

# AN EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH OF CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION STRUCTURES

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**Abstract:** *This paper is premised on the observation that a view of competitive development based on ‘nation states’ may gradually have to give way to ‘contexts of development’ as an analytical framework which accounts more appropriately for the interstitial fabric of economic, as well as historical, social and cultural linkages across borders between atomized actors (countries, firms, and individuals). We attempt to identify contexts boundaries to reveal the contextual origins of a country’s competitive assets. We collect data for the three mapping dimensions: identity (geographical scale and polity), functionality (thematic focus of cross-border cooperation, policy areas), and governance (policy space, decision-making, civil society). The geographical focus consists of ten selected European regional groupings. We produce a qualitative assessment of each cooperation structure by assigning scores of institutional quality on two institutional dimensions: breadth and depth of the level of integration.*

**Keywords:** territorial development; economic integration

## INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to present evidence related to the hypothesis about replacing the view of ‘nation states’ as optimal economic units (in explaining development) with a spatially contextualized one based on territories as economic areas of variable geometry. With ever greater emphasis on territorial cooperation and regional networks in the programming framework, the European Union (EU) heads towards a vision of economic integration which accounts more appropriately for the interstitial fabric of economic, as well as historical, social and cultural linkages across borders between atomized actors (countries, firms, and individuals). Against a background of almost inexistent barriers to trade, as well as near completion of the single market, the EU member states are expected to increasingly benefit from geographical and institutional proximity within neighbouring regions rather than conventional gains of country specialization. In other words, regional commonality has become a competitive asset.

The territorial vision of the strategy of integration is by no means a European characteristic. Contiguous regions that were successful at earlier times in advancing integration may shed light on things to come. One such example is

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Cascadia, a region on the Pacific coast stretching from British Columbia in Canada to Oregon and Washington in the U.S., and including parts of Yukon, Idaho, Wyoming, and Western Montana states. Initially conceived as the territory of an environmental project in the Cascade Mountains in the 1970s, the region has grown to a stage wherefrom it boasts the political identity of “The Republic of Cascadia” for its approx. 14 million residents (Webley, 2011), with a GDP of \$814 billion (2011), which would rank it the 18th largest economy in the world (Talton, 2013), and home to multinationals like Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks and Nike, or worldwide renowned entertainment industries in Hollywood and Vancouver. Cascadia has proved to be a remarkable case of merging political and economic interests towards setting-up a cross-border polity with a regional identity, functional economy, and common governance, identifying characteristics of regional viability.

This is an outline this paper attempts to detail at the level the current European initiatives and projects of cross-border cooperation structures (CBCS). We first discuss the two building blocks of cross-border cooperation, geographical and institutional proximity. This provides the background for an institutional evaluation of CBCS as a function of regional identifiers, core functionalities, and policy scope, and how these relate to wider issues of development and advanced integration. We apply a three step exercise emphasizing the breadth and depth of the agglomeration. In terms of breadth, we want to know the number, thematic focus and institutional forms of the areas of cooperation that make a region more or less functional. In terms of depth, we investigate the connections that have resulted among various regional initiatives and the extent to which they become accomplished objectives. We conclude on the conditions of transforming cross-border development into a competitive asset.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tackling cross-border cooperation in Europe has become almost an inevitable step on the way to understanding what the future engines of growth may consist of. Its dynamic development during the last decades (see Chilla *et al.*, 2012) permits some lessons to be drawn as to the setting of integration among member-states along contiguous borders, as well as the implications of integrating them into coherent regional policy initiatives. For instance, ample discussions relate now to both successful and failed attempts to overcome the disadvantages associated with marginal border location (Kratke, 1998, Perkmann, 2007), which may prove a stimulating premise of achieving the ambitious objectives of social and economic cohesion.

CBCS initiatives arise from a two-pronged set of prerequisites in relation to proximity. One is geographical, the other is institutional. The geography of CBCS is responsible mostly for the quantifiable effects of market integration: resource allocation, competitive effects, increasing returns to scale, and transportation costs. The amplitude of the effects depends essentially on the market size to the extent that a large geographical scale allows factors to find the

most favorable returns. The optimal institutional design should reflect these benefits as a function of the geography of integration of an area within which growth and competition become self-enforcing. That was the economic case of establishing a customs union among the six EU founding members in 1957, and it should have played a similar role with each successive waves of enlargement.

An economic bloc, however, thrives on unquantifiable benefits as well, resulting from example from externalities, trust, or commonalities such as a feeling of closeness, language, ethnic roots or historical events. On a general level, the potential of turning them into tangible gains from integration is a function of institutional proximity. An enlarged EU finds increasingly difficult to adapt a single set of policies with the same effect to environments that differ in the way they set their political vision, organize their economies, or adopt cultural values and social norms. Institutional proximity make complex, well-defined and oriented relationships possible across countries: “examples include customs, collective habits, prejudices, legal or moral rules but also parliaments, firms, associations etc, that constitute a concrete manifestation of institutions.” (Talbot, 2007)

Cross-border cooperation structures (CBCS) are formed on cultural, social and economic affinities, due their common historical background, offering a framework for regional cooperation. Based on the institutional form and level of governance, these structures have different tools to adopt and implement decisions and cooperation projects; they configure spaces of development within a geographical scale that includes homogeneous institutions. It is from this perspective that territorial development may be regarded as a competitive asset linking the two defining parts of a regional economy – its geography and its institutions, formal and informal – in truly mutually dependent articulations. Poor geography can undermine the success of good institutions, as can bad institutions turn a good environment into a botched attempt to development.

## 2. EVALUATION OF INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTH

### 2.1. Methodology

We collected data for three mapping dimensions: identity, reflected by geography and polity, functionality, the thematic focus of cross-border cooperation, and governance, the policy space of decision-making. Each of these dimensions, combining facets of both geographical and institutional proximity, permits a qualitative assessment of each cooperation structure by assigning scores of institutional quality on two dimensions: breadth and depth of the level of regional integration.

Our CBCS sample consists of ten European regional groupings, represented in Figure 1, as follows: Oberrheinkonferenz, Nordisk Ministerråd, Agglomération franco-valdo-genevois, Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa Euroregio, Greater Region, Siret-Prut-Nistru Euroregion, Euregio Maas-Rhein, Council of the Baltic Sea States, Trinational Eurodistrict Basel, and Euroregion Alentejo-Centro-Extremadura.

**Figure 1 – Cross-border cooperation structures' map**

Source: Association of European Border Regions (2014)

The breadth of CBCS refers to the number and thematic diversity of regional policies. The strength of the regional structure is a function of common results from activities such as science and technology, cultural and educational exchange, health care, environment, tourism, and their relation to the economic development of the local economies. It has become customary that intra-regional partnerships include ‘science and technology’, ‘cultural and educational exchange’, or ‘health’ among prioritized areas of cooperation, which are all particularly favourable to promoting local/regional distinctiveness. These initiatives eventuate in increasing institutionalization strategic set-up in a cross-border region that would lay down the platform of deepening market integration.

The *institutional scale* is local, regional, and national for each thematic focus (Kraetke, 1999, p. 636), while the *geographical scale* is small, for areas under 5,000 km<sup>2</sup>, medium (5,000-25,000 km<sup>2</sup>), and large (above 25,000 km<sup>2</sup>). For example, cooperation in environmental protection might involve only a certain part of the region and the area of this specific territory should be classified as small, medium or large irrespective of the geographical scale of the entire cooperation structure.

The depth of CBCS refers to the level of integration for each thematic focus. We evaluate the strength of the cross-border institutional structure placing it in one of three categories to which we assign a number of stars accordingly:

- \* If there is a written form of cooperation like agreement/contract/convention, etc.
- \*\* If there is an institutional work form and a record of actions taken, for example: adopted working standards or codes, etc.
- \*\*\* If there are economic effects, such as research and development projects, patents, application of standards, etc.

### 3. FINDINGS

#### *Identity*

Political organization takes a variety of forms. The study includes ten cross-border cooperation structures, some of them having an informal structure, such as a charter (Franco-Valdo-Genevoise Agglomeration and EuroregioMeuse-Rhin). Trinational Eurodistrict Basel, Danube-Kris-Mures-Tisa (DKMT) and Siret-Prut-Nistru Euro-region are non-profit associations, while the Greater Region has the most institutionalized form, with legal personality: European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) having a regional authority. Other structures have a consultative role at governmental level: the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) - political forum for regional intergovernmental cooperation, the Nordic Council - parliamentary cooperation forum, and Upper Rhine - intergovernmental commission.

The organization of the technical staff is not connected to the status of the cross-border cooperation structure and it usually consists of separate working groups. Their activities are not necessarily interconnected. Only *Projet d'Agglomeration franco-valdo-genevois*, Siret-Prut-Nistru Euro-region Association, Euroregio Meuse-Rhin and Meuse-Rhin work as integrated teams. This has a direct impact on the degree of coordination between several policies within the cooperation structure.

The Franco-German-Swiss Conference of the Upper Rhine provides the institutional framework of cross-border regional cooperation in the Upper Rhine area. Furthermore, the Government Commission represents the link between the Upper Rhine Conference and the national governments and can mediate questions, which cannot be settled at the regional level.

The Nordic Council (Norden) is the official inter-parliamentary body, all members being nominated by the party groups in their home parliaments. It works as a consultation body between its members, adopting recommendations prepared in its standing committees, or by passing specific declaration which are then acted on by ministers and officials in member states.

Grand Geneva or the France-Vaud-Geneva agglomeration is a cross-border cooperation structure that has evolved into several institutions that cooperate to preserve the quality of life in the context of the permanent demographic and economic expansion of the region: *Comité regional franco-genevois* (established in 1973 by Geneva and France), *Conseil du Léman* (1987). In 2004, the most extended project of cross-border cooperation that comprises the region of Geneva was initiated: *Project d'agglomération franco-valdo-genevoise* (Grand Geneva)

created in 2007 to support a homogenous development of the agglomeration. Métropole lémanique (2011) is the most recent institution and was created to promote the interests of the Léman region in Switzerland. The project of Grand Geneva implies a vast cross-border cooperation in several areas: agriculture, economy, environment, housing, mobility, nature and urbanization. (Grand Geneva, 2013)

Danube Kris Mures Tisa is an association based on 10 working groups with the purpose of extending the cooperation between local communities and local governments to ease the European integration process.

The Greater Region (or Greater Region of Luxembourg) is a geopolitical region within Europe, created to promote economic, cultural, touristic and social development and one of the most densely populated and wealthy regions of the EU.

Siret-Nistru-Prut Euroregion Association proposes a systemic approach toward strategic planning: local strategic planning - regional strategic planning frame.

The Euregio Rhin-Meuse is an agglomeration which was formed in 1976 as a charter and it is characterised by the existence of important sea ports like Rotterdam and Antwerp which generate high income.

The Council of the Baltic Sea States is an overall political forum for regional inter-governmental cooperation and its members are the 11 states of the Baltic Sea Region as well as the European Commission. The Council consists of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs from each Member State and a representative from the European Commission.

The Tri-National Association Eurodistrict Basel has a non-profit nature and its members are cities, municipalities, communal groups and communities which are located within the perimeter of the tri-national agglomeration of Basel.

EUROACE is located on the Spanish-Portuguese border. This organization is not legally formed. This means that EUROACE's structure is open and dynamic and that all entities and organizations within the three member regions, both public and private, that wish to participate can join this community. The Euroregion's territory is comprised of a vast web of medium-sized and small cities.

The geographical scale describes the surface of cross-border cooperation structures. The smallest regions are Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel (1,989km<sup>2</sup>) and the Franco-Valdo-Genevoise Agglomeration (2,000 km<sup>2</sup>), being densely populated urban areas. Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel comprises several towns and villages around the city of Basel, while the Franco-Valdo-Genevoise Agglomeration is created around the city of Geneva and includes both Swiss and French municipalities. Large structures are usually Euroregions: DKMT, Siret-Prut-Nistru and Alentejo-Centro-Extremadura. The largest CBCS is the Nordic Council (1,319,482.70 km<sup>2</sup>) and it is formed by entire countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Medium sized CBCS are: the Council of the Baltic Sea States and Euroregio Meuse-Rhin.

### Functionality

The functionality or the thematic focus of cooperation is analyzed in two dimensions: the breadth (the number of domains of cooperation) and depth (the level of integration on each thematic focus).

The thematic focus for each region differs according to the common background of the members, to the specific economic activity, specific resources, cultural affinities, social issues, etc. and cooperation targets using regional advantages to enhance its development.

The most common domains for cooperation are environmental protection which can be found in eight of the ten analyzed structures and culture in seven structures. Other very important directions are health (six structures), education and tourism (each in five structures). CBCSSs can develop an important part of cooperation in domains that cannot be found in other cases. An eloquent example is that of life sciences and biodiversity in Basel, which contributes strongly to this Euro-district's economy. One person out ten who lives in this region is employed in life sciences. (Eurodistrict Basel, 2013)

The depth of cooperation in each thematic focus is calculated as a sum of the number of stars assigned for each project. The highest rank reached Norden in environmental protection (25\*) and EUROACE also in environmental protection (19\*). Other advanced levels of cooperation were established in economic development: Norden (16\*), CBSS (12\*) and DKMT (8\*). In the Nordic Council, culture has an important role in cooperation (13\*), while Meuse-Rhin Euroregion focuses on research and development (12\*), the Greater Region on tourism (9\*) and Trinational Eurodistrict Basel on transportation (10\*). In general, an advanced level of development translates proportionally into the ease of multiplying the opportunities for asserting regional belongingness. A synoptic view of these findings is presented in Table 1 and Figure 2 below.

**Table 1 - A hierarchy of CBCS according to institutional strength**

(a) Large geographical scale

CBCS	Policy focus	Institutional score
Nordisk Ministerråd	Environment and Nature	25* (5x2*+5x3*)
Euroregion Alentejo-Centro-Extremadura	Environment	19* (2x2*+5x3*)
Nordisk Ministerråd	Economy, business and working life	16* (5x2*+2x3*)
Nordisk Ministerråd	Culture, leisure and media	13* (5x2*+1x3*)
CBSS	Economic development	12* (3x1*+3x2*+1x3*)

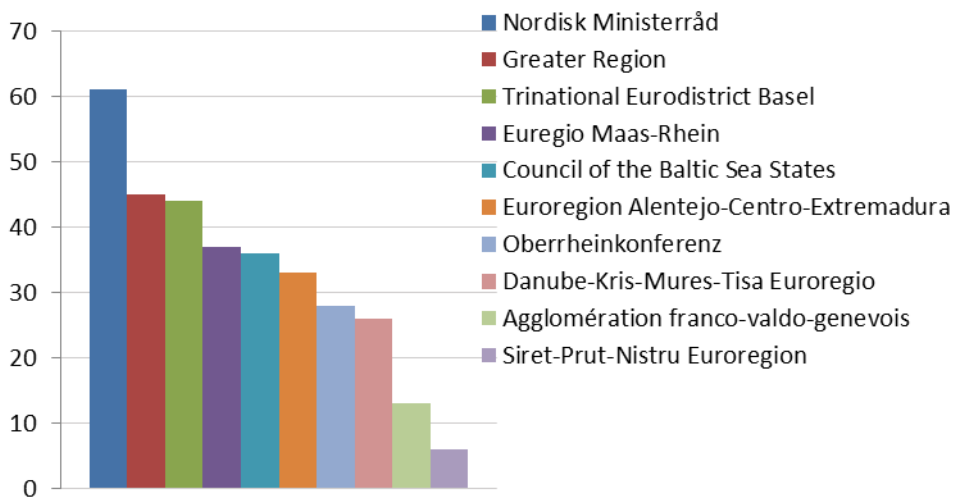
Source: authors' calculation

## (b) Small/medium geographical scale

CBCS	Policy focus	Institutional score
Euregio Maas-Rhein	Research and development	12* (3x2*+2x3*)
Trinational Eurodistrict Basel	Transport and urban development	10* (5x1*+1x2*+1x3*)
Trinational Eurodistrict Basel	Environment	9* (2x1*+2x2*+1x3*)
Trinational Eurodistrict Basel	Culture	9* (3x3*)
Trinational Eurodistrict Basel Council of the Baltic Sea States	Planning and sustainable development Civil security & human dimension	8* (1x2*+2x2*+1x3*) 8* (1x1*+2x2*+1x3*)

Source: authors' calculation

**Figure 2 - Institutional strength of selected European CBCS**



Source: authors' calculation

In terms of breadth, Greater Region cooperates in eight directions (the highest number), which are also the most frequent ones: environment, health, education, culture, economics, tourism, etc. and it is on the second place on the total number of stars achieved for the depth of cooperation, regardless the thematic focus. DKMT and Basel have seven domains of cooperation, but some of them comprise two or three areas at the time: transport and urban development for Basel and, in DKMT, economics & infrastructure and culture, education & sports. The region with the smallest breadth and smallest depth is Siret-Prut-NistruEuroregion with only one project for each of the three areas, each of them being ranked 2 stars. This region is also the newest and it includes a small population.

The region with the highest number of stars for all its projects, is Norden (61\*). All its domains of cooperation rely on a broader thematic focus: environment & nature, education & research, culture, leisure & media, etc. Its



projects are very advanced and they produce important economic results (nine projects were ranked 3\*) with a high emphasis on innovation. There is an important role assigned to education in almost every domain, being used to disseminate information to each policy's stakeholders. Creative industries receive a great attention in both economy and culture and leisure areas as they are seen as growth engines.

Greater Region also has many projects ranked 3\* (eight), but In the Greater Region policies are not interconnected through an integrated development strategy. For example, the project Edudora2 is a cooperation in the healthcare sector and it has certain implications in education as it relies on teaching the population to prevent and cure health problems. The Environmental cluster deals with development of cross-border cooperation in fields such as economy, education and research and the research in the Corena project is developed in medicine and agriculture.

### *Governance*

The institutional level can differ very much from one project to another in the same region and same thematic focus. The national level includes governments and national institutions, regional actors include regions, provinces, cantons and local actors include municipalities, communes and districts. There is no distinction in the analysis between civil society and public or private actors due to lack of comparable information.

Within the ten regions, there are generally more domains in which national actors are implicated in the decision process. The thematic focus which relies only on regional and local actors is usually more locally specific: housing and accommodation, urbanism and sports, or there are programs initiated by smaller regions which are more competitive in these directions: research and development, technology and tourism, or have certain geographical cross-border assets that they exploit: tourism, environment.

The size of the policy space is usually similar to the size of the whole region, but in some cases certain areas of cooperation focus on smaller geographical space. This is case of cooperation in security in Upper Rhine, which only focuses on the border area (small) and uses regional and local actors to coordinate and implement the projects, urbanism projects in DKMT, which develop only certain towns, and education in the Greater Region applicable in a number of municipalities, but coordinated at national, regional and local level. On the other side, Grand Geneva implements projects which are designed for a larger geographical space that it takes part of. For instance, cooperation in health includes programs that are conducted in France and Switzerland at national level, in a cross-border cooperation framework: emergency sector, health crises, epidemiology, environmental health and a free telephone line for prevention of addictive behaviors. DKMT is a special case, where most of the projects are at small scale, in small regions, initiated by local communities, trying to promote a very unique and concentrated cultural space through rural tourism, crafts and cultural events.

All in all the ten regions present a large variety of characteristics that describe their geographical space, polity, policy areas and governance. The limit of this analysis is that it does not set a direct relationship between the form of organization, size and governance level on one side and the level of integration on the other side, but it presents some obvious relations and a complete data on a common framework.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our results address some tangible policy issues such as: What connections are established between different thematic areas of cooperation? What is the role of cross-border externalities and what is their impact on country specialization?

A selection of ten cross-border cooperation structures, broadly spread on the surface of the European Union, serves the objective of describing well defined regional identities and their core functionalities, regardless of state borders. Their variety is given by geographical scale, form of organization, the thematic focus of cross-border cooperation, the governance and levels of decision, while their strength and unity relies mostly in the level of integration derived from the number of cooperation areas and the implementation level of the projects in each area.

The main conclusions of this analysis are:

- The geographical scale is not directly connected to the level of integration. Although policies that comprise large areas, such as entire states, are hard to coordinate, the Nordic Council is the most integrated region, while the Trinational Eurodistrict Basel is an urban agglomeration which creates many opportunities for cooperation, important cross-border flows of capital, workers and goods and congestion issues that are hard to manage.

- An older cooperation is usually more advanced, but this is rather the result more of the common history and cultural background, as well as older international relations of the countries involved.

- Integrated teams serve for a slightly stronger cooperation comparing to working groups assigned for each functionality because the last ones are more specialized and focused on their specific role. Functionalities can be otherwise coordinated through a common vision, good management of the CBSS, implication of common actors and assigning a single working group for two or more domains.

- Greater Region is the most institutionalized region and this might have an important role in its high level of integration because it has more authority and financing possibilities.

- Regarding thematic focus, there is a large set of possibilities to integrate a region on both the depth and breadth dimensions. The number of functionalities does not have a clear relationship to the advance of the projects and their economic impact. The cooperation is stronger in areas with a more general impact on the stakeholders: environment, health, education and tourism. Coordination between domains of cooperation is given by the organization of the CBSS and the

connections between them, which allow the appliance of the same policy, such as culture and leisure, or economy and business.

The governance level has an interesting influence of cross-border cooperation: a smaller scale, such as local, or regional gives more independence to central states being able to focus on regional identity and advantages, while a national one gives more authority, legal power and central coordination. The most integrated structure from our sample, Norden, functions as a consultative body between governments and uses national actors in all areas of cooperation.

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