



Resituating the Local in Cohesion and Territorial Development

Policy Brief 3

Policy messages to the EU and the national
and local levels

May 2021

Introduction

Achieving place-based spatial justice can be challenging and, in most cases, requires a joint effort that builds on policy synergies between the local, regional, national and EU levels.

For this reason, **RELOCAL** has collected the most important policy lessons for meaningful and sustainable collaborative initiatives that emerge from contrasting and comparing our 33 [case studies](#). The lessons correspond to the following current policy challenges & issues:

1. Continuing **territorial disparities** and clustering of productivity.

2. Popular perceptions of inequality and a failure to promote solidarity lead to EU's **legitimacy crisis**.

3. All levels struggle while trying to advance welfare under pressures for growth and competitive advantage.

4. Higher-level public interventions are **not always place-based friendly**.

5. Spatially unjust positions are most often structurally embedded and result in **weak local capacities** to combat them.

6. Rigidity of Cohesion Policy in terms of requirements, funding criteria, impact measurement vs the need to experiment, and eventually, innovate.

RELOCAL policy messages:

1. Place-based does not equal 'bottom-up', it requires cooperation between and coordination of actions at all scales.
2. Transparency in delivering EU Cohesion Policy has to be substantially increased at all levels by paying more attention to communicating and consulting with citizens.
3. Member States should empower their local actors and commit to providing an institutional environment that enables local agency and capacity-building.
4. European Structural and Investment Funds -supported programmes and actions need the inclusion of social partners as a horizontal principle.
5. Local development strategies should include the cross-cutting objective to promote deliberative and participatory arrangements in the implementation and monitoring of all local development actions.
6. The EU should play a role in further pushing local/regional government and help creating political momentum for the support of local and integrated development strategies.
7. Top-down initiatives must also include measures to avoid and actively combat stigmatisation of localities.
8. ESIF programming should give more space to learning and innovation by allowing more experimentation.

1 *The role of the local in addressing continuing disparities through place-based action*

The European Union and the Member States should continue to establish and further develop instruments and governance arrangements (opportunity structures) that enable local communities to make use of their local assets and capacities in order to address disparities ‘from below’.

State actors should assume responsibility in providing enabling institutional conditions for the empowerment of local actors. Member States’ inability or unwillingness to do so may result in deformed project objectives, the cementing of uneven distributions of power and thus, in the systematic reproduction of disparities.

Local and regional decision makers should introduce routines for the mobilization of local/indigenous knowledge and to engage diverse stakeholder groups in the design and implementation of actions. Local/regional decision makers and local stakeholders should be encouraged to engage also in horizontal networks and exchanges to have up-to-date and contextualized assessment of their own assets and relative (dis)advantages.

2 *The capacity of the local to contribute to solving the EU’s legitimacy crisis*

In order to promote more solidarity, the European Union must appreciate and actively support local actions that address social and community needs. This will, on the one hand, stabilize communities in precarious situations and emphasize the EU’s role in promoting equal opportunities and better living conditions. Besides that, the inclusion of social partners should become a horizontal principle in the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) supported programmes and actions, and where possible, interventions should dedicate special attention to various disadvantaged groups and those at risk of marginalization.



Transparency in delivering EU Cohesion Policy have to be substantially increased on all levels from the top down to the beneficiaries by paying more attention to communicating to and consulting with citizens about the origins and ambitions of implemented measures and their expected and achieved impacts, and also potential failures of interventions. This is especially important in the case of ‘soft’, social projects that reach out to grassroots and citizens in a more direct way. Only through this real place-based action can be achieved.

Problem-oriented cross-sector platforms would be useful to establish in local contexts which could offer a common space and more visibility to diverse local initiatives, ongoing EU-funded projects, volunteerism, peer-support and mentoring, etc., and strengthen communities of practice on a broad social base – also to avoid selective inclusion and elitist approaches. A possible practical measure could be promoting a network of local European contact points ('guichet unique', one-stop shops), giving a role also to local civil-society organisations. This would not only facilitate mentoring, learning and guidance for capacity-building of local actors, but would give "Brussels" a more human and less bureaucratic face, establishing a more direct connection and feedback.

3 *Balancing between welfare and growth objectives*

Recent crises have taught us that growth should not be defined and assessed in terms of growth in volumes, but improved resilience.

To mitigate *territorial disadvantage*, spatial justice objectives need to be decoupled from economic growth and efficiency, particularly in the context of population decline and socio-economic crises, e.g. decline of traditional industries or COVID-induced recent hardship. The EU should adjust their set of selection and monitoring criteria under ESIF programmes to reflect this necessary

paradigm shift and lay equal emphasis on indicators that relate to the well-being and welfare of local populations; increasing local resilience and decreasing precariousness.



More accent should be given to integrated development policies both at higher levels and at local municipalities in order to combat 'spatially unjust' distributions and processes across countries and regions, and within localities. First steps into this direction have been taken by the EU through Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) and Integrated Territorial Investment (ITI) initiatives, but implementation of these varies to a significant extent among the Member States. It is often the integrated aspect of CLLD implementation which is not introduced or causing difficulties (e.g. bureaucratic burden, weak cross-sector partnerships). In this regard support to capacity building and learning at the local but also regional and national levels should be given more emphasis in relevant EU programmes. The EU should play a role in further pushing lower levels of governance and help creating political momentum for the support of local and integrated development strategies.

4 *Commitment from the higher levels is required for place-based development*

Place-based does not equal 'bottom-up', it requires cooperation between and coordination of actions at all scales. Top-down national intervention can be important in place-based development at local levels by, for example, bringing in know-how, technical expertise, financial means and coordination. However, such initiatives must include local political leadership as well as a broader set of local stakeholders and residents in order for them to co-own decision-making processes.

Top-down initiatives must also include measures to avoid and actively combat stigmatisation of localities (ranging from neighbourhoods to regions) as this might reinforce negative mentalities in the labelled places. Place-based development actions applying a positive discriminatory approach need to be aware of their potential to reinforce or even create (racial-ethnic, territorial etc.) stigmatisation. Besides a focus on 'actual', objective aspects of development, local/regional development policy have to pay equal attention to image improvement, and always with the engagement of the pertinent social groups. Well-thought communication strategies are needed also for the enhancement of both internal and external perceptions of the place.

5 *Importance of building local capacities for action to improve spatial justice*

Member States should commit to providing an institutional environment that enables local agency and capacity-building. This includes the assurance of high degree of local autonomy, determined mainly and more explicitly by decisions and capacities at the national level: giving a clear mandate to the local level, defining clear distribution of competences across the scales, ensuring resources proportionate to the devolved responsibilities, promoting and facilitating horizontal learning processes.



On the local level, it is the competence of leaders, the legitimacy of local institutions earned via proximity, transparency and openness, willingness and capacity to mobilise and include local knowledge and perceptions and place/inhabitant knowledge. Local development strategies should include the cross-cutting objective to promote deliberative and participatory arrangements in the implementation and monitoring of all local development actions.

6

Facilitation and promotion of innovation and experimentation in the deployment of Cohesion Policy

ESIF programming should give more space to learning and innovation through allowing more experimentation and flexibilities in terms of, for instance, inclusiveness of approaches and beneficiaries as well as performance indicators. EU programmes should also directly facilitate and promote opportunities for 'learning by doing'. This could be done by devoting more resources within EU funding programmes to flexible coordination, project support, facilitation of horizontal exchanges and additional activities that generate cross-project and cross-programme synergies, even if this may imply less concentration of funds (smaller budgets for supported initiatives) and an increased need for financial control tailored more to individual projects.

knowledge and place-based knowledge into learning loops.

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You may also watch our recorded policy events:

- [Empowering the Local for Enhancing Cohesion and Spatial Justice in Europe](#),
- [Perceptions of Spatial Injustice](#),
- [Two urban RELOCAL cases](#) and
- [Top-down vs bottom-up approaches](#).



Both local and place-based knowledge must be mobilised; networks of deep learning necessitate that leading actors identify ways of mobilisation, cross-fertilisation and the incorporation of local



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RELOCAL aims to identify factors that condition local accessibility of European policies, local abilities to articulate needs and equality claims and local capacities for exploiting European opportunity structures.



For more information:

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Contact	Dr. Petri Kahila (petri.kahila@uef.fi)



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