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How "green" are spatial development policies at the European level?
- An analysis of framework documents and case studies from an
environmental point of view

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How “green” are spatial development policies at the European level? – An analysis of framework documents and case studies from an environmental point of view

MARKUS LEIBENATH and KARINA M. PALLAGST

Abstract

Policies of the European Union are of growing importance for spatial structures and the state of the environment within the member states of the EU. The reasons can be found firstly in the Structural Funds and secondly in the ruling competencies the EU has acquired in many fields of spatial and environmental relevance. Furthermore some specific instruments for spatial and regional development have been elaborated in recent years which are, however, legally not binding, at least if they focus on conceptual or planning aspects.

As – in accordance with article 6 of the treaty of Amsterdam - “environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Community policies and activities”, the question arises to which extent the goals of the Community’s environmental policies have already been integrated into European spatial development policies. Furthermore it was intended to investigate whether the approaches on the European level can be used to foster sustainable urban and regional development in the member states, e. g. in Germany.

On the one hand five instruments in the field of spatial and urban development have been analysed comparatively. On the other hand the results have been achieved by case studies in which examples of implementation processes and projects have been evaluated. The cases were selected from the Community initiatives INTERREG II (track A and C) and URBAN I. The criteria for the evaluation of instruments and cases have been integrated into a profile of environmental requirements, based on environmental policy documents of the EU.

The evaluation of framework documents showed that the goals of environmental policies of the Community are already taken into account in European spatial policies. The best examples in this regard are the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), the “Action Plan for Sustainable Urban Development” as well as the Community initiatives INTERREG III B and URBAN II.

The in-depth case studies led to the result that the analysed Community initiatives offer much room to realise environmental goals which is not always used adequately by local authorities and NGO’s. Therefore the position of environmental stakeholders should be reinforced in the processes of program planning and approval. Moreover the instruments at EU-level should be linked more closely with related instruments at national level, e. g. local agenda 21 or regional development concepts.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 70es many attempts have been undertaken by different environmental policy actors to foster the provision for of environmental aspects within EU policies. (Wilkinson, 1990). They achieved popularity under the catchword „greening“.

The Amsterdam Treaty of 1997 takes these attempts into consideration. In Article 2 a „a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment“ is declared an expressed aim of the EU. Furthermore it is stated explicitly in article 6: „Environmental protection requirements must be integrated into the definition and implementation of the Community policies and activities, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development.“

Deeper involving environmental aspects in legislation on the European level is related to the fact, that policies of the European Union influence spatial structures in the member countries to a greater extent. Among the spheres relevant for spatial planning is structural policy of the EU a field of action. „Greening the structural funds“ is therefore an important concern in terms of the Amsterdam Treaty.

In the ‘Guidelines for Structural Fund Programmes’ was agreed that for the programming period 2000-2006 environmental aspects have to be taken into account for implementing measures in the frame of the structural funds. According to this, Shutt / Colwell / Koutsoukos point out a growing importance of the topic sustainable development in the frame of structural funds. Albeit they endorsed „at least in the rhetoric“ in parenthesis (Shutt, Colwell and Koutsoukos, 2002).

Parallel and partly funded by the structural funds attempts for European spatial development policy occur as a new field of action on the European level. Relevant actors are EU member states and the European Commission. The development comprises the documents Europa 2000, Europa 2000+, the Community Initiative INTERREG II C for transnational cooperation, and the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). The latter has been accepted in 1999 and is since then being implemented. Nevertheless it has to be mentioned, that spatial development activities on the European level are to a great extent informal, as EU doesn’t obtain formal competencies for spatial development.

Environmental policy as well as spatial development policy aim at improving environmental and living conditions. However both policy fields are following different paths to achieve this (van der Gun / de Roo, 1994). On the European level, the coordination turns out to be different and complex. This is due to the differentiated and linked constellations of actors in the structure of a multilevel system. Such a system is characterised by a multitude of heterogeneous actors, whose relations are rather based on the exchange of information than on mechanisms of control, and shared decision making processes (Benz, 1998). It might be concluded, that in a system as complex as the one mentioned above, single topical issues like e. g. environmental aspects might lose their relevance during the process of implementation.

Whereas according to the structural funds involving environmental aspects has been analysed and discussed among other things in the frame of political sciences (Lenschow 1999, 2002), they are a mostly untended sphere in the frame of European spatial development policy. In this context the following questions have to be posed, which tackle different levels of European spatial development policy and its implementation:

- In which way have environmental aspects been included into the aims of European spatial development policy? Does “greening” in this sphere only comprise verbal attempts?
- Can a stronger provision for environmental aspects be stated as well as within the programming documents of spatial development policy, and up to the project level conducted by the member states?

- In which way can the existing attempts of spatial development policy on the European level be of use for a sustainable environmental city and regional development in the member states?

These questions have been investigated by the authors in a study which analysed selected instruments of spatial relevance on the European level according to environmental aspects.¹ As it was already mentioned, a spectrum of Community policies is related with spatial implications. For this reason it is necessary to narrow the research topic. Given the fact, that limiting urban and regional growth is one of the most urgent fields of action in the overlapping of urban and environmental policy (Friege 1999), it is necessary to study the links to the European level in this area. Therefore, such instruments will be taken into consideration in the study which are either focussed on city regions or obtain an integrating relation. Whereas sectoral EU-instruments such as they are in use in transport, agriculture, energy, and the ones concentrated on rural areas will not be taken into consideration. EU's environmental policy instruments are also not included in the study. Nevertheless they offer an important basis for developing assessment criteria.

The paper presents - because of the differentiated research questions - a multidimensional research frame developed in the study. Sketching the classification of spatial and urban policy instruments will be left out in this presentation in favour of the detailed description of the assessment processes.² Firstly, five instruments of spatial and urban development policy will be analysed in a comparative way and assessed according to environmental aspects. These are the ESDP, the Community Initiative INTERREG III A and INTERREG III B, the Framework for Action on sustainable urban development in the EU, and the Community Initiative URBAN II.³ This step of the study concentrates on the framework documents. Based on this, the following steps will be analysing and assessing case studies on the Community Initiatives mentioned above and their implementation processes as well as realised projects. Examples will be case studies from Germany, representing one EU member state.

Assessing the instruments and case studies will be based on a profile of demands for the environment that has been specially developed during the research project. This step also required a distinction between different levels, such as:

- Analysing the problems in order to show in how far environmental policy aims have been taken into consideration.
- Analysing the potentials offered by the instruments for realising environmental aims in the member countries.

Elaboration of an ecological requirements profile

The assessment to which degree policies of spatial development consider environmental needs resembles a strategic environmental impact assessment. However, most of the required information is only available for plans or programmes addressing specific locations, e. g. the environmental characteristics of or the prospective impacts on the environment. As none of the selected policies is related to specific locations, only those parts of a strategic environmental impact assessment could be executed, that are not dependent on information about any location. (Arts 1994) Having this in mind, the following criteria have been formulated for the first part of the ecological requirements profile:

- In which way are environmental goals addressed?
- Do all relevant goals get mentioned?

- Is the level of specification of the environmental goals comparable to the other goals?
- Are there any statements about how environmental goals ought to be considered in the process of implementation, e. g. an obligation to carry out formal environmental impact assessments on the project level?

The question whether a spatial development policy considers all relevant environmental goals can only be answered based on a reference system of environmental goals. For this purpose the main documents of European environmental policy have been considered, e. g. the articles of the European treaty focusing on the environment, the 5th Environmental Action Programme, the Fauna, Flora and Habitats Directive, the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy as well as "A Handbook on Environmental Assessment of Regional Development Plans and EU Structural Funds Programmes".

The second part of the environmental requirements profiles centres on the evaluation of opportunities for the promotion of environmental issues which a certain political instruments offers to stakeholders in the member states. This is the case, if an instrument can be used as basis of discussion because of its political relevance, or if it is linked with the allocation of funds. The most important criterion therefore is whether an instrument is financially binding in any way. If that is the case one has to assess

- how extensive the share of money is that is reserved for environmental matters and what the relation is between measures related to the environment and other measures, and
- how the allocation of funds can be influenced.

Outcomes of the analysis of framework documents

Based on the environmental requirements profile which has been set up by the authors, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), „Sustainable Urban Development in the European Union: A Framework for Action“ and the guidelines for the Community initiatives INTERREG III A, INTERREG III B and URBAN II have been analysed. The ESDP has been chosen as it is the main document of spatial development policy on the European level. It has been elaborated over many years and as it is of growing importance for the coordination of other political instruments. The document „Sustainable Urban Development in the European Union: A Framework for Action“ is the starting point of several other political initiatives and is of great interest chiefly because the European Commission used it as a means of challenging and re-aligning its activities with regard to urban development. The Community initiatives URBAN and INTERREG have been integrated into the evaluation because they allow not only to analyse the framework documents, but also to trace and to assess their implementation into specific projects. Furthermore INTERREG III B is of particular interest as it is designed to apply the ESDP (European Communities 1999: 39).

The European Spatial Development Perspective – ESDP – (European Communities 1999) is rooted in the Foundations of European Policy: Economic and social cohesion, development and conservation of natural and cultural heritage, as well as a more balanced competitiveness of the European territory. By bringing social and economic demands in line with the environmental and cultural functions of space, a more sustainable, balanced spatial development is intended. The normative statements have been grouped to three policy guidelines which centre on the urban system and the partnership between urban and rural areas, on the parity of access to infrastructure and knowledge, as well as on the development and conservation of natural and cultural heritage. Because there is an own policy guideline for the conservation of natural resources, and because ecological issues have partly been integrated into the other policy guidelines, all relevant environmental goals

are addressed. Their level of specification is similar to that of the other goals. In the policy guidelines, several process-related statements concerning the consideration of ecological issues can be found. E. g. with regard to the topic “improved transport links” the authors ask for a “territorial impact assessment”. The ESDP is legally not binding. Nevertheless it is of great value as a basis for environmental discussions because it represents a milestone for the application of the overall goal of sustainable development, and because it has been elaborated in a broad consultation process in which the member states have been involved. However, although the term “sustainable development” is frequently mentioned, it is not clear how one can come to a decision between short-term interests related to the use of territory and long-term conservation needs. (Ewringmann and Perner, 2000)

The paper „Sustainable Urban Development in the European Union: A Framework for Action“ (Commission of the European Communities 1999) aims at coordinating the policies of the EC with regard to problems of cities. Therefore, it is exclusively addressed to the political institutions of the EC. The framework includes four main chapters: Prosperity and employment, equality and social inclusion, protecting and improving the urban environment, and “contributing to good urban governance and local empowerment”. In total, 24 actions are proposed, which are guided by five principles, of which “environmental sustainability” is one. In the case of actions that may effect the environment, the authors point out the necessity to protect the environment, in particular with regard to transport policies. At large, the environmental objectives are as precise or even described in more detail than other goals, e. g. in the realm of economy. Additionally, a lot of process-related statements concerning the consideration of environmental aspects can be found, e. g. the proposal to extend Eco-labelling and Eco-Management for improving the environmental performance. Like the ESDP, the Framework is politically not binding, but can be useful for discussions about the urban environment beyond the EC commission.

Strand A of the EC Community Initiative INTERREG III (Official Journal of the European Communities 2000/C 143/6) is guided by the overall goal to foster regional development in adjacent border regions along the internal and external land borders of the EC. It is intended to create economic and social centres that way. Besides regional development in general, the EC wants to stimulate entrepreneurship, the creation of new employment opportunities, environmental protection, and transportation, as well as cooperation in the fields of administration and justice. Strand B is dedicated to the transnational cooperation in relatively large groupings of regions. This kind of large-scale cooperation aims at promoting a higher degree of territorial integration. Priority is given to proposals that take account of the TEN policies or the ESDP.

The Community initiative INTERREG III offers financial incentives to improve cooperation and development across national borders. In the chapter „General objectives and principles” no environmental goals neither any other sector-oriented objectives are mentioned, but only trans-sectoral principles as “balanced development and integration of the European territory”. The guidelines for INTERREG III A include a list of priorities in which environmental protection is mentioned as one out of eight points. Altogether the environmental objectives show the same level of specification than the other objectives. There are no demands to consider environmental aspects in the process of implementation, but only unspecified references to the general provisions on the Structural Funds and to the Community policies. In contrast to that, environmental considerations play a more prominent role in strand B. Not taking into account the priorities for the most remote regions, three out of five priorities are closely related to the conservation of natural resources. INTERREG implies substantial transfers of funds. In the current period 2000 to 2006, 4,875 million Euro (= 2.5 % of total ERDF funds) are available, whereas approximately 20 per cent of the proposed measures are linked to environmental protection. Thus the Community initiative INTERREG III offers extensive opportunities to direct funds towards environment-oriented measures.

The EC community initiative URBAN II (Official Journal of the European Communities 2000/C 141/8) which is also financed by the ERDF sponsors the economic and social regeneration of cities and neighbourhoods. Furthermore it focuses on knowledge and the exchange of experiences with regard to sustainable urban development. In the period 2000 to 2006, 700 million Euro are designated to URBAN II, which means that about 50 cities or neighbourhoods can receive funds. It is positive that the principle of sustainable development is mentioned several times in the guidelines. In addition, the Community initiative is explicitly intended to promote the implementation at local level of Community environmental policies and legislation. Specific environmental issues are mainly addressed in the list of priorities the recipients' strategies have to comply with, e. g. reduction in CO₂ emissions or efficient water management. There are no statements concerning the consideration of environmental issues in the process of implementation. The guidelines include an annex with an indicative list of eligible measures. They are divided into seven groups of which two consist exclusively or for the most part of ecological measures. In sum approximately 40 per cent of the proposed measures can be classified as environment-oriented. This shows, that the Community initiative URBAN II is to be evaluated positively from an environmental point of view, even if the consideration of the protection of natural resources in the implementation process is not sufficiently ensured.

The results concerning the framework documents have been complimented by case studies in selected regions. The following chapter is devoted to this aspect.

Results of the Case Studies

The case studies had the function to analyse to which extent environmental aspects have been considered in specific projects. Within each Community initiative two regions or cities have been investigated to raise the significance of the findings. With regard to INTERREG II A the Saxon-Bohemian Euroregion Ore Mountains and the German-Dutch EUREGIO have been chosen. For INTERREG II C the North Sea Area and Central, Adriatic, Danubian and South-Eastern European Space (CADSES) were selected. Finally, there were case studies in the German cities Magdeburg and Saarbrücken concerning URBAN I (see fig. 1 and 2). As the number of cases is relatively small, the results are not representative. However, they can possibly be transferred to other areas.

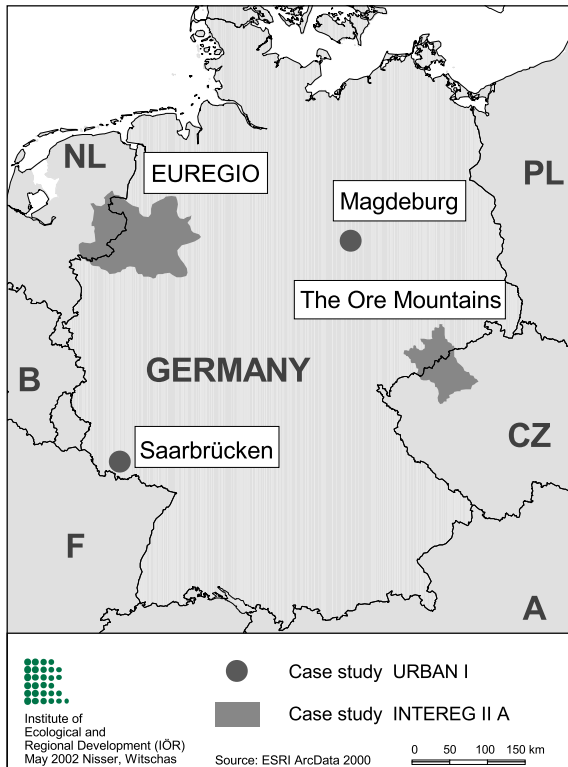


Figure 1: Study areas for the analysis of the Community initiatives INTERREG II A and URBAN I

The ecological requirements profile has been modified for the case studies, because it was intended to scrutinise chiefly the relation between projects with positive effects for the protection of natural resources, and other projects – both with regard to the sheer number of projects and to the extent of funding. The required information has been gathered from the operational programmes, the national interim evaluations, and the project lists or the project descriptions respectively.

Except for the operational programme for the German-Dutch EUREGIO, environmental goals have been considered in all analysed operational programmes. The INTERREG II C programme for the North Sea Area can be mentioned as particularly positive as it centres very much on the protection of the environment. Another positive example was the URBAN I programme for the city of Saarbrücken, which is very responsive to environmental concerns.

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