

# **The European Spatial Development Perspective (E.S.D.P.)**

*Comments and recommendations from the European Consultative Forum  
on the Environment and Sustainable Development*

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## **Foreword**

The European Consultative Forum on the Environment and Sustainable Development was established as a consultative body by a Commission Decision in 1997 (97/150/EC) within the framework of the Fifth Action Programme "Towards Sustainability". Its purpose is to advise the Commission on policy development and to provide a bridge to different sectors of the European society. Its members are appointed in a personal capacity by the Commission on the basis of suggestions from European interest groups. A balance of representation from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), industry, business, consumers, local and regional authorities, trade unions, science and other interests is provided for in the Decision

Among its other activities, the Forum has organised a Working Group on Urban and Spatial Issues, because it believes that there are strong links and impacts from urban development and spatial organisation on sustainable development, as well as on environmental quality, energy consumption, mobility, health and quality of life. Urban and spatial development also touches issues already treated by different working groups of the Consultative Forum as for example agriculture, enlargement, integration, global climate change, health and quality of life.

The first task of the Working Group was an analysis and evaluation of the first draft of the European Spatial Development Perspective (E.S.D.P.). Members of the Working Group have participated in the transnational seminars organised in 1998 to discuss its various aspects. They have also taken into consideration that the E.S.D.P. is related to a number of other European and global initiatives, such as:

- Eurocities (a network of 81 cities in 25 European countries),
- The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI),
- The Local Agenda 21,
- The European Community Programme of Policy and Action in relation to Environment and Sustainable Development (5<sup>th</sup> Environmental Action Programme),
- The European Commission Expert Group on the Urban Environment,
- The Directive of the European Commission on Habitat protection (Natura 2000),
- The Communication from the Commission on Sustainable Urban Development in the European Union: a Framework for Action (COM 605),
- The Transeuropean Networks,
- The Habitat II initiative.

The first assessment of the E.S.D.P. was discussed by the Plenary Session of the Consultative Forum on 14 October 1998 in Copenhagen and the final comments and recommendations were approved by the Forum on 27 January 1999 in Brussels.

We hope that these comments and recommendations will constitute a useful contribution to a very significant European initiative

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## **Executive summary**

### **General principles on spatial development**

- Respect of sustainability goals by economic decisions with spatial implications.
- Need of Strategic Impact Assessment of such decisions.
- Balance of social cohesion and sustainability with competitiveness and the markets through spatial development.
- Conservation of the rich territorial variety of Europe.
- Respect of ecological equilibrium between natural and anthropic systems.
- Spatial planning contribution to local and global climate change control.

### **Positive aspects of the E.S.D.P.:**

- First integrated view of the whole European continent.
- Use of a spatial framework for co-ordinating a wide spectrum of policies.
- Novel trans-sectoral and proactive approach to planning.

### **Areas for improvement:**

Social and cultural concerns:

- Conflicts between the goals of competitiveness and cohesion need to be addressed.
- Greater emphasis on the social aspects and their spatial impacts, particularly in the urban systems.
- Inequalities between the E.U. and the neighbouring regions in the East and South need to be addressed.
- Conservation of the rich diversity of land use in Europe, and avoiding the homogenisation of its territory.

Environmental concerns:

- Threat of fragmentation of the European territory by transport networks.
- Possible confusion as to the “sustainable development” of the natural and cultural heritage, which is a European wealth to be safeguarded and enhanced.
- Protection of biological diversity not only through an „ecological network“, but through integrated management of the entire territory.
- Sustainable management of the water cycle.
- Greater incorporation of health and quality of water considerations.
- Contribution by planning policies to the local and global climate change efforts and commitments.

### **Recommendations for implementing the E.S.D.P. :**

- Greater emphasis on clear and courageous policy formulation.
- Wider awareness of the E.S.D.P. initiative by decision-makers, the planning professions and the general public, through appropriate training and campaigns.
- Necessary redrafting to clarify terms and to sharpen the message.
- Provision for the use of Sustainability Indicators and Strategic Environmental Assessment.
- The role of the future Observatory Network in co-ordinating the process should be strengthened.

### **Conclusion:**

The E.S.D.P. a very positive European initiative, to be strongly supported and further improved, through a multi-level consultation process.

## 1. General principles on spatial development

The Consultative Forum considers that the following principles should be the guidelines for all initiatives concerning the spatial development of Europe within the framework of sustainability and with full respect to the precautionary principle:

- Policies and decisions especially economic ones with implications for spatial development, concerning mainly human settlements, agriculture, transport, energy, tourism, and industry must not have negative impacts on sustainable development and its objectives.
- To achieve this, and before making such decisions with spatial implications, it will be necessary to undertake Strategic Environmental Assessments on long-term ecological effects and to monitor ecological changes with appropriate indicators. The current instrument of Environmental Impact Assessments is in principle insufficient to provide adequate safeguards and in practice often abused.
- The above are of critical importance in the case of political decisions that may have catastrophic effects such as draughts and floods, erosion and land slides, as well as soil, water and atmospheric contamination.
- Spatial planning should balance public interests between on the one hand the objectives of social cohesion and sustainability and on the other the need of competitiveness and market imperatives.
- A paramount objective should be the conservation of the rich diversity of the European territory, which includes geomorphologic, biological, landscape, land-use, cultural and social aspects. Inappropriate efforts at “harmonisation” and homogenisation should be carefully avoided. Indeed, diversity of landscapes contributes to ecological diversity, especially biological diversity.
- Ecological equilibrium of the landscape implies taking into account the interactions and the balance between complex natural and anthropic systems, avoiding one-sided approaches.
- As land-use may have detrimental effects on the climate spatial planning should be used as an effective tool for combating local and global climate change.

## **2. Positive aspects of the E.S.D.P.**

The European Spatial Development Perspective (E.S.D.P.), whose first official draft was approved in June 1997 by the E.U. ministers of spatial planning in Noordwijk of the Netherlands, is the result of four years of hard work undertaken by the member-states and the Commission (mainly DG XVI) since 1993. Difficult discussions were held under many presidencies of the EU, and gradually (and sometimes painfully) a considerable degree of consensus was achieved. This process explains both the strengths and the weaknesses of the document. In any case, any shortcomings of the E.S.D.P. do not diminish its historical importance as the first official and systematic initiative to consider the European territory in its entirety, and to plan its future in a cohesive and collaborative spirit.

Thus the objectives of the E.S.D.P. are both wide and noble. They can be summarised freely as the intention to use a spatial framework for co-ordinating a broad number of policies concerning the continent, all of which have an impact on the condition and use of the European territory. In this sense, the E.S.D.P. breaks new ground, as its approach is trans-sectoral and integrating, but also proactive. This should be contrasted to the traditional physical planning approach - still prevalent in many parts of Europe - which tends to be reactive and regulatory, and looks at the spatial dimension mainly on physical and technical terms. It is, therefore, an initiative to be commended and strongly supported by all those concerned about a better future for the European Union and its people.

## **3. Areas for improvement**

There are, however, a number of weaknesses, which should be remedied through the current process of debate and improvement.

Perhaps the main one is the insufficient effort to reduce the tension between the seemingly conflicting goals of competitiveness and cohesion. The demands of globalisation and free markets appear to be inconsistent with the wish for greater social and territorial balance. Sustained economic growth may not harmonise with sustainability, at least in the short term. The E.S.D.P., while recognising in its analytical part the importance of social problems within Europe, and the disparity in conditions and opportunities between regions, in its policy section does not address the issues with clear and decisive initiatives, probably because of disagreements among the Member States. Thus the social issues affecting Europe (inequalities, unemployment, economic migration, social exclusion etc.) and their spatial dimension are not given sufficient prominence.

The social issues are especially important within the urban systems, where the majority of the population of Europe resides and works. Urban organisation, energy management, urban transport planning and sustainable mobility, noise, waste and pollution management, urban regeneration, urban ecological networks, telematics, co-ordination of sectoral policies, solidarity and social integration are all sustainability aspects that need to be addressed in a consistent way, if a better quality of life for the citizens is to be achieved.

These remarks are reinforced, if the periphery of the Union and its neighbouring countries are considered. Europe is not an island and should not be considered as such. The inequalities even between the less affluent Member States of the Union and many of the surrounding countries (such as those of the South and East Mediterranean or of Eastern

Europe) are enormous and still growing. The resulting social and economic problems within these countries have an increasing impact on the E.U., mainly through uncontrolled economic population fluxes, with a pronounced spatial dimension.

In its analytical part, the E.S.D.P. recognises the diversity of the European territory and notices the need to maintain it, by adapting planning solutions to local specificities. Yet, in its policy section, it includes a number of aims, which will undermine this diversity, such as increased accessibility, more even distribution of economic activities, greater availability of development incentives. It would be perhaps wiser to recognise the particular characteristics of each region and to capitalise on its comparative advantages. In this way, the present patchwork of densely developed urban centres, rural areas with milder economic activities, and natural areas of minimal human intervention, could offer the citizens of Europe wider and more sustainable choices.

On the environmental side, such an approach would leave intact greater areas of the continent, which is being fragmented at present at an unprecedented rate by the ever-expanding European transport networks. In this context, the policy aim of connecting all local transport networks with international ones does not seem a sound choice.

E.S.D.P. stresses the need to maintain the biological diversity of Europe, as well as of its cultural resources, "by the prudent management and sustainable development of the natural and cultural heritage". It proposes the establishment of an "ecological network" as currently being established through "Natura 2000". Two remarks on this:

- The natural and cultural heritage has certainly an economic value, as evidenced by the number of visitors to some of Europe's historic cities, and to its limited natural parks; and it does constitute a comparative advantage on the global scale, which should be maintained at all costs. To speak, however, of its "development" (even if it is sustainable) may lead to excesses.
- The biological diversity of the continent cannot be assured just through an ecological network of protected areas, as nature depends on continuity. The recent toxic threat to the Doñana National Park is a characteristic example. It requires also the integrated management of the whole territory and of human activities in it, along the principles of sustainability.

As far as sustainable water management is concerned, maintenance of the water-cycle, water allocation for the conservation of ecosystems, ecological problems with water-transfers, the negative impacts on the environment of water management engineering works and both flood and draught mitigation should be taken into account.

Considerations on health and quality of life should be given a greater prominence, so that they are taken seriously into account in all spatial policies and interventions included in the E.S.D.P.

In addition, the use of territorial planning measures (such as a rational organisation of activities in space to reduce the need of mobility) in order to decrease gas emissions, within the framework of controlling the global climate change, should be given prominence in the policy aims of the E.S.D.P. initiative. Efforts to decrease commuting by bringing closer housing and working locations, improving the life quality of cities, relying on new technologies, as well as developing regional production and consumption patterns should be strongly encouraged.

## **4. Recommendations for implementing and developing the E.S.D.P.**

Recognising the importance of the spatial dimension in the process of achieving sustainable development, the Forum considers that the European Spatial Development Perspective (E.S.D.P.) should be actively further developed. In this context a change is needed from the present emphasis on analysis and its somewhat timid approach to objectives, to a provision of a clearer and more courageous policy orientation framework for the European continent and its neighbouring regions. This should overcome the limitation agreed in Leipzig in 1994 of the approach being indicative and not prescriptive.

Stronger and clearer statements will contribute to a better understanding and acceptance of the ESDP among a broader public. At present, this important European initiative is known only by a limited circle of EC and government staff and certain professionals involved. Very rapidly, it needs to be made known and understood by three major target groups: decision-makers, professionals involved in planning processes, and the wider European public. This task seems straightforward for the first group, but much more difficult for the other two. It is suggested that for the planning professionals appropriate training courses should be incorporated in university curricula, and made available to practitioners through their professional organisations. In addition, scientific exchanges in Europe should be encouraged with EU financial support, and their results being taken seriously into account in decision-making. For the awareness of the public on the same issues, the non-governmental organisations can play a decisive role.

Such a training and awareness process will require systematic actions and appropriate resources, and should be carried out simultaneously on the European, the national, and the sub-national and local levels. It will also require a drastic redrafting of the present E.S.D.P. document, in order to:

- clarify the terms used, thus avoiding inevitable confusion (especially in translations);
- make its statements clearer and more easily assimilated by the general reader;
- provide specific examples and case studies, which will render the policy aims more concrete and less ambiguous.

In addition, it has to be strongly emphasised that the operativity and efficiency of this initiative depends on adequate updated and consistent basic information, and will be extremely limited if, in particular, updated mapping is not available, including use of soils (land cover), and also the translation into Geographic Information Systems (GIS), existing information on the quality of environment and natural resources productivity and functionality.

For that purpose updating of land cover is urgent. This has become a multipurpose tool for planning, Strategic Environmental Assessment, monitoring changes and produced territorial indicators. Most of actual maps are based on 1990 satellite images and should be updated no later than during the year 2000, and made available to all potential users.

Also, during the redrafting of the E.S.D.P. the use of Sustainability Indicators and Strategic Environmental Assessment for all major decisions should be incorporated.

The E.S.D.P. has to be understood as a long-term process within the European Union, which will mature and develop during the next few years. In this process, the proposed European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (E.S.P.O.N.) could be a useful structure,

not only in providing credible data (as proposed at present), certainly in association with the European Environmental Agency and European Statistical Office (Eurostat), but also in co-ordinating this process, and in making the necessary information widely known.