



ESSAY

Europeanization of local governments: $2 + 2 = 5$ or $2 + 2 = 3$

Mutual learning in a transnational network for local government managers and policy makers. Edge Cities Network as a case study

*Admission ESSAY Master of European Studies:
"Using examples from case studies, discuss the opportunities and limitations of
European cross-border cooperation"*

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Mutual learning in a transnational network for local government managers and policy makers. Edge Cities Network as a case study

"None of these nation states correspond to a natural geographic region or to a unity of a homogeneous population. They are all made up of a chaos of alliances, succession conflicts, annexations and wars. They all carry very great geographic, ethnic, economic and sociological differences. Nevertheless, these nation states do not only constitute an administrative unit but also a matri-patriotic unity because only the mythical and historical mortar can bind such a radical and diverse heterogeneity together." (Edgar Morin¹) [Author's own translation].

Late one afternoon; a Swede, a Dane and an Irishman are at a pavement café in the Place Luxembourg, Brussels, enjoying the last warmth of the autumn sun to tones provided by an elderly Turkish accordion player.

The mood around our table is enthusiastic. We have just concluded two days of successful meetings with civil servants and politicians from our European network of seven local governments working together and learning from each other.

The meetings were particularly successful this time in part because we had been able to benefit from our partnership with the Danish municipalities association, and perhaps even more importantly, with the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR) and their exquisite conference facilities including the indispensable interpreters. Specifically, this meant that all participants could enter the arena and express themselves under the same conditions for the first time.

¹ Edgar Morin, *Penser l'Europe* (Paris, Editions Gallimard, 1987). p.58

But is it at all possible to work together in a meaningful way having seven different perspectives? Does it really mean added value, or is it just words and intentions at best, and at worst a simple waste of time and energy? That afternoon in Brussels we felt no doubt that we could be positive and optimistic.

As the departing, current and next chair, the Irish, the Danes and the Swedes comprise the triumvirate or executive committee of the Edge Cities Network, a cooperative body for European integration on a local government level trying to turn European transnational collaboration into a 2+2=5 relationship.

Learning across borders

The network was formed in 1995 on the initiative of the densely populated London suburb of Croydon as a result of the local economy being seriously hit following the recession in the early 1990s. Croydon envisaged that collaboration with other similarly challenged cities would prove helpful. The network was formally launched in 1996. Those eligible to join were edge cities situated on the outskirts of European capitals and politically independent of the capital. These criteria still apply today. At its peak, the network covered 10 local authorities.

Today it has seven members² who work both across borders and transnationally. The network does not have any direct links with the EU, but according to the cooperation protocol the members must come from an EU member state or a country with which the EU has opened accession negotiations. There must also be only one suburb per capital city so as to keep it small and manageable.

Edge cities

The profiles of the network partners are all different, ranging from higher middle class to lower middle class areas depending on specific local realities, but each of them also reflecting the broader cultural and historical diversity constituting Europe.

One of them is Ballerup, 15 km from Copenhagen City. This is where I work as a local government officer.

² The Municipality of Getafe (edge of Madrid, Spain), the Municipality of Kifissia (edge of Athens, Greece), Nacka Kommun (edge of Stockholm, Sweden), Fingal County Council (edge of Dublin, Ireland), North Down Borough Council (edge of Belfast, Northern Ireland), the Municipality of Ballerup (edge of Copenhagen, Denmark), Grodzisk-Macowicz (edge of Warsaw, Poland).

But the partners also have similarities apart from the proximity to a nearby capital, the rapidly historical growth and lots of residential and business areas.

One of them is the awareness of growing competitiveness and market thinking at different levels. Thus a constant need for innovation, streamlining and improvement of the local public services.

Through the close collaboration at all levels between the members, the network constitutes therefore a privileged transnational platform for searching, sharing and producing knowledge about how to ensure excellence and best practice when it comes to framing the daily life of the European citizen.

Searching and sharing knowledge

The network has adopted the Lisbon Strategy as its prevailing principle. And under that common reference every aspect of the public services can be focused on as part of the collaboration. The presidency of the network runs for a year at a time and it is the responsibility of the president in office – after consultation with the other members - to introduce one or two new subjects for new mutual learning.

This is where the difficult bit begins. The question is what to search for and what to share when there are seven different national and local agendas, seven different administrative and political cultures and seven different ways of taking action at a local level.

But because the willingness to learn is there, we try to find a way and an answer to everybody wanting for instance to develop the local democracy or to get in touch with the youngsters or to Ireland wishing to learn more from its partners' city planning experiences of building sustainable housing areas; to Spain wanting to compare notes on the policies for integration and immigration; to Denmark seeking knowledge about decentralizing part of the budget for local self-determination; to Sweden finding interesting the strategy for creating a strong and well-structured relationship between police, schools and social services to prevent crime and keep an eye on young potential criminals; to Northern Ireland and Greece wishing to focus on economic development, and to Poland having a more general interest in learning whatever it can from the new western partners.

Producing knowledge

The network is also producing new knowledge by running joint projects. Most of these are carried out with financial support from the EU.

But the collaboration does not succeed every time. Talking about the general enthusiasm for the just finished biannual meetings, the three of us sitting in Place Luxembourg had to admit there was also a fly in the ointment. Denmark had found it necessary to put an end to the network's effort of setting up a common bid for the EU Public Health Programme.

This stemmed from the fact that, in conjunction with the upcoming Danish presidency, Ballerup had desired to lead the way and take charge of a new joint project. We chose to address a rather complex issue: social inequalities in health. The municipalities in Denmark had to bring a sharper focus on health, better lifestyle and preventive healthcare following the implementation of a comprehensive structural reform of the local government and county system. And as a local level actor we were looking for effective multi-disciplinary measures and methodologies to ensure that lifestyle-related health programmes also could reach and include the most vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups.

So Ballerup arranged a seminar called 'Strategies and new methods to combat social inequalities in health' with the participation of the interested partners. We had also invited a Danish professor and other Danish academics from university public health departments to provide some facts about the issue as a common base on which to work from.

But at the meeting it became very clear that the reality in the various partner countries was extremely different and that it would be very difficult to find a common ground.

In the words of the Danish professor invited to the seminar: "Different countries have different problems in translating wealth into health."

Sweden and Spain were more in favour of a combined and broader social and health project, Sweden focusing mainly on the self-destructive behaviour of young girls and Spain being more open to different social groups and their specific problems, while Ireland, Poland and Denmark were more disposed to stick to the original issue of combating social inequalities in health.

Then some of the original stances took on a more prominent role at the next meeting in Spain because neither Poland nor Ireland took part and had more or less decided not to continue with the initiative. To the Danes this meant that the project was moving away from a decided

focus on health towards a more social focus as preferred by Spain and Sweden.

As the lead partner in this matter, Denmark went back to the home organisation to see if it was possible to adapt the Danish approach to suit the more socially-oriented direction desired by the other partners. Local cross-sectoral meetings were then set up but unfortunately it was not possible to find any new project possibilities. We had to give up and the attempts to achieve a common project had to be abandoned.

The questions we need to ask, then, are: Did we try hard enough to understand each other's perspective? Did we really understand what was at stake in the different partner communities? Did we 'miss' each other because we simply did not understand one another's way of expressing ourselves and failed to understand each other's cultural and structural contexts? Did the path to compromise become too long in comparison with the prospective outcome? Were the professionals brought together by the different partners the right ones? Was it all just a waste of time – a pure case of a $2+2=3$ situation or did we learn anything from our investigations?

It was not a complete waste of time. The Spanish representatives, for example, found it very stimulating that a group of professionals sat down and thought through things together. They also adopted the method back home and have now started to try and find a common cross-sectoral focus within their daily work in the municipality.

The Danish participants say that, even if it was made clear that no project applications should be made immediately, the mere collaboration provoked a curiosity to find out more about the partners and to examine how and what we can learn from each other.

So even if everyone is willing, finding common ground is not always so obvious. But in this case, it seems as if there are good opportunities for establishing a simple working group to exchange experiences at a later date.

Perspectives

The creation and the further development of the Edge Cities Network can be seen as an answer to a need felt by local governments in a new competitive situation.

As a policy maker and a service provider, public sector administration constantly has to develop the best-practice methods both in relation to

the citizens and in relation to running the organization. The local authority has to be able to attract well-qualified staff, innovative businesses, resourceful citizens and future oriented educational establishments at the same time as providing competitive municipal services.

But the local governments are also actors in the European integration process and thus also participants in the process that must ensure the success of the Lisbon Strategy to in turn ensure the European economic future.

For this to happen, inspiration, different experiences and knowledge can be collected and transferred in the trans-European collaboration with other local authorities.

Despite this, some local government officers and politicians question if the Edge Cities Network does any good and if it has produced any concrete results.

One answer from the deputy mayor of Getafe, Spain is that the European collaboration has made the different departments in their local administration coordinate much more with each other than before, thus adopting a new kind of administration practice. He hopes that the elected members of the network will have much closer relations in the future and that they can end up working as a kind of lobby organisation for local authorities.

Another answer from a councillor in Fingal, Ireland, with a connection to the Edge Cities Network going back many years is that the network was their first point of contact with Europe and their original motivation for becoming a member was the opportunity to be able to collaborate bilaterally with Northern Ireland under the umbrella of both parties being an Edge Cities Network partner. Having said that, the councillor also adds that Fingal has benefited from the partnership, especially in the spatial planning, educational and waste management areas and that it would be advantageous for the network to have a common Secretary-General with roots in one of the partner municipalities to ensure a faster development.

The Ballerup chief executive feels that the network is a good long-term collaboration structure, but he also feels that if the collaboration is to make a real difference, it will need to have a higher and broader level of activity, with or without support from the EU.

So, clearly a set of positive assessments and also a desire to see the network develop.

The challenge is to ensure that the value of the efforts flows back into all parts of the local organizations, so that the insights and the ideas accessed via the network will be adapted into the specific local context.

Conclusion

To answer the initially posed question of whether the trans-European network collaboration is always a win-win situation or if it is sometimes a $2+2=3$ situation, one has to say that if a local community wants to be an active player in the future Europe, it has to forge its own role and demonstrate both a desire and an ability to learn.

In 1900 Europe represented about one third of the world's population. In 2050 a prediction is that Europe's population will be only 4% of the total world population – unquestionably an unsettling prospect.

So if Europe is to enjoy a reasonable level of success, all the actors in the picture, including the local governments, must ensure that the collaboration concludes in a win-win situation, in one way or another. $2+2$ *has* to equal 5.

And, as this case study shows, with the increasing participation of not only civil servants but also of political actors in the trans-European collaboration, local policy making is already on its way to become directly affected by Europeanization.

So even if it can sometimes seem difficult to overcome the lack of homogeneity and to find the unity of the diversity, the European integration has also hit the local governments as a new reality.

Postscript

It is time to go our different ways; the sun has set and the evening air soon takes on a chill. Meeting together was again really beneficial and fills you with renewed energy and inspiration. That was that day; and that is what so many other days are like when we meet for transnational European learning.