

ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE  
Geneva

# **SPATIAL PLANNING**

*Key Instrument for Development  
and Effective Governance*

*with Special Reference to Countries in Transition*



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# FOREWORD

Over the past few decades, innovative approaches to spatial planning have spawned new ideas about space and place as well as the role of spatial strategies in contemporary governance contexts.

This publication is a further contribution to raising awareness among the general public and politicians about the importance of spatial planning. This study identifies the role and benefits of spatial planning, the particular challenges vis-à-vis spatial planning that face countries in transition, its key principles, the division of roles and responsibilities, the main stages in the process of developing spatial plans, and finally, priority actions for countries in transition.

Spatial planning is largely a public sector function to influence the future spatial distribution of activities. It aims to create a more rational territorial organization of land uses and the linkages between them, to balance demands for development with the need to protect the environment, and to achieve social and economic objectives. Spatial planning comprises measures to coordinate and improve the spatial impacts of other sectoral policies so as to achieve a more even distribution of economic development within a given territory than would otherwise be created by market forces. Spatial planning is therefore an important lever for promoting sustainable development and improving the quality of life.

Although this study refers specifically to countries in transition, it is intended as a reference for all UNECE countries. Central governments, which are responsible for setting up spatial planning systems and distributing responsibilities among the administrative levels, are the primary audience. At the same time, however, recommendations related to practical aspects of the planning process are addressed to local level audiences, as implementation is carried out mainly at this level.

I hope that this report will be useful to all UNECE countries by supporting policymakers and representatives of civil society in improving spatial planning and its implementation as well as in further promoting sustainable development at all levels, and that countries will benefit from lessons learned from the experience of others.



Marek Belka  
Executive Secretary  
Economic Commission for Europe

# PREFACE

The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Committee on Housing and Land Management\* decided to prepare a study on spatial planning with a particular focus on countries in transition. To start discussions on the contents of the study, the workshop “Spatial Planning Systems: Organization and Practice” was held in Warsaw in 2005, organized by the Polish Ministry of Infrastructure. In preparation for the Warsaw workshop, a survey questionnaire on spatial planning systems in UNECE countries, developed by the delegation of Poland in cooperation with Professor John Zetter (expert) and in consultation with the Bureau of the Committee on Housing and Land Management, was distributed to the UNECE countries. Responses were received from Albania, the Czech Republic, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Moldova, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Additional papers on national planning systems were received from Serbia and Montenegro, Spain and Norway.

As well as drawing on a wide variety of international sources on spatial planning, the study also draws on the discussions of the workshop and the questionnaire responses described above. It provides guidance on how to improve the functioning of the spatial planning systems in the UNECE member countries, particularly in the countries of Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) and South-Eastern Europe (SEE), based on the experience of and practice in the more advanced economies in the UNECE region. It focuses on enabling all actors in the public, private and community sectors to work together and play an effective role in human settlements development at the local level. It also builds on material related to UNECE activities.

This study was jointly prepared by Dr. Dominic Stead of Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands, and Mr. Vincent Nadin of the University of the West of England, Bristol, United Kingdom. A group of experts designated by the Committee, comprising Ms. Ruzan Alaverdyan (Armenia), Ms. Maria Jose Festas (Portugal), Professor Adam Kowalewski (Poland), Ms. Janja Kreitmayer McKenzie (Slovenia), Mr. Andre Müller (Germany), Mr. Juha Talvitie (Finland) and Professor Zetter as Chair, provided inputs at various stages of the drafting process.

The study draws primarily (but not exclusively) on experiences in Western and Eastern Europe, where the concept of spatial planning has been in use in various forms for some time. Countries in transition that can learn from these practices will nevertheless need to develop systems that are appropriate for their own social, economic and cultural environments. These guidelines aim to help them find ways to achieve this.

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\* Former Committee on Human Settlements.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Spatial planning is a key instrument for establishing long-term, sustainable frameworks for social, territorial and economic development both within and between countries. Its primary role is to enhance the integration between sectors such as housing, transport, energy and industry, and to improve national and local systems of urban and rural development, also taking into account environmental considerations. This study on spatial planning is an overview document that draws the attention of policymakers to the importance of spatial planning. It also aims at raising awareness of the importance of increased community involvement and social cohesion as well as of the role of all parties concerned in territorial development in the implementation of housing and related policies and in environmental protection.

The study puts emphasis on the need to establish a shared vision and consistent direction for spatial development based on the efficient use of resources, good governance, public-private partnerships, and effective decision-making with regard to investments. While the document is intended for a pan-European audience, it pays special attention to the requirements and challenges faced by countries in transition. Due to the variations in political, cultural and economic conditions between UNECE member States, a single universal approach to spatial planning is not recommended. The study should thus be viewed as a resource that must be adapted to suit the needs of the country in question.

Spatial planning has a regulatory and a development function. As a regulatory mechanism, government (at local, regional and/or national levels) has to give approval for given activity; as a development mechanism, government has to elaborate upon development tools for providing services and infrastructure, for establishing directions for urban development, for preserving national resources, and for establishing incentives for investment, etc.

Spatial planning aims to:

- (a) Promote territorial cohesion through a more balanced social and economic development of regions, and improved competitiveness;
- (b) Encourage development generated by urban functions and improve the relationship between the town and countryside;
- (c) Promote more balanced accessibility;
- (d) Develop access to information and knowledge;
- (e) Reduce environmental damage;
- (f) Enhance and protect natural resources and natural heritage;
- (g) Enhance cultural heritage as a factor for development;
- (h) Develop energy resources while maintaining safety;
- (i) Encourage high-quality, sustainable tourism;
- (j) Limit the impact of natural disasters.

Effective spatial planning also helps to avoid the duplication of efforts by actors such as government departments, commercial developers, communities and individuals. This is of great importance, as many of the above issues are of a cross-sectoral nature and therefore should be treated as such. Spatial planning is a public sector activity at all levels. Hence a clear distribution of responsibilities is needed between the different levels of administration.

At the national level, Governments are responsible for developing framework policies that both initiate and guide the decision-making process, setting the conditions for the operation of effective planning at regional and local levels. Major tasks include the establishment of effective framework

legislation, coordination with other sectors and between regions (including those that cross-national boundaries), the monitoring of implementation of national guidelines and principles at the regional and local levels, and the identification of bottlenecks in planning and implementation. National authorities are also responsible for supporting regional and national authorities when implementing national guidelines, in particular through capacity-building in terms of professional expertise and political leadership.

The main task at the regional level is the preparation and coordination of an overall regional spatial strategy by looking ahead 15 to 20 years at the overall development of the region. This should be done in cooperation with regional and local stakeholders. Regional government also has the responsibility of supporting local authorities by providing information on national and regional priorities, designating protected areas, planning and delivering major infrastructural improvements, and providing environmental assessment and appraisal of regionally significant plans and projects, as well as supplying guidance and assistance to local authorities by creating local planning instruments.

Local-level spatial planning takes into account policies elaborated at both the national and regional levels. Local plans are especially important because they involve and affect the end-user. Local governments should prepare regulatory planning instruments, establish priorities for action, facilitate the preparation of local spatial plans, coordinate planning with neighbourhood authorities, engage with the community using participatory planning techniques, take proactive measures to encourage development, and monitor the implementation of policies and proposals, e.g. by enforcing adherence to specific planning legislation.

Many countries have recently made fundamental reforms to the body of planning law to enable changes in the elaboration and operation of their planning systems. In some countries, however, planning statutes have not kept pace with the reality of spatial development. The problem is usually not a lack of legislation, but rather that the legislation is no longer relevant.

In other cases, reform in planning law has not been a high priority. In these cases, effective spatial development at all levels has yet not been implemented, as the legal basis has not been put in place to facilitate the planning process. This includes provisions that require cooperation among planning authorities to address sectoral interests to ensure consistency in the decision-making process. Where planning reform has taken place, it is generally targeted at shifting the focus from physical land-use regulation to an integrative spatial planning approach.

The implementation of effective spatial planning depends upon the development of relevant laws, policies, guidance, procedures and incentives. Implementation requires that both short-term

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