

14th European Conference of Ministers responsible for Regional/Spatial Planning (CEMAT) (Lisbon, Portugal: 26-27 October 2006) on “Networks for sustainable spatial development of the European continent: bridges over Europe”

Resolution No. 1 on Polycentric development: promoting competitiveness, enhancing cohesion

adopted at the 14th session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT) of the member states of the Council of Europe, in Lisbon, Portugal, on 27 October 2006

Preamble

The ministers responsible for spatial/regional planning of the member states of the Council of Europe,

Highlighting the fact that the 12th session of the European Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial/Regional Planning (CEMAT), which took place in Hanover, Germany, on 7 and 8 September 2000, adopted the Guiding Principles for Sustainable Spatial Development of the European Continent (CEMAT Guiding Principles) to provide a coherent strategy for integrated, regionally balanced development of the European continent based on subsidiarity and reciprocity, its implementation being recommended to the member states by the Committee of Ministers (Rec. (2002)1);

Focusing on Part II of the CEMAT Guiding Principles on “Spatial development policies in Europe: new continent-wide challenges and prospects” in which special attention was given to intercontinental relationships as strategic elements in spatial development and to considering larger European regions as a basis for mutual support and co-operation;

Referring to Part IV of the CEMAT Guiding Principles addressing the “principles of a planning policy for a sustainable development in Europe”, especially the “Promotion of territorial cohesion through a more balanced social and economic development of regions and improved competitiveness”;

Considering the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers decision of 7 February 2001 (740/9.1 – CM (2001) 6) to take into account the CEMAT Guiding Principles when deciding on projects with a spatial impact;

Drawing attention to the CEMAT Ljubljana Declaration on the Territorial Dimension of Sustainable Development (2003), which refers to polycentric development as a relevant policy that should be improved in order to manage adequately the major challenges for sustainable spatial development of the European continent;

Following the premises and objectives suggested in the work programme of the Committee of Senior Officials, for the period 2004-06, highlighting the theme “Networks for sustainable territorial development: bridges over Europe”, and its priority topics: the role of polycentric development and territorial governance;

Having regard to the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) agreed at the Informal Meeting of ministers responsible for spatial/regional planning of European Union member states at Potsdam in May 1999, in which polycentric development is presented as the core spatial development concept for Europe;

Taking into account that growing territorial disparities are a threat to Europe's territorial cohesion and that polycentric development is increasingly seen by the academic, policy and political communities as a possible long-term model for territorial organisation, capable of tackling such problem;

Considering the need to intensify co-operation between EU and non-EU member states of the Council of Europe in terms of sustainable spatial and socio-economic development;

Adopt this resolution which targets the political commitment towards the effective promotion of polycentric development, through the creation and usage of innovative policies, strategies and implementation mechanisms. This resolution recommends that the governments of member states heed the following proposals for enhancing the long-term effectiveness of the polycentric development model for the European territory and to its implementation.

1. Debating the concept of polycentric development

The definitions and perceptions of the concept of polycentric development are far from clear or consensual. It must be acknowledged that the meaning of polycentric development is wholly context-dependent (e.g., different territorial and demographic characteristics of countries; their urban development patterns, institutional organisation, local market dynamics).

According to the CEMAT Guiding Principles and the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) we must address the territorial challenges resulting from a competitive, knowledge-based economy as woven by the Lisbon Strategy. Previous diagnoses identified wide gaps in economic competitiveness throughout the European territory. Polycentrism is, in this context, presented as a functional tool that, while promoting economic competitiveness, is expected to secure territorial cohesion. By combining existing know-how pools, economic and logistical functions, one can encourage the growth of a wider number of centres of competitiveness that may then network throughout the European territory with the already existing growth poles, promoting a more sustainable development pattern.

Summarising, polycentrism is an umbrella theme that encompasses different conceptual debates; it is thus hard, and perhaps unwise, to try and find its exact definition. Nonetheless, despite the fact that there is no holistic definition of polycentric development, there are certain assumptions that can be consensual:

Polycentric development as a framework of overlapping networks

Spatial development policies at different government levels should take into consideration the existence of overlapping polycentric networks. Yet it must be beforehand clarified that there is a wide range of spatial arrangements of centres at different spatial levels.

Certain urban centres might be global, national or regional nodes, or all simultaneously. At the level of the European continent, several basic scenarios can be identified: (1) strong national capitals versus peripheries elsewhere; (2) transnational or cross-border region(al centre)s; (3) borderless hierarchy of metropolises and regional centres; (4) national hierarchies of centres diversified and tailored to each particular country.

As polycentric networks are considered in terms of spatial development policies, they should be designed to overcome historical barriers, namely those related to local cultural rivalries, national administrative boundaries, physical distance and poor communications.

Complementarity as a key pillar of polycentric development

Spatial development policies should actively promote functional complementarity and co-operation between government levels at the same time as they reinforce the validity of polycentric development. Urban systems and functions – including small- and medium-sized urban centres in rural regions, and between these

centres and their hinterland – should take the form of networks to expand and capitalise on their potential complementarity.

Polycentric development as an integrative cross-sectoral, cross-level and multi-scale policy objective

Existing examples underline the link between the objectives of polycentric development and the requirement for growing interdisciplinary integration resulting from the introduction of new territorial scales, a stronger need for co-operation between the relevant political bodies and authorities, greater support of civic organisations and a demand for stronger public participation.

The preparation of comparable regionalised spatial information is here recommended as a crucial first step in scoping out and negotiating priorities in the operationalisation of both horizontal and vertical transnational and cross-border co-operation. Special care must be taken with the encouragement of intra-regional co-operation, because greater development disparities sometimes occur not between regions but within regions.

The implementation of polycentric development as a riverbed for territorial cohesion

The ongoing debate on spatial development perspectives highlights the role polycentric development might have in paving the way for territorial cohesion. Further research should aim at better informing the design of future policy instruments, by focusing on the synergy between spatial development policies at different levels and the consequent link between polycentric development, territorial competitiveness and territorial cohesion.

2. Implementation of polycentric development: challenges and opportunities

a. Reaching political consensus

Polycentric development scenarios will raise many challenges for the creation of political consensus. Each scenario will imply different costs and benefits, winners and losers, political and economic feasibility, social and environmental consequences. Development strategies should pre-emptively clarify these impacts, securing the highest possible degree of transparency in terms of investment geo-prioritising.

b. Financing a framework for tackling disparities

In order to address regional inequalities, polycentric development capitalises on latent potentials and existing linkages, especially those previously restricted by national administrative boundaries. Polycentric development implies targeting growth potentials, understanding cities as economic drivers, essential to endogenous regional development. The goal of polycentric development should be considered a key issue when member states discuss domestically the allocation of financial resources for spatial development policies.

c. Introducing new development instruments and better mobilisation of endogenous resources

Traditional spatial development instruments combine the 'sticks' of development control and regulation with the 'carrots' of subsidies, incentives and other market-stimulating tools. Economic efficiency is often detrimental to socio-spatial equity. The traditional 'hard' instruments of spatial management are excessively focused on infrastructure investment. The implementation of the respective 'hard' policies will depend first and foremost on a financial commitment by the member states.

Furthermore, existing sectoral competition hinders the optimal polycentric development strategy. Polycentric development strategies should pre-emptively take into consideration the difficulties of co-ordination between sectoral policies and from the start aim at gathering sufficient political consensus to avoid such obstacles.

In addition, integrated spatial development strategies should take into consideration the existence of 'soft' instruments that may make more effective use of available infrastructural, organisational and human resources. These can only be achieved with a robust institutional background and wide support across the stakeholder community. Unlike direct financial assistance, which brings material improvements (e.g., a new road) in a relatively short time, 'soft' investments may become effective only after longer periods of time, but with a lesser burden of ensuing maintenance costs.

d. Promoting capacity-building

The implementation of polycentric networks at the regional and/or local level will demand institutional capacity-building in those regions and municipalities that have less developed administrative and cultural traditions in creating partnerships and coalitions. In highly centralised nation-states this will be an added challenge and emphasise the link between the development of governance mechanisms and polycentric spatial development models.

e. The growing requirement for partnerships

Polycentric development aims at addressing growth disparities. Various kinds of partnership have been increasingly called on to mediate these processes. Moves towards horizontal and vertical co-operation between various levels of

government (as well as between government and non-public bodies, especially the private business sector) and towards achieving integration between disparate responsibilities have now become the central focus of effective governance across Europe.

f. Move towards strategic spatial development processes

Traditional planning as a government instrument for achieving desirable changes in spatial patterns has evolved during the last three decades in response to changed social and economic contexts. More streamlined spatial development processes have been applied in many European countries in response to the increased dynamism of social, economic and territorial changes. This emerging new nature of "spatial planning" is better suited for the pursuit of polycentric development.

g. The need for effective territorial governance

Governments are fully aware that, in order to manage actively any spatial change, it must be secured by an effective, democratic political leadership, long-term co-operation and a shared understanding of development goals and concepts at different government levels on what constitutes desirable change and the participation of major spatial actors and stakeholders in its planning implementation. It is precisely these principles which the concept of territorial governance embodies. These principles should be made clear to all involved stakeholders during the strategy-making process.

h. Territorial governance as a riverbed for polycentric development

Increasingly polycentric forms of spatial development are closely associated with – indeed, they demand – more polycentric forms of governance. However, in many countries mid-level governance is problematic. It often tends to limit its control to specific sectors only, such as certain health and education services, structural planning, regional public transport and regional economic development. It can be inclined to act as a buffer between national and local governments, occasionally taking a salutary checks-and-balances role. Cross-border and cosmopolitan regionalism is advocated as a pro-active alternative to sometimes narrow localism.

Achieving polycentricity should require adapted administrative and organisational structures with competence to support equitable sharing and redistribution of diverse regional resources, as well as to absorb the burdens and negative impacts of spatial decisions that often traverse local administrative borders.

3. Assessing and monitoring polycentric development: knowledge and practice development

a. Facing the diversity of the European territory

There is a high socio-cultural, political, institutional and administrative diversity within the group of member states of the CEMAT territory that supposes a wide range of different adaptive patterns towards more effective forms of polycentric development. In this context, understanding what may be the optimal policy design for promoting polycentric development becomes a demanding, yet necessary challenge. Member states should aim at promoting the greatest possible, constant and target-orientated dissemination of existing knowledge and practice on the design and implementation of polycentric development.

b. Identifying and monitoring domestic adaptation patterns

Patterns of domestic change should be closely monitored and interpreted, and member states should take this as a key policy objective in order to maximise the implementation potential of polycentric development principles. Taking into account similar ongoing experiences at European Union and Council of Europe levels, the Committee of Senior Officials should be given the task of following up this highly relevant point. The Committee should address the dissemination of ongoing researches in the different member states. Furthermore it should be expected to secure articulation between such knowledge and the domestic policies targeting the principles of polycentric development.

c. Enhancing and capitalising on knowledge networks

The necessary conditions should be created to support this knowledge network – in particular, financially – because on the one hand it is necessary to strengthen existing links between research and policy communities and on the other hand this increases the quality and availability of existing data for comparative research. Special care and resources should be allocated to the dissemination of outputs. Polycentrism, the networks it depends on and territorial governance all require a strengthening institutional capacity that can be improved by greater and more target-orientated flows of information and experience-sharing throughout the European territory. The acquisition of the required competences to achieve effective constant monitoring and assessment of polycentric development cases should make the best possible use of already existing networks, such as the projects developed by the European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON), the URBACT Community Initiative Programme, the Interreg III Community Initiative/future objective 3, and the European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN).