

**Cross-border Cooperation:
Design and Management of
Cooperation in Spatial Development in the
German-Polish-Czech Borderlands**

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- Abstract -



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Abstract

What is the purpose of this study? Issues, objectives and structures

Cooperation in cross-border spatial development between Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic faces a dilemma. The framework conditions for cooperation are better than ever and cross-border coordination is urgently needed. In the new EU Structural Funds period 2007-2013, enormous funding is available for territorial cooperation. A new legal instrument (European Grouping for Territorial Cooperation) resolves the problem of a lacking legal framework. European integration is proceeding apace; the Schengen Treaty came into force in Poland and the Czech Republic in December 2008. European and national spatial development policy increasingly requires cross-border coordination to deal with demographic change, establish polycentric spatial structures and avoid undesirable spatial development. However, much cooperation has proved sporadic or disappointing. This discourages the actors involved. One objective of this study is therefore to answer the following research questions:

- What can cross-border cooperation achieve in spatial development?
- Which factors can be identified for successful cooperation in German-Polish-Czech borderlands?
- How does cross-border cooperation evolve with growing experience in the field?
- What role does the spatial dimension play?

Another objective is to provide information and recommendations on the design and management of cross-border cooperation in spatial development for practitioners to ensure a successful and continuous process.

What do we know about cross-border cooperation?

To establish the status of research, the relevance of three strands of theory for the research questions are discussed. They are general approaches for explaining the development and progress of cooperation between individuals, planning theory approaches on governance and cooperation, and approaches explaining networks, actors and communication in a cross-border context. Nine theoretical assumptions on factors influencing cross-border cooperation in spatial development are formulated on this basis, with the aim of structuring empirical data collection and evaluation in the course of work on the subject. These factors can be classified as exogenous or endogenous. The exogenous factors include:

- the size of the cooperation area, experience in cooperation in the participating cities and regions,
- the need for cooperation in specific cities and regions,
- processes of transition, differing administrative structures, the relationship between politics and administration,
- transnational organisations and legal framework,
- languages, prejudices and cultural differences.

The endogenous factors include:

- transaction costs, financial resources and funding,
- objectives, expectations and issues,
- actors, their competencies and resources,
- the design, management and moderation of cooperation processes.

An empirical investigation in three case studies

In the empirical investigation, the following three instances of cooperation in differently dimensioned cooperation areas serve as case studies:

- “City 2030 – A Common Guiding Principle for the European City Görlitz/Zgorzelec”,
- “Zittau, Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou – Small Triangle City Network” and
- “ENLARGE-NET – Cross-Border Networks Between Cities and Regions in Saxony, Lower Silesia, and Northern Bohemia in Preparation for EU Enlargement”.

Major variables in the case studies are the size of the cooperation area, experience in cooperation, objectives and duration of cooperation, as well as the type of management (external or internal). All case studies are cross-sectoral in nature, are located in the German-Polish-Czech borderlands and face similar challenges in urban and regional development.

Data was collected through sixteen semi-standardised interviews in German, Polish and Czech with experts from the case studies, analysis of documents, and participating observation. Data collection and evaluation were structured by the theoretical assumptions mentioned above. The first stage of data evaluation is guided by the nine theoretical assumptions, while the second and final stage focuses on the three case-studies.

The most important factors influencing cross-border cooperation

The empirical analysis shows that all nine factors assumed to have an influence are indeed relevant but to a varying extents in varying ways.

The *size of the cooperation area* has an impact on cross-border cooperation processes. The greater the distance between cooperating partners is, the more abstract are the issues addressed and the more costly and time-consuming is the cooperation process. The cooperation area grows in size as experience in cooperation increases.

The *need for cooperation* is often unclear in spite of obvious spatial development challenges in borderlands. Intensive phases for identifying the need for cooperation have proved their worth.

Differences in administrative structures hinder cooperation but the problems they cause can be overcome. More of an obstacle are differences in the human resources available in local authorities. German municipalities, in particular, which tend to be large, have been perceived as complex and inflexible by cooperation partners.

The lack of *transnational organisations and legal frameworks* hinders cooperation. The more tangible cooperation is, the more of a hindrance it is if a legal framework is lacking. EU Enlargement in 2004 created a positive atmosphere for cooperation, but expectations have been disappointed and resignation has spread. The Euroregions as existing cross-border institutions have done little to support cooperation.

Different *languages, prejudices and cultural differences* also influence cooperation. As experience with cooperation progresses, however, different languages and cultural differences come to be increasingly appreciated as an enrichment. Prejudices are waning.

Transaction costs, financial resources and funding play a major role in cooperation. The transaction costs of cooperation are generally high in a cross-border context – in particular in large cooperation areas. Funding to compensate these costs is therefore important, particularly in the initial stages of cooperation. However, it is essential that cooperating partners contribute their own resources if they are to gain the commitment of the others. Furthermore, the equitable distribution of funding is important.

Objectives, expectations and issues in cooperation need to be deliberately defined. When cooperation begins, objectives and expectations are vague and diverse even in small cooperation areas. Overdrawn objectives and expectations can result, with harmful consequences. Intensive phases of goal definition and agenda-setting have proved useful.

The *participating actors, their competencies and human resources* play a major role in cross-border cooperation. Even in well institutionalised cooperation processes, key actors are necessary. Cross-border cooperation is never an automatic success. Administrative staff are poorly equipped for such processes, which require flexibility, a readiness to assume risk, and creativity. Early and constant involvement by political decision-makers turned out to be important. Extending cooperation to include non-administrative actors proved difficult in all case studies.

Finally, the *design, management and moderation of communication processes* are crucial. Cross-border cooperation requires careful design and professional management. Coordination offices on an equal footing for ensuring continuous communication have been useful, as has external moderation.

From a cross-case study perspective, the following five major factors influencing cooperation, and hence the success of cooperation can be identified:

- Continuity and a long-term perspective for cooperation processes
- Adequate objectives and joint strategies
- Key actors in administration and politics
- A coordination office
- Funding available at the beginning of the processes

Major findings on the three case studies

The intensity of communication between Görlitz and Zgorzelec could not be maintained after completion of the *City 2030 Görlitz/Zgorzelec* project. Notable accord and results were achieved and implemented in a modified cooperation treaty. However, many agreements remained without political consequences, have not been reflected in further decisions, or have not been implemented. Key actors for cooperation between the two cities currently seem to be lacking. A planned coordination office to maintain communication has not been established.

The *Zittau, Bogatynia, Hrádek nad Nisou Small Triangle City Network*, in contrast, performed better in institutionalisation, in stabilising cooperation, and in focusing political action on the outcomes achieved in cooperation. Jointly elaborated strategies and well established cross-border organisational structures allow a continuous communication process and the implementation of joint projects, like a cross-border industrial estate and the joint management of settlement areas. A joint budget gives greater binding force to cooperation and facilitates the co-financing of projects. Although there is currently no joint coordination office, each of the three municipalities has an internal coordinator.

The *ENLARGE-NET* project initiated temporary cooperation in a large area with little experience in cooperation. The approach has been only partially successful. Intensive cooperation largely ceased after completion of the project. Some objectives and expectations had been overambitious and could not be attained. However, “soft,” difficult to measure results have

been achieved, like the establishment of contact between actors, the exchange of experience, and the reduction of stereotypes. These results should not be underestimated, since they provide the basis for future cooperation.

How is cross-border cooperation to be designed and managed?

On the basis of these practical findings, recommendations about designing and managing cross-border cooperation in spatial planning in the German-Polish-Czech borderlands can be formulated, in general on major influencing factors and specifically on the case studies. General recommendations include:

- cross-border cooperation needs to be purposively designed and managed
- the size of the cooperation area and the experience of the cities and regions involved with cooperation need to be taken into account; a start should be made with reasonably restricted areas, which can later be expanded
- Cross-border organisational structures need to be established and continuity ensured
- A coordination office needs to be set up
- External moderation and scientific monitoring and coaching are required
- Adequate and joint objectives need to be identified
- Joint strategies need to be elaborated, adopted and taken into account in further policy decisions
- Key actors from politics and administration need to be involved
- Continuous and regular communication needs to be enabled
- Political consequences need to be produced and joint decisions made
- Funding needs to be procured and own resources provided
- Cooperation needs to be evaluated and feed back provided.

How to continue in the case study cities and regions?

The *EuropeCity Görlitz/Zgorzelec* should intensify cooperation and sustain it through institutionalisation. A coordination office would therefore be useful to ensure ongoing communication and provide a contact point. The results achieved in the City 2030 Görlitz/Zgorzelec project should be followed up, kept up-to-date, and implemented, as well as being taken into account in future policy decisions.

The major challenge in the *Zittau, Bogatynia Hrádek nad Nisou Small Triangle City Network* is to consolidate cross-border structures and to focus action in the three cities on the requirements of joint urban and regional development. The project-oriented establishment of European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) should be considered to supply a legal framework. Furthermore, Objective 3 funding for territorial cooperation (INTERREG III A follow-up programmes) offers new possibilities for cross-border cooperation in the coming EU funding period. The joint coordination office is under consideration and should be established. Strategic documents should be regularly updated.

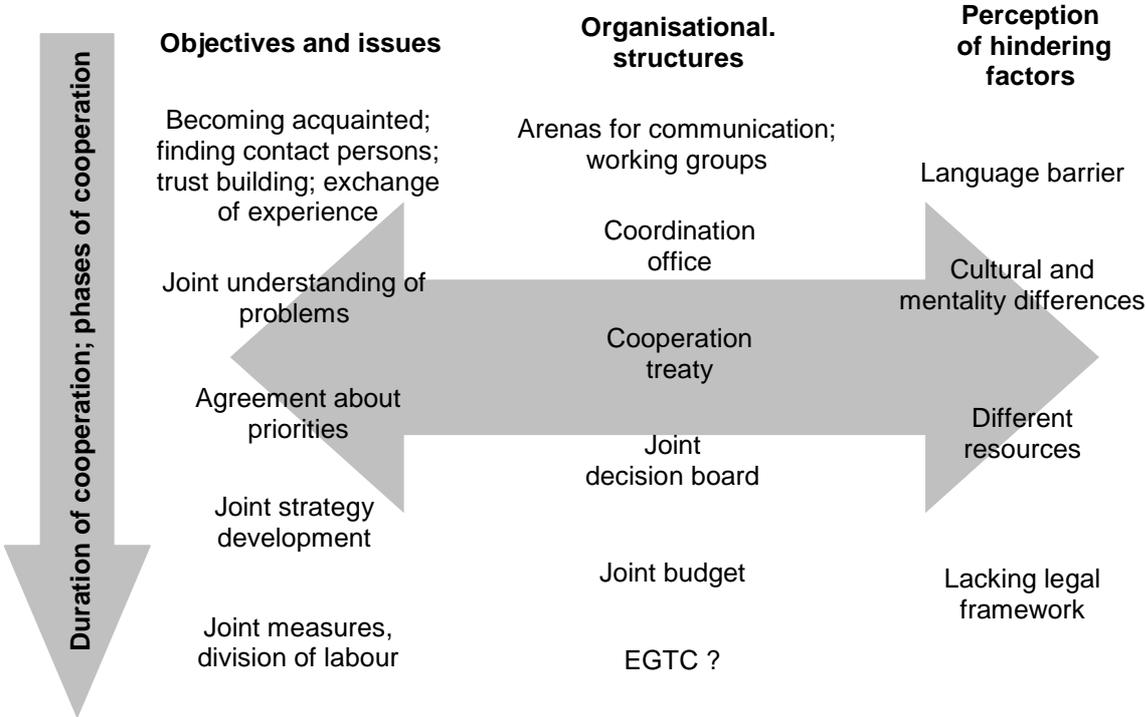
Recommendations for the whole *ENLARGE-NET* cooperation area are not useful. However the ideas that the project generated should be examined and followed up. A regional development strategy addressing a larger area could help avoid undesirable spatial development in the borderlands and to be well prepared to absorb Objective 3 funding for territorial cooperation. The contacts that have been made should be used for these purposes.

The evolution of cooperation, the difference between the results and benefits of cooperation and the spatial dimension

Finally, the theoretical findings of the study emerge. The existing approaches for classifying cross-border cooperation processes can be more clearly defined. The subject matter of cooperation, organisational structures, and major hindering factors are considered in relation to the duration of cooperation.

At the beginning of cross-border cooperation processes, “soft” objectives and results are achieved that are hard to measure. As cooperation advances, more tangible and measurable objectives come to the fore. The organisational structures of cooperation are likewise in flux and become more and more binding and formal as cooperation progresses. Interestingly, different hindering factors develop or are perceived as such in the succeeding phases of cooperation. Whereas the language barrier and differences in mentality hinder cooperation to begin with, the participating actors come to terms with these factors as work proceeds, and even come to perceive them as an enrichment. In contrast, the lack of a legal framework does not hinder “soft” outcomes of cooperation but does affect cooperation in the implementation of joint projects.

If there is an imbalance between these three dimensions or if the objectives, organisational structures or influencing factors are inappropriate to the given phase of cooperation, the cooperation process can be disrupted. There is a danger of overambitious objectives being set, of excessive or inadequate demands being made of actors, and of inadequate organisational structures or unexpected influencing factors emerging that may comprise the cooperation process (see figure).



Evolution of cross-border cooperation in spatial development in the German-Polish-Czech borderlands

Moreover, the results of cooperation cannot be equated with the benefits of cooperation. Difficult to measure and “soft” results – like becoming acquainted and the exchanging experience – can be very useful at the beginning and provide a basis for future cooperation. Tangible results – like joint strategies – can be of little value if they are not reflected in policy decisions and if cooperation is not continuous. An outcome of cooperation is beneficial for the actors if it is appropriate to the given phase of cooperation. The precondition for the outcomes of cooperation becoming benefits are continuity, the settlement of results in joint documents and the consideration of results and agreements in administrative action and political decisions.

The spatial dimension plays an important role in cross-border cooperation. The larger the cooperation area is, the more costly and time-consuming is communication between the actors and the more difficult it is to agree on joint objectives and interests, since there are few spatial and functional interdependencies. As experience with cooperation progresses, more abstract issues are tackled and there is a tendency to extend the cooperation area.

Further research is needed into on the transferability of findings to other types of borderland and cooperation (transnational and interregional cooperation) and in a long-term study on the evolution of cooperation in different types of borderlands.