

March 2019

Local Experiences in Achieving Cohesion and Spatial Justice

Introduction

In recent years, the local level (cities, towns, neighbourhoods) has come under increased scrutiny as a potentially decisive actor in European Union Cohesion Policy. Without doubt, it is at the level of community and locale where the benefits of belonging and place are most closely experienced - but it is also the level where social problems, discrimination, injustice are most directly felt. Through the perspective of 33 case studies the RELOCAL project explores factors that either promote or inhibit community-based attempts to achieve spatial justice, defined as a fair distribution of opportunities and resources, and as "having a voice" in decision-making. Many local communities, be they cities, towns or villages, are seeking ways to improve their overall economic situation, quality of life and social sustainability. In many cases, however, the challenges are considerable as support for public services dwindles and economic opportunities gravitate towards prosperous areas. While it is common knowledge that "one-size-fits-all" strategies are rarely possible, local development actions add to the wealth of information regarding local practices. In RELOCAL we ask:

- Are EU and national level cohesion policies more effective if brought closer to the local level and citizens, and if so, in what ways this could be achieved?
- Can decision-making autonomy be created or enhanced by pooling local capacities for action in promoting balanced and equitable social and economic development of places?
- Comparatively speaking, how does autonomy affect development outcomes?
- How do localities interact with EU and national policies?
- How can practicable and actionable knowledge be gained from local experiences?

What do RELOCAL case study outcomes reveal?

Three cases selected from a pool of 33 (from Finland, the Netherlands and Spain) are all examples of experimental governance and institutional learning. Changing formal governance modes is difficult and a long-term process. Shifting informal practices, however, can be a faster and highly effective way of creating new governance tools. Institutional learning of course differs greatly from locale to locale. It can, for example, take the form of voluntarism, governance partnerships and a combination of both.

Voluntarism is non-binding cooperation rather than legal obligation. The main issue here is the realisation that pooling resources not only enhances local service provision and community identity but also strengthens the political position of communities within wider territorial contexts. In addition, what begins as voluntary cooperation can with time evolve into something more permanent and formalised

Partnerships between different decision-making levels is another potential option when communities are able to project their local concerns onto wider regional, national contexts. This option facilitates access to national and EU-level resources and political support.

In both cases, developing capacities to connect localities to different support and financing schemes as well as mobilise support, ideas and energies is key. Capacity-building is a gradual learning process that requires nurturing despite short-term political pressures.

Visit the RELOCAL website for the full Case Study Reports and more (www.relocal.eu)

Cases on Local-level experiences with Cohesion and Spatial Justice

Case 1: Eix de la Riera de Caldes

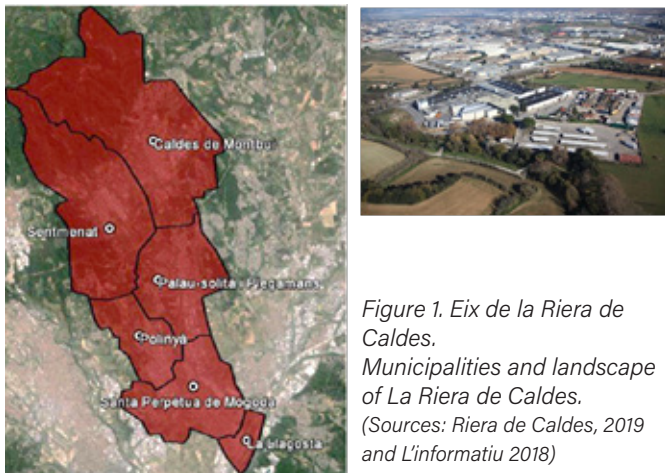


Figure 1. Eix de la Riera de Caldes. Municipalities and landscape of La Riera de Caldes. (Sources: Riera de Caldes, 2019 and L'informatiu 2018)

The Association of Municipalities of Eix de la Riera de Caldes (AMERC) is a success story in which a group of municipalities have joined forces in the development of services and programmes supporting economic activity and employment in the Caldes Basin area. The Association is not a formal body – it has no budget or staff of its own. It is rather a framework for collaboration where municipalities take yearly turns to promote and manage programmes of common interest.

The group of communities are part of a “fuzzy geometry” of cooperation rather than the formal geography of territorial administration. The municipality in charge during any given year is the one that applies for grants, receives funds and then redistributes resources among the other municipalities. To do so, ad-hoc agreements of collaboration and protocols are concluded between member participants for each action. This relatively informal collaboration framework and the low level of initial commitment by its members is the result of: 1) Ministry of Finance restrictions regarding funding of new governance forms and 2) initial mistrust and fears that local autonomy could be compromised by a formal body.

Outcomes

- increased capacity of the municipalities (and especially of the smaller ones) to utilise funding opportunities for employment and economic promotion services, and a much broader portfolio of services and resources than what they could otherwise, individually access.

- greater critical mass and a more integrated labour market space compared to individual municipalities, allowing to design more advanced and complex services for companies and employees. This indirectly increases economic and labour opportunities for residents.

- strengthened position of the municipalities in the area in negotiating strategic issues with higher Administrative levels, like public transport services and infrastructure, training facilities, spatial and environmental planning issues;

- reinforced legitimacy, which has improved cooperation and coherence with existing higher administrations.

- stronger local identity and self-confidence and better positioning of the Caldes Basin municipalities within the Barcelona Metropolitan Region.

Thanks to these results, consensus has emerged on the need to further develop the Association in terms of more formal collaboration.

Case 2: Kotka civil action based development

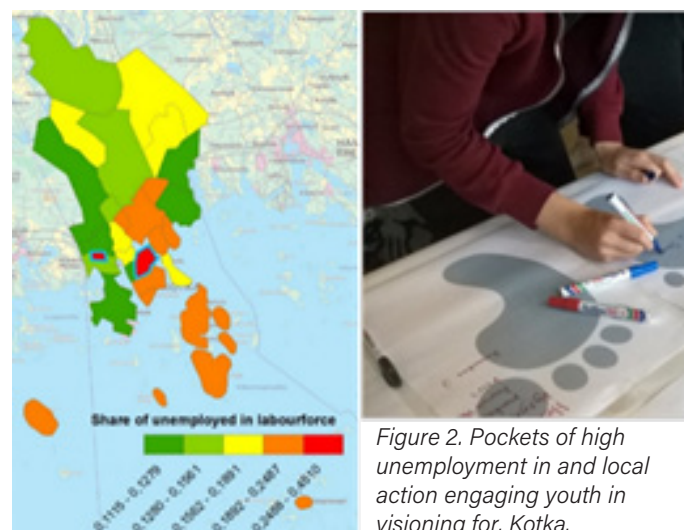


Figure 2. Pockets of high unemployment in and local action engaging youth in visioning for, Kotka.

The civil action based local initiative in the medium-sized city of Kotka on the south-eastern coast of Finland is implemented through ESF-funded projects for the social inclusion of unemployed youth and other vulnerable groups in the urban parts of the municipality. Due to its reliance on external resources, this local, civil-society initiative has been both enabled and controlled ‘from above’

by European, national and regional interests, priorities and structures. The Action represents a community-led local development type of initiative, and as such fulfils some of the elements of the single 'CLLD-methodology' outlined by the EU (EC 2013, 2014), including a focus on sub-regional areas, place-based strategic thinking (production of an action plan), engagement of residents, networking and partnership between the local civil society and the public sector. The two consecutive grassroots projects carried out as part of the action themselves do not (and cannot), however, deliver what the EU has originally proposed with the CLLD tool, that is, an integrated, multi-sectoral local development strategy and connect or integrate various European funds (ESIF).

Outcomes

- Being a grassroots initiative, the Kotka action by nature is using a 'soft' approach to alleviate socio-economic problems and exclusion, which complements pertinent municipal duties and tools, the City's and the State's formal public policies and supportive structures for people at risk of marginalisation in Kotka.
- Various instances of 'empowerment' occur in relation to the civil-society-initiated Action in Kotka, creating partnerships and linking multi-level structures, processes, interests and resources with stakeholders and beneficiaries involved in reducing social/spatial justice within the city.
- As such, the local stakeholder organisations, institutions and in general, participants in the Action could learn about the ways and benefits of using opportunity structures from above for the realisation of their bottom-up initiative. Such experience is encouraging to keep on seeking out further approaches to fit cohesion policies to their specific local needs in terms of improved spatial justice.

Case 3: Rotterdam South

Rotterdam South is a city district of about 200,000 residents, with a high concentration of socio-economically vulnerable households. The concentration of lower incomes originates from a historical distributive injustice, when the district was designed as a new harbour area, with residential districts mostly targeted at the working classes. Here, spatial injustice relates to a concentration of socio-economically vulnerable households. This can

create negative neighbourhood effects where children and adults have a somewhat restricted 'window on the world' leading to a lack of awareness of opportunities that reach beyond the individual experience of neighbourhood residents.

The Nationaal Programma Rotterdam Zuid (NPRZ) is a local network organisation, which coordinates and stimulates participants to commit themselves to this long-term project (2012-2030). It has found support from the central government. Stakeholders are from the government (municipality, state), employers, housing associations, education and wellbeing organisations. Local stakeholders use their own means for NPRZ projects, but they also receive additional grants from the government, especially for education. The NPRZ bureau received a strong mandate from stakeholders to keep the program on course. It coordinates the actions with a small but persistent staff. The NPRZ is neither a platform that distributes funding nor is it a top-down extension of the central government in the Hague; all stakeholders commit themselves, contribute their own projects and execute them.

However, the focus of NPRZ is much on stakeholders that have concrete contributions for projects, such as additional teaching hours, job guarantees and development of middle-income housing. The residents have one representative on the NPRZ board and so far the NPRZ is reluctant to include small-scale neighbourhood initiatives. NPRZ aims for a few strategic targets while community groups are 'welcome' to start local initiatives via different means than NPRZ; as long as they do not interfere with NPRZ ambitions. To the NPRZ bureau participation implies that residents have meaningful daily activities (including volunteering) or grasping the educational and career opportunities provided by NPRZ. Several times the NPRZ has engaged with residents at large scale events and welcomes suggestions for neighbourhood improvements. This does not imply that there are many community organisations in Rotterdam South, but they are fragmented along ethnic, religious and sectoral lines. Moreover, many residents hardly participate in the neighbourhood because they are in a survival mode.

Outcomes

- Overall, the NPRZ structure is a manifestation of temporary local autonomy. It is often both praised and feared for its persistence in keeping stakeholders on course. The NPRZ strategy has been to recreate the neighbourhood approach from the bottom-up.
- The NPRZ has a strong focus on continuity and the longer-term objectives. This seems to make sense because interviewees told that continuity can be very important in building relations and winning trust of residents.
- NPRZs autonomy seems to have some traits of inflexibility: this is illustrated by the reactions of NPRZ to well-intended suggestions from school boards and individual teachers.



14 partners in 12 Member States
October 2016 – September 2020
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