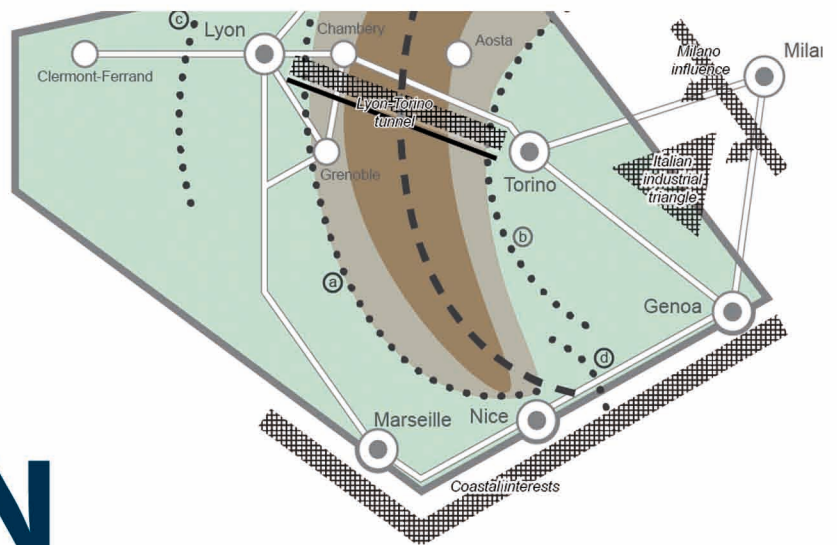**Inspire policy making by territorial evidence**
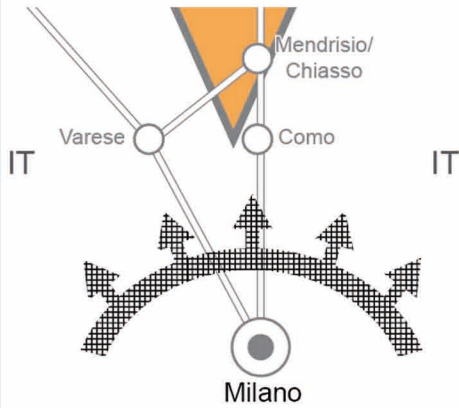
ESPON ACTAREA

Guide to developing soft territorial cooperation
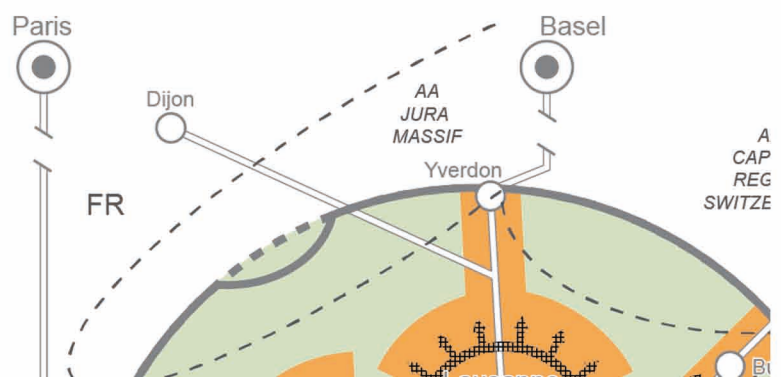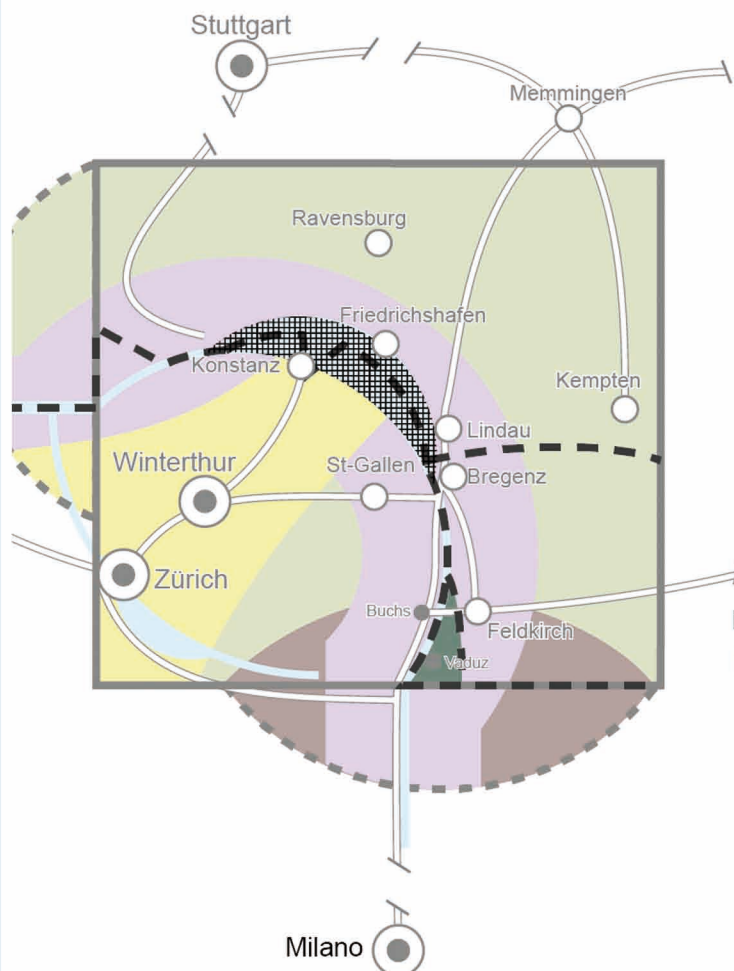
Authors
Erik Gløersen, Nathalie Wergles, Clément Corbineau Sebastian Hans, Sindi Haxhija and Lotte Hoeijmakers
Spatial Foresight (Luxembourg)
Tobias Chilla and Franziska Sielker,
Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany)
Jacques Félix Michelet and Lauranne Jacob,
University of Geneva,
Hub of Environmental Governance and Territorial Development (GEDT) (Switzerland))

© ESPON, 2017

Contact: info@espon.eu

ESPON
ACTAREA Guide to developing soft territorial cooperation

Table of contents

1 Introduction to this handbook:
Why, what and for whom?

This handbook builds on the lessons distilled from 24 case studies on soft territorial cooperation in different parts of Europe that were undertaken in the scope of the **ESPON ACTAREA project on "Thinking and planning in areas of territorial cooperation"**. Case studies focused on analysing and characterising soft territorial cooperation areas regarding

- ▶ the strategic purpose they pursue;
- ▶ approaches to region-building they take;
- ▶ organisational structures they have set up and resources they draw on;
- ▶ strategies to motivate actors to participate and overcome barriers to cooperation they have developed; and
- ▶ the policy frameworks and strategies under which they have been create.

1.1 Objectives

The objective of this handbook is to **provide concrete guidance on how soft territorial cooperation areas may be initiated, set up in practical terms and further developed**. Thus, the handbook addresses soft territorial cooperation initiatives in their different phases of development: from those that are just starting up to those that are well-established but look for ways to give their cooperation a new impetus.

The handbook also acknowledges that the adoption of soft territorial cooperation solutions by local and regional actors is highly dependent on their respective governance environment, regulatory framework and geographic context. Furthermore, each soft territorial cooperation area has its own history: some are developing from scratch, while others build on a series of previ-

ous cooperation endeavours or common history. Taking this into account, this handbook presents some general principles that are valid independent from the concrete context in which they are applied. Besides, guidance is, in principle, also independent from the level of implementation of the soft territorial cooperation (local, regional, national, transnational). However, as a result of methodological considerations, lessons learned are derived from meso-/ regional scale soft territorial cooperation areas, while metropolitan or city-region cooperation was not explicitly in the focus.

1.2 Target groups

Guidance aims to being easily accessible as well as concrete and practical, supported with concrete examples and illustrations, and targeting practitioners of territorial cooperation. Those practitioners can be found in local or regional authorities, e.g. in planning departments, in regional development agencies, and, more generally, in local and regional authorities. However, practitioners may also belong to civil society and private sector organisations that engage (or plan to engage) in territorial cooperation. Since the handbook guides soft territorial cooperation in all development phases, it addresses different roles of these practitioners (that can change with time): promoters of territorial cooperation, cooperation facilitators and cooperation partners:

- ▶ **Promoters of territorial cooperation:** Cooperation promoters are understood as individuals or organisations that take on, at least temporarily, the role of cooperation "engine" or "agenda setter", pushing a concrete cooperation idea forward or driving the concrete (further) development of the cooperation through the policy stages. Cooperation promoters

tend to be respected and influential individuals who use their powers, personal and institutional resources and networks to pursue their own political agenda. They can also be characterised as individuals who are first to identify a demand and opportunity for innovation in territorial governance when a policy window opens.

▶ **Facilitators of territorial cooperation:** The cooperation facilitator is understood as an individual who is in charge of day-to-day management of the cooperation and of moderating and supporting the cooperation process. The cooperation facilitator is thought to have a professional interest in driving the cooperation, but remain otherwise neutral, and does not have a voting right in the steering group of the cooperation. In reality, however, cooperation facilitators are often the agenda setters of the cooperation in that they bring up new topics, prepare input papers, launch concrete cooperation activities, etc. Thus, the distinction between the cooperation promoter and facilitator may often be blurry and depends on the concrete arrangements made.

▶ **Cooperation partners:** A cooperation partner is an individual from the public or private sector or from civil society who represents an organisation that is actively engaged in cooperation. A cooperation partner may at the same time act as cooperation promoter or cooperation facilitator. The latter happens, for example, when cooperation structures are slim and the cooperation is managed by the cooperation partners themselves, e.g. on a rotating basis.

1.3 Definition of soft territorial cooperation

Soft territorial cooperation areas are instances of territorial governance that **build on specific territorial challenges and opportunities** and have a **strategic outlook**. They are characterised by at least some of these features:

▶ define the **sectoral scope and geographical boundaries in an 'open' or 'fuzzy' way**;

▶ have a **medium to long term integrative perspective** (i.e. they are not limited to the implementation of a single project);

▶ seek to **enhance the capacities of involved players**, making them actors of their own development;

▶ **renew relations between institutional levels,**

sectors of activity and types of actors (e.g. NGOs, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies…).

Soft territorial cooperation instances can also be approached as **'communities of intent'**. Community of intent stands for a voluntary collaboration open to public and private actors who decide to jointly address territory-specific opportunities and challenges. The 'community' is understood as a network of actors that seek to enhance their influence within certain fields without applying a rigid concept of membership. Actors cooperate across institutional levels and administrative boundaries on strategic development options based on needs and strategic ambitions linked to their shared territorial embeddedness ('intent').

1.4 Why promote soft territorial cooperation?

Soft territorial cooperation holds great potential for renewing territorial governance. In the context of centralised structures, it can enhance participation of the local and regional level, breaking open the predominance of the central government level without adding any formal layer or formally transferring competences. In the context of a decentralised, federal structure, it can improve coordination between different tiers of government. In all cases, it can renew relations between institutions and actors and fill governance gaps. The particular **strength of soft territorial cooperation** is in its

▶ **Openness to involve different tiers of government and public and private stakeholders on equal footing.** This may lead to a renewal of relationships between various tiers of government in a multi-level governance arrangement or between different sector administrations, breaking open the 'silo-mentality' of traditional sectoral planning and rigid institutional systems.

▶ **Flexibility to choose the 'optimal' scale and geographic boundaries of policy design and implementation**, e.g. to address functional interlinkages beyond political-administrative territories.

▶ **Voluntary and participatory nature of governance**, which empowers (local/ regional) actors to take charge of their own territorial development, thus transfers ownership and, hence, increases implementation commitment. Ultimately, it can also lead to more sustainable planning outcomes.

At the same time, soft territorial cooperation is **no panacea to all territorial governance issues**:

▶ Soft territorial cooperation is **complementary to other existing and more institutionalised collaborations** and emerges in interaction with 'hard' instruments and procedures, often in an attempt to fill an existing governance gap, but without the actual transfer of (planning) competences. Soft territorial cooperation areas also **don't replace traditional 'hard' spaces for spatial planning**, but provide complementary opportunities for territorial development. The challenge is therefore to distribute the roles and responsibilities of the two in an appropriate way, ensure coordination, and manage 'hardening' processes that e.g. tend to occur when resources devoted to cooperation become more substantial.

▶ The **democratic legitimacy of processes and outcomes can be difficult to achieve**. Since membership in the cooperation is not based on principles of democratic representation and accountability, some actors or territories may be (unintentionally) excluded. Tensions can arise if cooperation activities have a potential impact on the territories or actors not involved in the cooperation.

▶ **Flexible cooperation geographies**, i.e. cooperating with different territories or partners depending on the issue at hand, **can impede community-building** and the development of a cooperation culture as these require continuity and, hence, a degree of stability in the cooperation partnership.

▶ The voluntary nature of communities of intent implies that all **cooperation partners must see an added value in cooperating**. Hence, soft territorial cooperation is primarily an option when cooperation promises to produce a win-win outcome for all cooperation partners. Negotiating and agreeing on issues with a potentially asymmetric outcome, e.g. unequal resource distribution, tends to require more top-down steering.

The understanding of soft territorial cooperation as a community of intent ultimately implies that actors should not be forced into cooperation when they see too little common ground for cooperating. However, a window of opportunity for cooperation may open any time as conditions change (new issues, new actors, etc.) wherefore it is worthwhile pursuing it.

1.5 How to use this handbook?

Rather than providing of a step-by-step guide to creating soft territorial cooperation areas, this handbook guides actors in territorial cooperation in a process of self-reflexion that should help them become aware of the different development options they have. In addition, the handbook provides them with a number of concrete tools that can support this self-reflexion.

The guide is organised as follows:

▶ **Chapter 1** gives **practical advice on how to (further) develop soft territorial cooperation** and discusses the main elements of cooperation: defining strategic cooperation objectives, establishing the multi-level cooperation partnership, defining the spatial focus of the cooperation area, setting up the governance structure, deciding on cooperation topics and activities and mobilising resources. The chapter ends with a self-reflexion matrix that ought to help territorial cooperation instances become aware of their own characteristics in order to identify the development potentials they have.

▶ **Chapter 2** presents two **tools developed to guide and inform soft forms of territorial cooperation** – mapshots and institutional maps – and gives hands-on explanations for how to use them.

The text is supported by illustrations and additional text boxes, marked with 💡, that include practical tips for soft territorial cooperation practitioners. And finally, a list of questions, marked with ❓, at the end of each section is meant to trigger self-reflexion on the rationales behind choices made regarding cooperation objectives, cooperation partnership, area, activities and resources, the overall coherence of these choices as well as alternative options.

For further reading, we would like to refer the reader to the Main Report that contains all findings from the comparative analysis and policy recommendations derived from them, the European Atlas of Soft Territorial Cooperation that showcases 13 soft territorial cooperation areas from across Europe, the separate Report on the Swiss Spatial Strategy and Atlas of Action Areas and the Policy Brief that links the project's outcome to debates on the future of Cohesion Policy.

2 Soft territorial cooperation:
How to initiate, set up and develop it

Establishing soft territorial cooperation is, essentially, **a process of dialogue that involves actors from different territories, levels and sectors**. The objective of the dialogue is to carefully identify the issues and topics linked to a specific territory for which there exists a common understanding that these are issues to be tackled, that cooperation is beneficial for tackling them, or for which such an understanding can be established. In other words, soft territorial cooperation builds on a 'territorially embedded consensus' that is based on shared perceptions, interests and objectives.
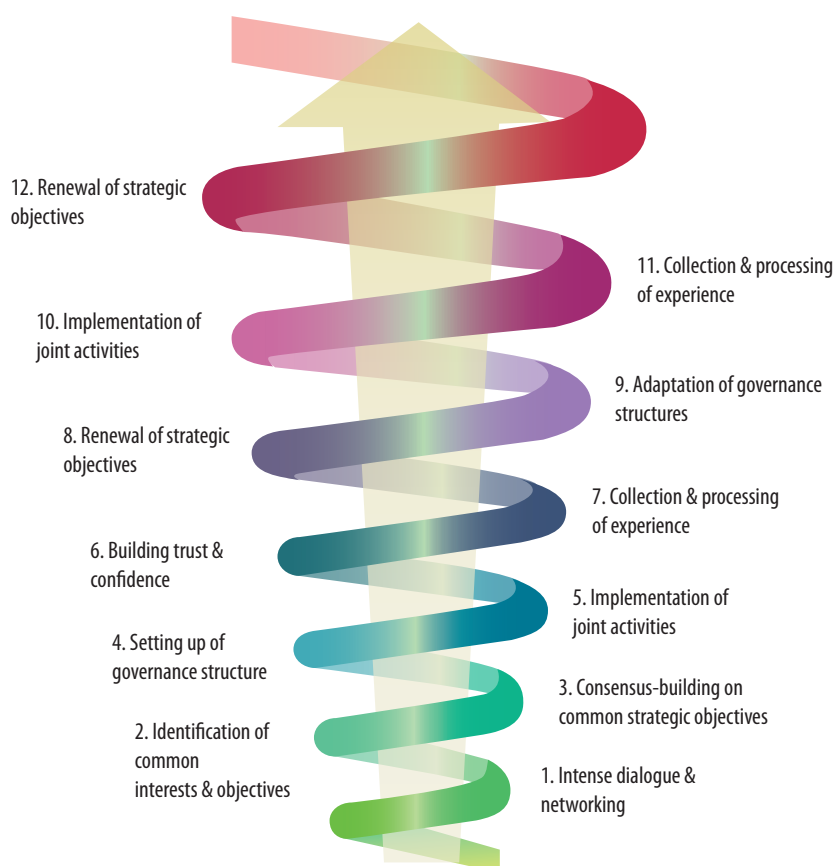
Developing soft territorial cooperation thus requires actors to go through the dialogue process of finding common ground for cooperation based on specific territorial needs. Typically, soft territorial cooperation goes through phases of:

- ▶ Intense dialogue, identification of relevant actors, networking, exploration ('getting to know each other'), consensus-building, definition of joint objectives…
- ▶ Implementation
- ▶ Collection and processing of experiences
- ▶ Renewal of cooperation based on accumulated experiences and evolution of framework conditions

Cooperation objectives, activities and organisational setups are in this respect all interrelated. This dialectic relation may translate in operational terms into a succession of development steps that mutually reinforce each other: an initial organisational setup triggers a first set of strategic actions, the implementation of these actions leads then to adjustments in the organisational setup, which may themselves generate revised ambi-

Figure 1: Spiral of growth in cooperation

12. Renewal of strategic objectives

11. Collection & processing of experience

10. Implementation of joint activities

9. Adaptation of governance structures

8. Renewal of strategic objectives

7. Collection & processing of experience

6. Building trust & confidence

5. Implementation of joint activities

4. Setting up of governance structure

3. Consensus-building on common strategic objectives

2. Identification of common interests & objectives

1. Intense dialogue & networking

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017).

tions for cooperative action. The positive feedback loops between organisational setups and strategy elaboration can be mobilised to generate a '**spiral of growth in co-operation**'.

Two conditions must be fulfilled for a positive bottom-up cooperation dynamic to develop:

1.) Cooperation partners must have sufficient freedom to shape the cooperation so that it is meaningful from their point of view. Cooperation objectives, partnership, perimeter, activities and governance structure must be the result of an ongoing dialogue process. Furthermore, they must develop continuously to adapt to changing conditions in order to remain relevant over time.

2.) Soft territorial cooperation must be continuously encouraged to avoid losing momentum. This is even important for cooperation initiatives that have succeeded in establishing a territorial 'brand' or 'shared identity', and in changing working habits, i.e. establishing a habit of cooperation, so that the cooperation become easier to implement.

Understanding the mechanism behind the 'growth spiral' in cooperation is important for the assessment of soft territorial cooperation dynamics and can guide its implementation: Cooperation initiatives that can build on a series of previous cooperation endeavours have a different point of departure in the spiral than those that first need to invest in the trust building process.

To conclude, elements of 'softness', i.e. the flexibility to shape and define the scope and objectives of cooperation, are essential for a positive bottom-up cooperation dynamic to develop. This bottom-up dynamic is, in turn, essential for the development of a strategic partnership of actors that voluntarily cooperate across institutional levels and administrative boundaries on long-term territorial development objectives, thus forming a 'community of intent'.

> 💡 **Tip:** An approach to defining cooperation topics and activities that is sensitive to the local or regional context, its strengths and weaknesses, should be applied. Providing 'cookbook' type of guidance to setting up cooperation and defining its cooperation area and partnership as well as suitable topics or types of interventions is not meaningful. Rather all elements of the cooperation must be defined so that they are coherent and fit with the respective governance environment, regulatory framework and geographic context of the cooperation area and address its specific territorial needs.

2.1 Defining strategic cooperation objectives

Soft territorial cooperation is purpose-driven. It develops out of a concrete need for cooperation and the awareness of territorial actors that specific challenges can be better addressed jointly than alone. **Reasons for cooperation** may be linked to:

▶ the aim to **respond to a common set of challenges and opportunities more effectively**. Such challenges can arise from functional linkages that cannot be sufficiently addressed within existing political-administrative units. The cooperation can aim to enable economies of scale and increase effectiveness, and often also efficiency, by performing tasks jointly. Another objective may be to achieve greater weight as regards the external (re)presentation of the region and joint lobbying for common interests.

▶ (the wish to establish) a sense of community or shared identity and **achieve greater regional integration**. This is often the case in collaborations between territories that are bound together by common history and/ or tight cultural links.

▶ the search for allies in an effort to **better withstand external pressures**. The (perceived) external pressures can come from the immediate surrounding, e.g. from neighbouring metropolitan areas, to the global economy.

The precise identification of strategic cooperation objectives is not necessarily trivial, as cooperation is generally an iterative and evolving process. Involved actors may have different objectives, and commonalities evolve over time as the dialogue opens new perspectives of joint action.

Becoming aware of what glues the cooperation partners together is vital to defining the cooperation partnership (see 2.2), the cooperation area (see 2.3), governance structures (see 2.4), topics and activities (see 2.6) and resource needs (see 2.5).

Furthermore, a multiplicity of scales can be considered in the design and implementation of soft cooperation instances, taking into account not only the level at which the cooperation is implemented, but also the external contexts it relates to.

? **Questions for self-reflexion:**

☑ What is/ the rationale behind the cooperation?

☑ To achieve stronger regional integration: does the cooperation build on existing (historical, cultural, political, economic, etc.) links that can be capitalised on? What are the regional commonalities (e.g. a natural feature, historical feature, etc.) and can these be used for regional identity creation?

☑ To position the cooperation within wider geographic contexts: Which scale/s is/are addressed?

☑ To achieve greater effectiveness or efficiency: Do functional linkages exist that could be better exploited, e.g. regarding the joint provision of general services? If the aim is the joint external (re)presentation of the region and joint lobbying for common interests to jointly represent the cooperation area to the outside world, who are the addressees of that joint presentation and what is the best way to reach them?

☑ To what extent is the cooperation rationale rooted in specific territorial needs? Do cooperation partners (still) have the same understanding of territorial needs and of the purpose of cooperation? If not, are the different understandings and objectives compatible or incompatible?

☑ Have cooperation objectives changed over time? Are they still topical?

☑ What are the different governance levels, types of territories, sectoral policies (e.g. agriculture, energy, transport and environment) and territorial policies (e.g. metropolitan, regional and rural policies) within which the cooperation has to position itself? To what extent does the cooperation coordinate with these elements? What are the potential synergies that could be realised through multi-level, inter-territorial, and cross-sectors coordination and cooperation?

2.2 Establishing the multi-level cooperation partnership

In soft territorial cooperation, cooperation partnerships are the outcome of a **community and consensus-building process**. That process may result in soft territorial cooperation partnerships that are more or less 'soft' with regards to their openness to different (public and private) stakeholders. While participation of private sector stakeholders and the general public is an important ingredient of territorial governance, there are also situations in which it makes sense to keep cooperation to the level of public actors only: a) early-stage collaborations that are still in the phase of finding out what the different positions and objectives of the public partners are and where the involvement of other actors would disturb the process, and b) collaborative planning processes that aim to produce a politically endorsed result that protects general public interests and where single private stakeholder interests ought not play a role.

Tip: Get to grips with the complexity of the institutional landscape and the relations between institutions and levels in the cooperation area by mapping them (see Institutional Mappings – 3.2). Mapping geographic overlaps between administrative units and existing territorial collaborations helps understand the institutional context and cooperation landscape. Furthermore, relations between levels can be mapped: they can be cooperative or conflictual, characterised by one- or two-way communication or by a lack of dialogue. By way of visualisation, each cooperation instance's role in a multi-level territorial governance can be identified more easily.

Soft territorial cooperation can renew relations between institutional levels, sectors of activity and types of actors (e.g. NGOs, private companies, local and regional authorities, agencies…) and enhance the understanding of each other's positions and needs. It is a particularly useful instrument for tackling multi-level coordination gaps and mismatches in decision-making between (functional) needs and actual competences. Transcending usual planning levels and enhancing cooperation between different governance levels can also improve the quality of planning as different types of knowledge is tapped into.

Furthermore, the enhanced level of stakeholder participation can turn involved local and regional actors into change agents who advocate the implementation of planning outcomes, which increases their chance of being sustainably implemented and finding broad acceptance. Ultimately, all these factors together can support multiscalar polycentric and sustainable spatial development.
 Soft territorial cooperation is hardly ever about redistributing power and competencies between administrative levels. The focus is on ensuring that the different perceptions, interests and objectives of involved actors are adequately reflected in the cooperation process.

? **Questions for self-reflexion:**

☑ Which actors at which levels are needed as active cooperation partners to organize and deliver the territorial cooperation objectives at stake? Are some relevant stakeholders (or stakeholder groups) (still) missing?

☑ Ought private stakeholders and/ or civil society representatives be allowed in and with what kind of role: as full members, as observers, as project collaborators?

☑ Did the cooperation manage to bring on board those actors who can become the "change agents" who can drive the implementation of the cooperation's objectives?

☑ What is the role of each cooperation partner? What is each cooperation partner's motivation to participate?

☑ With which other institutions and collaborations does the cooperation have thematic or territorial overlaps? How (good) are the relations with these institutions and collaborations?

☑ Does the cooperation impact groups of actors that are not part of the cooperation? How can tensions that may result from this be avoided or mitigated? How can new or previously excluded stakeholder groups be encouraged to participate?

☑ What is the cooperation's approach to public relations work?

2.3 Defining the spatial focus

Soft territorial cooperation does not necessarily mean that the geographic cooperation perimeter is fuzzy and flexible, but that cooperation initiatives take an open, process-oriented approach to regionalisation. In practice, different regionalisation logics may be combined in a pragmatic approach to region-building that is largely defined by the cooperation partnership. Cooperation areas can be based on:

► **Existing political-administrative spaces or combinations thereof (i.e. a pooled territory):** The strength of this approach is the clear structure of mandates and resources. The challenge is that territorial and functional dynamics often do not fit political-administrative boundaries.

► **Spaces with similar characteristics and features:** Those characteristics can be a homogenous regional economic structure, a natural or morphological feature such as a river or mountain ridge or a cultural feature such as a common language. The strength of the approach is that the resulting cooperation area is homogenous, which can facilitate the implementation of the cooperation, or shares a common feature with which to identify. However, governance gaps that soft territorial governance aims to fill often occur exactly at the border of two dissimilar territories.

► **Spaces that are functionally linked:** Such functional links can be labour markets, commuting areas, or river catchment areas, etc.; that is, spaces that are connected by flows. The strength of the approach is that it allows tackling challenges that arise from functional interdependences independent from existing administrative borders. However, in reality soft territorial cooperation initiatives often position themselves in relation to prevailing functional areas, e.g. to metropolitan areas which they perceive as external pressure, rather than being based on them.

► **Fully flexible cooperation geographies** might be considered the answer to the above mentioned constraints. But there are practical limitations to this cooperation *'à la carte'* approach: Fully flexible cooperation geographies imply that, depending on the issue that is dealt with, different territories or partners cooperate. In practice that means that for

each new issue that is be tackled, new cooperation alliances have to be formed. This is time-consuming and can impede community-building and the development of a cooperation culture, i.e. a 'habit' of cooperation, which require continuity and, hence, a degree of stability in the cooperation partnership and area. There might also be peer pressure on cooperation partners to participate in all cooperation activities, even if they would rather like to stay out of some of them, and they themselves might fear being marginalised.

The choice of cooperation area may have a potential impact on areas that are not formally part of the cooperation. This is particularly true when the cooperation is not embedded in a 'territory' that would satisfy the notion of 'region' as a continuous area, but linked to a network of places such as a city network. Such approaches can raise issues concerning territorial cohesion in the area as a whole as the forums for dialogue and exchange established by the cooperation can exclude stakeholders from some types of areas, and therefore make their issues and ambitions less visible. Similar issues can arise if membership criteria unintentionally excluded certain territories, for example rural areas. Territorial development objectives may then be developed by the cooperation that ignore the needs of these areas.

> **Tip:** Mapping the (perceived) defining features of the cooperation area can help build a shared understanding of the cooperation area (see Mapshots – 3.1). The resulting maps, so-called mapshots, can include geographic features and patterns and trends of relevance for observed or potential cooperation dynamics. Mapshots can hence be both the input and/or outcome of a dialogue process as they trigger debates around the meaning of geographical features, existing infrastructure and settlements for the cooperation objectives.

> **? Questions for self-reflexion:**
>
> ☑ What are the geographical features in the area? Are they elements of a shared identity or physical constraints?
>
> ☑ What are the important connecting or dividing (infrastructure) elements?
>
> ☑ What are central places in the area?
>
> ☑ What are existing functional interlinkages in the area? What are socio-economic trends in the cooperation area that (potentially) impact the cooperation?
>
> ☑ Where are existing alliances between actors or territories? Where are cooperation gaps?
>
> ☑ Is the cooperation area perimeter fixed or open to changes? Is it soft (i.e. fuzzily defined) or hard (e.g. based on the borders of existing political-administrative spaces)?
>
> ☑ How flexible is the cooperation geography, i.e. to which extent are cooperation boundaries adapted to the issue at stake?
>
> ☑ Does the cooperation impact territories that are not part of the cooperation areas?

2.4 Setting up the governance structure

Choosing how to organise the cooperation in concrete terms is an important strategic and practical decision to take. Different degrees of formalisation and types of institutionalisation are thinkable, from open cooperation configurations with no dedicated cooperation structure or a very limited one to highly institutionalised collaborations with a dedicated body having own legal personality.

All these arrangements can be equally valid, depending on the pursued outcome: Actors may intentionally use the soft character for strategic reasons, e.g. because they want to organise coordination without creating an additional formal structure that adds to institutional complexity, or because they see themselves as complementary to other existing and more institutionalised collaborations. They may also choose a high degree of formalisation as they ambition to deliver concrete and 'hard' results. Regardless of the concrete institutional set-up, **a limited group of dedicated coordinators with a clear mandate is essential** for any successful form of cooperation. This can take the form of a permanent office that takes care of day-to-day management such as the preparation of meetings, public relations or the management of cooperation projects. It may also be based on shared responsibilities

of the cooperation partners, who manage the cooperation on a rotational basis.

The **cooperation structure can also change over time** as the cooperation's strategic objectives become more ambitious and shift towards the achievement of concrete, tangible results (see Figure 1 – Spiral of growth in cooperation). Cooperation structures must adapt to it. This **process of 'hardening', i.e. a tendency towards a greater degree of formalisation and institutionalisation**, happens frequently, but is not the natural progression of any soft territorial cooperation. The cooperation can also intentionally choose a soft, non-binding format, or accept the soft format as a necessary (temporal) compromise.

In either case, it is important that the organisational set-up supports the achievement of the strategic cooperation objectives. As a rule of thumb, the more a cooperation initiative ambitions to achieve concrete and 'hard' results, the more its structures need to be formal and rigid. On the other hand, soft territorial cooperation instances that aim primarily at offering opportunities for exchange and coordination of actors might be better served with lean, informal and flexible cooperation structures.

? Questions for self-reflexion:

☑ What does the day-to-day management of the cooperation imply and how much manpower is needed for it? Who can take care of it?

☑ Does the soft territorial cooperation need to set up a new permanent structure or can an existing structure be upgraded?

☑ Does the current cooperation structure, in particular its degree of institutionalisation, support the achievement of the strategic cooperation objectives? How open is the cooperation structure to adapt to changing cooperation ambitions?

2.5 Mobilising resources

Managing and maintaining a collaborative partnership is time-consuming and not necessarily trivial. At the same time, the competencies needed to organise and facilitate the cooperation are not always well-developed within (local and regional) public authorities and, even more so, capacities are often low. Competencies are, for example, required on

- How to establish contact with and between relevant stakeholders;
- How to prepare and host consensus-oriented workshop series;
- How to jointly formulate objectives, targets and concrete measures;
- How to produce (territorial) evidence;
- How to organise a visioning exercise, etc.

Soft territorial cooperation instances could hence benefit from **organisational and methodological as well as financial support**. Support can come from different sources: from regional or national authorities, in particular from spatial planning departments, from regional development agencies, or from external process facilitators. As the coordination consolidates and coordination and management tasks become more complex, it is worthwhile to have a stable group of coordinators, resp. cooperation facilitators, in the form of a joint office or similar. They ensure that basic tasks are carried out, that there is continuity in the cooperation and that positive and negative experiences can be capitalised upon.

Another valuable resource is **territorial evidence** that can support evidence-informed cooperation strategies. For evidence to be useful it has to address the right geographical level, thus data has to be sufficiently disaggregated. In particular data on functional linkages can be relevant in this context. Territorial evidence can also be a component of the dialogue process of establishing a shared perception of and objective for the territory. Two tools developed in the project, mapshots and institutional maps, can both serve as an input as well as outcome of such a dialogue process.

Funding the permanent coordination structure as well as other basic services that are needed to maintain the cooperation (e.g. public relations, basic studies, data, etc.) requires a stable funding mechanism. Most typically, this funding is needed for paying salaries of a few permanent staff, renting office space, commissioning studies, running the website, etc. Since amounts needed are moderate, basic financing can often also be raised by the cooperation partners in the form of membership contributions. Contributions could be weighted by the number of inhabitants per municipality or region that is involved in the cooperation. Member contributions tend to be sufficient to maintain the cooperation in soft territorial cooperation areas that primarily target soft interventions like policy coordination, joint lobbying, exchange and networking. However, they are hardly ever sufficient to fund actual project activities. Other available (national or European) funds need to be tapped into.

Tip: Accessing national or EU funds can sometimes be hard for cooperation projects because of restrictive rules regarding geographic or thematic eligibility. Existing funding schemes must therefore be scrutinized regarding the conformity of their eligibility and selection rules with the soft territorial cooperation's objectives and geographical extent.

? Questions for self-reflexion:

☑ What organisational support can the cooperation draw on? Does the cooperation have a dedicated person, resp. team for coordination and facilitation? Is the current team of coordinators sufficiently staffed?

☑ What methodological support can the cooperation draw on? Are there regional or national authorities, e.g. from spatial planning departments, regional development agencies, or external process facilitators that can provide support when needed?

☑ What type of territorial evidence at the right spatial resolution is accessible to the cooperation and from whom? What data gaps exist and how could they be filled?

☑ Can the money needed for funding the basic cooperation structure be raised by the members?

☑ What type of (regional, national, European) funding sources are there that can be tapped?

☑ Do geographical/thematic/ eligibility criteria support cooperation project applications?

2.6 Deciding on cooperation topics and activities

There are no more or less suitable topics and activities for soft territorial cooperation. Instead, they should be specific to the soft territorial cooperation area's needs. Sectors frequently addressed by soft territorial cooperation areas are:
▶ spatial planning,
▶ transport & infrastructure,
▶ economic competitiveness & business development,
▶ tourism,
▶ cultural cooperation,
▶ environment & energy.

This list of possible areas to focus on should only serve as inspiration. The actual definition of topics should be sensitive to the local or regional context and its strengths and weaknesses. Cooperation activities should be in support of the implementation of cooperation objectives.

Put simply, there are **three basic types of soft territorial cooperation**:
▶ **'Strategic cooperation'** focuses on the definition of concrete cooperation objectives and on agenda-setting. Within this type, sectoral priorities are an output of the cooperation process and are not defined in advance. Typical activities are coordination meetings or the development of a joint strategy or vision.

▶ **'Implementation cooperation'** focuses on facilitating the implementation of a territorial development agenda, e.g. through the development of a joint spatial development plan or action plan, the setting up of a joint working programme, etc.
▶ **'Instrumental cooperation'** has a narrow thematic focus and concentrates on achieving concrete sectoral or territorial objectives through the realisation of joint activities. This project-type of cooperation typically only lasts for a short time and has limited visibility.

In practice, soft territorial cooperation instances can combine all three elements: be a forum for ongoing strategic discussions, translate these into concrete work programmes and realise concrete projects. It is important that project-type interventions are not an end in themselves, but are embedded in a wider strategic agenda. That often implies that individual project activities are linked in project chains geared towards producing change in the mid- or long-run.

Since soft territorial cooperation instances are understood as strategic long-term partnerships, cooperation topics must also be open to evolve and shift over time for the cooperation to remain topical. An active and dynamic cooperation is one that is agile to quickly absorb and react to current cooperation issues and topics.

? Questions for self-reflexion:

☑ What topics and sectoral policies are touched upon by the cooperation?

☑ Is the cooperation flexible enough to quickly react to and pick up current cooperation issues and topics?

☑ Is any formal transfer of competencies to the (soft) territorial cooperation foreseen? Does it have the right resources and mandates for it?

☑ What are the elements of strategic, implementation and instrumental cooperation does the cooperation address?

☑ Are project-type activities well-embedded in a wider strategic agenda?

2.7 Soft territorial cooperation self-reflexion matrix

A shared awareness of territorial characteristics and of development options can help actors involved in soft co-operation initiatives **identify development potentials**. It further allows them to **self-assess the overall coherence of the soft territorial cooperation** regarding cooperation objectives, cooperation partnership, area, activities and resources.

Table 1 summarises the different options that soft terri-torial cooperation areas have with respect to their scope, objectives and organisation on the basis of eight dimen-sions soft territorial cooperation. Higher values indicate a higher degree of 'softness'. It is important to underline that 'the softer, the better' does not apply. Rather, soft territorial cooperation areas should strive for the right degree of softness that supports the implementation of their objectives.

The values assigned to a cooperation instance can be translated into a spider graph as a form of graphical re-presentation of the multi-dimensional character of a soft territorial cooperation (see Figure 2). Spider graphs also provide a useful instrument for visualisation and compa-rison of cooperation instances within a region, country or cross-border area, respectively of cooperation frame-works and concrete realisations thereof. However, in view of engaging in a dialogue with cooperation instances, it is important that the spider graph approach is not mista-ken for a normative benchmarking.

💡 **Tip:** Most spreadsheet software, commercial soft-ware as well as freeware, include a functionality to produce spider graphs with only a few mouse clicks. Spider graphs are also known under the name of spider web diagram, radar chart, web chart, star chart, Kiviat diagram or similar…

Figure 2: Spidergraph based on the example of the Territorial Pole Pays de Retz
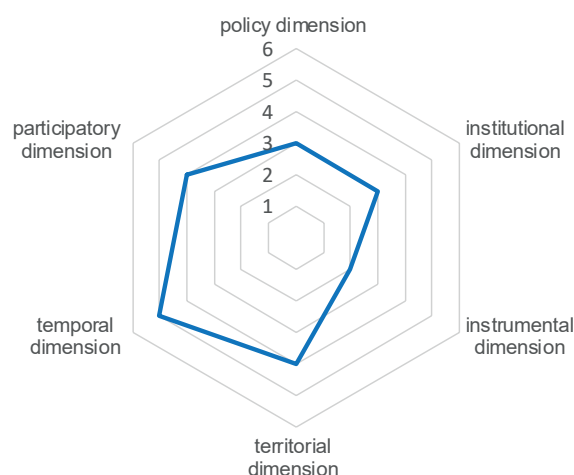
Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

Table 1: Dimensions of soft territorial cooperation and their potential characteristics

Dimension	Content	Values					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
policy dimension	strategic ambition	implementation of one concrete project	implementation of several projects	project development and/ or spatial planning	strategy concretisation	strategy development, agenda setting	governance development
institutional dimension	degree and type of formalisation	platform without structures, due to little political efforts	combination of existing structures ('pooled structures')	mainly combination of existing structures with some joint elements (executive committee etc.)	mainly joint elements (supra-structures) with still considerable influence of pooled elements	distinct, comprehensive structures (supra structures)	platform with intentionally maximal openness
instrumental dimension	resources	No own resources	small own budgets / discursive instruments	solid budgets / effective discursive instruments	budgets and some juridical instruments, effective discursive instruments	solid own financial, discursive and juridical resources	strategic combination of all kinds of instruments in the multi-level system
territorial dimension	territorial coverage / geographical scale	little spatial references	combination of existing territories without new label (pooled territory)	combination of existing territories with new label	supra-territory	soft spaces, fuzzy boundaries without intentional meaning	soft space, fuzzy boundaries - defining spatial focus as intentional part of process
temporal dimension	timeframe / historicity / continuity	just happening, no timeframe foreseen	short-term, fix timeframe	medium term, fix timeframe	Long term, fixed timeframe	long-term, continuity foreseen	long term, open-ended, flexible for termination
participatory dimension	levels and actors	just technical issues, few actors	single level/ purely public / domestic; few actors	several actors, at least one of the following features: multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	at least two of the following features: multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	multi-level, cross-border, public& non public	not defined, open for multilevel, cross-border, non-public
activity dimension	areas of intervention	only one sector involved (e.g. transport, environment)	more than one sector involved	more than one sector, spatial development	spatial development, some references to spatial planning	strategic spatial development and / or planning	multi-sectoral, integrated; ambitions with regard to modify territorial governance
	kind of activities	unclear	data & monitoring	discursive processes	influence on budgets	planning	strategic spatial development

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

13

3   Tools for enhancing dialogue:
Mapshots and institutional mapping

ESPON ACTAREA has developed a number of **tools to guide and inform soft forms of territorial cooperation**. These tools aim at building a shared understanding among cooperation partners of the cooperation and territorial landscape in the cooperation area. They can both serve as input into the dialogue process or be the output of the process. As communicative and participative tools, they refer to established elements of local and regional planning and show that they can be mobilized in a collaborative process that involves non-planners.

Organising soft cooperation is a challenging task. Challenges result from limited capacities of organising institutions, the large variety of potentially relevant actors, difficulties of coordinating the evolving fields of intervention when the cooperation is characterised by thematic openness, and challenges of coordinating with other territorial development instruments on different levels. In such a context, territorial evidence is essential. It is first crucial to get a picture of possible cooperation areas. Second, measurable patterns and trends and qualitative assessments of potentials for enhanced exchanges and integration help stakeholders involved in cooperation processes to develop shared common perspectives on territorial structures and organisations.

However, this territorial knowledge is often disparate and can hardly be synthesised using traditional maps and graphs. Therefore, ESPON ACTAREA has developed two 'soft cooperation planning tools' to bridge the gap between territorial evidence and the implementation of soft cooperation, and to support the inclusion of evidence into participatory processes:

▶ **Mapshots** are an instrument for the design of cooperation in relation to geographical features, socio-economic patterns and (perceived) cooperation dynamics.
▶ **Institutional mapping** is an instrument for the design of the cooperation in relation to other territorial collaborations and institutions dealing with territorial development.

Each of these tools help to analyse, represent and debate links between policies and territorial development processes. As such, they can contribute to the design and implementation of soft territorial cooperation instances. Furthermore, they are not meant to be static state representations nor serve as '*Leitbild*', but are input and output of an on-going process.

3.1   Mapshots

A mapshot is a conceptual representation of a cooperation area that includes geographic features and patterns and trends of relevance for observed or potential cooperation dynamics. Shown information is based on available geographical and socio-economic data (national or regional statistics), thus quantitative information, but also qualitative information on territorial trends from expert interviews, legal documents and grey literature.

Geographic processes such as polarising trends, gradients, discontinuities are made immediately visible to the recipient, while they may require more advanced map-reading skills if displayed using a traditional map. However, a mapshot is not designed to be immediately readable without an accompanying text. Its purpose is to allow stakeholders and decision-makers to reflect on

how social, economic and natural patterns and trends are organised geographically, and on the opportunities and challenges deriving from this organisation. They therefore require that readers dwell on the symbols used and on the general logic of the representation.

Map symbols

Each set of mapshots is based on a specific language with its vocabulary (a thematic dictionary) and grammar (overlaying rules), which was developed to be usable for showing issues of inter-territorial cooperation. Figure 3 presents the main symbols used. Three core dimensions of territorial cooperation are represented: geographic features, cooperation issues and socio-economic structures (or dynamics).

The category **'Basic geographic features'** includes poles and axes around which territorial development is organised. The shape of the cooperation area is simplified to remove all unnecessary 'noise'. Only shape components that are necessary to understand spatial configuration of the cooperation area are kept: metropolitan areas and cities as structuring elements of the urban hierarchy around which the rest of the territory is organised, road and/or railway lines as 'structuring infrastructure axis' which orient flows of people, goods and information in space, and rivers, mountains, lakes, etc. as 'structuring natural features'.

Figure 3: Dictionary of ideas/concepts and symbols for mapshots

| Dimension	Idea / concept	Basic sign	Potential declination					Comments
Basic geographical features	Simplified shape of the cooperation instance	geometric shape	square	hexagon	circle	triangle	other	
	Urban hierarchy	a circle	metropolis	regional centre	local node			
	Structuring infrastructure axis	white line with grey outline	major infrastructure axis	intermediate infrastructure axis				non deterministic use
	Structuring natural feature	line	river	coastline				non deterministic use
Cooperation issues	Status of the perimeter	Line (grey 50%, 3 pts)	Hard (or core area)	Flexible (or associated territories)				
	Cooperation rationale	Thin grid	to counteract an external pressure (e.g. from a metropolis)	to manage a physical object or a resource	to foster a specific relation			non-exhaustive list
	Cooperation landscape	curved line	cooperation challenge: mountain	cooperation challenge: border	cooperation challenge: language	cooperation axis	overlapping instance of cooperation	
Spatial structure	Social, economic, demographic differentiation	background color						

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

Three types of **cooperation issues** are represented: first, the hardness/flexibility of the perimeter (which help the reader to distinguish between hard and soft cooperation, and/or between main and enlarged area); second, the cooperation rationale, e.g. a geographic feature such as a lake or a mountain range around which cooperation efforts are organised or a border to an external area against which actors of the cooperation area position themselves; third, the cooperation landscape. This 'landscape' includes three kinds of components: cooperation gaps or challenges (e.g. a natural feature such as a river), cooperation axes and overlapping cooperation instances that may require enhanced cooperation. Finally, choropleth symbols (i.e. hue and value) are used to represent structuring **social, demographic and economic patterns** between sub-units of the cooperation area.

Each dimension of territorial cooperation is broken down into a concept which is translated into a set of symbols. Symbols are then overlaid and result in the model map. Figure 4 gives an overview of the process, based on the example of the Territorial Pole 'Pays de Retz'. It is important to understand that the mapshot is an 'expert interpretation' of different types of evidence and as such relies on editorial decisions: what is relevant to be represented and what is not? There is no deterministic relation between geographical features, spatial structures and cooperation issues. Whether or not to integrate a physical axis or cooperation challenge is not a question of objective hierarchy (e.g. road capacities, river discharge) or an automatic relation (e.g. 'administrative borders imply cooperation challenge'). The integration of elements depends on the interpretation of the expert and is based on a thorough analysis of local and regional development issues and a compilation of insights from policy makers and stakeholders.
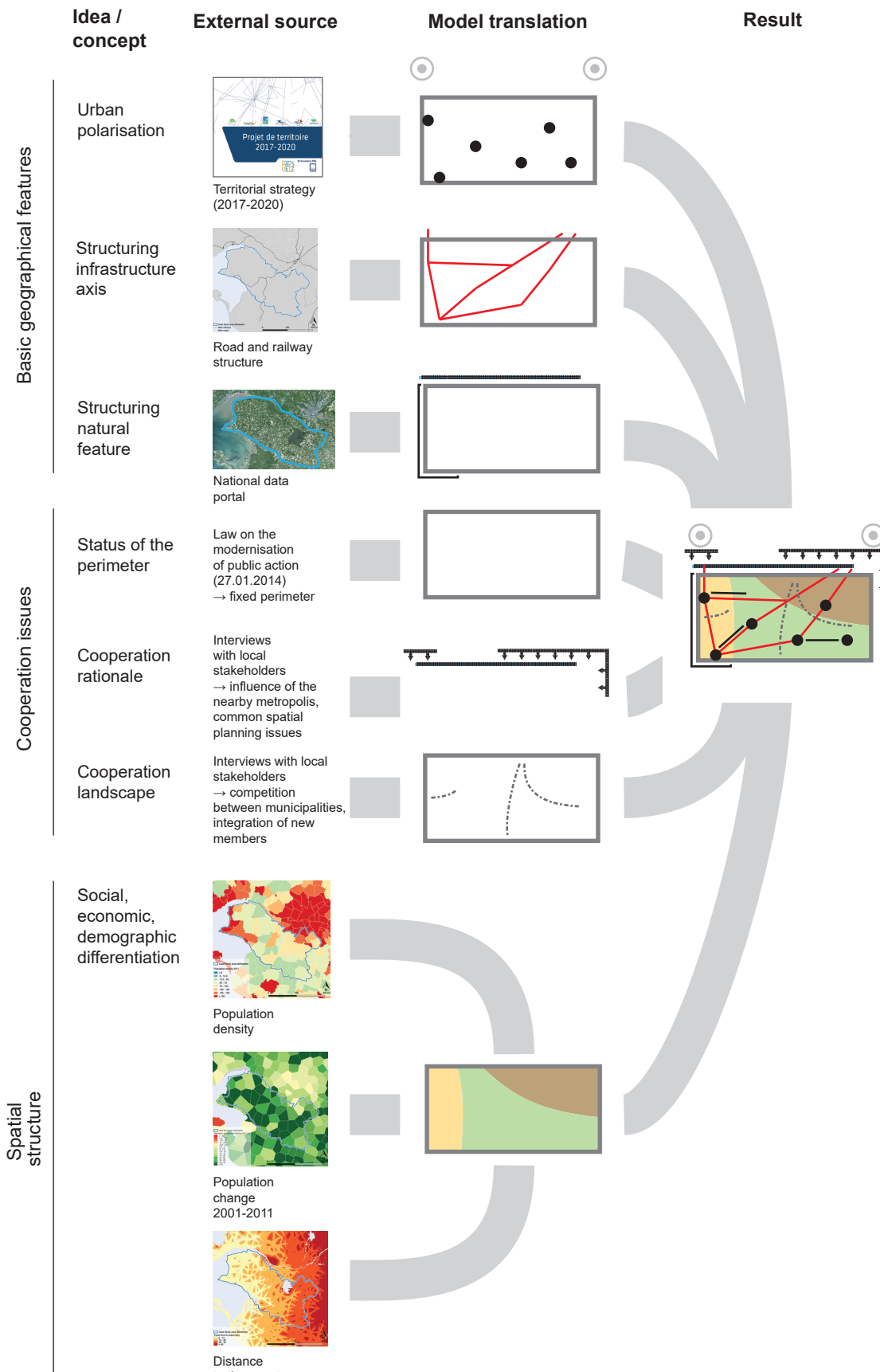
Figure 4: Mapshot of the Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area
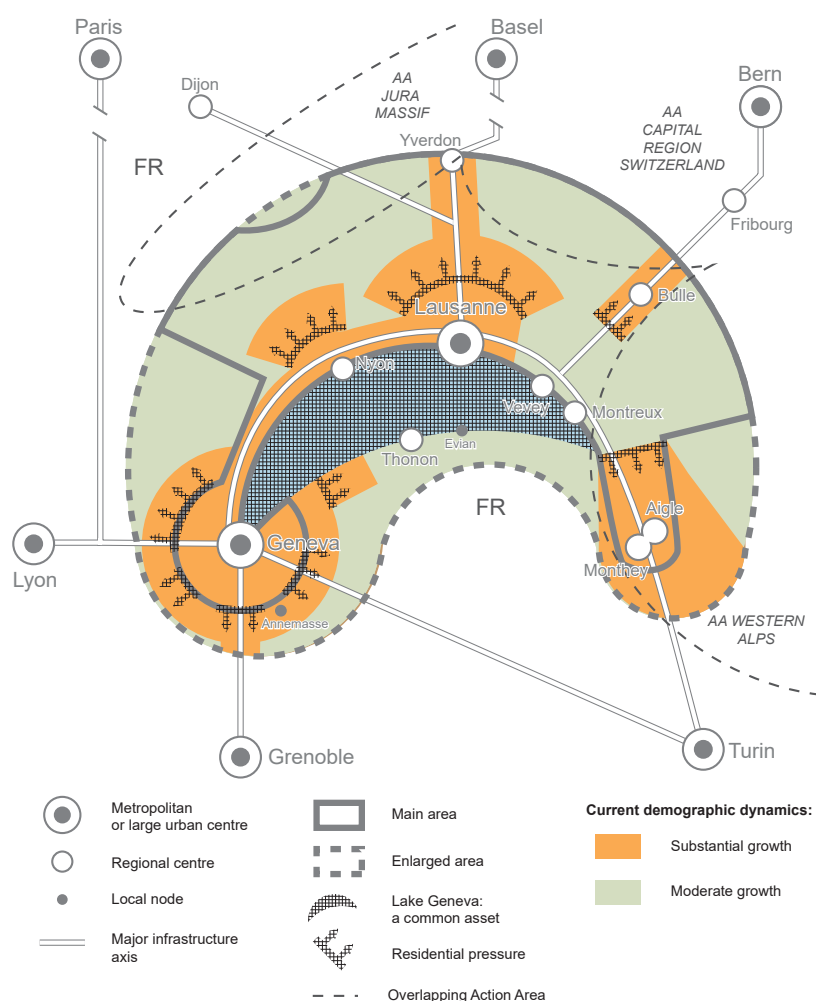
The mapshot of the Lake Geneva Metropolitan Action Area shows that development in the cooperation area is unbalanced. Population and economic activities as well as transport infrastructure concentrates on the northern (Swiss) shore of the Lake. In the core metropolitan area, a continuous linear agglomeration is emerging between Lausanne and Geneva that generates sprawl in their rural hinterlands and put neighbouring regions under pressure. Main cooperation issues are therefore to manage and channel growth and to contain urban sprawl. Around the city of Geneva, proximity to the French border creates specific challenges. The functional agglomeration extends far beyond this border. Differences in employment opportunities, purchasing power and property prices generate substantial commuter flows, tensions on housing markets and traffic congestion.

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

Figure 5: Sources and elaboration of mapshots (based on the example of Pays de Retz)

| Idea / concept | External source | Model translation | Result |

Basic geographical features

Urban polarisation — Territorial strategy (2017-2020)

Structuring infrastructure axis — Road and railway structure

Structuring natural feature — National data portal

Cooperation issues

Status of the perimeter — Law on the modernisation of public action (27.01.2014) → fixed perimeter

Cooperation rationale — Interviews with local stakeholders → influence of the nearby metropolis, common spatial planning issues

Cooperation landscape — Interviews with local stakeholders → competition between municipalities, integration of new members

Spatial structure

Social, economic, demographic differentiation — Population density

Population change 2001-2011

Distance to the coast

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

Figure 6: Mapshot of the Metropolitan pole Sillon lorrain

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)
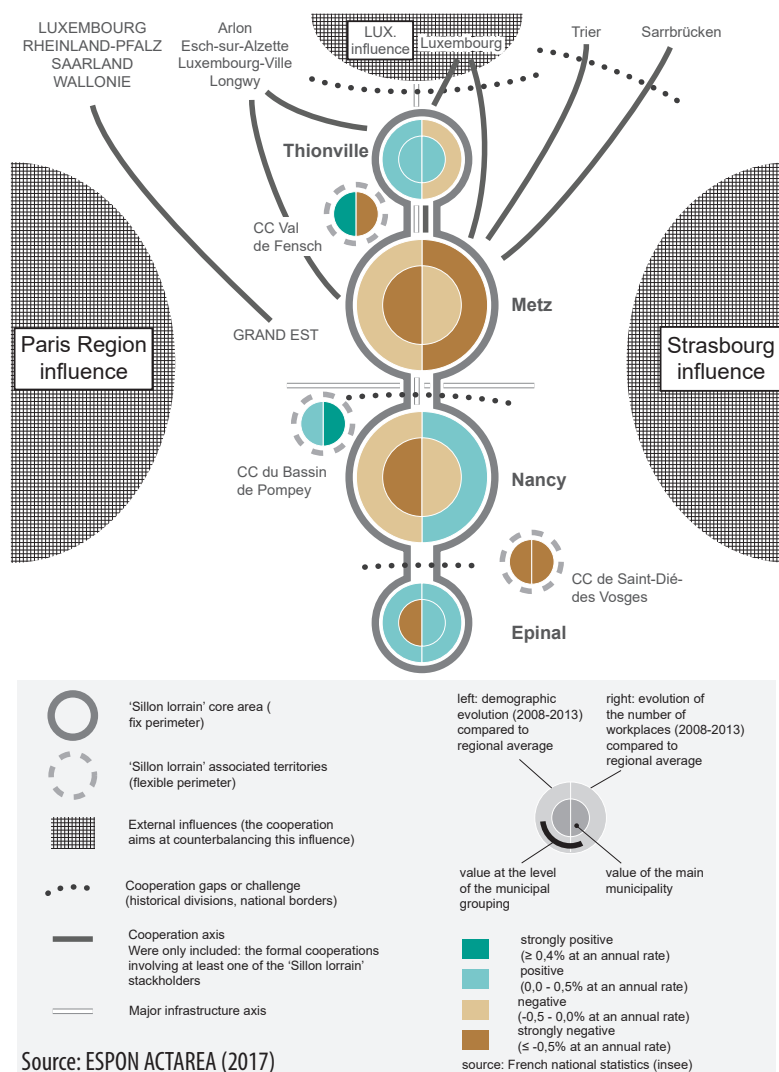
The mapshot of the Metropolitan Pole Sillon lorrain, a network of four cities and their related intermunicipal bodies, shows that the four urban areas have undergone different demographic and economic developments. Metz and Nancy experienced a significant demographic decline, which was slightly lower in their suburban areas. At the same time, Thionville and surroundings recorded a strong demographic growth. The number of workplaces increased in the 'Grand Nancy' area, but declined in Metz agglomeration.

These demographic and employment dynamics are related to the uneven proximity to Luxembourg and the uneven benefits taken from the high-speed rail line. The cooperation emerged as a network of cities to advocate for the metropolitan status of the urban region and counterbalance three main external metropolitan influences (from Paris region, Strasbourg and Luxembourg).

3.2 Institutional maps

Institutional maps synthesise geographic overlaps of administrative units and cooperation areas of relevance for the targeted cooperation instance. They help to understand the institutional context and cooperation setting in which the cooperation instance is embedded.

Institutional maps show in a highly simplified way how different cooperation areas in a region relate to one another geographically: which ones overlap, occupy adjacent areas or are embedded in each other on different scales. Institutional maps help discerning patterns of cooperation:

▶ Institutional mappings make it possible to take stock of existing cooperation instances which are relevant for the promotion of the soft cooperation area.

▶ The mappings can indicate the degree of the 'institutional thickness', i.e. the number of the cooperation initiatives in a specific territory.

▶ Moreover, in some cases, a spatial concentration of cooperation instances can be observed, for example in metropolitan core areas or around a specific geographical feature.

▶ The mappings visualise multi-level governance. Some cooperation instances operate in a context with multiple relevant bodies on the same level, while others relate to systems of administrative units and cooperation instances embedded in each other, which are thus of multi-level character.

▶ The institutional mappings produced by the ACTAREA project do not represent the political priorities or project activities in the regions, nor do they display concrete measures taken. They rather show in which perimeters and through which cooperation platforms activities take place.

Drawing guidelines

The following drawing rules are applied, albeit in a flexible way depending on what ought to be shown:

▶ The selection of cooperation instances to be shown in the map is based on information from interviews and document analyses. Criteria to include cooperation areas are their spatial proximity to the case study and similarities in terms of targeted cooperation themes and/ or actors.

▶ Maps show cooperation areas as rectangles and, depending on the specific case, borders between political-administrative territories as lines. If the cooperation perimeter is not identical with the perimeter of the cooperation partner it should be shown in the map. For example, in the case of the Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance, the *'Planungsregion Allgäu'* is partner, but only some of its districts make up the cooperation perimeter; in the case of the Upper Rhine Region, the Federal State of Baden Württemberg is the institutional partner, but only some of its sub-regions (*'Regierungsbezirke'*) make up the perimeter.

▶ The representation of each cooperation areas focuses on the size of its area in relation to the size of other cooperation areas. While proportions as well as simple topological relations (i.e. next to, within, partly within, etc.) ought to be roughly preserved, the shape of each cooperation area is reduced to a simple geographical shape (usually a rectangle).

▶ In terms of colour scheme, the convention introduced is to show the cooperation instance in question in a contrasting colour. Administrative territories are usually shown in grey.
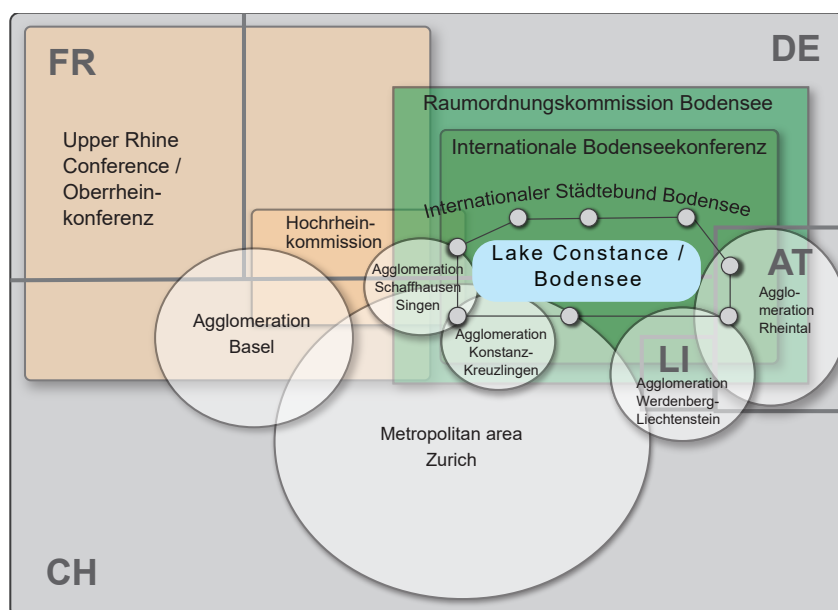
Figure 7: Sources and elaboration of institutional maps
(based on the example of Raumordnungskonferenz Bodensee/ Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance)
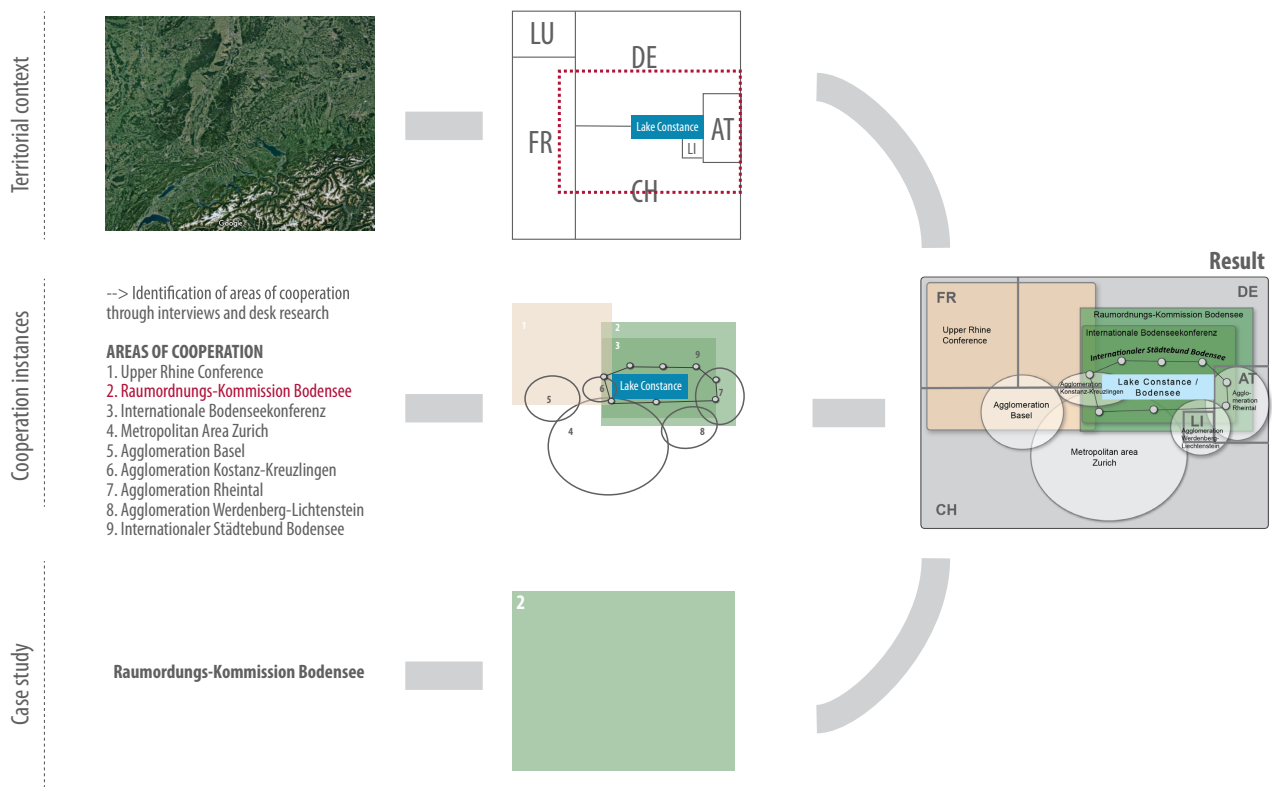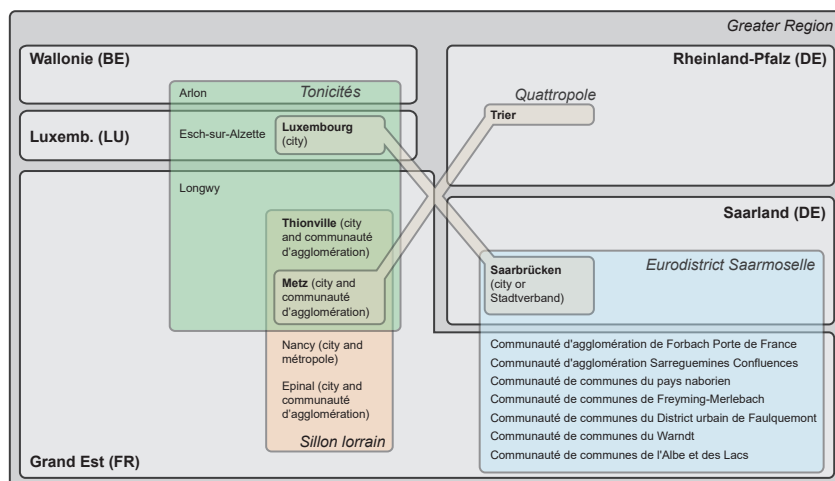

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

Figure 8: Institutional map of the Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance (Raumordnungskonferenz Bodensee - ROK-B)

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

The institutional map of the Spatial Development Conference Lake Constance (Raumordnungskonferenz Bodensee - ROK-B) shows the proximity with the International Lake Constance Conference, which covers almost the same area. ROK-B also interacts with the city network 'Städtebund Bodensee', which is a platform for exchanges between cities situated directly at the lake. The cooperation also overlaps with different agglomeration policies and with the Upper Rhine conference and the Trinational Metropolitan Region of the Upper Rhine, which are congruent cooperation perimeters.

Figure 8: Institutional map of the Metropolitan pole Sillon lorrain

Source: ESPON ACTAREA (2017)

The regional cross-border cooperation landscape around the Metropolitan pole Sillon lorrain is dense. Three cross-border cooperation networks involve either members of the 'Sillon lorrain' or neighbouring territories: Tonicités (created in 2006), Eurodistrict SaarMoselle (created in 2010 as a EGTC), Quattropole (2014). These networks aim at creating arenas to support cross-border mobility, common public services and urban development.

The Greater Region framework encompasses all these initiatives and involves Grand Est (FR), Luxembourg, Wallonie (BE), Rheinland-Pfalz (DE), Saarland (DE).