stimulus, **Wiktor Szydarowski** noted that territories are not all the same. They have different characteristics, different challenges, but they can also connect. But how to outmost regions face their particular challenges?

“By transforming liabilities into assets” replied Mr. **Cordeiro**, recalling his long experience from the Azores, the region he serves. He provided examples from the tourism sector and the field of innovation and research that help Azores address their challenges. He also underlined the need for sufficient infrastructures and service provisions in the outmost areas to help them address the demographic challenges.

Closing the event, the two panellists referred to the role ESPON can play in supporting policymakers in their work. ESPON gives us the opportunity to compare our problem in the European context, said Ms. **Seixas**. It helps us to understand where we stand and provides a lot of information that is useful in different ways and in different sectors.

“**Keep up the good work**” was the message of the **CoR Vice president**. “ESPON is helping us to shape our future, giving us the tools to decide better and that is priceless”.

You can watch again the debate here:

Twitter <https://twitter.com/i/broadcasts/1ynKOBqdpzAxR>

Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/ESPONProgramme/videos/934712184052614/>



Note to the Editors

ESPON is the European Territorial Observatory Network that provides scientific analyses and advice for territorial and sectoral policies in a number of contexts including economy and finance, unemployment, foreign direct investment, circular and low-carbon economy, healthcare, migration, etc. **ESPON** supports the discussions on the future of EU policies, notably the Cohesion Policy, as well as the upcoming preparation for the next generation of strategies and programmes at national, regional and local scales. **ESPON** is co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund. More at: www.ESPON.eu

The **ESPON 2020 Programme** is a pan-European programme managed by the Luxembourgish Ministry of Sustainable Development and Infrastructure on behalf of all EU Member States, UK, Island Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland and co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund under Interreg.

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