Summary of the study

ATLANTIC MACRO-REGION: AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE SEIZED? ATLANTIC CESER PERSPECTIVES

Background to this study

The Atlantic Arc is a geopolitical area that must face up to the major impacts of climate change, against a backdrop of strong economic development but also challenges relating to social cohesion. However, the Atlantic Arc area is diverse, and public policies and projects in each region sometimes compete with each other. Everyone is trying to find solutions at a local level, even though they may face the same constraints and difficulties.

At the level of the Atlantic territories, numerous economic, societal and environmental challenges require action, and these have been made more apparent by a succession of unprecedented events such as Brexit, which is cutting off Europe's Atlantic arc, the Covid-19 crisis, and more recently the effects of the conflict in Ukraine. The Atlantic seaboard is increasingly becoming a periphery of the EU.

Since 2020, a desire initially expressed in 2010 by the European regional players in the Atlantic Arc to move towards greater coordination of their strategies and a strengthening of cooperation has been re-expressed as a result of this evolving context, with European macro-regional strategy suggested as a possible response.

In May 2023, the Atlantic Arc Commission, the political representative body of the Atlantic regions at European level, adopted a political declaration in Cardiff in which its members renewed their request for the creation of an Atlantic macro-regional strategy.

This interest in an Atlantic macro-region project echoes the latest study by the Atlantic CESERs ‘A new dynamic for the Atlantic seaboard - strengthening inter-regional cooperation and synergies’, published in 2020, which concluded by inviting the four French Atlantic regions to provide a strategic and political framework for cooperation and to formalise cross-cutting strategies for inter-regional cooperation.

While it is accepted by the assemblies of the 4 CESERs that cooperation is an added value and should be encouraged, using the macro-region as a tool for transnational European cooperation remains an open question.

Introduction

This study examines the relevance of this political framework for cooperation in responding to the challenges of human, social, cultural, economic and environmental development in the Atlantic Arc area, which is undergoing significant change and is even collapsing.

Under what conditions could this strategic macro-regional framework enable Europe's Atlantic seaboard and its hinterland to become a sustainable, stable, prosperous and equitable area?

The study by the Atlantic CESERs provides a basis for understanding and analysing this macro-regional project, so that everyone is able to understand its benefits.
Chapter 1: What is the European macro-regional strategy?

The European Commission defines macro-regional strategies as “public policy frameworks established by EU and non-EU countries in a defined geographical area to respond jointly to common challenges and opportunities by defining shared long-term objectives”.

There are currently four European macro-regional strategies. Their geographical area is centred around a natural ecosystem that includes EU Member States and cross-border third countries.

The Atlantic area is currently only included in a sea basin strategy called the Atlantic Maritime Strategy, which was adopted in 2011.

The creation of an EU macro-regional strategy is an initiative driven by the Member States, who, through the European Council, give the European Commission a mandate to draw up and adopt the strategy.

Macro-regional cooperation is multi-stakeholder, multi-sector and multi-instrument. The EU’s macro-regional strategies should seek to achieve 3-dimensional coordination:

- Horizontally, between sectoral policies in a cross-cutting approach;
- Vertically, between the different levels of governance by bringing together the various skills;
- Geographically, beyond the administrative borders of the European Union.

There is no single model for a macro-region: each one defines its own objectives, governance and operating methods. Nevertheless, the European Commission defines three basic principles: macro-regional strategies do not receive

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1 Stéfanie Dühr, “The Baltic Sea, the Danube and macro-regional strategies: a model for transnational cooperation in the EU?” Notre Europe, September 2011
dedicated funding, they are not subject to specific regulations and they do not lead to the creation of new institutions.

Its objectives are strategic, long-term and specific to the macro-regional area, and address the challenges of economic, social, environmental and territorial cohesion in line with the European Union's main priorities.

A macro-regional strategy enables a group of stakeholders to agree on a common vision of the challenges and issues specific to a shared continuous territorial area. Without creating a new supra-state institution, it hinges on its ability to coordinate actions in a multi-level governance system, from European to local level, and to optimise all resources and sources of funding (European, national, local) to develop cooperation projects in response to the established objectives. This governance is a forum for dialogue and construction in which the public authorities and civil society work together to implement the strategy.

Chapter 2: Challenges and risks that call for greater regional cooperation

The study identifies common issues that make sense for the Atlantic area and that call for a strengthening of territorial cooperation.

The central question remains: what common objectives should we rally around and focus individual energies on in a collective project?

The Atlantic CESERs published a study in 2020, quoted above, which shows that development dynamics are far from standard along the coast and within each region. It pointed to a multi-speed development that entails the risk of territorial fractures.

The projections of these development dynamics must also be examined from the point of view of the sustainability and vulnerability of the territories: they must integrate the necessary ecological and energy transition requirements, and adaptation to the consequences of climate change.

Future public policies must ensure that certain structural trends to be corrected and make it possible respond to the challenge of social cohesion and balanced spatial planning in the Atlantic regions as a result of the significant variation in attractiveness between regions.

Furthermore, inaction today is likely to result in greater challenges in the future.

The study identifies the vectors for strong mobilisation in the Atlantic area, by asking two questions:

- What unites us, brings us together, constrains us?
- To what extent would working collectively be a source of added value in achieving our individual objectives?

This findings show that the climate emergency and decarbonisation are strategic threads that can mobilise all opportunities for collaboration and cooperation. Let's not forget that the Atlantic territories are particularly exposed to natural hazards, especially coastal hazards. The Atlantic regions are characterised by an exposure that combines the problems of coastal erosion and marine submersion, while the coastline has a high concentration of populations and activities.

Throughout these issues, water is very much present, with shared challenges (quantitative and qualitative), from upstream in the catchment areas to the Atlantic Ocean. Water is a shared heritage and a territorial resource for both its inhabitants and the natural environment. The pressure on water resources is set to increase as a result of climate change (more severe low-water periods, reduced river flows in summer, combined with increased consumption of drinking water due to hot weather). This phenomenon will have numerous impacts on use, whether they be domestic, economic, agricultural...

Common energy issues and assets have been identified, in particular offshore wind energy and hydrogen, as potential sources of cooperation that could bring together the assets of each region to contribute to the development of low-carbon energy.
European maps of offshore wind farms and projections of future hydrogen corridors show that the Atlantic seaboard is not covered by these types of projects.

A geostrategic issue has also been identified. The Atlantic macro-region should position itself as a European interface interacting with the rest of the world. It could help to strengthen transatlantic cooperation at all levels, while promoting Europe’s values of peace, sustainability and prosperity.

The Atlantic macro-region project also raises the issue of governance. Multi-level governance needs to be implemented to prepare territories and populations to face current and future challenges. The aim is to establish governance that is as close as possible to local issues and initiatives, with the full involvement of civil society players alongside national and local authorities.

Finally, this cooperation should help to develop a risk culture to strengthen the resilience of Atlantic territories.

All the issues identified form the basis of a strategy that would aim to combine different processes to strengthen the resilience of the Atlantic territories, taking a very local approach to the issues and risks involved and looking ahead to a new global geopolitical balance.

Chapter 3: What lessons can be learnt from European territorial cooperation areas specific to the Atlantic Arc?

To put this reflection into perspective, the study is based on an assessment of current macro-regional strategies and observation of cross-border cooperation areas, particularly in terms of governance. In order to understand what is driving the move towards a cooperation area in the form of a macro-regional strategy, the study identifies the cooperation dynamics already in existence in the Atlantic Arc.

In 1989, the Atlantic Arc Commission (AAC) of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions (CPMR) was created on the initiative of the Presidents of regions in Western France.

At the same time, this desire to promote Atlantic issues prompted the emergence of cooperation networks of stakeholders from civil society.

- 1989, ARESE (Association de Recherches et d’Etudes Socio-Economiques en Pays de la Loire), which became the CESER de l’Atlantique;
- 1993, AC3A, the Association of Atlantic Arc Chambers of Agriculture;
- 2000, the Conference of Atlantic Arc Cities, which became Atlantic Cities;
2003, the ATN, Atlantic Transnational Network. As early as 2009, when the Baltic macro-regional strategy was emerging, these networks joined forces to call for "enhanced territorial cooperation" with the aim of creating an Atlantic macro-region.

Alongside these institutionalised networks, there is a whole range of technical and thematic cooperation initiatives that have been set up to address problems in common or as part of European projects.

In 2011, in response to repeated calls from stakeholders for more ambitious cooperation in the Atlantic Ocean area, the European Commission adopted an Atlantic Maritime Strategy (AMS). This strategy is steered by the Member States, France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland, in conjunction with the European Commission. This strategy gave rise to an initial Atlantic Action Plan in 2013, which was reviewed in 2020. A mid-term review highlighted the need to improve the plan’s thematic focus and governance structure, and to introduce a monitoring framework. As the regions are not involved in the governance of the AMS, each country is free to organise the participation and representation of its regions and cities. In fact, only France grants its regions a place, each in turn. The Atlantic Arc Commission, Atlantic Cities and the ATN are recognised as associate members.

Alongside the AMS, the Interreg Atlantic Area programme is the main dedicated instrument aimed at supporting territorial cohesion by funding transnational cooperation projects between 22 Atlantic regions in the four Member States: Spain, France, Ireland, Portugal. The Interreg Atlantic Area programme has been developed in association with the priorities of the Atlantic Maritime Strategy. Its governance involves the four Member States and the regional authorities. A consultative role is given to civil society, in particular the Atlantic Arc Commission, Atlantic Cities and the ATN.

While there are institutionalised areas of cooperation, an analysis of their interactions shows that there exists:

- On the one hand, transnational cooperation between the Member States and the European Commission within the context of a sea basin strategy, the objectives of which are limited to issues strictly related to a sustainable, resilient and competitive blue economy.
- On the other, part of the Atlantic regions, united through political organisation, with the aim of promoting the assets and interests of the Atlantic territories at the crossroads of maritime and land issues.
- A European funding tool dedicated to cooperation, the Interreg Atlantic Area programme.
- In partnership, historic civil society networks, recognised for their ability to mobilise and support inter-regional and transnational cooperation projects.

If, in the prefiguration of a macro-regional strategy, the focus is on building links between the stakeholders and giving purpose to their desire in acting collectively, it is just as vital to create ‘links’ between all the existing initiatives, in order to strengthen their coordination.

In the prerequisites that emerge from the various hearings of existing macro-regions and from reading the European Commission’s reports, one of the first arguments put forward for moving the Atlantic strategy towards a macro-regional strategy lies in the desire to exercise an assertive political ambition that is sustainable over time. This political impetus must be combined with the commitment of the operational stakeholders and be reflected in an investment in capacity and resources to strengthen the coordination mechanisms.

The clarity of cooperation and its cross-cutting approach is important in order to avoid the risk of an “institutional hotchpotch”. It is recommended that the State and the Regions work together to guarantee that this twofold challenge of political impetus and clarity is met, as well as there being a strong role for civil society and particular attention to young people.

The macro-region tool would seem to make it possible to move from a culture of thematic projects, acting in isolation from each other and with results linked to objectives, to a global project culture in which projects are co-
constructed and respond to each other in a cross-cutting way, with a view to responding to a strategy.

**Chapter 4 - Outline and possible contours of an Atlantic macro-regional strategy**

The study's main point of warning is to give real meaning to this transnational cooperation project and invites those who will be primarily responsible for it to propose a roadmap with a strategic vision, as close aligned as possible to the realities and expectations of the Atlantic territories and populations. In this approach, it seems essential to define the geographical perimeter of this Atlantic area, giving a prominent place to the regions, and to co-construct a strategic vision in a collaborative approach in which civil society is fully involved as a contributor.

**Viewing the macro-region as an area of cooperation with variable geometry, necessarily open to the outside world.**

The juxtaposition of the maps reveals a geographical representation of the Atlantic area that reflects multiple realities. While the Atlantic Arc Commission covers 14 member regions of the political organisation, the Interreg Atlantic Area programme addresses 22 eligible regions.

During a period in which Normandy and Brittany are initiating separate cooperation initiatives with British territories to counter the effects of Brexit on their territory, the possibility offered by macro-regional strategies of involving non-EU countries is an opportunity to pool efforts and create a strong convergence between existing and future areas of cooperation on this European Atlantic arc.

Other transnational cooperation projects already exist in the Atlantic area, such as the New Aquitaine - Euskadi - Navarre Euroregion. It will need to find its place in the Atlantic macro-regional strategy project.

In the case of a potential Atlantic macro-region, the model of an "umbrella" area should prevail. It must be able to bring together smaller forms of coherent bilateral and regional cooperation, and facilitate their networking.

While the macro-region needs to be structured around a balanced geographical area, it is essential from now on to think about and project this Atlantic area in its historic role as an interface open to the world. The geostrategic scope of the macro-region is important because the notion of peripherality that makes up the Atlantic Arc must be combined with the opportunity for this Atlantic seaboard to be at the heart of new global centralities.

The association of Atlantic CESERs is inviting decision-makers to establish partnerships with overseas regional territories, to share the issues, the risks and the search for solutions.

On an inter-state level, the macro-region could be an opportunity to strengthen transatlantic relations beyond economic and scientific cooperation through cooperation agreements between the EU, the USA, Canada, Brazil and South Africa. It should be noted that Quebec became an associate member of the Atlantic Arc Commission in March 2023, which opens the way to new forms of interregional cooperation.

**Moving towards a new Atlantic project area with an ambitious, co-constructed project enabling a shared strategic vision**

The Atlantic area encompasses two structural components that need to be considered together in order to build a shared strategic vision: both a maritime component, the historical basis of the Atlantic identity, and a retro-littoral component which highlights shared issues and risks. At a time of climate change and the transitions taking place in our ecosystems, a strategy restricted to a maritime approach would be simplistic given the challenges and risks facing these territories: biodiversity, energy, mobility and connectivity in the Atlantic area, health and social issues, etc.

This "land-sea" bridge goes beyond the simple question of the issues and risks to be dealt with. This project must make sense to all the people in the region, which will ensure that a macro-regional strategy is well-received.
Creating the conditions for dialogue and collaboration: a governance model to be developed together

Aiming for a broader strategy will require an additional effort in terms of communicating and educating stakeholders. The success of the future cooperation strategy will depend on its clarity, its acceptability and its ownership by those who will implement it, including civil society stakeholders, who have a real role to play in advising, guiding and taking action.

In the light of the experience of existing macro-regional strategies, it would seem that the involvement of civil society in the prefiguration of a potential Atlantic macro-region is a prerequisite for its success. It is also important to organise for the participation of civil society in future governance.

A report, produced on the initiative of civil society organisations in the four macro-regions\(^2\), proposes the integration of a dedicated civil society pillar into macro-regional strategies and a strengthening of the involvement of civil society organisations in the governance structures of the macro-regions. Involvement should not be seen as a one-off event, but as an ongoing process.

The Atlantic CESERs support the idea that the development of an Atlantic macro-regional strategy should question the place of organised civil society in multi-level governance, and in particular the place of the CESERs. At the Atlantic level, the organised civil society stakeholders are already partly structured, both at French level within the Atlantic CESERs, and at transnational level within the ATN\(^3\), which enables them to exchange, analyse and formulate proposals for enhanced European cooperation on the Atlantic seaboard.

Finally, as soon as civil society participation in public decision-making is raised, the question of involving young people arises. In the context of the issues we have defined for the Atlantic area, the younger generations are at the forefront of those concerned. With a view to an Atlantic macro-regional strategy, it will therefore be necessary to define the right format for the participation of young people and to identify the structures that interact as closely as possible with their realities in order to ensure that their identities, experiences and expectations are broadly represented.

Chapter 5: Strengthening cooperation with an Atlantic strategy requires strong ambition and the keys to success

As part of this effort to gain a better understanding of macro-regional cooperation and with a view to the development of the Atlantic strategy, the Atlantic CESERs are making their contribution to the debate on this project here.

The conditions for success in the event of an Atlantic macro-regional strategy:

- A strong, collective political will, with a strategic vision that makes sense for the Atlantic territories and populations, in order to:
  - drive forward an overall, jointly-constructed project that promotes greater social cohesion and equity;
  - develop a shared risk culture;
  - commit to running a cooperative venture, giving it the capacity to operate, guaranteeing its long-term future and its ongoing presence;
  - accept the long-term nature of implementing a macro-regional strategy;
  - focus on clearly identified major issues: water and the development of low-carbon energy.

- A geostrategic opening-up of the Atlantic macro-region:

\(^3\)The Atlantic Transnational Network is made up of the Economic and Social Councils of the Basque Country, Andalusia, Galicia, the Canary Islands, Extremadura and Castilla y León, the CESERs of Nouvelle Aquitaine, Pays de la Loire, Brittany, Normandy and Centre-Val de Loire, and the Oceano Forum in Portugal.
Demonstrate that the problems identified in the Atlantic macro-region raise European issues of transnational cooperation;

Support the fact that the search for solutions through interregional and transnational cooperation serves the interests of the Member States and the European Union, including their outermost maritime regions;

Think of the Atlantic area as an interface between Europe and the rest of the world and develop a transatlantic cooperation area open to stakeholders at all levels;

Include regions that are not members of the European Union in this macro-regional cooperation area, with particular attention to the territories that make up the United Kingdom.

Appropriate governance to ensure a territorial approach to the strategy and stakeholder buy-in:

- Guarantee executive steering of the strategy involving the Member States and the regions;
- Include and mobilise civil society, with a special focus on young people, from the earliest stages of the project through to its operational implementation;
- Entrust the steering of operational actions to implement the strategy to civil society organisations;
- Create the conditions for "structured dialogue" with civil society organisations, including CESERs and similar structures in other countries;
- Establish multilevel governance to ensure a territorial approach to the strategy and stakeholder buy-in.

Points to watch to ensure the added value of a macro-regional strategy:

- Coordinate and build on existing initiatives to ensure that the various areas of cooperation are interlinked, in particular with the Atlantic Maritime Strategy;
- Neutralise the risk of competition by committing to an enhanced cooperation approach;
- Take into account the structural differences between stakeholders, and the cultural and linguistic barriers that can undermine the effectiveness of collective action;
- Make better and more efficient use of the funding available to support more projects to achieve the objectives of the strategy;
- Accept the long-term investment (human and financial costs, etc.) required to run the project.

Initial elements for methods and implementation:

- Develop tools for sharing information in order to monitor the situation and initiate a forward-looking approach on an Atlantic scale;
- Draw on the experience of cooperation areas in terms of methods, tools, practices, successes and failures;
- Innovate to remove the obstacles to cooperation;
- Define tools to assess the socio-economic and environmental returns from participation in the macro-regional project;
- Commit to social and environmental responsibility.
This study by the Atlantic CESERs has highlighted key issues for our 4 regions: climate change, water, energy, etc. In response to these issues, the macro-region is proving to be an appropriate tool for appropriate cooperation, available to elected representatives and regional players, including civil society. The study invites us to seize this opportunity for the benefit of a common ambition for the Atlantic Arc.

The Atlantic CESERs will be present as organised civil society to contribute to a possible Atlantic macro-regional strategy or any other form of cooperation in this geographical area.

"The important thing is not to be optimistic or pessimistic, but to be determined", Jean Monnet.