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Taking a Fresh Look at Rural Europe – An introduction to the EDORA¹ Project

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ABSTRACT

This presentation is intended as a brief introduction to three more substantive papers which focus upon specific elements of the EDORA project. This was a project commissioned by the European Spatial Observatory Network (ESPON), in the autumn of 2009. Its ultimate goal was to better understand patterns and processes of rural differentiation and change in a European context, as a starting point for the formulation of policy approaches to strengthen Territorial Cohesion in a rural context. Such a task presents a range of challenges, the two most obvious being the breadth of the topic, and the weight of inertia associated with established sectoral policy paradigms and implementation structures. This introductory paper will first describe in broad terms, how the research team responded to these challenges, and secondly provide a brief overview of the key policy recommendations.

The need to Refresh Generalisations

Rural change and patterns of differentiation across space are extremely complex phenomena. Over recent decades the pace of change has accelerated, and the geography has become increasingly variable. One of the consequences of this is that rural policy, which has changed incrementally, hampered by a great degree of inertia, has not kept up, and now requires radical reform if it is to fully address the needs of 21st century rural Europe. The inertia is embodied in generalisations about rural economies and society, some of which are increasingly stereotypical, but which retain a powerful influence over policy design and implementation (partly due to the role of certain interest groups). Here are some examples of such “stylised fallacies” (Hodge 2004):

- The *agrarian countryside*, in which the role of land-based industries is overestimated at the expense of other forms of economic activity which are of greater and increasing importance to socio-economic development.

¹ European Development Opportunities in Rural Areas (ESPON 2013 Project 2013/1/2)

- The “*rural exodus*”: characterised by out-migration and demographic ageing. This ignores the fact that many rural areas show in-migration, population increase and relatively young age structures.
- Rural “*dependency culture*” – an attachment to policy supports and compensation for disadvantage as the main policy option. In reality many rural areas, even remote ones, show evidence of dynamism, innovation and growth, even without policy support.
- Rural labour markets are commonly associated with *segmentation*, in which a dominant “secondary” component, characterised by low levels of human capital, insecurity, low activity rates (especially for females), disguised unemployment, and high levels of self-employment. All of these characteristics are certainly present in some (but by no means all) rural areas.
- Similarly, sparsity of population is often perceived as a barrier to entrepreneurship, due to an absence of agglomerative economies. As a result, the *impacts of globalisation* processes are believed to be predominantly negative in rural areas. Nevertheless it is important to recognise that information and communication technology (if associated with appropriate human capital conditions) are facilitating new forms of economic activity which enable some rural areas to sidestep these handicaps.

One of the main objectives of EDORA was to expose and challenge some of the outdated generalisations associated with rural Europe, by presenting evidence of the way in which rural economies and societies are changing. More appropriate generalisations are not, however, an end in themselves, they are important as building blocks of a rationale for “*Rural Cohesion Policy*”.

What is Rural Cohesion Policy?

In the EDORA Final Report the term “Rural Cohesion Policy” was used to distinguish the style of intervention we are recommending from “Rural Development Policy”. The latter generally has a *land-use* concept of the rural economy as its starting point, and focuses on supporting the primary sector, and “land-based industries”. It is epitomised by Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy.

By contrast Rural Cohesion Policy adopts a *territorial* definition of the rural economy. In other words activities are rural by virtue of their location outside urban areas, rather than because of their sectoral association. Rural Cohesion Policy is concerned with *territorial cohesion*. According to the Green Paper on Territorial Cohesion (EC 2008), territorial cohesion is about “harmonious development” and helping all areas to achieve the potential associated with their specificities. In 2009 Territorial Cohesion became one of the fundamental objectives/competencies of the EU (alongside social and economic cohesion) through the Lisbon treaty. Thus Article 158 states that: “Among the regions concerned, particular attention shall be paid to *rural areas*, areas affected by industrial transition, and regions which suffer from severe and permanent natural or demographic handicaps such as the northernmost regions with very low population density and island, cross-border and mountain regions.” (EC 2010, italics added)

The EDORA Project

EDORA is an abbreviation of “European Development Opportunities for Rural Areas”. This was a project funded under the ESPON 2013 programme², which began in September 2008 and was completed in March 2011. This project was coordinated by the University of the Highlands and Islands, supported by a large consortium representing twelve EU Member States (Table 1).

Table 1: The EDORA Research Consortium.

No.	Partner	MS	Principal Researchers
1	University of the Highlands and Islands	UK	Andrew Copus
2	Nordregio - Nordic Centre for Spatial Development	SE	Petri Kahila
3	Newcastle University	UK	Mark Shucksmith, Hilary Talbot
4	University of Valencia	ES	Joan Noguera
5	Research Committee - University of Patras	GR	Dimitris Skuras
6	The Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority	IE	David Meredith
7	University of Gloucestershire	UK	Paul Courtney
8	University of Ljubljana	SI	Majda Cernic
9	Johann Heinrich von Thünen-Institut, Federal Research Institute for Rural Areas, Forestry and Fisheries.	DE	Peter Weingarten, Stefan Neumeier
10	Federal Institute for Less-Favoured and Mountainous Areas	AT	Thomas Dax
11	Dortmund University of Technology	DE	Johannes Lueckenkoetter
12	Institute of Geography and Spatial Organization, Polish Academy of Sciences	PL	Jerzy Banski
13	Institute of Economics Hungarian Academy of Sciences	HU	Gusztav Nemes
14	Higher Institut of Agronomy	PT	Manuel Bello Moreira
15	Scottish Agricultural College	UK	Marsailli MacLeod
16	IOM International Organization for Migration/Central European Forum for Migration and Population Research	PL	Marek Kupiszewski

The tasks of the EDORA researchers, as set out in the specification, were three-fold:

- (i) To describe the main processes of change which are resulting in the increasing differentiation of rural areas.
- (ii) To identify development opportunities and constraints for different kinds of rural areas.
- (iii) To consider how such knowledge can be translated into guiding principles to support the development of appropriate cohesion policy

In order to address these three objectives the work of the project was carried out in three phases, which were conceptual, empirical, and finally, policy orientated. This structure (which is illustrated in detail in Figure 1) was a very deliberate consequence of a desire to follow a deductive, rather than inductive approach to the task. This was prompted by an awareness of the considerable

² <http://www.espon.eu/>

imbalance in the availability of rural data, with the volume of agricultural information outweighing, many times over, that relating to the rest of the (territorial) rural economy and society.

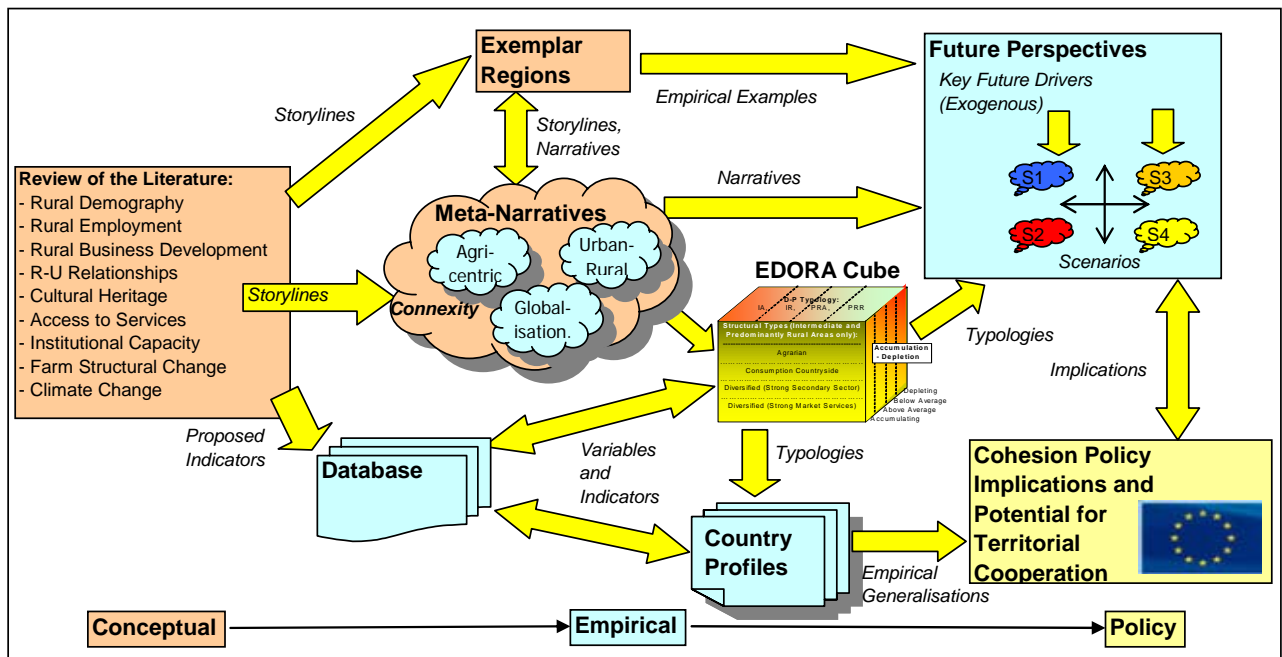


Figure 1: The Structure of the EDORA Project

Each individual research task was fully documented in a series of 27 working papers. All of these are available for download from the project's website³, whilst the full Final Report is available from the ESPON website.⁴ The key findings of the project are also summarised in a Nordregio publication (Hörnström and Copus 2011).

The EDORA Approach and the Structure of this Session.

The conceptual and empirical phases of the EDORA project underlined the broad scope and extreme complexity of the topic of rural change and patterns of rural differentiation. Nevertheless two forms of generalisation have emerged from this work:

(i) Our understanding of the process(es) of rural change is enhanced through the construction of a set of “meta-narratives”, which draw together a number of individual “storylines” of change. The three meta-narratives, (which feature in the paper by Shucksmith, Talbot and Lee, and Chapter 1 of Hörnström and Copus 2011), are:

- (a) Agri-centric.
- (b) Urban-Rural
- (c) Globalisation

³ <http://www.nordregio.se/EDORA>

⁴ http://www.espon.eu/main/Menu_Projects/Menu_AppliedResearch/edora.html

(ii) Generalisations about spatial differentiation are provided in the form of three NUTS 3 regional typologies, which are presented in Chapter 2a of Hörnström and Copus (*op. cit.*) The three typologies describe patterns of:

- (a) Rurality and access to urban areas.
- (b) The degree of economic restructuring.
- (c) Socio-economic performance.

These three typologies form a kind of “triangulation” which is the basis of a statistical “portrait” of rural Europe, (Hörnström and Copus *op cit* Chapter 2b).

At a micro-scale geographic level spatial generalisations are generally not helpful, since change at the local level is a consequence of the interaction of exogenous drivers, related to the meta-narratives (as described by Shucksmith *et al op. cit.*) and common across Europe, with local assemblages of “territorial capital”. Rural-urban linkages and cooperation are also generally assumed to be an important driver of these micro-scale patterns, and these will be explored in the third paper to be presented today, by Hilary Talbot and Paul Courtney. Czapiewski and Mazur will present a detailed analysis of rural differentiation in Poland in the second D3 session.

Another important element of the empirical phase of the project was an exercise in “foresight” which considered the key dimensions of future change over the next 20 years, and described alternative scenarios and their likely policy implications (Hörnström and Copus *op cit* Chapter 3).

The lessons for Rural Cohesion Policy which may be derived from the conceptual and empirical activities of the EDORA project form the subject of the final paper, by Dax, Kahila and Hörnström. These implications may be elaborated first in terms of a policy rationale which could structure a policy framework if one was given “a clean sheet”, without the requirement to build upon pre-existing arrangements (Hörnström and Copus *op cit* Chapter 5). More realistically it is important to be aware of “the story so far (Hörnström and Copus *op cit* Chapter 4) and also to reflect upon the current reform proposals (as at February 2011). This is the focus of Hörnström and Copus (*op cit*) Chapter 7.

The Key Messages of EDORA

The key messages of EDORA can be summed up in three broad propositions about rural differentiation and change which have the potential to form the foundation for a coherent policy rationale:

- A. That in a globalised world, in which linkages and interaction of all kinds are less constrained by physical distance, and increasingly determined simply by common interests and the strength of relationships, intangible assets (human and social capital, institutional capacity and so on) will become the key to enabling each rural region to fulfil its potential.

B. Also as a consequence of globalisation, processes of change which affect rural areas (i.e. the meta-narratives) may be considered exogenous, and common throughout much of the ESPON space. The observed increase in rural differentiation is thus primarily a consequence of local or regional differences in the capacity of regions, (or rather of their people and businesses) to respond to the challenges or opportunities which are presented to them.

C. That the capacity to respond may be divided into two components, according to the geographical scale at which they vary:

(i) Some exhibit broad macro-scale patterns of differentiation. These reflect the fact that the meta-narratives have different impacts in different types of rural area. These patterns may be to some extent captured by regional indicators, and typologies.

(ii) Others, particularly the intangible assets, seem to vary in an 'aspatial' way, which can only be captured on a region-by-region (or locality) basis, by some form of qualitative auditing.

Clearly these propositions point towards a twin level approach. A strategic perspective, based upon macro-scale patterns identified by regional indicators and typologies, leading to spatially targeted "horizontal" interventions, which are best designed and coordinated at a central level. In parallel, micro-scale patterns of territorial assets should be captured by standardised auditing procedures, to form the basis of what are sometimes termed "neo-endogenous" local development initiatives, combining true "bottom up" responsiveness to the local assemblage of challenges and opportunities with "top down" support in terms of advice and guidance (Figure 2).

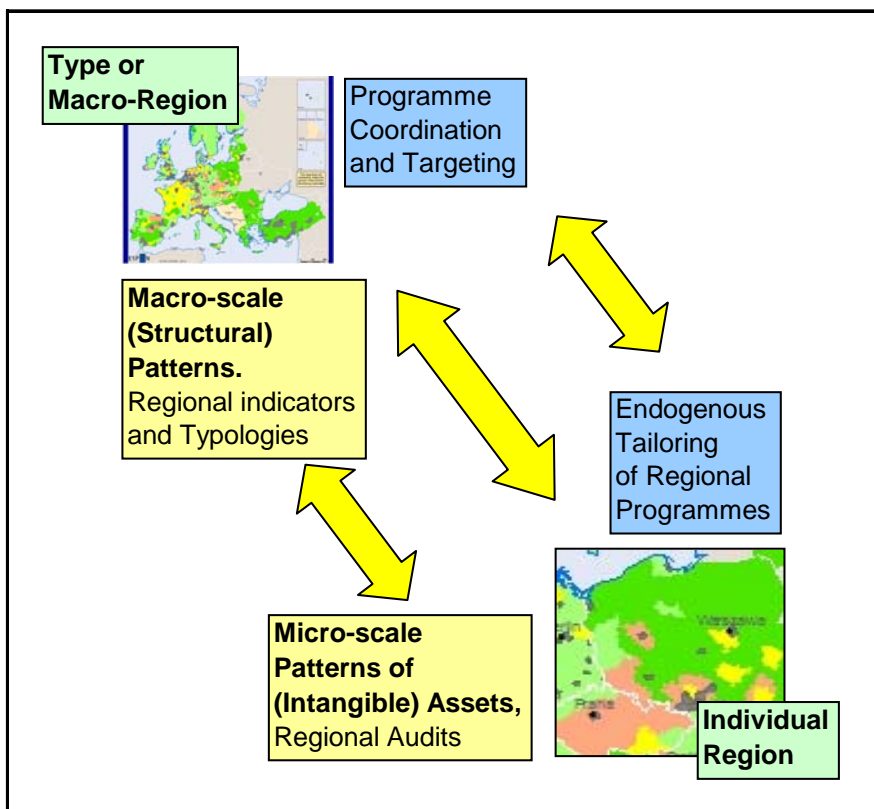


Figure 2: Neo-Endogenous Rural Cohesion Policy

Some guiding principles for practical implementation also emerge from the findings reported later in this report:

- o The need for close coordination between interventions to support territorial cohesion in rural areas, and other policies active in similar contexts and themes. These include, for example CAP Pillar 2, which, - as the EDORA Final Report explains - is viewed as a complementary policy, essentially sectoral, but with significant cohesion impacts, particularly in Agrarian and Consumption Countryside regions. Also important are a range of EU, national and regional Social and Employment policies which already address the issue of intangible assets.
- o Whilst a menu-based approach may imply unhelpful rigidities, the “top-down” guidance to local development should be sufficiently clear and specific to ensure its value as a resource to support regional implementation, and yet be flexible enough to be relevant across the full range of contexts.
- o This policy concept is only feasible within the context of effective multi-level governance. Where appropriate, support should be provided to facilitate regional capacity building. In addition to the need for rural audits and indicators of intangible assets, in the context of programme design, these should be developed in the tandem with systematic monitoring and evaluation of impacts.

Conclusion.

The three papers which follow, the EDORA Final Report, and the Nordregio publication (Hörnström and Copus *op cit*) seek to present the key findings of the EDORA project as a foundation for an evidence-based rationale for territorial cohesion policy for rural areas. The meta-narratives and the typologies are key components, part of a sequence of logical steps which point towards a twin level neo-endogenous approach in which both macro-scale and micro/aspatial socio-economic differentiation are addressed. An important feature of the recommended approach is an emphasis upon intangible assets, as a recognition of the increasing importance to development of a capability to interact effectively in “relational” network space.

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