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Potentials of Cross-border Cooperation for Strategic Urban Development in Border Regions

Designing and Evaluating Informal Cooperation Processes

Introduction

The process of European integration has made evident the need for cross-border cooperation, particularly along the internal borders of the newly enlarged European Union (EU). This paper focuses on cooperation processes between administrations in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic. The main question addressed is how cities in border regions can better cope with their future challenges and improve competitiveness by cross-border strategic cooperation with their neighbours. The paper will not present concrete research results. The aim is rather to raise further research questions and to outline a research framework for deeper investigation of these topics. The process of European integration and dissolving of national borders will of course continue, especially when one takes into account the next stage of EU enlargement. Therefore the subject will be of interest in the future. Furthermore the paper will give some suggestions regarding the design of cross-border communication processes to allow a common understanding of problems and enhance cross-border activities. These initial findings are based on previous knowledge gained from monitoring various cross-border cooperation processes along Germany's eastern borders.

After introducing the present dilemma of cross-border cooperation, the author will focus on the problems of urban and regional development in the border regions and on the potential benefits that cooperative acting can offer. The next chapter deals with the framework of analyses and emphasises that actors are the core factor of cross-border cooperation in the given informal context. Some initial findings concerning the design and evaluation of successful cross-border cooperation processes and further research questions will follow, before the paper closes with some preliminary conclusions.

The dilemma of cross-border cooperation

Boom in cross-border cooperation

Over the last few years cross-border cooperation has become a popular field of action within municipalities and regional administrations in border regions. In particular, preparatory work and the subsequent enlargement of the European Union (EU) in May 2004 have increased the number of cross-border activities between cities and regions on Germany's borders with the Czech Republic and Poland¹. These cross-border initiatives can be found at different institutional and spatial levels. Cross-border cooperation at different levels is massively funded, in particular by the EU. INTERREG IIIA funds can now be spent in the new EU member countries Poland and Czech Republic, aiding cross-border cooperation at the local level. Apart from local cross-border initiatives along the immediate border line, more and more projects are being launched on the interregional level, with municipalities and regional administrations getting involved more intensively. There is considerable political pressure in the border regions to cooperate across borders.

Besides INTERREG IIIB and IIIC, other sources of temporary funding are available for transnational and interregional cooperation – e.g. from the European Commission². Also national funds are more and more oriented towards cross-border activities and projects³. Overall one can say that since EU enlargement the conditions for cross-border cooperation are better than ever before, and that municipalities and regions are grasping the opportunities presented by realising numerous cross-border projects.

Unclear aims and expectations

Unfortunately, the initial enthusiasm of cross-border cooperation often dissipates before the processes have produced results. Aims and expected results are often overestimated or – even worse – remain unclear during the whole process. Sometimes the only common aim of cross-border cooperation is to benefit from EU subsidies (VAN DER VELDE and VAN HOUTUM, 2003, p. 6). The reasons for this can be either that expected results have never been discussed, or that political representatives have formulated unrealistically high expectations in order to gain political acceptance for cross-border cooperation and defuse public resistance. Often the protagonists involved do not take into account the fact that cross-border cooperation processes are – due to the difficult context – lengthy, and that measurable results take a lot longer to

¹ Examples of cooperation between cities in Saxony, Northern Bohemia and Lower Silesia: ENLARGE-NET – Cross-border networks between cities and regions in Saxony, Lower Silesia and Northern Bohemia in preparation for EU enlargement (LANDESHAUPTSTADT DRESDEN, 2005); Stadt 2030 – Gemeinsames Leitbild für die Europastadt Görlitz/Zgorzelec (INSTITUTE FOR ECOLOGICAL AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT, CITY OF GÖRLITZ, 2004a); Zittau, Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou - Städteverbund Kleines Dreieck (GROBE KREISSTADT ZITTAU, 2003).

² In 2001, the General Directorate Enlargement of the European Commission issued a “Community Action for Border Regions” (CEC, 2001), based on an initiative of the European Parliament. One of the follow-up measures of this Community Action was a “Call for Proposals for cross-border initiatives between local and regional authorities in EU regions bordering the candidate countries” which was published in July 2002 (CEC, 2002).

³ One example is the initiative “Stadt 2030” launched by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research. The aim was to develop strategies and visions for long-term urban development. Two of the 21 reference projects dealt with urban development in border cities along the German-Polish border (Guben/Gubin and Görlitz/Zgorzelec).

appear than in national cooperation processes. Vague or excessively high aims and expectations make it difficult to evaluate whether a process is successful or not. This can lead to frustration among the participating actors and may even disrupt the processes. A great many cooperation processes cannot therefore fulfil the expectation of permanent cooperation that is often formulated by the protagonists and fund-giving promoters at processes start. Rather the cross border cooperation process terminates with the drying up of funding.

A lack of strategic topics

The contents of cross-border coordination efforts are often so-called “soft topics”. These are topics such as culture or education where a consensus can be easily achieved due to common interests in the cooperating regions and cities. Long-term strategic topics such as development aims and improved infrastructure are relatively rarely dealt with in a cross-border context. Reasons for this can be conflicting interests or the high degree of abstraction that make negotiations and agreement difficult. On the one hand the fear of deadlock or disagreement leads the protagonists to avoid these topics in cross-border processes. On the other hand, not every topic is suitable for discussion in a cross-border context. The number of topics where a cross-border solution is feasible is especially limited in large cooperation spaces. As a result, municipalities and regional administrations still perceive cross-border cooperation as a burden and they are often reluctant to discuss strategic topics with their neighbours across borders – even though the tasks facing administrations are becoming ever more complex. Thus there is a danger that cross-border cooperation gets sidelined, particularly when one considers the difficult financial situation in public administrations. When it comes to co-funding of a cross-border cooperation project, for example, other priorities may be regarded as more important or more promising. In the future a gap may appear between an increasing amount of external funding for cross-border activities and a decreasing ability or willingness to provide co-funding. The reason can simply be that the administrations do not see the potential benefits of addressing strategic topics in collaboration with their neighbours across borders.

The dilemma of cross-border cooperation can thus be described as follows: While the conditions for cross-border cooperation have become easier with EU enlargement, the ability and willingness of regional and municipal administrations to grasp this potential seems limited. Cross-border cooperation is often perceived as an optional task. Administrations are reluctant to discuss strategic topics in a cross-border context even where cross-border solutions are feasible.

Future challenges in the border regions as a potential of cooperation

Future challenges in border regions differ from city to city according to size, location and distance from the border. However, specific tasks can be identified that commonly affect cities in the periphery along borders, e.g. between Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. These are demographic changes, structural and economic changes, stronger competition between the cities and decreasing resources within the public administrations. Beyond these there is the problem of incompatible spatial development plans that hinder the coordinated and strategic development of cross-border regions.

Demographic change and its effects

The municipalities in Eastern Germany are aware of the challenges of demographic change. The phenomenon can also be seen or forecast in Poland and the Czech Republic (LEIBNIZ INSTITUTE OF REGIONAL AND ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT, CITY OF GÖRLITZ, 2004b). The municipal infrastructure is particularly affected by demographic change. Social and technical amenities have excess capacity when the population shrinks. This means that costs rise and facilities may face the threat of closure⁴. Here the cities in the immediate border regions have the chance to cooperate by jointly using the infrastructure to full capacity, thereby rescuing facilities or reducing costs⁵.

Picture 1: When the demographic change becomes physically evident: The demolishing of multi-storey housing blocks in Eisenhüttenstadt in 2004



Source: R. Knippschild

Increased competition

Ongoing structural and economic change and the phenomenon of globalisation increase competition between cities and regions when attracting investors, for example. Although cities and regions along the borders have similar problems, they show different profiles and strengths at any one time (human resources, wage differential, quality of infrastructure). The municipalities have to decide whether they wish to cooperate with their neighbours, that is to share functions, infrastructure and amenities, at the same time as refining their profiles in accordance with their neighbours across the borders. The alternative is to cut themselves off, with the accompanying danger of losing the competitive race. The task in the future is to achieve an alignment of locational factors across the borders instead of entering into a ruinous competition.

⁴ Examples of redundant infrastructure can already be found in the border cities of Görlitz and Zgorzelec. In the Polish city Zgorzelec a bilingual kindergarten was forced to close, while on the German side in Görlitz the municipal concert hall is about to close.

⁵ A popular example along the German-Polish border is the joint sewage plant in the Polish town of Gubin that also provides sewage treatment for the German town of Guben. The plant was partly financed by both municipalities.

Limited resources

The limited financial resources of municipalities are restricting administrations more and more in their activities. This is particularly true of municipalities in the eastern German periphery (MÜLLER AND SIEDENTOP, 2004, p. 16) and makes the problems of demographic change, such as infrastructure, even more evident. MÜLLER AND SIEDENTOP see one way out by encouraging inter-municipal cooperation (2004, p. 27). For the border regions this also entails cooperation with the municipalities on the other side of the border. However, limited personnel resources make cross-border cooperation more and more difficult. Financial problems regarding co-funding and shrinking personnel resources mean that strategic results from cross-border cooperation processes have to be more clearly defined in the future.

Incompatible spatial development plans

Alternative systems of spatial planning in the three countries mean that spatial development plans along the borders are incompatible. The competences of planning administrations and contents of the plans are different. Furthermore there are almost no designations concerning cross-border development. A coordinated spatial and regional development can therefore only be achieved by an intensive cooperation and exchange process between the various administrations. Beyond this the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) requires cohesion in territory, complementary spatial strategies and a joint discussion of spatial policy (CEC, 1999).

A question for research

The fundamental question to be answered is whether cross-border cooperation between cities and regions in border regions can provide benefits by jointly addressing similar challenges and creating profiles in the different regions. The aim is to support the development of integrated cross-border regions with a specific profile and enhanced regional competitiveness. This question is not easy to answer and the solution requires a complex approach. In the following the author will focus on the role of informal cross-border communication processes between the actors under specific conditions. Due to institutional asymmetries and the fact that formal institutional structures such as found in a national context are lacking or insufficient in a cross-border context, informal communication takes on a greater importance in cross-border cooperation. Therefore the question about the requirements for cooperation and participation processes is crucial when conducting successful cross-border cooperation (MORHARD, 2000; KNIPPSCHILD AND KUNERT, 2005).

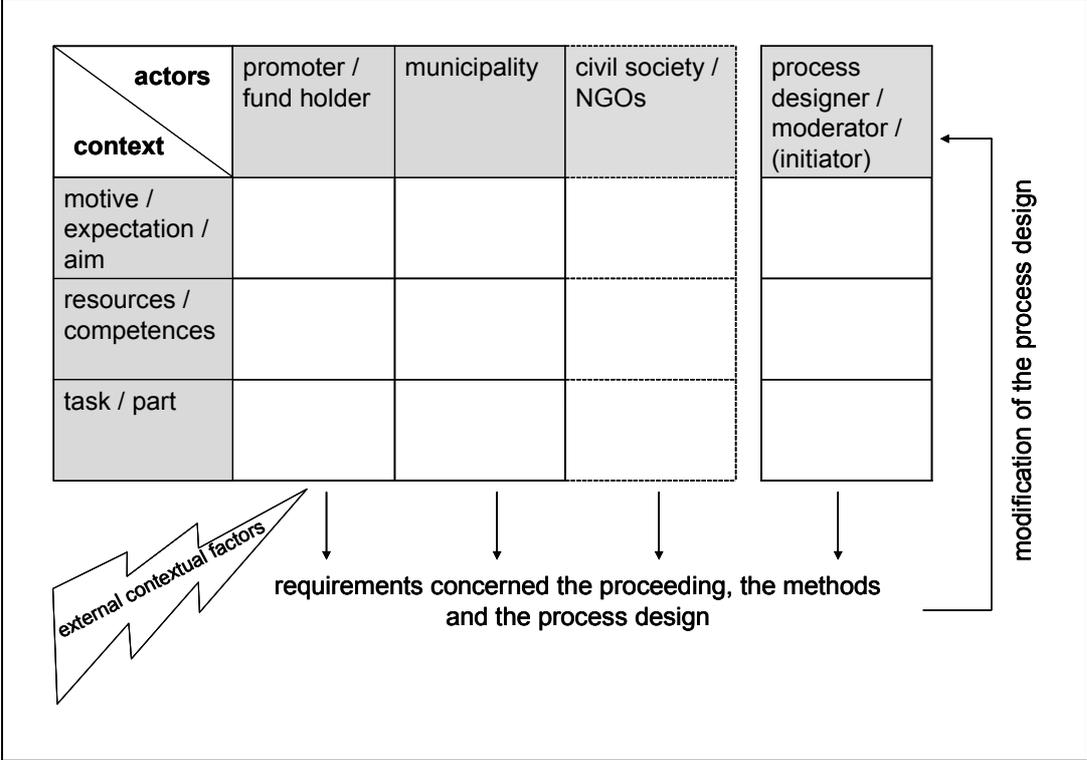
The actors within their context

The context

Border research in general has shifted its focus. While earlier studies saw the border as a line separating the territories of two countries, contemporary studies tend to focus on the processes of interaction, the actors involved and regional identities, etc. (NEWMAN, 2003, p. 13). To answer the questions described above one has to focus likewise on the relevant actors and group of actors and their context (see Fig 1). The term “context” here means their motivation to cooperate, their expectations and aims. The actors’ resources and competences refer to their skills, in particular the “soft skills” or intercultural competences that are necessary for intercultural communication e.g. language skills, and their institutional resources. Topics must be

given political and administrative backing and legitimation. Finally the roles and responsibilities of each actor must be defined for the various tasks within the cooperation process.

Figure 1: Groups of actors and their context schematically analysed for cross-border cooperation processes



Source: R. Knippschild

The actors

Who are the groups of actors? The promoter of the cooperation process will also be the fund holder in most cooperation processes, e.g. the EU. The municipalities are the main actors and if necessary should encourage further civil society groups, such as NGOs, to embrace the aim and the contents of the cooperation. Finally there is always a process designer – in most cases an external research, consulting or similar institute. They often additionally play the role of the initiator in cooperation processes. In a cross-border context, transaction costs for such things as translation services, travel expenses, etc. will always be incurred and have to be compensated by external funding.

External contextual factors

In a cross-border context, cooperation processes are further hampered by numerous barriers to cooperation. This is particularly true of the German-Polish or German-Czech border, these functioning as “hard” socio-economic and cultural borders. On the one hand political-institutional barriers such as institutional asymmetries and an insufficient legal framework hinder cross-border cooperation, especially in regard to the ongoing transformation process in Poland and the Czech Republic. One effect of the current transformation processes are frequently changing personnel. As cross-border cooperation is still often based on personal relationships between actors this will continue to be a problem as long as cross-border cooperation is not institutionalized. On the other hand there also exist socio-economic barriers such

as the depressed economic situation in the border regions and economic asymmetries, leading to fluctuations in financial and personnel resources within the cooperating administrations and institutions. Last but not least one has to take into account of the fact that socio-cultural and language barriers still hinder cross-border cooperation. The different mentalities and working methods, as well as the difficult historical background between the cooperating nations, mean that citizens may be sceptical of cross-border activities. Poor language skills – in particular on the German side – hamper the collaboration effort across “hard” social and cultural borders (Newman 2003, p. 13; KNIPPSCHILD AND KUNERT, 2005).

From the previous analysis diagram (Fig 1) one can deduce the necessary requirements for the process design to support cross-border communication and allow participation of relevant actors. This means the procedure and methods used within the communication process to encourage the participation of relevant actors while taking into account existing contextual factors.

How to design cross-border cooperation processes

Trust, continuity and a shared view of problems

Firstly, a shared view of problems and challenges has to be developed. A second precondition is the promotion of trust between the participating actors, allowing them to overcome possible conflicts and win-loose-constellations that may arise during the cooperation process. A third important step in the long-term is the setting up of joint formal institutions. At present, informal cooperation processes have to overcome the lack of formal cross-border institutions when preparing actors for cooperation in cross-border regions. These processes should later be institutionalised. Therefore continuity of cross-border communication is indispensable. How can these requirements be fulfilled?

Communication platforms

When conducting a long-term communication process an informal platform has to be established where the actors can meet. They must be able to discuss and exchange experiences regarding present and future problems and challenges, as well as airing their plans and visions. The provision of translation services is necessary here, as is an inclusive atmosphere that welcomes new actors who can contribute to a specific topic. A neutral and professional moderator can also help to defuse potential conflicts⁶. Continuity is crucial when providing such platforms: trust can only be built up in long-term processes through developing a common perception, interpretation and estimation of problems and potentials, and through joint activities and decision-making⁷. Otherwise cooperation remains symbolic and existing problems and challenges are not addressed. This frustrates the participants and may cause them to abandon the cooperation process⁸. Discussions within these platforms should go further than just exchanging information and should focus on the long-term perspective of realising common

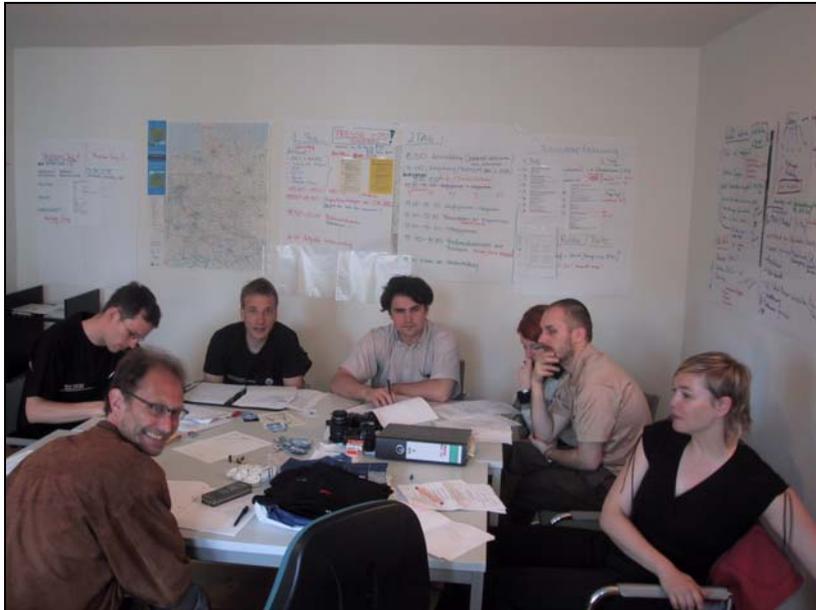
⁶ 78% of participants in the cross-border cooperation project ENLARGE-NET on the German-Polish-Czech border found it helpful to have a neutral moderation in workshops (LEIBENATH and KNIPPSCHILD, 2005).

⁷ “Enhanced trust between actors” and “Better understanding of the problems of neighbours” were the main results of the project ENLARGE-NET (LEIBENATH and KNIPPSCHILD, 2005).

⁸ Cooperation processes must be voluntary in nature. This means that every actor has an “exit option” to leave the process at any time.

projects or establishing a framework that supports cooperation between participating actors (KNIPPSCHILD AND KUNERT, 2005).

Picture 2: Communication platforms are crucial in allowing exchange between the actors



Source: IÖR

Involving relevant actors

Of course the actors are the core of the cooperation process, and the step of encouraging and engaging relevant actors for the discussed topics is crucial. For each task the relevant actors have to be found and convinced to participate. These can be experts from municipalities or other public administrations, from NGOs, from enterprises, etc. In most cases cooperation is initially among a limited group of actors. After a short time it becomes necessary to widen the group of actors and experts, though this should be done in stages. In general it seems more difficult to motivate actors from enterprises or NGOs than from municipalities and administrations. Persons with previous experience in cross-border cooperation, or with a specific interest in cross-border cooperation, are the easiest to motivate.

Politicians should not be involved in thematic working groups unless they are experts in the discussed topic. Equality in nationality, profession and rank is important when involving actors, as any preferential treatment can quickly lead to antagonism. If the public is concerned by a discussed problem then they should be involved, even in cross-border communication processes. However, as citizens may be frustrated by a misleading or too abstract discussion they should initially be excluded until the discussions become sufficiently concrete and precise.

Political support

Although politicians should not attend the thematic working groups, political support is crucial. Otherwise there is the danger of a deadlock among the involved actors. Progress in cooperation should be periodically reported to the political representatives. Subsequently they should give their feedback and provide support to the developing issues. Finally, political decisions are necessary in order to implement agreed courses of action.

The involved institutions must be prepared for participation in cross-border cooperation by providing them with the necessary financial and personnel resources. This means that actors must be released from other obligations⁹, and qualifying measures concerning intercultural competences have to be supported. External financial support will be necessary later to offset transaction costs. This always requires internal financial support, e.g. co-funding.

Long-term evaluation

The process of European integration is expected to continue, with the planned accession of Bulgaria and Rumania to the EU in 2007. There is still a great deal of work to be done towards integrating the EU's new inner borders and thus the subject of cross-border cooperation processes and their effects will be of some interest over the next years. Up to now a methodology to evaluate the long-term effects of cross-border initiatives has not been established. It is true that the short-term monitoring and evaluation of cooperation projects has been introduced by the EU, for example, but in a cross-border context the long-term learning processes and changes of attitudes play an important role (FALUDI AND KORTHALS ALTES, 1994). Unfortunately these effects cannot be satisfactorily measured by accompanying evaluation. Here is a promising field for further research. The actors of cross-border cooperation mentioned above (see Fig 1) should be interested in these effects in order to make best use of their limited resources.

Evaluating a process is only possible when the aims and expected results are clearly formulated. Therefore it is important to scrutinise the involved actors and their motivations, aims and expectations. A process can only be successful when it meets the expectations of its participants. A process is furthermore strategic when it tackles the strategic topics mentioned in national plans and planning documents and when it gives an answer to the strategic challenges facing a city or region. Further research is needed to determine in detail how best to evaluate cross-border cooperation projects concerning their potential for tackling strategic challenges.

Conclusions

A continuous process of discussion and negotiation can overcome language and cultural barriers in cross-border cooperation. However, quick results are not to be expected. Joint projects will be realised relatively easily after a common perspective of challenges and chances is worked out and a topic found with a feasible cross-border solution that improves on any national solution. Examples along the German-Polish and German-Czech border show that it is often in normal daily tasks that cross-border decisions and implementations can be achieved most easily. The processes become more difficult the more abstract and long-term the orientation, or when participation is voluntary. Therefore an attainable and measurable joint aim for cooperation is essential

Transaction costs are unavoidable for collaborative projects and funds have to be found for translation fees and travelling expenses, etc. External funding does not release municipalities or administrations from financial obligations (e.g. for co-funding). Thus once again the aim and expected outcome of the cooperation must be clearly formulated.

⁹ In a survey within the project ENLARGE-NET, 83% of actors declared that they were not released from other obligations when participating in the cross-border cooperation process (LEIBENATH and KNIPPSCHILD, 2004, p. 10).

If municipalities support cross-border cooperation in the administrative and political sectors, and if they are willing to discuss strategic fields of action with their neighbours, then they will be better prepared for future challenges. A necessary condition for competitiveness in border regions and cities is a fruitful and continuous process of cooperation with neighbouring administrations.

The challenge in the future will be to go further than merely symbolic politics. Gladhanding by mayors and the signing of agreements on good cross-border relations is no longer sufficient, and projects currently in place are too limited in scope and vision. The administrations must address strategic and complex topics - for example the question of demographic change and its impact on cross-border cooperation - and they must become involved in processes of continuous communication.

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