

# The Impact Of State Of The Environment Reports On Local Government Spatial Plans: A Comparative Study Of The South West Of England And The Brandenburg-Berlin Region Germany.

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As a scientific, educational and democratic basis for environmental planning, state of the environment reporting is recognised within the European Union as a key tool for realising sustainable development and Local Agenda 21. State of the environment reports (SoERs) assimilate disparate sources of data about local environmental conditions into a unified document and have been produced by local authorities in the UK on a voluntary basis since 1989 (Jacobs 1991). If updated on a regular basis, the reports facilitate spatial and temporal identification and monitoring of the areas of serious environmental concern within a local authority's jurisdiction. This provides a basis for environmental planning, evaluating local authority environmental management policies and if appropriately designed can also be an accessible and educational source of public information regarding the local environment. The German equivalent of the SoER is the *Landschaftsplan* (Landscapeplan). This is produced with the same intention of monitoring and reporting on the condition of the local environment over time and determining the capacities and limits of natural resources so that these can be used as the basis of land-use decisions in the *Flächennutzungsplan* (development plan) (Gruehn & Kenneweg 1998). Although local government interest and involvement in environmental reporting is high, there is evidence both in the UK and German literature that environmental reports are failing to make any significant impact on the plan-making process. According to Counsell (1998) for example, whilst 64.8% of planning authorities in England and Wales had undertaken a strategic environmental assessment of their structure plan, only 29.6% had based this on a state of the environment report.

Research in Germany by Gruehn & Kenneweg (1998) conclude similarly that information regarding environmental limits contained within the *Landschaftsplan* is insufficiently integrated into development plans. The purpose of the research is to identify and evaluate reasons for the poor integration between environmental reports and local authority spatial plans. It is hoped that this will contribute to the development of a best practice methodology for SoER so that data regarding environmental capacities can be fully integrated into local authority plans.

Within this broad purpose three aims can be identified: Firstly to test the adequacy of state of the environment reports produced by local authorities in the south west of England and Brandenburg-Berlin Germany against internationally recognised best practice criteria. Secondly to evaluate the extent to which the information in state of the environment reports is being integrated into spatial plans in the two regions. Thirdly to identify and evaluate the reasons why SoERs are failing to make an impact on plans.

It is hoped that the cross-national comparative dimension to this research will give fresh insight into how the methodology for state of environment reports can be improved by showing how environmental reporting is managed by local government in different cultural/political contexts. The research will focus on the influence that the report production process has on the level of integration between reports and plans and will consider factors such as who comprise the participants in the report production process, level of consultation with other stakeholders i.e. planners and the public, level of resource commitment to report production, degree to which report production is linked to policy objectives, methodology used and how derived. These in turn will be considered in the context of political and institutional factors such as the existence and quality of national government guidelines/regulations, general level of national government commitment to environmental reporting and how that is expressed e.g. financially/through training/other kinds of support, structure of the planning system and how this impacts for e.g. on environmental management in general. Research to date has tended to focus only on the SoERs themselves. Raemaekers' (1993) is the only UK research which quantifies local government production of SoERs. His work also gives a cursive evaluation of report quality. Campbell & Maclaren (1995) consider barriers to the widespread implementation of SoER in Canada. They

conclude that limited staff and financial resources together with a lack of well-developed indicators, lack of environmental data and generally poor SoER methodology are the most significant factors in preventing the implementation of SoER. The main focus of attention of research on methodology has been on difficulties associated with developing indicators. Research in this area is still in its infancy and proposals for a universal set of indicators are highly contested. Conacher (1998) for example highlights the difficulties in producing indicators which reflect not just static properties of the environment but also processes and mechanisms. Selman (1994) makes the most detailed consideration of the report production process. In particular he considers the influence that the extent to which report production is a collaborative process influences the quality and style of report produced. Innes (1990) has conducted extensive research into the circumstances in which knowledge is most likely to have an impact upon policy. Her research was mainly in the context of indicators for social policy although she has also considered the role of information in the environmental impact assessment process. She considers the extent to which; policy objectives are considered in the data production process, the report is produced in collaboration with stakeholders and whether the information is publicly presented and debated in conjunction with policy decisions to have particular influence on the extent to which information impacts upon policy. Whilst the literature provides useful insight into aspects of state of the environment reporting or the relationship between knowledge and policy, what it lacks and what this research proposes is a detailed evaluation of the reasons for the minimal impact of SoERs on local authority plans. This is vital if a best practice methodology for SoER is to be developed such that data regarding environmental capacities can be fully integrated into plans. As the research is in its early stages (5th month), precise details of methodology are still being developed. What follows therefore, is a basic outline only. The research will be conducted in two phases. Phase 1 will consist of a documentary analysis of state of the environment reports and structure and development plans for all local authorities that have produced SoERs within the south west of England and the Brandenburg-Berlin regions. The aim of this will be to evaluate the adequacy of state of the environment reports in relation to best practice criteria and by comparing SoERs with plans to quantify the level of impact of SoERs on plans. Level of integration will be judged according to the degree to which plans show evidence that measures to ensure environmental sustainability are based on data about environmental

capacities contained in the SoERs. Phase 2 will use a number of case studies from each of the regions to identify and evaluate the reasons why SoERs have had a limited impact on plans. This will take the form of qualitative interviews which will follow a consistent open-ended question format supported by an analysis of official documentation. The intention is to conduct interviews with representative stakeholders in the environmental report and plan making process including scientists, planners and members of the public. Once again precise details of the interview questions still need to be devised and will in any case be partly based on the results of phase 1 of the research. The questions will be designed to give insight into some of the following questions: How environmental report authors perceive the report production process, their role in it and their responsibilities in relation to the report's target audience and the ultimate policy objectives of the report. The extent to which official guidelines/regulations regarding SoERs seem to determine the level of integration between the reports and plans. i.e. to what extent do guidelines (if they exist) seem to encourage a holistic and integrated relationship between SoERs and plans. How important are organisational factors (resources/technology/training/environmental management structure) in determining the level of integration between reports and plans.

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