SOME HELP WITH EURO-PLANNING JARGON

Vincent Nadin and Stefanie Dühr

This paper was published in Town & Country Planning, special issue on ‘European spatial development and territorial cohesion: a new agenda for the UK’ March/April 2005

The content was revised and included in Chapter 2 in

The planning system is loaded with jargon (in both senses) and the European dimension adds another layer, some of which is finding its way into British planning. There can be no hard and fast rules – the meaning of words is inevitably ambiguous, especially so when working across languages and cultures. Our understanding of concepts is evolving too; so there can be no ultimate definition of ‘spatial planning’ or ‘polycentricity’. Meanings are also contested because they embody particular interests and concerns.

So it is with caution that we offer some definitions of key terms that you will find in the European spatial planning literature. They are offered as a starting point and interested readers will find more explanation in the sources below and articles that follow.

The starting point is spatial planning which is best understood in relation to spatial development, and spatial policy.

Spatial development refers to the physical distribution of built and natural features and human activities across a territory (neighbourhood, city or region). It also includes the distribution and qualities of economic and social activities, for example, disparities in access to opportunities from one neighbourhood to another. Spatial development is also the process of change through a complex mix of market decisions and public intervention. All sectors of public policy will have some impact on spatial development, though this is often not recognised by policy makers in those sectors. We describe the spatial impacts of sectoral policy (such as environment, transport, education and health) as spatial policy. For example, if a health authority decides to centralise its facilities in a smaller number of larger hospitals, there are implications for the distribution of access to those facilities.

If planning is to fully address spatial development then it needs to have some influence over policies and action in other sectors. Land use planning systems (of all kinds) have relatively little influence over important spatial policy decisions. Thus, the spatial planning approach concentrates on establishing better co-ordination on territorial impacts: horizontally across different sectors; vertically among different levels of jurisdiction; and geographically across administrative boundaries.

The European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), agreed in 1999 by the then EU-15 ministers, promotes the spatial planning approach within the EU and to member states. It provides a reference point for spatial policy – sectoral policies and actions that have a spatial impact. It recommends policy options to create more balanced and polycentric spatial development, improved urban-rural relationships, more parity in access to infrastructure and knowledge, and wise use of the natural and cultural heritage.
Polycentricity means ‘many centres’. Its meaning in spatial planning will vary at different scales from European to city-region (for example ‘greater London’ may have a polycentric structure at the scale of the South East but a monocentric character at the European scale). Polycentricity describes the spatial organisation of cities and their functional complementarity (do they try to provide the same services?); their institutional integration (are we preparing different strategies for these places?); and political co-operation (is there scope for mutually beneficial co-operation?).

The new Constitutional Treaty will bring in an overarching objective for the Community of territorial cohesion. This is very new, but the idea draws attention to the locational or spatial dimension of economic and social objectives and policies. It suggests that there should be fair (or equal) access for all citizens to services and opportunities (for example, housing, jobs, education, health and quality of life) irrespective of their location. This means that sectors (for example, agriculture, education and health) should take account of the spatial dimension of their policies and actions and act accordingly.

The Community’s Interreg Initiative has been the principal means of applying the ESDP through co-financing of spatial planning projects involving partners in different countries. In the programming period 2000-2006, Interreg had three strands of co-operation: cross-border, between geographically contiguous border regions; transnational, across large multi-national spaces; and inter-regional, among non-contiguous regions. When action is taken by a European institution it is described as supranational, but the ESDP was prepared intergovernmentally, that is the member states co-operating informally rather than through the EU formal committee structure, or comitology.

A number of the transnational programmes produced spatial visions or strategies which were intended to draw together the disparate project work and provide an agenda for future so-operation. The need to work across borders is justified with reference to the concept of transnationality, which means having an effect in more than one country and requiring co-operation across border for effective action. A proposed railway line from the Netherlands to Germany is obviously a transnational issue. Some interests like to use a wider definition which includes issues that are of common interest, such as urban sprawl or rural out-migration.

Demonstrating transnationality is important for meeting the subsidiarity principle, which implies that competences should be ceded upwards only when there is good reason by need or benefit. Thus, it could be argued that Interreg projects should only address issues of a transnational nature (and not those of common interest) in order to be co-financed by the Commission.

Sources:
Cullingworth and Nadin, (2001) Town and Country Planning in the UK;