

Proposal for an ESPON 2030 Programme Thematic Action Plan on 'Perspective for all people and places'

Input paper for the consultation from 26 November 2021 to 31 January 2022

For details of the consultation process, see www.espon.eu

1. The understanding

The 'Perspective for all people and places' is a comprehensive and cross-cutting TAP, which contains territorial evidence on the key trends and determinants of upward economic and social convergence between European territories.

The objective of this TAP is to develop the knowledge base as regards the territorial patterns of social and economic convergence in order to promote better balanced territorial development and less inequalities or disparities between people and places, better addressing territorial focused policies, avoiding possible pitfalls and unintended effects. Through the observations for the entire ESPON Programme area, this TAP intends to provide new insights on how to mitigate the consequences of the current COVID pandemic and other subsequent territorially relevant challenges, with a view on reducing territorial fragmentations and socio-economic fallouts in particular for vulnerable groups or regions. Focusing at various territorial levels on the drivers and consequences of economic and social convergence, this TAP aims at promoting the diversity and the potentials of European territories as a key determinant to secure sustainable territorial development beyond sole economic growth, facing global challenges and promoting local heritage, capacity or specificity.

Among others, this TAP:

- includes comparative studies aimed at a better understanding the increasing territorial and societal fragmentation at different territorial levels, which is sometimes fuelling growing disenchantment or discontent (focusing e.g. on demography, social inequalities and poverty, new forms of spatial segregation and social polarisation, income distribution, labour markets, access/ affordability of services of general interest, housing, education and lifelong learning, healthcare, cultural heritage or quality of life as a whole);
- informs EU and national policies on the impact of public investments to address social upwards convergence and promote policies that pay attention to development potential for all places in Europe, and that favour the socio-economic integration of disadvantaged groups;
- strengthens the capacities and skills of policy makers in order to promote the diversity of European territories, to develop and shape built environment and settlements, creating more attractive living environments, to secure and provide qualitative and affordable public services, and to identify diversified job opportunities.
- informs territorial strategies of the ESPON countries and regions in the aftermath of the current COVID-19 crisis with the focus of less inequalities between people and places.

2. The policy setting

This TAP theme underpins three out of five Cohesion Policy objectives for 2021-2027. It fosters the objective of a **more Social and Inclusive Europe** - to promote social inclusion and equal access to all public services. It also is in line with the objective of a **Europe closer to citizens** - to provide rationale for the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives. It adheres to the objective of **Greener, low-carbon Europe** - to sustain policy actions towards energy transition and circular economy, and also to advice climate adaptation and risk prevention. It links to the objective of a **more Connected Europe** - to help maintain people's mobility and connectedness to a smooth functioning of strategic transport and digital connectivity.

This TAP theme correlates well with the objectives of the **Territorial Agenda 2030**. It addresses a Just Europe objective by contributing to a better-balanced territorial development by enhancing local resilience potentials. Responding to a Green Europe objective, it acts for a better safety and resiliency, economic sustainability, and connectivity of all places. In addition, this TAP theme correlates also with the **New Leipzig Charter** and the **Urban Agenda**.

3. The challenges, trends and drivers behind

For the ESPON Programme territories, the accumulated ESPON evidence displays that **diversity (in a more comprehensive understanding) remains an essential asset for the prosperous and sustainable development of both places and people**. Therefore, the need to address territorial challenges and potentials with a higher degree of geographical sensitivity is greater than ever, in order to better understand the drivers, effects, linkages, potential and development opportunities and help reduce overall inequalities and disparities between countries or regions. ESPON evidence is built on benchmarking and good practices analyses, **showing that the diversity of challenges** is met with a **variety of innovative policy responses**, all relying, most of the times, on the ability and creativity of local public institutions or local communities to achieve or sustain a successful territorial development.

The **role that all places are playing** is reassessed through different strategical documents (at European and international level), unveiling a new path, focused on **the improvement or creation of more attractive and people-centred places**. The way people interact and use the built and natural environment will come into a new phase, and as it is outlined in the New Leipzig Charter, the **principles of good governance** incorporate as well good spatial planning and quality design in order to secure attractive, inclusive, durable and adaptable places. This new perspective will be linked to **enhancing the quality of life** for both individuals and communities, looking at various enablers: from the individual perspective (of good shelter, education and health - measured by availability, accessibility and affordability of housing, basic utilities, education and health services in the territory), enablers from the socio-economic sphere (good mobility, digital connectivity, work and consumption choices, social and cultural life in the territory) or the ecological sphere (looking at green environments, availability and maintenance of green infrastructure and protected areas) etc.

However, in achieving a sustainable and inclusive future for all places and people, existing or new social challenges need to be addressed: **social and welfare inequalities** (like limited inclusion, poverty, social polarisation), **social vulnerabilities** (in relation to economy or environment, for example) **and segregation** (based on occupation, income and education, as well as on gender and ethnicity etc.), understanding also the narrative behind the geography of discontent. Affecting all territories, these challenges are being heavily swayed by steady demographic trends (e.g. lower birth rates, in- and outmigration, foreseen depopulation, an ageing population and an increasing life expectancy which impacts both the healthcare and welfare systems etc.), climate change (e.g. socio-economic vulnerability to different types of hazards etc.), by on-going technological transformation or transition to green/digital economies.

The **layers of segregation** (individuals and households, generations, between and/or within regions or urban-rural areas or even neighbourhoods), which are often a result of inequality, are also influenced by different vicious cycles, that are generally linked to accessibility and affordability issues (e.g. access to services of general interest, housing, education or culture, etc.), less diversified economies (e.g. weak or/ less diversified labour market, low incomes, low demands for work force, high unemployment rates, etc.) or low vitality (e.g. youth outmigration or unemployment, aging population, etc.).

Additionally, different crisis, hazards or unforeseen events are contributing to deepening the territorial divides, affecting already exposed or at-risk population and consequently, lowering the overall quality of life. Some inequalities could be more accentuated by the socio-digital segregation (as the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an accelerated digital use - but bearing in mind that digitalisation is a tool for enhancing wellbeing, not an objective itself).

The effective response and coping mechanisms related to the crisis management have very much been linked to the ability and capability to change and/or adapt, for individuals and authorities alike, in order to **seize the opportunity to enhance and stimulate positive transformations**. A readjustment in the policy discourse has already found its way, looking at **coordinated, place-based initiatives to develop adaptive strategies, promoting wellbeing** while acknowledging that “going for growth” in some areas is not the most suitable answer for a balanced territorial development. Building on diversity and local innovative capacity, policies need to reflect broader collective objectives (including economic growth), such as inclusion, spatial justice, wellbeing, and support a Just Transition. In that same sense, public policies and state aids, alongside public investments will still need to be foreseen as they have a potential massive corrective effect in diminishing territorial and social disparities.

Policy needs:

- Regarding policies specifically addressing territorial inequalities or socio-economic convergence, which aspects are considered the most important in terms of priority and who are they addressed?
- According to your experience, is there any knowledge gap that prevent from delivering more effective policy responses?
- Could you specify those knowledge gaps? Do they result from difficulty in understanding the territorial development trends and challenges for your territory? Or, from lack of access to good practice on how similar places in Europe have dealt with those trends and challenges through the use of projects or policy instruments?
- Would you see ESPON as the right instrument to address those knowledge gaps? Why and in what way?
- What would then be your specific evidence and knowledge needs to improve capacity in policymaking that ESPON could address?

Research support:

- What is the stock of available scientific evidence (beyond the one accumulated by ESPON) matching the topical profile of 'people and places'? Is this evidence up-to-date or requires revisiting, e.g. on challenges, drivers, trends and development opportunities behind?
- What is the state of art in research work on territorial development beyond economic growth and upward social and economic convergence? Does this research have a territorial focus, and wide comparable territorial coverage?
- What are the current discourse questions and debatable aspects that might be further pursued by ESPON?
- In that, are there any distinct evidence gaps on territorial diversity that the ESPON Programme would be suited to fill? What are the instruments to achieve it and how could this complement the work by other research bodies?