



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT  
Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the Union

STUDY

Policy Department  
Structural and Cohesion Policies

# THE POSSIBILITIES FOR SUCCESS OF THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES APPROACH AND ITS IMPLEMENTATION

Executive Summary

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REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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**Content:**

The context for this study is the Bristol Accord that was agreed at the European Ministerial Informal meeting in Bristol, United Kingdom, on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> December 2005.

The report reviews progress across Europe, identifies a selection of case studies and suggests further work is required to elaborate the European dimension of the Sustainable Communities Agenda.

This agenda is being considered in the European Parliament, by the German Presidency of the European Union at the Leipzig Summit in 2007 and in the European Commission, who are finalising the 2007-2013 Structural Funds programme. A stronger focus is required for a more coherent European programme of action if the Sustainable Communities approach is to have better chance of success across Europe's towns and cities.

**IP/B/REGI/IC/2006-152**



## Executive summary

### Study Context

The context for the study is the Bristol Accord that was agreed at the European Union (EU) Ministerial Meeting in Bristol, United Kingdom (UK) on 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> December 2005 (<sup>1</sup>). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and agree the benefit to all Member States of creating Sustainable Communities across Europe. The Bristol Accord explained what is meant by a 'sustainable community' and set out eight characteristics of such places. The Sustainable Communities Agenda and the Bristol Accord are part of an increasing recognition of the particular importance of cities and urban areas in relation to the Lisbon Agenda and the overarching objectives of increasing growth and jobs that can also be seen in the conclusions of the informal Council in Rotterdam in November 2004.

In the Bristol Accord, Sustainable Communities are defined as '*places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all*' (ODPM, 2005,p.6).

The core components of Sustainable Communities present a vision which has gained the commitment of many stakeholders across Europe. However, turning that vision into reality raises key questions of delivery and approaches to regional planning, spatial planning and sustainable city policies across the EU of 27 nation states. The success of Sustainable Communities policies depends on the more effective interaction of spatial planning, transportation, economic and environmental policies, social policy, finance and governance - all strategic policy EU interventions in the 2007 – 2013 and 2014 – 2020 European Union programmes. The difficulty is that there are many definitions and ambitions for both sustainable development and Sustainable Communities.

### Review of Existing European Studies

The Commission's promotion of a 'Europe of the Regions' is a starting point for the policy of promoting greater political, economic and social integration between the regions within Europe. The Commission has done a great deal to encourage the cause of regionalism and integrated regional planning and governance in the last two decades. Particularly important has been the move to develop a more integrated spatial development framework for the whole European territory, working together to produce the *European Spatial Development Perspective* (ESDP) (EC, 1999), approved by ministers for spatial planning at Potsdam in May 1999.

This concept of spatial planning widens traditional land use planning to encompass concerns with:

- urban and regional economic development,
- influencing urban and regional population balance,
- planning, transport and communication infrastructure,
- protection of habitats, landscapes and resources,

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(<sup>1</sup>) (ODPM, 2005) UK Presidency of the EU 2005, Ministerial Informal, Bristol, 6-7 December 2005. The text is reproduced in Chapter 1, Figure 1.

- land use and property regulation,
- coordination of the impacts of other sector spatial strategies.

As Haughton (Haughton, 2004) points out, the ESDP emphasises the adoption of integrated spatial development strategies at all scales, but in particular, at the regional scale. The Bristol Accord Sustainable Communities Agenda begins the task of focusing integration at both the neighbourhood and city-region scales.

Chapter Two reviews a wide range of European studies and literature which feeds into the Sustainable Communities debate. An influential strand is the ESPON <sup>(2)</sup> (European Spatial Planning Observation Network) Programme of applied research, which has been concerned with the drive for territorial cohesion and the priorities for balanced development across the EU (ESPON, 2006f). It is possible to divide the policy areas covered by the ESPON Programme into that of economy, social and governance policies, the role of cities and urban centres, and environmental sustainability. Based on a total of thirty four applied research projects, the ESPON 2006 programme has provided a substantial study across Europe.

In relation to studies on the economy, ESPON projects demonstrate the economic opportunities offered by EU enlargement not just for the economies of the Accession states, but for the rest of the EU. Reducing regional and national disparities and increasing the balance of economic development of the EU-27 needs to help stem the flow of young people from East to West and from the periphery of Europe to the core. In other words, one of the pre-conditions for a sustainable community with a balanced population may be attainable only through measures taken at the supra-regional or supra-national scale.

Research within the ESPON Programme on the social dimension has shown the importance and impact of territorial spatial trends on social cohesion. Market forces are driving geographical concentration tendencies and the location of investment, resulting in inter-regional and intra-regional disparities. The disparities manifest themselves at the level of local communities and lack of social cohesion which contributes to, or constrains, development opportunities. As well as employment and income distribution, better policies are required for education and training, housing, and access to social services. Policy differences are evident in the levels of early school leavers as well as in the levels of life-long learning and digital literacy, leaving people in different communities and regions unequally equipped for the future. Governance and cultural assets issues are also important aspects of the appeal of a city or community and ultimately impact on the jobs agenda.

In relation to the role of cities, ESPON's conclusions are that the concentration of activities and population and its overspill, especially in capital cities and MEGAs (Metropolitan European Growth Areas), are causing serious social and environmental concerns. Current trends towards enlargement of functional urban areas contributes to an increasing flexibility of employment opportunities, yet, though positive for competitiveness, this is creating negative trends for sustainability due primarily to the increase in work-related travel and the use of private cars in cities. The reduction of cars in cities and the promotion of public transport is thus a critical issue within Sustainable Communities strategies.

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<sup>(2)</sup> Detailed information on ESPON is available at: <http://www.espon.eu/>.

The key importance of the ESPON programme has been to identify detailed urban and regional trends which may either empower or undermine individual communities, depending on their regional position. A significant conclusion of the ESPON programme has been the presentation of evidence that the European core-periphery pattern is weakening. Furthermore trends in economic and urban development have indicated that the 'core' of Europe is spreading: extending along a number of corridors. One consequence of this is that some small and medium-sized towns, as well as larger metropolitan agglomerations outside the European core, are gaining ground as important nodes for European development.

In keeping with the identified Bristol approach, the ESPON programme results have confirmed the growing importance of 'soft' location factors such as governance, culture and a high quality urban and natural environment on the potential of a city or community. These factors have an important bearing on viability in economic and particularly employment terms. The potentials associated with these 'soft factors' are shown to differ widely between areas. A key application of the ESPON work in this context is to demonstrate the variation within countries and between regions at different NUTs (<sup>3</sup>) levels.

ESPON results have also been important in cautioning against the temptation to view communities, cities and regions in isolation. Trans-national and intra-regional movements of goods and people are a fundamental and increasingly dynamic aspect of globalisation and European integration which directly impact on all communities.

The *Community Strategic Guidelines for Cohesion for the 2007 – 2013 programming period* (OJ, 2006) promotes an 'integrated approach' to Cohesion Policy, delivering social and environmental goals as well as growth and jobs. Subsequently, the European Commission argued that cities need long-term visions to maximise their critical success factors and proposes an integrated approach as 'the natural solution when designing regeneration projects on the district and neighbourhood scale'.

The Commission argues that the URBAN Community Initiative (<sup>4</sup>) has promoted an integrated approach to urban development. URBAN targeted social and economic cohesion, removing barriers to employability and investment whilst promoting social and environmental goals, and this should be carried on within URBACT (<sup>5</sup>).

The recent Stern Review (Stern, 2006) stresses that climate change is a cross-cutting issue that will affect everyone. It identifies the dilemmas of balancing urban redevelopment and expansion, integrating land use transport and infrastructure and sustaining the vitality and viability of city centres, whilst assessing environmental impacts and safeguarding natural and urban heritage resources. The Bristol Accord shares much common ground with the *Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment* (EC,2006c) that was launched in January 2006. The Thematic Strategy is seen as an important tool for the European Commission for the purpose of contributing to the sustainable development of cities and high quality of life for Europe's urban citizens.

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(<sup>3</sup>) NUTS: Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics (Eurostat) (NUTS 1, 2, etc.) (EU)

(<sup>4</sup>) URBAN is the Community Initiative of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for sustainable development in urban districts

(<sup>5</sup>) URBACT: Integrated Urban Development Transnational Exchange (EU). The URBACT programme aims to develop exchanges of experience between European cities involved in the URBAN programmes. France has volunteered and been entrusted with the management of the programme on behalf of the Member States.

The review reflects the fact that many previous research projects have not considered territorial cohesion, environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness and social challenges concurrently, or their implications for each other. The all-encompassing nature of the 2005 Bristol Agreement may offer a way forward in Europe in seeking to unite these goals in the search for better Sustainable Communities and integration policies. The task is to ensure that the Bristol Accord agenda for Sustainable Communities is reproduced throughout the EU-27 and that appropriate resources and learning networks are in place to promote the European Sustainable Communities Agenda in all Member States in the 2007 – 2013 period.

The 2007 German Presidency has a work programme and first progress report on the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development as reviewed in 2006. It focuses on an integrated urban development policy and in particular, on the integration of deprived neighbourhoods. Research has been commissioned from the German Institute of Urban Affairs (DIFU, 2007) and will be taken forward at the Leipzig Summit in 2007.

### **Key Challenges and Policy Practice**

In Chapter Three, the relative applicability of the Sustainable Communities Agenda to an EU-27, identified in seven regional groupings, is presented. Member state responses to the 2005 Bristol Accord at the nation state level have been very limited to date. Spain has welcomed the Accord informally and has been proactive in providing case studies. The Visegrád group acknowledged the issues raised by the Accord in relation to the needs of Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. In Scandinavia, Denmark is responding by organising a national skills conference, influenced by the 2006 European Skills Symposium in the United Kingdom. Sweden has initiated the Urban Futures 2.0 conference and plans other events with an emphasis on the role of young people in Sustainable Communities. During 2006, the Finnish government supported the objectives of the Accord and its holistic approach was praised - but a consistent fear has been that the broadness of the agenda may also serve to dilute its potential and that a more coherent European work programme needs to be elaborated.

The limited formal responses to the Accord to date do not mean that countries are not receptive to the principles within it or to the relevance of the issues. Most governments accept in principle the objectives, if not in name, and most have already developed their National Sustainable Development strategies, initially environmental in emphasis, which seek to incorporate many of the policy themes, and which will be renewed at the European Council in December 2007.

Apart from the policy themes covered by these national strategies, there is a wide variation in the administrative arrangements enabling, or not, participation in policy making and development. However, it should be noted that without adequate indicators to gauge whether the goals of Sustainable Communities development are being achieved, it is difficult for the public to assess for itself the process in relation to planned policies, thus limiting potential accountability.

On a practical level, the delegations sent to the Bristol EU Ministerial Informal give some indication of the perspectives and relative importance given to the policy areas encompassed by the Accord. A useful distinction can be made between leading countries which already score highly on trying to deliver on each aspect of the Sustainable Communities Agenda, such as Finland and Denmark, and the new Accession states, which are starting the process and have much to gain by implementing the strategy in the 2007 – 2013 programmes.

At the heart of the Sustainable Communities Agenda there is a desire to improve local and regional economies by economic growth and to address the environmental and social problems of communities, promoting in particular, regeneration and renewal in the most disadvantaged localities and integrating policy perspectives via the governance mechanism. The search for greater policy coherence and better integration of economic, social and environmental goals is accompanied by the need to build capacity and develop knowledge exchange on the Sustainable Communities Agenda. This report recommends that a coherent programme of work should be identified for each of the EU regional groupings.

## **The European Case Studies**

Chapter Four presents case studies on the Sustainable Communities concept which operate across a wide range of policy themes and at a variety of spatial scales. Case examples are central to the success of the place-making approach. It is only by examining specific cases of policy implementation that we can begin to outline the key factors in relation to the objectives of the Sustainable Communities Agenda. Case studies in Chapter Four illustrate innovative examples or opportunities for Sustainable Communities projects identified within each of the seven EU regional groupings. The aim is to understand and learn from best practice and examine how lessons can be shared across the twenty-seven Member States.

The case studies reassessed here are as follows:

- Alpine – Leoben, Austria.
- Baltic – Panevėžys, Lithuania
- Benelux – Tour and Taxis, Brussels, Belgium
- Central Eastern – Warsaw, Poland
- Central Western – Stuttgart, Germany
- Mediterranean – Ecociudad Valdespartera, Zaragoza, Spain
- Scandinavian – Aarhus, Denmark

Each has either been offered by respective Member States or has been taken from the existing European Urban Knowledge Network (EUKN) European case study database, which needs resources for further development. Throughout Europe, the debate is focusing on how best to develop more consistent policies and programmes to achieve Sustainable Communities. There is a wide diversity of policies and approaches to urban and territorial programmes and planning, but substantial evidence to show that integration of social, economic, environmental and governance approaches is necessary to produce better place-making results.

Sustainable community projects are often characterised by high degrees of complexity and a need for a wide range of competencies and skills, political accountability and understanding of diverse local communities, their aspirations and needs. In terms of regeneration and renewal projects, visions often take many years to ‘hatch’ and to develop. They often need to make use of a wide variety of funding programmes utilised from regional, national Member States and the European programmes. Whilst recognising that many competencies for Sustainable Communities development are held at the national, regional and local levels, there is much more that cities can do when their capacity for action is reinforced by the European programmes.

One key task identified in the report is the need to continue to build on the EUKN and the URBACT programme and to focus on the 2007-2013 phase. There must be more support for

policy makers and practitioners across Europe if there is to be a more effective European urban policy to make Europe's cities more sustainable in social, economic and environmental terms.

### **Indicators for Sustainable Communities**

Chapter Five presents the details of work during the last decade on the development of indicators to monitor progress towards achievement of sustainable development policy objectives, by bodies such as the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the EU. At individual Member State level, almost all countries now have sustainable development indicator sets to monitor progress towards their individual National Sustainable Development Strategies.

Chapter Five provides an analysis of existing indicators based on the characteristics of Sustainable Communities contained within the Bristol Accord. We then suggest developing a Europe-wide catalogue of Sustainable Communities indicators, which would inevitably feed from Eurostat's existing set of sustainable development indicators. However, while the concept of sustainable development has salience at all spatial scales, the Sustainable Communities Agenda, as we have argued in this report, is by its nature primarily focused at neighbourhood, local authority and city-region levels. Consequently, we would argue that indicators that monitor progress within individual communities, whether they be neighbourhoods, towns, cities or metropolitan regions (LAU2 <sup>(6)</sup> to NUTS3/2), would have the greatest value. Consequently, we also suggest the development of local-level indicators for individual Member States and as part of the Urban Audit. The next data collection is scheduled for 2009 and additional related indicators can be considered then.

### **Conclusions**

Chapter Six presents the conclusions and recommendations. The European Union must continue to play a key role in advancing the European Sustainable Communities Agenda. The European Structural Funds offer the most support to those concerned to promote the Sustainable Communities Agenda, although other European programmes, like the Framework 7 Research and Development programme '*Building Knowledge Europe: Regions of Knowledge and Research Potential*' <sup>(7)</sup> or the environmental, energy, transport and development programmes, can also contribute and need to be brought to bear on the initiative.

The re-orientation under 'Regions of Economic Change' offers the possibility of galvanising the Sustainable Communities Agenda throughout Europe and bringing together the work of URBACT and the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON) with the work of national organisations, like the Academy of Sustainable Communities (ASC) in the United Kingdom, to develop new programmes for:

- research and case study updating,
- knowledge transfer and best practice,
- dissemination of ideas and training,
- facilitation of new Action Plans focusing on skills and capacity building.

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<sup>(6)</sup> LAU: Local Administrative Units.

<sup>(7)</sup> See European Commission Research web page: [http://ec.europa.eu/research/future/index\\_en.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/research/future/index_en.cfm).

Greater clarity is required of the objectives for a European Sustainable Communities programme at both neighbourhood and town or city-region levels. It would be useful to invite each Member State to nominate one town and large-scale neighbourhood regeneration project for inclusion in a European-wide Sustainable Communities Programme which would seek to shape a model Sustainable Communities Programme for the EU-27 for the 2007–2013 programme. It would seek to focus on the most advanced approaches to Sustainable Communities in each neighbourhood identified and accommodate best practice across Member States..

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations of this report are designed as an input into the deliberations of the Regional Development Committee of the European Parliament and in particular to inform the Public Hearing the Committee is planning to hold in 2007.

### *Proposals for creation of closer synergies at the EU co-ordination level*

The challenge is to move from the Bristol Accord to fuller co-operation, exchange of knowledge and best practice and achieve durable institutional change.

- The twelve countries that have not yet become members of the EUKN, namely Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden, should be encouraged to do so as it is a European project for the sharing of knowledge and good practice in the field of urban policy and practice.
- The European Commission and Member States need to reconsider their obligations under the Bristol Accord to compile and share good practice case studies of successful places, to be submitted to the EUKN according to the agreed template.
- A ‘Sustainable Communities’ Working Group should be established at European level, tasked with ensuring systematic deliberations continue to take place and the best way of achieving Sustainable Communities policy goals and holistic integration in the framework of EU programmes.
- Utilising the research resources of URBACT and Member State national organisations, a programme of research and development should be progressed as a ‘European Model Communities for Sustainable Development’ programme. A European Sustainable Communities Observatory could be established, possibly with priority in one of the Accession States.
- *Improving European Indicators – resourcing further research*  
Eurostat should consider developing a specific sub-set of indicators to monitor, assess and review the Sustainable Communities Agenda contained within the Bristol Accord – Sustainable Communities Indicators. These could be structured in a similar fashion to the SDI set, with eight themes linked to the eight characteristics of Sustainable Communities, each with (a) headline indicator(s). Each theme would be sub-divided into a number of sub-themes pertaining to the detailed characteristics of Sustainable Communities within the Bristol Accord.

- *Urban Audit Support:*  
Eurostat and DG REGIO <sup>(8)</sup> should identify a specific sub-set of indicators that relate to the Sustainable Communities Agenda within the Urban Audit. (There are sufficient indicators already collected for the Urban Audit to make such an indicator set feasible). Individual Member States should be encouraged to contribute to supplying data to fill in gaps within the indicator set and the resources available to the Urban Audit should be developed further for 2009.
- *Member State local level:*  
Individual Member States should be encouraged to develop their own Sustainable Communities Indicator sets. This would enable all Member States to monitor performance towards a Sustainable Communities approach at the local level. It would also result in improved data availability for the Urban Audit. A template, or model set of indicators, should be developed, to suit individual national circumstances.
- *Data for Sustainable Communities headline indicators*  
This data could be inserted into the 2007–2013 mid-term review incorporated into a more systematic framework for the second half of 2010–2013 and later utilised in the 2014–2020 programming period.
- *Sharing experience across Europe at the mid-term review 2009*  
Further development work can take place within each EU regional grouping to identify strategies and best practice examples of Sustainable Communities and to highlight the cross-fertilisation issues in utilising the European Union resources available under the 2007 – 2013 programmes. The Commission, the Committee of the Regions and the European Parliament could jointly convene a European-wide conference on Sustainable Communities to coincide with the mid-term review of the 2007–2013 programme and to share best practice between West and Eastern Europe.

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<sup>(8)</sup> DG REGIO: European Commission Directorate-General for Regional Policy.

