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Transboundary Planning and Governance: from challenge to solution in times of crises?

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Abstract

This article introduces the AESOP Thematic Group “Transboundary Planning and Governance” and its recent organisational and thematic changes. It also scans recent research from the viewpoint of two interlinked key dimensions of transboundary planning and governance: scale and scope. By doing so, the article aims to highlight promising research perspectives related to transboundary and integrated planning, crossing administrative borders and siloes respectively. This is especially relevant with a view to the multiple crises society is currently facing. To date, transboundary planning and governance is often portrayed through the challenges it is facing. However, as this article argues, there is a need to move forward and focus on how the transboundary setting – often more flexible and malleable than other governance contexts – can make a contribution to address current crises.

Keywords

thematic group, AESOP, scale, scope, soft spaces, soft planning, policy integration, policy transfer, planning system, planning culture, strategic planning, border, cross-border, city-region, integrated planning, sustainability

Introduction

This article introduces the activities and focus of the AESOP Thematic Group (TG) on Transboundary Planning and Governance and aims to outline potential future research directions for the years ahead.

From 2014 to 2022, Giancarlo Cotella and Stefanie Dühr acted as coordinators of the AESOP Thematic Group “Transboundary Spaces, Policy Diffusion and Planning Cultures” (Cotella & Dühr, 2016). Under their lead, the group has been home to a variety of activities, including the first symposium of the TG in Kaiserslautern in 2016, organised by Karina Pallengst, and a series of events on policy transfer and maritime spatial planning. Moreover, the TG has been responsible for hosting the popular “Governance” track at the annual AESOP congresses.

At the AESOP 2022 Congress in Tartu, Estonia, the lead of the Thematic Group has been handed over to a new coordination team: Eva Purkarthofer and Alois Humer have taken over

the role as TG coordinators. As first action, the new coordination team launched a debate in the TG meeting in Tartu on the name, focus and activities of the thematic group. After constructive discussions with several key members of the TG, it was agreed to change the name of the TG to “Transboundary Planning and Governance”. The new name was chosen to reflect the various themes of interest of the active TG members. In a nutshell, the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance aims to provide room for discussing new planning spaces, formal and informal governance arrangements and comparative perspectives on planning systems, cultures, and practices in Europe and beyond, across various scales (see also AESOP, 2023).

The remainder of this section briefly explains the idea behind AESOP TGs and elaborates on the focus of the renewed TG Transboundary Planning and Governance. The following sections reflect on a potential future research agenda and discuss how transboundary planning and governance can move from being perceived as a challenge to being part of the solution in times of crisis. Lastly, an outlook section explains some practicalities around the activities of the TG and motivates for becoming an active member.

What is an AESOP TG?

The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) is a European wide network of around 150 universities and schools of higher education concerned with spatial planning and related fields. Within AESOP, so-called Thematic Groups are working groups on specific themes, established in order to create more effective platforms for debate and discussion among the AESOP community. There are currently 18 Thematic Groups listed on the AESOP website. Overall, their level and focus of activities varies greatly and is directly dependent on their level of institutionalization, member commitment and working practices. As the TGs are flexible and evolving arrangements, uniformity is not a goal. Rather, each TG should find a way for meaningful cooperation that is beneficial for its members.

AESOP supports thematic groups through institutional patronage, rights to use the AESOP logo and communication platforms, quality assurance, involvement in congress organization and the possibility for financial support for costs incurred from scientific activities (AESOP Council of Representatives, 2019).

What is the thematic focus of the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance?

The relaunch of the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance in 2022 has resulted in a new name and an updated thematic focus of the TG. In line with its history and origins (see also Cotella & Dühr, 2016), the TG provides a home for those interested in the international and comparative dimension of planning. Especially the context of European policymaking, including European spatial planning, EU sectoral policies such as Cohesion Policy and Europeanisation processes, has led to intense academic debate in the field of spatial planning. These processes of internationalisation of planning have also triggered increased debate about

policy transfer and policy learning, both within Europe and between the Global North and Global South (Blanc et al., 2023).

While transnational planning remains a core theme of the TG, transboundary planning and governance is understood in a broad sense in the context of the TG. Transboundary can thus also refer to planning process crossing administrative borders within countries at various scales, for example through the emergence of soft spaces such as city-regions (Purkarthofer & Granqvist, 2021). The rise of maritime spatial planning has brought to the fore another type of transboundary planning at the land-sea interface (Walsh, 2021). Lastly, transboundary planning and governance also refers to transcending disciplinary boundaries and administrative silos, thus covering themes such as policy integration (Duman, 2023).

For all practices of transboundary planning and governance, it is not only the new spatial or institutional arrangements that are of interest to the TG but also their wider implications, including what it means for citizens, politicians and planners to live and work with(in) these spaces.

Comparative research, for example at the local, city-regional, regional, cross-border, national and supra-national levels, plays a key role in understanding planning systems and planning cultures, which in turn shape ideas, policies and practices (Stead, 2024). Comparative perspectives within and between different country contexts can also reveal processes of policy transfer and policy diffusion and illustrate how planning ideas travel and transform (Healey, 2012, 2013; Purkarthofer & Granqvist, 2021). Lastly, the exploration of local and regional specificities can also shed light on the role of actors in shaping planning policies, and their scope of action vis-à-vis the institutional setting within which they work (Purkarthofer, Humer, & Mattila, 2021; Purkarthofer & Stead, 2023).

Transboundary research perspectives: scale and scope

In this section, we want to build on the TG's thematic focus and present a few timely research directions. We organise our line of argument along two interlinked key dimensions of transboundary planning and governance: scale and scope.

Rethinking scale

In terms of scale, transboundary phenomena appear in-between the regular tiers of (governmental) planning. Most explicitly, in planning research we can detect an interest in the city-regional scale – between the local and the regional –; the cross-border scale – between the regional and the national –; and the macro-regional scale – between the national and the continental. Often the emergence of such new scales is accompanied by friction with existing governance arrangements (Granqvist et al., 2021) or with the broader interests behind them (Purkarthofer, Humer, & Mäntysalo, 2021).

Often, these new planning scales build on the idea of functional or soft spaces that capture the reality of challenges and present themselves as suitable spatial frame for governance solutions. Through imaginaries (Davoudi & Brooks, 2021; Grundel, 2021), visioning (Mikuła, 2023), strategy development (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2009), branding (Zimmerbauer & Terlouw, 2024) and various other performative and governance mechanisms (Mattila & Heinilä, 2022; Purkarthofer & Granqvist, 2021), these soft spaces have been institutionalised as planning scales.

A thorough understanding of planning systems and planning cultures is needed to grasp what is truly novel about such new planning scales – a question not as trivial as placing them between existing tiers of policy making. Recent research on planning systems has moved away from rigid groupings and models of national planning systems and has instead focused on assessing reforms and trajectories (Nadin et al., 2018; Nadin & Fernández-Maldonado, 2023; Schmitt & Smas, 2023). Contributions addressing planning cultures have started to question the nation state as frame of reference and identified variations within states (Jackson, 2022; Purkarthofer, Humer, & Mattila, 2021). They have also continued to show how planning culture affects all aspects of planning practice, including the use of digital means in planning (Nummi et al., 2023) or the global circulation of planning ideas (Zimmermann & Momm, 2022).

Comparative research continues to be crucial to understand both planning systems and cultures. However, the challenges and pitfalls of comparative research are increasingly acknowledged (Nadin et al., 2018; Stead, 2024). Nonetheless, promising comparative perspectives illuminate planning practices from a qualitative viewpoint (e.g. Smas & Schmitt, 2021). Such qualitative comparisons complement a continued tradition of studies based on quantitative indicators about transboundary concerns (e.g. Viegas et al., 2024).

In this context, the European Union is often not only a frame for comparison, but a significant driver in the emergence of new planning scales (Purkarthofer, 2018). This calls for a continued engagement with the European level, together with the fact that the EU continues to affect all fields of policy making in various ways (Stead & Albrechts, 2023). Although terms such as European spatial planning or European spatial development might not be popular terms in research nowadays, links between the EU and domestic planning continue to exist, and their nuanced exploration from an output-oriented logic might provide new insights about their application and impacts (Purkarthofer, 2024).

Overall, recent research has highlighted both the omnipresence and complexity of rescaling processes. This encourages a wide engagement with scale in planning but also calls for more nuanced and contextual understandings of the observed processes. Upon closer inspection, common phenomena such as city-regional governance might thus differ significantly from place to place and thus warrant more engagement with context, highlighting the difficulties to walk the tightrope of contextual and comparative research.

Rethinking scope

In terms of scope, some themes are traditionally more prominent in transboundary governance and planning than others. Whenever uneven development on both sides of a border becomes an issue, transboundary perspectives are fruitful. This concerns sectoral planning of infrastructures and services, for example related to transport or health, but also cultural and social matters. Moreover, environmental issues such as wildlife habitats, river catchment areas, or pollution do not adhere to administrative borders.

Current challenges highlight the need for a transboundary approach to planning which spans across administrative borders but also overcomes administrative divisions between various policy fields. The fragmentation of public policies is increasingly acknowledged, and while the calls for more and better policy integration have been voiced for decades (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), such integration proves extremely challenging in practice (Duman, 2023; Stead & Meijers, 2009). Recent research highlights positive trends towards integration, yet also states that spatial planning often remains on the sidelines of such processes, rather than guiding integration (Nadin et al., 2021).

Regarding the scope and contents of planning processes, research has also looked to policy transfer (and other related concepts) with the goal to understand how planning ideas travel in across borders and between various contexts (Healey, 2013; Purkarthofer & Granqvist, 2021). Both policy integration and policy transfer literature touch upon the question what is integrated or transferred, for example policy tools (Stead, 2021) or knowledge (Eräranta & Mladenović, 2021). Increasing attention has also been paid to processes of policy transfer to, from and in the Global South (Blanc et al., 2023; Blanc & Cotella, 2023).

In general, there seems to be agreement that the scope of planning needs to be broad in order to grasp issues holistically, yet, it remains unclear how planning can meaningfully frame various policy fields and their integration, without becoming spread too thin – bringing to mind Wildavsky's famous title "If planning is everything, maybe it's nothing" (Wildavsky, 1973). It has been acknowledged that planning might not have the political weight to frame such processes of policy integration, and this might be even more true for transboundary planning and governance, often operating institutionally on thin ice and few resources.

Transboundary planning and governance: From challenge to solution in times of crises?

Media coverage and academic discourse alike have been emphasizing that we are living in times of multiple crises (Cotella et al., 2023; Davoudi, 2023; Olesen, 2023). The climate crisis is looming over us with more and more instances of extreme weather observed globally highlighting its urgency. Although the immediate effects of the COVID 19 pandemic have retreated into the background, the last years have shown the downsides of our globalized

society and resulting connectedness, and the strain on systems of public service provision in many countries. Russia's war on Ukraine has caused deep affliction across Europe and triggered far reaching social and economic implications on the whole continent, and globally. The war in Israel represents another geopolitical conflict with global consequences, including heightened political tensions and severe humanitarian distress.

While each of these tragic events is complex in itself and deserves deeper discussion than can be provided here, it can be said that all of these crises have a spatial dimension and a transboundary character. To a degree, they therefore highlight the continued or heightened relevance of transboundary planning and governance. They also demonstrate that transboundary planning is not confined to the voluntary and feel-good character of cooperation initiatives across borders such as Interreg, although without doubt these programmes can have a positive impact on policy coordination and transboundary relationship building. Instead, transboundary interaction is a reality and necessity in many respects, and often it is the sudden abolition of such interactions across borders which highlights their importance for dialogue, mutual understanding and exchange – features that might be taken for granted too easily under peaceful conditions.

As regards scale, planning and governance research and practice continues to be concerned with finding the adequate scales to identify problems and offer solutions. Transboundary planning creates new opportunities for policy responses, but it also comes with a long list of challenges, including inflexible administrative systems, diverging planning cultures, day-to-day communication challenges and – from a research perspective – methodological pitfalls and data scarcity.

Regarding scope, policy integration represents probably the most crucial goal for public administration, as it promises enhanced efficiency, improved outcomes, inter-sectoral synergies, a handle on wicked problems and the promotion of policy innovation. However, the reality of policy integration faces challenges such as the rigidity of administrative and political borders, prevalence of departmentalism, strength of sectoral interests, decentralisation of government and fragmentation of governance.

As can be seen from these challenges, integrated and transboundary can be understood as two sides of the same coin, the former associated with the scope and the latter with the spatial dimension of challenges and solutions. In many respects, such an understanding of transboundary planning and governance resembles what has been conceptualised as strategic spatial planning elsewhere (Albrechts, 2004; Healey et al., 1997; Mäntysalo et al., 2015).

In the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance we wish to continue rethinking both scale and scope, not least with a view to the aforementioned crises. The crucial question for researchers remains how not to focus on the challenges that transboundary/integrated planning are facing but how our growing knowledge about these processes can constructively contribute to become part of the solution. For example, in the context of the climate crisis, it

has been acknowledged that sustainable development is a multiscalar concern as well as an issue that requires a broad scope of actions (Næss, 2023; Purkarthofer, 2022). Yet, planning struggles to offer powerful solutions, let alone create the governance conditions to implement them in transboundary settings. While we do not have the answers to this dilemma, we think that the transboundary setting – often more flexible and malleable than other governance contexts – can make a contribution to address current crises.

Conclusion and outlook

As we have outlined in this article, transboundary planning and governance remain timely issues. The AESOP Thematic Group “Transboundary Planning and Governance” provides an excellent frame for discussing issues related to current challenges and planning approaches, to share relevant research findings among the scientific community and with planning practitioners and to learn from each other’s experiences. The TG is open to anyone with an interest in issues related to planning and governance and who is eager to continue rethinking issues related to scale and scope.

In the previous sections, we have attempted to highlight some potential elements of a research agenda associated with transboundary planning and governance. We would like to emphasise that this short sketch is not comprehensive and should not limit the activities associated with the TG in any way. In other words, we are happy to additionally accommodate other research directions within the TG and would also be eager to receive critical comments on the initial steps towards a “transboundary research agenda”, sketched out in this article.

Our main intention is to show that transboundary concerns are manifold and continue to be relevant for planning and society as a whole. We thus hope that the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance will continue to represent an active forum for knowledge exchange and encounter. The success of such an endeavour surely depends on the level of interest and activity of the TG members. As TG coordinators, we are therefore eager to hear your proposals for activities to keep the momentum of the TG going. In other words, please be in touch if you want to follow and co-create this AESOP TG with your own ideas and research interest in the field of transboundary planning and governance. In support of this follows an overview of established activity formats of the TG and practicalities of how to become an active member.

What are the main activities of the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance?

Following the re-launch of the TG, the main activities of the thematic group were summarised in four points. First, there are two annual *TG meetings*. One meeting takes place in person at the annual AESOP Congress in July, and the other meeting takes place online in December. Both meetings serve to discuss the focus of the group as well as joint future activities such as special sessions at the upcoming AESOP Congress or calls for special issues. The meetings are

open to all interested persons – an invitation is sent through the mailing list and an open announcement will appear on the TG webpage.

Second, the TG organises a *track at the AESOP Congress*. The TG coordinators, usually together with local representatives and AESOP Young Academics representatives, are responsible for the scientific orientation of the track, the selection of abstracts, the selection of potential best congress papers, the scheduling and the chairing of a track. For the AESOP 2024 Congress in Paris, France, the track associated with the TG is entitled “BORDERS: Transboundary planning for sustainability and cohesion”. It is also possible to organise special sessions or roundtables at the AESOP Congress, which are then aligned with the track.

Third, the TG has received offers from various *scientific journals* whose scope is aligned with the focus of the TG to organise joint activities or present proposals for special issues. Currently, journal collaboration is ongoing with the journals “European Planning Studies”, “European Journal of Spatial Development”, “Europa XXI” and “Planning Practice and Research”. By way of example, right this debate article is one such evident proof of the well aligned focus and aims between, in this case, the EJSD (Servillo et al., 2022) and the TG.

Fourth, the TG aims to organise and facilitate *conferences, seminars and workshops* on relevant themes. Such events can have a more intimate scale compared to the established conferences in the field and can therefore lead to more focused thematic discussion and collaboration. Although the TG coordinators are eager to facilitate the scientific and practical organisation of such events, the initiative and interest of other TG members is crucial for realising them.

How to become a member of the TG Transboundary Planning and Governance?

In the AESOP TG Transboundary Planning and Governance, membership is a rather open concept, that does not come with any strings attached. This means that everyone can sign up to become a member and membership does not entail any fees or expected commitments. Our main means of communication is a mailing list to which one can be added by contacting the TG coordinators. An AESOP membership of one’s institution is not a requirement for being included in the mailing list. Alternatively, users of the AESOP website (<https://aesop-planning.eu/>) can register for TG updates via their personal dashboard, to be found in their profile.

Although there are no set expectations for the TG members, the success and relevance of the TG of course depends greatly on the activity and interest of its members. We are thus grateful for all initiatives and ideas coming from our member community and will eagerly try to establish connections and facilitate activities related to the TG.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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