

COMMIN – an explanation through a sequence of tenses

The INTERREG III B project COMMIN – “Promoting Spatial Development by Creating COMon MINdscapes” aims at improving mutual understanding of planning processes in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR) by improving information flows and communication.

Past – what is the basis and philosophy of the project?

Since 1995 ARL produces so called Handbooks of Planning Terms. First a bilateral scientific interest was a driving force behind it. Spatial planning tasks on both sides of a border between Germany and his neighbour states – i.e. flood risk management - enhanced these efforts, as well as rising demands for trans-national development processes. The edition of Handbooks was started with a Polish-German Handbook. As the map shows ([link](#)), several bi- or trilateral Handbooks came into existence during the last decade.

European policies influenced increasingly national and regional development decisions. And, of course, the enlargement of the EU related with a total turnaround of political, administrative and planning systems in some of the new EU Member States raised the interest in their respective planning systems. INTERREG IIC funds in the CADSES area led to a trilateral handbook which was realized between Austria, the Czech and the Slovak Republic. A further bilateral edition was realized between Austria and Germany. In the BSR the same funds led not only to a revision of the Polish-German Handbook but also to the completely new elaboration of a Swedish-German and a Swedish-Polish one (INTERREG IIC Baltic Manual).

During the ongoing work on these latter mentioned handbooks at the beginning of this millennium it became clear that there is a crucial need for an overarching web-based glossary of planning terminology and its framing chapters coping with the constitutional, administrative and planning systems of the different States around the Baltic Sea. Due to frequent changes within the Polish system at that time a printed book did no longer meet the requirements of users. Furthermore, in the context of trans-national conferences, projects and negotiations English was, and still is, the main language spoken concerning trans-national issues.

Experience was made, i.e. during several INTERREG II-conferences, that project partners of different BSR countries, who were no planners but tackling issues which are spatially relevant or having spatial impacts, invented randomly planning terms. Some were not even aware of the existence of national planning systems and their related terminologies. On the other hand planners themselves were often trapped in misunderstandings due to differences in system structures. Although same English terms were used in professional discussions they often were related to other connotations. Often enough translating was done by others than specialists with a “3 L”-skill: language, legislation, linguistic.

On the basis of those experiences and former achievements the application for COMMIN was prepared with the ambitious challenge to foster mutual understanding and to harmonize planning terminology in the BSR on the basis of the English language.

Present – what do we elaborate and which obstacles arose?

The project consists of three main elements:

1. An Internet portal describing national planning systems and developing a common terminology in English (> European Core Term Glossary). (Work package 1)
2. Training sessions for planers in the region (BSR) to establish an expert network and disseminate information. (Work package 2)

3. Knowledge transfer on topics of transnational interest, placing emphasis on best practices. (Work package 3)

To achieve the above mentioned aims the partners of work package 1 should meet the following requirements as first working steps:

- Description of the systems (constitution, administrative structure, planning) in national languages. All partners followed a model structure which derived from the German case. National specifics led to alterations of that structure in details.
- Extraction and explanation of most relevant planning terms from top (national) to bottom (local) level > elaboration of a glossary of about 200 terms per country. National specifics led to less or more numbers of terms or to less or more detailed terms with regard to the planning level.
- Translation of both, system description and glossary. As to the availability of specialized translators and the communication between planners (project partners) and translators or with respect to the availability of already officially translated national, regional or local documents project partners had to overcome various obstacles while preparing translations. Because of the federalism in Germany the planning legislation varies from one Land to the other which could not be taken into account on the project's level of work. Furthermore legislation on the national level is changing due to the so-called federalism reform. Other countries, i.e. Denmark, had to cope with total turnarounds of their administrative organization during the elaboration phase. Younger EU-Members have to stabilize their administrative and planning systems. Since their liberation one and a half decade ago they experienced frequent changes of their systems.
- Preparation of so-called fact sheets: following the same structure concerning content and layout every nation prepared information for each level of planning responding to the legal basis, competences, binding forces, tasks and contents of planning documents, the planning process, its duration, governing participation principals and, last but not least, the duration of the plan's validity. In accordance to national planning system specifics the structure and layout of the fact sheet were subject to variations.

Concerning the European Core Term Glossary (ECTG) which was elaborated in a parallel process methodologically different approaches were taken (see scheme) (link). First, all English translated terms of the national glossaries (more than 2000 different terms) were listed in alphabetic order. Then, in search for a smallest common denominator, ranking lists of frequently used terms were prepared: a) English term used by, at least, three nations or more, b) English term used by two nations, c) English term used by one nation (link). With the growing mutual understanding of the national systems within the group of project partners the awareness of the different connotations raised concerning the use of one and the same term in two or more nations. Some partners stated that although special terms were not used by more than their own nation, these terms have to be estimated as a crucial term which in no way should be suppressed from the ECTG.

In a second step, terms were extracted out of a bundle of EU documents resulting in an alphabetic list with definitions and evidences of sources of information (link). After several discussions the awareness increased within the group of partners that these terms characterize more strategic issues on an administrative level which itself does not dispose of an own competence on spatial planning although its competences, mainly for regional development, influence in different ways spatial development throughout the whole EU territory. Therefore, these terms reflect a meta-level of planning and do not match necessarily the terms used on subordinated planning levels (national up to local level).

In the meantime, the initially formulated desire to harmonize the terminology became more and more the objective of critics for a couple of reasons. The main one certainly was that some nations who had established their systems no more than some years ago did not want to subordinate them outright the necessities of the European level. Doubts were additionally raised whether smallest common denominators should be extracted at any price or whether it will be possible, at all, as long as the systems differ that much.

These critics and the experiences of the work package's 2 and 3 activities – especially workshops and trainings (link) - led the project partners to the formulation of questions that have to be answered by planners in each nation. A first set of questions was intensively discussed during one of the project's meetings. It was broadened, detailed or altered where ever one nation's representative had arguments accepted by the other nation's representatives. Without resulting now in smallest common denominators, however, the comparability of the planning systems was eased. Hence, a sound basis for comparison was established which comprises links to the respective national planning system texts, the glossaries and the fact sheets where applicable.

Work package 2 included a set of eight seminars (link) conducted by Nordregio with all together 170 participants from 17 different countries. The goal of these seminars was to provide a training situation in which professionals from the Nordic countries, the new member countries and their immediate neighbours could learn together and establish a common set of references for the future. The seminars comprised the following thematic issues:

- Challenges of Urban and Regional Development, March 2005, Jyväskylä and Jamsä Region / Finland
- Development Dynamics, April 2005, Stockholm / Sweden
- Innovation and Regional Economic Development, June 2005, Jyväskylä and Tampere Region / Finland
- Innovative Indicators, October 2005, Roskilde / Denmark
- National, Regional, Interregional Programmes for Developing Excellence – Initiatives, Experiences and Good Practices, November/December 2005, Jyväskylä Region / Finland
- Spatial Planning and Regional Development in Europe – Past, Present and Future, April 2006, Jyväskylä Region / Finland
- Policy Development and Good Governance, May 2006, Helsinki / Finland
- Successful Cities: Strategies for Management, November 2006, Oslo / Norway

Though an integration or amalgamation of terminology used by participants during the several seminars into the glossary did not happen in a linguistic sense because of a time lag between different operations in the work packages, we now established good contacts and found ambassadors in the countries involved. This gives real possibilities for future multifaceted cooperation.

Work package 3 was composed of two workshops, a Report on Good Practices within the BSR INTERREG IIIB and IIC projects and of the Final Conference which took place in Berlin on April, 26 and 27, 2007.

“Trans European Transport Networks in the Baltic Sea Region – Coordination Requirements and Innovative Governance Arrangements” (link) was the title of the first workshop which took place in Helsinki / Finland in June 2005. The second one took place under the title “Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) in the Baltic Sea Region: Towards a Systemic and Regionalised Approach” (link) in April 2006 in Riga / Latvia. Both workshops brought together experts with different disciplinary and professional backgrounds, such as spatial

planners, environmental experts and economists. The latter workshop evolved around three main points of interest, namely the interplay between different levels and sectors, approaches for integrated planning and management, and criteria for successful projects. The ICZM workshop shares some basic ideas with the earlier workshop, which was based on the assumption that the European Union can be regarded as a system of multi-level governance. The multi-level governance approach includes a vertical as well as a horizontal dimension and refers to an increased interdependence, both between different levels and between governments and non-governmental actors.

The Policy Recommendations stemming from these workshops are to distinguish between three different spatial levels when applying the multi-level governance approach to the Baltic Sea Region (BSR):

- The trans-national level, i.e. the Baltic Sea Region as a whole. This is the level which sets the strategic framework for future regional development.
- The macro-regional level, which consists of several larger development zones within the BSR. Macro-regions can be seen as trans-national areas of interaction, where integration is promoted through functional cross-border relations.
- The regional/local level of neighbourly relations and regular cross-border interaction.

Attention should be paid to solving problems of the following categories: a) economic development problems, b) regulatory and legal problems and c) cultural and cognitive problems.

Important conclusions were drawn by the Report on Good Practices ([link](#)). With four aspects the findings could be summarized: 1) More effort should be put on the development of new planning concepts, especially in the field of polycentric urban development and transport. 2) Concepts should be tested better with regard to their implementation power, especially with respect to stakeholder involvement. 3) A focus should be put on the development of tools supporting the dialogue between spatial planners, sectoral planners, and decision makers – such as COMMUN website. 4) European senior planning institutions should overtake responsibility to maintain a public domain in the long term and to disseminate planning system information.

Experiences made in work package 2 and 3, as well as through the Report on Good Practices, were reported during several steering group meetings that consisted of participants of all work packages. Hence, within the group of project partners mutual understanding was growing and helping especially the partners of work package 1 to find their way.

Future – where do we go to?

For further investigation and research one question remains open to be answered: Will and should there be such thing named smallest common denominator, hence, is harmonization feasible and desirable?

Encouraged by experiences made with the publication of all existing Handbooks of Planning Terms in the past and the website at hand, the lead partner ARL won the impression that the inclusion of still lacking EU Member States into the so far existing data base is crucial for any attempt of harmonization of planning terms. EU policies influence mostly all Member States therefore it would make sense to gather the relevant information for all Member States not neglecting the maintenance of compiled data, and to reflect whether other aspects or details have to be regarded in order to complete the information requirements.

Terms are just an expression of the whole systems behind them which means that, if at all, systems have to be harmonized. Translations into English are just as good as the

communication between legislature, executive (planners) and language experts. By translating terms or expressions into another language their legislative content or their definition in the source language loses, at least, a part of its meaning. This is because the addressee hearing the translated term compares automatically with what is known of the own system attributing the translated term another connotation. This requires an interdisciplinary approach for further research ideas aiming for harmonization.

National systems are undergoing repeatedly changes because of political decision making often due to elections and new governments. A stable process of data compilation as well as a group of responsible institutions seems to be necessary with respect to the website at hand. Responsibilities should be located in each Member State and on the level of the EU. The Final Conference of the COMMIN-Project will hopefully bring about new ideas and interested persons and institutions to overtake part of such responsibility.

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