

Euro-Regions and Sustainable Development

Extended Abstract

This project intends to analyse the Euro-Regions and their role in sustainable development in the European Union. As the transnational character of sustainable development is one of its defining characteristics, territories need to articulate and work with each other in order to identify common goals and implement sustainable development. Euro-Regions, as European Union institutions whose main function is to nurture cross-border cooperation are the ideal site for EU member-state sustainable development goals in articulation with each other.

In this context, Euro-Regions thus have the potential to play an important role in tackling not only environmental, but also social and economic problems, that are central for the European Union's development agenda, as part of its pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Euro-Regions (also called Euregios, Euregions or Euroregions) are groups of local and/or regional authorities, from two or more EU member-states, that promote cooperation across one or more borders (Wolf, 2006). As points of intersections of different national, regional and EU-level actors and policies, these institutions play a very important role in nurturing cross-border cooperation in the European Union, and in the overall model of multi-level governance that characterises the European Union, by promoting a sharing of power between different level actors within and beyond national state borders (Schakel, 2020). This is reflected in the European Union formalised legal framework for Euro-Regions entitled European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC). For the European Union, these groupings "shall (...) facilitate and promote cross-border, transnational and/or interregional cooperation, (...), between its

members (...), with the exclusive aim of strengthening economic and social cohesion” (European Union, 2006, art.1). The figure of the EGTC was designed to foster cross-border cooperation at interregional and transnational levels (Evrard, 2016), and so, it would be the perfect framework to develop strategies for sustainable development, as it includes different actors, from different territories and levels of power, allowing for the policies to have more detailed view of the situation, which is crucial for the assessment of transnational environmental and socio-economic questions.

On the one hand, euroregions and their cross-border approach are important as they connect to the multi-level governance model in the EU, while creating a platform that is beneficial for fostering and enhancing sustainable development and goal integration (Blatter, 2000). On the other hand, cross-border cooperation can have some issues associated to it, fostering antagonistic communities and interests than can come into conflict (Blatter, 2000). Despite these shortcomings and possible problems, policies of sustainable development, being intrinsically transnational, demand cross-border cooperation and its broad dynamics. Consequently, Euroregions are specific platforms with great potential for sustainable development policies (Kern, 2011).

Questions of sustainable development clearly possess a transnational character, ignoring historically-defined territories and boundaries. It is therefore important, not only to maintain and preserve natural habitats and resources, but also to promote development that is coherent with natural limits and ecosystems to develop development strategies that are sensible to their natural cross-border implications. Hence, promoting cross-border cooperation and harmonisation of goals having in view sustainable development is a key aspect of the success of each state’s individual development strategies. The Sustainable Development Goals agenda, promoted by the UN, thus aims not only to tackle ecological issues but also social and economic issues, in the context of the broader sustainable development framework.

The EU has declared its commitment to sustainable development since the Millennium Development Goals were established in 2000 (Rodriguez-Anton et al., 2019), and now transition to a less linear model, minimising waste, and achieving a circular economy (Rodriguez-Anton et al., 2019). This expansion of the sustainable development targets within the EU has been a gradual movement, and so sustainable development has been seeing more and more inclusion in different policy areas (Rietig, 2013), despite sometimes lacking the actual enforcement needed for these measures to be implemented, and showing a more symbolic rather than effective commitment (Baker, 2007).

It is important the declaration of commitment to sustainable development from the EU, as it bears important transformative potentials (Baker, 2007). As sustainable development goals demand profound cooperation between the involved actors, it is important for the EU to choose the right way to implement them. Since the 1980s the EU has developed into a system of multi-level, in which national governmental control becomes diluted by the activities of supranational and subnational actors (Marks & Hooghe, 2001). Multi-level governance has been consolidating in the EU and its' dispersed competencies, interlocked institutions, shifting agendas and multiple actors denote conditions of dialogue and cooperation needed for the sustainability targets across the region (Marks & Hooghe, 2001). In this multi-level framework, we see cross-border cooperation and Euro-Regions as the clear path to integrate sustainable development in the EU completely. Through cross-border cooperation, this strategic environmental cross-border cooperation has clear goals, such as diversity of participating actors, experience in cross-border cooperation, coherence of objectives, and benefits to both sides (Kurowska-Pysz et al., 2018), posing Euro-Regions as a good vehicle for its application, since they already share these conditions and have proven to be collaborative and problem-oriented approaches (Meadowcroft, 1999), which could benefit the success of sustainable development.

We will focus on sustainable development and multi-level governance, trying to understand what is the role of Euro-regions, in the EU multi-level governance structure, for sustainable development goals achievement, through cross-border cooperation. We will see what are the positive outcomes of this relation between Euro-Regions and sustainable development, and equally the difficulties and obstacles they encounter in their path.

Environmental and ecological problems are intrinsically transnational issues, crossing borders and affecting different countries and societies, these questions are at the core of sustainable development. From these, sustainable development expands into economic, social and other problems that hamper societies development, as we can see in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals that highlight the synergies, dynamics and networks that exist and are created among the different targets, as they cannot work separately, and full achievement can only be attained through more inclusive practices. In the EU, the institution that reunites the different level actors and the cross-border cooperation is the Euro-Region, being the privileged platform for its implementation inside the EU.

Through the lens of multi-level governance, this project will analyse different Euro-Regions in order to understand their role in promoting sustainable development in the EU. In this context, particular focus will be placed on assessing the frequently complex and tense cross-border relations between EU-member

states when it comes to joint planning of their development processes, in an attempt to understand, on the one hand, how Euroregions facilitate these relations and the pursuit of a sustainable development agenda in the EU and, on the other hand, what type of obstacles do Euroregions face in promoting this goal.

Methodologically, we will engage mainly in interviews and documental analysis, allied to some literature analysis and field work, besides the central comparative study, that will focus on some euroregions as case studies that shows the virtues and difficulties of euroregions in sustainable development in a multi-level cross-border environment.

The analysed topic is the Euro-regions, as a multi-level institution based on cross-border cooperation, and their relation with sustainable development, as an inherently transnational and inclusive issue. With this project we mean to analyse how Euro-Regions and their cross-border cooperation projects relate with sustainable development, in a framework of multi-level governance, and taking into account the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals by the EU. The goal is to understand how these elements work together, their dynamics and synergies, but also the obstacles and difficulties in their way. Building on existing literature, official documents, case studies, interviews and field work, we aim to expand literature on this subject. Focusing on the role of the Euro-regions in sustainable development in Europe, the difficulties found by euroregions and what does this tells us about the relation between euroregions and sustainable development, and the adequacy of this model.

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