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Inspire Policy Making with Territorial Evidence

UPTAKE ARTICLE

ESPON Peer Learning Workshop on Digital Spatial Planning

Virtual (MS Teams)

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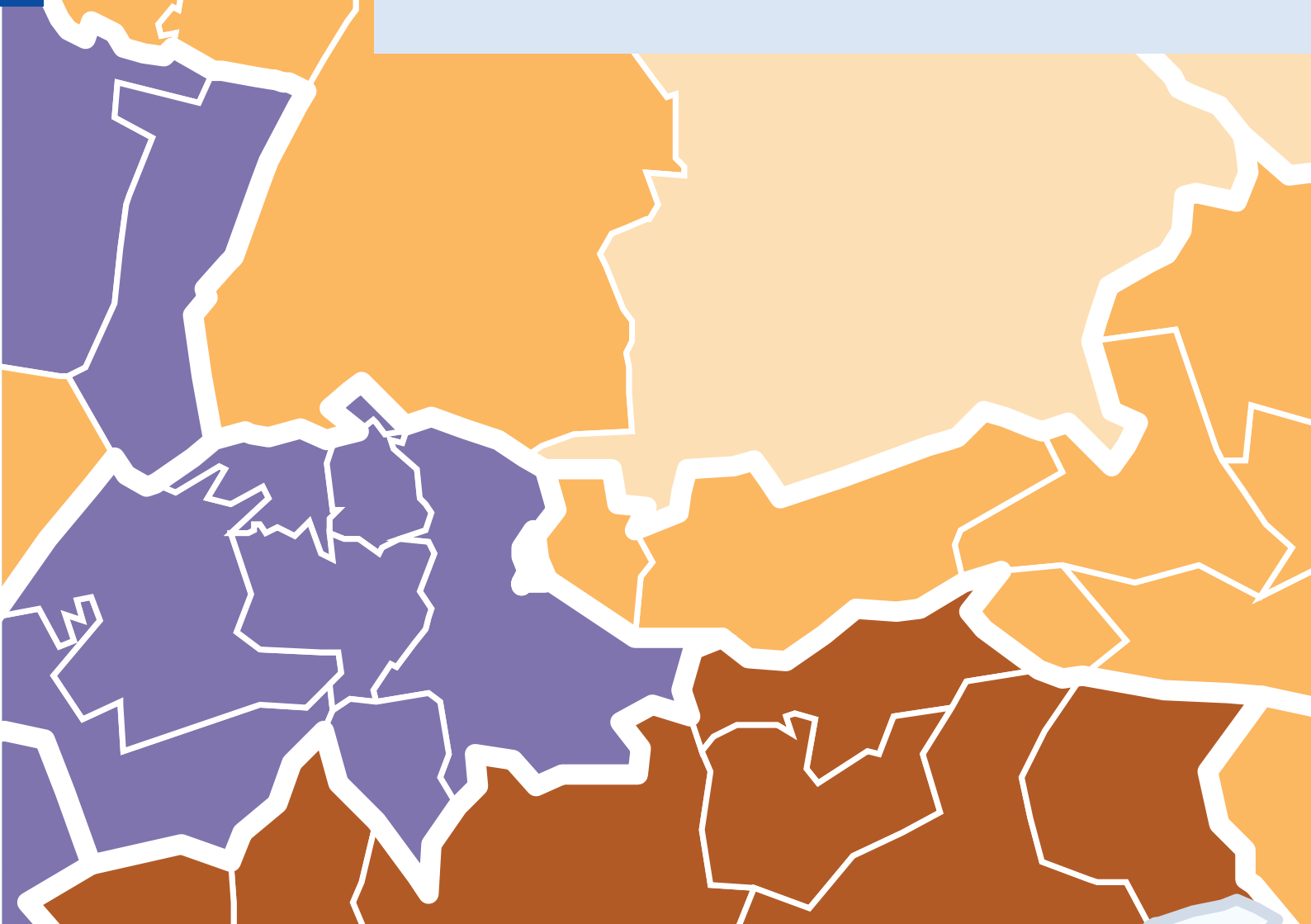

Introduction

In the framework of the ESPON-TNO programme (TransNational Outreach), the University of Tartu and the Department of Spatial Planning at the Estonian Ministry of Finance organised a Peer Learning Workshop on the 24th of November 2021 focusing on digital spatial planning. In the last decade, the digitisation of spatial planning has increased amongst public services in Europe. This digitisation has brought several advantages, such as a higher flexibility in the planning services and an enhanced transparency of the decision-making process.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the dependence on digital planning grew significantly and it was rapidly applied as an on-the-spot solution. This left little time to develop a clear strategy in its implementation and each public service across Europe has adapted to the situation in their own way. Nordic countries, especially Estonia, have shown to be a step ahead in the digitisation of their public services. This Peer Learning Workshop gathered several policymakers, academics, as well as public and private actors from Nordic countries to exchange digital planning practices, identify the challenges ahead, and discuss solutions on how to overcome these challenges.

A total of 117 participants registered and a maximum of 91 effectively attended the event. The majority of the participants were Estonians (45), followed by Croatians (19), and Irish (13). Among the registrants, 44 identified themselves as policymakers, 17 researchers, 9 from the private sector, 6 from civil society, and 41 “others” (the majority of which from public services). The post-event survey collected 20 answers (data as of the 10th of December) that were very satisfied (8), fairly satisfied (10) or neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (1). The main reasons mentioned for the satisfactory experience were the structure of the workshop, the speakers and the practical examples cited, the provocative questions from the moderators, and the added-value in terms of networking. Criticism indicated the lack of tailoring to concrete needs and an approach to the topic that was too broad.

Summary

The event started with an introductory session with Mrs. Piera Petruzzi, of the ESPON EGTC, followed by Triin Lepland of the Estonian Ministry of Finance and Department of Spatial Planning.

In the first keynote presentation, Prof. h.c. Anna M. Hersperger, the lead of the ESPON DIGIPLAN project, introduced the project as the first study to analyse the digital planning practices in all European countries. The DIGIPLAN study used an exploratory approach to analyse the different practices across Europe and performed 50 interviews with experts, an in-depth analysis of 6 countries, and overview studies of 15 other countries. The DIGIPLAN study identified different steps of digitisation starting from a mere scanning of plans into pdf format to actual full geo-data files and, in the future, the elaboration of machine-readable systems. The study has shown an overall eagerness of public services to standardise planning data and an improved workflow contributing to cost-reductions. Most differences in planning practices are generally due to the different traditions in spatial planning. Also, the harmonisation of the data should allow for more innovative practices. When well-implemented, digital planning could bring easier access to information, more transparency, reduced costs, more flexibility, and allow wide analyses to be performed. The main obstacles that need to be overcome are the lack of experience and technical expertise, the low quality of the data, and the lack of financial resources. As a conclusion, based on the different case-studies, the DIGIPLAN study developed numerous policy recommendations that would serve three different purposes: the efficiency, the emphasis on innovation, and the transparency of the digital planning services.

Dr. Nora Fagerholm, adjunct professor at the University of Turku (Finland), gave a presentation on the 3D visualisations supporting participation and collaboration in land use planning. 3D visualisations positively support participation when they seem credible, salient, legitimate or realistic, and when they allow for interaction and immersion. Dr. Nora Fagerholm and her colleagues conducted a study, GreenPlace, involving citizens in the use of a 3D landscape platforms. The study has shown that usability is a key factor in the level of people’s involvement. Overall, 3D visualisation has shown to be effective for increasing participation but challenges remain, especially regarding the digital divide amongst the population, which could lead to an overrepresentation of a specific group.

The second session focused on current uses of the digital planning data and practices with digitalisation in Estonia, Denmark and Sweden, and Norway. Mr. Taavi Pipar, from the Estonian Ministry of Finance and the Department of Spatial Planning, indicated that the Estonian government should develop a planning database centralised in one place, digital archives, and the expertise for regular technical checks as well as web-services. This implementation requires legislative changes, such as the Amendment to the regulation of formalities, that specified the classifications, formats, and the quality of the digital spatial planning data. Also, this transition is done step by step with the first step being the availability of all adopted spatial plans in digital format. The next steps for the future will be to develop fully digital and machine-readable spatial plans. The major challenge in the coming years is the uneven distribution of skills and expertise amongst the municipalities, which thus necessitates further training for public services.

Mr. Uffe Gross Nielsen, digital planning consultant at Niras Denmark, presented the different practices in Denmark and Sweden. Denmark has a much higher online use of digital plans compared to Sweden, where only pdf-versions of documents are accepted as legally binding. Nevertheless, the Swedish approach still allows for more creativity due to the organisational structure of the data strongly influenced by the planning tradition. While the planning data in Denmark is strongly centralised with common standards, each municipality in Sweden has its own formats and database constructs. The latter situation allows more place-based adapted approaches for planning projects and thus, more creativity. Denmark is considered a step ahead as digital plans were legalised in 2008. On the other hand, Sweden is doing better in the use of 3D plans.

Mrs. Hilde Johansen Bakken, of the Norwegian Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, presented the Norwegian practices in terms of digital planning. On the legal side, the Planning and Building Act of 2008 gave the opportunity to Norway to implement digitalisation into the planning legislation. Since then, Norway tends to digitise every land use plan in a standardised vector format. The Act of 2008 also required that all municipalities have a plan register containing information on the current land use plans and the related regulations. From 2013 to 2019, they observed an increase in municipalities fulfilling these requirements, especially from 2015 onwards, thanks to budget releases to achieve this goal.

These presentations were followed by an open debate guided by questions from the moderator, Garri Raagmaa of the University of Tartu, and from the audience. The first point of discussion concerned the influence of digital planning on the decision-making process and participation. Overall, presenters agreed to say that the digitalisation increased the transparency and efficiency of the public services. Therefore, citizens and private stakeholders tend to receive answers directly from the existing system and the collection of data is simplified in order to develop an overall view of the state of spatial planning decisions and be used for generating statistics. However, interpersonal knowledge of local stakeholders remains necessary for place-based adapted approaches. Also, digital “underground” activities (such as hacking and false digital documents) will be a challenge and should thus be considered when developing digital planning services.

A second main issue that was discussed addressed the difficulties to adapt the existing and traditional planning practices to the digital format. One of the planners’ concerns is the level of precision of the information that needs to be presented. The opinion of the speakers was that digitisation still seems to be the better option. Depending on the traditional planning practices, digitisation may imply the input of only standardised information. In most countries, all information that is required for spatial plans is legally binding. Reflections are ongoing in Switzerland and Denmark on how to digitalise planning ideas without the legally binding condition.

Last but not least, the harmonisation of the geo-data in the EU was discussed. Due to the high diversity of planning practices and traditions across Europe, a harmonisation of digital planning data is currently a difficult task. The INSPIRE directive might be a good starting point but further research and transnational collaboration is required to explore this possibility.

Conclusion

Dr. Pille Metspalu of the Estonian Association of Spatial Planners gave key take-aways and summed up the different points of discussions of the morning:

- It seems that digitisation is currently at the centre of spatial planning and is considered a necessity. However, pros and cons need to be identified and communicated clearly to respond to the fears of several stakeholders.
- In this context, clear definitions are of key importance to avoid misunderstandings. This transition will take the time needed and increasing the expertise of the public planning services is required through education programs.
- There is an overall concern that such digitisation might decrease the strategic approach of spatial planning and could ultimately jeopardise creativity. The current reflections in Switzerland and Denmark to integrate not only the legally binding information have identified interesting paths to explore.

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ESPON EGTC
4 rue Erasme, L-1468 Luxembourg
Grand Duchy of Luxembourg
Phone: +352 20 600 280
Email: info@espon.eu
www.espon.eu

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