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TRANSNATIONAL CO-OPERATION – FROM VISION TO FRAMEWORK

Abstract: Transnational Co-operation – from Vision to Framework. The vision formulated in the document VASAB 2010 is a good example of lexicon definition, making the unusual experience. The article presents two example of using such frames of acting in the sphere of spatial planning. One of them is a Swedish general plan with obligative and facultative elements in discussion between different environments and groups of interests connected with the development of the region. The first one is obligated to create commune's plan in every election cadence. Second one should prepare the informal notations, letting any changes be done. The process of coming from vision to framework in transnational co-operation gives a possibility of widening the knowledge of different aspects in spatial planning, co-operation as exchange of professional experiences, tools and research methods, and also solving common development problems.

1. European Spatial Development Perspective – a paper tiger?

Klaus Kunzmann called an early version of the European Spatial Development Perspective extremely naive (Kunzmann 1998). In his view it reinvents a top-down approach to influence spatial development across the whole European territory and points out that such an approach will not find necessary political support. It is very easy to criticize such a document, pointing out contradictions and lack of commitment. Nevertheless, Kunzmann welcomed the initiative of a comprehensive document concerning the spatial organization of Europe. The document should be used as a base for further discussion. What is needed is a more ambitious and visionary document for spatial perspectives of the European union, a document which can guide a process and mobilize commitment, not

one which controls development and the assignment of EU grants and allocations from national budgets.

As Williams (1996) points out, the potential regional effects of the EMU and a continued enlargement of the EU are additional arguments for upholding the coordinating function of the ESDP. But considering the large number of policy aims and options of the ESDP, many of which seems quite unsuitable for large, transnational planning efforts, it is also easy to agree with Kunzmann in his view that the implementation strategy of the ESDP in its present form seems unnecessarily detailed, unrealistic and out-dated. For example, vertical and horizontal coordination of efforts to remodel, „in a creative way, coherent groups of buildings situated in towns and cities undergoing degradation of their urban landscape“ do not seem meaningful goals for European planning at the end of the 20th century.

The Nordic countries, although usually pragmatic, also seem to think that there is need of a vision of transnational cooperation and have managed to produce, in working with other states around the Baltic Sea, *Visions and Strategies around the Baltic Sea (VASAB 2010)*, with a declaration on sustainable spatial development of this region. The comprehensive, integrated map, illustrating the vision, shows a dense, multimodal transportation network surrounding and criss-crossing the Baltic Sea, indicates coastal planning zones, wetlands and other protected areas. But more important, just as Kunzmann suggested, is the firm political commitment documented at the highest level of all the participating countries to the strategies for common action.

It seems that transnational cooperation around the Baltic has started to take steps from formulating a *vision* to building a *framework*.

2. Visions and frameworks

What is *vision* according to the dictionary? Two examples – „something seen in a dream, trance or ecstasy“ and „unusual discernment or foresight“. To be honest there are things happening around the Baltic, which would rather give you nightmares than making you ecstatic – risk of nuclear disasters in the region, radioactive and industrial pollution, lack of environmentally adapted infrastructure, increasing volumes of polluting car and truck traffic and so on.

But on the other hand the very initiative some years ago is a good example of vision in the second sense – unusual discernment or foresight. Something must be done – we'd better get started.

What is a *framework*, according to the dictionary? Two examples again: „a skeletal, openwork, or structural frame“ and „a basic conceptual structure“

One is led to think of something strong and long-lasting, a fixed structure firmly put together. But the point is, it is only fixed at certain points, at the joints, which must be very strong, but leaving a lot of room between the columns and beams.

After the VASAB agreement, several projects of transnational cooperation have been implemented under the various Interreg financing programs. Many of the projects have concerned either transnational transportation links or urban networks between cities in different countries with similar planning problems.

The two large groups of projects nicely illustrate important functions of the ESDP, being a platform both for coordinating transnational infrastructure investments and stimulating mutual learning and voluntary cooperation. These functions of the ESDP are particularly relevant for the Nordic regions. They are sparsely populated and characterized by few large cities and a great number of relatively small but viable towns and communities which serve as local service centres for the surrounding rural areas. These local authorities have a great degree of autonomy, particularly concerning land-use planning. They are also financing a substantial part of their own technical and social infrastructure with local taxes.

When the ESDP introduces the large-scale transeuropean transportation networks, the well-known „tunnel“ and „pump effects“ of these structures provide a strong incentive for the small but autonomous local authorities in the Nordic countries to develop their own networks of information exchange and cooperation. But scarce resources of some countries around the Baltic and high standards for environmental protection also underline the need for transnational coordination of large infrastructure investments as such.

One could ask: if it is already in your interest to learn and cooperate, why do you need a fixed framework? There is a point, however, in having both a framework and voluntariness. One could refer here to Healey's book (1997), where she argues for the importance of the *soft* infrastructure of relation building as well as the *hard* infrastructure of institutional design. The duality is illustrated by the different arguments, somewhat contradictory, for transnational planning projects competing for Interreg funds. Some project initiators argue that the funds are necessary to build a network and implement the projects, others that they have cooperated long before the funds were being

made available, which shows the relevance and eligibility of their projects!

3. The Swedish structure plan

In the Swedish planning system, there is, in fact, an interesting example of this interaction between formal frameworks and informal networks. In the planning law enacted in 1987 a new planning instrument, the comprehensive *structure plan*, was introduced. It is mandatory for each local authority to work out a comprehensive, cross-sectorial land-use plan, covering the whole territory and making clear all the public interests to be considered in detailed planning. The plan should indicate the land-use intentions of the local authority for the total territory. Even if you don't plan to develop an area you must say so, as well as indicate possible and suitable areas for housing, industry *etc.*

The structure plan is interesting in its combination of compulsory and optional features. It is compulsory in the sense that every Swedish municipality must draw up a structure plan. The plan must be updated every fourth year, corresponding to the election period. Every new local government must confirm and express its land-use intentions for the municipal territory. This is the *framework*. The freedom and the space for *visions*, is represented by the fact that nothing in the plan is legally binding. The local authority is free to change its mind about the suitable land-use at any time. It is not a part of a hierarchic, rigid system as in other countries, where all local plans must conform to the structure plan, and it's very difficult to change it.

The Swedish structure plan is intended as a statement in an open dialogue between different actors, public and private, local and central, who all must cooperate to make something actually happen on the ground. This at least, is how the plan was intended to work. To be honest, in practice this is not always the case. In planning and building, some actors often find it in their interest not to reveal their intentions, even if they do not feel bound by them. Planning is also strategy, negotiation, a political and economical power-game. We must probably accept that. The point is that the plan in its design could well serve in what planning theorists and political scientists call *deliberative democracy* (Buchstein 1997; Forester 1999) where actors come together with different agendas and interests, with different types of knowledge and competence, but also with a certain amount of trust. What you are entering is not a zero-sum game,

where one actor's gain is another one's loss, but an attempt to find new solutions to shared problems, which will benefit everyone.

Probably there are many useful ways to support such processes, which in their turn could take many forms – a fruitful field for academic research. Visions, frameworks, financial support of transnational cooperation all seem to help planners learn to speak with each other and make sense together, whether it will be in Euro-English or some other, regional *lingua franca*. In that dialogue one hopes that a clearer vision will emerge concerning the planning issues which really need transnational coordination and which are better left alone to voluntary networks.

4. Two examples of transnational cooperation

To conclude, two examples will be presented of what one can do with a framework in this sense – an obligation or incentive to do something useful, together with the freedom to choose what it will be.

4.1. The Baltic Manual – a Polish-Swedish handbook, presenting planning instruments and concepts

In this project, managed by Nordregio, Stockholm, one could learn how different planning systems can be, at least at the first look. The general principles behind public spatial planning may be more similar in different countries. But there are many examples of how misleading it could be just to translate superficially similar concepts. One must take the time to understand the whole system and learn how different planning instruments complement each other in a national planning system. A handbook is a good start, but should be complemented by transnational conferences and working groups.

The second example is an InterregIIIB project around the Baltic.

4.2. Water environmental towns as engines for regional development

Participants are a number of municipalities around the Baltic: Växjö in Sweden, Jyväskylä and Vaasa in Finland, Schwerin in Germany and Kaunas in Lithuania.

The overall objective of the project was to strengthen the attractiveness and potential of small and medium sized cities to serve as engines for regional development by developing a joint planning method (JPM) for

spatial development of waterfronts. The method would involve citizens, NGO:s, universities and other stakeholders. The idea was to bring various actors, all with diverse aims and organizational cultures together and involve them in a common learning process. The project has a holistic approach addressing four different aspects of water related spatial planning:

- Water Quality,
- Nature and Recreation,
- Tourism and Marketing,
- Managing conflicts in spatial planning.

The planning method takes its basis in the deliberative perspective that was presented earlier, analyzing the Swedish structure plan. Realising that there are conflicts in planning, the best thing is to be open about it – come together in an atmosphere of trust, try to see whether there are solutions, which are acceptable and could benefit most interests involved.

To conclude one could say that going from *vision* to *framework* would involve three levels:

1. Getting to know each other, learning from each other, how do we look at spatial planning and its possibilities? A handbook, helping us to talk to each other and understand our planning systems and planning terms is one step forward at this level.
2. Cooperation in the form of exchanging professional experiences, working methods, planning instruments, guidelines and recommendations. Being members of the EU gives us a fundamental framework for doing this. And the Water Town project is an example of what this could involve.
3. Joint projects where transnational teams work together to manage common problems.

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