

Proposal for an ESPON 2030 Programme Thematic Action Plan on 'Places resilient to crises'

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

While European regions and cities slowly emerge from varying degrees of lockdown measures that were imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19, the effects that the sanitary crisis caused are likely to last for some time to come. Due to different development conditions and territorial specificities, these implications vary across European territories, as do the policy responses that have been put in place. Just a bit more than a decade after the financial crisis hit in 2008, the Covid-19 pandemic underscores the need to increase the resilience of European cities, regions and countries and to strengthen their recovery process.

The TAP on 'Places resilient to crises' is very comprehensive and cuts across different thematic fields. It aims at creating territorial evidence on the vulnerability of European territories to different types of crises, emergent in environmental, economic, social, sanitary and digital fields of activity. The evidence to be gathered shall also inform about the specific strengths of European territories that enable them to withstand crises as well as their specific development opportunities that can be tapped to better manage the effects of crises. Altogether, the results generated in the framework of this TAP shall help to strengthen territories' adaptation capacity so that the policies, through the adapted governance mechanisms, can better mitigate different risks and shocks.

Through observations for the entire ESPON Programme area, this TAP intends to provide new insights and possible pathways for all places to build their resilience to the emerging threats.

Among others, this TAP:

- includes European research activities to help detect the already developing and potential natural and man-made hazards that could result in different types of crises bearing its mark on territorial development;
- includes comparative studies to capture the territorial vulnerability to different types of crises as well as particular strengths of European regions and cities (e.g. geographical specificities and similarities) that help withstand crises and foster development opportunities;
- supports countries, regions and cities in their efforts to further develop adaptation, mitigation and recovery strategies;
- promotes the collaborative approach across the levels and territories, the networking and the involvement of civil societies and other stakeholders that could play important roles in elaborating adequate and place-based resilience actions;
- strengthens the capacities and skills of policy makers on all levels of governance and across policy sectors to further integrate resilience in programming and policy making processes;
- contributes to understanding possible territorial consequences of resilience actions taken, including the use of specific policies as a tool to enhance territorial resilience.

2. The policy setting

This TAP theme underpins all five Cohesion Policy objectives for 2021-2027. It connects to the objective of **Smarter Europe** - to ensure an innovative, smart and digital transformation of the national economic systems and digital connectivity. 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 a smooth functioning of strategic transport. It

fosters the objective of **a more Social and inclusive Europe implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights** - to promote social inclusion and equal access to healthcare and other public services. Finally, it is in line with the objective of **a Europe closer to citizens** - to provide a rationale for the sustainable and integrated development of all types of territories and local initiatives.

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.

3. The challenges, trends and drivers behind

Depending on local characteristics and development potentials, the accumulated ESPON evidence and other research on the subject displays that the territories covered by the ESPON Programme show **a diverse sensitivity to shocks caused by natural and man-made hazards**. Also, their recovery paths will not look alike as territorial assets, capacities of public services to react to the crisis and implement mitigation measures differ. The latest **virus pandemic of COVID-19** has shown how the exposure trajectories of European places changed over time (e.g. between the first and second wave), and the range of public responses - either circumventing (doing things differently), mitigating (limiting negative effects), compensating (restoring the pre-crisis balance) or exploiting (taking advantage of the effects of the crisis).

The ability of places to withstand and respond to the whole range of natural and man-made hazards is strained by a number of challenges and results in a diverse pattern of impacts.

The **environmental challenges** set a contrasting territorial pattern between the potential positive impacts of climate change for some parts of Europe and the high vulnerability of regions in southern and south-eastern Europe, as well as in northern Scandinavia and Finland. The high vulnerability areas are predicted to cope with the most severe economic and social consequences resulting from droughts, biodiversity losses, land degradation and desertification, stresses on fresh water supplies and food production, changes in various economic sectors as well as health risks. Moreover, climate change impacts are not confined to the administrative boundaries but make the territories interdependent, e.g. in the entire catchment area at decrease of snowfall in mountainous regions.

The **challenge of social inequalities** due to technological and economical changes and demographic trends (e.g. ageing, depopulation and in- and outmigration) has its toll on territorial access to public services, to education, to employment and may result in social exclusion, spatial segregation and marginalisation areas. Again, as demonstrated by the ESPON research, some regions in Europe have proved to be more socially resilient than others (e.g. in the field of poverty or unemployment), with comparatively less risk of sustainable exclusion or their labour market recovering quickly from the downturns.

The **powerful drivers of innovation, digitalisation, automation and AI** (artificial intelligence) put the European places under constant pressure of staying competitive and quickly adapting to the market needs. The ESPON sees that the structure of the economy plays a crucial role. This means that the initial strengths of regions, their industrial legacy, the size and accessibility of the domestic market and their global connectivity have a substantial impact on the potential for economic resilience. A diverse economic structure in the region, high levels of innovation performance and efficient transport networks ensuring access to main gateways and corridors are found to be extremely important in this respect. However, there are pathways to innovation, recovery and more generally resilience for all places, no matter what their starting point is, provided that the territorial assets and potentials are effectively activated.

Finding a right crisis response based on the territorial characteristics is also determined by ability of each place to go beyond administrative boundaries when necessary (developing functional governance models with placed-based, participatory and networking approaches) . Building the adequate resilience requires policies, which promote cooperation and bottom-up initiatives, and which assimilate good practices from frontrunner regions.

Policy needs:

- How is the issue of territorial resilience formulated in your policies?
- In your work with policies on territorial resilience, do you see any knowledge gaps that prevent you from delivering a more effective policy response?
- What is the character of those knowledge gaps? Do they result from difficulty in understanding the territorial development trends and challenges? 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 a right instrument to address those knowledge gaps? Why and in what way?
- What would then be your specific evidence and knowledge needs for the better capacity in policymaking that ESPON could address?

Research support:

- What is the stock of available scientific evidence (beyond the one accumulated at ESPON) matching the topical profile of 'places resilient to crises'? Is this evidence up-to-date or requires revisiting, e.g. on challenges, trends and drivers behind?
- What is the state of art in research work on territorial resilience? Does this research have a territorial focus, demonstrate wide territorial coverage and is based on solid (veritable) data and methodologies?
- 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 resilience 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?