

## SUSTAINABILITY AND SPATIAL/REGIONAL PLANNING: FROM PAST TO FUTURE BY REINFORCING SUSTAINABILITY'S SOCIAL DIMENSION AND PLANNING

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**Abstract:** In order to define planning in Europe as coherent with the evolution of EU cohesion and policy in the perspective of 2030 and 2050, territorial approach to plan, rather than what is traditionally called “spatial”, should have a specific role to play in achieving the objectives of the New Green Deal Strategy for smarter, more sustainable, and inclusive development close to citizens, that is territorial cohesion.

Starting with this consideration, the paper discusses spatial planning from a geographical perspective, with a focus on greater territorialisation. This aspect has traditionally been considered less important than others in order to highlight the social values offered by the plan, which are now recognised as a powerful asset for sustainable and integrated development.

Furthermore, the article allows for the revival of the discussion on planning harmonisation, which was initiated by CEMAT in 1983 during the Torremolinos European Conference and by the ESDP in 1999. It also renews the proposal of a shared approach to social sustainability via territorialised spatial planning, taking into account the lessons learned from the Territorial and Urban Agendas, the innovations introduced by the SDGs, and the experiences gained from the Recovery and Resilience Facility. To this end, social benefits should be considered as internal factors in the new economic and financial instruments that accompany planning, along with territorial and environmental impact assessment tools. In this context, the significance of geographical diversity in territorial patterns adopted in regions and countries is emphasised.

Conclusions indicate that this approach represents a successful outcome of the gradual process of Europeanisation’s culture. This has been facilitated by a harmonised and cohesive discourse on territorial planning in recent decades, which has resulted in the emergence of a new functional approach based on geographical knowledge.

**Key words:** Social sustainability; Territorial and Spatial Planning; Europeanisation; Economic Geography

## Introduction

The dialogue on the harmonisation of spatial planning, initiated by the European Charter adopted in Torremolinos in 1983 (CEMAT, 1983) and continued by the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) in 1999, has been interrupted by changes in global policies due to the financial crisis, the pandemic and political uncertainty.

If the scope of that dialogue was to establish a common approach to the vision of economic and social sustainability in a more cohesive Europe (Bradley and Zaucha, 2017), in the current phase of the transition economy, the social goal seems to be achievable only through the just transition policy<sup>1</sup>, a fully green economy and participatory. Consequently, the concept of sustainable planning at regional and local level is rapidly evolving, focusing on climate change adaptation and mitigation, waste circularity and renewable energy to achieve a better quality of life<sup>2</sup>.

However, the complex content required to organise, design and manage an integrated and comprehensive sustainable planning process that includes environmental, social, cultural and economic aspects is often overlooked. The policies and objectives of the plan are not always in line with the objective of territorial equity, even though the EU's Europe 2020 and Next Generation strategies have ushered in the new era of the Green Deal (2020, 2020b) and revisited the Urban and Territorial Agendas (2016-2020) with regard to this issue.

Instead, policies and targets evolve in a way that perpetuates a global, top-down and predictive approach at the national level. There is growing evidence that territorial capital, which is an asset for achieving sustainable development, does not have the power to guide planning decisions based on bottom-up demand (Camagni, 2004; Prezioso, 2020a). This means that territorial specificities are not always integrated in all dimensions of planning, as they should be after 40 years (1983-2023). Multidisciplinary readings suggest that, in the transition from spatial to territorial planning, political considerations need to be re-addressed. To achieve this, planning has adopted streamlined, flexible and simplified decision-making processes that take into account different geographical scales and variables (Prezioso, 2013).

The Conference of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning of the Council of Europe (CEMAT, 2017, Resolution 1, p. 2) endorsed *sustainable spatial development and the exploitation of local potentials by identifying and structuring different categories of territories, such as Functional Urban Areas (FUAs), taking into account socio-economic development trends*. FUAs<sup>3</sup>. They are recommended as a basic tool to facilitate spatial planning actions under the umbrella of multi-level cooperation. The concept of sustainability is implicitly invoked, including external changes, site-specific conditions, equitable governance and public participation. This reinforces the concept of intergenerational equity, which is essential for social well-being.

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1. Focused on decarbonisation, energy efficiency and security to be achieved also through urban regeneration plans.

2. Quality of life paradigm is looking for a better integration between environment, planning, management and people's life; it requires closer cooperation between multiple disciplines (geography, sociology, economy, planning ....) (VASAB, 2023).

3. That are aggregated areas around urban centres with specific geographical and socio-economic characteristics.

The debate between territorial and spatial planning continues and is currently a pressing issue (Briesen, Strubelt, 2021). The aim of this paper is to address the uncertainty surrounding the adoption of social content in sustainable planning policies (Frideres, 2019). It begins by acknowledging the positive reception of the issue in Europe and asks how, after a long period of experimentation, sustainable local/regional planning can be made more inclusive and participatory by adding coherent and functional territorial contents (living spaces in cross-border areas, thematic areas such as ecology, migration, accessibility, settlement, inner peripheries, and so on).

## 1. Recognised contributions to the discussion

EU programmes have facilitated discussions between Member States on the next generation of EU objectives, with the aim of preventing a disconnect between the Northern and South-Eastern regions of the EU and the disintegration of territorial cohesion in the face of global conflicts. This was achieved by strengthening the development of urban integration through Local Action Plans (LAPs). The ESPON programme (2002-2023) and a number of scenarios provide evidence to support this approach, which aims to enhance the capacity to invest in sustainable transport, culture, local welfare, sport, leisure, environmental protection, technology clusters, digital mobility and services of general interest. The implementation of social policies is included in plans to challenge traditional models and revise national/regional guidelines based on territorial capital<sup>4</sup>. The use of GIS and satellite information has made it increasingly difficult to falsify or challenge the veracity of spatial planning data, highlighting the importance of including territory in planning design (Schön, 2009; Prezioso, 2020a).

The insertion of soft comprehensive (general but interdisciplinary) tools (ESPON, 2012), strategic integrated plans, community-led local development (CLLD), integrated territorial investments (ITI), soft governance, and green infrastructures, can transform planning into an instrument of territoriality and equity<sup>5</sup> in important areas such as new cross-border urban regions, metropolitan areas, and inner suburbs and peripheries.

It is, however, important to note that top-down influence continues and is greater than bottom-up one. While European legislation has a more uniform impact due to conditionality regulation, and countervailing policies are more diverse in terms of the level of financial support, the discourse on spatial planning is not still widely shared. The Eastern Member States and the Mediterranean countries appear to be open to the idea, but it is unlikely that there will be a uniform response to external stimuli in the short term. This is due to the influence of specific national traditions, cultures, and institutions, which are variables and determine the actual impact of Europeanisation on territorial governance.

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4. A first significant definition of 'territorial capital' appears in the *Territorial Outlook* drawn up in 2001 by the OECD. In the document, economic growth processes are considered dependent not only on traditional national scale factors (size of markets, political stability, quality of the workforce, etc.) but also on local/regional scale factors that, spatially differentiated, constitute territorial capital: geographic/physical qualities, quality of life and production systems, social capital and institutions, propensity to innovation, and factors reducing transaction costs.

5. Equity refers to the equitable access to resources and services.

The Territorial Plan is noteworthy for its dual impact at the political and operational levels. The plan represents a genuine reversal of the prevailing trend, advocating a shift towards concentration in the resolution of problems, in contrast to the tendency towards their diffused homologation. The plan reaffirms the distinction between milieu and environment as separate fields, yet as the main references for development processes. The value of the territorial resource is not solely that of exchange or aesthetic-visual perception (panorama, cultural view and landscape, monetary value). It also encompasses social well-being. Urban planning, as a tool for the rational development of the city, acknowledges the environment in a substantial form and not merely as an emergency. The gradual incorporation of the environment as an autonomous element of planning has necessitated the use of binding planning in recent years, with the objective of revising appropriate standards while maintaining the status quo in certain parts of the territory. The concept of social impact assessment is becoming an increasingly important reference point and coordination mechanism (Jany-Catrice, 2020, p. 4; European Commission, 2021), underscoring the significance of the social impact of public services included in spatial planning<sup>6</sup>.

The plan, which is intended to be of benefit to the public, encompasses the territorial location of productive assets and all aspects of EU funding. These include, for example, bio-agriculture and tourism, the reducing land use and protecting the soil from risks, the extent of the geological contribution to instability, seismicity and water scarcity. The resulting territorial impact (i.e. the impact on the landscape) is indicative of a tendency to concentrate settlements in favourable zones and to abandon inner peripheries. The Landscape and Cultural Heritage Plans illustrate a novel consistency between the analytical and design phases of societal well-being. Furthermore, there is a discernible interest in the regulation of participatory processes. The objectives of these plans are to reconcile the implementation of macroregional sustainable plans (VASAB, from 2004 to the present) within the European legal, regulatory, and administrative frameworks pertaining to the active protection of society.

The Green Deal 2020 has demonstrated that the relationship between planning and GDP, as a measure of development, can be re-evaluated in terms of both sustainability and cohesion, in addition to the traditional quantitative measures. To achieve this, the CEMAT (2017) proposed a flexible approach that involves interpreting European policy themes using common and comparable methodologies, indicators, and tools, as well as place evidence and ex-ante evaluation (TIA, SEA, EIA). The lexicon developed since 1998 has become a shared heritage of EU directives that have a significant impact on Europeanised planning processes.

The utilisation of a place-based approach (ESPON from 2002 to the present) has facilitated the reinvigoration of interconnections between disparate forms of planning, integrating them through place evidence and long-term strategy. This approach – that is substantially geographic - draws attention to the persistent underutilisation of potential territorial capital in comparison to the objective of reducing economic and social exclusion. In contrast to the sectoral or 'neutral' vision, this approach prioritises a more holistic perspective, thereby opposing the sectoral vision. Furthermore, the European Commission Communication on Sustainable Social Development, published in 2016, has also contributed to this shift.

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6. Which is itself a public service.

## 2. Which critical points to tackle

The 8th and 9th Cohesion Reports (2022, 2024) on economic, social, and territorial cohesion have reaffirmed the importance of planning, emphasising elements such as equity, efficiency, participation, quality, social well-being, democracy, and gender. These reports increasingly highlight the subsidiary cooperative role of planning in ensuring the political and administrative viability of sustainable development<sup>7</sup>. It operates within national and regional coordination programmes and large (infrastructural) projects, providing technical and political solutions for phenomena of exclusion in peripheralised contexts. These solutions include youth and gender employment, social housing neighbourhoods and villages, eco-services, and accessibility.

McCann and Soete (2020) note that the European Commission has prioritised sustainability and societal values in its long-term policy agenda; on its hand, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly number 11, focuses on 'Sustainable cities and communities', with the objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. Furthermore, the Commission is reconsidering economic and financial instruments, including cost-benefit analysis, the 'do no significant harm' principle, and social financial taxonomy, in light of the more inclusive growth pillar. This is coupled with impact assessment (territorial, strategic, environmental), in order to optimise the accompanying spending and implementation of programmes, plans and projects at national, regional and local levels.

It is, however, important to note that the concept of "zoning", as a rigid product of the modernist process, influences the European solutions of comprehensive master plans to social and environmental demands, including general issues such as reconstruction, urban regeneration, infrastructure implementation, housing, services, and land use. These issues are also addressed by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), which is part of the EU's Next Generation strategy for a more resilient, greener, and digital Europe.

The social aspect of planning is frequently overlooked or regarded as a niche within the discourse on cohesion policy, despite the urgent calls for a more inclusive and citizen-focused Europe. The RRF plan articulated this in terms of inflexible technical guidelines and did not include proposals pertaining to social changes such as migration, gender, and ageing, or novel forms of welfare that guarantee the integration of the growing multiculturalism. To prevent inconsistencies between public and private/individual interests, societal policies are developed in collaboration with citizens and stakeholders beyond the public sector, where a shared multi-level governance is operational (e.g. in the UK)<sup>8</sup>.

This outcome is regarded as one of the most successful results of the lengthy process of Europeanisation (Faludi, 2010, 2019; D'Orazio, Cochechi, 2017). The process integrated

7. Despite Brundtland's (1987) definition, the term sustainability has a self-renewing etymology in planning, which is a multiscale and multilevel issue. It is adaptive at its core and evolves alongside multiple systems (scales and levels), both natural and anthropic.

8. URBACT III and Interact programs' projects have shown the importance of 'territoriality' and, e.g., that Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) play a crucial role in the social success of the projects and in disseminating new participatory work methods.

at least five distinct styles of spatial planning, combining cross-border, national, regional, metropolitan, and local experiences. Planning was demonstrated to be a flexible, comprehensive (interdisciplinary), and territorial equity instrument of sustainability, utilising a range of financial products, including loans, guarantees, bonds, venture capital, and evaluating environmental, social, and governance factors.

Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, and the UK collaborated across borders, integrating national, regional, metropolitan, and local experiences. These experiences were subsequently employed to create the five spatial planning styles, which were subsequently merged (ESPON, 2012, 2018):

- Sustainable and inclusive contents of the urban agenda (France, Holland)
- Land use and policy dependency (Italy, Poland The following spatial planning styles were identified:
- Strengthening local identities (UK) and preserving traditions (Sweden)
- Regional economic development and multi-level governance (Germany)
- Comprehensive (general or master) plan (regulatory, iterative, hierarchical) (Spain, Italy, Greece)

In 1999, the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) had already introduced the objective of overcoming the marginalised view of social benefits in sustainable planning. The ESDP compared various theoretical and political positions<sup>9</sup>. It also acknowledged the risk of environmental degradation as a limit to economic growth. However, it is important to note that its acceptance may have been too uncritical. The EU Compendium of Spatial Planning Systems and Policies (European Commission, 1997) presented the first static overview of 15 countries that claimed national responsibility for spatial planning. The document only superficially considered the limited role of the EU, as well as the ESDP patterns and scenarios for 2030 and 2050 that are followed up until the last Territorial Agenda (2020) (ESPON, 2006, 2006a, 2019).

It is wrong to conclude that the EU is not involved in spatial planning merely because it delegates responsibility to Member States and their regions for establishing and regulating their own territories. Prior to the pandemic, CEMAT's activities had consistently sought to engage the EU through the Council of Europe, with the objective of incorporating it into this domain. From the early 2000s onwards, the focus shifted to the policy orientation of urban and spatial planning, which was conceptualised as a set of territorial practices contingent upon a state's institutional responsibility and technical capacity. These practices have increasingly been influenced by European policies, with the EU's presence becoming increasingly pervasive. Urban planning is a final product of creative processes and is recognised in the human sciences as a subject of coherent development of European society (Fageberg et al., 2016). In other words, through a process of trial and error, it can generate qualitative innovations that represent a new type or level of territorial reality in Europe and vice versa (Prezioso, D'Orazio, 2013; Cotella, Rivolin, 2018; Prezioso, 2013, 2020a).

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9. Such as determinism, possibilism, voluntarism, and ecologism.

Since the initial Report in 1996, the Cohesion Policy (and related funds) has been closely aligned with spatial planning and, probably, starts in 1988 with the European Regional Policy and the reform of Structural Funds boosting the relationship between Territorial Cohesion and Spatial Planning (Farinos-Dasi, 2023). This is evidenced by various studies conducted by the ESPON programme (2006; Interstrat, 2012; Cadec, 2013; Compass, 2018), which demonstrate the interrelationship between territorial and social development and integrate this field into spatial analysis. A number of countries, including Austria, Sweden, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and Portugal, have demonstrated the reciprocal impact of territorial development on both the physical spaces and the people inhabiting them. This is evidenced in the “ESPO country fiches” and applied research until 2023. From 2007 to 2018, a comparative analysis was conducted on European territorial governance and spatial planning systems (ESPO, 2007, 2012, 2013, 2018)<sup>10</sup>. The analysis identified a closer relationship between territorial cohesion (social, economic, environmental) and sustainability, and recommended ways to improve this relationship. The focus was not solely on climate change adaptation and mitigation through planning.

### 3. 2014-2024: a decade of societal changes and challenges in sustainable planning

A multitude of European experiences could be cited as innovative social and sustainable ‘good practices’, including cross-border cooperation. Cultural values, identitarian landscapes and attitudes guide behaviours and promote inclusion, cooperation and individual empowerment (UNESCO, 2014, p. 12) during the drafting of joint plans. Figure 1 illustrates the correlation between dimensions and domains of societal well-being in the UNESCO CDIS matrix.

The social and territorial dimensions are significant in the fields of economics, education<sup>11</sup>, governance, social participation, gender equality, heritage, and communication. These fields demonstrate the process of appealing to individuals or groups in territorial contexts from an economic and cultural perspective, with a focus on achieving decent standards of living<sup>12</sup>. The standards encompass a range of policy options, including active labour, access to services, educational provision, housing, active citizenship, and participation in political life. In accordance with the principle of equity, planning should ensure that all areas are afforded equal access to development opportunities.

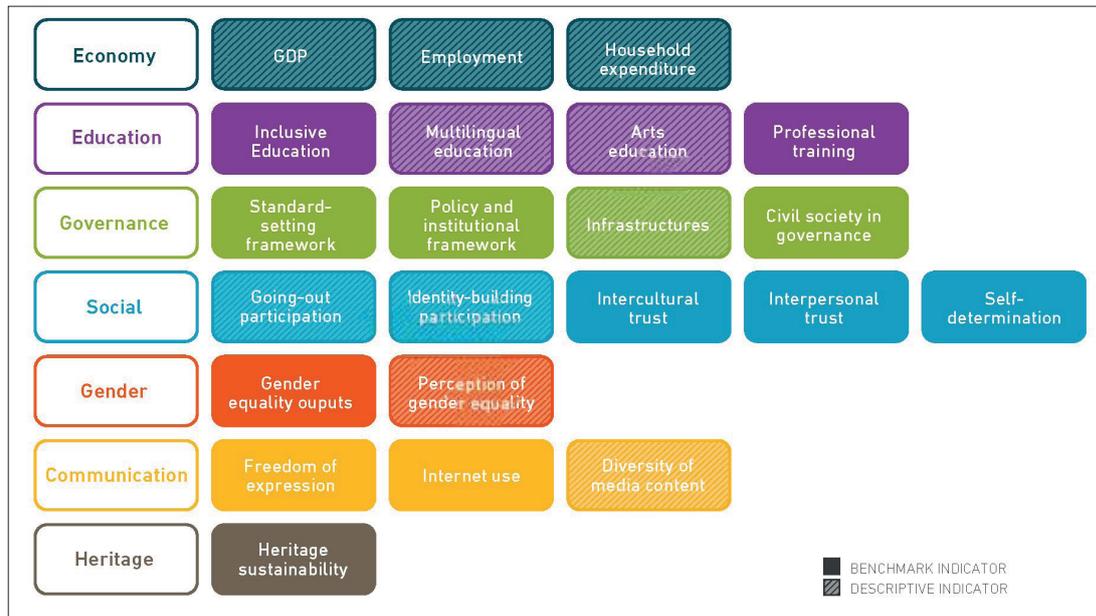
In the past century, the social environment (milieu) was accorded greater priority than economic considerations in the orientation of planning. This position has now been superseded by the importance of geographical (Gløersen, 2010) and political diversity of contexts. In countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Finland, the Netherlands, Poland, and Germany, the five plan styles described above have become recurrent models applied to spatial reality without a comprehensive evaluation of their influence with respect to the

10. The objective was to describe and explain the challenges for policy change, with reference to the cross-cultural contribution of 32 plus 7 countries.

11. The journal *European Planning Studies*, e.g., published several articles on priorities young planning scholars have to take in mind when they design a plan.

12. The social dimension of the plan implies to entry in the wide field of the ‘human capability’ and holistic vision of the development, as Sen (1993) and Nussbaum (2011) clarified.

**Figure 1.** The CDIS Matrix.



Source: (UNESCO, 2014, p. 13)

political objectives the plan claims to want to achieve. Evaluation tools are not consistently employed during the drafting process.

Analysing impact studies on the socio-economic development of a territory (Prezioso, 2018, 2020), it is important to consider the effects on the quality of life through the planning of climate change adaptation and mitigation actions. This analysis also included an assessment of the implementation of green infrastructure and the circular economy, the reduction of the carbon footprint, the provision of digital services and the promotion of green mobility (Benoît-Norris, Vickery-Niederman, 2011).

In the context of recurring crises, this approach is insufficient. The concept of sustainability is identified as a crucial value in order to maintain biodiversity, which is now recognised as a component of the environmental-social community by the European Commission and through the DNSH. Furthermore, alternative design solutions are proposed as a means of challenging the functional approach that currently dominates the plan. One potential avenue for progress is to reframe the relationship between society and nature as a two-way street, rather than viewing them as external variables in a cost-benefit equation. This approach, exemplified by the European Commission (2014, 2020a), could help to overcome the limitations of a linear neo-Keynesian economy (Prezioso, 2016).

In the 21st century, evolutionary vision has been proposed as a revision of planning in the EU, with contributions from Territorial Thinkers such as Wagner et al. (2001), Faludi (2002, 2009, 2010), Faludi and Waterhout (2002), Hague and Jenkins (2004), Davoudi (2006), Davoudi and Strange (2009), Schön (2009), Farinos-Dasi and Peiró (eds, 2018), Farinos-Dasi (2023), Melhbye et al. (2019), and Briesen and Strubelt (2021). In their 2020 publication, Territorial Thinkers established spatial planning as a territorial public service and criticised the absence of human geography in problem-solving. In order to address this,

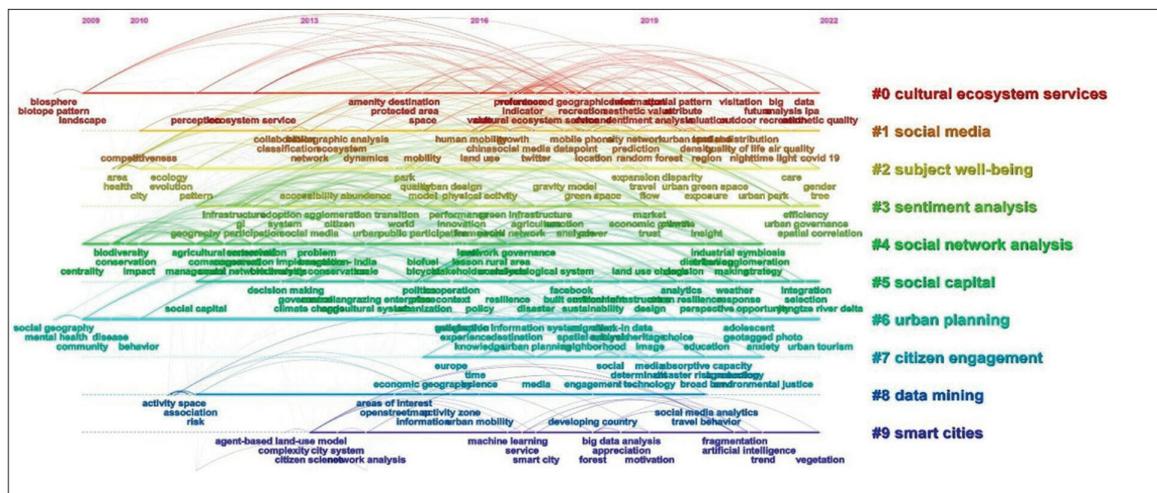
they proposed the adoption of flexible interpretation models and soft governance for urban design, with the aim of promoting societal sustainability (Prezioso, 2013, 2020a).

In 2020, a new interdisciplinary debate was initiated under the Recovery and Resilience Facility regarding development policies for the post-pandemic phase. This resulted in a fundamental shift in the study of the relationship between the environment and established communities. While studies and regional plans have historically been conducted from a socio-economic and territorial development perspective, the incorporation of environmental assessment has significantly enhanced the scope of programmatic choices. It is a fundamental requirement for the definition of the territorial context. Thematic geographical descriptions of cohesion are also deployed (European Commission, DGRegio, 2022).

From 2014 to 2020, the European narrative placed significant emphasis on the role of cities and their development plans as drivers of sustainable competitiveness. This commenced with the Amsterdam Pact or Urban Agenda (Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning, 2016; European Committee of Regions, 2022; UN-Habitat, 2023), which concentrated on four principal objectives: addressing air quality, housing, urban poverty, and inclusion through planning and novel forms of multi-level and multi-stakeholder collaboration.

In a previous study, Kokh and Mont (2016) examined the question of welfare in the context of sustainability as a political economy, linking it to the eco-social novelties introduced by the Just Transition Economy. In the period between 2017 and 2023, new terms have emerged in the language of applied research on planning, including social vulnerability (Papadakis and Kyvelou, 2017), a more social Europe (ESPON, 2019), and social impact assessment. These developments represent the emergence of a novel social and sustainable paradigm in urban development. The generation of social sentiment analysis and mapping is achieved through the utilisation of social media and AI. This technique is also applied to spatial planning (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Keyword timeline analysis in Citespace



Source: Yang and Liu, 2022

In 2021, the European Commission's *Fit for 55* package includes BEI activity and social taxonomy in the financial sector. This contributes to the image of an inclusive Europe that promotes social and green bonds as tools for a new economy. Nevertheless, the pandemic and war have impeded the full achievement of this objective. The discourse in the countries is becoming increasingly practical, prompting the question of whether the traditional urban planning of European cities is obsolete and whether more up-to-date and flexible tools such as Community Led Local Development Plans and Local Action Plans inspired by Territorial and Urban Agendas should be employed. It is pertinent to consider whether the future of urban planning lies in the metropolis as a polycentric system of large and medium-sized cities or in a 'robust' model of intermediate cities (with populations ranging from 250,000 to 5 million) that are closer to citizens. In 2017, the European Committee of Regions (2022) and the European Commission (2023) both posed the question of what contributes to urban liveability. The former identified potential factors including smart/digital solutions (Lithuania), sustainable polycentric planning (UK), and the green economy (Spain, Romania).

In 2019, the concept of a just transition emphasises the social aspects of digitalisation and the circular, collaborative economy. These concepts appear to combine innovation, sustainability, and equity, while also promoting a return to spatial planning as reconsidered in the revised Territorial Agenda (Informal Meeting of Ministers responsible for Territorial Cohesion and/or Territorial Development, 2020). Theories of 'new regionalism' (revisiting Scott and Storper, 2003) and external economies have been re-proposed since they defined spatial planning as the foundation for 'territorial competition', which favours cross-border cooperative territorial and socio-economic planning managed by European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC).

In the 2021-22 period, the concepts of sustainability and climate change adaptation were firmly established as planning contents and the plan as their instruments for promoting social well-being. A revision of the metropolitan plans of the Baltic macro-region and the three Republics reveals the introduction of additional variables in the governance of cities and capital city regions, management processes and tools in the composition of sustainable, smart and inclusive plans.

#### **4. Reflection between old and new feeling. Moving from theory to practice combining evaluation approaches**

The policy proposals for the 2021-27 programming period have the objective of promoting inclusion in sustainable planning. This encompasses the development of circular and smart/digital cities, with the intention of encouraging participatory innovation and the implementation of sustainable mitigation, efficiency, and equitable resource use. The Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG Grow) and the Directorate-General for Regional Policy (DG Regio), in collaboration with the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) and the ECON Committee of the European Parliament (Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs) advocate for the implementation of Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) initiatives, which utilise EU funds through a bottom-up approach. The CoR's NAT Commission (Commission for Natural Resources) facilitates the integration of

rural and urban areas with the objective of strengthening territorial cohesion policy. This is achieved through the adoption of an appropriate governance model, which involves the Covenant of Mayors Community, as well as the Commission for the Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE) within the CoR.

The methodological breakthrough in spatial planning occurred during the period of the global pandemic from 2020 to 2021. During this period, the European Commission enacted specific directives and regulations pertaining to economic, financial, and spatial analytical models with the objective of stimulating economic growth. These were designated as essential components of the Recovery and Resilience large infrastructural programs. In order to support the decision-making and evaluation process underlying climate change, youth and gender employment, equity in service accessibility, and societal wellbeing, Italy reorganised in a single process cost-benefit analysis (CBA), territorial impact assessment (TIA), of cohesion, and the do no significant harms principle (DNSH). These tools should be considered in the assessment of the sustainability of plan choices, as well as the use of funds for sustainable cities (at least 6% of the ERDF resources is dedicated to reducing economic, environmental and social problems in urban areas), and financial taxonomy (European Commission, 2020a).

It is unclear whether there is full awareness in Europe of the impact of spatial planning on future generations and how it is evolving in a sustainable territorial instrument. RRF investments must address the urgency of climate change by producing low-impact solutions that will facilitate the achievement of an EU carbon-neutral economy. The objective of the cohesion policy for a greener and low-carbon Europe (European Commission, DGRegio, 2024) is to provide support for policies that facilitate a clean and fair energy transition, green and blue investments, the circular economy, climate change mitigation and adaptation, prevention and management of soil risks, and sustainable urban mobility. The Territorial Agenda 2030 for a Green Europe is being implemented in an equitable manner. Spatial planning is regarded as a pivotal factor in fostering socio-economic prosperity and integration, thus representing an indispensable component of 'territorial capital' for sustainable development. In pursuit of this objective, functional area patterns could be pursued in accordance with the recommendations set forth by CEMAT.

The mention of new planning and master plans in Amsterdam, The Hague, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Brussels, Lille, Lyon, Barcelona, Lisbon, London, Manchester, Birmingham, Łódź, Bucharest, Milan, and other cities evidences the positive experiences associated with such initiatives. Conversely, the exclusion of other areas is contingent upon the capacity-building efforts at the local level and the establishment of appropriate legislation and governance at the regional level. The strength of the cities lies in their participatory nature of the local plan (European Commission, 2019; ESPON, 2020). The budget is predicated on temporal, regulatory, and financial consistency in order to implement and manage joint projects.

In the context of the present Stability Pact, the taxation base parameters are exceeded when considering BES (Fair and Sustainable Wellbeing) indicators (Costanza et al., 2016). The scope for welfare increases with the provision of common goods and services,

including cultural, ecological, and green initiatives, as well as stability and soil quality. In addition, the type of housing, including co-living arrangements for young and old people, affordable housing, productive settlements, security, natural and historical values, economic dynamism, public health, the level of tertiary education, the labour market, and accessibility, are all important factors to consider. The new Common Provisions Regulation Article 23 (2021) requires a community-led approach.

The evaluation of spatial plans has been a long-standing practice, with the objective of determining the alignment of regional and local strategic policies with EU sustainable and cohesive alternatives. One such example is the ESPON (2018) initiative, which aimed to enhance EU regulations in countries and regions:

- Halting the loss of biodiversity
- Managing the sustainability of resources and public works
- Creating more cohesive and resilient local communities, protecting the landscape and cultural heritage
- Introducing advanced and low impact technologies and techniques
- Use renewable (bio-based) construction materials
- Use modular and flexible designs
- Provide low impact materials

The approval and implementation of large public infrastructural projects align with the pillars and flags of the EU 2027 Strategy, the Territorial Agenda 2030, and its ongoing revision. Prior to 2020, regional operational plans (ROP) included more effective policies to redirect investments towards social policy needs than national operational programmes (NOP). One of the principal areas where challenges to reform the European Cohesion Policy arose was that of welfare (Prezioso, 2018, 2020). Nevertheless, there is currently no consensus on the most appropriate methodology. The societal dimension has emerged as a significant concern for both European and national public policy. Regional authorities have assumed the responsibility of reconciling local policy needs with the objectives of EU/national policies and economic interdependencies between territories.

A reconsideration of this approach in the context of methods related to territorial analysis and new project evaluation tools, such as social convenience analysis within cost-benefit analysis, presents an important and innovative challenge in overcoming obstacles to ensuring efficient and sustainable design and spending in the context of Cohesion Policy.

The utilisation of innovative policy design is proving to be a valuable tool in the process of developing the RRF projects. To illustrate, in Italy, the approach facilitates the following: (1) The identification and response to real needs, (2) respect and appreciation for geographical diversity, (3) the selection of suitable mitigation measures for local investments, (4) the implementation of both territorial databases and monitoring systems, and (5) the use of appropriate indicators for the assessment of global major projects at the local level. Furthermore, it introduces the concept of territorial social sustainability, which is informally but *de facto* integrated into decision-making processes (European Commission, DGRegio, 2014; European Commission, 2020a, 2020b, 2021).

To demonstrate the potential of this approach, Italy has introduced guidelines for evaluating territorial cohesion, youth employment, and gender in the implementation of financing large infrastructural projects through the RRF. These guidelines elucidate the circumstances under which these aspects can be addressed in national strategic policy choices, integrating the mandatory documents that accompany the top-down approval and bottom-up realisation of public works projects. The Italian Ministry of Infrastructures (2021) reviews and adapts consistency with EU Cohesion Policy and TA2030 pillars and flags to account for geographical diversity.

This assessment estimates new territorial social cohesion, which depends on thematic objectives such as the circular economy, climate change, carbon footprint, cultural heritage, risks, protected areas, and social inclusion (Table 1).

The evaluation of potential territorial assets in various sub-regions and the monitoring of project suitability (such as high-speed railways, aqueducts, ports, and dams) and strategy orientation are now more closely aligned with the EU's Next Generation Strategy. This enables the creation of a specific Territorial Agenda 2030 for Italy, which aims to achieve a just transition towards decarbonisation, energy efficiency, and security. The agenda aims to establish a nexus between innovative research and policy, employing appropriate tools.

The specific objective is to quantify the impact of planning on society, considering a range of factors, including well-being, social inclusion, education, employment, income, and

**Table 1.** The complementarity between the thematic objectives of the Cohesion Policy, the Europe 2020 Strategy and the policy choice.

Priority of cohesion policy	Thematic objectives of cohesion policy	Europe 2020 Strategy	Europe 2020 flags	STeMA Policy choice
Increase labour market participation, promote social inclusion and improve the quality of human capital	Promoting sustainable and quality employment and supporting labour mobility	Inclusive Growth	Employment	Homogenisation of enterprise costs Support enterprise creation Support employees' mobility Support equal opportunities
	Promoting social inclusion, combating poverty and any discrimination			Re-involvement of aging people Support leisure Social inclusion Child protection Poverty reduction Policies dissemination for transparency and efficiency of bureaucracy Cultural integration Social Programme Financing Safety Support Welfare
	Investing in education, training and life-long learning		Poverty and exclusion/ Age and Public Health	
	Improving the efficiency of public administration			

Source: Prezioso, 2020, p. 33

other aspects. This is achieved through an integrated and targeted assessment of the territorial capital of European regions, which will identify the real and potential contribution of planning to the different dimensions of sustainable development. In Italy, for instance, these contributions pertain to the causal connections between planning areas and their use across the four main dimensions, as follows:

- Economic contributions related to use and non-use values, both direct and indirect; monetary (economic and financial) and non-monetary benefits.
- The social contribution described as an increase in social capital, inherent in social relationships (e.g. the nature and number of inter-institutional cooperation relationships and participation in a multi-level governance process). It can be conceptualised as a resource in which investment generates or implement a stream of benefits.
- The contribution to the cultural dimension concerning the areas related to the impact of the entrepreneurship, CH and institutions, mainly in education, skills and identity spin-offs or SME networks. Identity-based actions can contribute to education and training in a variety of ways, and more effectively involve the beneficiaries.
- The relationship with the environment respect to two main areas: i) the enhancement of complex urban/urban-rural centres and landscapes with increasing anthropic pressures (pollution, congestion) to maintain the typical landscape; ii) the contribution of the built environment to climate change mitigation with reference to the construction sector.

The fourth dimension assesses the impact of EU-funded investment on social well-being in cities and regions, with a particular focus on the promotion of regional development and the reduction of economic and social disparities. Over 90 regions within the EU have invested in initiatives designed to enhance the well-being of their inhabitants, with the objective of attracting funding from a range of sources, including the public, private, and social sectors. Several examples of investments for regional and local economic development, urban and rural regeneration, economic growth, social inclusion, and social innovation can be found throughout Europe. These examples serve to reinforce the connection between social inclusion and employment (European Committee of Regions, 2022).

## **5. Discussion and Remarks**

Since the turn of the century, European spatial planning researchers have used place evidence to inspire decision makers' opinions and decisions. They collect and develop data, indicators, and explanatory models to address policy needs from the bottom-up, harmonising investment offers across geographical diversities and regulations. Territorial planning serves to reinforce these aspects. Plan is the place where the relationship between democracy, and society is expressed in terms of areas closely linked to the broader relationship between culture and society. This connection can be revisited and implemented in order to maintain and enhance well-being, as well as to guarantee the 'right' to enjoy a territory based on specific economic and cultural needs.

Territorial plans play a crucial role in creating and enhancing social capital. It has the potential to improve the quality of life and well-being of individuals and communities by reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion through participation, intergenerational dialogue, cohesion, and integration.

It has the potential to enhance the quality of life and well-being of individuals and communities by reducing inequalities and promoting inclusion through participation, intergenerational dialogue, cohesion, and integration. Conversely, it serves an economic function as an intrinsic component of job creation and promotion across a range of sectors and at various levels of education and cultural training.

These efforts, facilitated by visibility and the speed of the social media action, have become the foundation for updating poorly regulated processes with the objective of reinforcing the concept of cohesive territorial planning (Prezioso, 2018) in the context of Europeanisation. The ESDP and CEMAT working method<sup>13</sup> is regarded as a significant factor in the cultural transformation of planning, which has resulted in the emergence of a strongly territorialised socio-economy.

The need for territorial planning, as more realistic and concrete than the spatial one, is a topic of conflict in an era where general and local policies often contradict each other. Territorial planning is a strategy designed to achieve integrated and strategic development by bringing together EU territories that differ greatly in terms of cohesion, sustainability, and competitiveness. In this field, the dialogue is critical of the philosophy that still permeates current 'national' urbanism.

The language and methods deployed in territorial planning offer insights into the truth and falsehoods of sustainable development when viewed through a territorial lens. This includes indicators, place-based evidence, phenomena, and new techniques. Consequently, geography enables a more nuanced comprehension of the evolution of the European political debate, from a focus on critical and theoretical thinking to an emphasis on empirical methods. Furthermore, it emphasises the potential for engaging in cooperative and subsidiary practices involving various geographical scales, typologies, and sectors of spatial planning, from the general to the particular.

The initial empiricism has challenged the methodological approach and governance rules that public institutions must follow to responsibly plan metropolitan cities such as Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, and Riga. This is because it has defined the terms, content, and timing of a process. A similar phenomenon occurs in the planning of large areas and macro-regions, such as the Greater Region, Baltic, Danube, and Alpine. This approach addresses and resolves sensitive issues related to the governance of political processes, decision-making, and participation in public/private relations. This encompasses both transnational and cross-level processes, as well as urban municipal design for recovery and regeneration.

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13. Both documents bring together representatives of Member States in pursuit of a shared objective in matter of spatial planning. Preparatory working paper, surveys, meetings produce final addresses and resolutions adopted as contribution to the achievement of the Council of Europe goals. CEMAT also elaborates [European regional/spatial planning charters as the Torremolinos](#) or Rural ones

The countries on the periphery of Europe face challenges in joining European territorial planning and providing spatial planning that is asymmetric<sup>14</sup> in both form and content across different regions (ESPON, 2012, 2014, 2018; Prezioso, 2018). The Europeanisation of territorial planning is also a factor to consider in countries such as Slovenia, the Netherlands, Finland, Ireland, and Latvia since 2017 (Committee of Regions, 2022). Their planning actions enable the governance of a territory to be adapted to the potential development capacity of places at different scales, in line with Community policy guidelines. This approach has also been implemented, with the aim of revitalising their position in an uncertain global market.

Sharing the new systemic direction of territorial planning introduced by ESDP (1999) and the CEMAT (2000) is challenging in the mosaic of European planning. The positive effects are due to the exchange of methods, techniques, and tools of good practice in applied research, data collection, geo-referencing, mapping of phenomena, production of atlases, and predictive scenarios. These practices inspired the construction of the new 'Europeanised framework' of public planning where the social inclusion is a main part of the intergenerational strategy.

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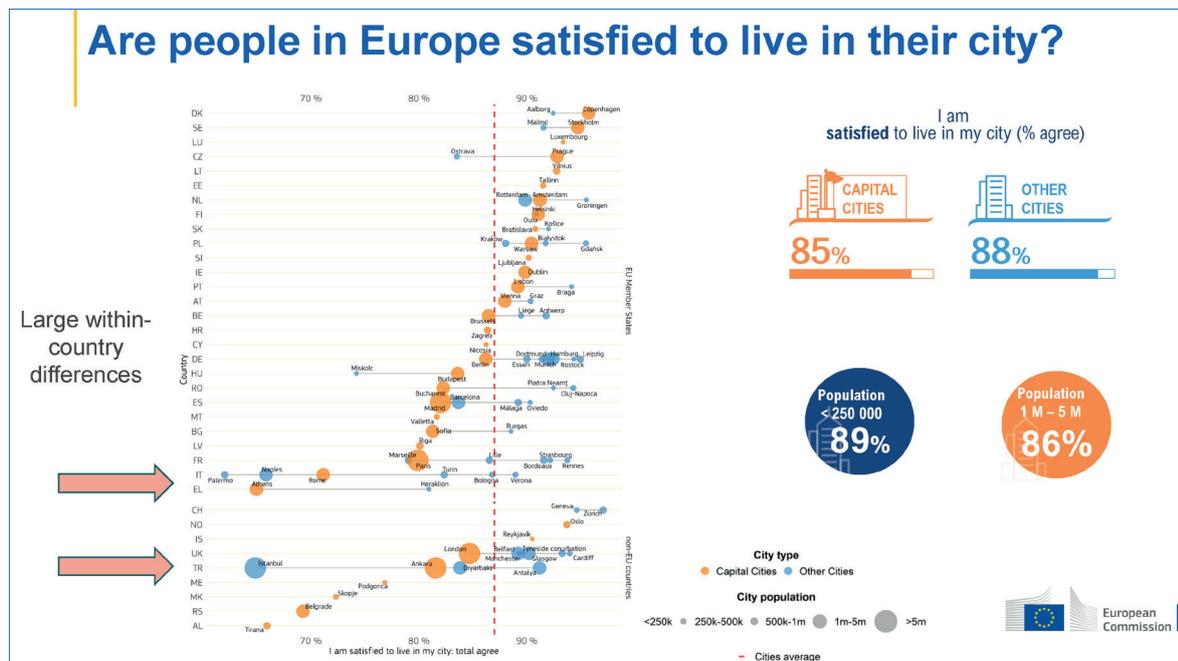
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