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The integrating role of regional spatial planning: five mechanisms of policy integration

Policy integration is considered an essential condition for constructing a more sustainable society, but proponents of sustainable development differ in their views about what is to be integrated, what is to be developed, how to link environment and development, and for how long a time. Regional spatial planning has been a locus of attempts to resolve these differences and realise policy integration, but its mechanisms to achieve this remain less explored. This study sets out to meet three objectives as follows: (1) to identify, through a systematic literature review, a broad set of mechanisms by which (regional) spatial planning realises joined-up policy making; (2) to illustrate the identified mechanisms in two distinct spatial planning systems, Germany and England; and (3) to generate insights into factors that contribute to, and confine, the identified mechanisms. The findings identify five integrating mechanisms of spatial planning that could inform plan making, analysis and monitoring and provide lessons about the potential and constraints of these mechanisms in different social, institutional and political contexts.

Keywords: policy integration, regional spatial planning, mechanisms, England, Germany

Introduction

Sustainable development as a concept has broad appeal but little specificity, although the combination of development and environment as well as equity is found in many attempts to describe it (Parris and Kates, 2003). Policy integration or coherence is considered an essential condition for constructing a more sustainable society (Van Assche and Djanibekov, 2012; Horan, 2020) but proponents of sustainable development differ in their views about what is to be integrated, what is to be developed, how to link environment and development and for how long a time (Parris and Kates, 2003). One of earliest applications of the term ‘policy integration’ by Self (1964) precedes the 1987 official birth of the sustainable-development concept. Self (1964) identifies such differences around ‘what’, ‘how’, and ‘for how long’ aspects with respect to attempts at policy integration that existed within the mainly economic and social dimensions of integration at that time and highlights the potential role of regional

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planning in helping to resolve these differences. This framing role of regional planning in achieving policy integration was strengthened after the environmental aspect of integration came to the fore with the sustainability discourse (Wannop, 2014). This meant that regional planning needed to change in terms of its scope, methods and institutions (Cullingworth and Nadin, 2006) in order to embrace this new focus.

As Geerlings and Stead (2003) argue, the new meaning of policy integration involves the same goals of sustainable development to formulate policy across all domains. In Europe, this broadened view of integration was an important drive behind the emergence of strategic ‘spatial’ planning (Albrechts et al., 2003) – a new planning approach whose precise meaning and definition remain difficult to pin down (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 2010; Van Assche et al., 2020). This conceptual elusiveness relates to the application of the term in various planning contexts from the Netherlands (Faludi, 2000), Denmark (Galland, 2012), the UK (Haughton et al., 2010), France (Demazière and Serrano, 2017) and Germany (Blotvogel et al., 2014), as well as subsequent applications of the term in the USA (Bryson and Shively Slotterback, 2017) and China (Wang and Shen, 2016). All these applications, however, have a scalar focus on the regional or provincial level and are marked by breaking away from a traditional focus on land or place towards a broader conception of planning for space. Taylor’s (1999) exemplification of the distinction between place and space helps in understanding spatial planning in terms of a three dimensional exercise – intersectoral, vertical and interterritorial.

Regional spatial planning also takes different expressions in different planning systems (Faludi, 2000). Studies that analyse the integrating performance of spatial planning therefore tend to apply specific criteria depending on spatial-planning configurations (Gustafsson et al., 2019). This constraint on transferrable evaluation criteria needs to be addressed to boost comparative learning in spatial planning that ‘seems to be constantly reoriented in terms of its purposes and reasoning’ (Galland, 2012, 1359). The present study aims to address this gap by meeting three objectives:

- 1 to identify, through a systematic literature review, a broad set of mechanisms by which (regional) spatial planning realises joined-up policy making;
- 2 to illustrate the identified mechanisms in two relevant but distinct spatial-planning systems; and
- 3 to generate insights into factors that contribute to, and constrain, the identified mechanisms.

Regional spatial planning for policy integration

Our view of spatial planning

In a literature review commissioned by the UK Department of Communities and Local Government on the role and scope of spatial planning, Nadin (2006, 3) notes that spatial planning aims ‘to put planning at the centre of the spatial development process, not just

as a regulator of land and property uses but as a proactive and strategic coordinator of all policy and actions that influence spatial development'. This review was published two years after England had created a statutory system of regional spatial planning at the heart of its new spatial-planning turn. This system stimulated and worked alongside some emerging voluntary spatial plans prepared for functional economic geographies to overcome limitations in interterritorial integration of housing, transportation and employment. The statutory system of spatial planning was, however, abolished when the Labour administration was not re-elected in 2010. Concepts of 'soft space' and 'fuzzy boundaries' were initially developed to explain a later version of spatial planning (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010) beyond the earlier statutory one. Independent enquiry by the UK2070 Commission highlights the environmental and equity losses caused by abolishing these plans and calls for new forms of statutory national, regional and strategic spatial plans in England (UK2070 Commission, 2020).

Beyond the UK, Germany is known as the motherland of comprehensive spatial planning, based on the recognition that the integration of development, environment and equity requires a statutory apparatus that is, however, aided by informal instruments in overcoming its constraints in such fields as the relationship between metropolitan spaces and rural regions, or demographic change (Blotevogel et al., 2014). Elsewhere, there are examples where soft-space planning is the only spatial planning at the regional level. In Sweden, in the absence of formal means of regional-level planning, voluntary dialogues between municipalities for creating 'structural images' are one example of a sole focus on knowledge and trust building to achieve policy integration (Pettersson and Frisk, 2016). While soft-space planning is considered to contribute to policy integration by creating new thinking and enabling stakeholder engagement (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2008), Healey (2013) and Othengrafhen et al. (2015) suggest that, due to its limitations in sectoral scope, transparency, accountability and implementation, soft-space planning is primarily intended to work alongside, and augment, statutory spatial planning chiefly at sub-regional levels. Therefore, this view of spatial planning involves a statutory system that draws on the possibilities of soft-space planning – as seen today in Germany and in England during the period from 2004 to 2010. We are therefore keen on exploring mechanisms that regional spatial planning can use for policy integration.

Integrating mechanisms of regional spatial planning

Our first task was to identify, through systematic literature review, a set of mechanisms by which regional spatial planning might realise its policy integration role. This involved two major phases of peer-reviewed reference search. The first was exploratory and used general search words such as 'spatial planning and policy integration' and 'how spatial planning integrates policies'. The second phase mined more specialised

literature and applied a networking/snowballing method, including postings on professional Web and social media platforms and direct conversations with other experts in the field. The outcome was the identification of five suggested mechanisms for policy integration that operate during regional spatial-planning processes. These are each explained below, although it is recognised that there are inevitably some potential connections and overlaps between them.

Forced (mutual) learning

Mutual learning lies at the centre of Habermas's communicative action (Healey, 1993). However, critiques of the notion of 'ideal speech' note the challenges of realising this potential between actors with opposed perspectives and power differentials (Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). Besides, Wallihan (1998) observes that there are situations in which parties only 'appear' to negotiate. Larsson (2014, 3) therefore refers to the formalisation of collaboration through regulation as akin to 'eating spinach': 'no one is against it in principle because it is good for you'.

Plan making is a 'negotiation-forcing' event (Watkins, 1998). It imposes regulated interaction in geographical proximity between adversaries for their production of a certain type of spatial-policy framework (Stead and Meijers, 2009). As Wolsink (2003, 720) notes, in this context 'actors are forced to listen to each other. Eventually, they might even learn something'. Indeed, such mutual learning is the outcome of 'non-cooperative adversaries' stranded in the assertive exchange of spatial views so that their pursuit of a way out of this situation drives the focus of discourses towards innovative propositions with which every side is content (Raiffa et al., 2007). In this 'learning under pressure', attention moves from frictional negotiation to a better comprehension of the speaker's core values and bendable objectives (Fells, 2009). The exercise therefore leads to the 'forced' learning of new policy avenues that can produce similar outputs for each side but be better joined up with other objectives.

Without such a formal context as spatial planning, adversarial negotiations are less likely to last long enough to reach this learning threshold (Raiffa, 1994). Conflict might result in the exploration of new policy interfaces because the hardship of continuing that way, on the one hand, and leaving that situation, on the other hand, drive reconciliation curiosity – for example, in terms of how heritage conservation, social regeneration and construction growth might be co-accommodated in the transfer of development rights (Renard, 2007). Campbell's (1996) triangle of contradictory goals indicates that attempts to stand at the centre of the triangle are feasible through such mutual learning of new policy linkages: 'it is being socially constructed through a sustained period of conflict negotiation ... This is a process of innovation, not of ... converting the nonbelievers' (Campbell, 1996, 302).

(Voluntary and involuntary) concession

Interpersonal relationships and trust that are developed between some actors over several years of plan-making interaction might sometimes enable unilateral adjustments to be made under free will (Laurian, 2009). Such voluntary concession in spatial planning might particularly flourish in soft-space exercises with more reversible implications, but can equally rest on continuity in statutory spatial-planning systems (Metz et al., 2020). Voluntary concession might also be made by those who seriously want 'to get things going' by allowing acceptable gain for some partners in the planning process to enable easy completion of the document in which they have overarching interests (Ringli, 2003; Fells, 2009). Stakeholders who have fundamental associations with spatial planning, such as social and environmental interests, might make such concessions. In contexts such as England and the Netherlands, with consumer/developer preferences for countryside housing development, these concessions can take place to prevent easing of residential development control in rural areas during plan-making deadlocks. A notable example of retreat from strict compact development, which might appear worthwhile to environmental stakeholders, is pseudo-countryside. Pseudo-countryside is a residential environment with the characteristics of the countryside but not located in the countryside (Heins et al., 2004), which becomes a compromise between spatial-planning goals and market preferences for rural housing. A different expression of concession takes place when unequal power in plan-making relationships leads to an agreement that some parties are unhappy with but are bullied into agreeing by more powerful actors (Gunder and Hillier, 2009). However, such reluctant concession hinders prospects of longer-term integration on a voluntary basis through negative experiences of previous cooperation and a lack of trust in other organisations (Stead and Meijers, 2009).

De-sharpening of policies

With a regulated process, spatial planning involves iterative consultation, feedback and revision until the final document is published (De Roo, 2012). Thus 'proposals ... should be open to discussion and may be recast several times by repeating earlier steps of the planning process before a firm choice is made' (FAO, 2008). As a consequence, at every iteration, the amended policies may lose some of their sharp edges in response to consultation feedback and, as the process goes forward, the resulting policies become less distinctive and more integrated (Helling, 1998). This can help policy makers gain a better view of possible outcomes in linked policy areas and establish dialogue on coherent policies to address interrelated gaps in sustainability (Horan, 2020). However, this hybridity and intersectoral blurring imply that policies could lose properties that are essential for implementing sustainable changes (Lowe et al., 2018). Where such de-sharpening sheds many policy edges or details to the extent that the

plan has little, if anything, to say about a particular field, a subsequent re-sharpening might occur to fill the vacuum (Moss, 2008). This could be driven by stronger interests or those concerned about the implications of local discretion. Re-sharpening could also be undertaken by policy actors in their subsequent proceedings, allowing them to promote their favoured individual policies via their interpretation of what is now an overly vague/generalised spatial plan (Olesen, 2012). Sometimes, however, re-sharpening might take place through legal routes of case clarification where spatial-planning objectives are broadly defined (Van Rij and Korthals Altes, 2010).

Exchange certainty

The integration of policies supported by all interests is not always feasible and there is often a need for more complicated solutions involving compromise (Kidd et al., 2020). Compromise – that is, settlement via the adjustment of particular interests – can take place under an exchange apparatus (Ziafati Bafarasat and Pugalís, 2020). By indicating ‘who gets what, when and how’ (Neuman, 1998, 215), a spatial plan provides certainty about the structure of long-term relationships so that, with the help of professional mediators, and the relative equalisation of the status of organisations involved, interests can be exchanged informally with the expectation of return in the future or in other domains (Stead and Meijers, 2009). In the light of the latter, termed ‘diffuse reciprocity’ by Schmidt (1995), the former may be regarded as ‘longitudinal reciprocity’. Spatial plans provide a reliable institutional memory for stakeholders to keep a record of when, and to whom, privileges have been made and to mutually control the approximate reciprocity of measures and their balance over a longer period (Heritier, 1996). This exchange certainty reconciles policy integration with political and economic considerations that might otherwise drive parochialism and departmentalism. Meanwhile, it is important that interest exchange be accompanied by mutual learning, otherwise, if the possible policy interfaces have not been fully explored, some actors might resort to a deliberate misrepresentation strategy – pretending that they have opposed views that they have set aside to gain advantage on other issues (O’Connor and Carnevale, 1997).

Diversions of criticisms

There is, in the accountability literature, indication that some accountability mechanisms can be counterproductive for integrative policies (Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen et al., 2018). Immunising political defences like scapegoating and creating a denigrated ‘other’, such as national government, can help local policy makers in dealing with community feelings against regional integration of objectives in housing, waste or water management (Haughton et al., 2010). This diversion of criticisms is assisted

by the multi-scalar and broad scope of spatial planning on a statutory platform and makes stronger contributions to policy integration where the local policy makers unify their objectives at the regional level but do not have the capacity or desire to engage in local advocacy of the strategic objective (Miller and Schames, 2000). Policy making for smaller scales and focused domains is more likely to resort to diversion of criticisms as local communities and interests are often more homogeneous and perceived adverse strategic policy integration becomes less justifiable at these scales and a community's dissatisfaction with an outcome blamed on an often less vulnerable and all-encompassing scapegoat, notably central government, is deemed more acceptable than if associated with their direct democratic representatives (Haughton et al., 2010).

Spatial planning is conducted through a formal hierarchy of plans to ensure the incorporation of strategic interests that are less favoured at lower scales (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2015). This principle can be exploited by lower-tier policy makers to claim that their hands are tied and therefore reflect their decisions as inevitable. In this situation, unpopular developments or policies could be adopted in integration with other sectors, territories and levels as local government depicts them as a *fait accompli*, and the community is deprived of the opportunity to challenge them and seek alternatives (Palermo and Ponzini, 2010).

The five integrating mechanisms identified above originally emerged from theoretical literature analysis primarily involving normative sources, conceptual argumentations and broad observations involving a theoretical perspective. We then selected England and Germany as the contexts for our subsequent review of more empirically based literature to further explore the proposed integrating mechanisms for two reasons. First, as mentioned earlier, spatial planning in its birthplace of Germany and within the 2004–2010 period in England closely corresponds to our conception of spatial planning. Second, the selection of Germany and England encompasses political, institutional and legal diversities which could enrich the outcomes reported in relation to potential issues and variables that contribute to, or constrain, the identified integrating mechanisms. Third, the authors' extensive previous empirical research on regional spatial planning in both contexts aided analysis and helped generate further insights.

Drawing on the literature review process and steps in Paré and Kitsiou (2016) and Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2015), we used three complementary paths in our literature search for relevant empirical case studies of regional spatial planning in England and Germany: first, a personal insight path which drew on our own previous case studies in these contexts; second, a network path which involved research network inquiries on ResearchGate, Academia.edu and LinkedIn; and, third, a Web search path which resulted in the exploration of a broader spectrum of studies that, in some instances, required deeper analytical engagement.

How the integrating mechanisms worked in the English context

Overview of regional spatial planning in England

Attempts at regional planning in England have had a long, but generally unrealised, history as they never became embedded in a way that was universally supported by all political parties and governments and were thus liable to subsequent abolition. During the 1990s, pressures from sustainable-development discourses and business voices that were unhappy with local political opposition to new housing resulted in the introduction of regional planning guidance (RPG), issued by the Secretary of State following advice from regional conferences of local authorities in each of the English regions (Pearce and Ayres, 2006). These initial versions of RPG had limited scope but they paved the way for a gradual enhancement of subsequent ones (Baker, 1998) and then for more significant strengthening of regional planning under the Labour governments of the late 1990s and the 2000s (Swain et al., 2013).

The reforms introduced by the Labour administration (elected in 1997) led to a strengthening of the process (e.g. the introduction of formal ‘examination-in-public’) and broadening of the scope of RPG, partly in pursuit of the government’s first strategy for sustainable development (*A Better Quality of Life* – DETR, 1999). Following the 1998 establishment of regional assemblies, consisting of local government and representatives of other stakeholder interests in each region to undertake the preparation of enhanced RPG, the most significant changes occurred as part of the government’s widespread planning reforms of the early 2000, culminating in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. The primary legislative changes meant that, for the first time, regional planning, in the form of new regional spatial strategies (RSSs), had the same legal status as development plans prepared by local authorities (Morphet, 2011). The RSSs provided a framework for the subsequent introduction of regional funding allocations based on stakeholder advice (Baden and Swain, 2013). This would help implement RSSs’ integrative framework covering a broad range of fields, although employment policies remained under the steering of parallel regional economic strategies (RESs) prepared by regional development agencies (RDAs) (Pearce and Ayres, 2009).

Partly as an attempt to bridge this gap between regional spatial and economic strategies, moves to replace regional assemblies with regional leaders’ boards and introduce a single integrated regional strategy to be prepared by the RDA in conjunction with the leaders’ boards were put in place towards the end of the Labour administration in 2009. But they did not prevail as the incoming Conservative-led coalition government in May 2010 rapidly moved to abolish all of these regional strategies and institutions, including central government’s own Government Offices for the Regions as well as the RDAs. Since a regional level of spatial planning has been in abeyance

from 2010, for the English context we have predominantly focused our attention on the earlier phase of regional planning guidance/regional spatial strategy preparation in considering the previously identified mechanisms of integration.

Analysis of the mechanisms of integration in England

Forced (mutual) learning

The emergence of multipurpose uses and diverse locations of regional parks in the North West region of England provides a good example of forced learning of layering in the spatial-planning process. The projects started with a sectoral focus. The RDA announced its intention to support regional parks at highway junctions around metropolitan areas so that their recreational functions could support its inward-investment sites. As the parks became subject to regional spatial planning, there was an initial friction between the regional assembly (which argued the recreational function of regional parks should primarily contribute to holistic regeneration of de-investment areas) and the RDA. In the course of their planning engagement, the two organisations jointly commissioned consultants for a regional park resources study (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016c), which involved holding two stakeholder workshops about the concept of regional parks and their applications in the region and an examination of the policy framework in the emerging plan and regional park proposals (NWRA, 2004). The study concluded that regional parks should integrate economic, social and environmental objectives and this should be reflected in the location, size, management and activities of regional parks. Drawing on the study and associated workshops, stakeholders built consensus around nine regional-park initiatives in the North West that would support major marketing points for inward investment in the region and contribute to the holistic regeneration of de-investment areas (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016c).

Exploring the linkages between regional spatial planning and the health sector was more complex in the North West. From an initial core group, it was soon realised that effective integration in this area requires many other stakeholders to be involved. For example, on the health side, contributions from the strategic health authorities in the region were considered essential, including staff engaged in broad public-health matters and those involved in NHS estate management. Equally, it was evident that health advisers from the Environment Agency could also offer helpful perspectives and many of the issues being discussed fell within the remit of local-authority environmental-health officers (Kidd, 2007). Thus a gradually increasing network of stakeholders emerged. Trying to engage all these stakeholders in the RSS workshops proved difficult. The tightly defined timetables and intensely procedural nature of RSS production did not help in the integration of this specialised field, although stakeholders were keen on exploring policy connections to overcome their differences.

Exchange certainty

The cross-national West Cheshire/North East Wales Sub-regional Spatial Strategy (Cheshire County Council, 2006) involved housing oversupply on the Welsh side of the border to cater for English demand that could not be met locally due to green-belt restrictions. It was also associated with rail link improvements within the functional sub-region (e.g. potential electrification of part of the Wrexham–Bidston line and Shotton Chord) and the development of a cross-border cluster of economic activities (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016a). This innovative deal was initially set out in an informal spatial plan to avoid public examination exercises that could sensitise nationalist voices on the Welsh side to English immigration. The deal was, however, seeded by the North West RSS and the Wales Spatial Plan – both statutory documents which subsequently incorporated the resultant priorities of the initiative (Haughton et al., 2010). A similar tactic was used in the case of Urban South Hampshire Sub-regional Strategy, seeded in the draft South East RSS. Major new housing was at the center of interest exchanges between local authorities, with the assumption that it would act as a catalyst for infrastructure investment and maximisation of funding opportunities from public-sector agencies and through central government regional funding allocations (Riddell, 2013).

In the course of providing the first-round advice by stakeholders to central government on regional funding allocations, the RSS in the North West (which had a formal horizon to 2021) provided a longitudinal exchange context for transport projects. A deal was agreed between local-authority groupings, whereby some would be winners in the first-round advice (2006) and others would have more projects incorporated in the second round (2009), while Greater Manchester and Liverpool City Region would have schemes in both rounds. Therefore, in the first round, the region submitted two lists of transport projects: a main one and an indicative one for the second round. Cumbria had four projects in the main list and none in the indicative list, Cheshire had one project in the main list and four in the indicative list, and Lancashire had five projects in the main list and none in the indicative list (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016b).

Concessions

In regional planning for the South East, there was clearly opposition to housing growth in some parts of the region. The argument of the majority of local authorities was that any future housing needed to be accompanied by investment in infrastructure to support sustainable growth. However, the definition of what was ‘sustainable’ was contested across the region, across the political divide and across a range of stakeholders, highlighting, for example, such objectives as affordable housing within sustainable development (Riddell, 2013). At the start of the process, the assembly secretariat set out to develop the technical evidence base without the interference of politics and was encouraged by the Government Office for the South East to set

the bar for new housing at a technically realistic, but politically high, level. As the process went on, however, the stakeholder group increasingly acknowledged the importance of politics and stepped back from interfering in the debate around distribution, feeling that it had influenced in some part the overall provision proposed in the draft plan. Coalescing views around housing provision in the South East RSS was therefore due to the fact that housing numbers were developed largely by the local authorities themselves in the light of concessions made by other stakeholders who wanted the plan to be finalised as soon as possible within this prosperous region with an 'anti-housing' dilemma (Riddell, 2013). In the North West, however, there were rather reluctant concessions made in the light of significant power differentials in a fragmented geography of thriving metropolises and rural peripheries. Housing requirements were subsequently seen in rural Cumbria as a top-down imposition based on the metropolitan regeneration priorities that did not accord with their local circumstances and curbed their visitor economy potential. This led local councils in this sub-region to be less inclined to support subsequent informal attempts at regional policy making (Ziafati Bafarasat and Baker, 2016).

Diversion of criticisms

Sustainable waste management involved the provision of inevitably unpopular waste disposal facilities serving wider than single-authority areas, and ensuring greater waste self-sufficiency in the big urban areas. As with other types of bad-neighbour and unpopular development, regional planning gave local politicians in the South East and South West of England someone else to blame for these unpopular decisions (Payne and Reid, 2013). Diversion of criticisms was more effective when unpopular policy decisions were added, post-draft, in response to the Secretary of State's proposed changes. In the South West, there was a considerable increase in housing numbers between the submitted draft plan and the subsequent proposed changes, mainly related to housing numbers in South Bristol, around Gloucester/Cheltenham and to the west of Bournemouth/Poole. In each case, the proposed changes made clear that urban extensions were the most sustainable solution and hence justified changes to the general extent of the green belt in these locations. Although the perception of some individual local authorities was that they were then left with the task of substantiating these higher housing numbers, as well as providing the detailed evidence for unpopular green-belt boundary changes in their own local development framework, the role of central government became highly visible to communities in the post-draft regional-plan dynamics, paving the way for these proceedings (Baden and Swain, 2013). In the East of England, on the other hand, the government directed the regional assembly to add 478,000 new housing units by 2021 and the final regional plan was released in May 2008 with higher housing targets than those in the draft plan. However, civic criticisms

nevertheless fell on regional planning rather than central government directives (Hager, 2012).

In the East of England, the centrally formulated target was a poor fit for the demographic and infrastructural realities of the region, indicating that the mechanism of diversion of criticisms could sometimes contribute to the distorted insertion or prioritisation of particular approaches masked as integration (Haughton et al., 2010). Local politicians sometimes blamed regional plans when taking controversial development control decisions, for example on the accommodation needs of gypsies, travellers and travelling showpeople (Swain et al., 2013). In the North West, this mechanism was resorted to more often within such discourses as ‘our hands are tied’, resulting in mixed community reactions within consultation responses to regional planning, ranging from detachment from the process on the one hand to a simple acceptance of the argument on the other (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2014).

De-sharpening of policies

During the examination in public of East Midlands RSS in 2007 there was considerable debate between the RDA and the Environment Agency over the scale of housing growth in coastal Lincolnshire. Coastal Lincolnshire had experienced strong population growth for a number of years, particularly of older people, and this was reflected in the 2003- and 2004-based household projections. The RDA argued that the projected scale of growth should be planned for, as it was consistent with the economic modelling that had underpinned development of the RES. The Environment Agency, however, was concerned that perpetuating high levels of growth near the coast would put more people at risk of serious flooding, particularly in view of predicted sea level rise and the long-term costs of maintaining flood defences. After several rounds of discussions, the regional planning body opted for a more cautious approach to development than the projections would suggest, based on longer-term (ten-year rather than five-year) migration trends. However, this pleased neither the RDA nor the Environment Agency, which did not agree to de-sharpen their policies to allow for the emergence of an in-between resolution (Pritchard, 2013). One explanation for the complication of de-sharpening in this example is that the full-scale engagement of these organisations began rather late in the planning process with a site-specific focus as opposed to front-loading more abstract sectoral policy debates which might have reduced the possibility of adopting such inflexible positions (Baker et al., 2010). This argument is evidenced by the experience of the North West region in relation to regional parks. Indeed, the RDA, the Environment Agency, the Regional Assembly and other stakeholders departed from their initial sharp policies of regional parks as ‘business parks’, ‘nature improvement projects’ and ‘urban containment and recreation opportunities’ before they began discussions about the number, location, size, management and specific activities of these projects (Ziafati Bafarasat, 2016c).

How the integrating mechanisms worked in the German context

Overview of regional spatial planning in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany consists of sixteen federal states. Twelve of these states are subdivided into planning regions. Due to their size, the city states of Berlin, Hamburg and Bremen and the small state of the Saarland are not further divided into planning regions. The state level has legislative and technical functions for spatial as well as sectoral planning. Statutory spatial planning also takes place in subdivisions of the states, i.e. the regions. The law nevertheless leaves the organisation of regional planning to the states (ROG §13 Section 1). This results in a wide variety of organisational forms with regard to the size of the planning regions and with regard to the state and municipal disposition of regional planning (Pahl-Weber and Henckel, 2008). However, due to an increasing awareness of the social and ecological aspects of planning (Blotevogel and Schelhaas, 2011), sustainability then became the overall guideline of spatial planning, which has been anchored in legislation since the Planning Act amendment in 1998 (Growe and Freytag, 2019). The last decades have been characterised through a gain of importance of informal planning tools. Formal instruments of planning are still important, although they are rarely noticed by the public (Münter and Reimer, 2020).

Today, regional plans as comprehensive plans have to include aims for at least three of the following topics: the future settlement structure, the future structure of open spaces and future infrastructure locations and networks (Schmidt 2009). These topics are explicitly mentioned in the Federal Spatial Planning Act (ROG §13). Furthermore, aims developed in sectoral planning, for example in environmental and landscape planning as well as in federal and state infrastructure plans with regard to energy and transportation, have to be included in the regional plans after a process of weighing the aims of environmental and landscape planning with those of regional planning as comprehensive planning. The inclusion of environmental and landscape planning aims in regional plans is necessary as environmental and landscape planning does not produce legally binding plans whereas regional plans are binding on the government. The outputs of environmental and landscape planning only become legally binding arrangements if they are included in regional plans (Kühnau, 2016).

Analysis of the mechanisms of integration in Germany

Forced (mutual) learning

In regional planning in Germany, communication processes are organised throughout the exercise, from the statutory hearing of public institutions to topic-specific round tables, either to generate new ideas or to increase acceptance of existing ideas (Jacob

and Kannen, 2015). In some cases, the requirement on stakeholders to arrive at a collective spatial framework drives them toward innovative modes of negotiation before the formal planning exercise in order to identify policy integration in a more relaxed setting. For example, the Rhine–Neckar region involves marked stakeholder divisions about perceptions of green and open spaces and their potential future uses (Wagner et al., 2019). In the context of forthcoming regional plans, a number of large workshops (up to 100 participants) were organised from spring 2019 to identify green and open spaces. Stakeholders from water management, tourism, forestry, agriculture and urban areas are involved in the process to exchange views and influence the future. By discussing views with other stakeholders, the views and understanding of each actor can change within the process. This is part of the *Landschaftskonzept 2020+* (Landscape Concept 2020+) project, funded as a model initiative by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development, which aims to combine formal and informal instruments. *Landscape Concept 2020+* in Rhine–Neckar, which involves four modules of structured negotiation, serves as a consensus-building platform for the subsequent preparation of the formal regional plan (BBSR, 2019). Work on the *Landscape Concept 2020+* is still under way, but early indications of mutual learning herald a more straightforward weighing process in the subsequent updating of the Uniform Regional Plan Rhine–Neckar. For example, the development of multifunctional green spaces is highlighted as a potential solution to satisfy the spatial requests of tourism and agriculture, especially wine growing, as well as limiting agricultural use and settlement development to protect groundwater formation in a vulnerable region in the context of climate change.

Meanwhile, the experience of regional planning in Germany indicates that mutual learning of layering needs time and expert mediation. A good example for such learning over several years through the interplay between actors representing different territorial views, e.g. actors from rural and urban areas, is the introduction of the concept of metropolitan regions in national spatial models (Growe, 2009; Harrison and Growe, 2014a). The idea of metropolitan regions as a potential category in regional planning began with discussions between researchers and practitioners who wanted to integrate development-oriented contents in spatial plans (Hesse and Leick, 2013; Growe, 2018). Various actors, mostly from urban backgrounds, actively aim to develop metropolitan regions through building and expanding networks, partially even beyond regional and national borders. Now, metropolitan regions are included in formal land use plans as a spatial category (e.g. in the state of Bavaria), or they form the administrative demarcation for developing regional plans (in the Rhine–Neckar and Berlin–Brandenburg regions (Zimmermann, 2008; Gualini and Fricke, 2018)). However, actors from rural backgrounds felt that the concept of metropolitan regions favours urban agglomerations over rural spaces. After processes of interaction and learning about the concerns and aims of actors with different territorial backgrounds, the concept of metropolitan

regions has been expanded through the concept of ‘large-scale areas of responsibility’ (Köhler, 2009; Harrison and Growe, 2014b). Thus mutual learning has helped to integrate policies in regional planning through the invention of new topics and spaces that accommodate different interests.

Exchange certainty

Embedded in a multi-level system, obligatory regional plans provide a reliable framework for interest exchange between local governments, but also between them and other government tiers, and between different interest groups (Growe and Jemming, 2019). The argument of Schmitt and Danielzyk (2018) that regional planning has evolved into a complex interplay between the state, localities, the market and civil society to involve a wider range of interests is therefore confirmation of the role of exchange certainty in policy integration. Although only intersectoral and vertical integration are legally defined in German regional planning (Weiland et al., 2007), the binding topics of regional plans provide a strong certainty about the structure of long-term relationships between local governments. This is especially important in the context of the German constitution, granting local authorities a wide-ranging extent of independence also including planning matters (Bogumil, 2018). Thus regional planning has to find a balance between coordination of developments in multiple municipalities and somehow preventing negative developments by – at the same time – not restricting the granted right of the municipalities to develop their administrative areas (Priebes, 2019).

In the plan-making exercise for the Ruhr region, municipalities and counties were asked to nominate regional cooperation sites for commercial and industrial uses, with the conditions that their size should be at least eight hectares, their development should take place in regional coordination, and their distribution should consider territorial balance as well as current specialisation potential. Despite these conditions, the same fields of economic activity were included in competitive site nominations by several localities. For example, the city of Essen proposed one site for ThyssenKrupp (industrial engineering) and one for Medion (electronics and ICT) which were also on the agenda of some others. However, in the context of commitment to negotiation outcomes, nomination exchanges were informally made between the localities (Ziafati Bafarasat and Pugalis, 2020). Especially in large urban regions, new ways to formalise such discussions have been developed. For example in the Ruhr area, as well as in the Rhine–Main region around Frankfurt, regional preparatory land use plans have been developed, combining elements of both traditional instruments (Rogge, 2018; Priebes, 2019).

One weakness in this context is, however, the long duration of processes to make a regional plan. As many plans stay legally binding for at least 15 to 20 years (BBSR,

2011), practitioners and politicians often participate in only one process to produce a regional plan. For example, most regional plans in Bavaria became legally binding before 1991. In such cases, certainty for the exchange of interests is gained rather through legislative requirements and assurances of the regional plan, without a chance to incorporate the resultant deals into that plan.

Concessions

Defined by the Federal Spatial Planning Act, the task of regional planning is to organise all claims to land uses and physical resources above the municipal level and below the state level within a harmonious system. As the size of the planning regions and the state and municipal disposition of regional planning vary in different German states (Pahl-Weber and Henckel, 2008), the ways relevant concessions are made also change. Important in this context is the relationship of the responsible administration and the responsible political council. For example, regional planning in the state of Baden-Württemberg has been organised by an association of municipalities since 1973. Thus regional councillors are elected by municipal councils and this paves the ground for asking for, and providing, concessions in the process of regional planning. Some of these concessions are made between regional planning and other stakeholders and some between administration and political regional councils within regional planning. Concessions between regional planning and other stakeholders (municipalities, for example) are given voluntarily in the context of close relationships in the multi-level system of spatial planning after several years of exercising the 'mutual-feedback principle'. The deletion of certain regional planning policies, like green belts, can happen if regional planning administrations and political regional councils are convinced that the planning aims of the municipalities also serve reasonable and sustainable goals (Beule, 2014; Stadt Freiburg, 2019). In this trust context, withdrawing a green belt in the regional plan of Southern Upper Rhine (Südlicher Oberrhein) in Baden-Württemberg enabled a large greenfield housing development in the city of Freiburg (Stadt Freiburg, 2017). Although one aim of regional planning is to limit large greenfield developments, agreed concessions meant that the planned housing area would be more sustainable and efficient with regard to transportation and infrastructure if realised in one bigger city than scattered in numerous smaller towns or villages (Stadt Freiburg, 2019).

In other cases, concessions can result from influence differentials of administration and political regional councils within the process of weighing the aims of environmental and landscape planning with the aims of regional planning as comprehensive planning. Typical situations where concessions might be expected result from regional councillors aiming to support the local economy whereas the regional planning administration aims to protect open spaces. One such example can be found in the town of Bad Krozingen-Hausen in the regional plan of Southern Upper Rhine, where a

green belt has been withdrawn due to a resolution of regional councillors against the wish of the regional planning administration (Regionalverband Südlicher Oberrhein, 1995; 2019). In contrast to the previous example of green belt withdrawal as a voluntary concession, this example shows that reluctant concession might serve economic interests rather than holistic integration for sustainable development.

Diversion of criticisms

Regional planning in Germany stands between the state and municipal levels and between various sectoral interests, as well as between individual interests and the common good. However, as plans differentiate between goals and principles (Turowski, 2002), it is often transparent as to which plan elements are included due to the regulations of superior (higher spatial) levels and which are included due to a decision at the more localised planning level. Therefore the classic diversion of criticisms may only work where the planning body has ample political experience and legal insight.

This results in a behaviour beyond simple 'blaming' of other levels in the multi-level planning system, but also leads to a more implicit use of diversion of criticisms or a 'diversion of criticisms on further inquiry'. For example, where regional politicians do not favour the safeguarding of open spaces, regional planners can plan green belts complementary to already protected sites like nature/landscape protection areas that are established based on the Federal Nature Conservation Act. The regional plan of Southern Upper Rhine is an example of this. By playing out the integrative role of the regional plan (which integrates landscape planning into comprehensive planning), more open spaces are protected than the regional councillors would have agreed upon. This behaviour is most effective if the complementarity of the differently protected areas is not explicitly communicated but confirmed only on request. However, the regional plan for the Ruhr does draw on this complementarity in explicit terms as the political context is more favourable for extensive interpretations of comprehensive planning (Shaw, 2002). This integrative approach to protected areas can extend to popular projects, images and discourses, such as the IBA Emscher Park in the Ruhr, which is referred to in ideas of sustainable housing and holistic regeneration in regional planning (von Haaren and Reich, 2006; Gruehn, 2017). In a more modest example, a number of Hessian cities and districts develop and link green open spaces in the region under the heading Regionalpark RheinMain (Hoyler et al., 2006).

De-sharpening of policies

A notable example of de-sharpening processes in the regional plan of Southern Upper Rhine is the change in admissibility of settlement activities in green belts. Normally, green belts should be kept free from settlement activity, including the construction of photovoltaic systems. However, against the background of federally promoted energy transition in Germany and the support of renewable energy sources, exceptions are

possible for photovoltaic systems under certain circumstances, e.g. if photovoltaic systems should be constructed outside forest areas and biotope core areas (Tietz, 2018). The admissibility of photovoltaic systems in green belts of Southern Upper Rhine, however, resulted from an incremental process of negotiation and feedback which exhausted straightforward scenarios.

On the other hand, where de-sharpening takes place in sectors such as infrastructure and economic development, sometimes subsequent re-sharpening processes to 'fill the vacuum' are observed in Germany. For example, the regional plan of Southern Upper Rhine initially aimed to follow the ideal of a lean regional plan, the idea of which was to include only topics and aims that can effectively be regulated at the regional level due to the scale and legislative background of regional plans (Fürst, 1999). However, transportation projects were subsequently included as a result of political intervention, although these projects are regulated in the Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan and cannot be decided on in the regional plan. Thus the aim of producing a lean and effective regional plan was compromised as some sectoral planning topics were re-sharpened.

If agreement to the de-sharpening of policies occurs due to political pressure, one behavioural adaptation responding to that mechanism can be initially overshooting the mark in crucial aspects in order to be implicitly prepared to then agree to de-sharpening processes. However, overshooting the mark in the sense of planning even less would therefore limit the aims of the regional plan. Thus de-sharpening of policies is an effective mechanism to increase the covered contents of a plan at an abstract level. However, this can happen at the expense of important content. This happens when, in iterative planning processes, more specific goals or policies of spatial planning are changed into more abstract principles of spatial planning. While the specified goals or policies of spatial planning are binding stipulations, the principles of spatial planning are more generalised precepts taken into account when weighing up interests. In the process of doing so, conflicting public and private interests are to be weighed against each other and given fair consideration. However, during this process some interests are seen as less important, and thus not all interests are realised in the respective formal plans. One example can be found in the Southern Upper Rhine regional plan. Initially, a detailed list of inadmissible uses in priority areas for drinking-water protection was to have been formulated as a binding goal of spatial planning. The final regional plan, however, contains a much shorter list, while a generalised principle of spatial planning states, in more abstract terms, that potential uses have to consider the importance of priority areas for drinking-water protection. In this context, a number of economic, leisure and other uses are possible, while the aim of protecting drinking water is softened.

Conclusions

This study began with three objectives: (1) to identify, through a systematic literature review, a broad set of mechanisms by which (regional) spatial planning realises joined-up policy making; (2) to illustrate the identified mechanisms in two relevant but diverse spatial-planning systems, Germany and England; and (3) to generate insights into factors that contribute to and confine the identified mechanisms. In relation to the first objective, we analysed the theoretical, sometimes normative, literature and identified five integrating mechanisms of spatial planning. In order to test these mechanisms in diverse settings, we drew on literature sources and our extensive prior research experience on regional spatial planning in England and Germany. The intention was to consider the success (or otherwise) of the mechanisms rather than to directly compare regional spatial-planning processes in the two countries. Indeed, although it is still relevant today in Germany, in England the era of enhanced regional planning came to an abrupt halt in 2010. There are, however, potential lessons here for alternative strategic special planning initiatives that have subsequently emerged in some city- and sub-regions, such as the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) and its attempt at preparing a strategic spatial framework for the conurbation.

Overall, the evidence from the empirical literature suggested that regional spatial planning has the potential to provide an effective framework for policy integration, but its capacity to do so depends on a number of institutional, political and geographical variables that, in the context of English and German experiences, are summarised below in respect of each of the integration mechanisms.

(1) Forced (mutual) learning

Regulated processes of negotiation with a timetable for agreement and output help induce diverse stakeholders to engage in serious exploration of innovative joint policy approaches that could be supported by every player (e.g. the selection of regional parks in north-west England and the Landscape Concept 2020+ in the German Rhine–Neckar region, as well as the process of working on the concept of metropolitan regions in national spatial models in Germany). However, intense procedures and tightly defined timetables are less helpful, in particular, to the integration of specialised fields that require more education, expert mediation and interaction. Indeed, the formalisation of collaboration helps through exerting pressure, which drives stakeholders to devise their own negotiation platforms and studies, sometimes before or outside the formal planning process, in order to explore solutions in a relaxed and informed setting (e.g. the Landscape Concept 2020+ serves as a regional spatial model focusing on landscape aesthetics). Therefore the design of spatial planning should allow modest time between negotiation milestones and expertise, and network support should be provided for stakeholder initiatives outside the formal planning bureaucracy.

(2) Concessions

Voluntary concession is realised through spatial planning in two contexts: systems of multi-level governance, which are reliant more on mutual feedback and trust (e.g. relationships between regional planning institutions and municipalities in Southern Upper Rhine, Germany, where municipalities are granted a wide-ranging extent of independence, including in planning matters) and less on more top-down hierarchical relationships within more prosperous contexts (e.g. around regional housing targets in south-east England), in which planning departments and social and environmental actors want the plan to be finalised as soon as possible. Reluctant concession was observed in the context of power differentials between local interests where the planning area was quite heterogeneous (e.g. England's North West) and between political actors and planning departments where the latter had to prioritise economic objectives over environmental considerations at the request of the former. These examples suggest that forms of concession that aid policy integration are less likely to take place in spatial planning for vast, fragmented territories and where political representatives have strict principal-agent relationships with planning departments.

(3) De-sharpening of policies

Spatial planning was observed to be more effective in incremental negotiative de-sharpening of policies in such fields as planning for open and green spaces (e.g. in the Southern Upper Rhine region in Germany or regional parks in England's North West) rather than for housing, infrastructure and economic development (where, for example, the respective environment and regional development agencies in eastern England conspicuously declined to tone down their incompatible policies on environmental protection and housing growth). Although front-loading negotiation could help the application of this mechanism in more assertive sectors, sometimes subsequent re-sharpening processes to fill the vacuum might even introduce more detached policies in these sectors. The example of inadmissible uses in priority areas for drinking-water protection in the Southern Upper Rhine region in Germany indicates that power relations might skew the ideal of a lean spatial plan towards a biased de-sharpening of its environmental and social policies. Therefore, where the legal and institutional context of planning does not sufficiently reduce influence and power differentials, the inclusion of more detail in spatial plans is advisable in order to render inappropriate de-sharpening of policies less likely.

(1) Exchange certainty

The evidence indicates that long-term and broad-ranging plans contribute to policy integration through their platform of certainty. However, this can be utilised via informal arrangements, which can accommodate compromises of interest exchange away from civic scrutiny. We observed that sometimes spatial planning understands and supports this supplemental role, for example by suggesting potential informal offshoots at the beginning of the planning process and subsequently incorporating priorities introduced by those offshoots into the final plan document (e.g. in the West Cheshire/North East Wales sub-region and during the process of nominating large-sized commercial sites in the Ruhr region in Germany). This mechanism of policy integration is more effective where the duration of the processes to make a plan is not too short for the establishment of informal offshoots within it, but not so long for new stakeholders and conditions to factor in.

(2) Diversion of criticisms

Evidence suggests that the diversion of criticisms to higher scales of spatial planning is helpful in removing negative community pressure from local authorities, for example in instigating regional landscape protection in the Southern Upper Rhine or to accommodate future housing needs on a cross-boundary basis, as in various (particularly southern) English regions. However, in some other cases, this mechanism could contribute to the distorted insertion of particular centralised approaches under the mask of integration. Therefore planning departments which operate under a system of political self-interest may need to address this by being more transparent about how some of their specific policies are devised. As our evidence from Germany suggests, planners could, at the same time, activate 'diversion of criticisms on further inquiry' against political pressure on them to, for example, focus on growth objectives.

Overall, our findings add to the existing knowledge about spatial planning by identifying and illuminating a set of integrating mechanisms through which regional spatial-planning exercises can better achieve overarching goals of policy integration focused on promoting sustainable development. More explicit consideration of these mechanisms can guide performance improvements and evaluation of spatial-planning exercises as new social, environmental and economic challenges require rethinking spatial-planning purposes, scales and instruments. These dynamics are already unfolding in the UK (UK 2070 Commission, 2020) and elsewhere in Europe and are likely to surface further in the light of COVID-19 pandemic implications and future spatial-policy implications and responses.

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