

## AESOP Thematic Groups

### Report of communication and meeting with Thematic Group Coordinators during the joint ACSP-AESOP Congress in Dublin

July 2013.

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An e-mail correspondence was held with Thematic Group Coordinators in late June - early July with a view to improve communication and information flow within and between Thematic Groups. 12 out of 14 Thematic Groups answered, while no replies could be received from two of the Thematic Groups, *Urban Design in Planning* and *Monitoring of the European Landscape Convention*. It should be noted that it is still possible for these groups to send their answers and comments, which could then be incorporated into this report. Two other Thematic Groups, *New Technologies & Planning* and *French and British Planning Studies* replied but their coordinators were not able to send answers to the questions due to various reasons. It is also possible for these groups to send their answers/comments or respond to the information compiled in this report.

#### 1. Information received from Thematic Group Coordinators via e-mail correspondence

Thematic Groups (TGs) vary in size. Some TGs are small groups with 10-15 members while there are groups with 250 as well as 400 members.

Some only have a list of e-mails used by coordinators to announce meetings, news, etc., while some TGs have e-mail groups actively used by its members for news & discussions.

All TGs are allocated a webpage at the AESOP website: some TGs effectively use this webpage and keep news up-to-date, but some do not. Some TGs have created an independent webpage, and use both these pages and the AESOP webpage.

Most TGs try to meet annually at AESOP congresses; but not all do. One TG has done it for the first time in the Dublin Congress. Some also meet as a social activity, over dinner, during the congresses.

About half of the TGs are very active in organising events and activities:

- Planning & Complexity TG holds 2-day workshops once or twice a year
- Public Spaces and Urban Cultures TG also holds regular annual workshops
- Planning Law & Property Rights TG holds international annual conferences
- Sustainable Food Planning TG also organises regular annual conferences
- The newly established Planning/Conflict TG will hold its first annual conference in 2013
- Transport Planning & Policy TG used to hold 3-day workshops of academicians, practitioners, and PhD students but these have discontinued for a while
- Evaluation in Planning TG also holds 3-day workshops every 2-3 years

Such activities often result in publications. Plus, some TGs have been involved in research projects, funding applications, etc.

## 2. Comments and suggestions from Thematic Group Coordinators

TG coordinators were asked to explain main gains and successful experiences of the group. The replies are as follows:

- Active and committed network with a very positive energy, intense dialogue, in-depth exploration of concepts, collectively produced output
- TG evolving into an international association, with very successful meetings/conferences
- Annual conferences very rewarding, with participants from across the world
- Cohesive grouping of academics, students and practitioners
- A well knit network delivering publications, research proposals and personal friendships
- Support to young academics in bidding for research funding
- Training of PhD students and early career researchers
- Close interaction with practitioners during the workshops
- Cooperation with other institutions and actors in the field
- Growth and strengthening of a group
- Raising interest from eminent members of other disciplines (i.e. overcoming the planning/urban studies divide)

They were also asked to explain major challenges for the effective functioning of the TGs:

- Limited time for management of the group
- Continuity in office holders
- Having few of the members actively involved
- Inadequate amount of time dedicated by group members to the functioning of the group
- Time and funding required to organise the TG events
- Institutionalisation of the group
- AESOP TG webpage not functioning interactively
- Scheduling of TG meetings at AESOP congresses in a way that conflicts with other sessions/activities
- Gaining interest from other disciplines

Finally, TG coordinators made the following suggestions for a better and more effective functioning of the TGs:

- The financial support (up to 500 EUR per year) from AESOP for inviting keynote speakers at TG events seen as very positive – must be maintained
- More funding is required for start-up activities as 500 EUR is inadequate
- Funding is required for PhD students to attend TG events
- Financial support for the coordinator, so he/she could reserve more time for the development of the TG
- Active involvement and support of AESOP YA in TGs (with organisation of events and website, etc.)
- TG meetings at AESOP Congresses to be better planned and scheduled to avoid any parallel events/sessions

- Having Congress Tracks connected/linked to the TGs
- AESOP encouraging researchers in other parts of the globe to participate in the TGs
- Providing a short URL to the website of each TG
- Slightly changing the lay-out of the first page of the AESOP website thus helping to make the name of the Thematic Group more visible in the roll out menu window
- Providing a TG newsletter tool on the AESOP website

### **3. The outcomes of the Thematic Group Coordinators meeting held in Dublin, 15.07.2013**

There is a general understanding that annual TG activities are rewarding experiences, and that each TG should explore possibilities for annual meetings, workshops, conferences, etc. that would reinforce links between researchers within AESOP member schools, as well as help develop links in a broader international context.

AESOP can allocate 500 EUR per year to support such annual TG activities. Although it is not possible to increase this amount, as and when there is an urgent need for more funds clearly illustrated by TGs to assure a successful annual event, AESOP may consider an increase (in a case-by-case approach). This fund is to be used for the organisation of events, and that may include funding for invited key-note speakers. Unfortunately it is not for funding the travel expenses of participants to events, such as a travel grant to students.

An increased involvement of AESOP Young Academics (YA) in TGs should be encouraged and sought for as suggested by TG coordinators. In future meetings with TG Coordinators, a YA representative can be invited; and TG activities and events can be announced in YA webpage and newsletters with a view to attract more young researchers to TGs. YA should be made aware of possibilities within TGs with regards to publications, research project calls, as well as increased exchange opportunities. In addition to clear benefits for YA themselves, their involvement can also make the TGs more active and visible. Their help would also be welcome in TGs webpage organisation and updating.

As for TG webpages, it is clear that although some TGs are very active, their webpage is not updated and this may give the wrong impression to those who may consider joining the TGs. Even when a TG have their own separate web site outside of AESOP webpage, it is important that the AESOP TG webpage is also kept up-to-date and with links to the other web site as well as links to ongoing events and activities. In cases where TG Coordinators find it difficult or too time-consuming to manage the webpage, AESOP Secretary General can arrange for another person from the TG, suggested by the coordinator, to have access to the site to upload information and update the page.

A shorter URL address to the AESOP webpage of each TGs does not seem possible right now. This will be explored with the webmaster. Comments with regards to making the Thematic Groups more visible in AESOP main page, as well as possibilities for a more interactive format are also to be discussed with the webmaster.

In future congresses, organisers should ensure that there are no other parallel events in the time-slot allocated for TGs to meet.

In addition, it would be beneficial to have the TGs tying in with the Congress Tracks. Some TGs may have their own track in some congresses; however, this does not necessarily have to be the case for each TG/Track: instead, a reference to the relevant TG may be included in the Call for Papers, in a way that invites possible special session or roundtable session proposals in the working area of the TG.

Finally, holding a TG Coordinators meeting during the Dublin Congress was seen as a positive experience. There is support to hold these coordination meetings every year during the annual Congresses in order for the TGs to share their experiences and activities of the past year and their plans for the future.