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Evaluating the Application of the European Spatial Development Perspective in the United Kingdom: Methodological Considerations and Emerging Trends

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Abstract

In May 1999 the EU Ministers of Spatial Planning meeting at Potsdam, Germany, agreed on the final version of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) to guide spatially significant public policy making at all spatial scales from the Community level, to the regional/local level. A non-binding and indicative rather than prescriptive, document, the ESDP seeks to guide institutions in the exercise of existing competences, which influence spatial development and its application is to be achieved through voluntary co-operation based on the principle of subsidiarity. The ESDP Action Plan agreed at Tampere in October 1999 sought the promotion of a spatial dimension in Community and national policies, and the integration of ESDP policy orientations into national spatial planning. Informed by this context, the focus of this paper is the application of the principles of 'Europeanisation' and 'spatialisation' to Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) documents in the UK. Consideration will be given to how the influence of the emerging European spatial development policy agenda on the performance of strategic regional planning in the United Kingdom can be evaluated and the extent to which

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the ESDP and the wider European context for planning are being used to inform and shape the development of RPG for the English regions.

1.0   Introduction

The final version of the ESDP was agreed by the Meeting of European Ministers Responsible for Spatial Planning at Potsdam in June 1999 as a non-binding and indicative framework to guide institutions at all spatial levels in the exercise of their spatially significant competences. The application of the ESDP is to be achieved through voluntary co-operation based on the principle of subsidiarity.   The ESDP Action Plan agreed at Tampere in October 1999 sought the promotion of a spatial dimension in Community and national policies, including the integration of ESDP policy orientations into national spatial planning.   This call for a Europeanisation and spatialisation of planning policy is echoed in England by national policy on regional planning - 'Planning Policy Guidance Note 11' (PPG 11) (DETR, 2000a) which makes clear that Europe and the ESDP are important contexts for the preparation of Regional Planning Guidance Notes (RPG), which should be taken into account when developing regional spatial strategies and policies.

2.0   The evolving European spatial development policy agenda

Since its inception during the Belgian Presidency of the European Union in 1993 the European Spatial Development Perspective has been the focus of extensive debate and activity among academics and practitioners both within and outside the field of planning. Attention has been paid to both the political / procedural aspects of the ESDP process and the political / substantive questions involved (see Giannakourou 1996; Jorgensen 1998; Rusca 1998; Nadin 1999; Nadin & Shaw 1999; Davoudi 1998; Faludi 2000; Faludi, A., Zonneveld. W., & Waterhout, B. 2000; Williams 2000; Faludi 2001; Faludi & Waterhout 2002).   Andreas Faludi has outlined how the aspirations and 'political opportunity structures' of planning agencies in particular Member States, national interests, the concerns of regions in Federal States, and key individuals interacted to give the ESDP its particular form and content (2000a).

In the absence of a formal treaty competence for spatial planning the process was not steered by the Commission as is customary in other policy areas. This in part reflected the 'endemic struggle' (Faludi 2000b: 245) between the member states and the commission in terms of the distribution of power and competences between different levels of governance. For Faludi, 'Inevitably, therefore, the high politics of integration forms the shifting context of any attempt at developing supranational spatial policy' (2000b: 246). Reflecting this the whole issue of the place of spatial policy and planning within the European polity has generated debates about competences, regionalism and power shifts between governance levels in Europe. In particular there has been sustained debate in relation to the competence of the EU in matters of spatial planning (Nadin 2000b; Eser & Konstadakopulos 2000) and more recently in relation to the way in which discourses of European spatial planning are *de facto* already influencing the terms of reference for, and the practice of, planning in Europe (Jensen & Richardson, 2001). To an extent such perspectives can be seen to reflect traditional 'spill-over' views of the process of European integration and the process of so-called 'creeping competence' already observed in fields such as Environmental and Regional policy (Nadin 2000a; Eser & Konstadakopulos, 2000). Many authors citing Weiler's typology of the three modes of European governance 'international', 'supranational' and 'infranational' (Weiler 1999: 270-285) have seen the ESDP process and the role of the informal Committee on Spatial Development (CSD) within it, as a classic example of the infranational approach whereby committees of experts develop policy beyond the established structures of political accountability with low actor visibility (Jensen & Richardson 2000; R.H. Williams 2000). Jensen and Richardson (2000) argue that the process of developing a European spatial planning framework is 'implicitly normative and ideological - about politics and power as much as about rational policy-making' (2000: 506) and that there is a need for critical observation of the emerging field of European spatial development policy in order to expose hegemonic trends within its discourse, epistemic bases and policy prescriptions (2000: 517).

The perspective one takes on the competency issue is clearly linked to the observer's conception of the role of spatial planning and the extent to which it is concerned with land use

regulation or with strategic framing of public policy decisions. For Faludi and Waterhout (2002: xi) spatial planning is about strategy and not simply land use regulation therefore competency becomes a non-issue. Essentially, the policies of the Community already exert a considerable spatial influence, so the ESDP and spatial planning agenda are essentially about recognising this and attempting to iron out incongruities, rather than setting up a competence.

It is also arguable that the traditional 'spill-over' view of integration is not an appropriate model in the case of spatial planning in view of current attitudes towards further European integration and the inherent characteristics of spatial planning. Most planning occurs at the local and regional levels and it is perhaps now less easy to envisage an explicit Community competence for spatial planning, particularly in view of the recent European Governance White Paper (EGWP) (CEC, 2001a) & Laekken Declaration (December 2001) which in considering the wider question of European governance postulate more decentralised governance and a re-distribution of functions between governance levels. In terms of action within the Treaties a key aim of the EGWP is to, 'bring greater flexibility into how Community legislation can be implemented in a way which takes account of regional and local conditions' (EGWP, p.4). The EGWP also states that the Union should assess whether action is needed and whether such action should be at the level of the Union and there is also an undertaking to promote 'greater use of different policy tools (regulations, "framework directives", co-regulatory mechanisms) (EGWP: 5). It is possible therefore that European policy may in future more closely resemble the 'framework -application' model represented by the ESDP than prescriptive legislation.

Interestingly, it is arguably possible to draw parallels between potential moves towards a 'soft-policy' model in the European context and the 'strategic' conception of spatial planning which views strategic plans as frameworks forming the minds of policy makers as opposed to 'masterplans' more firmly rooted in the legal regulation of land use. In this conception a strategic plan is viewed as an instrument of communication, which frames decision situations, rather than as a tool of prescription (see for example Faludi 2000). The ESDP is essentially such a framework, which in its own words should be taken into account in national planning systems by Member States 'in the way they see fit' (CEC, 1999: 44). The Commission itself

has already 'seen fit' to have regard to the ESDP in both the 2nd. Cohesion Report (CEC 2001b) and the European Governance White Paper (CEC 2001a: 13). Therefore, whilst it is possible to ask whether the EU has, or will acquire a strict competence for spatial planning, this is perhaps not the most pertinent research question. Current developments point to a continued 'informal' application of the ESDP rather than a further 'legalistic' institutionalisation of spatial planning within the Community. In this context it is more fruitful try and gauge the influence that the ESDP is having despite its non-binding status. For Richardson and Jensen 'the relations between the emerging EU spatial discourse and those of particular member states, regions and cities need closer analysis' (2000: 517).

3.0   Investigating the application of the ESDP in the UK

Since 1997 there have been significant changes in the policy and institutional structures within which planning operates within the UK. Political devolution to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the emergence of a 'new regionalism' in the English regions with moves towards a more bottom-up approach to regional institutionalism and policy making are of particular significance. The regional scale is of importance in investigating the application of the ESDP, as in the absence of a National Spatial Planning Framework for the UK this is the level of spatial planning at which the ESDP will principally be operationalised. The RTPI and others have investigated the issue of the need for a United Kingdom spatial planning framework but such initiatives are still at an early stage (Wong et. al. 2000). Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are pursuing their own approaches to the reform of strategic planning, with a National Spatial Planning Framework currently being prepared for Wales (ECOTEC & Cardiff University, 2000) and a recently completed Spatial Strategy for Northern Ireland. The relationship of such strategies to statutory land use planning as traditionally legislated for and practiced in the UK raises interesting questions about the institutionalisation of the 'spatial planning/development' approach represented by the ESDP. In England, Planning Policy Guidance Note 11 - Regional Planning (PPG 11) (DETR, 2000a), makes clear that Europe and the ESDP provide important contexts for the preparation of Regional Planning Guidance Notes (RPG), which should be taken into account when developing regional spatial strategies and policies, however, there are issues as to how far the RPG in itself can fully deliver the

spatial planning agenda of the ESDP and whether the spatial planning approach at the regional level needs to encompass the whole suite of regional policy documents including the Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Sustainable Development Framework. The Planning Green Paper (DTLR, 2001a) proposes replacing RPGs with Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) with an ostensibly wider spatial remit but the true import of this proposal has yet to be established. In this paper we shall focus on the current round of RPG reviews in the English regions, as the national planning policy context explicitly requires this spatial level and planning instrument to respond to the European spatial policy agenda.

4.0   A Methodological Approach

In investigating the application of the ESDP through the regional planning process in England the research approach accepts the proposition that strategic documents such as the ESDP are 'applied' rather than 'implemented', as it is only through the agency of others that they can exert an influence (Faludi 2001: 664). As discussed in 2.0 above, in this perspective strategic documents aim at 'shaping the minds of actors involved in spatial development' (Faludi 2001). This reflects the decision-centred view of planning which sees strategic level plans as instruments of decision making rather than blue prints of the intended end-state of an object (see Faludi 2001; 2000: 299-316; also Mastop 1997, van der Valk 1989). The idea is that the application of a strategic planning document involves the shaping of the minds of actors in the spatial development process rather than spatial development itself. Such an approach clearly appropriate in the case of the ESDP as an indicative framework of spatial policy options and guidelines rather than a spatially prescriptive 'masterplan' for the development of the territory of the EU (Healy, 1999).

The Dutch performance school of strategic plan evaluation makes a distinction between 'conformance' and 'performance' and sees the latter as more relevant to the case of strategic spatial plans. The issue of relevance is seen as being the key in terms of the evaluation of strategic spatial planning documents. The idea is that a plan is being applied where it forms part of the decision maker's decision-making process and that the units of analysis in such an approach to evaluation are the messages contained in a plan. Faludi (2001: 665) specifies two

conditions which must be satisfied for a strategic plan to be effective, that the relevant actors know the plan, and that 'they accept messages in the plan as part of their definitions of the decision situations'. To evaluate the application of a plan the researcher needs to identify the addressees of the plan and then see how their decisions relate to the plan and its messages. Even if such choices do not conform to the policies of the plan, it is still possible that its policies have played a 'useful role during the deliberations' (Faludi, 2001). Similarly, decision makers may take on board a message of a plan, but modify it so as to be more appropriate to the circumstances they find themselves in. This has been termed 'generative capacity' by Faludi. For Faludi there are four key situations in which the messages of the ESDP may be said to be being 'applied' (Fig. 1):

Figure 1: **ESDP messages – application situations**

(1) where the decisions of addressees conform;

(2) where their decisions depart from, but addresses nevertheless take account of ESDP messages;

(3) where ESDP messages are being invoked in situations unforseen by its makers;

(4) where the ESDP is being elaborated, thus demonstrating generative capacity.

(A. Faludi 2001)

In adopting the performance-evaluative approach, in investigating the influence of the ESDP, there was a need to get beyond a textual-analysis and scrutinize the decision-making process more closely. A methodology based only on a textual analytical approach may fail to distinguish between use of ESDP discourse as simply 'window dressing', and where the ESDP messages have been more profoundly understood and influential. This is a particularly in the English context given that PPG 11 requires that RPBs have regard to the ESDP in the preparation of RPGs. One would therefore expect to find reference to the ESDP within the documentation, and simply looking for references to the messages of the ESDP or the adoption of its spatial planning discourse and terminology would not necessarily shed much light on the role it had played in the performance of regional planning. Indeed, as the research progressed it became apparent that ostensibly similar use of ESDP language in different RPG documents masked markedly different understandings of, and commitment to, the ESDP and

its policy guidelines. Similarly, as the ESDP principles are very widely drawn consistency is easy to infer through a 'checklist/conformance' approach is not always very revealing. Structured interviews with regional players were therefore a key feature of the research design, and helped to ascertain the plan makers' views and interpretations of the ESDP's spatial development principles and planning approach.

Figure 2:   From conformance to performance

The research design reflected the considerations above and consisted of three components (see Fig. 2), 1 - a review of RPG documentation 2 - interviews with key players involved in the regional plan-making process, and 3- case studies of three regions at different stages in the process of preparing RPG. The desk-based review of RPG documents using a pro-forma provided an initial test of 'conformance' and helped to highlight the 'messages' of the ESDP, which had been adopted by the plan makers and to focus the subsequent interviews that sought to establish the understanding and use made of these messages. The regional player survey and case studies enabled a more thorough evaluation of the extent to which the ESDP had been a factor shaping emerging RPGs. The case studies of the North West, West Midlands and East Midlands sought to identify factors that had influenced the way that the European agenda had informed the RPG process and were based on key player interviews and a wide range of documentation including background papers and submissions to the Examination in Public (EIP) of the RPGs. The findings of the case studies are integrated into

the wider discussion of the application of the ESDP to RPG, as they tended to provide further evidence in support of trends observed from the general research.

5.0   The treatment of the ESDP and the European context for planning in emerging regional planning documents in England

All the RPG documents reviewed considered aspects of the European context for the region, although the extent to which the general European spatial and policy contexts were recognised varied considerably. In general the way that such contexts had informed the strategy and particular policies was poorly articulated and explained. Similarly, although references were made to the ESDP in all the RPG documents postdating the adoption of the final ESDP document in 1999 often the discussion amounted to little more than acknowledging the existence of the ESDP and listing some of the key policy principles. However, some regions including the South East, East Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber, presented a fuller consideration of European contexts. In general it seems that where there are clear sectoral linkages, such as in relation to Structural Funds, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, Trans-European Transport networks, and other EU legislation and programmes (e.g. Special Protection Areas), the connections to RPG policies are made explicit. Broadly speaking there also appeared to be consistency between the priorities established for spatial development, including regeneration priority areas and the availability of EU funding.

The spatial planning approach advocated by the ESDP places emphasis on the need for vertical and horizontal cooperation in spatial development policy-making (CSD 1999: 36). Consideration was therefore also given to extent to which there was evidence of horizontal and vertical co-operation within the region and with agencies and areas that are outside it, particularly where there are significant cross-boundary issues. In terms of the vertical integration of policy in national and regional space the review suggested that there is good vertical integration and that the RPGs have been prepared with regard to variety of national, regional and local legislation, policy guidance and strategies including, Planning Policy Guidance Notes, development plans, local transport plans, Single Programming Documents, sub-regional strategies, Local Agenda 21 strategies, and urban design frameworks. In terms

of horizontal co-ordination within the region, the review sought to identify evidence of inter-agency collaboration, and of consistency between RPG and other key regional strategies. There was evidence of consensus building within regions with numerous references to regional partners and other regional strategies and agencies. All the documents referred to the relevant RDA for the region and make links to the RES. However, links to Regional Sustainable Development Frameworks (RSDF) were generally less clear in the documentation reviewed, with some exceptions. Overall however, it appeared that horizontal collaboration between RPBs, RDAs and GOs had occurred across the regions during the preparation of RPGs. In terms of wider regional collaboration the documentation also contained references to a range of other sectoral agencies that have been consulted, and will need to play a role in delivering RPG objectives. In terms of cross-border horizontal links, all the documents reviewed contained some reference to cross-border issues in national and or transnational space, usually in the sections that set out the regional context. Examples of cross-border issues identified in RPGs included, transport (including TETNs), waste management, water strategies, minerals planning, functional sub-regions with a cross-boundary dimension, and in some limited cases transnational relationships. However, there was variety in the extent to which such issues were considered and developed. Despite this there was evidence in a number of RPGs that the issue of cross-boundary relationships had been a consideration in the process of developing RPG and there were references to a variety of mechanisms to address cross-border issues notably cross border sub-regional studies and interregional multi-modal studies. A number of RPG documents also included commitments to take forward cross-boundary working in their sections on implementation. Certain RPGs also adopt sub-regional 'packaging' within their strategies to address intra-regional cross-boundary issues.

Consideration was also given to the extent to which the ESDP spatial policy guidelines, aims and options of the ESDP have been applied to the RPG documents. In general, there is a high level of consistency between the spatial development principles of the ESDP and the strategies and policies of the RPGs. This is the case even where the consistency with the ESDP is not made explicit by a direct reference to the ESDP. The majority of the documents referred to one or more of the ESDP spatial development guidelines as having relevance for the region, but the extent to which the implications of these were developed and used to inform the

strategies and policies of RPG varied. Most regions appear to have picked out the elements of the ESDP, which were felt to be most relevant to their region and sought to demonstrate how the approach that has been adopted reflects these. However, it is not clear from the documents whether the ESDP has actually actively informed the development of the strategies, or if it there has been a process of post-rationalisation, mapping the RPG objectives back onto the ESDP principles. By contrast there are a number of regions where it seems that the ESDP has had a more profound effect on the overall approach adopted. In the South West, East Midlands and the West Midlands it seems that the ESDP ideas are perhaps being more imaginatively used in structuring the approach to developing RPG. The South West RPG has adopted a polycentric approach based on the functions of different settlements, rather than on a demographic hierarchy. Particular attention is paid to the relationships between the Principal Urban Areas (PUAs) and Significant Settlements and their sub-regional hinterlands. A key principle for the future development of the region is the development of an integrated approach to urban and rural areas. In the Proposed Changes Draft of RPG for the East Midlands an explicit link is made to the ESDP and its emphasis on the need for policy to take full account of urban-rural relationships and interdependencies, in justifying the sub-areas approach. Stress is placed on the importance of an understanding of how the urban and rural network of the East Midlands functions and how it could be improved. In the process of developing new RPG 11 for the West Midlands a consensus is starting to emerge that a fundamental change of policy direction is required, particularly regarding the relationship between the Major Urban Areas and the rest of the region. The Draft Spatial Strategy and Indicative Policies document 'Moving Forward' indicates that consideration has been given to the ESDP's three key principles in the development of the West Midlands strategy. Research has been commissioned into a methodology for mapping the functions of different parts of the region and developing a Polycentric Framework for the West Midlands. The Draft Spatial Strategy outlines key policy principles and 11 supporting objectives, including Objective 11, which aims to, 'Create a "joined up" multi-centred regional structure where all areas have distinct roles to play' (WMLGA, 2001, p.22).

6.0   Policymaker attitudes towards the ESDP and its role in the policy-making process

As part of the research, structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the Regional Planning Bodies (RPBs) and the regional Government Offices who in performance planning terms can be seen as the principal addressees of PPG 11 and of the ESDP. The ESDP was generally seen as a document embodying spatial development principles rather than as a document promoting a particular kind of 'spatial' planning process. In terms of the spatial policy principles and aims of ESDP, there was a general feeling that even though the consistency between RPG strategies and policies and the ESDP was not made explicit, there was nevertheless general consistency. A number of interviewees noted that the values of the ESDP were in many respects similar to those of the British planning system, for example, the commitment to containing urban sprawl and securing urban regeneration. Consequently it was broadly possible to map the objectives of the strategies and policies of the RPGs onto the ESDP principles, and in some regions consideration of the ESDP seems to have consisted of little more than a checklist (i.e. conformance) or badging exercise in order to satisfy the requirements of PPG 11. The degree of concurrence between the values and objectives of the ESDP and the UK planning system reflects the way that the ESDP has been developed as a dialogue between European planners, and essentially reflects the current orthodoxy in terms of policy thinking on sustainable spatial development.

In terms of the spatial planning process advocated by the ESDP, one interviewee noted that in some respects the ESDP's approach is more spatial than traditional town and country planning which reflects the dichotomy between land use and economic planning in the UK. In another region it was acknowledged that the RPG being developed was not yet truly spatial despite the broadening of its scope during the current review.   Another interviewee suggested that pragmatism had been the real motivation for pursuing a more spatial/sectoral co-ordination

approach in RPG, in terms of getting other agencies 'on-side' in order to deliver the RPG strategy.

In terms of the role of the ESDP in informing policy debate, the interviews confirmed the findings of the documentary review in suggesting that there is wide variety in the extent to which the ESDP has informed the development of different RPGs. In some regions although the RPG was broadly consistent with the policy principles of the ESDP, the ESDP had not really played a key role in informing the debate. In such regions, the ESDP was seen as an important contextual document, but much less significant than other policy documents such as PPGs, or regional documents such as the Regional Economic Strategy. In a number of cases the ESDP was described as *'another peg'* on which to hang the justification for policy responses already suggested by regional analysis and national policy guidance. However, in other regions, the ESDP is being more actively employed as a justification for policies and strategies.

An interesting point, which reinforced an idea suggested by the desk based review, was that the indigenous characteristics and spatial realities of certain regions were key factors in determining both the degree of consistency with the ESDP and its role in informing policy development. For example, in the North East the strategy for RPG had evolved from the principles that were felt to be important in the region at the time, and these were coincident with central ESDP principles. After the publication of the ESDP, a checklist appraisal had been undertaken to assess the consistency of the RPG themes with the ESDP, but the origin of the approach and strategy was firmly rooted in the region itself. In other regions the ESDP appears to have been actively used to inform policy debates rather than simply being viewed in terms of a policy checklist. In the East Midlands it was noted that the *'diverse mosaic of sub-regions fits ESDP thinking'* whilst in the South West it was suggested that the RPG was *'very much informed'* by the ESDP in terms of the polycentricity issue. In the West Midlands a consensus that there was a need for a 'clean slate' in developing a new strategy. In this context the ESDP, and particularly its promotion of polycentric and balanced

development, was perceived by certain key regional players as a useful *'tool which appeared'*, with strong potential to help inform the revision of RPG. In three regions the relevance of the ESDP's policy principle of a new urban-rural partnership and rural-urban networks was highlighted. In another case, a closer consideration of cross-boundary issues was noted as something that had been encouraged by the ESDP

Overall, it seems that in three regions - the East Midlands, South West and West Midlands, the ESDP has been one of number of key factors, which have helped to stimulate a profound re-consideration of the spatial structure of the region and the approach to developing RPG. In terms of 'messages' the concept of polycentricity seems to have been the ESDP principle most widely perceived as relevant, and in some regions it had clearly caught the imagination of key players in the RPG process as a new 'lens' through which to view functional linkages within the region. Similarly, in terms of cross-border linkages, there was an acknowledgement in number of regions that the ideas in the ESDP had occasioned a re-appraisal of RPG's approach to such issues. In two regions the ESDP's emphasis on cross border dimensions was specifically described as useful. The survey also strongly reinforced the idea that the empirical reality of a region is an important factor influencing the treatment of the European agenda and the response to the ESDP. The conditions in some regions lent themselves to a natural application of the principles of the ESDP. In essence, connections to Europe, relationships with other UK regions and internal spatial structure were reflected in the way that RPG was produced and perhaps led to a fuller consideration of the European agenda as a whole and the ESDP in particular. It seems that in some regions, the ESDP principles provided a new 'lens' through which to view the region and aided a new analysis of key spatial and thematic planning issues. In other regions, whilst the ESDP was perhaps not the origin of certain analytical and policy approaches adopted, it nevertheless served to reinforce indigenously derived conclusions and policy choices.

7.0   Applying the ESDP in the English regions

The discussions above suggest that the European context and the ESDP are beginning to be accepted as important frames of reference in the production of Regional Planning Guidance,

but that there are variations in the extent to which they are informing the development of regional planning policy in the English regions. Faludi's two conditions for a strategic planning document to be effective are firstly that the decision makers or relevant actors must know the plan, and secondly that they accept its messages as part of their decision situations (Faludi, 2001). It would appear that with respect to the application of the ESDP through the RPG process in England these conditions are now being satisfied, although the extent to which this is true for the second condition varies from region to region. Clearly the fulfilment of these conditions in part reflects the nature of the national guidance on regional planning and the significance accorded to the ESDP by national policy guidance on regional planning (PPG 11).

With respect to the four types of 'situations' where the ESDP can be 'deemed to have been applied' (see Fig. 1) there is variation across the regions. In terms of (1) - *where the decisions of addressees conform with the messages of a plan*, as has been described, all the elements of the research tend to support the proposition of vertical consistency between the RPGs and the ESDP's policy guidelines, aims and options. The wide ranging nature of these means that it is possible to infer consistency between the objectives of the documents and the principles of the ESDP even where this is not made explicit. This degree of 'conformity' is perhaps unsurprising given the way that the ESDP has been developed as an iterative process by the CSD with input from an emerging European spatial planning community of academics, civil servants and practitioners, with the result that the principles and policies of the ESDP to a large extent represent the current orthodoxy in terms of spatial planning for sustainable development. Perhaps reflecting this, it is not clear from the documents whether the ESDP has actually actively informed the development of the strategies, and whilst the majority of the documents referred to one or more of the three overarching ESDP policy guidelines as having relevance for the region, in most cases there was little development of these themes. However, there was evidence in certain regions that concepts such as polycentricity and rural-urban partnership have exerted a more profound influence on the direction, development and structure of RPG.

There was less clear evidence of the existence of situations (2) - *where decisions depart from the plan but addressees nevertheless take account of ESDP messages*, and (3) -

where ESDP messages are being invoked in situations unforeseen by its authors.
However, in respect of (3) an environmental group in one region had used the ESDP in its
representations to the public examination, and in the North West of England elements of the
ESDP have informed aspects of a non-statutory design guide being prepared for Liverpool
(Liverpool City Council, 2002). There was more evidence within the RPG process of the
existence of situation (4) - *where the ESDP is being elaborated, thus demonstrating
'generative' capacity.* This is clearly so in the case of the review of RPG for the West
Midlands where research has been commissioned on the relevance and operability of the
concept of polycentricty, and arguably also in the South West and the East Midlands where
the guidelines of polycentricity and a new urban-rural relationship have exerted an influence on
the direction and content of RPG strategies and policies.

In summary, the ESDP seems to be being used as an indicative framework of options and
ideas for spatial development from which regions are selecting the aspects, which they feel are
most relevant. There appear to be three broad approaches to this, which can perhaps be
described as 'degrees of application'. Firstly, some regions appear to regard the ESDP as a
requirement to be satisfied through a checklist or badging exercise, which maps the strategy
and policies of RPG onto the principles of the ESDP in a process of post-rationalisation.
Secondly, in other regions the ESDP seems to be regarded as a useful source of further
justification on which to 'hang' particular policy ideas, and see the document perhaps more as
a menu of interesting spatial development policy ideas of varying relevance to their regions, but
which often provide a useful lens for conceptualising planning issues and regional structure.
Thirdly, there is evidence that in perhaps three regions the ESDP has been one of a number of
key factors, which have helped to stimulate a radical re-consideration of the spatial structure of
the region and the approach to developing RPG.

8.0   Conclusion

In conclusion, it would appear that whilst there is mixed picture across the English regions, the
European context for planning and the ESDP are beginning to be accepted as important
frames of reference in the production of RPG. The key messages of the ESDP are starting to

form part of the discourse of regional planning in England and have already informed regionally specific data analysis and policy development in a number of regions. Given the emerging policy context it would be naïve at this stage for the regions to have embraced the principles of the ESDP in similar ways. It is interesting to note in this context that the ESDP does not seem to be perceived as a top-down, imposed, discourse reflecting the power rationalities of a European elite. The mostly strongly expressed view in some regions was that the ESDP actually represented nothing new. Rather in those regions where a greater 'degree of application' has occurred, the European spatial development policy discourse seems to be being picked up and moulded, often by key individuals, in an interactive process to generate endogenous policy options and change within the regions. The perceptions of the plan-makers are clearly moulding this process. Another key factor is regional distinctiveness and the indigenous characteristics and spatial realities of the region, which seem to lead to the ESDP and European context being given greater or lesser emphasis. There is however, also evidence of mutual learning between the regions in terms of the approaches, which have been adopted in responding to the European agenda and PPG 11. The checks and balances involved in the process of RPG preparation also appear to highlight where the European dimension has not adequately been taken into account. However, there is perhaps still scope to be more explicit about the links between the European context and the strategies of RPGs and to apply some of the ideas of the ESDP more constructively in those regions where consideration of the ESDP has so far consisted of a checklist/conformance exercise. In particular it would appear that concepts such as polycentricity and, particularly in the UK context, the strengthening of the urban-rural partnership, still have much to contribute to enriching the communicative process of preparing RPG and generating regionally specific policy analysis and development.

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