

GEOTA and LEU's commentary on the Draft of the Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA)

31.03.2020

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As we speak, our only certainty is uncertainty. The global COVID-19 health crisis comes at a moment when the world is still in recovery from the trauma of the 2008 economic crisis, and when the perils of the environmental crisis have just started to be recognized and responded to globally. The overall health and economic impact of this pandemic remains to be determined, but it will certainly have far reaching repercussions for the global society as a whole and, therefore, for all territorial organizations. We hope that Territorial Agenda 2030 will help to shape and improve this outlook.

The European Territorial Agenda 2030 (TA 2030) is a crucial strategic document that, while being non-binding, helps to establish a common language for all European Union territories to address issues concerning territorial cohesion and development.

The TA 2030 is the fifth of a series of documents^[1] prepared by the European Commission with homologous ambitions. In 1999, the *European Spatial Development Perspective: Towards Balanced and Sustainable Development of the Territory of the European Union* (ESDP) was prepared. Today, the ESDP is still a reference for European spatial policies. As the draft version of TA 2030 was prepared and presented in 2019, in this comment we will use the ESDP as a reference for a 20-year comparison of how certain topics have evolved in European planning discourse.

^[1] Here we consider the following documents: The European regional/ spatial planning charter - Torremolinos Charter (1983); European Spatial Development Perspective (1999) and the Territorial Agenda of the European Union (2007 and 2011 - the version currently in effect).

About the authors:

GEOTA (Environmental and Land Use Planning Study Group)¹ is a non-governmental organization with activity since 1981. It has been actively involved in every major environmental struggle in Portugal regarding law and policy, in addition to specific projects, most of which were related to environmental education.

LEU (Urban Studies Lab)² is an experimental collective founded in 2018. It aims to conduct and support research in a way that is open to all academics and citizens interested in urban processes. It is a platform to host projects and people who want to explore experimental approaches to urban research, independently from their affiliation.

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I. Potential of the Territorial Agenda 2030

In our understanding, *communication* is one of the main promises of TA 2030. Since this document aims to influence how the European territories are transformed, we expect it to be integrated with policies and territorial strategies at various levels, with the necessary cultural and contextual adaptations in each case.

In this sense, it is commendable that TA 2030 enhances the Union without giving up on diversity, that it values citizen participation as well as community-led initiatives, and that it seeks to influence "all relevant policies at all governance levels", which in our understanding is a significant step for its operationalization potential.

Concerning the document's form, we value the emphasis on two overarching objectives (Just Europe and Green Europe) and the presentation of a summary. However, an index of the full version is missing. Also, in order to achieve its full potential, we believe that TA 2030 should be more concise, language and conceptual definitions clearer, and the background better explained. Therefore, our following comments aim to contribute to this clarification. It is our hope that these comments support increased use of TA 2030 in local and national territory policies.

II. Comments from GEOTA & LEU

1. The TA 2030 approach to *environment* is hazy

Since TA 2030 is divided into *social* and *environmental* dimensions - Just and Green Europe - we consider that a physical or ecosystemic dimension is inexplicably absent. Adding this third dimension would make the connections between the "social" and the "environmental" more explicit, hence making the underlying message of TA 2030 about the importance of sustainability stronger and easier to operationalize.

2. Conceptual frameworks are unclear: *territory* and *inequalities*

While the concept of "territory" was used with a clear purpose in the 1999 ESDP, the TA 2030 loses that much-needed clarity. Even with an assumed spatial approach, the word "territory" is used in ESDP to refer to the political dimension of the entire EU space. For instance, in the 2019 document, the territorial agenda doesn't address why the message assumes a territorial perspective and, when describing those involved in the territorial governance process, describes the process as "spatial planning", leaving the readers confused.

Another example is the use of the word "inequalities". While in the 1999 document the discourse was focused on "spatial disparities" - which emphasizes the differences between specific territories - in the TA 2030 this concern seems to be concealed by resorting to the all-encompassing term "inequalities". The problem with this seemingly ubiquitous, yet potentially manageable idea, is that no operationalization examples are offered, which the 1999 ESDP did so well.

3. Commitment is necessary to fight XXI century development challenges

GEOTA and LEU understand that we are living in the Anthropocene¹/Capitalocene² age, facing an eminent environmental crisis right after the great economic crisis of 2008, not to mention the health and economic consequences of the Covid-29 crisis. Without a strong sense of urgency, which is required to address the consequences of the state the world is in, there is no hope for recovery.

¹ IPCC (2018); ² Moore (2016).

We believe that in 1999, through the ESDP, we could see a more concrete plan for tackling the pressing issues than we see now in TA 2030. When looking for specific goals of the agenda, we find no concrete orientation for solutions, which makes the document less consistent in its strategic purpose. Indeed, the ESDP gave a clear explanation on its status, what it was and why it was written. In TA 2030 we believe this task was vaguely and insufficiently addressed. In this context, and as a matter of effectiveness, we suggest TA 2030 should take into account, for instance, the United Nations's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals and associated indicators.

4. We cannot continue *business as usual* - we need an actual *transition*!

The need for us, as Europeans, to be prepared to take real, achievable steps towards more sustainable management of natural resources is much more pronounced in the 1999 ESDP document than in TA 2030. We can find references to indigenous development and knowledge, as well as mentions of the importance of addressing the complexity of water management, among others. However, what seems to be missing in TA 2030 are specific policy options in this sphere of action. In the 2019 document, climate change is referenced as a vague imperative with matching loose characterizations on loss of biodiversity, quality of air, water, etc. Without specific options to tackle these issues, the climate change narratives give room to policy that, in the name of urgency, might lead to unwanted consequences. Several different movements and groups have worked in the past decades on specific steps we can take to transition to more sustainable systems. Despite their arduous work, we find no mention of their ideas. In fact, reading about the need to transition only, again, is again a vague imperative with no substance. Working closely with these groups, we at GEOTA and LEU believe that there is a systematic body of knowledge that could be integrated in strategic documents such as TA 2030 to orient action and discussion in these topics. We are open to collaboration to help ensure these are included in a future version.

5. Let's continue to talk about *wise management*

In the 1999 ESDP we could read references to “wise management” of resources and contextual problems. The term “wise” is today refreshing to read, in the sense that it appeals to the interpretation of knowledge and information - a critical hermeneutical dimension of such strategic documents. The TA 2030 leaves us underwhelmed by its seemingly strict bureaucratic approach. We find the text to lack serious efforts in contextualizing or addressing key issues in an increasingly urbanized world, such as housing, ageing, mobility, food security and energy production and distribution, among others. Every time a key issue is mentioned, we read many references to the word pairing “opportunities and challenges” or “challenges and potentials” - in the entire text, these pairings appear more than 20 times. We understand that, while objectivity is necessary in analyzing serious issues, a political, action-orienting document should offer some *wise* insight into how these issues *should* be addressed, and we hope that a future version of the document takes this remark into consideration.

6. Do we want *real change*? Just Europe and Green Europe revisited

Without serious, specific, goal-oriented commitment, there is no room for any beneficial “digitalization” of society, nor for “progress” or “development”. While TA 2030 mentions that some places “are lagging behind” it does not offer any real direction for the future development of these territories. It does call for more “competitiveness”, but it does not point towards a more “sustainable” framework of reference for this desired competitiveness - or progress, or development, for that matter.

Consequently, local and national planning efforts are left with a dilemma: boosting competition and development to achieve “progress” is pivotal; however, they should do so while providing “equal opportunities for citizens and enterprises” and while paying attention to diversity, sustainability,

inclusiveness and other general *desirable* goals. The text is almost ideological when calling for "optimal balance between sustainability, inclusiveness and competitiveness" while not providing any insight into *how* this might be achieved. An example of how confusing the text is regarding some of the key-issues follows:

"These demographic dynamics (ageing, domestic and intra-EU migration, others) have severe social implications incl. increasingly social exclusion and inequalities, challenges for public service provision, labour markets and housing." (TA 2030, page 6, paragraph 30)

Does this point imply that the housing problem is a consequence of (inevitable, neutral?) demographic dynamics? How can we clarify this point? If we are to agree with the slogan "Just Europe", we cannot say that the text of TA 2030 is sufficient to orient action or policy towards this goal. What is the definition of justice in this context? Is it related with cohesion? There is not enough conceptual clarity to orient "just" policy or action, nor enough clarity about possible operationalizations.

The same doubts emerge for the second slogan, "Green Europe". We understand that no romanticized "sustainable connections" are possible within an increasingly digitalized world built on exploitative and unacceptable conditions of production necessary to feed the technology maintaining the current economic relations. No transition is possible if we don't know *where to*, and no sustainable change will take place without structural programs to anchor experimental, local initiatives.

III. Conclusive Summary

To summarize, we commend the Territorial Agenda 2030 for continuing the crucial dialogue that will help European territorial agents to speak a common language while working to achieve local and global goals. We value the focus on multi-scalar cohesion and the identification of two critical dimensions - justice and sustainability - when addressing Europe's territorial challenges (especially in the context of the COVID-19 crisis). However, we appeal to the need for a more concrete language and focus on effectiveness.

Our contribution to this process mainly reflects the following points:

1. The TA 2030's approach to *environment*;
2. The conceptual framework used for *territory* and *inequalities*;
3. The commitment necessary to address the 21st century challenges;
4. The need for actual *transition* and the risks of continuing *business as usual*;
5. A reflexion around the skills and knowledge necessary for a *wise management* of our social and natural resources; and
6. A reflexion around the changes necessary to achieve a more *Just Europe* and *Green Europe*.

We also hope our comments contribute to bringing the TA 2030's mission closer to grassroots movements, as well as all European citizens, by shedding some light on the complexity of the issues implicated in territorial decisions.

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