![ADE - ANALYSIS FOR ECONOMIC DECISIONS]

Evaluation of the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) programme

Final Report

March 2013

Study coordinated by *A*DE

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List of acronyms

CU	Coordination Unit
ECP	ESPON National Contact Point
ENPI	European Neighbourhood Policy
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESDP	European Spatial Development Perspective
ESPON	European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion
EU	European Union
IPA	Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance
MA	Managing Authority
MC	Monitoring Committee
SB	Sounding Board
SEG	Scientific Expert Group
TA2020	Territorial Agenda 2020
TC	Territorial Co-operation
TO	Territorial Observations
ToR	Terms of Reference
TPG	Transnational Project Group

Executive Summary

1.   Territorial cohesion and the role of ESPON

- Since its inception in the 2000-06 Regional Policy programming period, ESPON's role has been to contribute to understanding of issues relating to spatial development and the spatial impact of policies across Europe. The mission of the current "ESPON 2013" programme, running from 2007 to 2013, is to:

  "*Support policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion and a harmonious development of the European territory by (1) providing comparable information, evidence, analyses and scenarios on territorial dynamics and (2) revealing territorial capital and potentials for development of regions and larger territories contributing to European competitiveness, territorial cooperation and a sustainable and balanced development*".

- The current programme has a budget of €47 million of which 75% is co-financed by the ERDF. The remainder is funded by the 31 countries participating (27 EU Member States and Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).

- There are five programme priorities in the current ESPON programme[1]. These are:

  1. **Applied research** on territorial development, competitiveness and cohesion: evidence on territorial trends, perspectives and policy impacts;

  2. **Targeted analyses** based on user demand: a European perspective on the development of different types of territories;

  3. **Scientific platform and tools**: comparable regional data, analytical tools and scientific support;

  4. **Awareness raising, empowerment and involvement**: capacity building, dialogue and networking;

  5. **Communication and technical/analytical assistance**

- In November 2011, the Ministerial meeting on the Territorial Agenda of the EU2020, held in Poznan[2], under the Polish Presidency, concluded that:

  "The capacity of ESPON in supporting the European Commission and Member States in reinforcing EU policies' territorial dimension needs to be strengthened. In order to ensure a

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[1]   The fifth Priority, which is technical assistance, was not included in the focus of this evaluation.

[2]   "*Roadmap towards promoting and enhancing an integrated, territorial approach based on the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020*" Polish Presidency, November 2011, Poznan, Poland.

> *widespread use of territorial evidence-based responses in form of short term analytical deliveries and comparable data on regions and cities in key policy processes its institutional setting needs to be reinforced."*

- In addition, EU Member States agreed that the European Commission would conduct *"an evaluation of the results of ESPON providing the basis for its future work[3]"*. The rest of this Report details the main findings from this evaluation which was carried out in eight months, from April to December 2012. The evaluation included 12 in-depth project case studies, peer reviews by a team of senior academic experts with relevant research and policy experience in the field of territorial cohesion and interviews with a range of stakeholders.

2.   The main findings from the evaluation

Finding 1:   High quality research – the challenge is to translate this into policy impact

The independent peer reviewers found that the research carried out is generally very good. In fact, for 6 out of the 12 projects, outputs were considered of high scientific quality and useful for policy makers. A further 4 were considered of medium quality and only 2 were considered of lower quality. Moreover, most of the research projects filled a genuine gap – research topics which inform territorial policy but are not usually covered in the academic literature or most academic funding routes.

> **Two examples of high quality projects**
>
> The **SGPTDE** project provided quantitative analyses of the performance of secondary cities across Europe, together with nine in-depth case studies. The peer reviewers noted the quality and policy relevance of the outputs – especially important in a context where the performance of secondary cities represents a gap in the existing literature. Finally, analysis responded flexibly to the economic crisis as it unfolded.
>
> **ESPON climate** used an innovative methodological approach to assess regional climate change vulnerability. A key feature was the wide range of different types of data brought together and analysed in one place for the first time. The results were published in a user-friendly format – clear typologies and easily readable maps.

However, the challenge is to translate project quality into policy impact:

- Few of the interviewees – project leaders, academic peer review experts, Monitoring Committee members – could demonstrate policy impacts from the 12 case study projects. This was a particular issue for the breadth of research carried out under

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[3]   Ibid.

Priority 1 – since Priority 2 projects are demand driven, they tend to find a more 'natural' policy audience.

- The problems start with unfocused terms of reference. 8 out of the 12 projects had project specifications that were too broad and ambitious, attempting to cover too many issues from the outset. There was a clear correlation between broader coverage and fewer policy relevant outputs. FOCI and TERCO were particularly clear examples: the sheer breadth of the work and the findings made clear policy messages difficult.

An example of broad coverage reducing policy impact: the FOCI project

The FOCI project had project specifications that were very broad, covering three main research areas: 1) the state of European cities; 2) cities and their hinterland; 3) opportunities for development through polycentric cooperation. Each of these alone would have been an ambitious research project.

The breadth of coverage ensured that, although the project team collected a large amount of data, it was very difficult to distil clear and concise policy relevant conclusions. In addition, such broad coverage made it impossible to define and target an audience of policy makers and stakeholders.

In the end, project outputs were far too dense and complicated for policy makers to read and digest (e.g. the Scientific Report had up to 800 pages[4]). The length of the outputs meant that the feedback received from the Sounding Board and Monitoring Committee was very limited and it was very difficult for the Coordination Unit to steer the process towards policy relevant outputs.

- The inception process tends not to define a policy audience or plans for how to engage them throughout the lifecycle of the project. 7 out of the 12 project lead partners said that a dissemination strategy was absent and the target policy audience was not clear.

- It is not surprising therefore that project outputs too often focus on experts/researchers instead of key stakeholder and policy maker audiences. Whilst some improvements were made in this programming round compared to the previous, deliverables are still often too dense, long and not easily digestible by non-academic audiences. Policy makers find it hard to pick out the key messages – all of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the project research findings should be more concrete, concise and presented in short policy briefs specifically targeted to policy makers.

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[4]   For the full version of the FOCI Scientific Report, dated 15/12/2010 please see:
      http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_AppliedResearch/foci.html

> **Good practice in dissemination: the DEMIFER project**
>
> The policy brief from the DEMIFER[5] project provides a concise 4-page summary of the main findings from the project relating to the issue of the impact of migration on population change. A key fact cited is that 75 per cent of all European regions will have a larger population in 2050 if current migration flows continue than if there were no migration[6]. Two useful maps are included to illustrate and accompany the short discussion of the key findings. The final section highlights several policy implications from the DEMIFER project findings, which are presented very succinctly in a user friendly way, including that migration will most likely benefit the most affluent regions whilst poor regions would lost population due to migration.

- The Coordination Unit's dissemination strategy focuses mainly on the central ESPON events and seminars. This strategy seems better than disseminating individual projects, since it has the potential advantage of economies of scale. However, outreach to policy makers is a challenge: participation from non-ESPON partners outside the hosting country is usually close to zero.

- Project leaders and Monitoring Committee members alike said that the burden of administration (see below) means that the ESPON Coordination unit does not have enough time for scientific issues, including dissemination. Indeed, several Monitoring Committee members suggested that for ESPON to produce more concise, timely and relevant documents it will need to rely on more senior in-house expertise and have access to a pool of outside experts who can draft such documents in a relatively short time frame.

Finding 2: Excessive administrative burden at the project level

The administrative burden of managing an ESPON project is too heavy:

- At least half the median project leader's time is spent dealing with financial, audit and administrative issues, not on the actual research. 5 out of the 12 project leaders had experience with FP7 research projects and found that ESPON procedures compared unfavourably. First level audit controls are a particular problem, partly because auditors in Member States are not used to dealing with such claims.

- The fact that all project partners had to go through first level audit controls, even if they received small amounts of money (e.g. less than 10,000 Euros) meant that payment delays were common - sometimes lasting over a year. This caused significant problems for project partners that were not able to rely on other funds to meet cash flow short falls.

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[5] "*Demographic Diversity of the European Territory*"; "*Impact of migration on Population change*"; "*Scenarios in the European Labour Force*",
http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_AppliedResearch/demifer.html, September 2011.

[6] Ibid. pg 1

- 6 out of the 12 project leaders said that they would not take on the leadership of another ESPON project because of the bureaucracy.

While complaining about the procedures, project leaders generally appreciated the role of the ESPON Coordination Unit team in helping them navigate these procedures. Moreover, during the second half of the current programme, some improvements were made to speed up payments (e.g. to between 2 or 3 months).

Finding 3: Governance could be improved – in particular, the Monitoring Committee needs a more strategic focus

Monitoring Committee members represent the policy customers of ESPON and should provide useful inputs into shaping and monitoring the programme:

- The Monitoring Committee members are currently asked to read and comment on each and every project deliverable. Clearly, this is not practical and hence the level of feedback provided is really rather limited – lack of feedback from the Monitoring Committee was highlighted as a general problem by all 12 project leaders.

- The few comments which do arrive are often too general in nature or focus on issues relating to particular Member States. Project leaders highlighted a lack of guidance on how to increase the policy relevance of the findings.

- In the present institutional setting, every decision on every project must be validated by the entire Monitoring Committee. Given the limited scientific capacity of the Monitoring Committee, a consensus could only be reached on very general and loose recommendations and the instructions given to the research team were never sufficiently clear to imply a significant change in the behaviour of the research team.

- A majority of Monitoring Committee members said that they wanted to reduce the amount of time spent on administrative and financial issues and to focus instead on strategic issues. This is particularly important since at least half of the Monitoring Committee members are only able to spend as little as 1 day per month on ESPON related activities.

- An interesting finding: many of the ESPON National Contact Points (ECPs) are engaging with policy makers at the (sub)national level, disseminating findings in national and local languages. However, ECP funding and operation varies by Member State – some of the ECPs are more focused on accessing ESPON funding than on engaging with policy makers, an obvious conflict of interest.

4.   Recommendations

The findings of this evaluation are in line with the 2011 evaluation[7]. This confirms a consensus about the ways in which ESPON needs to be reshaped - improvements have been made, but clearly more needs to be done.

4.1   Improve the policy relevance of ESPON's research

Measures to ensure policy relevance should be firmly mainstreamed throughout the project lifecycle:

- Project design and specifications should include three key elements: (i) a policy relevant issue or question; (ii) a realistic and feasible scientific contribution to this issue; (iii) a specific policy audience to which it will be delivered.

- Each project should be required, from the outset, to make a detailed plan for engaging the policy audience at each key step of the project life-cycle, not just at the end of the project. The plan should include key milestones, numbers, tool and approaches to be used and by whom.

- The way in which the research findings are presented and disseminated needs to be improved, through more concise, targeted and innovative summaries that complement the Scientific Reports produced. The use of easily accessible and digestible tools such as PowerPoint, video overviews and social media should be used by the projects to tailor the key policy relevant findings to the policy audience.

- There is only so much that project leaders can do here – economies of scale mean that the ESPON Co-ordination Unit has a key role to play as a "knowledge broker", an interface between researchers and the policy world. In particular, the model of Priority 2 projects suggests that projects have a greater impact when responding to policy demand – the Co-ordination Unit should take the lead not just in disseminating results, but also in ensuring that ESPON supply follows policy demand.

- The Monitoring Committee and national ESPON Contact Points have a natural and obvious role to play as a policy interface – informing ESPON of policy demand as well as disseminating results of ESPON projects.

4.2   Simplify ESPON's administrative process

The project administrative process must be simplified - currently it creates a disproportionate burden for lead partners and for the Coordination Unit. One option, suggested by the comparison with FP7 is a 'service contract' logic. This would also have the advantage of paying projects by results and giving the ESPON Coordination Unit team greater control over the policy relevance and quality of the outputs.

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[7] ESPON considerations post 2013, "*ESPON 2013 Programme External Evaluation*", Loxley Consultancy, 2011.

4.3   Refocus the governance of the ESPON programme

The governance structure of the ESPON programme needs to be refocused to ensure it is 'fit for purpose':

- The ESPON Monitoring Committee needs to focus much more on setting the key priorities, objectives and milestones of the programme. In other words, a strategic view, maximising the policy relevance and impact of the programme.

- This necessitates more delegation within the committee, in line with the thematic interests of members. We suggest creating thematic steering groups with one or several Monitoring Committee members (given the number of actual comments on most projects, we suggest no more than three), a member of the Coordination Unit and a European Commission official (usually but not exclusively from DG Regional Policy). The role of the steering group would be to follow projects in this area from conception to completion. The Monitoring Committee member on the steering group would be responsible for providing a short update on the progress and key findings of the particular project to the rest of the Monitoring Committee.

- The ESPON Contact Points should be selected through a process that reduces the number of partners who are candidates for research projects and instead emphasises their capacity for dissemination - engagement activities with policy makers, translating and communicating research findings into policy relevant messages in local languages and contexts.

1. Introduction and methodology

1.1 The analytical focus of the evaluation

The aim of the evaluation is to draw conclusions on the effectiveness of ESPON and provide recommendations for improvement – in a context where the demands on ESPON are likely to increase. The aim is to examine the links that run from the conception of respective ESPON projects through the implementation and then to assess the policy influence and impact.

The respective Tasks and main research questions from the Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the evaluation contribute to three different levels of analysis (see Figure 1 below).
These are:

1) the ESPON programme as a whole;

2) the 12 case studies that have been selected as the core of the evaluation, across the four ESPON priorities;

3) the individual experts and stakeholders involved in the respective projects;

As Figure 1 highlights, the ESPON programme is situated within a policy context that provides, on the one hand, some of the main drivers to the thematic projects carried out. On the other hand, the links between the ESPON programme and the respective projects are crucial in terms of providing policy relevant outputs that can be used by a range of stakeholders within that policy context.

The key point is that each of the three different levels of analysis is interlinked and the aim is to explore the "causal chains" that connect the different levels together. For example, Task 2 deals with the case studies selected, how they operate and the policy relevance of the respective outputs produced. In turn, these outputs contribute to those produced by the ESPON programme overall, which is the focus of Task 4, assessing the role and function of the Monitoring Committee and Coordination Unit. Lastly, Task 5 provides conclusions and recommendations about the ways to improve ESPON for the next programming period 2014-2020.

The next section discusses in more detail the various methodological approaches and tools that were used to carry out the respective Tasks outlined here.

Figure 1:   Analytical focus of the ESPON evaluation
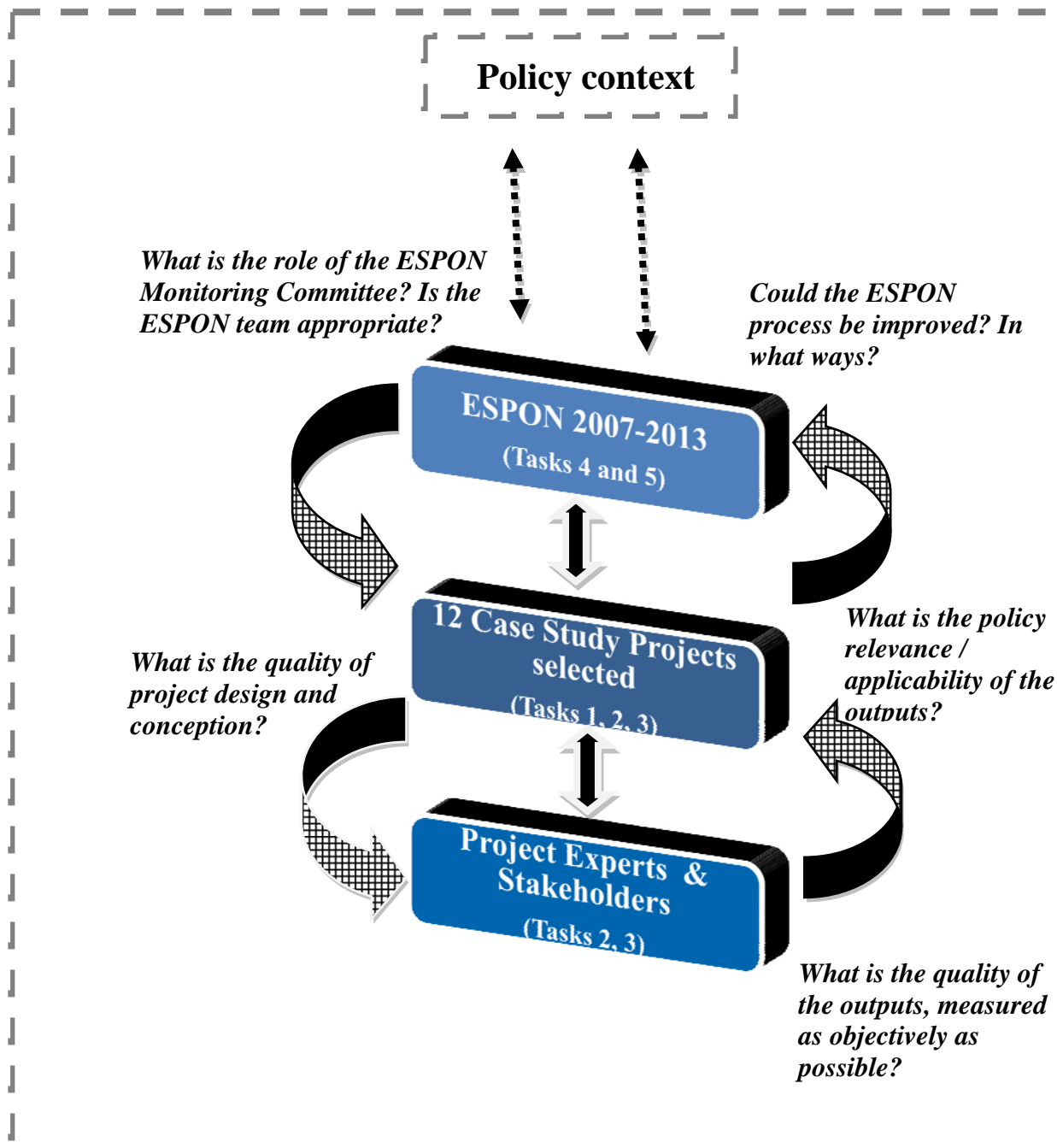
1.2   Overall methodology of the evaluation

This section describes the methodology that was used in each of the respective Tasks of the ESPON evaluation. Figure 2 below provides the overall timeline of the evaluation, taking into account the deliverables and the activities carried out during each Task.

Figure 2:　　Methodology: overall timeline
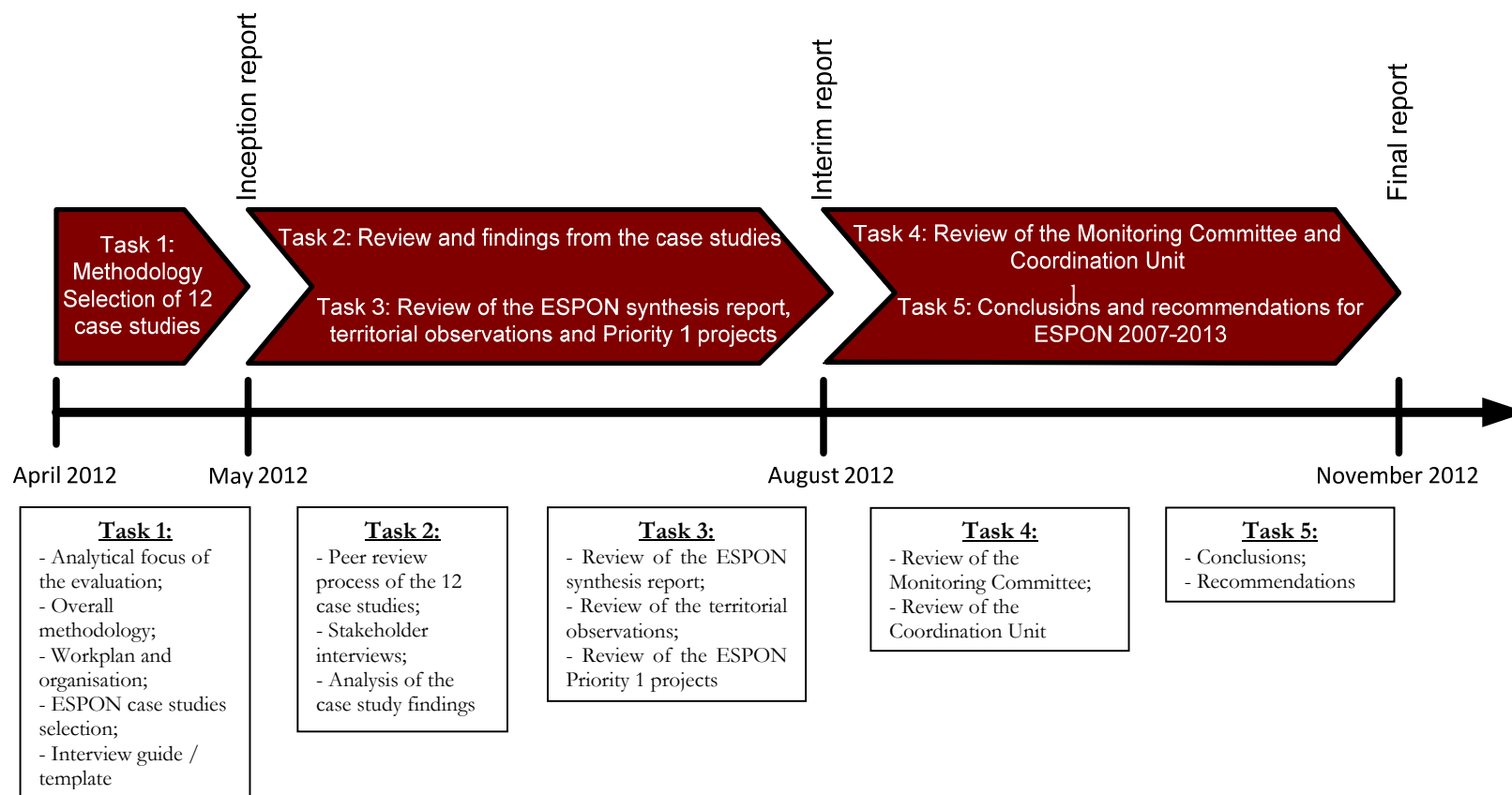
1.2.1 Task 1: The selection of 12 ESPON project case studies

Task 1 was to select the 12 ESPON project case studies, which form the core of this evaluation. The selection process involved several steps; first, an analysis of 62 projects (the total number that ESPON commissioned by the start of this evaluation) according to several criteria:

- Priorities 1 to 4 (in terms of both budget and project numbers);
- The thematic focus;
- Category of project sponsor/key stakeholder;
- Geographical balance (to the extent appropriate);
- Lifetime of the project and different ESPON contact person.

Table 1 below provides a statistical overview of the 62 ESPON projects.

Table 1:   Statistical overview of 62 ESPON projects

Priority	Projects	Overall budget (€)	Overall %	Average Budget (€)	Median Budget (€)	Average Lifetime (months)
1	25	19.134.177,75	58,3	765.367,11	750.000,00	30
2	22	6.531.190,49	19,9	296.872,30	345.097,71	19
3	10	4.652.328,00	14,1	465.232,80	355.000,00	26
4	5	2.500.772,56	7,6	500.154,51	436.875,00	33

Priority 1 has the most projects and by far the largest budget per project; just over double the median size per project compared to Priority 2. On the other hand, Priority 4 has the fewest number of projects but they tend to be longer and also have relatively large budgets.

Table 2 below provides an analysis of the partners' profiles:

**Table 2:   Number of partners for each priority
(and stakeholders for priority 2)**

Priority	Projects	Projects already started	Discrete Lead Partners*	Discrete simple Partners*	P2 Discrete Stakeholders
1	25	21	19	108	-
2	22	18	18	59	111
3	10	5	4	12	-
4	5	5	5	25	-

* Note: as explained hereafter, the discrete count is within Priority and type of partner, therefore the same partner may appear in another Priority and be counted both as Lead partner or simple partner

For obvious reasons, it is more relevant to focus on discrete partners since for instance, Nordregio or the Autonomous University of Barcelona take part in more than one project as either a Lead or simple project partner. Overall, the number of partners is quite large, especially in Priority 1. The number of stakeholders in Priority 2 is also large due to the focus on engaging directly with the policy community.

Figures 3 and 4 (see below) provide information about the geographical and institutional distribution for all the ESPON project partners. As the distribution is not by Priority but for all the 62 projects, each partner is counted only once (or twice if it appears both as Lead and simple partner).

Figure 3:   Geographical distribution of partners for all the 62 projects
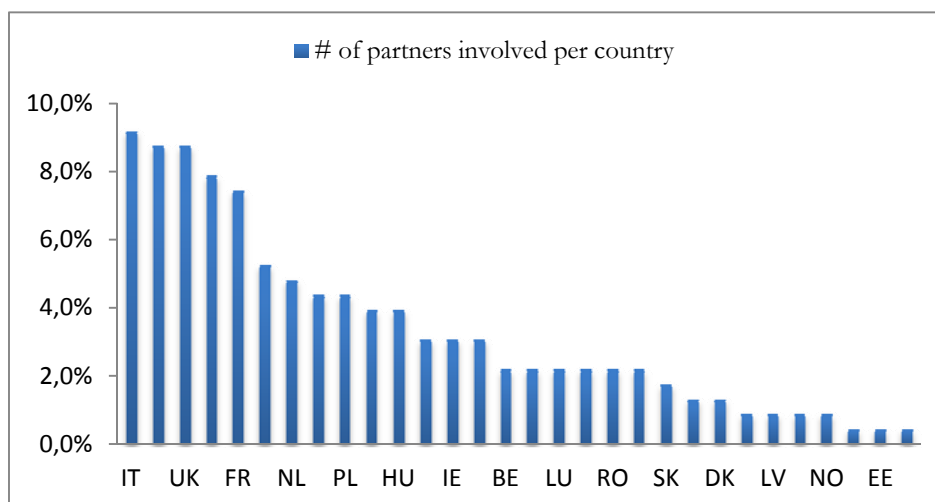
Italy has the largest relative number of partners, closely followed by the UK and Spain, then by Denmark and France. Conversely, Cyprus, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta and Norway are represented each by less than 1%.

Figure 4:   Institutional distribution of partners for all the 62 projects
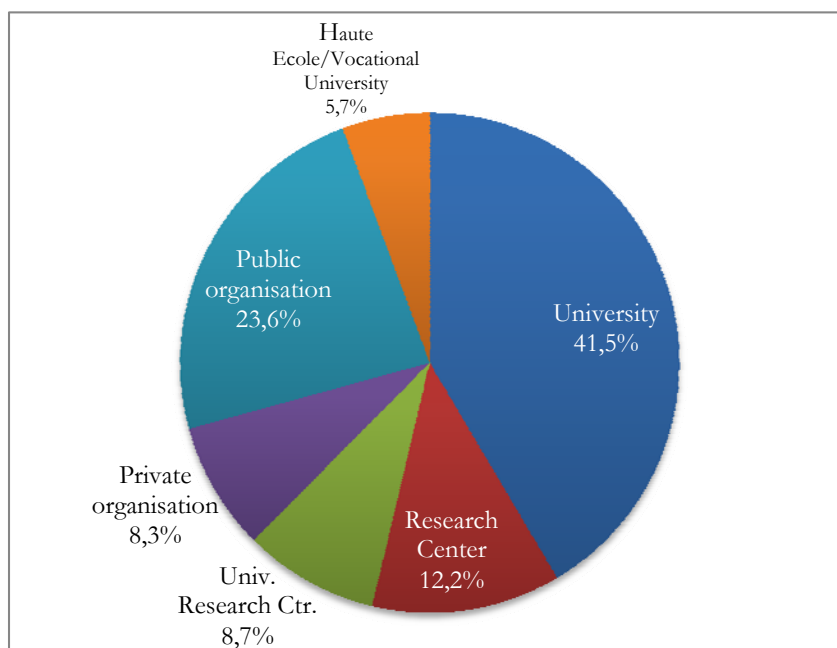
By far the largest institutional type is Universities, with just under half the total number of partners in the 62 projects. On the other hand, Vocational universities and the private sector (mainly public policy consultancies) make up the smallest number of organisations involved.

The second step, based on the same criteria, was to analyse the 12 case studies proposed by DG Regional Policy in the ToRs (see Tables 3 and 4 and Figures 5 and 6 below). This was to check whether, based on the previous analysis of the 62 projects, a more representative sample of 12 case studies could be developed.

Table 3:   Basic statistics of the ToR sample

Priority	Projects	Overall budget (€)	Overall %	Average budget (€)	Median budget (€)	Average lifetime (months)
1	6	4.322.802,00	68,2	720.466,90	763.300,00	26
2	3	659.800,00	10,4	219.933,33	209.800,00	15
3	2	471.337,00	7,4	235.686,50	235.686,50	18
4	1	881.973,00	13.9	881.973,00	881.973,00	25

Table 4:   **Number of partners for each priority (and stakeholders for Priority 2) for the ToR sample**

Priority	Projects	Projects already started	Discrete Lead Partners	Discrete simple Partners	P2 Discrete Stakeholders
1	6	6	6	35	-
2	3	3	3	8	20
3	2	2	2	2	-
4	1	1	1	8	-

Figure 5:   **Geographical distribution of partners for the ToR sample**
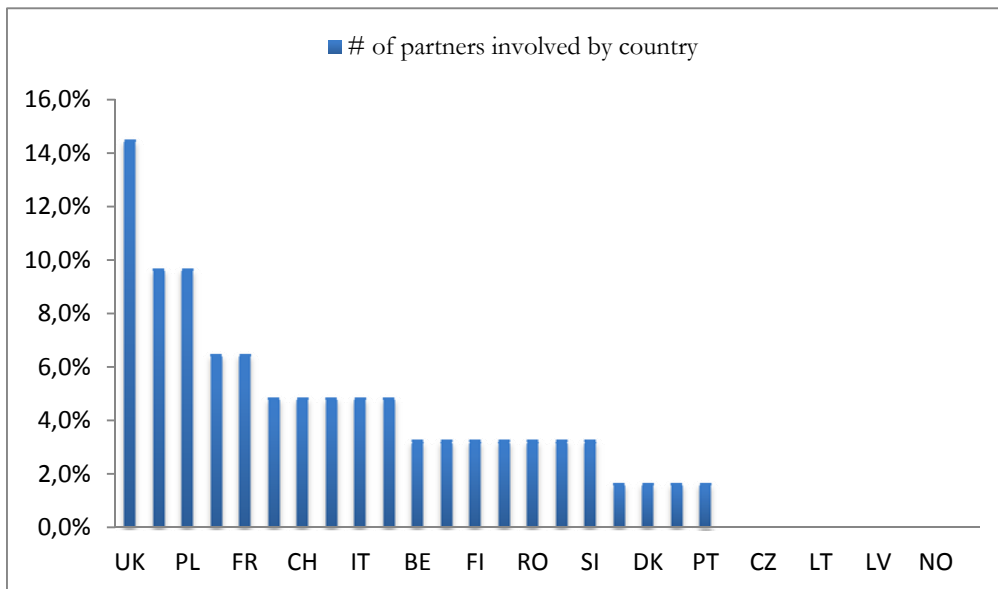
Figure 6:   Institutional distribution of partners for the ToR sample
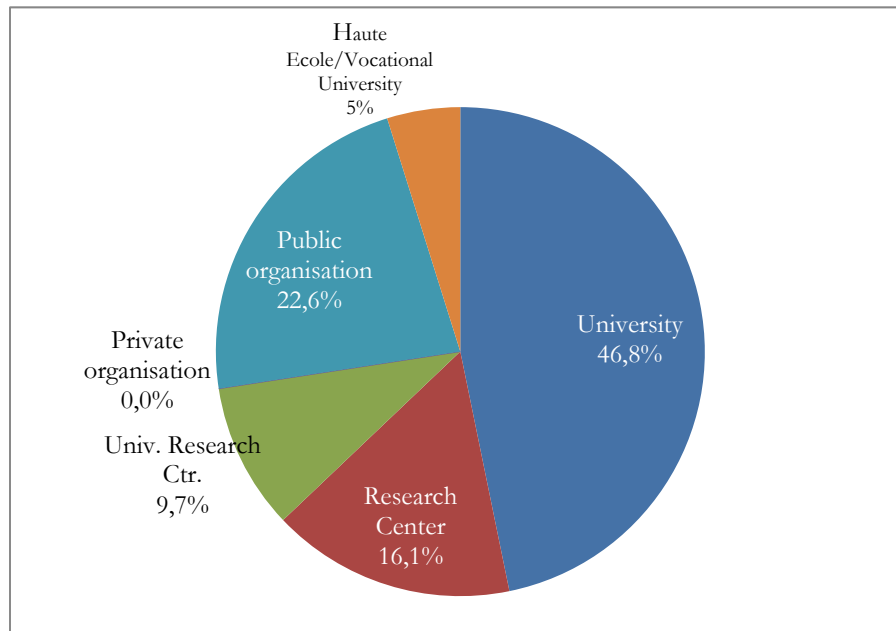
Based on our analysis, however, several gaps in the selection were identified, which are listed below:

▪ Several countries (especially newer EU Member States) are not represented. It would therefore be preferable to have at least one project dealing with such countries. It must be said also that most of these countries do actually appear in projects where no draft or final report is available yet;

▪ There is no private organisation in the sample while this group represents 8.3% of the partners for the 62 projects. Since private organisations are also leaders of several projects, it would be interesting to include them in the actual sample of 12 case studies.

The third step was to make the final selection of the 12 case studies. This includes 4 projects (in italics below) that have been added to the sample in order to make the list proposed by DG Regional Policy slightly more balanced, covering the gaps identified in the analysis discussed above.

The four projects that were added to the list were in Priority 1 and 2 respectively whilst the choice of projects for Priority 3 and 4 remained unchanged from the proposal in the ToRs. The final selection of 12 projects ensured that the case studies are as representative as possible, which underpins any attempt to use them to draw general lessons for the programme.

Priority 1
- FOCI - Cities and Urban Agglomerations
- DEMIFER - Demographic and Migratory Flows
- TERCO - Territorial cooperation in transnational areas and across internal/external borders
- SGPTDE - Secondary growth poles in territorial development
- *ESPON Climate - Climate Change and Territorial Effects on Regions and Local Economies in Europe*
- *GEOSPECS - European Perspective on Specific Types of Territories*

Priority 2
- EUROISLANDS - The development of the Islands - European Islands and Cohesion Policy
- *PURR - Potential of Rural Regions*
- *POLYCE - Metropolisation and Polycentric Development in Central Europe: Evidence Based Strategic Options*

Priority 3
- INTERCO - Indicators of territorial cohesion
- HyperAtlas update[8] (Service contract)

Priority 4
- ESPON INTERSTRAT

In summary, the rationale for the final selection of 12 case studies, compared to the proposal in the ToRs, is listed below:

- A variety of territorial cohesion issues are included. For example, rural development is the focus of the Priority 2 project (PURR) replacing the Priority 1 project (EDORA);

- More Member States are now covered;

- A project involving a private organisation has now been selected (PURR);

- The distribution is still representative of the priority/budget size criterion;

- Stakeholders' profiles are also more balanced by having 5 stakeholders involved at the national level, 9 at the regional and 7 at the municipal level against respectively 12, 7 and 3 in the proposal made in the ToRs;

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[8] This project was commissioned via a Service Contract rather than 'Call for Proposals' process used for the other projects.

- Lastly, several ESPON contacts are also involved which guarantees different points of view about the management of the projects etc.

The information presented in Tables 5 and 6 and Figures 7 and 8 (below) provides an overall summary of the 12 selected case studies. Then, Table 7 summarises the thematic focus of each of the case studies.

Table 5:   Basic statistics of the final selection

Priority	Projects	Overall budget (€)	Overall %	Average budget (€)	Median budget (€)	Average lifetime (months)
1	6	5.274.566,60	71	879.094,40	874.830,00	30
2	3	809.562,26	10,8	269.854,09	250,000.00	20
3	2	471.337,00	6,3	235.668,50	235.668,50	18
4	1	881.973,00	11,9	881.973,00	881.973,00	25

Table 6:   Number of partners for each priority (and stakeholders for Priority 2) for the final selection

Priority	Projects	Discrete Lead Partners	Discrete simple Partners	P2 Discrete Stakeholders
1	6	6	38	-
2	3	3	11	21
3	2	2	2	-
4	1	1	8	-

Figure 7:   **Geographical distribution of partners for the final selection**
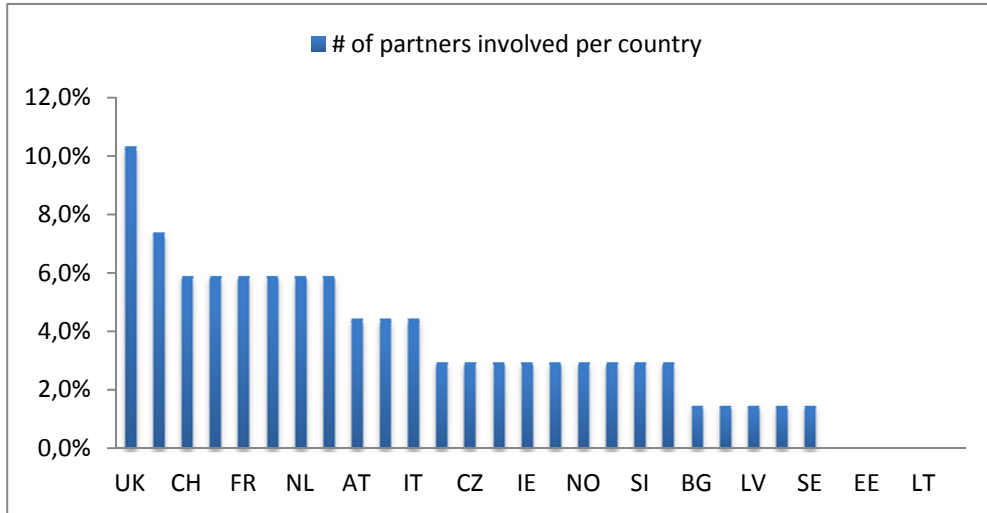

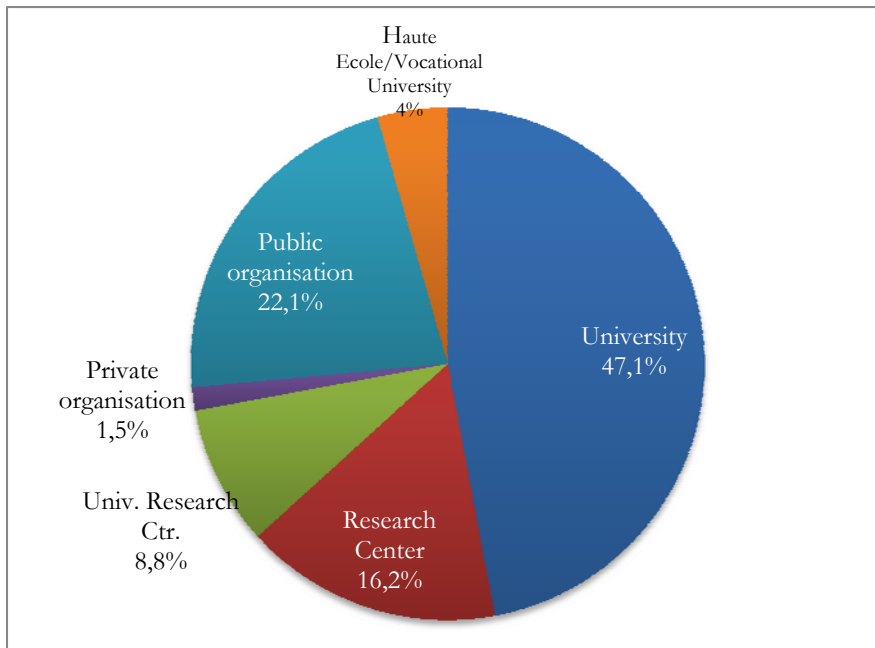**Figure 8:**   **Institutional distribution of partners for the final selection**

Table 7:   Overview of the thematic focus of the 12 case studies

TITLE AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION	PRIORITY	THEMATIC FOCUS OF THE PROJECT
FOCI - Cities and Urban Agglomerations	1	This project focuses on European cities and urban agglomerations, analysing their current state, trends and development perspectives.
DEMIFER - Demographic and Migratory Flows		This project addresses the effects of demographic and migratory flows on European regions and cities and examines their implications for regional competitiveness and European cohesion.
SGPTDE - Secondary growth poles in territorial development		This project focuses on European Secondary Cities, analysing their role and economic importance, particularly in the European, national and regional growth process.
TERCO - Territorial cooperation in transnational areas and across internal/external borders		This project brings policy insights on territorial co-operation (TC) as a contributing element to European cohesion.
ESPON Climate - Climate Change and Territorial Effects on Regions and Local Economies in Europe		The focus of this project is to identify and compare the relative vulnerability of ESPON regions to negative impacts from climate change.
GEOSPECS - European Perspective on Specific Types of Territories		This project focuses on seven specific geographical categories to develop a coherent perspective on territories with specific geographical features to identify development opportunities in these parts of Europe.
EUROISLANDS - The development of the Islands - European Islands and Cohesion Policy	2	This project aims to deliver an appropriate set of policy recommendations and strategic guidance to foster the sustainable development of European islands within the framework of the single market.
PURR - Potential of Rural Regions		This project focuses on creating and testing of new ways of exploring the concept of the « territorial potentials » of some rural areas and small and medium sized towns around the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the Baltic Sea.
POLYCE - Metropolisation and Polycentric Development in Central Europe: Evidence Based Strategic Options		This project analyses the functional relationship between five capital cities (Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Prague, and Vienna) and their wider hinterlands and the implication for cohesive, sustainable spatial and societal development.
INTERCO - Indicators of territorial cohesion	3	This project focuses on bringing together a wide range of data related to territorial cohesion in a systematic fashion, framed in a clear, multi-layered framework.
HyperAtlas update[9] (Service contract)		This project offers the possibility of creating a wide range of cartographic maps in support of decision-makers.
ESPON INTERSTRAT	4	The overall goal of the project is to promote the development of integrated territorial development strategies and to encourage the use of ESPON research findings in those strategies.

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[9]   This project was commissioned via a Service Contract rather than 'Call for Proposals' process used for the other projects.

1.3 An overview of the methodology for Tasks 2 and 3

The analysis of the 12 case studies was carried out by several methodological approaches, which are discussed in more detail below:

▪ **A robust academic peer-review process**

A team of senior academic experts with relevant research and policy experience in the field of territorial cohesion was assembled, to carry out the peer-reviews. Annex 1 provides the list of academic experts that were involved. Two of these experts participated in the Scientific Expert Group (SEG) for the ESPON evaluation. Its role was to provide input and guidance to the respective Tasks carried out. The third member of the SEG was not involved in the peer review process but has extensive knowledge in the field of regional development and the links between academic research and policy development.

In terms of the process, for each of the 12 projects, the main project deliverables[10] were reviewed by 3 experts[11], remotely and independently. The aim was to ensure that each expert developed a familiarity with the methodology and was able to compare and contrast projects from the different ESPON Priorities. Indeed, each expert was fully briefed beforehand about the methodology and provided with electronic copies of the deliverables to review. In addition, each expert was provided with a template specifying the key questions to be covered by the review, how to complete it with the necessary detail required and deadlines etc. Annex 2 shows an example of the peer review template.

The peer review process was designed to be as robust as possible, which explains why each project received 3 rather than 2 reviews. This ensured that it was possible to capture a decent range of higher quality feedback; for example, for several of the case studies, 2 reviewers were slightly more positive whilst the other was rather more critical. Such differences in feedback would not have been gathered if only 2 reviews had been carried out.

The ADE consultancy team oversaw and managed the peer review process in liaison with the respective experts. Once all the reviews were completed, the ADE team collated and then analysed the findings from the respective peer review responses per project.

▪ **Stakeholder interviews**

In parallel to the peer review process, a series of stakeholder interviews was carried out for each project, with the lead partner, a stakeholder and relevant desk officers from ESPON and the European Commission (see Annex 3). The mix of stakeholders was determined for each project; for example, for Priority 1 case studies, a Sounding Board member was also interviewed.

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[10] The documents reviewed included the original Project Specification; the actual Project Proposal and comments by on it the ESPON CU; and all relevant reports produced such as Inception Report, Interim, Draft Final and Final (where available).

[11] In order to maintain anonymity and independence, the choice of reviewers per project is not listed here.

The aim of the stakeholder interviews was to complement the peer review process and to really get into the detail of how each particular project was conceived, developed and implemented, trying to capture relevant qualitative information. Clearly, such information was not able to be gathered from the peer review process given that, as discussed, it focused on analysing project deliverables. Annex 4 shows the interview question guide that was used. The ADE consultancy team was responsible for carrying out the stakeholder interviews which were carried out both by telephone and face-to-face.

▪ **Combined analysis of peer review findings and stakeholder interviews**:

The third element of the analysis involved the ADE consultancy team. The team carried out a combined analysis of the peer review templates produced by the experts alongside the relevant findings from the respective stakeholder interviews, per project. The consultancy team members were also responsible for drafting the case study summaries for each project as well as contributing to a synthesis document, including initial recommendations that were submitted to DG Regional Policy for approval, as part of the Interim Report of the evaluation findings.

Then, following approval, each of the draft case study summaries was made available to the respective Lead Partner of the 12 ESPON case studies. This was to ensure transparency of the draft findings in order to get feedback on the content. A total of 7 out of the 12 Lead Partners replied and gave additional comments on the case study summaries. The majority of the comments received were subsequently integrated into a final report of the case study summaries, which are available in Annex 5. In addition, Section 4 of this Final Report discusses the main findings from the case study analysis.

▪ **Analysis of other ESPON deliverables and list of Priority 1 projects**

To complement the case study analysis, Task 3 of the evaluation had two different elements. First, the analysis of the 19 remaining Priority 1 projects that were not selected as case studies in the evaluation; this involved a brief survey of each project specification with a view to assessing clarity, focus and feasibility as well as the likely policy relevance of the results. Second, the ESPON 2010 Synthesis Report and ESPON Territorial Observations were also reviewed and assessed for their policy relevance and impact at the European, national and regional level (and the territorial agenda process). The detailed findings from Task 3 are shown in Annex 6.

1.4 Task 4: Review of the ESPON Monitoring Committee and Coordination Unit

The aim of Task 4 was to understand more about how ESPON operates in terms of the role, remit of the Monitoring Committee members as well as the core members of the Coordination Unit team based in Luxembourg. This involved the ADE consultancy team carrying out interviews (via telephone or face-to-face) with ESPON Monitoring Committee members. In addition, a sample of other relevant stakeholders including ESPON CU staff, officials from various European institutions as well as other 'users' of ESPON were interviewed, chosen because of their knowledge of the programme as well as expertise in

the field of territorial cohesion. Annex 7 provides the list of stakeholders that were interviewed and Annex 8 provides the interview guide that was used for Task 4.

The aim of the interviews was threefold:

▪ First, to assess the overall 'institutional impact' of ESPON in terms of policy relevance, applicability and impact in the field of territorial cohesion within the framework of EU Cohesion Policy;

▪ Second, to assess the ways in which ESPON's current structure enhances (or not) its capacity for 'institutional learning' and to be able to capitalise on the range of findings in the territorial cohesion field;

▪ Third, to assess the extent to which the current ESPON 'institutional setting' provides an effective governance framework, especially in relation to how project themes and selection are carried out.

1.5   Task 5: Conclusions and recommendations

On the basis of the findings made during Tasks 1 to 4, a series of conclusions has been identified and recommendations made as to how to improve the effectiveness of ESPON. These are listed in Section 6 and 7 respectively of this Report.

1.6   Methodological challenges in doing the ESPON evaluation

Having discussed the various methodological approaches utilised during the evaluation, this section summarises the main challenges that arose in actually trying to evaluate the various aspects of the current ESPON programme.

▪ **First**, the aim of the evaluation was to assess the extent to which the research carried out under the current ESPON programme had, in line with its mission, '*supported policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion...*'. The focus was not, therefore, on the academic quality *per se* of the range of projects but rather to assess the extent to which the findings produced were/are '*fit for purpose'* in policy related terms. For instance, the relevance of the outcomes to ongoing policy debates about the future of EU Cohesion Policy; the level of involvement and interest amongst policy makers in particular ESPON projects etc.

▪ The key point, however, is that it is certainly not a straightforward or linear process to simply 'read-off' academic findings directly into policy relevant conclusions. This is dependent on a range of factors. For example, the aim and scope of the original research project; certain findings may be directly relevant to ongoing policy discussions or indeed be commissioned to tackle a particular topical question or issue. On the other hand, the policy impact of more 'blue-sky' research may be exploratory and less policy relevant in the short term, however, such work tackles important issues relating to potential future policy challenges. The ESPON programme covers both these types of project.

- **Second**, collecting, measuring and assessing policy relevance and/or impact is a complex process. The key challenge is precisely how to 'measure' policy relevance or impact. Some of the information can be quantitative (e.g. citations, policy publications and presentations given at practitioner-led seminars, workshops and conferences) and also qualitative (e.g. influence of findings on key policymakers, academic publications shaping policy discourses, good practice exchange). In this regard, ESPON has produced a wide-range of outputs since its creation and subsequent two rounds of funding. Thus, the challenge is to assess the main achievements that ESPON has generated and the extent which this material has enhanced both academic and practitioner understanding of the issue of territorial cohesion.

- **Third**, the temporal issue is really important because particular findings from a project may have a policy impact several years after the actual research is completed. Other research findings may be directly relevant to a current policy issue and so should have arguably a greater 'impact'. This point is relevant to the ESPON programme as the suite of projects under the current funding round, 2007 to 2013 is still ongoing and several projects remain to be completed.

- The current evaluation focused only a 'snapshot' of time and a relatively small sample of projects so it is not possible to fully assess the policy relevance and impact of all projects. To fully assess the policy impact of the ESPON programme would require a more structured analysis to be carried out once all the research has been fully completed.

- In this regard, an analysis to assess policy impact carried out by the ESPON CU[12] shows that 52 policy documents made reference to the programme: 26 of them were at the European level (European Commission etc..); 1 at the International level (NATO); 2 at the Transnational level (Baltic Sea Region Programme); 15 at the National level; 7 at the Regional level; 1 at the Interregional level; and 1 at the Local level.

- **Lastly**, policy impacts are both *time* and *place* specific so both of these dimensions need to be taken into account when evaluating the ESPON programme. This poses a number of challenges. For example, dominant socio-economic and political circumstances are really quite different both within and between the 31 Member States. This is particularly relevant in recent years with the advent of the recession in the European economy, which really hit in 2008 after the Operational Programme for the current ESPON programme had been agreed.

- Clearly then, policy approaches are territorial specific, with different countries and regions tackling issues in different ways, over time. Thus, it is vital that ESPON is able to *adapt*, *align* as well as be *applicable* to such shifts in socio-economic as well as policy context in order to produce policy relevant applied research, in line with its mission.

- Having discussed the main methodological approaches as well as challenges, the next section focuses on ESPON itself, exploring in more detail the concept of territorial cohesion and programme's role in trying to shed some light on the main issues.

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[12]   Provisional data provided by the ESPON CU, November 2012

2. Territorial cohesion and the role of ESPON

2.1 Understanding territorial cohesion

In 1999, the concept of territorial cohesion came to fore of policy debates when the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP)[13] was adopted during the German Presidency of the European Council. The ESDP aimed to provide the strategic framework for both Member States and European policies, stressing the need for territorial development policies to work towards a more balanced and sustainable development of the EU. As part of the ESDP process Ministers agreed on the need to create ESPON, which would provide a knowledge base for policy makers on spatial development issues[14].

Since its inception in the 2000-06 Regional Policy programming period, ESPON's focus has been to contribute to increasing the knowledge and understanding of issues relating to spatial development and the spatial impact of policies across Europe. Implemented within the framework of INTERREG III (inter-regional strand), ESPON's specific aim was to provide a common platform for applied research in the policy fields related to EU Cohesion Policy and the ESDP. It aimed to improve knowledge, co-ordination and consistency of policy actions and measures at the EU level and between the EU, national and regional levels, as well as for bilateral relations of individual Member States.

The first programme, ESPON 2006 had an overall budget of €14,464,688 million (ERDF and Member States contribution) and research activities focused on four main priorities:

- Thematic projects on important spatial developments;
- (EU) Policy impact projects;
- Co-ordinating cross-thematic projects;
- ESPON research briefing and scientific networking.

During the 2000-06 programming period, the importance of territorial cohesion in EU policy debates was further reinforced in several important documents. First, in 2004, the Treaty of Lisbon actually added territorial cohesion to the goals of economic and social cohesion, and stated that the EU *"shall promote economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among Member States"*. Second, in 2007, the so-called Territorial Agenda defined territorial cohesion as its fifth pillar ("*Strengthening territorial cohesion*"). Third, in 2008, the European Commission published a Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion, which defined territorial cohesion as a principle *"ensuring the harmonious development of all the EU territories and*

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[13] Final Conclusions issued by the German Presidency, Informal Council of EU Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning, held in Potsdam, Germany, 10-11 May 1999; see:
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docoffic/official/reports/pdf/concl_en.pdf

[14] Ibid, page 2.

about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories".[15]
Most recently, in 2010, the Commission's 5th Report[16] on Economic, Social and Territorial
Cohesion '*Investing in Europe's Future*' emphasised the importance of territorial cohesion in
the delivery and implementation of the EU2020 Strategy.

Building on these policy developments in the field of territorial cohesion, an evaluation of
the first ESPON programme was integrated in the overall ex-post evaluation of
INTERREG 2000-2006, and provided the following recommendations to help shape and
improve the functioning of the current ESPON programme (2007-2013):

ESPON 2006 recommendations ("*Ex-Post Evaluation of INTERREG III 2000-2006*", Panteia,
2010):

▪ ESPON should more strongly explore issues which are of strategic relevance to furthering an
   integration of cross-border and transnational co-operation areas to provide a basis for a more
   informed preparation of future territorial co-operation programmes;

▪ ESPON should start connecting itself better and more intensively to the ongoing EU-wide
   debate on initiatives for establishing spatially differentiated data;

▪ The ESPON Managing Authority and Coordination Unit should start preparing concrete
   solutions with the Commission to further clarify and simplify the contractual arrangements
   with Transnational Project Groups for the period after 2013;

▪ ESPON should closely monitor their progress in establishing mutual co-operation and
   synergies and develop closer co-operation in particular with the ENPI and IPA programmes.

The next section turns to an analysis of the current ESPON programme.

2.2   The ESPON programme: 2007 to 2013

The current ESPON programme, 2007 to 2013, builds upon the previous phase but was
also modified to have an increased focus on providing policy relevant research findings and
engaging more with stakeholders at the local, regional and national level.

The mission of the ESPON 2013 programme is to:

> "*Support policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion and a harmonious development
> of the European territory by (1) providing comparable information, evidence, analyses and scenarios on
> territorial dynamics and (2) revealing territorial capital and potentials for development of regions and
> larger territories contributing to European competitiveness, territorial cooperation and a sustainable and
> balanced development*".

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[15] "*Green paper on Territorial Cohesion – Turning Territorial Diversity into Strength*". COM (2008) 616; European
Commission, 2008;

[16] "*Fifth Report on Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion: Investing in Europe's future*", European Commission,
2011.

The ESPON 2013 Programme has a budget of €47 million of which 75% is co-financed by the ERDF (under Objective 3, European Territorial Cooperation). The remainder is funded by 31 countries participating, 27 EU Member States and Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland. This is an increase of 325% of the budget compared with the 2000-2006 programme.

There are five programme priorities. These are:

> 1. **Applied research** on territorial development, competitiveness and cohesion: evidence on territorial trends, perspectives and policy impacts;
> 2. **Targeted analyses** based on user demand: a European perspective on the development of different types of territories;
> 3. **Scientific platform and tools**: comparable regional data, analytical tools and scientific support;
> 4. **Awareness raising, empowerment and involvement**: capacity building, dialogue and networking;
> 5. **Communication and technical/analytical assistance**

A total of 62 projects have been funded under the ESPON Programme involving over 250 partners from a range of organisations from across the European continent.

The Gödöll meeting[17] concluded that the role of ESPON should be further developed in future:

> *"We suggest that the ESPON programme should take into account the priorities and challenges of TA2020 in its research activity. In addition, the stronger focus on territorial cohesion and the wish to contribute to the Europe 2020 Strategy will require further knowledge and methodological support to stakeholders. The current status, role and outputs of the ESPON Programme should be adapted to the future period in agreement with the European Commission to better serve European policy-making related to territorial development and cohesion".*

The key point is that territorial cohesion remains a rather 'slippery' concept to define and certainly operationalise. Moreover, the policy context has changed in recent years with the economic downturn across Europe which has really placed the issue of territorial cohesion at the fore of policy debates at the European as well as (sub)national levels. Since its inception, ESPON has been at the heart of the territorial cohesion. However, given the changing socio-economic and policy context it is vital that ESPON's role and remit adapts to meet the needs of practitioners and policy makers, especially at the regional and local level, to help them develop policies and projects that clearly contribute to encouraging territorial cohesion in what are extremely challenging circumstances.

In this regard, in November 2011, the Ministerial event on the Territorial Agenda of the EU2020, held in Poznan[18], under the Polish Presidency, concluded that:

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[17] Polish Presidency Conclusions "*On the territorial dimension of EU policies and the future Cohesion Policy*", November 2011, Poznan, Poland.

"The capacity of ESPON in supporting the European Commission and Member States in reinforcing EU policies' territorial dimension needs to be strengthened. In order to ensure a widespread use of territorial evidence-based responses in form of short term analytical deliveries and comparable data on regions and cities in key policy processes its institutional setting needs to be reinforced."

As part of the preparations for the future programming period, a mid-term review was carried out of the current ESPON programme in 2011, the main recommendations from which are listed below:

ESPON considerations post 2013 ("*ESPON 2013 Programme External Evaluation*", Loxley Consultancy, 2011):

- The development of ESPON should be managed as a continuous action as continuity of ESPON beyond 2013 is clear given its growing value to policy makers and practitioners; especially as the EU Cohesion Policy including Territorial Cohesion and Territorial Agenda develops. It should establish a longer term plan to guide the work through a technical/policy steering group that can set priorities on a periodic basis.

- The format of projects and their interrelations in terms of methodology, scope, size (resources both in monetary, time and staffing terms) and output should be more varied. This variation should be considered in relation to prior results and knowledge, the policy instruments being studied and the time frame within which results are required. Consideration should be given to running small parallel studies looking at different aspects of a policy question for discussion at a seminar with public access and subsequent rapid publication in an ESPON series.

- Reviews of state-of-the-art knowledge on a topic, or good practice in policy development and application, are in themselves of value to practitioners and could form individual projects.

- Applied Research projects should have tightly focused themes and subjects (as recommended in earlier evaluations). These should be defined with support from groups of experts (whose interests do not conflict), or through strengthened central policy and scientific direction. The process of using web based surveys to identify themes for calls should only be used as a second stage consultation of the wider community following hearings with expert groups of key policy makers, scientists and practitioners.

- Sounding Board members should be involved in the project specification stage.

- To achieve a more responsive programme in the period after 2013 targeted Calls could be more frequent and/or prepared in a more streamlined manner to avoid long delays from identification of a need (theme) to commencement of a project. This is more compatible with a demand responsive programme.

- Territorial cohesion is still a concept that needs to be more clearly defined and delineated. ESPON was set up to support policy development with facts and evidence

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> in order to achieve this and until the concepts and policy implications are much better integrated into EU thinking and policy at all levels it is imperative that the ESPON programme continues and is strengthened.
>
> ▪ Making more data and tools available to analysts and policy makers outside the programme should be reviewed and priorities set for specific activities.
>
> ▪ The EC should be encouraged to review Structural Fund financial regulations as procedural issues reduce effectiveness and efficiency in the 2007-2013 period. The extended use of service contracts should be considered. Ways in which this approach can be embedded in a post-ESPON 2013 programme must be implemented.
>
> ▪ The technical capabilities of the CU should be strengthened to offer more scientific and statistical support. The MC might investigate secondment of a senior statistician with experience in regional statistics on short term release from one of the ONSs. This is a standard procedure used by EUROSTAT.

In addition, the ESPON Monitoring Committee oversaw an internal review of programme procedures in February 2010. Twelve recommendations were made by an independent expert, as listed below. The recommendations in bold were taken into account and implemented by the MC:

> **ESPON 2013 Procedures review**, prepared by an independent Financial Control Expert (2010):
>
> ▪ Increased Flexibility in MC Decision Making;
>
> ▪ Declarations of No-conflict of Interest for Expression of Interest;
>
> ▪ **Increased Efficiency in Priority 2 Decision Making;**
>
> ▪ **Strategic Design of MA-led Projects;**
>
> ▪ Streamlining Activity Reporting Periods for MA-led projects;
>
> ▪ Strategic Reporting;
>
> ▪ Status Quo Assessment of MA-led Projects;
>
> ▪ **Actualisation of the Internal Manual;**
>
> ▪ Double Filing in Two Electronic Archiving Systems;
>
> ▪ **Simplification on Travel Cost Administration;**
>
> ▪ Simplification of Financial Progress Reporting I and II.

Understanding the ways in which the ESPON programme has evolved over time is important to build on current strengths as well as improve upon certain weaknesses. To this end, it was agreed that the European Commission would conduct "*an evaluation of the results of ESPON providing the basis for its future work*"[19]. The findings detailed in this Report

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[19] "*Roadmap towards promoting and enhancing an integrated, territorial approach based on the Territorial Agenda of the European Union 2020*" Polish Presidency, November 2011, Poznan.

provide policy conclusions and recommendations for the future programming period, 2014-2020.

The next section outlines the way in which the current ESPON programme operates.

2.3   Deliverables and timeline of a Priority 1 project[20]

This section provides a brief description of the process from conception of an ESPON project (Priority 1) to final results, including the timeline and various stakeholders involved.

First, this involves considering the stakeholder map for the ESPON programme, including the range of different stakeholders involved and how they interact (see Figure 9 below). The complexity of the interactions is really apparent with the Coordination Unit (CU) being positioned at the centre of the 'map' having multiple interactions with each of the other stakeholders.

Second, Figure 10 provides an example of an ESPON Priority 1 project timeline to illustrate the overall process, the different stakeholders involved as well as the timescales involved. It is important to note that each of the four Priorities has somewhat different timelines, due to the differences in thematic, funding and deadlines.

Specifically, the Priority 1 ESPON timeline is divided into two main phases:

1) the contractual phase: which takes between 13 and 15 months;
2) the implementation phase: which takes between 25 and 30 months;

The respective stages involved are listed below:

- The idea for a particular project comes from the Monitoring Committee (MC) which then works up a specific project specification in partnership with the CU;

- This involves the drafting of a proposal and the approval of the project; it is written and validated by the MC. Once a project is validated, there is a pre-announcement and then an announcement for the Call for Proposals (both done by the CU) which are published in the Official Journal of the EU. The call is then open for 2 months;

- During these 2 months, potential applicants (Transnational Project Groups (TPGs)) submit their proposals. The selection phase is divided into three periods: eligibility checks (on behalf of the CU); correctable omissions (on behalf of the CU); and evaluation of proposals, which is done by a combination of MC members or experts nominated by the MC, representative(s) of the European Commission and a

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[20]   The information listed in the timeline was taken from a Priority 1 project that was commissioned in the first round of ESPON calls. This information is used purely to illustrate the length of time taken in each of the respective elements involved. According to the ESPON CU, the length of time involved was reduced for later projects, following a streamlining of the procedures involved.

representative of the relevant Sounding Board. The final decision about which proposals to fund is taken by the MC;

- When the TPG has been selected, the CU or Managing Authority (MA) sends a letter to the lead applicant of the TPG, and a subsidy contract is signed. When all the procedures are completed, the project can actually start with the CU closely following progress on behalf of the MC and with the support of the Sounding Board;

- The submission of the deliverables required to be submitted by the TPG includes: Inception, Interim, Draft Final and Final Reports. The lengths of these respective reports are listed in the project specification and the lead partner has to deliver these to the required standard and they have to be approved by both the CU and MC;

- Feedback on the content of the respective reports is provided by the CU, in liaison with comments from the MC and the Sounding Board members. The TPG is required to revise the deliverables in line with the feedback provided;

- When all the reports are delivered, the MA sends a letter to the Lead Partner to inform him/her about the content closure of the project.

- Building on this analysis, the next section of the Report discusses the main findings of the 12 case studies carried out.

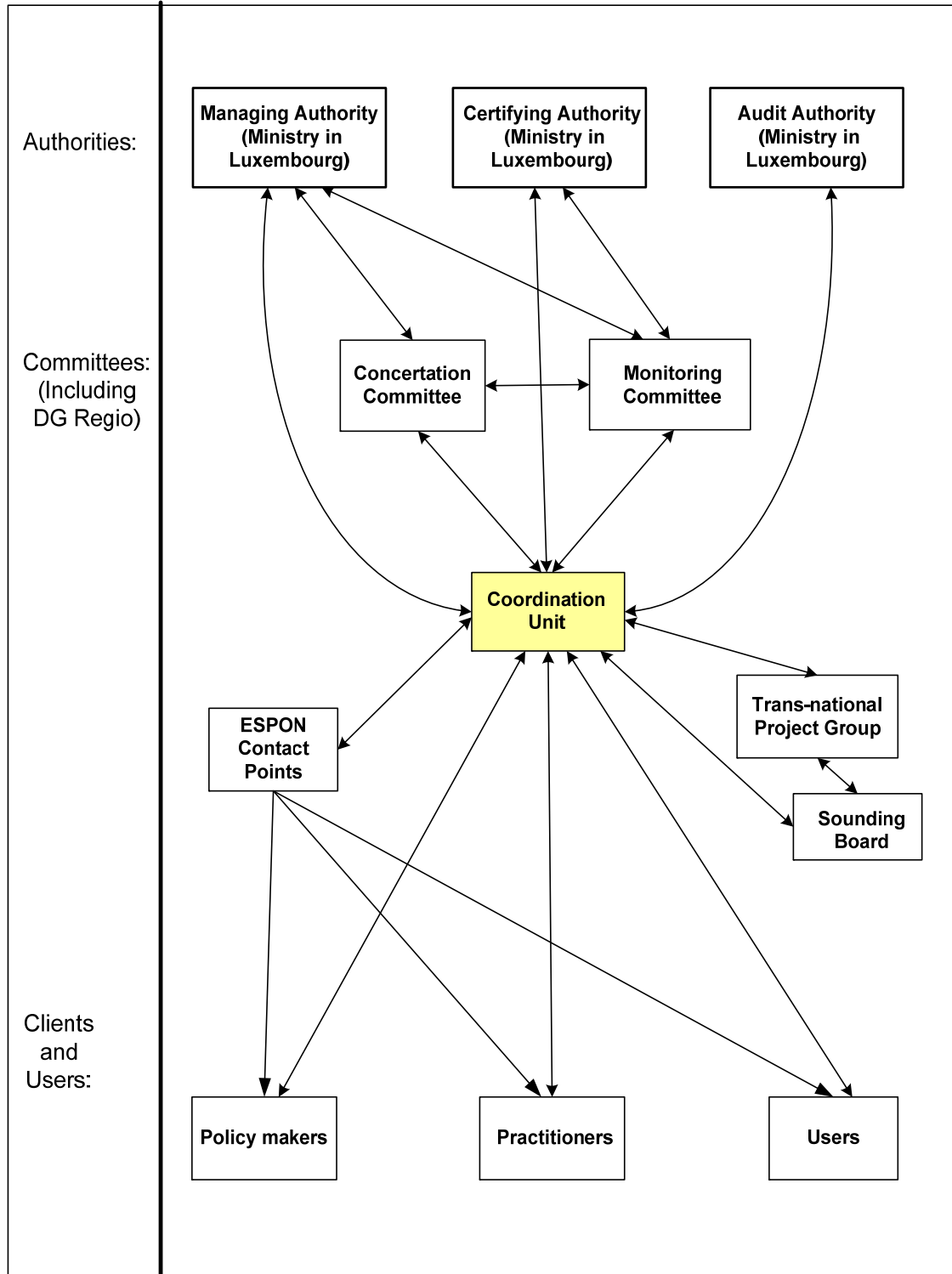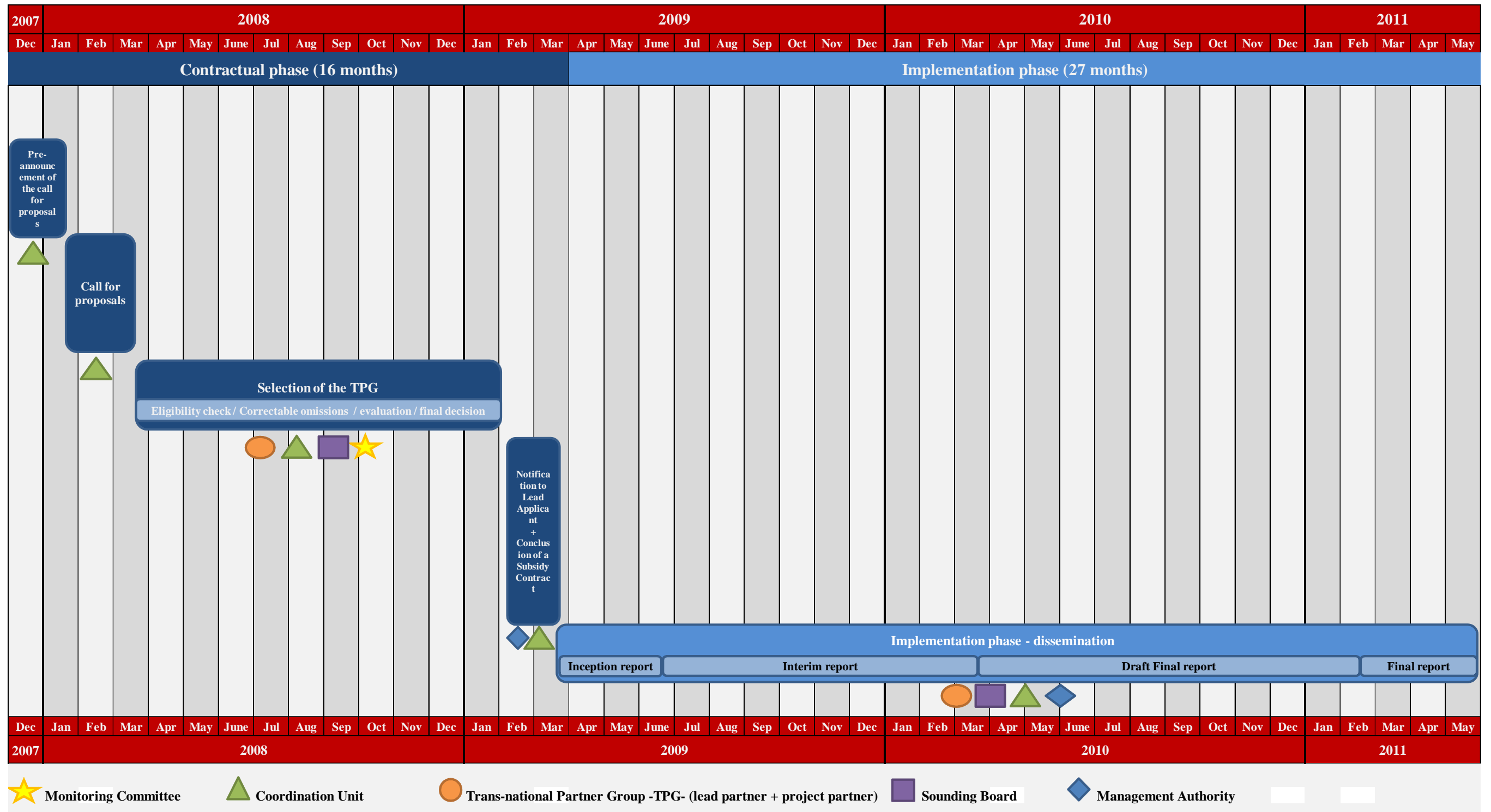**Figure 9:   Stakeholder map for the ESPON programme, 2007-2013**

Figure 10:   ESPON Priority 1 project timeline[21]

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[21] Dissemination and the communication of results continues after the formal closure of the project although this is organised and funded primarily by the members of the TPG in terms of publishing academic articles, attending conferences and workshops etc.

3. Main findings from the analysis of the 12 ESPON project case studies

3.1 Introduction

The 12 case studies form the core of this evaluation. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, the selection of the case studies was made in order to be as representative as possible of the overall range of projects carried out for the current ESPON programme. This means that the findings generated from the analysis of the case studies, which are discussed in more detail in this section, can be applied to the programme as a whole. This analysis is crucial as it really informs the Conclusions and Recommendations that are discussed in detail in Sections 6 and 7.

The analysis of the 12 ESPON case studies was based on a combination of research methods including a robust academic peer review process and interviews with key stakeholders (see Section 2.3 for more details). Annexes 1 to 5 provide more information about the case study analysis as listed below:

- Annex 1: List of Academic Experts involved in the ESPON evaluation;

- Annex 2: Peer Review Template;

- Annex 3: List of stakeholders interviewed;

- Annex 4: Stakeholder interview guide;

- Annex 5: Summaries of the 12 Case Studies.

The subsequent sections below are organised into main four parts each of which deals with the main evaluation questions that were used to analyse the respective case studies. These are (1) *project design, conception and selection*; (2) *quality of outputs*; (3) *policy relevance and impact*; and (4) *project management and support*.

Each of the respective sections summarises the main messages, including project examples and tabulated facts that emerged from the transversal analysis of the research carried out for the 12 case studies. The aim is to illustrate the principal findings, per evaluation question, in order to shed some light on the common issues that emerged.

Prior to that, Table 8 below provides an overall summary of the main headline findings that emerged from the transversal analysis of each the 12 case studies, per evaluation question.

Table 8: Summary of the main findings from the transversal analysis of the 12 case studies

PRIORITY	PROJECT	PROJECT DESIGN/ CONCEPTION/ SELECTION	QUALITY OF THE OUTPUTS	POLICY RELEVANCY AND IMPACT	PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND SUPPORT
1	FOCI DEMI-FER SGPTDE TERCO ESPON Climate GEO-SPECS	The quality of the project design varies both by Priority and project; 8 out of the 12 projects had project specifications that were too broad and ambitious; The availability of the ESPON funding was cited by 9 out of the 12 Lead project partners as being an important motivating factor for participating in the programme; 7 of the 12 Lead project partners had already been involved in previous ESPON projects either as a Lead or project partner; At least 5 out of the 12 case studies had rather vague intended policy goals. This was especially the case in Priority 1 (e.g. FOCI and TERCO) which meant that the sheer breadth of the findings made it difficult to make clear policy messages;	The quality of the outputs varies both by Priority and project; 6 out of the 12 projects outputs were considered of high quality. These were DEMIFER, SGPTDE, CLIMATE, POLYCE, INTERCO, and HyperAtlas; 4 out of the 12 projects were considered of medium quality. These were FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, and PURR; 2 out of the 12 were considered of lower quality. These were EUROISLANDS and INTERSTRAT; All of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the project deliverables were really very long and far too dense for policy makers to try to read and digest; The Monitoring Committee's feedback regarding the progress of the 12 case studies is viewed by all the project leaders as rather poor.	The policy relevance/applicability of the outputs varies both by Priority and project; The policy relevance and impact of the project outputs is the area in which the feedback was the most critical; For 7 out of the 12 lead project partners, a dissemination strategy is needed from the outset that specifies the target policy maker audience; All of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the project research findings should be more concrete, concise and presented in short policy briefs specifically targeted to policy makers; 4 out of the 6 Priority 1 Lead partners stated that the content and focus of the project specifications is the main variable for ensuring (or not) the policy relevance of the findings; The projects that covered too many issues from the outset were judged as having relatively less policy relevant outputs.	10 out of the 12 project leaders spent too much time on project management; At least half the median project leader's time is spent on dealing with ESPON related bureaucracy; 5 out of the 12 project leaders argued that the controls were much more stringent for ESPON projects compared to other Framework Seven research projects; 6 out of the 12 project leaders said that they would not take on the leadership of another ESPON project because of the bureaucracy; The administrative burden creates 'barriers to entry' for new, smaller or private institutions.
2	EURO-ISLANDS PURR POLYCE				
3	INTERCO Hyper Atlas update				
4	INTER-STRAT	A total of 6 out of the 12 project leaders stated that they would be very reluctant to take on the Lead role again in the future. The main reason cited was the considerable administrative burden that is placed on the project leader.			

3.2   Project design, conception and selection

The first evaluation question focused on the quality of the project design and conception (including the terms of reference) and whether the goals were realistic.

3.2.1   What is the quality of the project design and conception (including ToRs)? Were the goals realistic?

- A key issue was that the project specifications and related goals for 8 out of the 12 case studies were too broad and ambitious. These were FOCI, DEMIFER, SGPTDE, TERCO, CLIMATE, EUROISLANDS, PURR, and INTERSTRAT;

- A typical example of this was the (Priority 1) FOCI project which had a project specification that was considered to be too broad and ambitious, covering three main research areas: 1) the state of European cities; 2) cities and their hinterland; 3) opportunities for development through polycentric cooperation. Each of these could have been a single research project in their own right, rather than being combined into one overarching project. The breadth of the research coverage ensured that it was very difficult to ascertain clear and concise policy relevant goals and conclusions.

- The quality of project design does vary significantly both by project and by Priority;

- Another example was the (Priority 1) TERCO project in which the implementation was hampered by the intrinsic complexity of the project specification. This focused on trying to assess existing territorial cooperation areas as well as proposing new and more appropriate ones. It proved particularly difficult for the project partners to differentiate between the scientific and policy questions while at the same time ensuring a clear relationship between them.

- The project specification for the (Priority 2) EUROISLANDS project was too ambitious and unrealistic in terms of the scope and complexity of the research questions. The aim of the project was to deliver a set of policy recommendations and strategic guidance to foster the sustainable development of *all* European islands within the framework of the Single Market. There were 11 different stakeholders involved from 9 different European countries, the budget was €250,000 and the timescale was 17 months.

- On the other hand, INTERSTRAT, the sole Priority 4 project was criticised for a lack of strategic clarity about its goals, particularly in not defining actual stakeholder communities and ways to engage them.

- The project specification for ESPON CLIMATE was identified as having a particularly innovative project design which tacked a very important issue at the regional level. The project specification allowed the TPG to build on its extensive expertise in the field and use a range of methodologies;

- The most effective project specifications were designed for the two Priority 3 projects – INTERCO and HyperAtlas. These built on previously completed projects and were focused on developing specific ESPON data and indicator 'toolkits'.

- The positive findings that emerged for the Priority 2 projects - PURR, POLYCE and EUROISLANDS was that the research was 'demand driven' directly emanating from a policy 'need' from the stakeholders involved. This was welcomed by the peer reviewers although the projects remained rather broad and ambitious.

- Good practice to improve the quality of project specification based on regular and constructive exchanges between the different stakeholders (CU, SB, MC, project partners) emerged in the case of DEMIFER which contributed to improving the project design and subsequent research.

3.2.2 What motivated participants and stakeholders to participate in the process?

- Out of the 12 case studies, 7 of the 12 Lead project partners had already been involved in previous ESPON projects either as a Lead or project partner. These were FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, CLIMATE, PURR, INTERCO, and HyperAtlas. This experience including the fact that they were aware and familiar with ESPON procedures, was the main reason for them to carry out a project in the current round.

- On the other hand, only 4 of the 12 Lead partners had never previously been involved in carrying out an ESPON project. These were DEMIFER SGPTDE, EUROISLANDS and POLYCE.

- In the 12 case studies selected, by far the largest institutional type of the project partners was Universities, with just under half (47.1%) the total number involved. On the other hand, Vocational universities and the private sector (mainly public policy consultancies) make up the smallest number of organisations involved (respectively 4% and 1.5%).

- The availability of the ESPON funding was cited by 9 out of the 12 Lead project partners as being an important motivating factor. In the context of public funding cuts across Europe, which has impacted upon research budgets, especially for universities, the opportunity to gain ESPON funding, for a substantial period of time, was welcomed by the project leaders.

- A key point mentioned was that the ESPON funding was rather unique in providing an opportunity to carry out policy relevant research. This was stressed as also being an important factor for participating by at least half of the 12 project Leaders interviewed.

- Several of the projects, including GEOSPECS (Priority 1), INTERCO and HyperAtlas (both Priority 3) were also closely linked to specific projects that had been completed in

the previous programme. Thus, the opportunity to build on previous research was cited as a clear motivation.

- The majority of the Priority 1 projects involve Lead partners that have considerable experience in successfully developing and implementing ESPON projects. This was the case for FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS and CLIMATE (4 out of 6 Priority 1 projects). This ensured that there were less 'barriers to entry' for those particular partners in that they knew how to draft a decent proposal as well as put together a decent research team.

- On the other hand, the Lead partners of DEMIFER and SGPTDE had not participated in ESPON projects before and both did an excellent job in delivering high quality academic work that was also policy relevant.

- With regard to Priority 2, the Lead stakeholders, which are public organisations, were motivated to access ESPON funding in order to gain quality academic research and have access to evidence-based research findings on a particular policy issue of relevance for their respective territory. This opportunity was viewed as a positive addition to the current ESPON programme.

- The only eligible applicants for the Priority 4 project, INTERSTRAT, were the ESPON National Contact Points (ECPs). The key point that emerged from the interviews with a range of ECPs was that involvement in INTERSTRAT provided an invaluable source of funding to carry out a range of dissemination activities. Given that the funding of ECPs is managed very differently in each Member State, with some ECPs not receiving much financial support at all, then Priority 4 was a crucial resource. However, this raises a number of issues about transparency and the ways in which ECPs are funded in the next programming period.

3.2.3 How did the projects come to be and what were the intended policy goals? Have those goals been reached? If not, why?

- At least 5 out of the 12 case studies had rather vague intended policy goals. This was especially the case in Priority 1 projects, which tended to have broad project specifications which meant that the sheer breadth of the findings made it difficult to distil them into clear and concise messages.

- This was especially the case, in 2 of the 6 Priority 1 projects - FOCI and TERCO – in which the policy goals were not so clearly articulated and remained rather ambiguous as a result of the project specifications being too broad and lacking focus. Thus, more needs to be done to make sure, from the outset, that the key target 'users' or stakeholders are identified and then the research is framed to meet their specific needs. This would help to inform the way in which the dissemination is also carried out.

- Conversely, 2 out of the 3 Priority 2 projects – POLYCE and PURR had fairly clear policy goals from the outset because they were 'demand driven', building on the stakeholders' policy needs. The Priority 2 projects were developed in partnership between the lead stakeholder and the ESPON CU. In all three of the evaluated projects, the Lead partner of research team was from the same Member State as the lead stakeholder.

- Likewise, the 2 Priority 3 projects – HyperAtlas and INTERCO, both had a clear goal to provide the 'toolkits' for other ESPON projects to utilise and this was largely met. In addition, both the Priority 3 projects were led by partners that had been previously involved in very similar ESPON 'toolkit' projects. Thus, they were very well placed to continue the work previously carried out.

- The eligibility for Priority 4 projects is restricted to the 31 ESPON National Contact Points (ECPs). The Lead partner was well placed to build a consortium with other ECPs.

- The goal of the Priority 4 project was to bring together and disseminate the findings of the ESPON programme as a whole. As discussed earlier, the motivation of some of the partners seemed to be more about accessing funding to help them deliver their work as ECPs rather than on the project aims *per se*. This is because not all organisations receive funding from their respective national governments and so Priority 4 was designed, in part, to help bridge this funding gap.

3.2.4 Would they participate in another ESPON project (or have they been involved again)?

- A total of 6 out of the 12 project leaders stated that they would be very reluctant to take on the Lead role again in the future. The main reason cited was the considerable administrative burden that is placed on the project leader. More time is spent on financial issues, attending project meetings and dealing with bureaucracy which detracts from the time able to be spent actually carrying out the research. This is an issue that needs to be addressed in the future ESPON period.

- An interesting observation is that at least 3 out of 12 project partners involved in this period were Lead partners in the previous one. However, given their experience they chose to opt to be a partner rather than taking the lead role.

- At least 3 examples arose in which more experienced project partners encouraged new ESPON participants to take on the Lead partner role rather than doing it themselves.

- Overall, there is an apparent continuity in the partners that have carried out projects before and that they continue to be involved in others (7 out of 12 project partners: FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, CLIMATE, PURR, INTERCO, and HYPERATLAS). This is perhaps normal given that the 'barriers to entry' are relatively high in terms of completing an application, putting together a successful bid etc. Moreover, it also shows the value that many researchers place on being involved in ESPON as an important and unique source of funding for applied research.

- Nevertheless, a key aim of the next ESPON period should be to engage new partners into the ESPON 'family', including a diversity of organisations such as private sector companies (only 8.3% of the 62 ESPON projects) or research institutes with a slightly different thematic or disciplinary focus (e.g. business and management schools, sociology, public policy). This will enrich the quality of the research and allow new and innovative methods to be used and developed to engage the policy community.

3.3   Quality of outputs

The key findings below are based on the transversal analysis of the 12 case studies focusing on the quality of the outputs produced. Table 9 below summarises the main points that emerged from this analysis including the policy relevance of the outputs because these two issues are closely interlinked. More detail on policy relevance is discussed in Section 4.4. The rest of this section focuses on the summary of the main findings for each of the separate questions relating to the quality of the outputs produced.

Table 9: Summary of the main findings of the 12 case studies focusing on the quality and policy relevance of the outputs produced

PRIORITY	PROJECT	MAIN OUTPUTS	STRONG POINTS	OVERALL QUALITY AND POLICY RELEVANCE OF THE OUTPUTS	POSSIBLE IMPROVEMENTS TO QUALITY AND POLICY USE
1	FOCI	Quantitative data analysis, mapping and definitions of Europe's urban areas;	Previous experience of carrying out ESPON projects;	Good scientifically but too broad and ambitious focus led to outputs that were too long, dense and not really policy relevant;	Better targeting of policy users to shape policy relevance of the findings.
	DEMIFER	Demographic typology and mapping of regions across Europe;	Clear outputs targeting key users;	Robust project design and conception delivered high quality, policy relevant outputs;	The future policy impact of the outputs needs to be continued through targeting specific audiences.
	SGPTDE	Quantitative analyses of the performance of secondary cities across Europe, together with nine in-depth case studies;	Analysis responded flexibly to the economic crisis as it unfolded;	The outputs are both of high scientific quality and useful for policy-makers;	The project contributes in a significant way to the ongoing policy debate in the field of territorial cohesion.
	TERCO	A modelling tool and several case studies developed in order to try to better understand the dynamics of territorial cooperation across Europe;	Opened up a complex and difficult concept (territorial cooperation);	The project was hampered by its intrinsic complexity; particularly difficult for the project partners to differentiate between the scientific and policy questions;	The project is in its final stages. A strong communication strategy is required to ensure proper dissemination of the outputs.
	ESPON Climate	An innovative methodological approach used to assess regional climate change vulnerability to develop associated maps and typology;	Innovative methodological approach to regional climate impact;	The project makes a novel contribution to knowledge by producing a composite index using a wide range of different types of data and providing comprehensive outputs using easily readable and understandable maps;	The dissemination strategy lacks ambition which is regrettable because of the high potential impact of the project results. The challenge will be to track how the findings are incorporated (or not) into future policy development.
	GEOSPECS	Quantitative data analysis at the local level to compare and contrast seven specific territorial types across Europe;	Highly spatially disaggregated data collection and analysis;	The findings are of high quality but the overall quality of the output was reduced by the overly descriptive text and the relative lack of attention to policy relevance;	Very broad and ambitious project specification, covering too many different specific territorial areas which made it difficult to deliver policy relevant outputs.
2	EURO-ISLANDS	Case study analysis and comparison of the attractiveness of several different European islands;	Highly targeted on European islands;	The quality of the outputs was judged to be limited, owing mainly to the lack of soundness and representativeness of the findings and superficial discussion of policy recommendations;	A very ambitious project specification in a too limited time-scale which hampered the delivery of policy relevant outputs.
	PURR	Comparison of the potential of some rural areas and small and medium sized towns around the North Sea, the Irish Sea and the Baltic Sea;	Stakeholder engagement;	The strongest element of this project was the dedication of the TPG to take into account the interests and concerns of the different stakeholder groups to produce policy relevant outputs;	There was a long delay between project specification and effective launch of the research and the withdrawal of some initial stakeholders from the project.
	POLYCE	Analysis of the socio-economic relationships between five capital cities (Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Prague, and Vienna) in Central Europe;	Innovative topic (functional relationships between five cities);	The provision of a comparative approach to analyse the 5 cities is considered as a strong point of the study just as the consultations and coordination process with the stakeholder cities;	It is important to monitor the extent to which the main findings generated are implemented in the 5 cities in the coming months.
3	INTERCO	Bringing togeer of a wide range of data related to territorial cohesion to generate maps and related indicators;	Integrating different quantitative methods for territorial cohesion analysis;	The outputs provided, considering the budget and timescale available are very appropriate;	The policy proposals are rather oriented towards academic and technical audiences than towards the broader public.
	HyperAtlas update	Interactive web-based tool containing a wide range of cartographic maps in support of decision-makers in the field of territorial cohesion;	How to successfully build on earlier successful ESPON project;	The scientific and technical qualities of the outputs are ranked very highly;	Despite major efforts in the design and user-friendliness of the interface created, the tool might remain relatively little known owing to its still limited visibility in the policy sphere and its relative complexity.
4	INTER-STRAT	Promote the development of integrated territorial development strategies and to encourage the use of ESPON research findings in those strategies;	How to deliver 'interest awareness' and capacity building;	There was an absence of any approach to analysing the effectiveness and appropriateness of the methods and tools used. The quality of the objectives is mixed and varies greatly;	The policy relevance appears to have suffered from a lack of strategic clarity at the outset of the project. This project was also commissioned early in the programme so there were very few findings to disseminate.

3.3.1 What is the quality of the outputs, measured as objectively as possible and benchmarked against appropriate criteria?

- Overall, 6 out of the 12 projects outputs are considered of high quality (DEMIFER, SGPTDE, CLIMATE, POLYCE, INTERCO, HYPERATLAS), while 4 out of the 12 projects are considered of medium quality (FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, and PURR) and 2 of low quality (EUROISLANDS, INTERSTRAT). This classification is based on information gathered from the peer reviewers and the interview material with the stakeholders.

- As illustrated in Table 9 above, as with the previous section on project design, once again it is important to recognise that the quality of outputs does vary significantly both by project and by Priority. However, as discussed below, it is possible to draw out some of the main messages by Priority whilst also mentioning specific project examples.

- For Priority 1, the feedback points to several key elements. First, the considerable academic excellence and track record of the Lead partners in their respective fields is highlighted as a real strength (e.g. DEMIFER, SGPTDE). This ensures that the research was carried out to the highest standards of academic rigour and insight. Second, the breadth as well as depth of academic findings produced in the (Draft) Final and Scientific Reports is emphasised as being of high quality. Third, the range of methodologies utilised is highlighted as an important element, especially the quantitative data collection and analysis across the 31 Member States as well as in some projects, the use of both qualitative approaches and case studies analyses.

- In terms of improvements, as highlighted in Table 9 above, 3 out of 6 projects really tried to cover too much ground and were too ambitious rather than focusing on a specific issue or challenge (e.g. FOCI, TERCO and GEOSPECS).

- For instance, in the case of FOCI, the TPG concentrated 80% of its work on issues outside the remit of the project specifications without the CU or the MC being able to make them refocus on the original specification. This inevitably meant that the results were less robust in certain areas and for the next period a 'less is more' approach should be taken to avoid 'catch-all' projects on broad themes, such as urbanisation or territorial cooperation.

- In addition, partly as a result of the breadth of the project specifications, the focus tended to be more on data collection and related mapping of indicators and rather less on the causal relationships accounting for the data i.e. more on the 'what' and less on the 'why'. Again, this should be rectified for the next period. Focus should be less on mapping and more on elucidating the key causal relationships behind the different phenomena in order to shed more light on the territorial dynamics currently impacting Europe.

- Although a range of qualitative methods were used in the projects, more could have been done in this area to develop the findings. The bias was certainly towards quantitative analysis. For example, whilst all of the projects carried out case studies, some of the projects failed to really draw out the conclusions from the findings and especially the policy relevant messages. This was the case in the FOCI, TERCO and GEOSPECS projects.

- Other feedback suggested that the case studies were often carried out from the same 'core' set of countries and regions and that more should be done to coordinate which regions are the focus of study to ensure a broad and differentiated territorial coverage. This would require the CU to coordinate and monitor the choice of particular case study choices within and between respective projects to avoid duplication and repetition.

- The choice of themes was also mentioned as an area that could be improved. For example, having a focus on the current economic recession and how this is affecting Europe's cities and regions was mentioned as a key thematic priority for the next programme. One of the final Priority 1 projects to be carried out under the current funding focuses on this issue but clearly more research needs to be done to really try to analyse the impact of the recession across the EU.

- The issue of data availability and comparability across the 31 Member States should not preclude the inclusion of certain policy issues or themes of interest which should be the key driver and then data availability should follow.

- Whilst the issue of pan-European comparison is an important strength, a key element that was highlighted was the need to have more geographically focused applied research in Priority 1. For example, on macro-regions or even groups of territories sharing common issues (such as POLYCE). In other words, rather like in Priority 2, where a variety of spatial scales are used, the future Priority 1 should also consider more nuanced territorial scales which would allow the issue of data availability to be solved as well.

- Turning to Priority 2 projects, 1 of the outputs is ranked as good (POLYCE), 1 as average (PURR), and 1 is low (EUROISLANDS). There are several reasons for this. Whilst the overall focus of the research was 'demand driven', a key constraint was the relative lack of time, financial resources as well as number of partners which meant that it was really challenging to go in-depth into the particular thematic areas. As a result, the peer reviewers felt that the outputs produced were rather less robust in academic terms. On the other hand, the stakeholder feedback was much more positive about the policy relevance and usefulness of the Priority 2 outputs.

- As mentioned, the Priority 3 projects (INTERCO, HyperAtlas) were both relatively strong in terms of the quality of the outputs. Specifications were rather focused, building on previous ESPON work, which ensured the outputs were of a high standard. In other words, lots of good work had already been done in this area (in terms of data collection, mapping, interactive tools etc) so the challenge is to develop interesting and more nuanced 'toolkit' projects to take the research and projects to a higher level in the next period. There is no point in simply 'reinventing the wheel' but rather trying to develop innovative projects to use the range of data and indicators better and to reach out to a wider policy and stakeholder community.

- The Priority 4 feedback in this area was rather weak. It must be noted that the peer reviewers were less able to review scientific reports and documents as produced for Priority 1 and 2 or tangible tools and websites as in Priority 3 projects. The focus of Priority 4 was on disseminating results and it is not a trivial task to accurately measure the quality of such work. Having said that, the feedback pointed to the fact that whilst lots of good work was carried out more work could have been done to define specific stakeholder groups to target for the ESPON work.

3.3.2 How did the various other features, built into the lifecycle of the project, impact on the quality and timeliness of the output? These features include the monitoring committee, sounding board, the expert follow-up, seminars and workshops

> - 12 out of the 12 Lead partners said that there was a relative lack of useful feedback on the various project deliverables from the MC;
>
> - 7 out of the 12 project leaders mentioned that there was a lack of budget made available for individual project dissemination events and that the CU focused its efforts much more on the central ESPON events and seminars;
>
> - 3 out of the 6 Priority 1 project leaders stated that the SB feedback was generally considered to be not very useful;
>
> - 4 of the 6 Priority 1 SB members stated they did not have enough time to be able to read the range of project outputs.

- The Monitoring Committee's feedback regarding the progress of the 12 case studies is viewed by the project leaders as rather poor.

- There was a relative lack of feedback on the various project deliverables from the MC, which was highlighted as a general problem by all project leaders. This was often limited to two or three separate comments from respective MC members and certainly not more than six or seven. Moreover, the majority of the comments from the MC members was rather too general in nature and often focused on issues relating to particular Member States. Indeed, it is most often the ECPs within respective Member States that provide the so-called 'blunder checks' to MC members which are then fed back to respective projects.

- In this regard, the feedback from the project leaders was that more in-depth comments from the MC members would have been welcomed in order to help shape the on-going work, especially in relation to the policy relevance of the findings for stakeholders. In addition, feedback from DG Regional Policy was also mentioned by several project leaders as rather lacking and again this is something that should be improved for the next programming period.

- On the other hand, there was recognition that the current system in which MC members are sent all project deliverables is not conducive to encouraging detailed feedback not least because there is not enough time for them to respond in such short a time-frame. The need for this system to be changed in the next period was emphasised in order to encourage MC members to provide more relevant feedback.

- For Priority 1 projects, the SB members (normally two per project) provided feedback on the content of the work being carried out. Again, however, the feedback about the quality of the input from the SB members was rather mixed.

- 4 of the 6 SB members interviewed welcomed the opportunity to contribute to several project meetings although they stated they did not have enough time to be able to read the range of project outputs given the number of days that they were allocated for the role. In addition, several members were appointed after the projects had already

completed their Inception phase which made it more difficult to get into the detail and shape the research work.

- 3 out of the 6 Priority 1 project leaders stated that the SB feedback was generally considered to be not very useful. The feedback depended on the personalities as well as the specific academic interests of the individuals involved. For example, 2 projects stated that the feedback from the SB members focused on developing the in-depth research further. This actually contradicted the feedback provided by the CU, which focused on improving the policy relevance of the findings.

- With regards to the inputs from the CU, 3 project leaders argued that their feedback was often very detailed and was primarily focused on improving the policy relevance of the findings.

- As regards seminars and workshops, 7 out of the 12 project leaders mentioned that there was a lack of budget made available for individual projects to really do a lot of dissemination events and that the CU focused its efforts much more on the central ESPON events and seminars. Moreover, the point was made that there was really no flexibility to move funds around within individual projects to be able to fund additional dissemination activities, such as attending conferences, which were not originally envisaged in the original project applications.

3.3.3 Are the stakeholders satisfied with the quality of the outputs, measured as objectively as possible and benchmarked against appropriate criteria?

- All of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the Scientific Reports were really very long (up to 800 pages for FOCI[22]) and that they were far too dense and complicated for policy makers to try to read and digest.

- The project deliverables should be made much more concise and targeted to specific policy maker audiences. This should be made explicit from the project inception. These should include a two-page project summary; a PowerPoint presentation containing the key project findings and policy messages; a short project video summarising the key findings, available online; a shorter Executive Summary and more concise Final and Scientific Reports. This would result in much more policy relevant outputs.

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[22] For the full version of the FOCI Scientific Report, dated 15/12/2010 please see:
http://www.espon.eu/export/sites/default/Documents/Projects/AppliedResearch/FOCI/FOCI_FinalReport_ScientificReport-r.pdf

- For Priority 1 and 2 projects, the main message to emerge is that the outputs were generally of decent academic quality, containing an impressive range of data analysis and maps. However, criticism from SB members as well as CU staff focused on the fact that project outputs, especially some of the Scientific Reports were really very long (e.g. over 800 pages for FOCI) and were really difficult to distil down into clear and concise policy messages. In particular, this is linked to the broad project specifications, which result in a tremendous amount of data being collected which are not so easily translated into key policy messages.

- The Priority 3 project outputs were really targeted from the outset although concerns were raised about the extent to the web tools were really disseminated to the widest possible audience in order to raise the profile of the ESPON programme. In addition, another concerns is that the Priority 3 project tools need to be continued in the next period in order to make sure that they are maintained and not simply left as useful 'artefacts'.

- The Priority 4 project was specifically targeted towards disseminating ESPON project results and clearly had some success in doing that. However, more could have been done to define the key user groups and target audience for the dissemination activities. In addition, the INTERSTRAT project was commissioned in the early phase of the current ESPON programme when actually there were almost no findings from other projects to disseminate. This is something that should be improved for the next period.

3.4 Policy relevance and impact

The key findings below are based on the transversal analysis of the 12 case studies focusing on the policy relevance and impact of the project outputs. Table 9 above provides a summary of the main findings that emerged from the analysis and the sections below provide more detail on the respective questions.

3.4.1 What is the policy relevance/applicability of the outputs? Does the output make a contribution to the policy field concerned?

- Yet again, as in the other two sections, the policy relevance/applicability of the outputs varies both between Priorities and projects.

- Several Priority 1 and 3 projects have added undoubted value to the range of research carried out in the field of territorial cohesion. These were DEMIFER, SGPTDE, ESPON CLIMATE as well as INTERCO and HyperAtlas. The latter two Priority 3 projects were policy relevant because they provided useful tools that stakeholders across Europe could utilise.

- The INTERSTRAT project allowed 9 ECPs to play a bridging role to engage and spread the results of the programme to policy makers. However, there the project suffered from a lack of targeting of key audiences.

- The feedback for Priority 1 projects from both the stakeholders interviewed and the peer reviewers emphasised the undoubted value of the range of research carried out in the field of territorial cohesion. On the other hand, policy relevance and impact received the most critical feedback with several key areas being cited for which significant improvements need to be made for the next ESPON funding period.

- The Priority 2 projects, especially EUROISLANDS and PURR, received mixed feedback in this area from the peer reviewers. However more positive responses were expressed by the respective stakeholders involved in the various projects. The criticisms from the peer reviewers focused on the breadth of the project specifications as well as the lack of time to really allow the research team to get into sufficient research detail.

- The stakeholders', however, firmly welcomed the findings in the three Priority 2 projects because they provided quality research on particular case studies of direct relevance to local and regional challenges. This 'demand driven approach' was certainly welcomed by the stakeholders and should certainly continue in the next period.

- The Priority 3 projects were judged by the peer reviewers as being policy relevant mainly because they provided useful tools that stakeholders across Europe could utilise. This work was highlighted as an important area of the ESPON programme, building on the previous programme's work collecting and mapping territorial cohesion indicators.

- The main challenge, however, is to ensure that such tools are disseminated widely to a range of stakeholders in order to increase engagement. This element was viewed as an area for improvement for the next period.

- The Priority 4 INTERSTRAT project which focused on dissemination of ESPON research findings received less than positive feedback from the peer reviewers. It must be noted, however, that given the nature of this project, there were less conventional academic outputs to review certainly compared to Priority 1 and 2 projects.

- Having said that, again the stakeholders involved in the project were rather positive about the aims and outcomes from INTERSTRAT. Importantly, the project funding was welcomed by 9 ECPs as allowing them to actually carry out dissemination at the national level of ESPON project findings. Indeed, 4 ECPs interviewed noted that they would not have been able to carry out as extensive a range of dissemination activities if they had not been involved in the INTERSTRAT project.

3.4.2 Do the experts know of policy impacts from the project outputs? What has been the follow-up to the projects?

> - According to 7 of the 12 Lead project partners, a clear forward looking dissemination strategy is needed for each of the projects from the outset, specifying the target policy maker audience, the tools to be used to engage them and the timing for this work to be carried out during the project.
>
> - All of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the project research findings should be more concrete, more operational, more to-the-point and presented in short policy briefs specifically targeted to policy makers.

- Whilst recognising that it is not a straightforward process to simply read-off academic findings into policy relevant messages, the feedback from the analysis of the 12 case studies shows that more could be done to improve the policy relevance and impact of the project outputs.

- The criticism focused on the presentation of the main research findings, policy conclusions as well as dissemination efforts (especially for FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, EUROISLANDS, PURR, and INTERSTRAT). Communication was too often focused on experts/researchers instead of being targeted to key stakeholder and policy maker audiences.

- In terms of follow-up, several other related research projects developed out of the ESPON Priority 1 funded work, with the project leaders able to capitalise on their involvement in the programme as a positive spin-off. In addition, 7 out of 12 Lead partners or TPG had already been involved in other subsequent ESPON projects (FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, CLIMATE, PURR, INTERCO, and HYPERATLAS).

- The follow up from the Priority 2 projects mainly focuses upon continuing the links and networks that developed between respective stakeholders involved in the projects. Such stakeholder and policy maker collaboration is also a notable impact of the ESPON research, which might otherwise have not taken place. Of course, the test is to see the extent to which such networks bear fruit in terms of other benefits in the coming years.

- The Priority 3 projects have the potential to be really quite important tools for a range of researchers and stakeholders outside of the ESPON programme. Hitherto, however, the tools largely remain of use for other researchers working on ESPON projects, which is something that needs to be further widened during the next period.

- The Priority 4 projects are focused on disseminating a whole range of results produced from the other ESPON projects. The INTERSTRAT project, in particular, played an important bridging role to engage and spread the results of the programme to policy makers. The project has had some success; however, the feedback suggests that better targeting of key audiences should be the focus for similar projects in the subsequent programming period.

3.4.3 Are the stakeholders themselves still using the outputs (and how?)

> - The policy impact of the ESPON CLIMATE project has been notable especially with the European Environmental Agency in Copenhagen using project data to model results.

- As discussed above, the Priority 2 outputs are being used by local and regional stakeholders that were involved in the particular projects.

- The UK national contact point has been very useful for the dissemination of the results of the SGPTDE project. They made repeated reference to the project in various presentations and briefs, highlighting the policy relevancy of the findings from the project.

3.4.4 What could have been done differently to improve project impact?

> - 4 out of the 6 Priority 1 partners stated that the content and focus of the project specifications is the main variable for ensuring (or not) the policy relevance of the findings. The projects that covered too many issues from the outset were judged, by both the stakeholders interviewed and the peer reviewers, as having relatively less policy relevant outputs.

- First, a key improvement would be to define the project specifications much more tightly on a set of key issues. As said previously, 5 out of 12 projects had broad specifications, most of them in Priority 1 projects (FOCI, TERCO, and GEOSPECS).

- Second, the project specifications should prescribe key target stakeholder groups to whom the research will be primarily aimed. This is crucial in order to make sure that the research is focused on addressing the needs of such groups as well as ensuring that project outputs are drafted with such groups in mind.

- Third, the feedback suggests that even though dissemination activities are defined from the outset of a project, far too often this work is rather seen as a kind of add-on towards the end of the research. This tended to be the case for the majority of the Priority 1 projects.

3.5   Project management and support

The key findings below are based on the transversal analysis of the 12 case studies which are summarised in this section, divided by evaluation question. For this particular theme, there was a specific question related to the potential improvements that could be made to the project management process.

3.5.1 Could the ESPON project process be improved? Are there appropriate quality management procedures? Are the outputs timely? Is the administrative burden proportionate? To what extent are contacts between stakeholders and project contractors appropriate?

> - 10 out of the 12 project leaders mentioned that too much time was spent on project management, especially dealing with financial issues and that the process was far too complicated and bureaucratic. This served to detract from the time spent on carrying out the research;
>
> - Whilst it is difficult to quantify how much time is actually spent on project administration, we estimate that for the median project leader, more than half their time is spent dealing with ESPON related bureaucracy;
>
> - 5 out of the 12 project leaders argued that the controls were much more stringent for ESPON projects compared to other Framework Seven research projects that they had undertaken;
>
> - 6 out of the 12 project leaders said that they would not take on the leadership of another ESPON project because of the high administrative burden and related hidden costs. A further 3 lead partners hesitated about taking on the role of lead partner again.
>
> - The administrative burden is the main reason why the 'barriers to entry' for new, smaller and private institutions into the ESPON programme are really too high.

- In particular, the level of financial control was consistently mentioned as being disproportionate to the actual project budget levels. 5 out of the 12 lead partners highlighted as a negative point the slowness of payments, which could sometimes take over a year. This caused significant problems for some project partners that were not able to rely on other funds to meet cash flow short falls.

- This was especially problematic for those projects which had private sector partners that had real problems in balancing their budgets. Again, this caused internal management problems and delayed research being carried out in 2 of the 12 case studies.

- In particular, the first level audit controls were cited as being problematic partly because auditors in Member States were not used to dealing with claims related to research projects, such as ESPON. The fact that all project partners had to go through such controls, even if they received relatively small amounts of money (e.g. less than 10,000 Euros) meant that there were often delays in project payments being made.

- In the same vein, the lack of fixed currency exchange rates for those partners not using the Euro was highlighted as an issue because there was no certainty in the level of funding to be allocated due to currency fluctuations (e.g. INTERCO).

- Two of the Lead partners (for EUROISLANDS and POLYCE) had had no prior experience of carrying out an ESPON project before. The relative lack of experience emerged, however, as a key factor in the way in which the lead partners were able to

manage the administrative demands of delivering their respective projects. This indicates that the 'barriers to entry' for new, smaller and private institutions into the ESPON programme are really too high.

- The service contract for HYPERATLAS contributed, together with its small size, clear and precise specifications to a decent project.

- The CU team was praised by 6 of the project leaders for their professionalism and ability to deal swiftly to questions from project leaders. The hard work that the CU staff put in was also noted given the range of demands on their time.

- Having said that, a different set of 6 project leaders noted that the CU staff, due to time constraints, have to focus more time on project management issues and consequently have much less time to spend on engaging with the particular research areas as well as capitalising on project findings. This was noted as an area for improvement because often the CU staff would like to get into the research detail but they are unable to do so.

- The input from the MC members also needs to be improved because currently it is rather patchy and viewed as less useful by the projects themselves. This point is discussed in much more detail in the following section.

4. Review of the ESPON Monitoring Committee and Coordination Unit

This section discusses the findings from Task 4 of the evaluation which focused on the role and activities of the ESPON Monitoring Committee (MC) and the Coordination Unit (CU) in order to explore what works well and what could be improved for the next programming period. The findings are structured into three main domains, which cover the questions listed in the ToRs for the evaluation. Annex 7 details the list of stakeholders interviewed and Annex 8 shows the list of interview questions that were posed.

The top 3 issues for change cited by the ESPON Monitoring Committee
➢ The **role of the MC** should be primarily to provide the overall **strategic direction** of the programme, rather than being involved in the day-to-day management of ESPON.
➢ The **ESPON CU** spends too much time on administrative work: it needs to be changed for the next period to increase the staff's **scientific capacity**.
➢ ESPON's **administrative burden**, both financial and procedural, is too high and needs **to be rationalised**.

4.1 ESPON's 'institutional impact'

This domain focuses on the extent to which the findings from the evaluation find that ESPON's mission and role in support of territorial cohesion across the EU has been achieved and in what ways. In particular, the focus will be on highlighting the main achievements of the programme (good-practices, results and impacts) and the extent to which the outputs are 'fit for purpose' in terms of policy relevance.

KEY ISSUES ON ESPON's INSTITUTIONAL IMPACT
- Stakeholders would like to see simpler, concise and more readable deliverables.
- Define from the outset of the project the target audience and make sure that the "potential customers" are involved in the project.
- Translate academic research findings into policy relevant messages for practitioners.
- ESPON Contact Points (ECP) need to be strengthened in order to make sure that project results are disseminated more widely at the (sub)national level.
- Enhance connections between ESPON and other European programmes.
- Reduce the administrative tasks of the CU staff to allow them more time to work with the TPG in a scientific way.

4.1.1 What are the possibilities for adapting ESPON to produce concise and policy relevant documents in a shorter timetable?

- Whilst the academic strength of the research carried out as part of the ESPON programme is regarded as high. For the next programming period, almost all of stakeholders stressed the need for more simple, concise and readable deliverables to be produced by the respective individual projects.

- In particular, the current length of the project reports is too long and dense (e.g. FOCI or SGPTDE). The aim should be to reduce the need for such lengthy deliverables as well as ensuring that more targeted and concise reports are produced specifically to meet the needs of practitioners.

- The suggested improvements include making it clear from the outset of each of the projects - who are the target audiences and how the research findings will meet their needs. This information should be detailed in the project specifications and then listed in more detail in the Inception and subsequent reports.

- The list of deliverables required should be more prescriptive to include, for example, shorter policy briefs; a short PowerPoint presentation listing the key findings from the project that practitioners could use to disseminate to their respective partners. A good example that one MC member cited is the policy brief from the DEMIFER[23] project.

- This policy brief provides a concise 4-page summary of the main findings from the DEMIFER project relating to the issue of the impact of migration on population change. A key fact cited is that 75 per cent of all European regions will have a larger population in 2050 if current migration flows continue than if there were no migration[24]. Two very useful maps are included to illustrate and accompany the short discussion of the key findings. The final section highlights several policy implications from the DEMIFER project findings, which are presented very succinctly in a user friendly way, including that migration will most likely benefit the most affluent regions whilst poor regions would lost population due to migration.

- The use of social media should also be explored, for example, to make sure that each project produces a short video summary of the key findings that could be disseminated online to practitioner audiences. One MC member said: "*Asking to the TPG to produce a 15 minutes understandable video on their project would oblige them to think how to communicate about their research*".

- In addition, several MC members suggested that for ESPON to produce more concise, timely and relevant documents it will need to rely on more senior in-house expertise and have access to a pool of outside experts who can draft such documents in a relatively short time frame.

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[23] "*Demographic Diversity of the European Territory*"; "*Impact of migration on Population change*"; "*Scenarios in the European Labour Force*",
http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_AppliedResearch/demifer.html, September 2011.

[24] Ibid. pg 1

4.1.2 What skills and capacity would be necessary to enhance the role of ESPON as a resource for territorial development within cohesion policy?

- First, the need to better define the main "customers" of the individual projects would enhance the relevancy of the whole ESPON programme. The evidence from the current period suggests that in Priority 2 projects, the involvement of stakeholders from the beginning enables clearer targets (e.g. POLYCE); this is especially the case if the stakeholder is also a MC member.

- Second, the current projects have produced a lot of results with a high level of academic complexity, which is why the reports are currently not as useful for policy makers as they could be. The future ESPON programme should consider the strategic focus either to zoom in on certain policy areas and niches which have not yet been covered in so much detail. Or, the focus should be on specific territorial issues (such as macro-regions) that are of relevance to specific policy makers and practitioners.

- Third, it would be very interesting to enhance the connections between ESPON and other European programmes (such as FP7 or Interact) or respective national ones in order to take advantage of their networks to disseminate ESPON project findings.

- Fourth, the role of the network of the ESPON Contact Points needs to be strengthened in order to make sure that project results are disseminated more widely at the (sub)national level. Whilst the current network has done some interesting work; for instance, the UK's ECP organised a workshop in November 2012 ("*Overcoming rural, urban and cross-border development challenges*"), disseminating the results of several ESPON projects[25]. On the other hand, the current system is rather ad-hoc in terms of funding and the way in which dissemination activities are carried out.

- To increase the dissemination of results, one MC member suggested to "*select generous persons from research promotion institutions in order to spread the results of the projects using their network amongst local, regional and national administrations*". Another MC member stated that "*in my country, the ECP has a good knowledge of the research results of ESPON's projects but has not one single contact with the local administration*".

4.1.3 What are the main constraints (administrative, scientific etc) standing in the way of this?

- It is not a trivial task to translate academic research findings into policy relevant messages for practitioners. Having said that, ESPON needs to focus more on how it engages with policy makers; how project findings are communicated and disseminated, especially in terms of the conclusions and recommendations for policy makers.

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[25] ESPONs' project findings related to urban and rural development in England were presented, based on projects such as TIGER, FOCI, CAEE, PURR and EDORA. http://www.rtpi.org.uk/knowledge/research/research-events/uk-espon-contact-point-events/overcoming-rural,-urban-and-cross-border-development-challenges/

- The administrative burden of ESPON is too high (which limits participation and thus the variety and quality of the project proposals). In addition, the scientific capacity of the current ESPON team is rather restricted due to their contribution to manage the high administrative burden. This point was made by over 75 per cent of the MC members interviewed.

4.1.4 To what extent has ESPON's mission and role in support of territorial cohesion across the EU been achieved and in what ways?

- ESPON has been able to provide territorial analysis which was considered useful by a variety of stakeholders at the regional, national and European level. In particular, one MC quoted the relevance of the ESPON CLIMATE project and another mentioned SGPTDE.

- Nevertheless, a closer and more expert driven guidance of the ESPON projects could substantially increase the impact of the ESPON programme in the next period.

4.2 ESPON's 'institutional setting'

This domain focuses upon the findings from Task 4 related to ESPON's 'institutional setting' and the extent to which the governance framework (including decision making, project management, thematic priority setting etc.) are appropriate and in what ways they could be improved. Understanding the current situation will allow clear recommendations to be made about potential improvements to ESPON's 'institutional setting' for the 2014 to 2020 period.

KEY ISSUES ON ESPON's INSTITUTIONAL SETTING
- The role of the MC should be primarily to provide the overall strategic direction of the programme.
- The MC has to provide feedback at every stage of a particular project. That is why MC members (along with a CU staff member) should follow individual projects regarding their specific interest.
- More work should be delegated to the CU in order to allow the MC's work to be better prioritised and focused on strategic decision making (there is a considerable scope for delegation of many decisions taken by the MC).
- ESPON should have certain MC meetings on administrative issues and others on project and strategic policy orientation.

4.2.1 An assessment of the role of the Monitoring Committee

- The feedback suggests that the role of the MC should be primarily to provide the overall strategic direction of the programme, making sure that the key targets in terms of spending are met as well as the achievement of both project and programme deliverables.

- Currently, however, the MC is rather too involved in the day-to-day management of ESPON. The MC has to provide feedback at every stage of a particular project, from the drafting of the project specification to the approval of each report received from the TPG.

- This process currently has a significant impact on the capacity of the MC to actually steer the projects because of (1) the large number of ESPON projects; (2) the size of the reports (sometimes more than 800 pages); (3) the variety of themes addressed by ESPON; and (4) the fact that the all MC members are supposed to comment on all projects.

- The current process, therefore, is designed in such a way that it is extremely difficult for the MC to have a close and serious follow-up of the projects. Very few of the MC members is an expert in all the fields covered by ESPON, nor do they have the time to read so much material. Moreover, the size of the MC precludes a detailed discussion of each project, which sometimes has considerable consequences on the scientific quality and/or policy relevance of the projects. Indeed, the MC agrees on general recommendations, and the instructions given to the TPG are not clear enough to steer the project. To ensure a closer follow up of the projects, this should be delegated to an individual MC member.

- There is considerable scope for delegation of many of the decisions taken by the MC. The analogy is that the MC should be rather like the Executive Board of a company, with the CU providing quarterly updates to the Board on progress in key areas so that the MC members could shape and guide the programme's strategy as well as identify areas for improvement.

- Several comments pointed to the fact the MC's role has shifted away from this strategic role and more towards considering administrative elements of individual projects and the programme overall.

- Some MC members suggested that this is because of the life cycle of the programme as administrative elements are currently much more relevant given that the majority of the projects are coming to a close. Thus, at the start of the next programme the MC will have to consider the main strategic issues in order to shape the selection of the projects and the work to be carried out by each of them.

4.2.2 Is the right balance struck between strategy on the one hand and detailed or administrative tasks (such as project selection and management) on the other?

- The feedback in this area is rather split. On the one hand, a number of the MC members mentioned that *"since 2000-2002, the discussion about administrative issues has increased considerably. In particular, real debate over the content and focus of the projects themselves does not really take place anymore at MC meetings."*

- In this regard, a majority of MC members said that they wanted to reduce the amount of administrative and financial agenda items in order to ensure that discussions at MC meetings focus on more strategic issues.

- On the other hand, other MC members suggested that it is not so easy to differentiate the administrative tasks from the strategic tasks. For example, project selection is not considered by certain MC members as an "administrative task" but rather as a strategic issue.

- In summary, the current MC is a mix of civil servants with more knowledge of either the content or the procedures. As a result, the discussions depending on the topic are more relevant for one half or the other half of the MC.

4.2.3 Is the committee considering an appropriate level of detail or is there room for delegation ?

- Time is a key constraint that was mentioned by almost all of the MC members. Most of them have a range of other tasks to do in their 'day jobs' and so do not have that much time to dedicate to ESPON related activities. For instance, one MC member estimates that he spends about 5% which is equivalent to 1 day per month of his time on ESPON. Another MC member said she was able to devote 1 day per week on her ESPON related activities.

- For this reason, there is simply not enough time for the MC members to read and comment on every report that they are sent (the average length of the 7 available Scientific reports is 484 pages[26]). This explains why the level of feedback from the MC members on project deliverables is rather limited with an average of around only four or five comments. That is why several MC members suggested reducing the amount of information that is sent from each of the different ESPON projects to them to read and comment on.

- The feedback also suggests that more work should be delegated to the CU in order to allow the work of the MC to be better prioritised and focused on strategic decision making.

- Several MC members suggested splitting the themes of the MC meetings (for example, between administrative and strategic elements) so that different colleagues could attend respective meetings. This would allow meetings to be more tailored to the interests of a majority of MC members.

- For the next period, another suggestion was that MC members (along with a CU staff member) should follow individual projects of specific interest, which would allow them to follow the work carried out much more closely. In turn, they could update the rest of the MC on the key project findings. This would allow the MC members to get more involved in specific projects rather than being asked to comment on each and every project, which is currently the case.

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[26] Data were available for FOCI, SGPTDE, CLIMATE, GEOSPECS (Draft Scientific Report), EUROISLANDS, POLYCE, INTERCO.

4.2.4 An assessment of the composition and activity of the monitoring committee. Is this appropriate and are the right people (including right skills, right level) represented?

- Several MC members suggested that the role of the committee has changed since the inception of ESPON and the current focus is rather biased towards the administrative elements of the programme. This was cited partly as a result of the seniority and expertise of the majority of the members of the MC who tend to be more responsible for administrative rather than strategic elements of ERDF and territorial cohesion.

- Another point that emerged was that there are considerably strong differences between MC members in terms of their time and capacity to dedicate to ESPON related activities. Some MC members have more time and have a more supportive team to rely on in their respective home ministries than others.

4.2.5 What other improvements could be made to ESPON's current 'institutional setting' for future funding rounds to make it more 'fit for purpose'?

- As mentioned earlier, a suggested improvement is to organise certain MC meetings on administrative issues and others on project and strategic policy orientation. This would enable different MC members to attend them according to their competencies and expertise.

- Another point mentioned was that MC members are not experts in everything, so they need advice and support which is why more work should be delegated to the CU. Agreement on the details of what can be delegated should be reached for the next programming period.

- The role of the ECPs should be strengthened to help support respective MC and national involvement in ESPON. Currently, the ECP network is rather patchy with some being better financed than others and consequently more able to engage prospective users as well as communicate effectively with practitioners and policy-makers.

- The role of the ECPs was mentioned as unclear and could be improved. The feedback suggests that they should be financed through the ESPON programme itself to ensure that individual ECPs undertake more dissemination, networking, and translation activities.

- The level of material that was sent to MC members was also raised as an issue. The feedback suggests that too much information was distributed to members prior to meetings to read and comment on and that it was not possible to really respond fully to all demands. For example, they are asked to comment on all project deliverables and this was viewed as being far too much work. This needs to be managed better for the next period.

4.3   ESPON's 'institutional learning'

This domain focuses on the extent to which the ESPON team, internally, is able to capitalise on and effectively disseminate to stakeholders the knowledge and research findings from the projects that have been carried out. This is especially crucial for the future period to ensure that the ESPON team is able to utilise the accumulation of knowledge in the territorial cohesion field in order to help shape and interact with the wider policy and stakeholder community.

KEY ISSUES ON ESPON's INSTITUTIONAL LEARNING
- The CU staff spends a lot of time on administrative work: it needs to be changed for the next period. The challenge is to free up enough time for the staff to get engaged in the scientific elements of respective projects.
- ESPON's administrative burden, both financial and in terms of procedures, is too high: ESPON procedures need to be rationalised and the CU must be more flexible in the way that the ERDF rules are interpreted.
- The ESPON twice yearly seminars should be reconsidered in terms of format and frequency.

4.3.1 Is the ESPON team appropriate? Are there enough staff and do they have enough scientific skill?

- According to a number of MC members, the scientific capacities of the CU team are very appropriate. However, the point was made that the CU team spends a lot of time on administrative work, managing the projects for which they are responsible which often means that they simply do not have enough time to engage fully in the scientific elements of respective projects. This was cited as an element that needs to be changed for the next period.

4.3.2 Would it be appropriate to boost the scientific capacity of the team?

- Given that the ESPON procedures are rather time consuming, the CU team members have relatively little time for other activities. The feedback suggests, however, that the CU staff should play a much more active role in the translation and dissemination of the scientific findings from the different projects. The challenge is to free up enough time for the staff to get engaged in the scientific elements of respective projects.

- This is a crucial area that needs to be significantly improved for the next period and a key way suggested is for the CU to take on the role of 'knowledge broker'. This would require the ESPON team to have both more full-time in house scientific staff and access to a flexible pool of expertise. In addition, this requires not only scientific expertise but also a very good knowledge of how to engage with stakeholders and get the key policy messages across.

- The feedback emphasised that the 'knowledge broker' role is by no means a trivial task. The right skills and expertise need to be either brought into the CU team or current staff needs to be encouraged to take on the role with adequate training provided.

4.3.3 Are current ESPON processes appropriate? Are the administrative elements (including financial control) proportionate?

- The ESPON administrative burden, both financial and in terms of procedures, is too high. This was emphasized as being a crucial area that needs to be improved for the next period.

- MC members also underlined the fact that the administrative burden is due mainly to the way in which ESPON interprets the ERDF rules. In particular, the current system that the ESPON CU operates providing subsidy grants imposes a significant burden on all participants (ESPON CU, MC, project partners) and the result is that no one stakeholder group is content with the current situation. It must also be recognised that there are other ways in which ERDF contracts could operate; the example of the HyperAtlas service contract is a case in point.

4.3.4 Are they producing the desired results for the applicants? Could they be rationalised?

- The ESPON procedures need to be rationalised and the CU must be more flexible in the way that the ERDF rules are interpreted and that, as far as possible, in order to reduce the administrative burden for potential applicants.

4.3.5 How useful are the ESPON seminars? What do attendees take away in terms of policy lessons, what evidence is there of implementation?

- The ESPON seminars are organised twice a year to coincide with the MC meetings in the country hosting the presidency. "*These seminars are useful in order to develop a common understanding of territorial cohesion issues and provide a bridge between scientists and policy-makers. Indeed, it is essential for the practitioners to attend such seminars in order to acquire knowledge of what is going on in the ESPON programme*" said an MC member interviewed.

- These seminars, however, have become rather too large which makes it much more difficult to follow all of the presentations as well as do effective networking. The time allotted to presenting the work is often too short or not enough work has been done to merit a presentation. Discussions do not enter into sufficient detail to ensure that comments can be taken onboard. Participation from non-ESPON partners outside the hosting country is usually close to zero.

- The ESPON twice yearly seminars should be reconsidered in terms of format and frequency. It should be more explicit what audience they are trying to reach and with what kind of information. Some stakeholders as well as MC members think it would be useful to have smaller workshops, which are more targeted on specific issues of

interest. This would make the ESPON seminars more intimate and hence easier for networking and debate. In this regard, several of the ESPON more focused, thematic seminars in Brussels have been more successful in presenting a coherent topic with study which is sufficiently advanced to share results.

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5. Conclusions

This section discusses the main conclusions that have emerged from the work carried out for the evaluation. Clearly, the conclusions made here are very much interlinked even though they are presented separately. For example, ESPON's governance structure, which is based on the key role and operation of the Monitoring Committee, has a very significant impact on the (too broad and ambitious) design of the projects and the (limited) capacity of the MC and CU to actually steer the projects. In fact, this is one of the main factors that causes ESPON to rather miss its *"raison d'être"* because of the general lack of policy relevant outputs and findings from the projects carried out. The first conclusion below discusses this point in more detail.

5.1 ESPON's remit is to better serve European policy-making related to territorial development and cohesion

As outlined in Section 3 of this Report, the remit of the ESPON is actually to provide a knowledge base, for policy-makers, on spatial development issues. The first programme aimed to improve knowledge, co-ordination and consistency of policy actions and measures at the EU level and between the EU, national and regional levels, as well as for bilateral relations of individual Member States.

Just to reiterate, the mission of the current ESPON programme is to:

> "*Support policy development in relation to the aim of territorial cohesion and a harmonious development of the European territory by (1) providing comparable information, evidence, analyses and scenarios on territorial dynamics and (2) revealing territorial capital and potentials for development of regions and larger territories contributing to European competitiveness, territorial cooperation and a sustainable and balanced development*".

The key point to emerge from the evaluation relates directly to this mission statement because it is apparent that ESPON needs to really realign and refocus its efforts on better serving policy makers in the field of territorial cohesion.

5.1.1 ESPON needs to realign and refocus to its original mission

- Whilst ESPON has produced a range of interesting territorial analyses and findings, especially in terms of data collection and the mapping of indicators, the evidence is that the scientific quality varies from one priority to the other and it also strongly varies from one project to the other. The critical point is that the range of useful territorial analyses produced could have been much better targeted on directly supporting policy making and development *(see Tables 8 and 9; Section 4.3 and 4.4).*

5.1.2 ESPON is not a source of funding for academics

- ESPON's *raison d'être* is to directly support policy makers and it is not a source of funding for academics across Europe. The programme is viewed, however, as predominantly a source of funding by academic partners rather than a way of carrying out research that supports policy development.

- The availability of the ESPON funding was cited by 9 out of the 12 Lead project partners as being an important motivating factor for participating in the programme *(see Table 8 and Section 4.1)*. In other words, it seems that the focus on policy making is secondary compared to potential academic research opportunities.

5.1.3 ESPON project specifications are an absolutely crucial area

- The main focus of the projects should be on producing research that supports policy making and development in the field of territorial cohesion. This means that the individual project specifications need to stem from a particular policy issue, need or question that practitioners, at multiple levels, are trying to grapple with and need some further research to help shape and inform the policy making process.

- The ESPON project specifications, therefore, are an absolutely crucial area as they lay the foundations for the research and policy relevant research to be carried out.

- The findings from the evaluation suggest that the projects that covered too many issues from the outset were judged as having relatively less policy relevant outputs. In addition, in projects that have a broad specification the TPGs were able to concentrate 80% of their work on issues outside the remit of the project specifications without the CU or the MC being able to force them to focus on what needed to be done

- Overall, a total of 8 out of the 12 projects had project specifications that were too broad and ambitious. In addition, at least 5 out of the 12 case studies had rather vague intended policy goals; examples of this include FOCI, TERCO, GEOSPECS, EUROISLANDS and INTERSTRAT *(see Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.2 and 4.3)*.

5.1.4 Priority 1 project specifications tended to be too broad and take too long

- This was especially the case for Priority 1, which is important given that it takes up over half (58 per cent) of the total budget for the 62 projects commissioned by ESPON *(see Section 2.2)*.

- Whilst the breadth of research issues covered by Priority 1 covered a lot of interesting topics in the territorial cohesion field, the findings suggest that a number of projects could have been much more focused on more specific topics.

- Overall, 4 out of the 6 Priority 1 Lead partners stated that the content and focus of the project specifications is the main variable for ensuring (or not) the policy relevance of the findings *(see Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.1)*.

- In particular, FOCI and TERCO were cited as being clear examples in which their respective project specifications were far too broad and ambitious which meant that the sheer breadth of the findings made it difficult to make clear and concise policy messages.

- In addition, for Priority 1 the time taken to deliver the projects from original idea to completion was too long. The projects were designed to give the researchers' time to really tackle the breadth of issues included in the various specifications. However, this meant that the respective project timelines were typically rather long – over 3 years from start to finish *(as illustrated in Section 3.3)* – which meant the ability to influence and support policy development on a particular issue was made rather more difficult. The timeline for policy development is rather shorter, especially when a particular issue arises such as the problems resulting from the recession.

5.1.5 Priority 2 'demand-driven' stakeholder involvement was largely successful

- The introduction of the 'demand-driven' stakeholder involvement for Priority 2 really provided concrete examples of where ESPON projects directly supported policy making and development, as per its mission statement *(see Section 4.2 and 4.3)*. In addition, the Priority 3 projects provided significant added value providing the 'toolkits' both for other projects to use as well as policy makers. The real strength of these projects was the specific focus on a particular issue which meant that the research carried out was really tightly targeted. Priority 4 focused on the dissemination of the research findings to policy makers and stakeholders and provided a crucial source of funding for the ECPs.

5.2 Policy relevance and impact

The second main conclusion to emerge is that the policy relevant research carried out and level of impact on the policy making process needs to be significantly improved for the next programme. The findings from the evaluation suggest that the current programme has produced limited policy relevant research and hence the impact, hitherto, on the policy making process, has been rather limited *(as illustrated in Section 2.6)*.

The academic quality of the research carried out is considered to be of decent quality, however, several important points emerged about the way in which this research is conceived, targeted, disseminated for policy makers and then to fully monitor the impacts arising.

5.2.1 Target policy maker and stakeholder groups are not well defined from the outset

- From the outset of the projects, the target stakeholder groups tend to not be very well defined and there is lack of detail about plans for engagement throughout the project life-cycle. Put simply, dissemination and policy relevance are not firmly mainstreamed right from the original project idea through to the finish of it.

- In fact, for 7 out of the 12 lead project partners, a dissemination strategy is needed from the outset that specifies the target policy maker audience *(see Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.4).*

- In addition, there is little evidence to show that projects are really able to demonstrate the policy relevance and impact of the research carried out. Undoubtedly, monitoring and assessing policy impact is not a trivial task *(as discussed in Section 2.6),* having said that it is possible but in fact very few of the projects, particularly in Priority 1, could really demonstrate the ways in which they have supported policy development in the territorial cohesion field.

5.2.2 The deliverables are too difficult for policy makers to digest easily

- The project outputs generated are frequently too difficult for the policy makers to digest easily. Whilst some improvements were made in this programme compared to the previous, it is apparent that the deliverables remain rather dense, long and not so easily digestible for non-academic audiences.

- In particular, the Executive Summaries and Final Reports tend to be too long and hence policy makers find it hard to pick out the key messages from the research and certainly do not have the time to trawl through lengthy individual project outputs *(see Section 4.3).*

- All of the stakeholders interviewed stated that the project research findings should be more concrete, concise and presented in short policy briefs specifically targeted to policy makers *(See Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.4).*

5.2.3 The CU should play more of a 'knowledge broker' role

- In the current programme, there is ambiguity about who is best placed to capitalise on the rich academic work that is carried out. The findings *(see Sections 4.4 and 5)* show that the role of the CU should be strengthened in order to allow staff to play a more active role in disseminating the findings – a kind of 'knowledge brokerage' role acting at the interface between the academic and research institutes as well as the policy makers.

- Currently, the CU team spend too much of their time dealing with project management related issues and relatively less on engaging with different project teams to help guide and shape the research as well as disseminate findings to relevant policy maker audiences.

5.2.4 The 'barriers to entry' into the ESPON programme are too high

- Academic institutions make up the overwhelming majority of organisations (over 90 per cent) involved in the current ESPON programme *(as illustrated in Section 2.2.1).*

- 11 out of the 12 case studies leaders were from Universities or publicly funded academic research centres. Moreover, 7 of these 12 Leaders had already been involved

in previous ESPON projects either as a Lead or project partner *(see Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.1).*

- Whilst the academic focus helps to ensure that the research is of decent quality, it means that other non-academic types of approaches to carrying out policy related research are not really utilised by ESPON. More diverse organisational involvement, however, would certainly help to ensure the use of different approaches to communicate to policy makers and stakeholders.

- The biggest problem, however, is that the 'barriers to entry' for private sector, NGOs, think-tanks and other organisations are too high. This stems mainly from the administration burden that is placed on project leaders (and partners) to participate in the ESPON programme. For example, delays in payment of over a year really place severe constraints on private sector organisations *(see Section 4.5)*

5.3 Governance arrangements

The third main conclusion to emerge from the evaluation is that the governance architecture of the ESPON programme is actually not really very 'fit for purpose' and its 'form' no longer really follows, nor facilitates, its 'function', for several reasons.

5.3.1 ESPON has a complex 'organisational ecosystem'

- ESPON has developed into a very complicated network of inter-relationships between different organisations *(as illustrated in Figure 9).* The CU sits in the centre of this 'organisational ecosystem' and it has to serve multiple 'customers'; these include the Luxembourg Managing Authority, the individual projects as well as the Monitoring Committee. The key point is that the policy makers, which are theoretically the 'end-users' and both the 'clients' as well as 'customers' of the ESPON programme are seemingly not always the primary focus.

5.3.2 The role of the Monitoring Committee needs to be reviewed

- It is clear that the role of the Monitoring Committee needs to be reviewed because at the moment the level of involvement from the respective members is rather limited *(see Section 5).*

- The MC members represent the policy maker angle of ESPON and as such provide useful inputs into shaping and monitoring the programme. However, the MC members are currently asked to do much in terms of reading and commenting on each and every project deliverable.

- This, when combined with their respective professional roles, means that the majority of MC members have very little time to really engage in shaping individual projects as well as the overall programme priorities. For example, some MC members are able to spend as little as 1 day per month on ESPON related activities.

- In addition, in the present institutional setting, every decision on every project must be validated by the entire MC. Given the limited scientific capacity of the MC, a consensus could only be reached on very general and loose recommendations and the instructions given to the research team were never sufficiently clear to imply a significant change in the behaviour of the research team. This meant that the MC was basically unable to provide detailed feedback to really improve the quality of projects that needed more support and direction.

5.3.3 The role of the ESPON National Contact Points (ECPs) needs to be refocused

- The ESPON National Contact Points (ECPs) play a key role in increasing the engagement with policy makers at the (sub)national level, through disseminating findings both in English as well as in local languages. However, the way in which the ECPs operate and are funded in each Member State really varies quite a lot and the real level of engagement with policy makers is rather patchy because the majority of them are actually academic institutions *(see Section 5)*.

- The reality is that some of the ECPs are more focused on accessing the various funding available via ESPON rather than engaging with policy makers. This is partly not their responsibility but rather the way in which the ECP network is currently constructed.

- Most notably, the fact that the ECPs are eligible for ESPON funding creates a potential conflict of interest with their role to engage policy makers and encourage them to get more involved in using the ESPON research findings.

5.4 Administrative arrangements

The fourth main conclusion to emerge from the evaluation is that the administrative burden of managing an ESPON project is really too heavy, in several different ways.

- First, 10 out of the 12 project leaders stated that they spent too much time on project management. For the median project leader, more than half their time is spent dealing with ESPON related bureaucracy *(see Tables 8 and 9 and Section 4.5)*.

- Second, 5 out of the 12 project leaders argued that the financial controls were much more stringent for ESPON projects compared to Framework Seven research projects. Several issues emerged including the level of financial control, especially the first level audit; the slowness in payments being made, which caused difficulties for all partners, especially the private sector participants; and overall, the complexity of project rules and regulations.

- Third, a worrying statistic is that 6 out of the 12 project leaders said that they would not take on the leadership of another ESPON project because of the bureaucracy. This is clearly indicative that much more needs to be done to improve the administrative arrangements for the next period.

- Fourth, whilst it is recognised that the ESPON CU team does provide a professional service for stakeholders to help them navigate through the administrative procedures, it

is clear that more could be done by the CU to rationalise and streamline some of the procedures to ease the administrative burden for project leaders.

- During the second half of the current programme, some improvements were made to speed up payments (e.g. to between 2 or 3 months) although much more needs to be done in this regard for the next period.

In summary, it is very important to note that the main conclusions generated from this evaluation are very much in line with those that were outlined in the external evaluation of ESPON done in 2011[27] *(see Section 3.2)*. There is a clear consensus, therefore, about the ways in which ESPON needs to be reshaped in order to meet its overall mission to serve policy makers in the field of territorial development and cohesion. This is a key point that needs to be borne in mind when drafting the Operational Programme for the next programme.

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[27] ESPON considerations post 2013, "*ESPON 2013 Programme External Evaluation*", Loxley Consultancy, 2011.