



Co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund

Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

UPTAKE ARTICLE

European rural policy at a crossroads? Rethinking needs, objectives, and measures

Virtual

21st April 2022, 12:00-15:45 (CET)

Introduction



The ESPON-TNO consortium, composed of Ghent University, the University of Paris-Cité, the Norwegian Ministry for Local Government and Rural Development, and the Innlandet county authority jointly organised a Peer Learning Workshop (PLW) on 21 April 2022.

Within the framework the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA2030) pilot action “Small Places Matter” on the role of sparsely populated towns and villages in the development of integrated policy coordination between territories, the PLW focused on the objective to explore ways that ESPON could inspire better understanding of rural trends identified by the TA2030, and to offer more appropriate, evidence-based actions for affected communities.

The event, moderated by William Kutz (University of Paris-Cité), was organised into four broad sessions. The first session provided an overview of existing territorial evidence from ESPON regarding rural development and change in Norway and the wider Nordic region. The second session provided an overview of the “Small places matter” pilot action and outlined pathways on how to generate rural renewal policies and mechanisms for the future, using concrete examples supported by the EU Interreg program funding for the Norwegian-Swedish cross-border region. The third session enlarged the optics from the Nordic region, putting the Small Places Matter pilot action into a conversation with other ESPON initiatives – specifically those focused on regions (ESCAPE) and innovative rural service provisioning (PROFECY). In final fourth session, three participants from the previous sessions reconvened for a moderated roundtable focused on ways to merge ESPON insights from Norway with the experiences of territorial actors in other European contexts.

A total of 176 participants registered and a maximum of 124 effectively attended the event. The majority of the participants were from Norway (38), followed by Poland (19), and Belgium (15). Among the registrants, 84 identified themselves as policymakers (of which 30 regional, 26 national, 10 local, and 8 European, while the rest was a combination of two levels), 48 researchers, 8 from the private sector and 25 “others” being planners, consultants, and civil servants. As of 29 April, the post-event survey collected 16 answers that were very satisfied (7), fairly satisfied (3), neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (5) or fairly dissatisfied (1). The main reason mentioned for the satisfactory experience was the relevance of the content and the roundtable discussion. Three attendees mentioned the lack of practical examples as dissatisfactory aspects of the event. One attendee was disappointed by the emphasis on the quantitative analysis and would have liked more attention on the policies.

Summary

The event started with a short welcome address from Kjersti Bjørnstad, State secretary at the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, introduced by Erik Hagen, the lead contact for ESPON Norway. Secretary Bjørnstad provided an overview of the state of the rural development and change in Norway and the need to for better, place-based, and integrated responses to support affected communities. This speech was followed by Wiktor Szydarowski, director of the ESPON EGTC, who gave an overview of how the organisation functioned and its salience for addressing the key challenges raised Secretary Bjørnstad. He stressed that rural policy is not at one crossroad, but multiple overlapping conjunctures – social inequalities, economic opportunities, and territorial planning and infrastructure coordination, as well as programmatic conjunctures, such as the TA2030, the EU Green Deal, the EU Just Transition, and the ESPON community – all of which must be accounted for in their own ways. While the current phase of ESPON programming is at an end, we should think of this is the starting point for new horizons and possible trajectories for “actionable knowledge” to balance European territories.

The **first session** began with a detailed description of ESPON evidence from the Nordic context. This presentation was provided by the Anna Vasilevskaya, spatial analyst at Nordregio. After providing an overview of Nordregio’s mission with ESPON, she elaborated on several key projects currently underway to better identify evidence of development and change in Nordic countries. Rural areas are not homogenous. Every place is

unique and therefore, analysis should be complex. This makes generalising about trends difficult, if not unhelpful. In Norway, aging populations are more prevalent in rural areas; access to basic services and infrastructures is uneven across the country. There is a strong imbalance between rural settlements in northern and southern Norway, as well as between the coastal zones and inland areas. Similarly, there are also visible differences in rural development between Norway and the wider Nordic region. For example, the distance to access services is generally shorter in Norway than Sweden. New methods in spatial analysis have been especially important in clarifying these differences. Nordregio is currently fine-tuning rural typologies based on grid-level data, offering more precise insight for action than more commonly used official EU NUTS-level datasets in use.

The **second session** centred on elaborating the context and implementation of the TA2030 pilot action “Small Places Matter”. The first presentation, by Irene McMaster (University of Strathclyde) and Andreea China (ESPON EGTC), provided an overview of the pilot action – the context from which it arose, how it was coordinated, and what directions these actions are heading in for the future. They stressed need for researchers and practitioners to be aware of the interdependent nature of challenges facing rural territories today, and to consider the Pilot Action as a way to identify, test, and experiment with existing efforts already being implemented on the ground. Small places, are therefore, “anchor points” for scaling up successful initiatives to other rural contexts with similar capacities to implement and benefit from these actions. This is achieved via inter-municipal cooperation (Small Town Academy); sharing public resources; promoting a more outward facing public engagement, and; cross-border cooperation. The second presentation by Bjørnar Sæther (University of Oslo) gave a concrete example these efforts have played out in the Norwegian context. He detailed successful cooperation between two rural villages Trysil (NO) and Sälen (SE), and how after several years of significant territorial decline, they devised novel ways to modestly improve demographic growth in the area. In this case, using Interreg funding to bring in new infrastructure – especially the construction of a new regional airport – to support year-round tourism-based development. In this context, both local authorities and businesses have witnessed how cross-border cooperation can help achieve their bottom lines.

The **third session** took these experiences and best practices and compared them to other ESPON initiatives. The first presentation by Eduardo Medeiros (ISCTE, Lisbon) underscored the potential for development clusters to support “Small Places” and Territorial Cohesion in Europe. For Medeiros, “cluster development” is often considered through a single economic domain, e.g. tourism, but should instead be seen as a much wider constellation of social and economic drivers to support rural towns and villages, namely, by placing the economic drivers alongside considerations for sustainability, local talent, balanced growth, institutional development, placemaking, and infrastructural systems that are designed and implemented through the active participation of local inhabitants themselves. The second presentation by Mar Ortega-Reig (Polytechnic University of Valencia) and Carsten Schürmann (TCP International, Stuttgart) provided an overview and elaboration of the ESPON PROFECY project. The two argued that the complex drivers of extreme peripheralisation as well as corresponding pathways for revitalisation, are best identified through a methodology that accounts for grid-level disconnect. These trends should not be seen as homogeneous forms of marginality but are instead outcomes of compound relational factors linking social, spatial, and temporal processes. Therefore, while their indicators differ, this approach underlines the importance of common methodologies (grid-level change) and outlooks (compound relations over mono-causal events) raised across previous speakers. The third presentation by Gergely Tagai (Centre for Economic and Regional Studies, Hungary) offered lessons from the ESPON ESCAPE project. This initiative stressed importance of territorial shrinkage as a complex process beyond demographic decline or outward migration, but as the result of overlapping feedback effects pertaining to economic change, locational attributes, socio-infrastructural peripheralisation, and institutional ruptures. He and his team found that that these factors have contributed to important East-West cleavages in shrinkage tendencies within Europe, notably shaped by institutional “legacy effects”, such as the lasting consequences brought about by the collapse of the USSR on Europe’s eastern territories. In particular, this approach calls for renewed emphasis on a systemic, integrated approach to rural policy at all levels, in a way that is adaptive to the differences in “depleting” and “accumulating” rural areas.

The **final session** was a roundtable between Wiktor Szydarowski (ESPON EGTC), Irene McMaster (University of Strathclyde), and Eduardo Medeiros (ISCTE) that focused on main questions that were tailored to addressing the PLW objectives: (i) How can regional strategic planning provide more positive development for rural areas, whilst also maintaining a place-based focus on policy implementation? (ii) From an implementation standpoint, how might Norway’s “small-places” approach to rural development connect with planning strategies for medium towns to improve mutual territorial gains? (iii) What lessons can we draw from ESPON projects (PROFECY, ESCAPE) to foster more effective rural development in small places? Finally (iv) What are some policy recommendations we might consider replicating to improve outcomes in rural contexts, given what we have

learned from the Small Places Matter pilot action and others? The following are a few key observations raised from the discussion:

Szydarowski: There is a need to shift attention away from rural outcomes based on quantitative indicators (i.e. the number of inhabitants moving into or from a particular place) towards outcomes that prioritise the quality of life found in these contexts. This means accepting the reality of demographic decline and focusing more attention on the lives of those that remain in ways that are not defined exclusively by economic indicators. Such a focus on place-based development should be prioritised over hard infrastructure ‘handed down’ from national governments. In doing so, the development of quality of life in itself could attract new inhabitants and improve the inflow of investments and infrastructures. An open question remains, however, as to what “quality of life” actually means, who makes that distinction for what specific ends? Interaction with people about quality of life must be done *with* the community not *for* the community.

Medieros: The current approaches to address rural development and change – whether they are Small Places Matter, ESCAPE or PROFECY – are not taking adequate consideration of *who* defines development priorities and how they are implemented. Research on cohesion policy shows that in most countries, funding largely flows to private actors who lobby for their own interests, not for the development of regions or for the benefit of communities themselves. Territorial indicators and evidence must be integrated with clear modes the participation, feedback, and action by affected community members. Furthermore, participation cannot be an end in itself, as participatory planning can also simply act as a screen for perpetuating elite patronage networks. The two problems must go hand in hand.

McMaster – It is important to have a clear structure and institutions in place to support rural development actions, such as Interreg and SITE in Scandinavian mountains. Furthermore, rural strategies must be integrated within cohesion programs. A key challenge to this end is that cooperation can sometimes have a bad image for some parties, who see it as a restraint on control over local knowledge, capacities, and resources. McMaster argued that it is important for local actors to understand how “buying in” to cooperation can generate multiplier effects that generate benefits beyond what one group could achieve by acting alone. This is the key to developing the trust and support needed for meaningful participatory policy implementation.

Conclusion

William Kutz, geographer at the University of Paris-Cité, gave the concluding remarks. Combining the different issues discussed and debated during the event, he offered a synthesis of several takeaways for future policy development:

1. The participants underscored a clear need to address new methodological challenges to rural development and change in Europe. These pertain to both ongoing gaps in data availability and types of data that are employed to map and measure rural trends. In what ways are these indicators prioritised to inform what combination of factors are considered relevant drivers of socio-spatial marginality and peripherality? This was made most visible in the prevalent use of grid-level data by the presenters, who considered NUTS-level indicators too rough an approximation to interpret rural development and change.
2. Related to this, the methodological issues demonstrate an underlying problem about aspects of rural development are understood to be worthy of attention from policymakers. Most of the discussion ignored the role of urban feedback impacting the rural contexts, leaving gaps in our understanding of what has been happening. Given the important shift in demand for real estate in rural contexts since the COVID pandemic, it is clear that rural analyses should think across the rural-urban divide. One intervention would be to incorporate more housing data into ESPON rural analyses.
3. The final issue pertains to the role of human capital shaping the types of “actionable knowledge” employed to balance out rural areas. Several speakers noted the insufficient attention given to how local civil society is or should be involved in the design and implementation of rural policy development, beyond simple participatory planning. There is an ongoing need both *who* and *how* affected groups can “buy in” to ESPON projects.



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