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GROWING PAINS: A MATURATION FRAMEWORK FOR EUROPEAN TERRITORIAL COOPERATION

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Abstract

The last two decades have witnessed a surge in territorial cooperation arrangements across the EU. This paper engages with on-going academic and policy debates around the contributions of territorial cooperation. Addressing the well-recognised difficulties in evaluating their contributions, the analysis sets out a nuanced framework in which to evaluate territorial cooperation, which is sensitive to quantitative and qualitative results of cooperation. Crucially, the analysis focusses on the 'maturation' process of territorial cooperation programmes and proposes a framework in which key characteristics of territorial cooperation efforts are identified - motivation, scale, intensity, governance structures, as themes - as variable in accordance to different phases of maturity. The main argument is that maturation should be a key consideration in relation to the results that can be expected from territorial cooperation and how these can be measured. In doing so, the paper addresses a significant gap in the literature on territorial cooperation and a significant practical challenge for policy makers. The analysis focusses on INTERREG programmes; the EU's primary policy instrument for supporting territorial cooperation. Evidence is drawn from data that was gathered as part of a three-year research project (ESPON TERCO) and consists of an analysis of INTERREG programme documentation. Furthermore, 35 semi-structured interviews with programme officials were conducted in five targeted INTERREG case studies: Flanders – Netherlands, North Sea Region, Czech – Slovakia, Slovenia – Austria and the Central Baltic Programme.

1.1 Introduction

This paper engages with on-going academic and policy debates around the contributions of European Territorial Cooperation (ETC). Addressing the well-recognised difficulties in evaluating the contributions of ETC (McMaster 2013; Colomb 2007; Böhme 2005), the analysis sets out a nuanced framework in which to evaluate territorial cooperation, which is sensitive to quantitative and qualitative results of cooperation and crucially, variable results linked to the 'maturity' of the cooperation arrangement. The analysis focuses on the 'maturation' process of ETC and proposes a framework that identifies key characteristics of cooperation – motivation, scale, intensity, beneficiaries, governance structures, themes, impact and measurement - at different phases of maturity. In doing so, the paper addresses a significant gap in the literature on territorial cooperation and a significant practical challenge for policy makers.

The last two decades have witnessed a surge in cooperation arrangements that cross borders. In particular, the number of sub-state institutions involved in cooperation across borders has increased (Scott 2002). This phenomena has been linked to rapid globalisation, increased functional interconnectedness/ dependencies between regions, and increased autonomy for regional institutions (Dühr *et al.* 2007: 292; Scott 2002). Within the EU, one of the most significant drivers of cross border and transnational activities in the past two decade has been the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective which is an integral part of the EU's Cohesion policy (Ferry and Gross 2005), and the EU primary policy instrument for supporting territorial cooperation. Since 1989 when ETC was established an increasing number of programmes – called INTERREG - have been initiated across all of the EU's internal borders and some of its external borders. For the 2007-13 INTERREG programme period a total of 52 Cross border programmes (INTERREG A), 13 transnational programmes (INTERREG B) and an inter-regional programme (INTERREG C). These programmes have received a total budget of €7.8 billion.

As ETC is entering its fifth phase, many programmes have been operational for over two decades. As these cooperation efforts become more established and matured, the demands placed on them increase. More precisely, questions are raised about how ETC can achieve greater impact and contribute to the EU's strategic goals of smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. In theory the Commission's performance framework apply to all Structural Funds including ETC. The proposed regulation for Structural Funds in 2014-20 and the Common Strategic Framework provides the structure and guidelines in which programmes have to operate. It stresses the need for more tangible output of all programmes, emphasising concentration and a 'reinforced focus on results through performance framework' (CEC 2012a; 2012b) with a particular focus on outcomes and results (Gaffey 2012). In practical terms this means that the ETC programmes are expected to make contribution that are akin to those of ERDF structural fund programmes.

The added value of ETC is widely recognised by the Member States, EU institutions, and participating regions (CEC 2010; INTERACT 2006; 2010; ESPON 2013; Beck 2008) but covers a broad range of dimensions (e.g. political, institutional, socio-economic and socio-cultural) (Gabbe and von Malchus 2006). Some of the most widely recognised benefits/results of ETC are in the shape of mutual learning and policy transfers. However, Scott (2002) reminds us that short term benefits of territorial cooperation may appear elusive and that therefore the perspective of long term gains need to be persuasive enough to create the environmental conditions that allow successful cooperation to flourish. Moreover, capturing the nature, quality and results of ETC programmes is challenging and is

the subject of considerable debate (McMaster 2013; Colomb 2007; Böhme 2005; ESPON 2013). The added value that ETC brings is often understood in qualitative terms, providing a basis for mutual learning that can lead to changes in mind sets, policy innovation and institutional adaptation (Panteia 2008) as well as giving impetus to various forms of policy transfers (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). A number of challenges have been identified. First, ETC programmes are not well suited to the positivist and indicator-led approaches that are prevalent in the evaluation of Cohesion policy (Colomb 2007). Such evaluations rely heavily on impact assessments, econometrics and quantifiable performance indicators (Murtagh and McKay 2003; Bachtler and Wren 2006). In the case of ETC, the comparative data necessary for these approaches is lacking for cross border and transnational cooperation, particularly in relation to local and regional levels (Weith and Gustedt 2012; Knippschild and Wiechmann 2012). Second, ETC frequently produces intangible results' (Colomb 2007) and, therefore, programmes tend to show inconsistencies and weaknesses in relation to the EU's prescribed indicators (Taylor *et al.* 2004). Third, the more qualitative aspects of evaluations, such as lesson learning, capacity building and internationalisation are often ignored when considering the performance of the policy (Batterbury 2006).

A key factor which is commonly overlooked in these discussions is that type of result and added value ETC can be expected to have will be greatly affected by the maturity of cooperation efforts between regions (Perkmann 1999). Taking this gap in the analysis as a starting point, this assessment aims to identify the different 'maturation stages' of territorial cooperation and explore the characteristics associated with each stage. The paper proposes a more nuanced account and envisages an evaluation framework in which there is room for both quantitative and qualitative elements. It explores some of the implications of recognising different levels of maturity in cooperation and for evaluation practices.

The empirical part of this paper includes an initial exploration of the maturation model. It draws, in part, on a three-year research project, ESPON TERCO, which ran from February 2010 to March 2013 (ESPON 2013). The research for ESPON TERCO involved several elements. First, a documentary analysis of all ETC programmes which included Operational Programmes, annual reports, mid-term evaluations and guidance manuals was carried out. Second, 35 semi-structured interviews with programme officials were conducted in five targeted case studies of ETC programmes: Flanders – Netherlands, North Sea Region, Czech – Slovakia, Slovenia – Austria and the Central Baltic Programme. The TERCO project did not specifically aim to address maturation processes in ETC as part of the research methodology. However, the findings did identify maturation as a central topic that requires more research (ESPON 2013).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In the first section, the importance of maturation for ETC is discussed. In the subsequent sections this is further explored and a framework is developed which identifies three stages - new, consolidated and embedded – and describes the characteristics of ETC in each phase. The empirical contribution of the paper discusses the implications of the framework, by providing a preliminary exploration of the characteristics of maturation in five ETC programmes. In conclusion the paper argues that maturity of cooperation has a significant impact on what ETC can be expected to deliver and therefore should be a key consideration in the evaluation of its results. In practical terms this calls for a flexible approach that takes into account both quantitative and qualitative measurements.

1.2 The importance of maturity for ETC

The 2014 – 2020 period will be the fifth phase of ETC and many programmes have been operational for over two decades. Throughout this period many of the programmes and the policy have undergone significant changes which have impacted the maturation of cooperation. In the past decade, there has been increased pressure for ETC to deliver results that contribute to the EU's growth strategies. It has proven challenging to refocus ETC programmes to effectively contribute to the growth agenda. For example, research has demonstrated that the contribution of ETC in terms of growth and jobs is considered negligible (ESPON 2013). The changes in the policy framework have according to some scholars affected the maturing of cooperation structures and led to 'a blurring of the initial intentions for cooperation' (Dühr and Nadin 2007: 379).

What's more, ETC faces certain well-known barriers that are abiding and that require a 'longue durée approach' in order to be overcome. Due to the inherently complex nature of ETC it is inevitable that practices, partnerships and projects develop at a slower pace than is often the case in domestic programmes and the time it takes for cooperation structures to mature is often underestimated (Panteia 2010). This makes maturation an even more crucial factor in terms of evaluating the results that can be expected from ETC. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to provide an exhaustive list of barriers that ETC faces but it is worth highlighting some of them to demonstrate how they relate to issues of maturation.

First, it has been argued that cooperation is most likely to be successful between partners that share a similar administrative culture (Bachtler *et al.* 2005) and that differences in relation to administrative practices can form an important barrier. However, there are as many organisational and management styles as there are instances of cooperation (Hofstede 2001; Ratti 1993). These practices are often deeply embedded in organisations. For instance, it has been noted that in the field of spatial planning the allocation of planning powers differs from country to country and the 'style of planning' is different (ESPON 2006). It seems therefore reasonable to assume that knowledge and understanding of administrative practices and traditions in other country will facilitate cooperation efforts between partners and allow partnerships to deliver more effectively. However, familiarity with these practices has to mature; it can take considerable time to fully understand the nature and impact of different approaches.

Second, there is consensus that developing cross border relations require trust and need time to develop (INTERACT 2006) but political mind sets and mental and cultural differences can prevent deeper integration (ESPON 2013; Panteia 2008). A prevailing culture of cooperation provides according to the OECD (2006; 2010) an invaluable basis and should be regarded as the foundation of cooperation. If a culture of cooperation exists, this can be supported by appropriate governance structures and financial resources. Cooperation across national borders is not only the technical inter-linkage of two or more different systems of governance. It also has to bring together different people and social systems with differing systems of values. Therefore, the culture of cooperation that exists (or may emerge) is decisive for the future of the cooperation arrangement. A mature partnership can create trust and establish interpersonal relations. Related to this, language barriers are often identified as one of the most important barriers as well as psychological barriers such as negative stereotypes and reservations among populations and political leaderships may act to limit cooperation (Bazin 2003; Medeiros 2010). Language problems or different standards in culture, politics, etc., can provoke long delays in the administration and implementation of technical questions and cause frustration

among cooperating actors (OECD 2006). There are many positive examples of Western European partnerships with their long history of post-war reconciliation and cooperation. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Iron Curtain largely halted such endeavours. This is problematic because, in general, the longer the experience with territorial cooperation, the more smoothly cooperative initiatives tend to run (Bachtler *et al.* 2005).

Third, the complex nature of ETC often requires quite specialist knowledge on the part of the bodies that implement them. Learning does not only take place in the projects but also is an important aspect of those that are responsible for implementing ETC. Leibenath and Knippschild (2007) argue that for effective transboundary policy coordination some institutional capacity or 'Institutional thickness' is necessary. Developing institutional capacity can take a considerable length of time and can even founder in case of frequent personal turnovers and unfavourable framework conditions' In any case programme governance structures need time to mature.

Fourth, the manner in which the nature and quality of cooperation can be measured is a topic of considerable debate but it is generally recognised that maturation is a key factor (Perkmann 1999). For example, Beck (2004) outlines six levels of cooperation (one being the lowest):

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6. Implementation - Joint implementation of actions, efficient joint management, fulfilment of requirements by each partner
 5. Decision - Binding commitment of partners, partnership agreements
 4. Strategy / Planning - Defining joint objectives and developing concrete actions
 3. Coordination / Representation - Creating a joint partnership structure, first allocation of functions and roles
 2. Information - Developing (targeted) exchange of information, building basic cooperation structures and trust, shaping cooperation ideas
 1. Meeting - Getting to know each other, learning about motivation, interests, needs, skills, expectations, cultural and structural aspects

In brief, the examples above demonstrate that maturation is an important consideration in relation to ETC and that there is general agreement that forming effective governance structures, partnerships and projects takes a considerable length of time. However, the theoretical implications of different phases of cooperation are perhaps less well understood. There are questions in relation to the different themes that are likely to be addressed in each phase, the motivation for cooperation or the scale of activities that are taking place. Additionally, there are implications in terms of governance frameworks and types of beneficiaries that take part in the cooperation. Finally this leads to questions concerning how to measure the performance of ETC in each stage, both in terms of the results that ETC can deliver and how this can be best measured.

1.3 Modelling Maturation

Conceptually, three phases – new, consolidated and embedded territorial cooperation - can be identified (Table 1). I will discuss how these stages can be hypothesised to differ from in each other in relation to motivation, type of beneficiaries, governance structures and themes, measurement and impact. The discussion is placed within the specific context of ETC programmes but potentially has broader applications.

(i) *Motivation*

The motivation for cooperation in ETC is diverse. One way in which motivation can be understood is by the extent to which member states are willing or unwilling to commit their own resources to cooperation activities or rely on external funding. Although the levels of external funding (co-financing) in relation to ETC programmes are related to the prosperity and population levels in regions, they can also be indicative of the level of maturity of cooperation. In the first phase cooperation beneficiaries rely on relatively high levels of external funding and compliance requirements that help to initiate activities. One of the risks of high levels of external funding is that cooperation partnerships sometimes represent short-term funding coalitions as opposed to having genuine cooperative integrity (Church and Reid 1999). Scott (2013) notes a difference between East - West 'whilst territorial cooperation has become routinised and even independent of structural report fund support in Western European contexts, it is seen more in instrumental, even opportunistic, terms in Central and Eastern European countries.

Perkmann also stresses that 'it makes a considerable difference whether ETC support was accommodated into existing local cross-border cooperation structures or whether the launch of ETC actually triggered cross-border cooperation initiatives that had not been existing beforehand' (Perkmann 2004). In cases where structures were already well-established progress to a higher phase can be achieved much more rapidly and 'projects and activities with a visible impact on the territorial development of the area concerned' (Dühr *et al.* 2010: 353) could be funded rather than those that are focus on establishing relationships. Deppisch (2012: 329) makes a similar point when she stresses the importance of pre-existing social capital and trust. The relationships between partners across borders can be fostered using an initial injection of European money and support which helps to establish stronger links between partners. In cross border regions where levels of trust are low, ETC funding can be an important motivation for bringing partners together. This initial incentive can then provide a basis for further cooperation.

In a second phase cooperation efforts have been consolidated. There is a continued reliance on external funding but commitments amongst partners and Member States is no longer fleeting. In this phase a culture of cooperation is starting to emerge and therefore it can be expected that the availability of resources for territorial cooperation is rising as both sides are more committed and more resource intense projects are being initiated. The final phase of cooperation can, at least in many cases, be considered aspirational. In this phase territorial cooperation is fully embedded and there is strong domestic commitment for territorial cooperation activities. Programmes and projects are no longer fully reliant on external funding as domestic actors understand the importance of cooperation and can see its impact. However, in practice, cooperation efforts continue to require support. Evidence has shown that once resources are no longer available many of the partnerships that were established cease to exist (Gabbe and von Malchus 2006). Furthermore, in order for cooperation

efforts to remain viable and innovative a continuing supply of new entrants is crucial. Such entrants start from a lower level and require resources to create networks and relationships that allow them to enter in more advanced partnerships.

(ii) *Scale, intensity and beneficiaries*

A second set of characteristics that can differ according to different phases of maturation in ETC are *scale, intensity* and *type of beneficiaries*. It has been noted that the intensity and effectiveness of ETC varies greatly. Those regions that are already well integrated within pre-existing political and strategic frameworks have a considerable advantage compared to those where such frameworks were absent prior to the introduction of ETC (Panteia 2010: 179). Additionally the scale of cooperation may differ, Church and Reid (1999) stress the importance of the density of cooperation efforts in an area and the need for coordination between different levels, programmes and institutions in order to achieve a more strategic scale of cooperation.

In the 'new' phase cooperation efforts are usually small scale and can often be typified by a lack of coordination. In this stage activities are often dominated by local actors from public bodies, cooperation takes place in 'closed networks' that relies on key individuals within organisations (Dühr *et al.* 2010), often consisting of a few leading politicians and senior public officials (Hall 2008). The cooperation efforts are principally orientated towards exchanging knowledge and know-how. Officials from both sides of the border will organise meetings with the specific purpose of getting to know each other as well as learning about each other's motivations, interests, skills, expectations and structural aspects (Beck 2004). In the consolidated phase, projects are implemented on a larger scale and coordination frameworks/ instruments are being developed. Although efforts still rely heavily on the involvement of public partners attempts to involve other partners (private and third sector) are being made. In this phase the intensity of cooperation efforts increases and resources are pooled in order to tackle some common challenges (Colomb 2007).

In the embedded phase cooperation takes place within, or is part of, a comprehensive strategic framework which reinforces the strategic impact of ETC. Regional and local authorities recognise cross border or transnational cooperation as an important part of their development strategies. There are joint transnational investment and transnational spatial strategies have been developed and are part of the mainstream policy framework (Colomb 2007). In this phase, ETC activities are coordinated with, domestic regional development programmes, other EU funding streams that have a regional impact, and other overlapping and adjoining ETC programmes. Public authorities remain one of the main drivers of cooperation activities but a wider range of actors, including private sector and third sector actor, is now fully integrated within programmes and a 'culture of cooperation' exists within all sectors.

(iii) *Governance structures*

The governance structures of ETC may also mature through several phases (Gabbe and von Malchus 2008). In the new phase ETC efforts are not yet embedded in the organisations. The governance structures that are in place to manage and implement the cooperation activities are often duplicated on both sides of the border. In the consolidated phase joint partnerships structures are created. Cooperation capacity is increasing on both sides of the border and functions are being allocated in order to ensure that cooperation efforts are adequately staffed and resourced but the efforts have not

been fully entrenched into the domestic organisational structures. In the embedded phase, the role of ETC programme staff is more specialised and is strongly focussed on establishing links between projects and other funding streams in order to emphasis strategic targets. Furthermore, senior officials are fully supportive they are willing to dedicate departmental budgets and resources to cooperation activities and recognise opportunities for organisational learning and policy transfer (Dabinett 2006).

(iv) *Themes*

New ETC programmes often show that cooperation efforts are often less focussed and cover a broad range of topics (INTERACT 2012). In the 'new' phase the themes that are addressed are mostly non-controversial (Deppisch 2012: 330) This 'easy' theme selection can at least partly be explained by interregional rivalry which is driven by political rivalry, historic differences and market forces (Dühr and Nadin 2007). It is therefore often 'softer less competitive themes such as culture and tourism' that are chosen (Dühr et al. 2007). As trust and relations are beginning to take shape, partnerships are starting to address more challenging themes (e.g. spatial planning, environmental challenges, etc.) and ETC efforts involve a wide range of themes that are strongly linked to key domestic and European priorities. Levels of trust and understanding are high and there is a concerted effort to tackle controversial issues.

(v) *Impact and measuring*

Generating projects that have impact and measuring the outcomes and results of ETC has been a key challenge. Defining these in clear quantitative terms has been even more difficult. Commonly experienced problems are that is extremely difficult for relatively small-scale cooperation activities to determine 'cause and effect' and disaggregate the effects of ETC from other public expenditure and. The 'breadth' and scope of cooperation objectives can also make it particularly difficult to clearly demonstrate 'concrete' results and impacts (Taylor *et al.* 2004), particularly in comparison to many regional and national programmes which often have a more narrow range of objectives and receive more funding (INTERACT 2010). In addition, the large geographical scale of cooperation areas (particularly for transnational programmes) means that resources are spread thinly, which can mean that measurable impacts may not be immediately apparent in all regions (Taylor *et al.* 2004). Put in rather stark terms, one commentator suggested that INTERREG IIC and IIIB have 'hardly any tangible outputs' (Böhme 2005).

Traditional approaches to monitoring and expressing impact and progress have been extremely problematic in the context of territorial cooperation. As Colomb (2007) argues, monitoring and evaluation approaches used by other economic development policies/programmes are commonly inadequate for the investigation of processes of cooperation that characterise ETC, and the qualitative changes that may arise as a result. The sheer breadth and scope territorial cooperation programmes, objectives, projects and partnerships calls for an eclectic approach in how its impact can be assessed. A key challenge has related to the definition of common indicators. Most ETC programmes have suffered from a lack of clarity in the definition of common indicators and a lack of baseline data against which to measure progress, which has invalidated attempts at aggregating data collected from projects (Colomb 2007; Taylor *et al.* 2004; INTERACT 2006).

It can be hypothesised that less mature ETC programmes/projects demonstrate little tangible impact (Dühr *et al.* 2010), or at least not at a strategic level. Their impact is mainly local and 'softer'

qualitative indicators are probably better suited to capture the contributions these programmes/projects make. For more consolidated programmes/ projects qualitative indicators remain important but the strategic goals for the cooperation efforts are more clearly defined and therefore achievements can be measured using harder quantitative measure that focus on outputs and to a certain extent results. ETC, in its most advanced phase, directly contributes to territorial cohesion as an EU policy goal. Cooperation efforts contribute to 'the harmonious and balanced development of the Union by reducing economic and social disparities, by preventing territorial imbalances from emerging and by making sectoral policies that have a spatial impact more coherent with regional policy' (Bennet (2004) quoted in Doucet 2006). In this phase impact indicators can be added to the already existing set of measurements that are in place. However, it is questionable whether ETC can really be measured in terms of impact and therefore this phase should at least at the moment be more regarded as aspirational or at best a long term achievement as it can really only be measured over a considerable time frame.

Table 1: Phases of ETC

Maturity	Motivation	Scale	Intensity (Colomb 2007)	Type of Beneficiaries	Governance structures	Themes	Measurement	Impact
embedded	Strong domestic commitment with limited requirement for external funding	Large number of actors are involved and a comprehensive strategic framework is in place through which territorial cooperation efforts are coordinated	joint transnational investment, Transnational spatial strategy	Public-private partnership (including third sector)	Joint up approaches. Formalised and institutionalised framework. Senior level actors fully engaged	Key Economic development themes, including pressing and controversial issues.	Scope for using impact indicators	Territorial cohesion
Consolidated	Continued reliance on external funding but emerging domestic commitments	A more strategic approach is emerging and attempts are made to coordinate efforts	Pooling resources to tackle common problem	Public authorities leading with some involvement from other sectors	Increasing levels of institutionalisation appointment of dedicated staff		Scope for using harder quantitative measures that focus outputs and results	Larger strategic impact
New	Reliant on external funding and compliance requirement	Relatively small number of actors and lack in coordination	Preliminary meetings exchange of experience and know-how	Public authorities	Parallel structures. Reliance on key individuals	Easy/non-controversial (e.g. culture, infrastructure or tourism)	Programme's impact is measured using soft qualitative indicators	Limited small scale local impact

1.4 Some considerations

The framework presented above demonstrates that maturity of cooperation efforts can be measured in terms of motivation, scale, types of beneficiaries, intensity, governance structures, and themes which has an affects the impact and the type of measurements that can be used to evaluate ETC programmes and projects. However, the schematic overview presented in Table 1 should be considered as a heuristic device; a way of exploring the nature of ETC in areas. The framework as presented above clearly comes with several caveats. First, there are important endogenous drivers which have an impact on the phase of cooperation. As has already been noted above maturity does not solely depend on the length of time that a particular ETC programme has been in place. It also depends on any pre-existing cooperation efforts on which a new programme can build. Furthermore, the cultural links and historic ties between some countries are stronger than others which can be an important factor in terms of the success and maturity and ultimately the impact of cooperation. Additionally, administrative traditions and the institutional/constitutional framework in countries often diverge which can facilitate or complicate cooperation. Furthermore, there are social and economic disparities and commonalities between cross border areas that can have an effect on cooperation. Finally, the extent to which physical and geographical links between countries should be taken into account (ESPON 2013).¹

Second, the model's criteria that determine the maturity of cooperation are non-related. In other words, a programme, project or region can have advanced governance structures but at the same time addresses relatively non-contentious themes and mainly attract public sector beneficiaries. On the other hand, some programmes will start off with strong private sector or third sector participation. This means that the maturity of cooperation efforts should be considered within each category separately and that contextual factors require to be taken into account

Third, the framework can be applied to regions as a whole, a particular programme or particular partnerships. This means that the framework cannot be applied in a general holistic manner. It could be the case that a programme as a whole can be described as consolidated or show aspects of being even embedded and that many of the programmes beneficiaries are very experienced. At the same time that programme can also include new partners who still need to learn the ropes and therefore find themselves in a 'new' phase. The important point in relation to these less experienced partners is that once a programme enters the consolidated or embedded phase this does not mean that the underlying activities that take place in the early phase are no longer important. Cooperation efforts are largely artificial and require long term commitment until they are fully embedded (Nordregio 2010). It has been noted that it is essential for ETC programmes to attract and engage new partners as this creates an environment which supports cooperation and consequently new ideas for cooperation is established (INTERACT 2012). It has been recognised that there is a need for continuous support for people-to-people type of cooperation activities in cross border areas (INTERACT 2012) and although such projects form the basis of any further forms of territorial cooperation these projects are chronically underfunded and the high administrative burden also does not facilitate initiation of such projects which require the inclusion of certain groups (civic society, private sector and other smaller groups) with limited resources (Scott 2002).

¹ Although the impact of physical barriers is often overrated

1.5 Methodology and case studies

The empirical part of this paper applies the above presented conceptual framework to five INTERREG programmes particularly focussing on the 2007-2013 period but also in some cases reflecting back on past experiences. The European Regional Development Fund has since 1989 a European Territorial Cooperation objective which is the EU's primary policy instrument for supporting territorial cooperation. ETC objective focus on three main areas:

- development of economic and social cross-border activities;
- establishment and development of transnational cooperation, including bilateral cooperation between maritime regions;
- increasing the efficiency of regional policy through interregional promotion and cooperation, the networking and exchange of experiences between regional and local authorities.

The cooperation is deemed necessary as border regions are often described as functional territories that share similar characteristics, challenges and/or opportunities. Moreover many issues do not adhere to administrative boundaries and require coordination and joint strategic approaches (Beck 2008). The total budget for ETC is €7.8 billion and is divided across three types of programmes. The current (2007-13) INTERREG programme has 52 Cross border programmes (INTERREG A) with a budget of €5.6 billion; 13 transnational programmes (INTERREG B) with a budget of €1.8 billion, and an inter-regional programme (INTERREG C) and three networking programmes (Urbact II, Interact II and ESPON) with a budget of €445 million.

INTERREG programmes are a very specific form of territorial cooperation but are of particular comparative interest for three reasons. First, the monitoring management and implementation structures and processes for INTERREG take place within the EU regulatory framework. Although there is plenty of scope for variation within this framework, it does mean that there is a greater opportunity to compare similar cases. Furthermore, by focussing on INTERREG there is scope to look beyond administrative arrangements and focus on how institutions and processes operate and interact at various stages of maturation. Second, INTERREG is entering fifth programming phase and can therefore be regarded as relatively well-established. Thus, enough time has passed to reflect on changes that have occurred and the scope for lesson learning and adaptation that has taken place. However, in each programme period new programmes have been added and new areas have been added to existing programmes. Therefore a certain level of variation in terms of maturity can be expected. Third, INTERREG programmes are relatively well-funded which means that they are not 'empty vessels' or 'talking shops' but have resources to implement concrete projects.

The empirical part of this paper draws from the ESPON TERCO study undertaken between 2010 and 2013 (ESPON 2013). The findings are based on an analysis of programme and strategic documents from all INTERREG A and B programmes. This included operational programmes, annual reports and evaluation studies. This analysis of strategic documentation directly contributes to the empirical findings used in this paper but the review also formed the basis for five the selection of five case studies. These included Flanders- South Netherlands (Grensregio) (FL-NL), North Sea Region Programme (NSRP), Central Baltic Programme (CBP), Czech and Slovak Republic (CZ-SK) and Slovenia and Austria (SI-AT). Case studies were selected taking into account different levels of maturity (i.e. spanning a number of programme periods). The case study selection also took into account geographical spread; different types of borders (i.e. land borders, sea borders, Schengen

partner, Euro partner, EU12 or EU15 borders); and number of participating countries. Whilst these criteria provide enough variation that allows the application of the above set out framework and generalise the findings to a certain extent, the limited number of cases is also a reason for caution.

For the five targeted case studies semi-structured interviews were carried out with key stakeholders such as policymakers, programme managers, secretariat staff, regional contacts and programme beneficiaries. In total 35 interviews were conducted, roughly equally spread across the case studies.² For each case study a report was produced.³ The interview schedule did not specifically address issues around maturation but broader themes such as motivations for cooperation, types of beneficiaries, key drivers, governance structures, strategic management, implementation structures, thematic focus and impact. Maturation was one of the themes that emerged from the case studies. As such the discussion in the next section does not represent a systematic analysis of the framework set out above but rather an preliminary empirical exploration that provides a starting point for further research.

1.6 A Preliminary empirical exploration

(i) Motivation

One important motivation for actors to participate in ETC programmes is the financial incentives that they offer. All INTERREG programmes are co-financed and consist of a set proportions of EU and domestic funds but the levels of co-financing available vary across programmes, depending on the prosperity of the regions that participate in the programme. Co-financing ranges from 50 percent to 85 per cent. Programmes that receive a lower percentage of Community funding are mainly situated in regions where there is a strong internal commitment to territorial cooperation and where cooperation efforts can be considered as well-developed.⁴

The variation in co-financing levels can have an impact in terms of the motivation for participation in cooperation programmes. For example, in the case of CZ-SK programme, the EU financial contribution is considerable – 85 percent⁵ - hence the motivation for local and regional actors participate is great in order to tap into this funding. Many projects would not be realised without this external funding (although the most desirable projects could be expected to be initiated). In SI-AT programme one interviewee pointed out that the co-financing rates should not be too high. Financial support by the programme can on occasions even reach 95 percent. There is a risk that such high levels of co-financing attract beneficiaries that are mainly interested in receiving funding for projects in their region/ locality rather than have a willingness to genuinely engage in cross border cooperation. Nevertheless, co-financing remains an important incentive in programme's where the rates are lower.

² For Flanders – Netherlands (Grensregio) eight people were interviewed; for the Central Baltic Programme six people were interviewed, for the North Sea Region Programme five people; for the Czech Republic - Slovak Republic eight interviews; and for Slovenia – Austria five interviews. The in-depth case study involved interviews with members of the Monitoring Committee (MC), Managing Authority and Joint Technical Secretariat (JTS) as well as NCPs and project beneficiaries.

³ For more information on methodology please refer to van der Zwet et. al (2013) Case study on governance and EGTC; Identifying driving forces of and governance structures for territorial cooperation, ESPON TERCO. Available on: http://www.esponterco.eu/media/raporty/terco_final_report_scientific_report_part_ii.pdf

⁴ For example France- England, Netherlands – Germany, Two Seas, Oresund, Kattegat and Skagerrak, Grande Region, Flanders – Netherlands, EUregio Meusse Rhine, Upper Rhine, Sweden- Norway and Botnia –Atlantica are all programmes which receive close to 50 percent co-financing.

⁵ On top of that beneficiaries can receive an additional 5 percent from the central state

For example, in the NSRP projects are 50 percent EU funded. Even at these lower levels of external funding is a motivation for partners. As one interviewee states: 'funding galvanises cooperation activities'.

(ii) *Scale, Intensity and Beneficiaries*

ETC programmes often take place within regions where there is a high number of overlapping cooperation programmes (not just INTERREG). Establishing coordination frameworks that create strategic linkages can be challenging. Macro-regional strategies are one new way that has been introduced to address the coordination challenges in areas where there is a high density of cooperation activities. The Baltic region is an example of a region which has a high number of overlapping territorial or functional cooperation programmes. The Baltic regions and Member States have recognised the need for a more coordinated approach and the European Union Strategy for the Baltic Sea (EUSBSR) provides a comprehensive strategic framework in the region which coordinates and links territorial cooperation efforts. The objectives of the CBP have now been strongly linked to the EUSBSR. This link is mostly present at a project level as projects are required to comply with the EUSBSR criteria⁶, although the strategy has no formal influence at the project-decision phase. A mid-term evaluation of the CBP programme showed it is well in line with the EUSBSR. The relevant aspects/pillars of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region have been taken into account in the actual implementation of the Programme without much prior effort from the Programme's side. This has been possible due to the fact that the Programme's strategy largely coincides with EUSBSR and therefore ensures that majority of the projects is also link to EUSBSR.⁷ That said the strategic objectives of both the EUSBSR and the CBP are very broad making it relatively easy to identify linkages.

All ETC programmes investigated noted that lesson learning, exchanging ideas, know-how and sharing best practice are some of the major contributions of the cooperation activities. For example, in FL-NL interviewees stated that cross border cooperation can function as an 'eye opener' to partners, allowing for knowledge exchange and policy learning, especially when it involves a diverse partnership. In the CBP it was noted that the two sub-programmes⁸ have well established networks that support learning and exchange of ideas, but have increasingly also promoted transfer of policy solutions. Yet, ETC programmes do not simply exchange views in meetings, seminars or conferences. Indeed, the type of networking that takes place in the CBP is considered to have evolved from the exchange of ideas and support for learning to projects that deliver products and

⁶ Project application forms include an input field where all project applicants are asked to explain if and how they see their project supporting the EUSBSR. In addition, project applicants which see their project in the Central Baltic Programme (not the Southern Finland - Estonia or the Archipelago and Islands Sub-programme) as belonging to one of the EUSBSR Flagship Projects mentioned in the Action Plan will have to provide a letter of recommendation by the respective Priority Area Coordinator. The information provided by the applicants in the EUSBSR input field (and, if applicable, the letter of recommendation) is evaluated by the JTS in the assessment of the project applications and will become part of the assessment reports provided to the Steering Committees. This way the Steering Committees will be enabled to take into account the relevance of the projects for the EUSBSR when taking funding decisions. Approved projects which support the implementation of the EUSBSR are also highlighted in the programme's publicity measures as e.g. the Showcase Brochure if labelled as relevant for a certain priority area.

⁷ Deabaltika, 'Evaluation of the Central Baltic INTERREG IV A programme 2007-2013', Final mid-term evaluation report, 24 November 2010, p. 5

⁸ The programme consists of three components: an overarching Central Baltic programme, and two sub-programmes - Southern Finland - Estonia and Archipelagoslands programmes - both of which were independent cross-border INTERREG programmes in the 2000 - 2006 period..

services and more tangible outcomes. In the SK-CZ programme it was noted that formal meetings are not useful for true experience exchange. Instead more informal exchanges that take place in a practical setting which aim to address some common problem(s) are considered more suitable for true policy learning. It is only when partnerships actively address issues that affect both sides that a process of policy learning which is practical and adaptable takes place.

However, whether ETC contributes to the establishment of joint transnational investment plans and spatial strategies remains difficult to assess (Colomb 2007). In order for this to be achieved territorial cooperation activities require to be fully embedded in domestic institutional frameworks. In other words, it is not just those with a direct interest in ETC that are engaged in activities but also key senior staff from domestic sectoral departments (see governance structures). As of yet there is little research that shows this to be the case. However, it has been noted that it can be difficult to embed cooperation practices and thinking in organisations (van der Zwet 2012). Instead ETC is often promoted and animated by a small unit that directly deal with the programmes, rather than the larger organisational hierarchy.

ETC programmes attract a broad range of partners. In all case studies public authorities are identified as the most important beneficiaries of the programmes. These include: regional authorities, local authorities, universities and regional development agencies. Most programmes also aim to attract a broader range of partners but their involvement is for a large extent dependent on the level of autonomy and professionalization of a certain sector in a country. For example, in Britain the voluntary sector is well established and has increasingly become an important partner for Programme's such as the NSRP as they have taken over some of the tasks that Regional Development Agencies.⁹ Furthermore, the competencies of local and regional authorities differ per country which influences their participation and can in some cases lead to difficulties. In SI-AT it was noted that the highly centralised nature on the Slovenia and the Austrian Federal structure can cause mismatches.

Additionally, ETC programmes' governance structures can form a barrier for participation of certain types of beneficiaries. For example, in SK-CZ it was noted that NGOs and civic organisations and in SI-AT civic associations are important initiators of concrete local projects. The involvement of these beneficiaries is particularly important for people-to-people projects. Yet, because these organisations are relatively small and have limited capacity, they can find it difficult to participate in programmes due to administrative complexities and financial regulations that are imposed on them.

As there is an increased focussed on the results and impact of ETC programmes, many have looked at ways to engage the private sector. However, their involvement has often proven to be difficult due to state aid and competition regulation. Hence, some programmes have therefore chosen or been unable to include private sector partners as beneficiaries. For example, in SK-CZ private sector partners are not eligible for programme support due to the set programme rules. However, some programmes such as the NSRP have, to a certain extent, been able to adopt mixed mode networks which are considered important especially in the light of the 'triple helix'¹⁰ approach. Such networks are particularly applicable for certain types of projects (e.g. innovation projects). In the SI-AT

⁹ The UK government announced in 2010 that RDA would close in 2012. In the transition phase responsibilities are being carried over and activities are phased out (<http://www.englishsrda.com/>)

¹⁰ A strategy that fosters cooperation between university, industry and government actors in relation to innovation and economic development.

programme the role of private sector is deemed to be increasing but public-private partnerships have so far been limited.

(iii) Governance structures

ETC programmes operate within a formalised and institutionalised framework. In this sense all programmes have structures that are to a certain extent embedded and ensure stability, durability and consistency. Having dedicated staff is an important factor for facilitating cooperation efforts. Some programmes note capacity problems and high staff turnover. Such issues can vary across countries in a programme area. For example in the CBP it was noted that Latvia experienced capacity issues whereas in Estonia there was overcapacity. In the SI-AT programme interviewees stated that there is a high turnover of staff and a lack of resources to attract sufficient staff. A dedicated professional institutional framework for cooperation activities that is well resourced is considered an important feature of a successful programme.

However, the existence of an institutional framework does not necessarily mean that is fully embedded. Territorial cooperation can often take place in relative isolation. In the case of ETC programmes efforts have moved beyond the pet projects of a few enthusiastic individuals but in order for territorial cooperation efforts to be fully embedded programmes need to engage with domestic sectoral departments particularly at a senior level. A study of county involvement in territorial cooperation programmes in Norway showed the importance of the active involvement of high ranking officials and politicians. When they were integrated into the county structures (through which relations were institutionalised) the impact of projects was increased (IRIS 2011).

The embedded phase may in many cases be largely aspirational but there are programmes and developments that demonstrate that territorial cooperation is perhaps moving in this direction, at least in relation to governance structures. In July 2006 the EU has adopted legislation that allows the establishment of European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).¹¹ EGTC have legal personality and aim to facilitate truly joint up implementation structures for territorial cooperation. The regulation has been a longstanding desire of many who are involved in territorial cooperation and also the Committee of the Region has had considerable influence in its adoption. The regulation is thought to serve two purposes. First, it is hoped that (border) regions are able to intensify their cooperation efforts and improve their development. Second, it can be used as an implementation device of EU funded programmes, especially within new member states (Engl 2009: 14). However, so far only a single ETC programme (Greater Region) has setup an EGTC. This limited uptake can perhaps be explained by the fact that many countries implemented the legislation after the 2007 – 13 period had commenced and hence making it unattractive for programmes to radically change their governance structures at such a late stage. It remains to be seen how many programmes will adopt an EGTC in the 2014-2020 programme period. The Commission has included EGTC in its regulatory proposal, sending out a signal it regards it as useful. However, EGTC's are not just designed for ETC programmes but have many other applications. As ESPON (2013) research demonstrates the distribution of EGTC remains heavily in favour of western European countries and particularly those areas that can be considered functional urban regions in the core of Europe.

¹¹ Regulation 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation, OJ 2006 L 210, 19-24.

(iv) *Themes*

ETC programmes mostly have broad thematic objectives. As a consequence they are able to attract a wide variety of partners in order to absorb funding. However, such an inclusive approach has disadvantages. For example interviewees in the CBP found the programme's themes too broad and therefore lack impact. The consensus view is that in order to maximise the impact of ETC programme, themes should be more focussed so that the allocation of resources can be more concentrated. As already mentioned, the 2014-20 regulations include a menu of 11 themes with specific investment priorities. It is hoped that through such concentration of funds more strategic results can be achieved (CEC 2012b). The narrowing of focus is perceived to be particularly important due to the fact that there are a broad range of overlapping strategies that affect most programmes. For instance, the CPB's Southern Finland – Estonia sub-programme has national-level cooperation agreements between the two countries, but also has to take into account the agreements made in relation to the EUSBSR. Within in this complex web of different strategies, programmes and policies it is important for ETC programmes to carve out their own distinctive niche whilst at the same time demonstrating links to the other strategies, programmes and policies.

The type of themes a programme addresses are of course closely linked to the development needs in the region. The Central Baltic, North Sea Region and FL-NL programme all have a strong focus on innovation, business development, environmental challenges, transport/ logistics. These are intricate policy areas that require a high level of coordination. They are also closely related to the EU's growth agenda – Europe 2020. The SK-CZ and SI-AT programme also offer a wide range of themes but there tends to be an increased focus on tourism and cultural development. For example, the SK-CZ runs a micro project fund that specifically targets local people-to-people projects. One of the key aims of the programme is to renew and preserve regional cultural traditions. Such themes facilitate an environment in which trust and relations can be established. In the Baltic Sea Region and also the North Sea Region such relations are already very advanced and therefore more contentious issues (e.g. environmental degradation, shipping routes/ safety, transport corridors) are currently being addressed through territorial cooperation programmes.

(v) *Impact and measurement*

Considerable efforts have been made to increase the impact of ETC programmes and capture and convey results. Indeed, many programmes are increasingly focussed on tackling challenges that require 'ground-breaking' solutions (e.g. North West Europe INTERREG IVB) or focus on tangible products or services (e.g. Northern Periphery INTERREG IVB, Atlantic Area INTERREG IVB) which produce concrete economic results (SI-AT), legacy and impact (e.g. Ireland-Northern Ireland – Scotland INTERREG IVA, NSRP). Notwithstanding these developments, the need for softer outcomes, such as networking, remains important. This is because networking and personal relations are often deemed to be necessary conditions to pave the way for other (more tangible) types of cooperation.

Interviewees stressed that the 'softer' characteristics of territorial cooperation that aim to facilitate mutual understanding and trust are prerequisites for implementing 'hard' projects that may be more strategically beneficial and produce measurable tangible outputs. In other words, partners first have to build up relations of trust and understanding before committing to more intense forms of cooperation. The importance of maturity of cooperation is demonstrated in two case studies in particular. FL-NL

programme area is an amalgamation of two areas Scheldemond, Benelux mid area which had separate cooperation programmes in 2000 – 2006 period and prior to that. Although partnerships do extent beyond the borders of these 'historic' programmes, cooperation partnerships tend to take place within the historic programme areas. A similar situation is apparent in the CBP. As mentioned this programme also consists of two former independent programmes which have been maintained as sub programmes (Southern Finland – Estonia sub-programme and Archipelago and Islands sub-programme). Project generation and partnership creation in these sub programmes has been running smoothly whereas the overarching programme which aims to establish partnerships that span both historic programmes found it more difficult to generate projects.

Despite the fact that improvements have been made in the measurements of results, most programmes continue to report specific limitations with respect to their indicator systems. Indicators are generally perceived to be of limited value, particularly with respect to measuring tangible outcomes. Some of the key concerns are that:

- projects rarely meet their initial assessment criteria;
- most partners want to focus on local activities and the transnational dimension is not seen as a priority;
- measurability can vary across themes;
- indicators are difficult to interpret; and
- indicators do not measure long-term outcomes of the programme (e.g. policy influence).

Some programmes have adopted specific approaches to try to overcome these challenges. Programmes may have worked to refine their monitoring systems to ensure that the both the tangible and intangible outcomes can be more accurately captured. For instance, in the FL-NL programme, all projects have to develop their own indicators as well as complying with the programme's general set of indicators. The project-specific indicators have been able to assess project progress and capture tangible results where these are delivered. The downside is that these project-specific indicators do not provide a programme-wide overview and cannot be measured at any aggregate level.

1.7 Conclusions

This paper provides a model that provides a framework for exploring maturity of cooperation between regions, in ETC programmes and in partnerships. Key factors in determining the maturity of cooperation activities are: the motivation, scale, intensity, type of beneficiaries that participate, governance structures that are in place themes that are being addressed. Ultimately the maturity of cooperation activities is an important consideration in terms of the results and impact of a programme and how this can be measured.

The model should not be interpreted as a classification scheme but more as a heuristic conceptual tool to analyse cooperation efforts between regions, in programmes or project partnerships. The model identifies several important considerations for understanding maturation in ETC. First, maturation does not take place at equal speeds; endogenous factors impact the speed of the process.

The characteristics of each stage can be regarded as independent dimensions. This means that a region, programme or project can be in different stages for different characteristics.

A second consideration is that ETC activities are conducted by a diverse range of partners. These include experienced and less experienced partners. In fact, most programmes are continuously attempting to refresh their partnerships by engaging and animating new organisations in their area. However, the increase focussed on tangible outputs and results make the threshold for participation of new partners higher. It is not realistic to expect that these new partners would be able to deliver the same outputs and results as experienced partners. An indicator system that discriminates between different types of partners and projects and allows for the inclusion of inexperienced partners would greatly benefit the evaluation of ETC. It also means that ETC programmes should continue to use a mix of softer and harder project indicators depending on the specific nature of territorial cooperation activity. Whilst the current emphasise on a more quantitative approach is understandable in terms of providing hard evidence of Cohesion policy and ETC, the undesirable side-effects should not be underestimated.

In relation to the empirical part of this paper which represents a preliminary explorative analysis of the application of the model, some tentative conclusions are merited. The framework suggests that the need for external resources is initially high but as territorial cooperation becomes more embedded and added value is recognised by a broad range of domestic (senior) staff, more domestic resources can be attached to activities. Although availability of external funding resources remain important in more matured programmes, such funds are particularly important for regions in which cooperation is considered less developed and a greater proportion of the funding is provided by EU institutions.

Second, ETC programmes remain heavily dominated by public bodies but efforts are made for private and third sector participation. It is difficult to attribute third and private sector participation to any maturation stage because legislation and state aid rules have a major impact. However, there does seem to be some evidence that more matured programmes are more successful and more open to include a broader range of partners. Third, ETC governance structures are formalised and institutionalised with dedicated staff but truly joint approaches are rare. EGTC legislation may have some potential to address this but it remains to be seen whether ETC programmes will adopt these structures. Fourth, ETC programmes that are well-established tend to have objectives that involve complex, strategic, and potentially controversial issues rather than what can be described as 'easy' and local projects in domains such as tourism and culture.

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