



# **An Ocean Apart? Subnational Transatlantic Environmental Cooperation**

**Markus Knigge  
Matthew Collins**

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**Ecologic – Institute for International and European Environmental Policy  
Pfalzburger Str. 43/44 – 10717 Berlin – Germany - ++49/30/86880-0  
Internet: [www.ecologic.de](http://www.ecologic.de) Mail: [knigge@ecologic.de](mailto:knigge@ecologic.de)**

## Table of Contents

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| <b>1 Abstract.....</b>   | <b>2</b> |
| <b>2 Introduction .....</b>  | <b>2</b> |
| <b>3 Key Features of Subnational Transatlantic Environmental Partnerships .....</b>                | <b>3</b> |
| <b>4 Challenges and Opportunities for Transatlantic Cooperation at the Subnational Level .....</b> | <b>7</b> |
| <b>5 Conclusions.....</b>  | <b>8</b> |

## 1 Abstract

This paper investigates transatlantic cooperation at the subnational level, with the aim of better understanding its functioning and contribution to environmental policy-making. After briefly outlining the specific goals and methodology of the project, this paper reports on the key features of subnational transatlantic environmental partnerships, with particular attention being paid to the impacts of cooperation. Specific challenges to and opportunities for subnational transatlantic cooperation are identified, and suggestions for future research in this subject area are offered.

## 2 Introduction

Many environmental problems are of a global nature and are characterized by their cross-border impacts. Nevertheless, a great deal of the implementation and practice of environmental protection aimed at addressing global problems takes place among subnational actors at the local, regional and state level. Consequently, local and regional institutions are key to effectively dealing with both local environmental problems and global environmental challenges. Moreover, subnational authorities may also play a crucial role in the formation of environmental policies at the federal level.

Given the important role subnational actors play in national environmental policy-making and implementation, it is interesting to note that state and local governments on both sides of the Atlantic are increasingly cooperating in this area, in particular by sharing innovative policies and practices. For example, American environmental practitioners are learning from European urban environmental policies, such as the promotion of smart-growth or “green” buildings and renewable energy. Likewise, Europeans look to the U.S. for clean-up technologies and models of private financing to rehabilitate derelict lands.<sup>1</sup>

This paper is based upon a project undertaken in April 2005<sup>2</sup>, and provides a better understanding of the functioning of transatlantic cooperation at the subnational level and its contribution to environmental policy-making. Thereby, the paper seeks to facilitate the exchange of international best practices and innovation among state, regional, and local officials on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In particular, the paper investigates the following key questions: How have the various transatlantic regional or subnational partnerships come about, and how do they differ in their frameworks for

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Medearis & Brian Swett (2003) International Best Practices and Innovation – Strategically Harvesting lessons from Abroad; online at: [http://www.ecologic.de/download/verschiedenes/2003/medearis\\_swett.PDF](http://www.ecologic.de/download/verschiedenes/2003/medearis_swett.PDF).

<sup>2</sup> The authors would like to extend their thanks to their European and U.S. partners who helped them to carry out this project. Foremost, we would like to thank the John J. McCloy Fund of the American Council on Germany, for its generous financial support for this project, and all the kind people interviewed in the course of the research. For a complete version of the project report, please visit: <http://www.ecologic.de/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1415>.

cooperation? What similarities or dissimilarities exist in terms of their objectives, methods for policy learning, stakeholder representation, sources of funding, reporting methods and environmental issue areas? What has the impact of transatlantic cooperation been? What are the challenges to and opportunities for such partnerships?

### **3 Key Features of Subnational Transatlantic Environmental Partnerships**

When considering subnational transatlantic environmental cooperation it must be borne in mind that there is a diverse array of partnerships in operation, and that they may vary from each other in a number of respects. For example, there are state-to-state partnerships, regional partnerships or partnerships at the local level. However, partnerships differ not only in their geographic scope and their level of governance, but also in their participants, regularity of exchange, means employed for their exchange or in their level of formality.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, despite the many differences between partnerships, common key features can be identified.<sup>4</sup>

#### **Establishment of the Partnerships**

Most partnerships investigated within this study<sup>5</sup> came about through the development of friendships between individuals on both sides of the Atlantic. International conferences and workshops, as well as delegation visits, were frequently the occasion for the beginning of these international acquaintances. In general, similar environmental challenges, socio-economic or geographical characteristics in Europe and the U.S. often served to encourage partnerships. Also, in a number of cases, historical ties between the continents helped to create a supportive atmosphere for the environmental partnerships.

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<sup>3</sup> The following chapter is based on the key findings of interviews undertaken in 2005 with environmental experts and practitioners involved in transatlantic environmental policy learning.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that the explanatory power of the findings is somewhat limited due to the design of the project. E.g. the possibilities for collecting information from persons that are not involved in transatlantic cooperation were limited, and the information given by environmental experts and practitioners was usually not verified or validated by using other information sources.

<sup>5</sup> Case studies included: the Sister City partnership between Chicago and Hamburg, the Bavaria—Wisconsin Regulatory Reform Working Partnership, the State—Country Partnership between New Jersey and the Netherlands, the State Partnership between Maryland and Schleswig-Holstein; and the Regional Partnership between the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC) and the Verband Region Stuttgart.

## **Objectives**

Generally, the objectives of partnerships are to mutually benefit through exchange. However, the objectives stated in the partnerships' founding documents vary widely in their scope and precision. In some partnerships environmental issues play only a minor role in the exchanges, whereas others regarded the environment to be of equal importance to other issues or even the central focus of the entire partnership. Not only do some Memoranda of Understanding focus specifically on environmental issues, some partnerships point to specific environmental policy instruments and methodologies which address these issues, such as market based instruments.

## **Methods for exchange**

Partnerships make use of a variety of methods for exchange regarding environmental issues across the Atlantic. Short-term visits, usually less than one day in length and often including brief presentations of best practices and site visits, represent a frequently-used method for exchange. However, information flows during short term visits are often very much biased towards the visitors, as there is usually not sufficient time to discuss environmental policies of the visitors' country. Longer visits for a number of days or a week therefore seem to be a more productive method for exchange and transatlantic policy learning, as there is sufficient time to understand the characteristics and challenges of the hosting countries, to experience first hand the implementation of innovative methodologies and best practices, as well as to discuss open questions with the partners. As part of these long-term visits, but also as single events, conferences, workshops and case studies are also effective learning and exchange fora.

For individual experts there are a number of opportunities for transatlantic exchanges on environmental issues through working exchanges, fellowships or scholarships. Remarkably, most partnerships have thus far not considered taking advantage of these opportunities. As a result, most individuals who carry out research or exchange on environmental issues seem to do so without the framework of a transatlantic partnership. Telecommunications, including phone, internet, email and video conferences, play a critical role in the cooperation at the subnational level. One of the major benefits of transatlantic partnerships is to have the opportunities to informally ask foreign experts for suggestions and advice on short notice, which is naturally facilitated by telecommunications media.

## **Participants in the Cooperation**

Generally speaking, the selection of participants in delegations or partnerships tends to be done on the basis of existing networks and personal relations. A diverse array of actors, from NGOs, local activists, businesses, academia, labor, policy-making and other fields, are represented in transatlantic environmental cooperation at the

subnational level. However, the range of actors taking part in longer visits and their working levels differ from partnership to partnership.

Whereas some longer visits are undertaken by groups of stakeholders from numerous fields of expertise, such as non-governmental organizations, trade unions or even media and universities, other visits may be largely limited to policymakers. Likewise, the working levels of the participants in some delegations is relatively homogenous, whereas the participants' working levels varies widely within other delegations.

### **Financing of Cooperation**

While the expenses of email and phone exchanges are negligible, the resources needed to organize longer visits or conferences may be substantial, and most partnerships suffer from limited financial resources for the organization of travels and visits. While the time for the organization of and the participation in exchanges is usually provided by the employing authority, subnational entities often lack the resources for international activities. It should be noted, however, that the costs of exchanges are easily overestimated, as most lunches and dinners are sponsored by local business or authorities. Moreover, environmental aspects can sometimes be integrated into visits that focus mainly on fostering business and economic development, which are often better funded. Generally, partnerships do not possess institutionalized funding for exchanges or conferences. Therefore, financing is sought on a case-by-case basis. To cover the travel and accommodation costs, many partnerships attract private or business donations. Foundations play an important role in the funding of exchange visits, and most of the delegations that embarked on visits received support from foundations, such as the Heinrich Boell Foundation, the German Marshall Fund or the American Council on Germany.

### **Reporting Methods**

Interest in the experiences gained from environmental cooperation is high, and partnerships use a number of different methods to inform other experts and the general public about their activities and their impacts. However, one can observe that partnerships generally have no specific strategy for information dissemination. Nevertheless, some common methods of communication may be identified: internal and external presentations about lessons learned are a method frequently used to disseminate information and to discuss the results of exchanges, and partnerships that participate in longer visits or organize conferences or workshops usually write reports about these activities. Some delegation participants also write papers and other forms of publications, but this is mainly done on a case-by-case base. As a result, there is only a limited amount of published information available on transatlantic environmental partnerships.

### **Environmental Issue Areas**

Generally, transatlantic partnerships cooperate on a wide variety of issue areas, such as education, business, culture, social and environmental issues. The selection of issues to be addressed is mainly done through the identification of common challenges, where practitioners foresee mutual benefits as a result of transatlantic exchange. With regard to the environment, these issue areas include, but are not limited to, smart growth, the revitalization of city centers, brownfield redevelopment and green rooftops and building techniques. Aside from the general challenges identified, a number of partnerships spent some time on specific issues dealt with at the local or regional level. These issues included emissions trading, the enhanced role of new technologies for the participation and involvement of grassroots organizations, environmental management systems, alternative pollution prevention and control approaches and environmental benchmarking. Additional issues about which views and experiences were exchanged ranged from sustainable agriculture to environmental justice, river restoration, traffic calming, supply chain environmental management and waste management and recycling.

### **Impacts of Subnational Cooperation**

Some of the strongest impacts of transatlantic exchanges are inspirations from best practices, including projects, policies, and methodologies and approaches to policy-making. While the best practice examples are certainly not always directly transferable, they nevertheless give an important stimulus for the setting of higher environmental goals, as attested to by a number of realized projects and environmental policies that can be traced directly back to transatlantic cooperation at the subnational level.<sup>6</sup> Also, the lesson of learning from abroad has led to a paradigm shift in a number of institutions and an extraordinary transformation of the relationship among different stakeholders. Based on the knowledge of the partners and the more private interaction during the visit, partners were more willing to listen to different opinions and were able to work more closely and productively regardless of political affiliations or beliefs. Yet another important benefit is that international exchanges force participants to reflect upon their own work, which often contributes to a productive reassessment of day-to-day work and stimulates internal discussions about personal work and performance. Last but not least, transatlantic environmental cooperation can contribute to increased self-esteem and a better working atmosphere. For participants it is often satisfying to see that other states struggle with similar environmental problems and that there are no quick fixes.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, green rooftops were constructed in Chicago following a visit of Chicago's mayor to Hamburg, New Jersey was inspired by the Netherlands about how to report on policy making to the public and Wisconsin's entire green tier legislation was modeled after the Bavarian Pact (See <http://www.stmugv.bayern.de/de/wirtschaft/index.htm>).

## **4 Challenges and Opportunities for Transatlantic Cooperation at the Subnational Level**

The transatlantic environmental partnerships surveyed in this study are very heterogeneous. Consequently, general comparisons and conclusions are transferable only to a limited degree. Nevertheless, the following gives an overview of the challenges subnational partnerships often face and the opportunities they have for becoming even more effective.

### **Challenges**

- Funding for transatlantic environmental exchange is scarce. The financing of personal travel costs can constitute a major impediment for certain groups, such as those from civil society. As foundations scale down their support for transatlantic environmental exchanges, private or business sources are looked to more frequently for financing. However, even if business groups offer to sponsor NGO participation, it may be difficult for NGOs to accept this funding as their work relies to a large extent on financial and political independence.
- A number of partnerships see the potential of becoming unbalanced. This regards less the potential to learn from each other than the means to organize the cooperation. Some European partners, in particular states, have more resources than their transatlantic counterparts to engage in international exchanges. Also, the language was seen by some partnerships as a challenge. While Europeans were usually able to read and speak English, many visitors from the U.S. were not able to communicate in their partner's language.
- One of the biggest challenges to productive partnerships is the issue of succession of active individuals. The activities of all cooperations rely to a very large degree on the commitment of individuals that work to provide the partnerships with content. Therefore, it is difficult to sustain a high level of cooperation if people actively involved in the exchanges, who are often also the initiators of the partnership, leave the office or switch jobs.
- A change in government or political leadership may also present a challenge. In particular, some partnerships were scaled down after a change in the administration.
- Yet another challenge is the prejudice that exchanges, and in particular visits, constitute mainly a private pleasure and bring about only limited benefits for the home state.

### **Opportunities**

- The use of monitoring systems and evaluation schemes can contribute to rendering partnerships more effective and to internally and externally justifying the effort and financial means invested. Thus far, most partnerships have used only

informal feed-backs to enhance the quality and the impact of their cooperation. Positive results of these schemes would prove beneficial for attracting political and financial support for the partnerships.

- Thus far there has been only limited reporting of the impacts of the partnerships. Documented results, for example on how improved environmental protection was achieved without losing competitiveness, would certainly make the argument for transatlantic environmental cooperation stronger. An increase in the dissemination of information on the partnerships and their impacts should present an opportunity to make the benefits of transatlantic cooperation at the subnational level more widely known and might contribute to an exchange between different partnerships or facilitate the creation of new ones.
- Exchanges can be made more effective by not only identifying and exchanging views on specific issues or policies, but also cooperating on the planning, creation and implementation process. The utilization of workshops or cooperation on specific environmental issues, such as a land-use plan, might be promising in this respect. Yet another possibility for increasing the impact might be to include high-level decision makers in exchanges.
- The use of existing institutions might prove beneficial to increasing cooperation on environmental issues across the Atlantic. For instance, there are numerous sister cities programs,<sup>7</sup> but many of these do not yet include exchanges on environmental issues.
- Certainly it would be beneficial to expand the number of partnerships by bringing in new actors and creating new partnerships. This is particularly true for entities which work on similar environmental problems, but have gathered different experiences. For example the Chicago Climate Exchange (CCE) has a long history of emissions trading, yet there is no active exchange between the CCE and the newly created European Emission Trading Schemes and their trading platforms. In fact, a partnership between these entities could help to avoid the development of different and perhaps even incompatible systems within the U.S. and the EU.

## 5 Conclusions

Numerous transatlantic partnerships have successfully exchanged views on how to best address local and regional environmental problems and sustainable development issues. Testimony to this is given by legislation, implemented projects and transferred ideas. Moreover, there are many intangible benefits of these exchanges, such as better cooperation among different stakeholders, enhanced working atmospheres or the self-reflection of work. However, the study also confirmed challenges and impediments to exchanges at this level. Moreover, it seems that there is little guidance

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<sup>7</sup> For a list of sister cities registered with Sister Cities International see: <http://www.sister-cities.org/icrc/directory/index>.

on how to best organize and institutionalize these exchanges, both at the national level and within the different organizations. Therefore, it might be assumed that there is a potential for even more effective and efficient partnerships and exchanges on environmental issues.

Given the large variety of different partnerships investigated, each with a unique setting and particular characteristics, the study certainly entails a number of inspirations<sup>8</sup>. However, it does not identify the “magic wand” which is able to enhance the effectiveness of all partnership at the same time. Indeed, the next step in the direction of enhanced transatlantic environmental cooperation at the subnational level should comprise further research and investigation, such as the development of a more systematic approach to analysis and detailed case studies. Finally, it should be investigated in what ways the identification of common solutions to environmental problems at the state or local level has contributed to, and could continue to assist in, finding common ground, developing common positions or successfully influencing policy at the national level as well as in international relations.

Given recent developments in international environmental policy negotiations, it might be tempting to assume that Europe and the United States are not only „an ocean apart“ in terms of their environmental policies, but that the ocean is an ever-widening one. It should not be forgotten, however, that numerous subnational transatlantic environmental partnerships serve to partly bridge the gap that may exist at the international level. Moreover, the potential clearly exists to integrate environmental aspects into transatlantic partnerships that have not, thus far, turned their attention to environmental issues. Even if transatlantic environmental partnerships clearly cannot completely substitute for enhanced and more cooperative policy-making at the international level, it is not unrealistic to expect that transatlantic environmental partnerships can be made both more numerous and more effective in the future, and thus play a crucial factor in promoting and sustaining transatlantic environmental cooperation.

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<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed description of the case studies and best practices, see the full report at: <http://www.ecologic.de/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1415>.