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## EJSD

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The ESPON (*European Spatial Planning Observation Network*) research programme will be concluded by the end of 2006 (see [www.espon.eu](http://www.espon.eu)). This programme is part of a larger process that was actually initiated in the early 1980s with a major milestone being reached in 1999 when the ESDP (*European Spatial Development Perspective*) was issued. Two ideas underpinned the continued work after 1999, firstly, the idea of establishing a network across Europe among research institutions specialised in spatial development issues, and secondly, the pursuit of reliable statistics in order to elaborate criteria and indicators for the monitoring of spatial development across the continent. In order to test these ideas, a preliminary phase was initiated in 1998-2000, known as SPESP (*Study Programme on European Spatial Planning*) under the auspices of DG *Regio* from the Commission (see [www.nordregio.se](http://www.nordregio.se), search "SPESP", see also Nordregio report R2000:4). Subsequently, the ESPON programme was initiated as an Interreg III Community initiative.

The various contributions of the ESPON programme, as well as the programme as a whole, have of course been assessed along the road. It remains as yet however too early to try to deliver any pertinent overall assessment of the results of the programme. Published material can be assessed, but there is much more to it than that, including all the training and learning aspects as well as all of the contacts and networks established over the years. Indeed this is an aspect of European integration that while often being much undervalued is certainly of some significance. Leaving all this aside, it may be fruitful to discuss ESPON-experiences in terms of more fundamental matters of European integration and the role of EU institutions, notably the Commission, in relation to Member State co-operation. All this of course takes place in a global context. From a researcher's point of view, "policy-relevant research" always actualises the blurred borderline between politics and academia, which is a matter of credibility both for the academic and the political world, but sometimes only vaguely understood by many of those involved.

Whatever the intellectual and ideological point of departure, we feel it is important to initiate a discussion about the experiences gained from the ESPON process. Such a discussion could prove to be very fruitful with regard to our endeavours to come, providing that we try to free ourselves of the 'ideological binoculars' most of us use. This may not of course be possible as we all need a secure starting point, but it is certainly something to consider.

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Much of what currently passes for "planning theory" seems to have been reduced to neo-liberal ideology, as is obvious in the agenda and discourse of international planning associations such as AESOP. Liberalisation is pursued by the planning academia using an arsenal of allegedly novel catchwords, while the factual effects of market liberalisation such as sharply rising real estate prices and the corresponding exclusion of large parts of the middle class from home ownership raise few comments. The concept of *good governance* has spread from institutions promoting globalisation such as the World Bank to other institutions such as the EU, lending itself to promoting a vocabulary that may at times blur more than it clarifies global conditions.

This neo-liberal jargon transcends the various documents on spatial planning, which formed the basis of the ESPON programme as well as the texts of standard academic commentators on European spatial planning. From the point of view of science, the problem is not that liberal ideas (rather than conservative or socialist ones) are pursued, but that ideology is sometimes mistaken for evidence and that a particular “future” is claimed to be inevitable. All this is obviously standard practice in rhetorical terms, but unacceptable as a point of departure for research. In view of the challenges of globalisation that Europe currently faces, a more analytical approach is needed. Here again, we want to provide a forum for a discussion on these matters.

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The status and power of the EU as a supranational institution is of course something that is constantly contested by its Member States, while questions over the various development options, i.e. *moving towards a supranational state formation or deepening intergovernmental cooperation between sovereign states*, cloud the every day running of the EU in almost every field. By its very nature, the Commission seems to promote its own stately influence in whatever endeavour it is involved in, the promotion of spatial planning and development considerations in a concerted manner across the European territory being a case in point here. The question remains however, who is the “owner” of such an endeavour, the Commission or the Member States in the context of intergovernmental co-operation? Spatial planning is not widely recognised as a matter within the competence of the EU. This has been contested by representatives of the Commission, putting forward the argument that decisions and policies should match the geographical extent of the problems to which they refer. Consequently, the Community is said to have competence in spatial planning since it concerns the co-ordination of Community policies, which affect the use, organisation, and structure of the EU territory.

The road that led from the initial preparations of the ESDP, through SPESP to ESPON has been long and winding, while the relationship between the Commission, promoting supranational ambitions, and the Member States, trying to promote improved conditions for spatial planning based on intergovernmental co-operation, has not always been easy. The ESDP was essentially the result of intergovernmental co-operation. The SPESP was set up as a pilot action under Article 10 of the Structural Funds in co-operation with the Member States and the Commission, while ESPON was put in place under Article 53 of the Structural Funds Regulations for 2000-2006. Meanwhile, a new process, representing intergovernmental co-operation, the so-called Rotterdam process, initiated in 2004, has emerged producing documents on the territorial perspectives of the European Union. With all of this in mind we can ask, how then should responsibility for the future promotion of European spatial planning be allocated? Moreover, does historical experience suggest that we are likely to see the emergence of an efficient, workable and mutually agreed upon solution apportioning responsibility between the Commission and the Member States? The floor, as they say, is yours!