

Project n°: PIEF-GA-2009-254649  
Project Acronym: EUP-Med  
Project Full Name: *Transboundary territorial cooperation, policy learning  
and the Europeanization of urban and spatial planning policies  
in the Mediterranean area*

## **PUBLISHABLE SUMMARY**

### **BACKGROUND and RATIONALE:**

This project aimed to investigate the process of *transboundary policy learning* in European territorial cooperation projects with a particular focus on Southern Europe. *Policy learning* refers to the deliberate attempt made by a public institution ‘to adjust the goals and techniques of policy in response to past experience and new information’ (Hall, 1993, p. 278). *Transboundary (territorial) cooperation* refers to cooperation across national borders between sub-central governmental actors (e.g. cities and regions) at various scales. This includes the European Territorial Cooperation (ETC) objective of EU Cohesion Policy in the period 2007-2013 (i.e. the 3 strands of INTERREG – cross-border, transnational and inter-regional – and the URBACT programme), as well as inter-city networks (e.g. *Eurocities*) or cooperation structures (e.g. Euroregions) which may have developed independently from EU-funded programmes.

A commonly held assumption within the EU policy community and among academic researchers is that transboundary cooperation facilitates the dissemination of ‘good practice’ and leads to policy transfer and/or policy change within the organisations involved in cooperation. Tracing a causal link between transboundary cooperation and policy change is, however, a very challenging task. Existing evaluation methods used for ETC programmes are not very suitable to grasp the qualitative, micro-dynamics of the cooperation and learning processes at play within cooperation projects and networks. The starting point of the project is thus that we need to focus on, and understand, the *learning processes* that take place (or not) within transboundary cooperation projects and networks in order to analyse whether and how such processes may lead to policy change in the organisations involved.

### **OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH DESIGN and METHODS:**

The project aimed to address the following four questions:

- What types of learning are at play in transboundary cooperation projects and networks?
- Which factors hinder or facilitate the transition from *individual* to *intra-* and *inter-organisational learning*, and subsequently to *social/policy learning*?
- Do such learning processes lead to identifiable examples of ‘policy mobilities’ and policy change in the organisations involved?
- Can we, on that basis, talk about a form of ‘Europeanization’ of territorial, spatial and urban planning policies in the (South-Western) Mediterranean area through transboundary cooperation?

Through two sets of case studies, the project analysed:

- (i) how learning happens horizontally within a sample of similar types of transnational cooperation projects from the INTERREG IV programmes MED (covering 35 Mediterranean coastal regions from 13 states) and SUDOE (covering 30 South-Western European regions in 4 states);
- (ii) how learning happens within a sample of public actors from one particular region, Catalonia, which participated in different types of transboundary cooperation projects and networks (e.g. Generalitat de Catalunya, Diputació de Barcelona, and a sample of large and medium-sized municipalities).

Understanding and analysing transboundary learning processes is only possible through qualitative methods which engage closely with individual actors. The methods used included semi-structured interviews with technical officers, civil servants and politicians to gain in-depth knowledge of the learning processes within and between institutions; an online survey of a sample of INTERREG

project partners to investigate the mechanisms of cooperation and learning, as well as trace potential evidence of policy change; documentary analysis of relevant project documents (e.g. activity reports, minutes of meetings); and whenever possible, participant observation of transnational cooperation events.

The project was multidisciplinary and built upon political science and public policy (policy transfer studies, Europeanization studies); qualitative and constructivist evaluation approaches; organizational sociology and the sociology of innovation and diffusion; planning studies (the circulation of planning ideas, European spatial planning) and urban geography (policy mobilities).

### **PRELIMINARY RESULTS and FINDINGS:**

At a conceptual level, the project contributed to develop an understanding of the different, mutually-related types of learning at play within transboundary cooperation networks and projects: individual learning by the professional staff involved in transboundary cooperation; intra-organisational learning; inter-organisational learning; social or policy learning. Two broad types of transboundary learning were identified: i) when actors learn *from* other actors located in another country who possess expertise or know-how in a given field; ii) when actors learn *with* other actors located in another country by pooling expertise, know-how and resources to address specific issues at a new transboundary scale

Some of the key variables influencing transboundary (inter-organisational) learning between partner organisations seem to be the type of issues dealt with and the geography of the partnership, the rationale/primary motivation of the partners (e.g. an explicit search for learning or a purely instrumental view of ETC as a financing mechanism), the micro-dynamics of cooperation (in particular the presence of reflexive ‘learning agents’ and facilitating mechanisms). Some of the key variables influencing intra-organisational and social/policy learning within partner organizations are the pre-existing agenda and desire for policy change or innovation, the ‘institutional memory’ and staff continuity, the inter-departmental fragmentation or coordination, the linkages and degree of trust between technical and political staff.

(Transboundary) sharing of experiences does *not* necessarily lead to intra-organisational learning, which itself does *not* necessarily lead to policy change within partner organizations. There is limited, but some evidence of transboundary policy learning of the first type as identified above (e.g. the Catalan urban regeneration law of 2004, *Llei de Barris*). There are only few examples of transboundary learning of the second type. Participation in transboundary cooperation is one (often small) factor influencing policy learning and change, and is not easy to disentangle from other factors. The shift from individual to (intra-)organisational and policy learning remains a problematic issue, due to the limited involvement in cooperation projects by senior officials or politicians, and to the dramatic impact of recent cuts in public funding in Southern Europe.

In theoretical terms, the project has sought to contribute to bridge the gap between micro-analyses of the dynamics of transboundary cooperation and macro-scale theoretical debates on ‘Europeanization’ and policy change in EU regions and cities. The project has shown some evidence of ‘horizontal’ or ‘cognitive Europeanization’, but no harmonization or convergence of local policies in the fields under study. Whilst specific policy concepts like ‘sustainability’ or ‘integrated urban regeneration’ may circulate widely thanks to transboundary cooperation networks and projects, they remain flexibly reinterpreted by local actors according to local/regional needs and political priorities.

### **POLICY RELEVANCE OF THE PROJECT:**

The project’s final results, which will be communicated to relevant stakeholders, will contribute to the debates on the future of EU Cohesion Policy post-2013 and on the added-value of European Territorial Cooperation therein, by helping us to better understand the learning processes between stakeholders involved in such cooperation and the likely impacts on local and regional policies and practices. This can help to improve the technical assistance, facilitation mechanisms and evaluation frameworks which are being put in place for the future generation of ETC programmes.