

## **Benchmarking cross-border cooperation**

The role of successful border regions for territorial cohesion and the need for comparison, criteria and indicators of cooperation

**Robert Knippschild**

Leibniz Institute of Ecological and Regional Development, Dresden

- Manuscript for *alfa SPECTRA-Planning Studies* -  
(please do not quote without the author's permission)

### **Introduction**

The process of European integration is pacing ahead with the EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007 and the extension of the Schengen Treaty on nine further member states in 2007. In an integrating Europe cross-border cooperation plays an important role since policies and strategies in spatial development, spatial functions and last but not least funding instruments do not end on national borders any longer. Cross-border cooperation is a precondition for good governance in spatial development in an integrated Europe. The European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) as a new legal instrument to facilitate cross-border cooperation that now allows public authorities to establish cross-border groupings with a legal personality.

The framework conditions for cross-border cooperation are better than ever before and cross-border cooperation is perceived to play an important role in the process towards Territorial Cohesion in Europe. Anyhow the ability and willingness for getting engaged in cross-border activities by local and regional public authorities is often limited – in particular along the borders with new member states. One reason for this might be restricted financial and human resources. Another reason is scepticism within public administrations towards projects and initiatives beyond administrative routines in general (Fürst 2001: 64). In particular in cross-border cooperation processes the benefit for the partners is not easy to estimate. Therefore it is necessary to develop tools for comparing and measuring benefit und success of cross-border cooperation initiatives.

This contribution therefore elaborates on the idea of benchmarking cross-border cooperation in Europe. It highlights that border regions and cross-border cooperation play an important role within the discussion on Territorial Cohesion. Afterwards the concept of benchmarking is introduced and its application for cross-border cooperation in spatial development discussed. First ideas on possible criteria and indicators will be elaborated before proposing first steps towards a benchmarking of cross-border cooperation. The contribution concludes with estimating the value of benchmarking for facilitating cross-border cooperation in order to support a harmonious development of border regions and Territorial Cohesion in Europe.

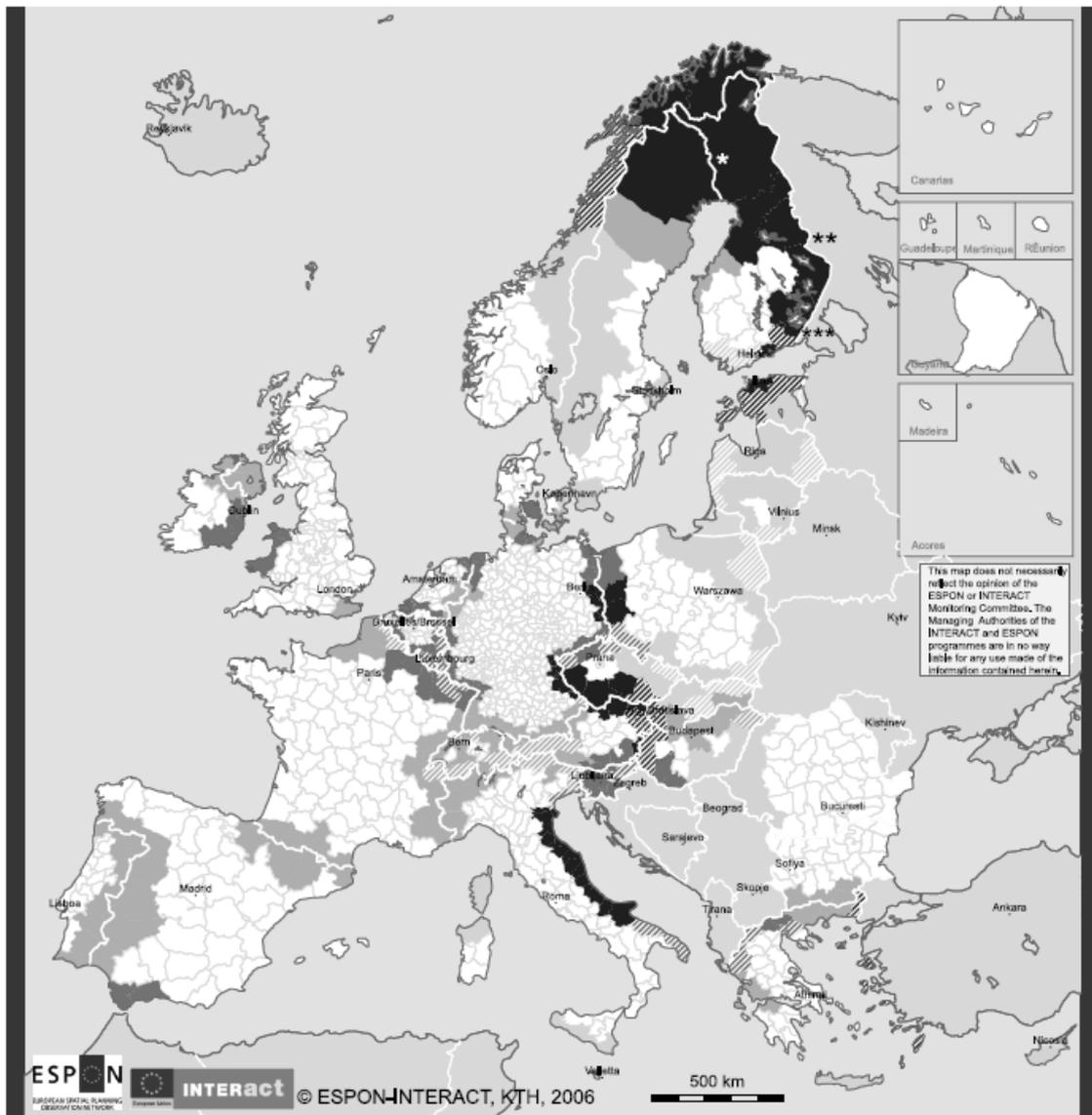
## **Border regions, cross-border cooperation and Territorial Cohesion**

In particular in the new member states of the former Eastern Bloc the process of European integration is very dynamic and can be classified into at least five dimensions:

- territorial dimension (enlargements in 2004 and 2007)
- “physical” dimension (e.g. enlargement of the Schengen Agreement area)
- policy dimension (EUREK, CEMAT, Territorial Agenda)
- financial dimension (e.g. Objective 3)
- legal-institutional dimension (e.g. EGTC)

Borderlands play an increasing role within this rapid process of integrating countries of Central and Eastern Europe into the European Union. Since the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 the length of internal borders of the EU almost tripled with an increase of 174 per cent (ESPON 2006: 59). Regional disparities along “old” and “new” EU borders are still significant – although decreasing – as well as a lagging behind economic development and GDP per head in the “new” external border regions (see fig. 1) (CEDC 2008: 8). Furthermore the borderlands in Central and Eastern Europe are struggling with institutional asymmetries, with limited financial and human resources in public administrations, with different mentalities and cultures clashing, with severe language barriers and – simply for historic reasons - with a “backlog of cooperation” in comparison to Western European border regions, that requires catching-up (CEDC 2008: 8).

**Map 8: Level of economic disparities between areas of INTERREG IIIA programmes approximated to NUTS3 regions**



© EuroGeographics Association for the administrative boundaries

Source: KTH, Cross Border Regions Database (2006) for identification of border regions  
Economic data for EU25 and Candidate Countries from EUROSTAT, 2003; for Norway and Switzerland from National Statistics Offices, 2003

- Non border regions
- Areas without significant disparities
- Areas with Low levels of disparities
- Areas with High levels of disparities
- Areas with Very High levels of disparities
- NUTS 3 regions included in more than one INTERREG IIIA Programme

Economic disparities, based on Euro-per-inhabitant as percentage of EU 25 average, 2003

\* INTERREG IIIA Nord: Programme area includes Murmansk, Russia

*Figure 1: Level of economic disparities between areas of ONTERREG III A programmes approximated to NUTS3 regions. Source: ESPON 2007*

According to the Green Paper on territorial cohesion, launched by the European Commission in October 2008, “territorial cohesion is about ensuring the harmonious development of all [...] places and about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories. As such, it is a means of transforming diversity into an asset that contributes to sustainable development of the entire EU.” (CEC 2008: 3) This comprises implications for border regions in Europe. Here, diversities of European regions are clashing and the potential of making use

of them is high. The Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion furthermore asserts that “increasingly, competitiveness and prosperity depend on the capacity of the people and businesses located there to make the best use of all of territorial assets. [...] Many of the problems faced by territories cut across sectors and effective solutions require an integrated approach and cooperation between the various authorities and stakeholders involved.” (CEC 2008: 3). For the numerous borderlands in Europe this is a request for enhanced cross-border governance, which needs support in particular in border regions in Central and Eastern Europe along “new” EU internal borders.

The Territorial Agenda of the EU, agreed on in May 2007, identifies need for cross-border cooperation in supporting innovative clusters in business, science communities and administrations, in transport management and in supporting cross-border rail and road connections for enhanced accessibility as well as in risk management and climate change (TAEU 2007: 6f.).

Exceeding these particular issues in border regions, cross-border cooperation is required when tackling all kinds of policy fields in border regions. Furthermore border regions are recognized as regions with specific geographical features. Therefore borderlands play an important role in supporting Territorial Cohesion and they remain an important European policy field.

### **Cross-border cooperation: Nothing but a waste of time and money?**

Despite these requirements and chances, cross-border cooperation in particular in Central and Eastern Europe is in a dilemma. The political pressure for cross-border cooperation is high and enormous EU subsidies are available. The Objective 3 Programmes for Cross-border Cooperation, will be with 5.6 billion Euro much better equipped than its parent programmes (CEC 2007:55).

But difficulties of cross-border cooperation - like administrative asymmetries, the language barriers, lacking human resources in public administrations - persist. The EU accession of Poland, the Czech Republic and other Central and Eastern European states highlighted that many problems did not disappear with the accession. The EU external border was often put forward as an excuse for stagnating cooperation processes (Knippschild 2008). The new legal instrument EGTC has the potential to facilitate cross-border cooperation but at the moment uncertainties concerned the range of application and risks predominate.

Cross-border cooperation is furthermore suffering missing continuity and missing implementation. Many cooperation processes are dependent on external funding and are in the danger of ending when funding runs out. Missing implementation of cross-border cooperation can be observed when agreements are not considered in political decisions or public administrations feel not politically legitimized for cross-border acting and decision-making (Knippschild 2008).

These phenomena often cause disappointed expectations among the actors involved in cross-border cooperation. Unclear or too high expectations can cause disappointments when not taking into account that cross-border cooperation is a long and complex process. Therefore the benefit of cross-border cooperation remains for the involved actors too often unclear. The benefit of cooperation is hard to measure and often emerges years later, in the form of contacts, built-up trust, knowledge about organisational structures, priorities, visions, methods etc. on the other side of the border. As a result one can observe “fatigue of cooperation” among actors in borderlands responsible for cross-border cooperation. Although the framework conditions for cooperation are better than ever before, the willingness and ability for cross-border cooperation did not rise over the last years (Knippschild 2008).

Therefore the following questions come up: How can the benefit of cross-border cooperation be measured and estimated? What are reasonable indicators for successful cross-border cooperation in spatial development (benchmarks) in consideration of the preconditions in the borderlands? What are best-practice examples in cross-border cooperation in Western as well as in Central and Eastern

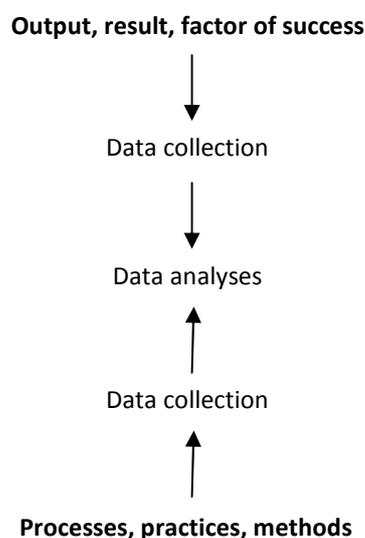
Europe? What can borderlands in Europe learn from each other? The opportunities of the concept of benchmarking for answering these questions will be discussed in the following.

### **Main principles of benchmarking**

Benchmarking is used since the 1990s as a tool for improving competitiveness and performance of enterprises. In economics benchmarking attracted massive attention, although the principle of benchmarking can be applied in other sciences as well (Andersen / Petterson 1996).

Benchmarking is a continuous process to measure and match products, services and practices with competitors. Within this process benchmarks are measurable units of the best practices. Often benchmarking is understood as a process of setting objectives (Camp 1994: 13, 19). One of the clearest definitions give Anderson and Petterson: "Benchmarking is the process to continuously measuring and comparing one's [...] processes to obtain information that will help the organisation identify and implement improvements." (Andersen / Petterson 1996: 4)

The aim of benchmarking is basically to learn from other institutions that maybe more successful and better, preferably from the best, and to improve the own performance and results. Further aims are to motivate within the own institution and to legitimise revised aims and objectives. The aim of benchmarking is not only to evaluate, but to allow and stimulate learning processes. An important principle of benchmarking is reciprocity of benchmarked institutions. All participating partners have to benefit in a benchmarking process. (Camp 1994: 34, Andersen / Petterson 1996: 4, 9).



*Figure 2: Benchmarking model (cp. Watson 1993: 73)*

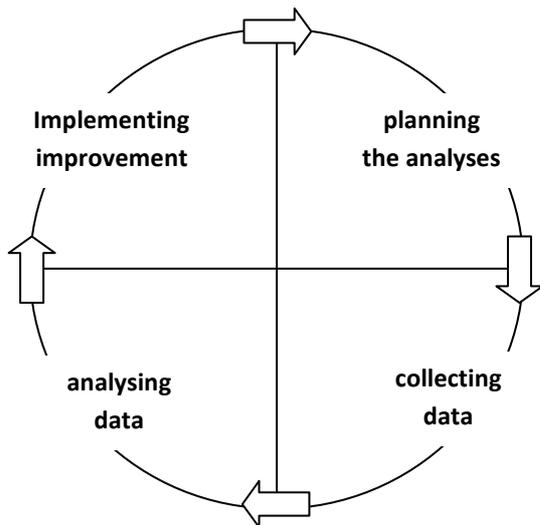


Figure 3: Benchmarking process (Watson 1993: 83)

### **Benchmarking and cross-border cooperation**

Benchmarking seems to be an adequate approach for comparing and enhancing cross-border cooperation. It follows a performance principle and focuses not only on the results but also on the process and practices. One aim of benchmarking is to support agenda- and objective-setting. This is in particular an important process not only at the beginning of cross-border cooperation that can be supported by benchmarking.

In Europe there is a need for more exchange between border regions in Europe. Benchmarking could support learning processes concerned conditions and practices of cross-border cooperation from a scientific perspective in addition to the initiatives of networks like the Association for European Border Regions (AEBR) and the Mission Opérationnelle Transfrontalière (MOT) or the INTERACT Programme. In particular the exchange on best practices between border regions in Western and Central and Eastern Europe could contribute to enhanced cooperation. An intensified exchange between border regions could also contribute to stimulating the establishment of EGTC by diminishing uncertainties concerned chances and risks of this instrument.

Finally benchmarking can contribute to measuring and defining successful cross-border cooperation and the benefit for involved actors. Therefore a clear objective of benchmarking and a set of indicators are required. Such objectives / benchmarks, indicators and criteria do not exist so far and have to be elaborated in a first conceptual phase of a benchmarking process.

### **Possible criteria and indicators**

This chapter comprises a first draft of possible criteria and indicators for benchmarking cross-border cooperation (see figure 4). This proposal is subject to discussion and completion - in particular from the border regions' point of view. Important criteria for benchmarking cross-border cooperation are on the one hand side framework conditions, the form and state of institutionalisation and the issues tackled in the border regions. On the other hand factors allowing evaluation have to be comprised into the benchmarking like results and outputs of cooperation, project intensity, the integration of the civil society and enterprises as well as the performance of cooperation and benefit for the involved actors.

Framework conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- geographic situation</li> <li>- language barrier</li> <li>- socio-economic situation</li> <li>- regional disparities</li> <li>- demographic situation</li> </ul>
Institutionalisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- contracts, agreements etc.</li> <li>- working groups</li> <li>- decision-making body, joint decision-making and actions</li> <li>- institutionalisation of Euroregions</li> <li>- coordination office</li> <li>- EGTC</li> <li>- Euro Districts</li> <li>- budget</li> <li>- moderation</li> </ul>
Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- regional and urban development</li> <li>- coordination of spatial planning</li> <li>- technical and social Infrastructure and services</li> <li>- environmental protection and nature conservation</li> <li>- flood protection</li> <li>- cultural landscapes</li> <li>- tourism</li> <li>- ...</li> </ul>
Results, outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- "soft" results (knowledge, trust, joint agreements, objectives or strategies etc.)</li> <li>- "hard" results (investments , jointly utilized infrastructure etc.)</li> </ul>
Project intensity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- INTERREG projects</li> <li>- other funding</li> </ul>
Integration of civil society and enterprises	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- involvement of civil society, public etc</li> <li>- involvement of enterprises</li> </ul>
Performance, benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- implementation of agreements through decision-making</li> <li>- continuity</li> <li>- "good cross-border governance"</li> </ul>

*Figure 4: Criteria and indicators for benchmarking cross-border cooperation*

### **Further steps**

Before the process of benchmarking itself, a methodology for the application for cross-border cooperation has to be elaborated. The following steps towards a typology of benchmarking cross-border cooperation are supposable:

- typology of cross-border cooperation: The existing typologies of cross-border cooperation have to be specified towards spatial aspects
- identifying "cross-border territorial capital" in border regions

- elaboration of benchmark objectives (e.g. territorial cohesion, enhancing coordination of spatial development)
- elaboration of benchmark criteria and indicators
- call for participating border regions / cooperation projects
- selecting case study border regions / cooperation projects (representative concerning border region typology). Preliminary criteria: different legal types of borders, different natural types of borders

After these steps have been closed, the process of benchmarking itself can start. The following steps can be an indication for further elaboration:

- collecting data; inventory of strategies, instruments, networks, activities, processes and results of cross-border cooperation in spatial development
- in depth-Interviews with stakeholders
- first benchmarking (regular / annual benchmarking exceeding project duration)

## **Conclusions**

Within the process of European integration borderlands gain importance. Regional disparities in Europe are significant, in particular after EU enlargements in 2004 and 2007. Intensive cooperation in border regions and a strong development will contribute to diminishing disparities. Therefore border regions play an important role in supporting territorial cohesion in the sense of the Green Paper of the European Commission.

Pre-conditions for cross-border territorial cooperation are better than ever before with massive European subsidies being available. At the same time restrictions persist. Many actors question the benefit of cross-border cooperation and have limited motivation to force enhanced cooperation. Success of cooperation is indeed hard to measure since the benefit may occur long time after the cooperation process ended.

Benchmarking could help here to make objectives, chances and also restrictions of cooperation as well as potential benefit for the participating actors more transparent. The aim of benchmarking cross-border cooperation is not to evaluate or to judge but to support learning processes between them. Exchange and learning processes between border regions can contribute to an exchange of best practices and of experiences and expectations concerned the establishment of EGTC. Therefore benchmarking could help to facilitate cross-border cooperation in particular in Central and Eastern Europe, to support a harmonious development in border regions and to contribute to territorial cohesion.

This contribution provided first thoughts about benchmarking cross-border cooperation. Further research and elaboration is needed on this approach concerned the methodology, criteria and indicators.

## **References**

- Andersen, Björn / Petterson, Per-Gaute (1996): *The Benchmarking Handbook. Step-by-step instructions*. London. Chapman and Hall.
- Bogan, Christopher E. / English, Michael J. (1994): *Benchmarking for Best Practice*. New York. McGraw-Hill.

- Camp, Robert C. (1994): Benchmarking. München, Wien. Carl Hanser Verlag.
- CEC - Commission of the European Communities (2007): Die Kohäsionspolitik 2007-2013. Erläuterungen und offizielle Texte. Luxembourg.
- CEC – Commission of the European Communities (2008): Commission staff working document accompanying the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength. Brussels. Available document [online]  
[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/consultation/terco/paper\\_terco\\_annex.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/terco/paper_terco_annex.pdf). 17.10.2008.
- CEC – Commission of the European Communities (2008): Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion. Turning territorial diversity into strength. Brussels. Available document [online]  
[http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/consultation/terco/paper\\_terco\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/consultation/terco/paper_terco_en.pdf). 17.10.2008.
- ESPON (2006): Territory matters for competitiveness and cohesion. ESPON Synthesis Report III, results by autumn 2006. Luxembourg.
- ESPON (2007): Cross-border Cooperation – Cross-Thematic Study of INTERREG and ESPON activities. Esch-sur-Alzette, Viborg. Verfügbares Dokument [online]  
[http://www.espon.eu/mmp/online/website/content/interact/1316/80/file\\_2792/Cross-Border\\_Cooperation\\_web.pdf](http://www.espon.eu/mmp/online/website/content/interact/1316/80/file_2792/Cross-Border_Cooperation_web.pdf). 18.08.2007.
- Fürst, Dietrich (2001): Planung in bürokratischen Organisationen – Organisation als strukturelle Steuerung des Verwaltungshandelns. In: Fürst, Dietrich / Scholles, Frank (Ed.): Handbuch Theorien und Modelle der Raum- und Umweltplanung. Dortmund. Page 54-69.
- Knippschild, Robert (2008): Grenzüberschreitende Kooperation: Gestaltung und Management von Kooperationsprozessen in der Raumentwicklung im deutsch-polnisch-tschechischen Grenzraum. IÖR-Schriften Band 48. Dresden. Leibniz-Institut für ökologische Raumentwicklung.
- TAEU - Territorial Agenda of the European Union (2007): Territorial Agenda of the European Union. Towards a More Competitiveness and Sustainable Europe of Diverse Regions. Agreed on the occasion of the Informal Ministerial Meeting on Urban Development and Territorial Cohesion on 24/25 May 2007. Available document [online]  
[www.bmvbs.de/Anlage/original\\_1005295/Territorial-Agenda-of-the-European-Union-Agreed-on-25-May-2007-accessible.pdf](http://www.bmvbs.de/Anlage/original_1005295/Territorial-Agenda-of-the-European-Union-Agreed-on-25-May-2007-accessible.pdf). 16.10.2008.
- Watson, Gregory H. (1993): Benchmarking: Vom Besten lernen. Landsberg/Lech. Verlag Moderne Industrie.