

THE TERRITORIAL COHESION CONCEPT: SCALES OF APPLICATION, MEASUREMENT SYSTEMS AND DERIVATIVE POLICIES

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In 2008 the European Communities' Commission initiated a consultation and clarification process about the concept of territorial cohesion and how to make it operational, resulting in the publication of the Green Paper on territorial cohesion. The document represents a step forward to the realization of the main issues related to territorial cohesion but it raises, in turn, important questions about scale and scope of territorial action. And also about how to improve cooperation and coordination between sectorial and territorial policies and what indicators should be developed to assess characteristics and trends of territorial cohesion. These and other questions were addressed in the forum about cohesion, diversity and territorial development, held in Seville in 2009. The experts' contributions, conveniently synthesized and evaluated, are included in this text as an answer to the questions proposed in the Green Paper.

The debate began in the late '90s, when the European Commission initiated a process to determinate a defining and complete concept of territorial cohesion, understanding that this should be a guiding principle for a more harmonious and balanced development.

Naturally, this whole process has to be included in the widest debate about the EU budget and structural policies reform (mainly the policy actions of the ERDF, ESF, Cohesion Fund, Rural Development Fund and the Fisheries Fund). For Faludi (2005:19), the intentions that emerge around the concept of territorial cohesion promoted by the Committee have to do with the traditional and redistributive European regional policy. But the concept also incorporates self-organization elements, endogenous development and good governance, aspects that had not been included before. This also implies a shift in cohesion policy and its consequent funds redistribution. The aim of European regional policy will not only consist of reducing the imbalances, but also improving competitiveness and cooperation between regions as well as harmonizing all the policies applied to a territory. In Green Paper's words: «there has been growing awareness of the need to frame development strategies around the particular assets of territories, their physical, human and social capital as well as their natural resources» (EC, 2008:4).

Since its emergence, the concept has been gaining institutional recognition within the EU, although, as reported by some authors, it is mostly defined by what it tries to correct (imbalances) and scarcely by what it proposes (Farin, 2005:66).

Perhaps the key to its success is due precisely to the territorial perspective it gives to the other two Union's principles: economic and social cohesion, transferring all issues that used to be presented under a purely social prism (equality, equity, solidarity) to a territorial approach. That implies to incorporate equity and inter-territorial solidarity issues as well as environmental quality and sustainability objectives and integration / coordination mechanisms of different sectorial policies with territorial impact. As the Green Paper notes, «the concept of territorial cohesion builds bridges between economic effectiveness, social cohesion and ecological balance, putting sustainable development at the heart of policy design» (EC, 2008:3).

Regarding the most appropriate definition of territorial cohesion, we propose in this paper to define it as a principle for public action to achieve goals such as creating links between members of a territorial community (social cohesion) and promote equitable access to equipment and services (equity / territorial justice). It has to be characterized by setting up an authentic common territorial project (identity) on the basis of respect for the diversity and particularities, articulating and connecting the different parts of the territory. It is a question of breaking the present trends of polarization and inequality between regions, drawing on the strengths and inherent features of each one. In short, it is pretended to find out the cohesion or internal consistency of the territory, and its connectivity with neighbouring areas.

In this sense, territorial cohesion would be a principle for public actions aimed at territorial development, which would include the following three key elements:

- The physical linkage between parts of the concerned territory, in this case the EU. This consideration would be covered through infrastructure networks and the already mentioned concept of equivalent accessibility.
- The territorial equity, understood as equal opportunities to achieve personal development in all the parts of a territory. Its concrete expression would be achieved by ensuring equal levels of public services, amenities and infrastructure in all the parts of the concerned territory.
- The identification of the community that inhabits a territory with a common life project. This is perhaps the most novel element, and possibly the most complex to quantify and define about performance lines (as it escapes from material sphere and enters the field of belonging and identity feelings). But its inclusion seems to be essential, as it can be seen how often the greatest threats to territorial cohesion, related to the emergence of divisive or centrifugal tendencies, are originated in territorial contexts in which the first two elements provide very positive indicators, frequently above the average for the territory as a whole.

In turn, based on existing regional diversity in the European Union, territorial cohesion refers to the establishment of links between these areas that can enable them to exploit their comparative advantages towards greater competitiveness and efficiency. This implies avoiding excessive concentration processes activity, territorial polarization and social

inequality, in favour of the objectives of social cohesion, territorial equity and environmental quality resulting from a balanced and sustainable development.

At the same time, it is assumed that, despite being a generic objective of the EU, it should be developed at state and intrastate levels. Therefore, it is considered that the States or the competent sub-scale entities are responsible for the Land Use and Spatial Planning, which is reaffirmed as the most important mechanism for coordination among actors and levels.

In this sense, the development of territorial cohesion concept means opening up to new possibilities for the coordination of different sectorial policies with spatial impact, at Community, state or sub-scale entities levels, and starting from the principle of the need to align the different policies to the uniqueness of each area. This adaptation implies an individualized treatment of each territory's problems and the proposed solutions, avoiding the uniform application of standard formulas. This turns into an integrative approach of the various sectorial policies (infrastructures, promoting economic development, environment, welfare, etc.), which lack of territorial coordination remains as one of the unresolved deficiencies of public policies in the EU.

Likewise, these new insights open the way to improve the public participation channels in land management processes, bringing the treatment of the problems to the concerned citizens and local public and private actors (through the impulse to territorial cooperation networks at local or subregional levels, for example). Even so, these intentions for better territorial governance present unquestionable difficulties, like the inequality of performance and negotiation power among the incident actors, in which general interests usually appear underrepresented, especially in the long term.

With no contradiction to the aforesaid, it seems necessary to warn about the dangers of maximizing conceptual innovation and taking the risk of forgetting the essential concepts and aspects that should be on the basis of every development debate. More specifically, it should be reaffirmed the need for inter-regional solidarity policies to continue with the purpose of reducing economic disparities, which is the fundamental and irreplaceable basis from which moving towards more specific concepts and complex realities (such as the ones inherent in «quality of life»). These latter concepts are essential for the advance of theoretical and methodological debate, but they cannot be alternatives or substitutes of the principal development indicators (income and employment, primarily), especially when establishing objective criteria or quantitative thresholds for implementing solidarity policies between territories.

We must also refer in this summary to the subtitle on the Green Paper on territorial cohesion which proposes, literally, «Turning territorial diversity into strength». This close relation between cohesion, diversity and territorial development concepts has already been discussed by this paper authors in another publication (Fernández-Tabales, Mendoza, Pedregal and Zoido, 2009), and they found that the view of territorial diversity, conceived not as opposite to unity but to uniformity, is consolidating. It is being seen as a value, and even as a resource for development, not as a restriction to it. That derives from the possibilities that emerge from applying a separated treatment to each territory, in order to optimize their singular potential. And it is consistent with the guidelines appliance for territorial policy proposed by the ESPON: «Good management of natural and cultural heritage, to help the conservation of regional identities and cultural diversity against globalization.»

Finally, an important challenge to make the concept operational is the design of an appropriate measurement system and indicators in order to evaluate the cohesion extent and compare different territories. For this reason, it is considered necessary to develop a system of territorial cohesion indicators at EU level to provide real and institutional consistency to the concept, being an essential tool for the development of policies designed for that purpose.

In this sense, previous experiences developed at EU level can be taken as guiding precedents, although in this case, there should be taken into account specific issues such as: physical articulation by transport networks, equivalent access to equipment and services, exploitation of the territorial capital (distinguishing human, economic, social, cultural, environmental capitals) and the presence or absence of separatist tendencies, among others.