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THE ROLE OF SPATIAL RESEARCH IN PROVIDING ADVICE TO POLITICIANS AND PLANNERS: BETWEEN EXPECTATION AND RESISTANCE

Research in the spatial sciences

Research in the spatial sciences - as conducted with considerable success over the last 60 years at the German Academy for Spatial Research and Planning - encompasses inter-disciplinary analysis and evaluation of those processes in society which impact on spatial structure, and of the interplay between spatially significant activities within society, on the one hand, and spatial resources and potentials, on the other.

Spatial research is also concerned with theoretical and methodological aspects of our attitudes to space as a "non-elastic" good, and with addressing the uses to which space is put as a consequence of human activity. Spatial processes are shaped by complex interactions between social, economic, ecological and cultural processes. Consequently, and to remain consistent with the sustainability imperative, spatial research is required to grapple with the entire gamut of factors affecting spatial development.

Spatial research is concerned with actions and activities whose dimensions transcend state boundaries in their significance and impacts. Spatial structure and development is increasingly taking on global dimensions; however, these global aspects have their main impacts at the regional and local levels. In the light of the many changes in the background conditions affecting spatial development - demographic, socio-cultural and economic change; environmental problems; competition for investment between locations; increased mobility; continuing suburbanisation; the emergence of new types of disparity, etc., not all of which are simply effects of globalisation - the role of interdisciplinary research in the spatial sciences can be expected to gain in its importance for identifying solutions to social, economic, ecological and other types of problems of development in the years to come.

Spatial research is concerned particularly with "providing"; it is, therefore, primarily future-oriented. As an example of future-oriented research, it has developed its own distinct scientific profile with a proven inventory of normative theories, methods and procedures. It is shaped by contributions from the entire range of scientific disciplines relevant to spatial development, from which it incorporates theories, methods and content in a multidisciplinary alliance. The diversity of input and coverage accounts for the impossibility of there ever being one single complete, consistent, general theory of spatial development and space.

Particularly in the applied field, spatial research needs to address itself to the principles, strategies, visions and instruments of sustainable spatial development.

Research requirements

Over the coming years, the most prominent challenges for substantive research in the spatial sciences relate to such cross-cutting issues as "demographic change", "sustainable spatial development" and "spatial development at the European level". In some regions both planning policy and planning practice will have to face up to a number of huge tasks. Many of the questions now being raised are yet to be answered.

Demographic change

Long-term decline in population figures, coupled with the steady ageing of the population, are producing far-reaching changes in socio-demographics. This is true not only for Germany, but also for many other countries in Europe. From the perspective of sustainable spatial development, this process is creating a widespread - albeit regionally differentiated - need to make adjustments to settlement structure and infrastructure. The types of action required in urban regions are, however, quite different to those called for in suburban and rural areas, and in structurally weak, peripheral rural areas. There are also major differences between the Länder (states) of eastern and western Germany with regard to the need for action.

In the more sparsely populated regions of Germany, which in many cases are at the same time structurally weak, peripheral, rural areas, entire sub-regions are already facing the very real risk of almost total depletion and "passive clearance", with all of the serious consequences which this entails for safeguarding transport services, the range of utilities and the supply of the public and private services which make up the social infrastructure. Entire categories of settlement are threatened.

At the same time, the city centres particularly of the metropolitan regions of eastern Germany are struggling to cope with the consequences of population depletion on a massive scale. Throughout the entire territory, the demands associated with reshaping settlement patterns and urban structures are creating major and far-reaching challenges for spatial planning and public policy in Germany's eastern states, and now increasingly also in some sub-regions of western states.

The third component of demographic change is growing internationalisation in the form of migration. Here too there is an urgent need to examine spatial impacts.

Sustainability issues

In addressing issues of sustainable spatial development, the focus, following the initial stage of basic research, now switches to questions of implementation



and to validating research findings in practice. At this stage it is now important to initiate practical contributions towards sustainable spatial development, most particularly in the areas of regional planning, land-resource policy, transport and land management.

Implementing the requirements associated with sustainability in the day-to-day practice of regional planning is a matter of providing assistance, for example on ways in which planners might adopt sustainability considerations into plans and programmes, and by providing information on examples of best-practice in the regions of Germany.

Spatial development at the European level

High priority has to be attached to the recently completed enlargement of the EU. Viewed from the perspective of spatial research in Germany, the primary issue is to examine the consequences for spatial structure in German regions, most specifically those of eastern Germany. The second issue to consider is the assistance measures to be provided to help the new EU member-states. There is a need here for more transnational research alliances in the spatial sciences such as those already in existence within the ARL network.

It is assumed that EU enlargement will have positive benefits for future prosperity and social cohesion, as well as for securing long-term peace in Europe. However, it cannot be denied that the massive economic divide between the old EU member-states and the new accession states, and the accelerated processes of modernisation and adjustment, do give rise to fears and anxieties on both sides: concerns about increased competition and unemployment, and about the influx of migrants and commuters, on the one hand, and fears of being dominated by foreign capital on the other.

Spatial research and spatial planning must address the impacts of EU enlargement on the regions. Moreover, they must seek out these new partners and enter into dialogue with them, offer assistance and promote a genuine exchange of knowledge and experience.

It should be a matter of common interest to campaign for the adoption of a European spatial-development policy. One important aspect of this, particularly against the background of the enlarged EU, is the continued development of the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP). It is vital that those working in the field of spatial research should be involved in this process, and equally in the essential task of defining in more concrete terms just what is to be understood under the term "territorial cohesion".

Proving advice to politicians and planners: problems of knowledge transfer

Those involved both in fundamental and in applied research in the spatial sciences are charged with the task of raising awareness for the results of their work in society at large and of making them known and available to other scientific disciplines, to politicians and public officials, and to the general public. In view of the far-reaching significance and urgency of the challenges currently being faced, this transfer must be clearly targeted, it must be organised in an appropriate manner, and it must take place as early as possible.

However, making spatial processes accessible to politicians and to the general public is made all the more difficult by the high level of abstraction usually involved, and equally by the - in most cases - mid- to long-term orientation of both research in the spatial sciences and of spatial-planning measures. Indeed, the importance of the very concept of "space" as a structural entity and a dimension for target-setting has still not been grasped sufficiently clearly, despite the fact that such a diversity of human activities take place either in or in relationship to "space".

The diverse forms of advice

The forms and channels through which the advisory function for politicians and planners is discharged range from consultation with individual experts to either ad hoc or permanent commissions, and also to councils of experts. To take one example, specialist knowledge is sought in the context of parliamentary scrutiny in the preparation of new legislation and political strategies, and also prior to the adoption of new spatial-planning programmes and planning strategies. Research may, however, also be initiated for the purpose of acquiring material to support decision-making processes, for example on changes in demographics, on developments in transport and traffic, on regional policy or on climatic change. In addition to being specifically commissioned, the advisory function may be performed as a matter of more spontaneous initiative, for example by means of a publication in a research journal in the spatial sciences, in the form of a position paper, or through a meeting or conference targeting a specific topic.

Problems and misunderstandings

The process of providing advice to politicians and planners has always been prone to problems and misunderstandings. Politicians, on the one hand, are accused of calling in expert advice primarily in order to bolster their own position and gain influence; they use this advice, it is claimed, simply as an alibi. The charge levelled against the advice-givers is that they skilfully abuse their role in order to exert covert political influence. It is the experts, allegedly, who wield the real power. On top of this we hear the criticism that experts are brought in,

commissions set up and expert reports commissioned not for genuine material reasons, but in order to create the appearance that something is being done; similarly, politicians and planners are said far too often to call in expert advice simply as a matter of routine, which in turn has led to inflationary tendencies and the associated absence of the quality this advice needs to display.

It will hardly come as a surprise, on the other hand, that those recommendations from experts which do not provide backing for politicians and planners are rarely, or at best reluctantly, cited. A further subject for complaint is the supposed lack of independence or of competence on the part of experts and commissions, which may indeed occasionally be warranted. However, arguments of this kind are frequently voiced - either openly or wrapped up in other more acceptable objections - in cases where the specific expectations placed on this advice have obviously not been met. In such cases a different consultant is usually brought in without further delay.

These - and other - reservations can do nothing, however, to affect some fundamental truths. Firstly, the quality of the process of providing advice on planning policy and practice depends critically on the quality of the experts concerned and of their recommendations - but also on the quality of those receiving this advice. The manner in which the recipients of advice deal with research findings also reveals whether they themselves are capable of meeting the high standards associated with this advisory function.

Dwindling acceptance and growing resistance to advice

The effects attributable to the advice provided to support planning policy and practice usually become visible - at best - only with a very considerable delay. The reason for this is that it is only in extremely rare cases that it is possible to identify just what was the concrete impact of the advice contributed, and just what outcomes are to be put down to each player in the decision-making process. In most cases the tracks left by advisors and the recipients of the advice can no longer be distinguished.

In a world of increasing complexity, globalisation and internationalisation, one might expect to see an increase in the importance attached to the advice offered to support planning policy and practice. However, more recently advisors have begun to encounter a certain lack of enthusiasm with regard to the advice they offer on the part of the politicians and officials who are the recipients of this advice. So although the amount of advice being offered is on the increase in quantitative terms - never before have there been so many expert groups in existence as today - the importance attached to this advice is quite obviously on the decline.

One reason for this lies in the expansion over recent years of in-house research capacities working directly to politicians and planning authorities. Many ministries have also set up their own scientific advisory bodies. To be added

over and above formal consultation is the overwhelming deluge of information now available, which is growing constantly and which tends to diminish the acceptance which the official advisory function meets with in political and administrative circles. Brussels and Strasbourg alone churn out a seemingly endless flow of data and requirements for action. And increasingly frequently the response to this deluge is to raise the white flag in surrender. However, sorting through this wave of information and separating the wheat from the chaff would be precisely the kind of challenge that those who provide advice from the spatial sciences could usefully take up.

There is also another reason - over and above the general decline in acceptance - for the widely heard laments of resistance to advice and recommendations from the spatial sciences: except in the case of commissions dedicated to specific problems, politicians and planners are increasingly turning to private-sector companies for advice, even though in most cases this ends up being significantly more expensive.

For research in the spatial sciences, the effects of the decline in acceptance and the increasing resistance to advice are unfortunate in two distinct ways. Firstly, the very status of the discipline suffers when planning policy and planning practice cease to draw on expertise from the spatial sciences. This, in turn, blocks the transfer of knowledge to other policy areas and fields of activity of particular importance for spatial research. Such areas include environmental, fiscal and economic policy.

Is there an end to the crisis in sight?

Sooner or later spatial research as a source of advice to politicians and planners will come back into fashion. The reason for this confidence lies in the increasingly demanding challenges already facing spatial policy and spatial planning today (although possibly not yet in sufficient magnitude for their importance to be properly felt), and which in some regions will become even more explosive in the future and call for spatial-policy decisions to be made. Cases in point here are the growing conflicts over land use and the continuing "concreting over" of open space; urban sprawl, the carving up and pollution (including noise pollution) of landscapes, processes all impeding sustainable spatial development; changes in demographics, in particular ageing and migration; regional disparities; competition among regions (which did not begin with globalisation and internationalisation); and, finally, the generally uncertain prospects for the future.

What others do not have and cannot do?

It was the former chancellor of Austria Bruno Kreisky who made the much-cited remark: "Anyone who has visions ought to go and see a doctor." Nonetheless, supplying advice on possible futures is a special feature of - and challenge for - advice from spatial research. There are no clairvoyants; no-one can look into the future with any real certainty. But spatial research has to be able to draw the lessons from previous experience and from past mistakes,



to point these out to others, and from this to derive recommendations for political action and for practical action in planning. It is this orientation to the future that makes spatial research particularly suited to creating the foundations for forward-looking and sustainable spatial development.

Spatial research is able to place problems on the agenda today which society will not recognise as problems till tomorrow. In view of the challenges facing society now and in the future, this early-warning function will become more and more important. This is not simply a matter of spatial scientists being expected to develop solutions for an uncertain future. It is more that they are in a position to draw on a much greater stock of options if they do not have to keep coming up with solutions to yesterday's problems. A long-term perspective creates the space for flexibility in cases where a short-term approach would allow only for rash action and crisis management. Ad hoc accommodation to current pressures frequently destroys valuable resources and leads to ill-advised guidance being given.

Spatial research is concerned with natural resources - resources which are finite and in many cases non-reproducible. In this respect its tasks are very similar to those in public finance, where the scarce resource is money and capital - the difference being, however, that these are reproducible (apparently without limits). Even if people might be forgiven for thinking that the subject of sustainable development has recently gone off the boil - for the moment at least with other issues currently being perhaps more pressing in spatial-planning circles - and starting to feel thoroughly sick and tired of the phrase, it remains indisputable for any modern society that the concept of sustainable development is with us to stay. In the face of finite natural resources, we will be forced sooner or later to remodel both economic and spatial structure in accordance with the associated principles of good housekeeping.

The spatial sciences are eminently capable of supplying the substantive content needed to flesh out the topic of sustainable development. Sustainable spatial development is after all a complex process which can be achieved only through the integration of a number of distinct disciplines, i.e. within a common, interdisciplinary vision. In this respect, as far as its advisory function is concerned, spatial research holds a number of trump cards, which it should play without further delay. And the relevant players from the fields of planning policy and planning practice would be well advised to take full advantage of the contributions to their own work which spatial research has to offer.

Moreover, in focusing on both space and time, spatial research has within its field of vision two factors of key relevance to every single task relating to planning policy and planning practice, and equally to society and the economy in general. This is one of its major strengths, and one which it can bring into the equation in the context of its advice-giving function.

Transferring results - a targeted approach

And there is one further important point regarding the future of the advice-giving function. In future, spatial research should consider more carefully just what issues it should make the subject of its advice at specific stages in the advice-giving process. Not everything is in demand at the same time. In the recent past, the ARL (German Academy for Spatial Research and Planning) has been at its most successful in its involvement with planning policy and planning practice in the following subject areas: the need to establish a European spatial development policy; the use of environmental impact assessment in connection with plans and programmes; reaffirming the status of sustainability considerations in regional plans and state-level spatial structure plans; implementation of the EU water framework directive; and risk management by means of spatial planning.

Notwithstanding the obvious "systemic" difficulties and shortcomings in reaching the "outside world", the ARL's role of providing advice to politicians and public officials - and equally its broader public-relations role - has been progressively developed, systematically structured and improved. This has involved establishing a much more sharply defined profile regarding the manner in which the ARL presents itself externally, adopting a more targeted marketing strategy for the ARL's "products" (i.e. its various publications and events), systematically developing the Academy's institutional network in Germany and Europe, and extending existing strategic alliances with such important "multipliers" as geography teachers, journalists and politicians. It also includes participation in the network of spatial-research institutions in Germany and Europe, as is clearly demonstrated by the SPECTRA - PERSEUS project here in Bratislava.

In undertaking these measures, the Academy is also striving to make a contribution towards enhancing awareness of the importance of spatial planning among politicians, and of the role played by spatial planning, which in the circumstances we find ourselves in today can be expected to become more and more important. After all, spatial research and spatial planning are partners in the endeavour to secure sustainable development throughout the regions.

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